

[On Romans 3: a chapter from one of my books that covers much of the ground]

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Chapter Two

Batting 1.000 in the Game of Life

In Chapter One we learned that the only way to a genuine sense of self-worth is through a relationship with Jesus. All other substitutes for a sense of value will not satisfy in the long run. And it is only through such a sense of value that we can become the kind of people we need to be and want to be.

This leaves us with the crucial question. How can we get into that kind of relationship with Jesus? How can we come into an acceptable standing before God? How can we know when we are right with God? What must we do in order that we might have eternal life? (Matt 19:16) The obvious answer from a human perspective is: make no mistakes! Live an irreproachable life. Live fault-free. Then God will have to accept us! But logical as this approach may seem, there are serious problems with it. In this chapter we will take another look at one of the clearest texts in the Bible on this subject. Unless the “gospel” that we believe and share is solidly grounded in God’s revelation, we may find ourselves falling back into traps of illusion. And we cannot expect secular people to give up their illusions for something even less certain! So let’s take a fresh at what the Bible calls “salvation.”

Make No Mistakes!

The Christian life is a lot like baseball-- at least that has been true in my experience. We often get up in the morning, determined to bat a thousand today (for those readers who may be intellectually challenged where sports are concerned, batting 1.000 [pronounced “a thousand”] means hitting the ball safely every time you get up, something that rarely happens in a single game, much less over a season or a career). We may think to ourselves, “Today I’m going to be really nice to the spouse and real patient with the kids. Today I’m going to think only nice thoughts about the boss.” And if it is Sabbath, we plan to think only about amazing grace and never about Mark Grace (a well-known Chicago Cubs baseball player).

Then evening comes and we realize that we have fallen way short of our intentions again. So we begin to beat up on ourselves. We start saying things like, “What difference does it make to be a Christian after all, am I never going to change?”

No wonder there are so many long-faced Christians! How could anyone possibly rejoice in the context of continual failure and frustration? I mean life is a real battle. I can understand Christians who feel they have no time to smile, no time to celebrate. I can understand such Christians because it is my battle, too. I am battling, and I get bruised every day, and I have not hit a thousand yet.

One Sabbath, however, I was determined to do it. I got up long before the rest of the family, I spent an hour in devotions, got myself prepared for Sabbath, had my multi-grain breakfast cereal, and gently awakened the family so that my wife could take care of her own needs. I then got the kids washed, dressed, and fed. We made it to Sabbath School on time without a single word of frustration. I was feeling real good that Sabbath morning. Until little Kimberly’s Sabbath School teacher came up to me and said,

“You dressed Kimberly this morning, didn’t you?”

I said, “Yes, I did,” with just a touch of pride. I thought she would think, “Wow, what a man,” but instead she stated evenly, “She has her shoes on backwards” (left for right). So much for batting a thousand that Sabbath day! While the infraction itself may seem trivial, the reversal of shoes triggered in me all the sense of failure that a more serious infraction would have.

Paul and Baseball: A Two-fold Problem

In the Book of Romans, Paul summed up the deeper picture of human existence. He never played baseball but he seems to have understood exactly what I am talking about. In Rom. 3:23 he described the fundamental problem of human life in a few short words:

“For all have sinned
and fall short of the glory of God . . .” (Rom 3:23)

If you have followed baseball at all, you’ll know that no one ever bats 1.000 for more than a game or two. Actually most players feel real good if they bat as high as .300 (pronounced “three hundred”) over the course of a season. Mark Grace is currently one of the better baseball hitters. For his entire career he has batted around .315. That means that he succeeds in batting safely about 30% of the time and fails about 70% of the time. The most successful hitter of all time was Ty Cobb; he batted .367 over the length of his career. Even Ty Cobb failed nearly twice as often as he succeeded.

What Paul tells us in Rom 3:23 underlines the point that life is a lot like baseball. Just as even the best of baseball players succeeds occasionally in the midst of general failure, so Paul expresses an indictment on all humanity when he says, “All have sinned.” In the original language the word for “sinned” is an *aorist indicative*, which in this sentence expresses that sin is characteristic of our entire past history seen as a whole. We all have a past record which we wish did not exist. Every one of us has made plenty of “outs” in the course of our career. There are no exceptions to this rule outside of Jesus Himself. This is why “every human mouth needs to be closed and the whole world made accountable to God.” (Rom 3:19) This is why the “works of the law” cannot be the basis for anyone to get right with God. (Rom 3:20) Everyone has made sufficient mistakes to come under the law’s condemnation. Batting a perfect 1.000 is the requirement and no one has ever met that requirement. Anyone who has reached adulthood has made enough mistakes to be forever doomed in the eyes of the law.

But the problem is far more serious than even that. Even if somehow that past record could be forgiven, it still wouldn’t be enough. Paul goes on to say that we all “fall short of the glory of God.” This means that even if we could get a fresh start, our best deeds aren’t good enough to meet the standard. In the original language the verb translated “fall short” is a *present continuous* tense. This emphasizes the continuous nature of our falling short. The inadequacy of even the good things that we do is ongoing and constant. All continually fall short of the glory of God. This makes it clear that, just like baseball players who bat .200, .300, or even .400, even our best efforts fall far short of the ideal. Every one of us continually fails to bat a thousand in the Christian life, we all continually fall short of the glory of God.

It may seem trivial of God to expect that human beings somehow live up to His standards of character. After all, He is God and we are humans. But I believe that Paul’s point here is a practical one. He is affirming what we already sense deep inside. With few exceptions, most people sense that they are not living up to their own standards of right and wrong, much less God’s! How do I know? Whenever we criticize others, we are raising the bar for our own

performance. If we think a thought or action is wrong in another, we sense that it is equally wrong in ourselves as well. Paul here is helping people avoid a false sense of self-worth, one based on an inadequate concept of human responsibility.

In Romans 3:23, then, Paul identifies two realities in our lives that make it impossible for us to be saved on the basis of our own efforts. (1) We all have a past record of sinful thoughts and acts that we cannot take back. We have all at some time rebelled against God; we have all done actions that reflect our natural enmity with Him (Rom 8:7). (2) Even our best efforts in the present, even our good deeds, fall short of the ideal that God has held out before us. We have not only failed to keep His ten commandment law, but also in the perfect example of Jesus' earthly life. If, therefore, my *performance* is the basis on which I get right with God, my situation and that of all humanity (Rom 1:18 - 3:20) is hopeless. There has got to be some other way to attain to the favor of God and enter into a relationship with Him. And, thank God, there is.

Being Justified Before God

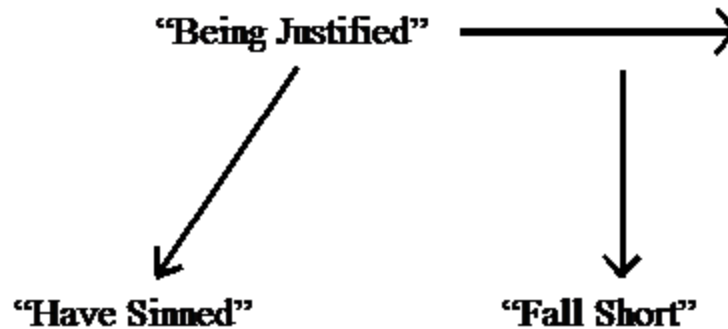
Paul doesn't waste any time getting right to the solution. He summarizes it simply and clearly in Rom 3:24. He tells us how God treats people who have sinned in the past and who continually fall short of His glory:

“Being justified freely by His grace
through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.” (Rom 3:24)

When Paul speaks of “being justified,” he is concerned with how a person fares under the scrutiny of God in the final judgment at the end of history (Rom 2:12-13; 3:6,19-20). In that context the connection between verses 23 and 24 is startling. In fact, it is so startling that some critical scholars suggest that verse 23 was not original with Paul but must have been added later by an editor who misunderstood Paul. The biblical message sometimes seems too good to be true. But since there is no evidence that anyone has tampered with this text, we must assume that Rom 3:23-24 expresses the message that Paul intended.

Speaking of those who “have sinned and continually fall short of the glory of God,” Paul describes them as “being justified.” “Being justified” is a present participle in the original language. According to basic Greek grammars, the time of a participle is understood as relative to the time of the main verb. In this case the main verb is compound; “have sinned” and “fall short.” The action of a present participle occurs at the same time as the main verbs. We “are being justified” not only in relation to our sins of the past, but also in relation to our continually falling short in the present! This is incredibly good news!

The sin problem is a two-fold one, therefore, the solution must also be a two-fold one. We all have a sorry record that needs to be forgiven. We all are also daily doing things that fall short of the glory of God. Justification solves both problems. It covers the sins of the *past* and it also covers the falling short in the *present*. In Romans 4 Paul describes these two aspects of justification further. To those, like David, who have done terrible sins, God offers forgiveness (Rom 4:6-8). To those who, like Abraham, have done plenty of good things but are still short of the mark, there comes an accounting of righteousness from God (Rom 4:1-5). I would illustrate the two-fold nature of this justification as follows:



The “being justified” of Rom 3:24 indicates that God looks back on the sinful record of our past and forgives it. But the justification that Paul speaks about is not merely a one-time act that leaves us to our own devices from then on. The “being justified” remains in place as a continual upgrading of our best efforts. “Justification” not only forgives the record of the past, it makes up the difference between our best efforts and God’s high and holy standards. We stand right with God, therefore, not just for the moment when we are forgiven, but continually through the ongoing imputation of His righteousness to our daily actions. What good news! Our standing with God is not subject to the ups and downs of our daily obedience, but to the ongoing nature of His perfect righteousness!

To readers from an Adventist background this may sound startling or new. So let me share a few statements from the writings of Ellen White that show that this view of getting right with God is not a new one to Seventh-day Adventist thought. The first two statements deal with the inadequacy of even our good deeds for pleasing God:

“The religious services, the prayers, the praise, the penitent confession of sin ascend from true believers as incense to the heavenly sanctuary, but passing through the corrupt channels of humanity, they are so defiled that unless purified by blood, they can never be of value with God. They ascend not in spotless purity, and unless the Intercessor, who is at God’s right hand, presents and purifies all by His righteousness, it is not acceptable to God. . . .

“Oh, that all may see that everything in obedience, in penitence, in praise and thanksgiving, must be placed upon the glowing fire of the righteousness of Christ.”

Ellen White, Selected Messages, vol. 1, p. 344

Even the finest and most God-honoring actions that we could conceive (obedience, praise, prayer) need the addition of Christ’s perfect righteousness in order to be acceptable to God. Even in our worship we “continually fall short of the glory of God.” The next statement underlines the fact that our completeness only comes in Christ.

“When it is in the heart to obey God, when efforts are put forth to this end, Jesus accepts this disposition and effort as man’s best service, and He makes up for the deficiency with His own divine merit.”

Ellen White, Selected Messages, vol. 1, p. 382

A similar statement follows:

“The soul who sees Jesus by faith, repudiates his own righteousness. He sees himself as incomplete, his repentance insufficient, his strongest faith but feebleness, his most costly sacrifice as meager, and he sinks in humility at the foot of the cross. But a voice speaks to him

from the oracles of God's Word. In amazement he hears the message, 'Ye are complete in Him.' Now all is at rest in his soul."

Ellen White, Faith and Works, pp. 107-108

Ellen White rightly emphasized the importance of obedience as a response to the mighty work of God in our lives. But these statements make it clear that such obedience can *never* be the basis upon which we become acceptable to God. The decisive work of salvation must come from outside of us. Ellen White and Paul are not in contradiction to each other.

Let's get back to Romans 3. On what basis can God justify those who have sinned and continually fall short of His glory? How can He justify the ungodly (Rom 4:5) without going contrary to his own character? How can God acquit messed-up people in the final judgment of earth's history? Paul summarizes God's strategy for justifying sinners in three parts. We are being justified by grace, in Jesus Christ and through faith. Notice what the text says:

"For all have sinned
and fall short of the glory of God,
Being justified freely by His grace
through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus:
Whom God set forth as a sacrificial atonement
through faith in his blood. . ."
Rom 3:23-25

By Grace

The first part of the divine strategy that Paul is laying out in Romans 3 is that we're saved by grace, "freely." The word translated "freely" is found also in John 15:25. There Jesus says, "They hated Me without a cause." The phrase "without a cause" translates the exact same Greek word as is translated "freely" in Rom 3:24. Jesus was hated without a cause. In other words, He did absolutely nothing to deserve people's hate. Similarly, our justification is "without a cause." We have done nothing to deserve being justified. We are justified "without a cause" by His grace.

The word grace in the original language is related to the word for "gift". How much do you do to earn a gift? If it is a gift, you didn't do anything. It was given freely, without a cause, sometimes for no reason but that the person likes you or cares about you. In other words, grace is a quality that is in God's heart, not ours. No amount of believing, obeying, repenting, or obeying causes God to regard us as just or righteous. His grace itself is the reason for showering His salvation upon us. And that grace isn't a one time act. We are "being" justified without a cause, by His grace. The grace is as continual as the justification is. As continual as the falling short of the glory of God!

That means that throughout this life we stand justified freely by grace. Are you glad? I certainly am. I recognize every day that I am a fallible human being. I am a person who doesn't live up to my own standards, much less those of others, in spite of my best efforts. My intentions can all be in the right direction but when the end of that day comes, I have not batted 1.000 that day and I know it. So when I kneel down at the side of my bed, I thank God that the Bible makes it clear that I am justified freely by God's grace, continually. Grace is not about something that I have done but about something that God has chosen to shower upon me. Ellen

G. White used the term “unmerited favor” as a definition for grace, in other words, I did nothing to deserve God’s favor. God looks upon us favorably without our even deserving it - that is what grace is all about. But the news about grace gets even better. This continual grace lasts a long, long time. All the way to the Second Coming. The next time you look at the book Great Controversy, check out page 641, where Ellen White describes Jesus Christ coming in the clouds. God’s people are looking up and seeing Him coming. What are they saying as Jesus approaches on the clouds? Are they saying, “Well it’s about time! I’ve been batting 1.000 now for the last 25 years, so I know I am ready”? Absolutely not. The last thing on their minds as Jesus approaches is their own readiness to receive Him! Instead they cry out, “Who shall be able to stand?” These are the people of God, not the wicked ones who have just cried for the rocks and mountains to fall on them. Even the righteous at the time of the Second Coming feel unworthy to live in the presence of this incredible glory. What does Jesus say to them? “My grace is sufficient for you.” At the second coming!!

Dear reader, if we can rejoice in His grace at the second coming, do you think it might be legal to do a little bit of rejoicing today? We might even be able to smile now and then, even on days when we bat something like .148, like I do sometimes. Jesus says, “My grace is sufficient for you.” To me this is absolutely fantastic!! And this grace is not only sufficient, it is bestowed without a cause. I have everything I need because God cared enough to give it to me. I don’t deserve it, and in some sense I will never deserve it, but God bestows it without a cause.

So Paul opens his discussion of the grounds of our salvation with the assertion that it is by grace. But Paul doesn’t stop with step one. If Paul had stopped at step one, he would have left the impression that God is like an indulgent parent, and I have to be honest with you, I don’t particularly care for indulgent parents.

I remember a time when I was in a grocery store and saw this little kid knocking things down from the shelves, getting in the way, and making all kinds of mess and trouble. I was starting to grit my teeth in frustration when I saw the mom come along. But instead of taking control of the situation, she smiled at me and said, “Oh, isn’t he cute?” Well, I didn’t think he was so cute. And I wondered what kind of adult he would become as a result of that kind of parenting. That mother was sending her kid the message that it doesn’t matter what you do, follow your heart, everything that comes natural is OK. And we know the destructive consequences of that kind of parenting style.

In Christ

So Paul’s doctrine of the grounds for justification doesn’t stop with step one. We are justified by grace, freely, without a cause. But while grace costs us nothing, it cost Him everything. Notice Rom 3:24 once more.

“Being justified freely by His grace
through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.”

Grace is freely bestowed but in another sense it isn’t free. We are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that came in Christ Jesus. In other words, we are not only justified by grace, we are also justified in Christ through the redemption which He accomplished on the cross. Romans tells us that God presented Him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in His blood. We are justified not only by grace, we are also justified by blood.

Grace tells us that salvation is without a cause in me. There is no cause in me that God would shower His love upon me. But blood tells me that salvation is not cheap, it cost Him

everything! Grace, according to John 1:17, came by Jesus Christ. The indulgent parent illustration is not enough. If you only preach grace and never blood, then grace will result in presumption and permissiveness. We must understand that grace comes at the cost of the infinite life of the Son of God.

According to the Bible, the Law and its consequences still stand, the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23). Human action has led us to the place where we cannot fix ourselves. We cannot make ourselves right with God. Once that law is broken, once a person has made just a single “out,” the law can never be kept perfectly. From that time on doing right, obedience, can never become the basis for one’s acceptance with God. While such a rapid judgment may seem harsh and unbending, the reality is that once you start down the road of disobedience, it rarely ends with just one offense. One “sin” leads to another until we lose discernment between right and wrong.

So there is no human way out for the sinner. You have to bat 1.000 to be saved, according to the law. And even if a human being, or even an angel, succeeded in perfectly living out the laws of the universe, their obedience could only save themselves. It would be in response to their own obligation.

But I have good news. There is One whose nature transcends the limitations of humanity. He is the very one who made the law. The story of the cross is the story of a God who came down to earth and assumed the limitations of human nature. In this divine-human person both God and the human race are perfectly represented. In the perfect obedience of the man, Jesus, the whole human race participated. To all those who “fall short of the glory of God,” Jesus offers the gift of His own perfect righteousness, earned in 33 years of perfect obedience here on earth.

But that raises an interesting question. How could the actions of one single man be counted equal with the actions of so many billions of people? How could one die in place of so many? How could one man’s acts of righteousness atone for so many sinful and imperfect acts? What kind of celestial compounding is taking place in the divine equation of salvation?

Let me ask a question that may seem unrelated for the moment. Which is greater on a scale, artists or their artwork? The answer should be obvious. Long before any piece of art ever existed in stone or on canvas, it was conceived in an artist’s mind. If something would happen to the art, the original artist would be capable of reproducing it. The artist is greater than the art.

Visiting St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome some time ago, I remember Michelangelo’s beautiful statue, the Pieta, to the right hand side near the back of the nave. The marble sculpture shows a seated Mary holding in her lap the broken body of Jesus, taken down from the cross. The artistry is beyond magnificence, the very stone seems alive with motion. It is an authentic description of how the artist imagined the original scene.

One day a madman hid a hammer under his jacket and entered the cathedral. He approached the statue, whipped out his hammer and began smashing it— blow after blow. First, one of Mary’s arms fell to the ground, then her nose was shattered. Finally, shocked onlookers restrained the man before further damage could be done. The greatest sculptors of Italy were called together to restore the priceless piece. Some eight weeks they worked diligently, they desperately sought to restore the Pieta to its original beauty. Finally, the leader of the artists broke down in tears and said, “If only Michelangelo himself were here, he would know what to do.”

Who is greater? The creation or its Creator? Once again the answer is obvious. Jesus is clearly greater than the creation. Not only did He make the moral law of the universe, He also made the entire universe. This explains why it was not sufficient for an angel to die for us. It

had to be the Creator. How much value, then, does Christ have? He is worth the entire universe, because He is the One who made it all! When Jesus died on the cross, a value equal to the entire universe was in play. As long as Jesus is the Creator, His death on the cross atones for every sin that ever was committed or ever could be committed. He is equal in value to all there is.

Some time ago I spent a month traveling throughout Europe to a number of ministers' meetings. On the way home my baggage was lost, so I arrived without my socks and underwear! A day later my family and I set out for a lengthy tour of the American West. Before we left I bought a new set of socks and underwear. While crossing the North American continent I kept phoning the airline to find out where my baggage was. "Probably in Copenhagen," they said, and that wasn't encouraging. Why am I telling you this? Because I was thoroughly impressed with the immensity of this great planet. Europe is vast enough by itself, but when I got back to the United States I discovered another great continent.

I was impressed with the enormity of the task of creation. The circumference of the earth's surface is 24,000. It would take at least a month to drive all the way around if one could! So vast is the world and Jesus Christ made it all. And yet this planet is only a mere speck in the vastness of the universe. Our nearest neighbor in space, the moon, is about 240,000 miles away. It takes light about a second and a half to pass from the earth to the moon.

Compare that with the vastness of the universe. It takes light more than ten billion years to reach us from the further reaches of what we have so far discovered about our universe. And Jesus made the entire universe; every galaxy, every planet (John 1:3). He is equal in value to every bit of it, and yet He chose to come down to this earth and to obey God perfectly for us. He came down and received the full consequence of our sin: eternal death, permanent extinction. At the cross, the sins of the entire universe were rolled onto Christ.

At the cross we discover infinite suffering, infinite humiliation, and infinite rejection. No one will ever be able to know what it meant for the Creator to be nailed to a cross, reserved for criminals, by his very own created beings! But by enduring the ultimate agony, He was atoning for the sins and shortcomings of His entire universe. Somehow "in Christ" God has the legal right to count every sinner righteous before Him. This can be explained in different ways. People talk about substitutionary atonement, representative atonement, demonstrative atonement, and other ways of describing this transaction. But this much is perfectly clear. What God did in Christ is sufficient to place me in an entirely new relationship to Him. Because of the cross, God has every right to count me righteous before Him. My old record is gone. A new and perfect record has taken its place. My best current efforts are acceptable to Him. And what Christ did is sufficient in value to redeem not just me, but the entire universe.

In human terms it may be impossible to adequately explain exactly how and why the great exchange between Christ and us takes place. But the following story helps a little bit for me, although I have not been able to verify every detail of it. I share it as a path to understanding. During the American Civil War the early Adventist believers ran into a problem when they came to the conviction that military combat was inappropriate to Christian experience. Somehow Adventist young people needed to find a way in which they could serve this country without being involved in combat.

The US government, fortunately, had a special plan for young people like that: if you could find a substitute who would be willing to go to war in your place, you wouldn't have to go yourself. There was a young Adventist who was called to serve in the army of the North. He happened to have a friend who was eager to help put an end to the rebellion! So the Adventist

youth allowed his friend to join the Union Army in his place. A short time later the friend was killed at the battle of Shiloh.

About a year later, a letter came from the draft board informing our young Adventist that he had been drafted once again. He sent a reply letter advising the authorities that he could not be drafted because he was dead. The authorities had never gotten a letter like that before because the dead usually don't write! So they took the young man to court. The amazing thing is that he won the case. The court ruled that when his personal substitute died at Shiloh, this young person himself died to the draft. It was legally as if he himself was there and lost his own life. As inadequate as this analogy may be, it helps me understand how the death of one could be accepted in place of another. Somehow, "in Christ," God has found the way to count all of us righteous before Him.

Paul talks about the great gospel transaction in these terms:

"He was made sin for us,
even though he did not know sin,
in order that we might become the righteousness of God
in him."

2 Cor 5:21

This text tells me that, in Christ, God is fully able to count us righteous before Him. In some mysterious way, what God did on the cross produced a great exchange for the human race. While the text doesn't explain the process as clearly as we might like, this much is clear. We don't have to remain in the condition of "having sinned and falling short." We can be right with God now. We can rejoice in who we are as a result of what Christ has done. To repeat Paul's language again, we are not only justified by grace, we are also justified in Christ.

If Paul had stopped here, he would have left the impression that everyone will be saved. Why? We are saved by grace and God showers His grace upon all. We're also saved by the blood of Christ, and He died for all. His death had a value equal to the entire universe. This leaves no one out. It includes everyone who ever lived. Everyone has been atoned for on the cross in Christ. Does this mean that everyone will be "saved" whether or not they want to be?

Through Faith

While everyone has been atoned for, not everyone will reap the benefits. For everyone to be "saved," actually, would be a bad idea for several reasons. (1) If all sinners were accepted by God, without any change in attitude or character, it would introduce sin, chaos and fear to the entire universe throughout eternity. A universe that goes on for ever in the kind of chaos we live with today is not very attractive. The day must come when sin is brought to an end.

(2) Saving unreconstructed sinners would be bad for the sinners, too. Can you imagine unreformed alcoholics being forced to live forever in a place without bars or package stores? Compulsive gamblers forced to live without casinos and lotteries? That might be worse than hell for them, and God has no intention of turning heaven into hell.

(3) Saving everyone would also be bad idea because God respects human freedom. If there are people who do not want a relationship with God, God will not force it on them. God will not save everyone, because He respects people's freedom to choose whether or not they wish to be saved. And so Paul in Romans 3 has one more thing to say about the way people come into a justified relationship with God. Justification is said to occur by grace and in Christ. But there is a third aspect to this issue of justification and it is found in verse 25:

“Being justified freely by His grace
through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus:
whom God appointed ahead of time
as an atoning sacrifice
through faith in his blood . . .”
Romans 3:24-25

Paul argues that we are not only justified by grace and in Christ, but that we are also justified through “faith.” Whatever Paul meant by “faith” here, it is not the ground of salvation. It cannot earn our justification, not in any way. We are justified because of something that happened in the heart of God (grace), and because of something that was done in Christ on the cross. Salvation never comes to a person because that person deserves it. Salvation is by grace and in Christ. Yet Paul says we are also justified through faith. The three pre-requisites by which people are justified are, then, by grace, in Christ, and through faith.

To be justified by faith means that even though grace and the blood of Christ provide all the ground we need to get right with God, it is still something that we have to consciously desire and choose. Faith is not a work, it is a gift. And yet, faith is something that you exercise in the same way that you put your hand out to receive a gift. If you put your hand behind your back, you don’t receive the gift. Faith is a gift but it has to be exercised. It is a capacity that is granted yet it is also a choice that must be put into practice.

What then is faith and how do I know when I have it? Saving faith is not a work, yet it never comes without works. Works are the evidence that our faith is genuine. When we have faith in Christ, faith in a justifying God, something happens to us as well. We’re saved by faith alone, apart from works of law, but saving faith is never alone. Faith is more than just a mere mental assent to the gift of salvation. It is a daring trust in God. Faith means staking your life on God, saying “God, I’m going to accept your salvation, no matter where it leads me and no matter what the cost.” Salvation is free but it leaves us changed people.

The best illustration I have ever seen of faith is the story of a French tight-rope walker named Blondin, who strung up a cable across Niagara Falls. In front of an audience he walked across the chasm on the cable and returned. Everybody cheered. Then he said, “How many of you think I could walk across the falls pushing a wheel barrow?” He did that successfully too, and everybody cheered again. Now he asked, “How many of you think I could make it across and back with a man in the wheel barrow?” Just about everyone raised their hands, because his skill was obvious. But when he then asked who would be the first to climb in the wheel barrow, all the hands came down.

Do you see the difference? One type of faith says, “Yes, I think you can do it”. The other type of faith stakes its life on that opinion. Saving faith means that we stake our life on what God has done for us in Christ. When saving faith becomes a part of our lives, then everything we do, say or live for is related to Christ. True faith is more than just a casual decision; true faith takes hold of us-- body, soul, and spirit. True faith becomes the central focus of our lives.

That’s the reason why, even though salvation is free, many people don’t want it. They don’t want to give their lives over to someone else. They want to stay at the center of their personal universes. But for everyone who is willing to exchange the life they have for something better, the news is good. Jesus never fails to respond to that kind of willingness. If you tell Jesus that you want Him to be at the center of your universe, He will come without condition. You didn’t

bat 1.000? He did. When your best efforts fall short of the glory of God, you can still rejoice, because you know that His best efforts are more than good enough.

But being saved by faith does not mean that it no longer matters what we do. Faith is never separated from the whole person. Those who are saved by faith become changed people. The decisions they make from that day forward are different decisions. Faith means you get into that wheel barrow and you go with Him— wherever He leads.

The Practice of Faith

How do we respond to what Christ has done for us in practice, in the real world? How do I actually go about starting a relationship with God? What does it mean to respond to God's mighty act of salvation at the cross? What does it mean in practice to be justified by grace, in Christ, and through faith? I would like to suggest a few practical steps.

(1) *Acknowledge your need.* We need to realize and freely admit that we haven't batted a thousand or even come close. Unless we do that, we can never come to Christ. That is the difference between a Pharisee and a publican. Pharisees have confidence in the quality of their "batting" efforts, publicans know that they are stuck in the minor leagues. They know that they need Christ if they are ever going to make it in this life or the next.

How can we become more aware of our need for God? Reading the Bible makes us aware of the kinds of things that tripped up the saints back then. The Bible portrays the deeds of its characters honestly, the good, the bad and the ugly. Reading about David and Moses and Peter helps us become more aware of our own shortcomings. It is also helpful to pray that God will open up your self-understanding. Some have found it helpful to develop a spiritual diary where they record the things that they learn about themselves from God and from the experiences of life. Consult also with trusted friends (more on these strategies in the last chapter of this book). The path to salvation begins with an awareness of our own need.

(2) *Desire and accept what Christ has done.* Drink in the incredible value that has been assigned to you at the cross. And you can have all that value today. You don't have to wait until you have "earned" it. If you realize as you read this that you are not in Christ, that you are batting .240, that there is no chance you will ever make it by your own efforts, you don't need to remain out of touch with Christ's grace and blood a moment longer. You can choose to accept what He has done for you right now.

Do you really want to be right with God? Are you afraid of what you might lose? You are not alone. Nearly everyone is somewhat divided inside over the question of salvation. Part of you knows that you are in a mess and you want desperately to get out of it. The rest of you clings to the mess and ticks off all the advantages of being in a mess! Take hold of that part of you that wants to be right with God, the part that wants to do God's will. Pray that God will give you a love for Him, a love for salvation, a love for the truth, no matter what the cost (more on this later in the book). I have found that when people pray that way, God provides. Accepting salvation involves cost, but the joy and freedom that comes from being right with God is worth whatever one might have to give up.

(3) *Rejoice in what God has done for you.* There's no reason to walk around with a long face when you realize that you are saved by grace in Christ. No matter where you've been or what you've done, God has done more than enough to save you. That is worth celebrating for the rest of your life!

But how do you maintain such an attitude of gratitude in a very cynical world? By developing an attitude of gratitude. There are thousands of good things in our lives that we have

never thanked God for. When we learn to focus our attention on these things more than on all the frustrations of life, we will have much more joy and much more faith (more on this in the next chapter)!

(4) *Let every act of your life demonstrate your loyalty and trust in Him.* Good deeds and faithful works are never the basis for your salvation, but they are the glorious result of that salvation. When you know that you are saved and when you know that you can smile in Christ, it becomes so much easier to be all that you can be for Christ. It becomes a joy to serve and to bless others. It becomes a joy to share the faith that energizes you everywhere you go.

And forget about the batting average from here on, let God count the batting averages. In Christ our best efforts are acceptable to God. In Christ we are batting 1.000 today, tomorrow and the next day, regardless of how we feel. And as we strive in Christ to make our lives more and more similar to the way He sees us, real changes will come. Our changing lives are a natural response to an incredible salvation that is free and available right now.

How is your life going right now? Are you finding yourself frustrated from day to day by your own shortcomings? The best way to know that you are living by batting averages and not by grace is how you respond to others. If your natural response to most of life's situations is to be critical, bitter, and constantly putting other people down, that is a sign that you're living by your batting average. If you know that you are batting .214 and you can find someone who is batting .188, it is natural to look at them and say, "What's your problem?" The critical and faultfinding spirit is the clearest indication that we are living by our batting average and not by grace. The person who lives by grace knows two things: 1) I don't deserve it and therefore I cannot point a finger at anyone else, and

2) in Christ I *have* it anyway, so I no longer need to build myself up by criticizing others.

Summary Reflections On Two Chapters

Let me tie the biblical concepts in this chapter to the more behavioral categories of the previous one. All of us, as sinners in the biblical sense, are trying to secure a life independent of God. But life without God, without His cleansing and his acceptance, results in an insecure sense of self-worth. So to cover our insecurity, we construct a belief system that will give us worth. We attribute value to what we have, what we have achieved, and who we know. Possessions, performance and people become the basis upon which we feel good about ourselves.

This is not only true of secular people, practicing Christians are vulnerable to this as well. We may even use our spiritual achievements as a measure of self-worth. When Christians are not sure whether God loves them and accepts them in Christ, they can be even more insecure than secular people, because they know the high standards of performance taught in the Bible.

The problem is that whenever we turn away from God's grace and try to build ourselves up through our own efforts (whether secular or religious) we will always feel superior or inferior to others. We feel superior when things are going well, or when we compare ourselves with the "losers" of our society. When we feel superior we take comfort in the fact that we are not as "bad" as others. But our confidence is misplaced and plunges us into a self-justifying illusion. On the other hand, we feel inferior whenever we fail to live up to our own standards, or whenever we come in contact with the "superstars" of achievement in our environment. While this inferiority is closer to reality than an phony superiority, it robs us of the confidence we need to make a positive difference in the world. When we live outside of God's acceptance, whether

Christian or secular, we tend to swing back and forth between an illusory superiority and a depressing inferiority.

The gospel dispels this game. It creates a new self-image. The gospel humbles us in the presence of others, because it teaches us that we are sinners saved only by grace. At the same time, it emboldens us before others when we realize that we are loved and honored by the only eyes in the universe that really count. The gospel gives us both boldness and humility. It gives us a boldness that needs no grounding in superiority. And it gives us a humility that doesn't depress. No mere philosophy or religion can accomplish this in us. We actually get free! We are no longer bound by lies.

Without the gospel, all our possessions, achievements, and relationships are tools to build or maintain our sense of worth. But when the gospel changes us, our possessions, achievements, and relationships stop being about ourselves, because we don't need to derive our worth from them. We can use our possessions as we choose. We can focus our energies on achievements that really matter to us and to the world. And we can relate to and enjoy others for who they are in themselves, not for how they make us feel about ourselves. It is taste of real freedom, freedom that only comes with the gospel. Nothing else in the whole world comes close. We are freed to serve others, not to enhance our own status, but in gratitude for the ultimate service that was done for us on the cross.

The effect of the gospel is beautifully illustrated by a bedtime story told by Uncle Arthur (Arthur Maxwell was a favorite author when I was a kid). It is a story about the slave market in New Orleans early in the 19th Century. A huge African man was up for sale. He was about six foot eight and weighed something like 280 pounds. He was powerfully built. If he were alive today we'd probably turn him into a football player. The auctioneer extolled the large amount of work that could be expected from such a man. There was only one problem. The whole time the auction was taking place the man stood there in a defiant pose with his arms folded across his chest, saying, "I will not work, I Will Not Work, I WILL NOT WORK."

The bidders in the slave market ignored his comments and the bidding went higher and higher. One man in particular seemed especially interested in this African. He kept jumping in to raise the bid. Before long the man was sold to him for the highest price ever obtained in the New Orleans slave market. As his new owner came up to claim him, the African spoke to him with some compassion, saying, "I know you paid a high price for me, but you need to know that I meant what I said, I will not work. You can shout at me, you can beat me, you can do whatever you want, but I will not work!"

"Let's not worry about that now," the slave owner said. "Just get in my wagon and I'll show you where you are going to live." After riding some distance out of town, the two men came to a lovely cottage surrounded by a white picket fence. The owner stopped the wagon and said, "This is where you will be living."

"This house is for me? Really? I didn't expect a place so nice!"

"Yes, this will be your home," the slave owner replied.

"That's very generous of you," said the slave. "You paid a high price for me, and now you give me this?! But I still must tell you, I will not work. No matter what you do to buy my favor, I will not work!"

"That's OK," said the master, "You don't have to work for me. I bought you to set you free!" And with that, he signaled his horse and the wagon began rolling away, leaving a startled African standing by the road in front of his new house.

“Stop, stop!” The man ran after his former master. When the wagon halted the former slave knelt down on the ground in front of the man who had purchased his freedom and said, “If you have truly set me free, I will serve you for the rest of my life!”

I detect just a hint in this story of the great transaction between Jesus and us that happens when we grasp the significance of the cross for our lives. If Jesus has truly set us free at the cross, is He not worth serving for the rest of our lives?