

Title: Adventurous Faith Clings
Text: Romans 3:23-25
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We are in week three of our exploration of one of the eight core values of our church- Adventurous Faith. We believe that faith is an unfolding adventure that God calls us into. We have named the truth that faith is more than belief; faith is belief enacted – belief that leads to action.

Over the last couple of weeks we have been exploring the life of Elisha, one of the Old Testament prophets. In Elisha's story we have discovered that faith first responds to the call of God, and that faith digs ditches anticipating God. If last phrase makes no sense to you at all, then I encourage you to download last week's message from the website or order a CD at the Info Desk today.

I was all set to continue Elisha's story today, but then I had a strong sense – a prompting from God – to go in another direction. We will pick up Elisha's story again next week. But on Monday I sensed God say to me, 'Stuart, let the table do the talking.'

Today is communion Sunday – the first Sunday of the month when we celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Today my message is going to operate as a long introduction to communion. What I hope to do is let the Table of our Lord, and all that it represents, do the talking today – that it would communicate all God wants to say to us.

Let's start where we always must start; with God's Word. The text that we will reflect on today is from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 3. Will you stand and read it with me?

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.
(Romans 3:23-25)

Here is the key point I want to draw from this text:

Adventurous Faith clings to the Cross of Christ.

Will you pray with me...

It has been exam week in our household. Our daughter Emily sat six grade 12 exams. Stress levels were a little higher than normal – and that was just Sue and me!

We are in the home stretch as a family when it comes to school exams. It's so different now to when Sue and I were finishing high school. Back in the 'old days' everything culminated with five, three hour exams at the end of the year. Your whole school career, your total mark rested on how well you went in those exams. To tell you the truth I underachieved all the way through high school. Some panicked cramming and a pretty decent short term memory are the only reasons I passed at all. These days I would be in trouble. These days it is two years of continuous assessment, of multiple tests and assignments and examinations every term. It's a marathon.

Life is full of tests. Life is marked examinations – formal and informal. There are formal tests like school tests and university examinations, immigration and citizenship tests, licence tests and IQ tests.

Then there are the informal tests of life. Marriage throws up a series of tests. (And now I am getting on shaky ground!) For example, Sue will often ask me a question to which there is only one right answer. For example, after speaking to me, she might ask, with rather an aggressive tone I might add, 'Were you listening to me?' Now, that is a tough question. It is not just the question, or the ways she asks it – bit also the look that comes with the question and the tone that communicates

to me that my answer has to be good. There is a very clear pass/fail grade. On one occasion I answered by asking, 'Can you please define listening?' I have learned the hard way that it is often not good to answer a question with a question.

Life is full of tests – some of which we pass, some of which we fail. And life ends with a Test. The results of this final Test are eternally important. Whether we pass or fail determines not just our tomorrow, but our forever.

The bible teaches, and we somehow know intuitively, that we are eternal beings. The bible actually says that God has planted eternity in the heart of every man and woman. In ways we do not fully comprehend, when our physical body dies, not just something of us, but the very essence of us, the core of us that marks our identity – our soul if you like - lives on. Not only will we live eternally, where we spend that eternity – with God or apart from God – will depend on the results of that Final Test the bible calls Judgment Day. On that day we will be called to give an account for our life – the good, the bad and the ugly:

We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.
(2 Corinthians 4:10)

Each of us will give an account of himself to God.
(Romans 14:12)

(We) will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead.
(1 Peter 4:5)

Not one of us will escape this test. And God will judge us according to what we have said and what we have done. Here's the key question; what will be a pass mark? When I was at school my attitude was that any mark greater than, say 75%, meant that I worked too hard. 75% was respectable. 75% was a solid 'B' grade, and I was a solid 'B' student – no better, no worse.

In that final Test a solid 'B' should be enough, shouldn't it? That's a respectable mark – and respectable should be good enough you would think. Logic says we should pass into eternity with God if the good we say and do through our life outweighs the bad we say and do.

Human logic might say that. But God, who in the end is the Final Examiner, doesn't. God's standards are different to ours.

The Apostle Paul says:

All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Paul is saying that all have failed the test. When we stand before God on the day of judgement, our good is not good enough – not by a long way. This is the case for every human being living and dead. When Paul says 'all', he means 'all'. Everyone from Mother Theresa to Hitler, from Stalin to Billy Graham, from the most terrible tyrant to the most beautiful saint – all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. There are no exceptions – not one.

This all sounds terribly harsh. How can we say God is loving if he sets a test that we cannot hope to pass? Again, the bible is very clear that God's very nature is holy and perfect – without sin. Anything or anyone that is marked or stained by sin cannot live God's presence for longer than a moment, let alone for eternity. Centuries ago the prophet Isaiah graphically illustrated our awful predicament:

All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.
(Isaiah 64:6)

Before a holy God, our sin sweeps us away. On Judgement Day nothing less than a perfect score will do. 100% is the pass grade, and not one of us is capable of that.

I was thinking this week; before the gospel can be good news it first must confront us with the bad news. The bad news is that standing before a holy God on the day of judgement when we face that final test, our good will never be good enough. It is this bad news that makes the good news just so amazingly good.

Paul goes on to say:

(All) are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement.

'Justified' is a biblical word full of meaning. For the last two thousand years, tens of thousands of books have been written, millions of sermons preached and countless arguments raged over the meaning of justification. Justification is:

God's action by which a sinner is made righteous through Christ's atoning sacrifice.

To be justified is to be validated and accepted by God – to pass the Final Test - not because of what we have done, but only because of what Christ has done on the Cross. Justification is God's answer to the terrible dilemma of our sin which separates us from a Holy God. To be justified means to stand confidently before God on the day of judgement. To be justified is to not only be forgiven by God, but also welcomed by God.

If we look carefully we will discover the source, grounds and means of our justification. Let's do that:

First, the source of our justification is God and his grace.

Paul says:

We are justified freely by his grace...

Grace is God taking the initiative. Grace is God not standing back with his proverbial arms folded saying, 'They got themselves into this mess. They can get themselves out of it!' Grace is God doing all he can and all that is necessary to rescue us from sin and death.

Grace is God stooping, God loving, God coming to the rescue, God giving himself to humanity. (John Stott)

Grace is the undeserved, unmerited and unearned favour of God. Grace is given to us by God freely or gratuitously. Grace is given to us without reserve.

Grace says that we are justified, we are set free and we pass the test first because God loves us and has taken the initiative. Tim Keller puts it this way:

God's reckless grace is our greatest hope.
(Tim Keller)

Second, the grounds of our justification is the work of Christ and his Cross.

Paul goes on to say:

(We are justified) through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement.

With justification, redemption is a word full of meaning we could spend weeks reflecting on. Let's keep it simple.

Redemption is a business and legal term. In Bible times a slave could be freed if a redemption price was paid. The bible teaches that as all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, all of us are in effect slaves to sin. As slaves to sin we

face spiritual death and eternal separation from God. That is the bad news. The good news is that through Christ's sacrifice in the Cross, God redeems us, or purchases our freedom. The cost of our freedom is Jesus' death. He died so we might live.

Atonement is another word pregnant with meaning. Sin, by its unholy nature, offends a holy God. Sin breaks the moral code of the universe established by the Creator. God's anger burns against sin.

All of us are stained by sin and God's anger burns against the sin that consumes and enslaves us. The bible teaches that the wages or the consequence of sin is death. Our sin condemns us to death. But on the Cross, Christ became our atoning sacrifice. The death we should have died, he died in our place. He became our substitute, taking on himself the punishment our sin deserved.

Through the redemptive and atoning sacrifice of Jesus, we are both set free from our sin and welcome home by our Father. A former Archbishop of Sydney puts it this way:

The voice that spells forgiveness will say: 'You may go; you have been let off the penalty that your sin deserves.'
But the verdict which means acceptance (justification) will say: 'You may come; you are welcome to all my love and all my presence.'
(Archbishop Marcus Loane)

This leads to my last statement about justification:

The means of our justification is faith in Christ and his Blood.

Our passage finishes:

(We are justified) through faith in his blood.

God by his grace has taken the initiative to rescue us. In his great love, Christ laid down his life so that we could be rescued. But in the end, we have to decide whether we want to be rescued.

We are justified, saved and rescued from sin and death, when and only when we place our faith and trust in Jesus and his blood – in the person and work of Jesus.

God does not force his love on us. We cannot earn his love, pay for his love or merit his love with our good works. But we can choose to receive his love, or we can choose not to.

Through this series I have sought to reinforce the truth that while faith begins with belief, it is much, much more than just belief. Let me borrow an analogy I have used before from English theologian Alistair McGrath.

A few weeks ago I was suffering from the most terrible disease known to humankind; the dreaded man-cold. Not only was I suffering, I was suffering loudly.

During this terrible season, I came to rely on the wonder-drug called the cold and flu tablet.

The first step towards benefiting from these tablets was to believe that they exist. Even in my sinus blocked stupor I could see that.

The second step towards benefiting from these tablets was to accept that they could do what they promised to do – relieve me from the symptoms of my disease.

The third and final step was the most important. You see I could believe these tablets existed, I could accept they were able to relieve me of my symptoms – but until I actually washed down a couple with a glass of water, there was no way I was ever going to benefit from their healing power.

You might believe God exists. Fantastic. That is a great first step towards faith.

You may accept what the bible says about Jesus is true; that he died on the Cross and that three days later he rose again. You may even believe that because of what he did, it is possible to receive forgiveness of our sins and eternal life with him.

You might believe and you might accept – but until by faith you receive what God has done for you through Jesus, until you trust your life to him – then you cannot and will not receive all that he offers.

The terrible tragedy is that churches are full of people who believe in God and even accept what the bible says about him to be true, but who have never gone that final and most important step and by faith trusted their life to this God.

Adventurous faith is belief enacted.

Four hundred years ago the Protestant reformers put it this way:

We are saved (justified) by faith alone by grace alone through Christ alone.

A couple of weeks ago I celebrated my 46th birthday. Sue and the kids gave me the best gifts. From Sue I got a handmade voucher giving me permission to buy some golf gear. Guilt free golf splurge – heaven! From Joel and Emily I got some gift cards. I have already starting spending them.

Did you know that in 2010 Australians gave \$1.2 billion in gift cards – for birthdays and Christmas and mother's day and so on? But did you also know this – it is conservatively estimated of those \$1.2 billion in gift cards, more than \$300 million will never, ever be cashed in. They will expire, or be lost or be forgotten. All gone to waste.

This table reminds us that 2000 years ago a priceless gift was offered to you and me. The cost of that gift was and is infinite – it is a cost beyond our imagining. But it is our gift to freely receive as freely as it was offered.

Here is my nightmare. Here is what keeps me awake at night. It is possible for you to come forward this morning to receive these elements of bread and wine, to take them and eat and drink them – to receive them into your body – and fail to receive the infinitely greater gift that can only be received by faith in the blood of Jesus – justification- salvation – rescue – forgiveness – restoration – eternal life – abundant life – healing – wholeness.

Adventurous Faith clings to the Cross of Christ, receiving freely what God has so generously given.