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SO YOU WANT TO BUY A CAR

Romans 5:6-21

A long time ago, though not in a galaxy far away, after I graduated from college I was living in Long Beach. Jerry, my brother, was living in the San Fernando Valley, and both of us became fans of the Los Angeles Kings hockey team. We had grown up in that hotbed of hockey, Bakersfield. Actually the only true thing in that description of Bakersfield was the word hot. One year, though, there was a hockey team there, the Bakersfield Kernals, and our dad took us to see a couple of games. We loved it. We never really got over it. Later, when we were both living in the LA area, we jumped at the chance to see the real thing, actual NHL hockey. We became fans of the LA Kings and went to games as much as we could. Eventually, Jerry came up with the wild idea that it would be cool if we could not just watch hockey, but could play it too. They call it ice hockey because they play it on ice. That means you have to be able to ice skate, which we couldn’t because back then there were zero ice rinks where we grew up. Not to be deterred, Jerry and some of his friends began learning how to ice skate and I did the same with friends. In order to play a game as kinetic as hockey, you have to be totally secure and stable on skates. You have to not even think about skating and be as secure on your skates as you would be if you were walking down the street. Many, probably most, of the top hockey players don’t remember learning to skate because they started so young. We had some work to do.

One night I and 3 buddies were at an ice rink working on our skating. We had new hockey skates. The only way to stop on hockey skates is to do a hockey stop, where you turn the blades of your skates perpendicular to the direction you are skating and kind of dig them into the ice. It is not an easy skill to learn when you are an adult. One of my buddies was feeling pretty confident and built up quite a bit of speed, then tried to do a hockey stop. Only, instead of his skates digging into the ice to stop him, they kind of went around in a circle. He spun around and then went down onto the ice, face first. He cut his forehead open and broke his nose on the ice. He pretty much gave up on the hockey endeavor after that.

I’m telling you this because you and I are involved in a high speed, kinetic activity called life. In order for us to excel in this endeavor we similarly need to be stable and secure. We must have a rock solid platform from which to pursue this activity called life because it is full of unexpected twists and turns, ups and downs, and violent surprises. What is that stable platform we need? There is a component crucial to that stability, and I’m going to talk about it today.

Picasso, the artist, said it is the greatest refreshment in life. Petrarch, the Italian Renaissance scholar and poet said it is “the redeeming principle that chiefly reconciles the soul to life.” Psychiatrist Karl Meninger said it cures people, both the ones who give it and the ones who receive it. This most important thing that those people referred to is love. We’ll learn about that in Romans 5:6-21.

GOD PUT HIS LOVE ON DISPLAY

The central message of this section of Romans is the familiar words of verse 8. “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” What is the ultimate proof of one’s love for another? It is to die for that person. Jesus said in John 15:13. “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

Love, at its core, is about giving up serving oneself to put another person first. The depth and quality of love can be measured by sacrifice. The more costly love is, the greater it is. There is no greater sacrifice than to give up one’s life. Whatever other price we might pay to love and serve another person, it pales compared to dying. When we die we give up everything.

I now know, having been a parent and grandparent, how much parents sacrifice for kids. Poor Carissa has been sick now for 31 weeks, all so she can give life to their next son. Michael recently said, “I can’t believe we’re going to go through the first year of a child’s life again.” He knows it’s going to be grueling. Michael and Carissa make sacrifices to love their little boys. Laurie and I still sacrifice for our kids and grandkids, because we love them. As huge as those sacrifices of love were, they don’t compare with what Jesus did.

In verse 7 Paul pointed out that it is rare that a person would die for a good person. It happens, but not often. If someone sacrifices themselves to save another person, they are regarded as a hero and their story likely will be in the news. But I am eager to sacrifice for Laurie, because she deserves any sacrifice I could make and more. Notice verse 8 starts with the word, “but.” This is a contrast. This is not about someone doing an incredibly noble and good thing to save a good person. This is about Jesus Christ dying to save people who were on the other end of the spectrum from good. Paul spent more than 2 chapters of this letter showing the truth about all human beings. These are people Paul described in 3:13, “Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips.”

Yeah, these are bad people. You would say they deserve whatever bad fate they get. You’d cheer their punishment. Maybe you saw the story of the 6 year old girl that was severely wounded in the fighting in Ukraine. Doctors worked frantically to try to save her, to no avail. A news person took video of their efforts. In the end, the poor little girl succumbed to her injuries. When all possible efforts had been expended, one of the doctors looked at the camera man and said, “Make sure Putin sees this.” We think, “Yeah, Putin is the devil. His feet are swift to shed blood. He deserves horrible consequences.”

But the bad people Paul was referring to was not Putin, or some psychopath or some horrible reprobate. It was us. All of us. We are the people that those in the spiritual realm would say, “Man, those people are awful and they deserve whatever terrible destiny God has in store for them.” And Jesus Christ died to save us.

Why would he do this? It’s not because, though we may have our peccadilloes and imperfections, we are still pretty lovable. It’s not because despite our flaws we are kind of cute and appealing to God. Jesus died for us when we were incorrigible in God’s eyes. He died for us not because of anything in us, but because his love for us is so enormous, so unconditional, so unstoppable that he would go to even that unimaginably horrifying length, to save us. It was totally about how much he loved us, not about anything in us that provoked profound love.

This is a fact, rooted in an event in real life history. Whatever may happen in our lives, we know this really happened. Jesus Christ made a terrifying, excruciating, total sacrifice for you and me, and he did it when we did not deserve it. He did it for one reason. It was because he has a love for us that is infinitely beyond our ability to comprehend. Why is it important that we keep this fact always in our minds?

It is because without this *fact*, we can only gauge whether God loves us by one of two things. One is our feelings. Do I feel like God loves me? This is a sketchy standard because our feelings are notoriously fickle. They can vary wildly based on the smallest of provocations, and sometimes we can’t even identify what is causing us to feel a particular way. I noticed recently one day I was feeling this odd sense of melancholy. I’m not a particularly moody person. You can ask Laurie. But I am not a robot. Occasionally I have those melancholy moments, but I can usually identify some trigger that causes them. This particular day I could find no reason for it. It was just there and I had no idea why. That can cause us to question whether God is there, whether he loves us. If all we have is our feelings, we will never be secure in his love.

The second indicator of whether God loves us we usually go by is our circumstances. Does it look to me, based on what has happened or is happening in my life, like God loves me? It is understandable why this would be such a big factor. If someone says they love you, but they treat you badly and never do anything thoughtful or nice for you, do you believe them? No, you question the sincerity of their love.

Our problem is we do the same thing with God. We hear that he loves us, but then he lets painful things happen to us. Writer Philip Yancey years ago wrote a book titled *Disappointment With God*, because everybody has had prayers go unanswered and desires that God could fulfill, only he doesn’t. How is that love? It doesn’t look to us like he loves us based on the way we think he’s treating us. Laurie recently told me that one of her grandfathers had gone faithfully to church, but after his wife died, he quit going to church. It’s possible that he only had gone to church to keep his wife happy. But it’s also possible that when his wife died, he lost his faith that God really loves us. I have known people who have given up on God for reasons much like that.

Laurie and I were watching a television show in which a man was talking to his gravely ill daughter, and he said he would pray for her. She said, “I didn’t think that you pray.” He said, “I pray all the time. It just hasn’t worked.” That’s the core of the problem. We feel like God hasn’t been good to us.

For some reason, one negative seems to eclipse a huge amount of positive. Not long ago when we were out, I spilled something on my shirt, leaving a stain. It wasn’t very big, but it was there. I felt like everyone who saw me would only see the stain on that shirt. The weird thing is that 99% of that shirt was clean and spotless. But we see the 1% that has a stain, and that speaks the loudest.

We do that in life. We are showered with good from God, but let that one bad thing happen, and that’s what we focus on. When our son went to medical school, they began by studying the human body and all of its systems, down to the cellular and even molecular level. He marveled at what he learned. At one point Toby said to me, “Dad, I don’t see how anyone can study the systems of our bodies and not believe that we are created by God. It is miraculous how everything works.” But after they had mastered all those systems, they then studied what can go wrong. They studied diseases and other problems. When he was done with that, Toby said to me, “Dad, there is so much that can go wrong, so many things that can so easily kill us. It’s a miracle that any of us survive.” It would be good if we could remember that every day we live is a gift from God. There is no guarantee that you or I will not have a brain aneurysm that bursts and takes our lives in minutes, or that we will not contract some virus that overwhelms us and kills us in short order. We are not guaranteed that we will not lose our eyesight or our hearing. There is no reason why a massive earthquake has not hit our area and killed us. The fact that none of that has happened is due to God’s love. Our ability to live, to breathe, to see, to hear, to walk, all comes from God’s love. The beauty of the world we experience in the sights we see, the food we eat, the smells of flowers, all of it is evidence of God’s love. We are inundated with it day after day. Sadly, all of it can get blotted out in our thinking by one disappointment, one loss or hurt. All we see is the stain. In other words, our perspective is skewed.

This reality is made even worse by the fact that we are all immature. Hey, I resent that, Rick. I’m mature. I’m offended you would accuse me of immaturity! Hold on. Compared to eternity, none of us lives long enough in this world to achieve true maturity. To think of ourselves as mature in an eternal time frame is like a 2 year old considering themselves mature. The problem with immaturity is, it doesn’t see things in their true place and with an accurate perspective. I remember years ago talking to a man who worked hard to support his family and who had saved enough money to take his wife and his kids with him to Hawaii for a vacation. What surprised me was that he was not as excited about that as I expected. I said, “Wow, what a great thing. I’m envious. I’ll bet your kids are thrilled.” He said, “Yeah, you’d think that, wouldn’t you?” He wanted so badly to have this be a fabulous family vacation. But one of his kids was a young teenaged girl. And she was making life unpleasant. She couldn’t believe her parents could be so mean to her as to make her go to Hawaii with them. She wanted no part of going to Hawaii because that meant they were taking her away from her friends for more than a week. How could they be so cruel? She was certain they were coldly determined to ruin her life. I was dumbfounded when he told me that. I almost said, “Could I go in her place?” I figured his daughter was an immature idiot. She couldn’t see that those friends, who were so all important and all consuming, would likely be totally absent from her life in 4 years or less. She had a tremendous opportunity to do something most people would jump at, something she would remember likely the rest of her life. and she was moping about it. That’s what immaturity does.

It does that to us as well, because we don’t have the perspective of eternal maturity. So God is on a “what have you done for me lately” basis with us, and he’d better not disappoint us by failing to give us whatever bauble we are focused on at the moment. Given all of this, it can be difficult for us to believe God really loves us.

In verse 8 the word “demonstrates” has the sense “puts on display.” When you put something on display, it is in the open, out there for everyone to see. This verse made me think of one of my favorite movies. It’s called *The Rookie*, and it is based on the true story of Jim Morris, a 37 year old high school baseball coach from Texas who ended up at that advanced age making it to the major leagues. He threw so hard in batting practice that his players made a bet with him that if they won their district championship, he would go to a tryout held by a major league team. They won the bet, so to the tryout camp he went. Everyone else trying out was in their 20’s and they thought this old guy trying out was a joke, until he went out on the mound and pitched. He put his ability on display for all to see. Jaws dropped. They couldn’t believe what they were seeing. But when the scouts’ radar guns clocked him throwing 97 miles per hour it established a fact beyond doubt. He could throw at the major league level. When Jesus was on that cross, God’s love was on display for all to see. That sacrifice established a fact beyond doubt. God loves us. Whatever our feelings might be, whatever our circumstances might be, we should never doubt that God loves us. He proved it at the cross of Jesus Christ.

It doesn’t feel to me like the earth is spinning at about 1000 miles per hour. Little Wesley loves to run. One of his favorite things to do is say, “Bapaw, fast.” He means run fast with me, Bapaw. Then he runs in a circle. After 3 laps I’m starting to feel dizzy. I am certain if we were continually spinning at 1000 miles per hour I’d be very much aware of it. I would be terminally dizzy. It just doesn’t feel like it’s true that the earth is spinning that fast, which means I am too. But it is a fact, whether it feels like it or not. The fact is true regardless of how I think or feel. And so it is with God’s love. It is a fact, established and displayed by Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. It is true regardless of how I think or feel.

GOD OPERATED ON THE “ONE MAN” PRINCIPLE

The rest of Romans 5 is about one big idea. It illustrates how incredible what Jesus did for us actually is. Paul wants us to grasp how amazing God’s love for us is. He wants us to be astounded at his wisdom and love.

This part of Romans has one main point. It is summarized in two verses, verse 12 and verse 15. Verse 12 says, “Just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned.” This is referring to Adam according to verse 14. Paul says sin entered into the human race through Adam. Death is the inevitable, invariable consequence of sin. Where sin goes, death goes. There is no instance where sin exists but not death. Sin is the cause of death. Death isn’t caused by anything else. If there is death, there has been sin. Those two are an inseparable pair.

Sin entered into the human race through one man, Adam. Where sin goes, death goes. When sin entered into the race, so did death. Hey, but wait a minute. Genesis 3 says it was Eve who took that fatal first step into disobedience. How come Adam gets blamed for it? Well everybody knows the answer to that, right? Ask any woman. The answer is, it's always the man’s fault. That’s a fundamental principle of marriage. If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, is it still the man’s fault? Yes it is. Just kidding. Sort of. In this case, that is actually true. God gave Adam the responsibility to lead in that relationship. He should have stepped in and said, “Eve, this guy is the devil. I mean literally he’s the devil. Don’t listen to him,” but he didn’t do that. He abdicated his role, maybe because he didn’t want Eve to get mad at him. Possibly he feared he’d end up sleeping on the couch that night if he interfered.

One of the puzzles that scientists are trying to solve is why humans age and then die. We don’t really know why that happens. They’d love to find a cure for that. I wish they would, and I need them to hurry. I keep having birthdays and I’m eventually going to run out of them. There are two main schools of thought about this. One is that it is due to assaults on our systems that accumulate over time and progressively damage them. A second school of thought is that aging is programmed into us. It could be genetic, or hormonal for instance. Let’s suppose that it is genetically programmed, which is very possible. That would mean that Adam passed on to all of us some genetic sequence that causes us to age and die. That would impact every human being. In a sense, Paul tells us that something kind of like that has happened. Adam has passed on to us in our spiritual DNA the presence of sin, with it comes its foul partner, death. Wait, you’re saying there’s a sin gene? No, this is just an analogy. That’s the idea.

Paul clarified in verses 13-14 that people have always died because sin has always existed in humans. Even before God gave his Law through Moses, people died. The Law codified for us what some of those sins are, but even before it existed people were sinning, disobeying God, so they died. If you have to renew your driver’s license and have to take a written exam to do so, you will probably scan through the little pamphlet about all the laws you might be tested on. There’s one that it’s easy to forget. It is that we are required at all times to drive at a safe speed. That safe speed is a bit subjective. Given conditions it may or may not be the same as the posted speed limit. In other words, you could commit the traffic sin of speeding even if you are driving less than the posted speed limit, because you are going faster than is safe in current conditions and you should know that. Everybody tends to think of Bakersfield as being hot, because in the summer it is sizzling hot much of the time. But that’s not true in the winter. It often is quite chilly. Some of my memories of life there involve heavy tule fog that can set in for weeks at a time. It's hard to explain how thick the fog is. We had fog days back then when they canceled school because the fog was so bad it wasn’t safe to travel to school. When the fog is so thick you can’t see 50 yards, it doesn’t matter if the speed limit is 65. If you’re going 45 you’re going too fast, and you should know that and adjust accordingly. In the same way, there are things that people should always have known they shouldn’t do, but they’ve done them anyway. Even though there was no written law, it’s still wrong and they should know that.

Verse 15 gives us the positive solution to this problem that we have all inherited the sin gene from Adam. “The gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many.” Just like a curse that brought death came through one man, so a blessing that brings life comes through one man, this time through Jesus Christ.

One man, Jesus Christ, was truly good and righteous and did an inconceivably loving thing for us, and we got mind boggling blessings as a result. How come we got something so good because of what he did? Did you know that all the kids in the schools in Cincinnati got an extra day off from school on February 14? It was the Monday after the Super Bowl. Hey, why didn’t that kind of thing happen when I was a kid? Man, we never got extra days off, except for fog days. Well, how many times did the NFL team in Bakersfield make it to the Super Bowl? There was no NFL team there, of course. In fact, when I was a kid, there was no Super Bowl. But the odd thing here is, what did those kids in Cincinnati do to deserve a day off from school? Nothing. They got the day off because of what some other people did, some professional football players, people they likely didn’t even know personally. We understand that there are times when what someone does provides a big benefit to many other people. That’s what Jesus Christ, in his matchless love, has done for us.

Verse 18 summarizes the contrast Paul is driving home. “Just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people.” The one man principle led to sin, death and condemnation. That’s bad. But that same one man principle in Jesus Christ resulted in justification, in us gaining what we all need, to be declared righteous by God, which means we have life. We can have life as God intended it, life was we long to have it, life that will ultimately be eternal, because in his love, Christ died for us.

The one man principle was absolutely critical. We could not make ourselves good enough to gain God’s approval, to have life, to gain eternal life. None of us could do it. Not one. In fact we couldn’t even get close. Try this. Go for the next week without having even a single thought in which you question God. Don’t have a single thought in which you are annoyed by someone or have a critical thought about them. Don’t have even a moment in which you are thinking only about yourself. How are you going to do? I tried this past week and was doing pretty well until we ordered a meal online from Chick Fil A. When we got the meal we found they had left out an item. What is wrong with everybody? Even Chick Fil A messed up. I was annoyed with them. My heart wasn’t full of only good things. I still don’t get close to being good enough to gain God’s approval on my own.

My point is none of us can do it. God could have just written us off, but instead he came up with a brilliant plan to save us from ourselves. It was the one man principle. God, would enter human history and be the one man who would undo what that one man did back in Eden. One man started the problem, so one man could end it. Paul is driving home how huge that act of Christ was, and reminding us that nothing compares with this.

IMPLICATIONS

This part of Romans 5 is about knowing that God loves us. Why is it important that we know God loves us? Let’s think about the positive and the negative.

HOW WILL BEING UNSURE OF GOD’S LOVE AFFECT US?

Laurie and I have, like most of you, had some interesting experiences buying cars. We once decided many years ago that the perfect car for us was a particular Buick station wagon. A Buick what? What’s a station wagon? It was a pre-historic vehicle that existed not long after the invention of the wheel. Why did you want a Buick? I’d like to say it was because it wasn’t your father’s Buick, but it actually was. Look, it was close to what we could afford, okay? I spent a lot of time looking at ads in the newspaper (the newspaper was a pre-historic form of the news feed on your phone), from car dealerships. I spotted a killer deal on the car we wanted that was such a great deal we actually thought we could handle it financially. It seemed too good to be true because it was much better than any other deal I could see, so I called the dealership and asked, and they affirmed that for that day only, yes, that deal was for real. We piled into our lousy old car and headed out to buy a new car. We got there, talked to the salesman, and he affirmed that for that day this was the deal. Then we test drove the car. It was what we wanted. Then they took us in the little room where the shenanigans started. They started trying to change the deal. We stood firm, but they kept at it. They brought the manager in and he finally laid out what they were actually willing to do, and it wasn’t the deal they had advertised. After all that time I said to Laurie, “Okay, let’s just go.” We got up, left the office and headed for our old car in the parking lot. We were disappointed, but we were done. Just as we were about to walk out the door of the showroom the manager stopped us. He said, “All right, we’ll do the deal that you are insisting on,” meaning the deal they had advertised and repeatedly told us was for real. We did buy the car, but afterward I decided I would never do business with them again. They were trying to scam us, to pressure us into a deal that wasn’t the best they could make. They were not looking out for us at all. I couldn’t trust them.

The best experience buying a car we’ve ever had was when a friend who was at that time a car salesman helped us. There were no games, no pressure, he was just seeking to help us. He explained everything to us and we knew we were getting the best possible deal on the car. The key was he was our friend who loved us. He wanted the best for us, and we knew that we could trust him every step of the way because of that. It made the whole process easy because he was looking out for us. He wasn’t out to make money off us, or just sell us a car, he was trying to help us because he loved us. Because we knew that, we trusted him.

You’re comparing God to a car salesman? Well, kind of, I guess. What I’m trying to say is if you don’t believe God loves you, you’re not going to trust him. I didn’t trust the people at the Buick dealership because I knew they didn’t love us. They weren’t looking out for our good. We have already seen, if we don’t trust God, if we don’t believe in him, disobedience will soon follow. The key to life is believing, being absolutely certain, that God loves us. If we don’t know he loves us, we won’t truly trust him, we will never have peace, we will be always trying to control things we can’t control, and we’ll disobey him.

One consequence of not being sure of his love is we likely will try replace him with something else. We need to be loved, we need to be given a stamp of approval, so we will try to gain that love and approval in other places. It will never work.

HOW WILL BEING SURE OF GOD’S LOVE AFFECT US?

Go back to the first part of this chapter that we looked at last week. We will be at peace. We can rest in the profound truth that God loves us. Even when life becomes tumultuous, we can stand firm and be at peace because we know God loves us and he is working for our good at all times. God’s love sets us free to live securely and freely.

Recently I had a virus that Toby identified as an adenovirus. One morning I got up and was feeling really crummy. That morning Laurie got up before me. I went down to the kitchen where she was making breakfast for us. She was sympathetic. She felt bad for me and tried to do what she could to help. She told me she loved me. When breakfast was over, I went upstairs to brush my teeth. What I saw in the mirror wasn’t pretty. I looked like I didn’t feel good. My left eye was swollen and kind of weepy. I hadn’t shaved. My hair was sticking up all over. It looked like maybe I’d had an electric shock or something. I never look pretty, but this day I looked like somebody had whacked me with an ugly stick. Here’s the astounding thing. It didn’t matter to Laurie. She didn’t berate me for looking awful. She just sympathized with me, expressed affection and told me she loved me. She sees me at my worst, and loves me anyway. Do you know what that does for me? It makes me feel safe with her. I do my best to not be my ugliest or to do stupid things, but my best isn’t very good. And it is a huge relief to know that even when I am a total idiot, even when I’m at my worst, she loves me. It fills me with joy and with love for her that knows no bounds.

What do you think it will do for us when we are that confident that God loves us? It will fill us with joy, make us able to be ourselves in his presence and be at peace, it will make us grateful for him and want to love him and be with him, just as I love Laurie and want to be with her. It means we will be safe with him, even when we are at our worst and do stupid things.

In Ephesians 3:17-18 Paul prayed for believers that they would be rooted in God’s love and would be able to grasp how vast God’s love for us actually is. In verse 19 he said he prayed that we would know this love, God’s love, that surpasses knowledge, then said, “that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.” How do we get filled with the fullness of God? By knowing his vast, immeasurable love for us.

More than anything else, we know God’s love by the cross of Jesus Christ. If we try to derive our sense of God’s love from how we feel, or from the way things are going in our lives, we are doomed to fail. To be confident, grounded, secure, at peace, joyful and grateful in his love we must do one thing. Go back to that irrefutable act in history. The day that Jesus Christ was on that cross and said, “It is finished,” God was putting on display for the entire universe to see, the truth that he loves you and he loves me unconditionally with a love that is fierce, powerful, more awesome and real than anyone else has ever had for us. Nothing can ever disprove that irrefutable truth. And that truth changes everything.