

Pentecost 3
June 18, 2017

“Solid Rock or Sinking Sand”

ROMANS 3:21-25 AND 27-28

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. ²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. ²⁸ For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

In the gospel for today we heard our Lord Jesus tells us that the person who listens to his words is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rains came down, the streams rose, the winds blew and the house did not fall because its foundation was built on the rock. Not so the foolish man who does not listen to what Jesus says. He builds his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and the house fell with a great crash. Isn't there a children's song about this? The wise man builds his house on the rock, the rain comes down and the floods came up. The foolish man builds his house on the sand, the rain comes down and the floods came up. The rains came down and the floods came up and the house on the sand went splat!

We just sang the refrain, "On Christ the solid rock I stand, All other ground is sinking sand." And shortly we will stand to sing, "In Christ alone, my hope is found. He is my light, my strength my song; this Cornerstone, this solid Ground, firm through the fiercest drought and storm."

For forty four years I have served as a pastor in Santa Barbara, in Tucson and here on the Central Coast. I have been used by our Lord Jesus to let people know the danger of building their lives on sinking sand. I have also been privileged to help them see on the basis of God's Word how important it is for them to build their lives on Christ and his work for their salvation instead of trusting in their own feeble attempts at trying to make themselves acceptable to a holy and perfect God.

What will I do in retirement? I am going to do what you are also called to do with the time the Lord gives us here on this earth. He calls each of us to the important responsibility of showing people how foolish they are to build their hope of being loved and accepted by God in themselves. He calls us, each of us, to help other people build their lives on Christ. One of the best chapters in the Bible for helping people see the difference between the sinking sand and solid rock is Romans chapter three. With the thought of "Solid Rock or Sinking Sand", let's take a closer look at these verses we just read.

Sinking sand

“But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known to which the Law and the Prophets testify.” It is so important, so critically important, that we build our lives on a righteousness that is not found in ourselves but in God himself. I cannot survive and I cannot escape the judgment to come if I build my hope on my righteousness, a righteousness that comes from feebly trying to keep the law and always falling short.

In this third chapter of Romans Paul does a diagnostic analysis of every human being on face of this earth and draws the startling conclusion from a verse in the Psalms that says, “There is no one righteous, not even one...All have turned away, they have become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” The natural human reaction to these words is to scream and yell and say “That’s not true. I know a lot of people who do good. What about the person who kindly held the door open for me when I walked into the post office this past week?” Lots of good is done in the world in which we live in spite of all the bad news, but none of this goodness or righteousness is good enough to pay for the bad that is done or good enough to make us acceptable to a perfect and holy God.

As proof of this fact Paul in Romans three speaks about people whose mouths are full of cursing and bitterness, and people whose feet are swift to shed blood and people who do not have the fear and respect of God before their eyes. As you honestly dig deeper into what is said, you realize you are no different. Your feet may not be quick to shed blood, but you have seen too many times where there have been flashes of anger or even uncharitable thoughts towards other people, even people you love.

If you want proof you need a righteousness outside of yourself that can only be found in God, take a closer look at what the verse we just read that says, “There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” It says, “There is no difference.” I share something in common with every human being who exists on the face of this earth. I have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Years ago, when I was a pastor in Santa Barbara, one of the members asked the question, “Does the Bible ever give a definition of sin?” Yes, it does. It says “All have sinned” and then it goes on to tell us what sin is. Sin is falling short of the glory of God. The Greek word has the meaning of missing the mark.

When I was a child we made bows out of tree branches and arrows out of cedar shingles. We even glued chicken feathers to the arrows to make them fly straight, but they did not. Then my father bought us a bow and arrows such as this. We even took archery lessons, but still we seldom hit the bull’s eye on the target. Missing the mark does not mean shooting arrows wildly all over the neighborhood. It means failing to hit the bull’s eye every time. That is why this chapter of Romans says, “There is no one righteous, not even one.”

To illustrate in another way. You have heard of the Rubik’s cube invented in 1980 by the Hungarian architect Erno Rubik. Did you know over 400 million of these game puzzles have been sold over all the world? To solve the puzzle each face must have one color. The world record time for solving the puzzle is 5.5 seconds. I have tried to solve the puzzle but never had the patience to finish. Someone could make one side green, or one side red, but that would not complete the puzzle.

What does it take to be accepted by God? You need to complete God’s law. You need to

be perfect and that is impossible because we are born in sin. Our sinful human nature tells us just doing one part of God's law will be enough to guarantee you a better place in the future, like completing one side of the Rubik's cube. God's Word tells us we must be perfect and measure up to his righteousness.

We share something in common here this morning. We have become convinced by God's Word and the Holy Spirit we have fallen short of God's glory. We read the Bible and see people messing up their lives and instead of feeling good about ourselves, we realize how much we have messed up our lives. In preparing for this sermon I was reading from chapter seven of Matthew where Jesus tells us about building our lives on him. There he also spoke about judging other people, looking at the speck of sawdust in a brother's eye and failing to see the plank or beam in your own eyes. How many times have I have fallen short of God's glory by thinking too much about myself and not enough about other people?

I repeat this illustration we used recently about "The Little Engine that Could" for the sake of my children who are with us today. I recall your mom reading that book to you about the little engine that had to pull a load of toys over the mountain. Remember how she read to you with great drama and enthusiasm, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can." It is OK to encourage our children to try always do their best. But when it comes to our salvation we need to show them where they have failed. All of us are born believing in ourselves for our salvation, saying, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can." The Holy Spirit says with great power and conviction, "No, you can't. No, you can't." On Christ the solid I stand, All other ground is sinking sand, including trust in myself. Martin Luther fondly spoke of putting his trust in an alien righteousness, the solid rock of Christ and his righteousness.

Solid rock

The Apostle Paul tells us there is a righteous that is apart from the law that God has made known to us in his word. "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Christ Jesus to all who believe....All are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." Notice this important word justify. It has been my privilege to teach people for forty four years that this word as it is used in the Bible does not mean "make righteous." In Scripture it has the meaning of being declared righteous. To make righteous implies a process that is ongoing. To declare righteous is a pronouncement or proclamation. We build our lives on Christ and his proclamation "It is finished" and his resurrection that assures us this work has been perfectly and completely.

It is a privilege for all of us to tell ourselves week after week in our worship together that we have been declared righteous on the basis of what Christ has done for us. Faith takes a hold of this proclamation and believes it is true. God works through his word to have us build our lives on Jesus' death and resurrection. Last year we had a children's Bible camp with 80 children learning about Jesus as the rock of their salvation. They learned the song, "Living, loving, dying, rising, Jesus did it all for me."

Now let's take a closer look at verses 27 and 28 to see how our lives are built on the solid rock of Christ and his completed work. "Where then is boasting? It is excluded. On what

principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law." See the athlete celebrate the goal that was scored, or the basket made, or the home run, or the touchdown. When we come together week after week, we do not come to celebrate or boast about what a great job we are doing by keeping God's law. No, we come confessing our sin before God. But then we celebrate, oh how we celebrate what Christ has done. What a privilege it has been to assure people in the words of the absolution that their sins are forgiven in Christ. What a privilege it is to give people the very body and blood of Christ so they can be sure their sin is forgiven.

We sing hymns that boast in Christ and what he has done. It is OK to stand up and sing, "In Christ alone my hope is found." It is OK to sing, "Rock of Ages cleft for me." It is OK to loudly proclaim, "On Christ the solid rock I stand, All other ground is sinking sand." It is OK to triumphantly proclaim with Paul in Romans 8, "Nothing else in all creation will ever separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

What am I going to be doing with the rest of my life? What will you do with the rest of your life? I want Jesus to continue to use me to warn people about the danger of building their lives on sinking sand. I want Jesus to use me to point to him as the solid rock. I am sure that is your prayer also. Amen.