

If You Say So

In the name of him who was lifted up on the cross, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life, dear friends in Christ: In my previous incarnation as an Army officer, I learned like so many other soldiers before and after me to depend a lot on a simple four word phrase. It's: "If you say so." You see, when you're in a military chain of command you have to follow orders that come down from above. And sometimes the orders don't make a lot of sense. Sometimes they defy all logic, reason, and even the laws of physics and nature; but as long as they don't violate the Constitution, the law of the land, or the Uniform Code of Military Justice, you are duty bound to obey them. "Yes Sir. If you say so."

Now, it happens that for most of my service, I was blessed with commanding officers who would tolerate helpful suggestions. "Excuse me, Sir, but if we do what you just said, the following problems will arise: this, this, and this. Don't you think it would be better if we did it this other way instead?" Many disasters were avoided in that manner. However, it didn't always work that way. And sometimes the orders that didn't make any sense stood as they were given. The authority to make the decision rested with the commander. All we could do was say, "Yes Sir. If you say so." It's as the poem goes: "Theirs not to give reply, theirs not to reason why, theirs to do and die." That is the nature of military service.

The same is true wherever there's a clearly defined chain of command: in corporations, factories, businesses, schools, and even in the family. Take the last example: Dad and Mom are in charge. Period. And when children feel the need to practice their skills as budding lawyers by asking over and over again, "But *why*, Mom, *why* do we have to do thus and so?" The best answer is very often "Because I'm your mother and I said so." Done. End of discussion. Saves countless hours of needless stalling, whining, and negotiation – all of which are designed to undermine the authority of the parent in charge. Don't go down that road. Teach the kids to be good soldiers: "Yes Mam. If you say so." And in a case like that it's easy to see that the person in charge has experience and access to information far beyond that of the underlings. Parents do know better than their children. That's why God put them in charge. I have to confess that once in a blue moon it happened in the Army: even though the order appeared to defy all reason, the man in command knew what he was doing and it was the right thing to do.

And that brings me to today's Epistle lesson which is from Romans, the Apostle Paul's great explanation and defense of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As you can see, the section we heard comes from chapter four. And to fully appreciate what he's saying here, we have to back up and review how Paul has been building the argument up to this point.

In a nutshell, Paul begins by showing that the wrath of God is being poured out from heaven against all mankind for our sin and rebellion against him. There is no one who is innocent. The people of God, who were the Jews in Paul's day, had the commandments that God gave Moses. They knew what God demanded of them and that they failed to measure up to his perfect standards of behavior. Other people, Gentiles, didn't have God's commandments; but they did have laws. They understood the difference between right and wrong. And they too knew that at least some of the things they did were evil. So, whether someone had God's commands or not, it really didn't make any difference: they were still sinners. And sinners cannot stand in the judgment. God will condemn them. Only the righteous will be received by the Lord into Paradise. Paul uses this to demonstrate the futility of trying to make yourself

righteous by means of the Law. The Law, he says, can only condemn you. It can only show you your sin.

But then he goes on to explain that God has prepared another way for people to be righteous. It's not by the keeping the Law, it's rather by believing in the Gospel of Jesus Christ: the truth that God sent his Son into this world to live a perfect life in mankind's place; and then to take the world's sins on himself, to bear them to the cross, and there to suffer and die as the perfect substitute sacrifice. In this way the wrath and justice of God are both satisfied. Jesus keeps the Law for us – that makes God happy. And he's condemned for sin in our place – that ensures the Law against sin is kept. Jesus does it all. And now you can be righteous in God's sight not by doing what the Law says (we've already seen that doesn't work), but rather by having faith in what Jesus has done. It's a righteousness not of doing, but of believing.

So, if you're following Paul's discussion, at this point you're thinking, "Wait. Let me see if I've got this straight: even though I'm a sinner who does all kinds of unrighteous things that offend God, he nevertheless declares me to be righteous when I trust in Jesus and what he's done for my salvation. It doesn't make sense. How can God say I'm righteous when I know full well I'm a sinner?" To which Paul would respond, "That's the wrong answer. Consider who it is that's making the declaration: it's the Lord. When he says something, it's true. Don't fight it. Don't argue with it. Don't try to reason with it. When God says you are righteous by faith in Jesus, believe it. You say, 'Yes Sir, if you say so', because if God says it, it is so."

Now Paul knows that his Jewish readers in particular are going to have trouble with this concept. After all, they have God's revealed Word. They have the Law God handed down to Moses at Sinai. And they were pretty much addicted to the idea that they could keep it somehow well enough to be considered righteous on their own. Paul has successfully torpedoed that idea and sunk it; but it's hard for them to let it go and receive this radical new idea of being righteous by faith in Jesus. So to convince them, Paul pulls the preacher's trump card on them. He points them to the Bible. He shows them what God's Word actually says. And he demonstrates that this radically new idea of being righteous by faith isn't new at all. It's what God has been saying all along.

He starts with the story of Abram who was later renamed Abraham. This is important because the Jews revered him. He was to them, theologically speaking, even more important than Moses. We heard the story of Abraham's call as today's Old Testament lesson. And what the Jews would have pointed to was Abraham's absolute obedience. When God called him and told him to pack up his stuff and head out to the Promised Land, he did what he was told. He was righteous in the sight of God because he was obedient. And we his children can be too.

But Paul explains that's not what the Scripture says. When Abraham was called by God he was given many wonderful promises. God said he would bless him, make his name great, make of him a great nation, and bless all nations on earth through him – which means he would bring the Savior into the world through his descendants. The Lord also promised to give the land of Canaan to the descendants of Abraham. And lured by these promises Abraham went – even though it really didn't make a lot of sense.

You see, when God called him, Abraham was 75 years old. His wife, Sarah, was 65. They'd probably been married for fifty years. They had done very well for themselves; made a small fortune. They had flocks and herds and servants and money to burn. But they didn't have any children. And what they longed for most was to hold a son in their aching empty arms. And that's why they went. God promised them many descendants – which meant that they first

had to have a son. They believed that the Lord would give them one. It wasn't obedience that led Abraham out of where he was living to go to Canaan; it was faith: faith in a promised son.

But the Lord didn't give him one; not at first, anyway. After they'd been living for ten years in Canaan, there was still no sign of Sarah becoming pregnant. Apparently when they left, they still considered it a remote possibility. But now with Sarah 75 years old, all indications of fertility had long since ceased. Abraham was heartbroken. He believed that God had let him down. Abraham figured the only way to make the promise come true would be for him to adopt his head servant. Then, in a legal sense if not biologically, he'd have a son. And through that son he could have many descendants. But he felt gyped. He felt he'd been lied to.

And that's when the Lord appeared to him again and told him to stop doubting. He told Abraham to forget about the adoption. "I'm going to give you a son from your own body." And then he told Abraham to step outside and try to count the stars – impossible because they are so numerous. The Lord said, "So shall your offspring be."

Now, that made even less sense than before. It was against reason. It was against logic. It was against nature. But God said so. And the Scripture says, "Abraham believed God, and he counted it to him as righteousness." Again, Paul stresses, it wasn't what he did that made him righteous in the sight of God; it was what he believed – namely in the child of promise God would later give him through whom an even greater Child of Promise would come.

To press the point home, Paul speaks of David, another great hero of the Jews. He was the shepherd boy who killed the giant. He became a great king, unified the nation, and destroyed many enemies. Surely his deeds made him a righteous man, right? Well, no. He was also an adulterer and murderer. David knew very well that he was a wretched sinner in the sight of God, which is why he didn't write in the psalm, "Blessed is the man who obeys the Lord perfectly", but rather "Blessed is the man whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin." David understood that it wasn't his doing that made him righteous before God, but his believing in what God had done for him to take away his sin.

Paul caps the argument by explaining that if there is any hope of salvation for us, it has to be this way. No one keeps the Law. It can only bring God's wrath on us. But if righteousness and salvation are matters to be obtained by grace through faith, then they're available to everyone – everyone who hears the Gospel and believes what God has done in Christ to save us. That is how God shows his great love and mercy: by sending his Child of Promise to work salvation for us. We receive that salvation when we hear and believe the Good News. God says you're righteous by faith in Christ. We respond: "Yes, Lord. If you say so."

Oh that all Christians would. I recently read a story about a man who in middle part of the last century lived on Corsica, which is an island off the coast of Italy. It's north of Sicily, and like that place has a reputation for having problems with organized crime. Anyway, this man was a faithful member of the church. Every Sunday he'd attend, taking his little granddaughter with him. He'd participate in the liturgy, confess his sins, hear the readings and sermon, take communion, all of it. But unfortunately, he understood that doing all that is what made him righteous in God's sight. He was a Christian because he acted like a Christian. Well, it seems that there was a large life-sized crucifix over the altar. The corpus, that is the representation of the Jesus' body, was particularly stunning. And no matter where you stood in the sanctuary, you had the sensation that this image of Jesus on the cross was looking directly at you.

Well it happened that one day the man stopped going to church. The granddaughter thought it was odd at first, since he'd been so faithful in attendance. After several weeks she asked him what the problem was. He replied, "I've done a terrible thing. I killed a man. And now I can't bear going back into that church and see Jesus looking at me."

Sad, isn't it? He missed the point entirely. And I believe that man's situation is far from unique. So many within the church, who are surrounded by the message of the Gospel, and who participate in the Sacraments that Christ has given for our assurance, still don't believe. That man looked into the face of Jesus and saw judgment. He imagined he heard Jesus saying to him, "After all I've done for you, that's how you repay me? How dare you come in here? Get out!" He used reason. He used logic. He used what made sense according to nature. He used the Law. And he was condemned.

The trouble is that he didn't listen to or believe what Jesus actually said: "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they do". "The Son of Man came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." "Come to me you who are weak and heavy burdened, and I will give you rest." "God loved the world so that he gave his Son, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." Nor did he believe what Jesus was continuing to say to him through the minister: "I forgive you all your sins." "Take, eat. This is my body given for you. Take, drink. This is my blood shed for the forgiveness of your sins." He couldn't simply say, "Yes Lord, if you say so."

Let it never be said of us. The Word of God does not operate according to man's reason, logic, or understanding of nature. It operates in power according to the love, mercy, and truth of God. When God says, "Let there be", there is. When God says to the dead, "Arise", they do. And when God says that you are righteous on account of your faith in Jesus and his work of salvation, it's true. Your response can only be, "Yes, Lord, not only if you say so; but because you say so." In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!