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IT’S NOT ABOUT THE HAPPY MEAL

Romans 8:31-37

Many years ago we were on Waikiki Beach. I noticed a young Japanese couple not too far from us. They seemed rather unhappy for people on vacation in Hawaii. After some time the young man went into the ocean. I paid no attention until later when he returned. He was running and shouting and obviously excited, a big contrast to the somber mood of earlier. I didn’t know what he was saying but he was definitely amped up. When he arrived back at his girl he exultantly shouted and showed her what was in his hand. It was his wedding ring. He apparently had gone swimming in the ocean earlier and lost the ring in the ocean, which evidently led to the previous unhappiness. He had decided to go back into the ocean and attempt the impossible of looking for his lost ring in the Pacific Ocean. Against all odds he had found his ring under the water.

There is a woman named Mary Grams who lives in Canada. In 2004 she was engaged to be married. One day while working in her garden she somehow lost her engagement ring. When she realized it was gone, she frantically searched, scouring her garden, hoping to find the ring, to no avail. The last thing she wanted to do was tell her fiancé she had lost the ring, so she bought a replacement ring. She was able to hide the fact she had lost the original from her fiancé, so basically she put that event behind her. In 2017 her daughter-in-law was doing some work in that same garden. She pulled a carrot out of the ground that was an odd looking specimen. This vegetable had grown up with a ring embedded in it! Mary Grams’ engagement ring was back!

How could that ring have been in that garden for that long and never been noticed? How did a carrot grow up through that ring? It’s astounding that after so many years the ring showed up again. We have a similar story in our church, for Reg Nielsen also lost a ring, only to discover it in a compost pile in their yard some 20 years later. I hear those stories and sometimes wonder why nothing that fortuitous happens to me. But something far better has happened to followers of Jesus. The Gospel of Christ is truly good news. In the powerful passage we are going to consider today, Romans 8:31-37, we will see why the Gospel is such good news.

GUESS WHO’S ON OUR SIDE

In the previous verses in this chapter Paul said there is no condemnation for those who have faith in Jesus Christ, that we are the children of God, that we have his Spirit helping us, and that God is working to bring good out of everything that happens to us. In verse 31 he says, “What, then, shall we say in response to these things?” In other words, what conclusions should we draw from these awesome truths? Here is what Paul concluded. “If God is for us, who can be against us?”

This is not a, “Well, if God is for us, and we hope he is, but we don’t really know” kind of statement. It’s not a “Do you think God is for us” statement. The “if” in this statement does not indicate uncertainty. This is what is known in Greek grammar as a first class conditional statement. It literally means, “If, and it is true.” It means, “Since God is for us.” That’s a big part of the point Paul has been making in this chapter. God is our heavenly Father who loves his children. He is on our side. He’s in our corner. He believes in us and he is with us.

A problem that has occurred throughout history has to do with religious people fighting wars against each other, always insisting that God is on their side. This passage seems like it will feed that unfortunate tendency. Religious people seem to never notice that they are doing terrible, ungodly things while claiming that God is on their side. The larger context of these verses tells us this is about God’s grace, and that we need to have that same grace for all people, even those who disagree with us and even oppose us, and that we should love them as God loves us.

What an astounding thing it is to think that Almighty God is for us. How many people do you have in your life that are for you, that actually will stand with you and help you and back you up? Most of us don’t have that many, but we are deeply grateful for those we have. But this is not just another person who is for us. It is the Creator of all, the Sovereign Ruler of all that exists. He is for us! Who can successfully go up against Almighty God? Whoever it is, it would be like a high school football team taking on the Super Bowl champion Rams. It would be like the small island kingdom of Tonga, population 105,000, declaring war on the United States of America. How do you suppose that will turn out?

This can have a powerful impact on us when we believe it. A classic case of all time occurred 3000 years ago when Israel was, once again, at war with their nemesis, the Philistines. The Philistines came up with a new strategy for defeating Israel. It involved a new weapon. Only this weapon wasn’t a tool or machine, it was a person. It was a massive, ferocious, intimidating fighter named Goliath. He was the kind of guy who would have made Darth Vader look like Bambi. People shook in their sandals and ran for the hills at the mention of his name. He was terrifying, and he was undefeated.

They sent this Behemoth out to challenge Israel to send one of their best to go one on one with him in a winner take all match. Day after day he would come out and challenge Israel, and day after day there were no takers. This went on twice a day for 6 weeks. The repetition of this ritual was intended to rub the Israelis noses in it. The whole point was to degrade them by demoralizing them, and the strategy was working. 1 Samuel 17:11 says Saul, their king and leader, and all the Israelites “were dismayed and terrified.”

Along came David, the youngest of 8 brothers, too young to be in the army. He came to visit his brothers, and when he saw what was going on, he was irate. How could God’s people let this insult to the honor of God continue? He wouldn’t put up with it. He said, “I’ll go fight that dude if nobody else will.” This was Opie from Mayberry insisting he’d go fight King Kong. “Just let me at him.” You can see everyone rolling their eyes and saying, “Yeah, right, Kid. You won’t even be a speed bump for that ogre. We’d become a laughingstock if we sent you out there. I can hear it now. ‘Hey, did you hear the best the Israelis could do was to send some pimple faced teenager to go up against Godzilla. What a joke!’” The upshot would be Goliath would turn David into a grease spot in the road, everyone would hear about it, and it would encourage other enemies to attack Israel because they were obviously so weak.

In 1 Samuel 17:37 you can see David’s response. “The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine." He believed God was with him, so he had no fear. The king didn’t have anybody else, so he let David do it. The fight began with Goliath trash talking and laughing at David. But David responded in 1 Samuel 17:45, “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.” In verse 47 he said, “The battle is the Lord’s, and he will give all of you into our hands.”

Malcolm Gladwell, the best selling writer, wrote a book titled *David and Goliath* in which he proposed that David wasn’t as much of an underdog as it might seem, because he used an unorthodox and unexpected tactic that Goliath wasn’t prepared for. Gladwell used this as his thesis that people throughout history have turned what seem like disadvantages into advantages. The premise is interesting, but at the end of the day, David was a big time underdog who should not have won this battle, no matter what tactics he used. Had the sling shot tactic been as new and effective tactic in warfare as Gladwell claims, it would have sparked an arms race with every nation developing sling shot regiments. Or at least they would have sling shot snipers attached to every unit, but none of that happened. That’s because everyone knew this was a one in a million shot. But it turned out just as David said, God did give Goliath into his hands.

The point here is not about tactics and surprises, but about the difference it made for David that he believed God was for him. Everyone else was terrified. All they could see was Darth Vader’s scarier ancestor. But David, the least qualified person among the Israelis, was thinking, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” That made all the difference, and it was the prelude to a huge upset victory.

That all sounds good. It’s inspiring. Years ago Laurie and I were invited to a chapel service for the Oregon State football team by our friend Mike Riley, the coach. It was the night before that team was going to play undefeated college football giant, USC, rated number 1 in the country, at that time the college football version of Goliath. To call Oregon State an underdog would be correct, but would not even come close to describing the true nature of the situation. The speaker at the chapel related the story of David and Goliath. Those kids came out of that meeting totally amped up. And the next day they went out and did the unthinkable. They pulled the upset. They beat Goliath, shocking USC and the college football world. So we’d love to grab onto these verses and think we can knock down any opponent because God is with us. We will never lose at anything.

But history and reality give us pause. If God is for us, who can be against us? The answer is, lots of people, many of them intimidating. In Acts 16 Paul and Silas were on a church planting trip when their evangelistic activities led to a riot in Philippi. They ended up being beaten and thrown in jail. They were released from that situation after an earthquake. They then moved on to Thessalonica. They had considerable success in ministry, and that led to another riot. The local new believers smuggled them out of town under cover of darkness. The next stop was Berea. Again there was success, and again there was opposition. This time the believers sent them out of town before the riot started.

In 1 Corinthians 4:11-13 Paul described what his life was like. “To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world, right up to this moment.”

There was no shortage of people who were against Paul. And there is no question that they did him harm. They beat him, put him in jail, forced him out of town, slandered him, and as he says, made him seem like the scum of the earth. Yet Paul could write that if God is for us, who could be against us. How do we reconcile this?

In part by reading on in this passage. Verses 33-34 say, “Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns?” Paul’s biggest concern is who might judge us and condemn us. If God, who is the judge, has already declared us innocent, approved, righteous in his eyes, who is able to condemn us? The answer is no one. The case is closed, the verdict rendered. The Judge declared us innocent and approved and then banged down his gavel. It’s over and no one can say otherwise.

We just spent a week taking care of our 3 granddaughters, ages 6, 4 and 1. Why do obviously tired kids resist going to sleep like it’s the end of their lives? The battle of bedtime was waged pretty much every night. I was getting so tired toward the end of the week that I said to the sleep resisters, “How about, since you don’t want to sleep and Nana and I are exhausted, that tonight you put us to bed and you stay up as late as you want?” I was kidding, sort of. Another interesting thing about kids that age is their eyes are sharp, they see everything and they are brutally honest. They haven’t learned the social grace of polite lying. So in the course of the week I received several questions from them. “Yapaw, why don’t you have more hair?” “Yapaw, why is your hair gray?” “Yapaw, why do you have lines on your face?”“Yapaw, why does your toe look weird?” “Yapaw, I can see a booger up your nose.” It can make you a little self-conscious.

None of these things are news to me. Not once did I say, “I have lines on my face? Really? Alert the media.” Having attention drawn to these matters, as I said, can get to you. However, the one whose judgment matters to me is Laurie Myatt. I can’t fix most of the things the kids highlight. But I know that Laurie sees them quite clearly. Not once has she said, “You really do have a lot of lines on your face. I don’t know if I can stand to look at you anymore.” She loves me. And if she is for me, it doesn’t matter what anyone else says. She has already judged me “righteous” in her eyes and approved. That deal is settled. So anyone else’s criticisms and accusations have no power.

That is a bit like what Paul is saying in this passage. We have an enemy who insists on pointing out every flaw and insisting that we are unacceptable. But Paul says “God is the one who justifies.” What anyone else says is irrelevant. The ultimate Judge has declared us innocent and approved.

There is an application of this principle to events in our lives. Sometimes we can get fearful of what people can do against us. Many get fearful, for instance, of what the government is promoting and what it’s going to do. We need to remember that God is for us. As people opposed Paul and did him harm, it is possible that people could do the same to us. But whatever they do, they will not thwart God’s plans and purposes for us. In the end, God will defeat them, just as he did with Goliath in David’s day.

WE’VE BEEN GIVEN THE BEST

Verse 32 is a profound verse. It makes the point that God did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us. That was a sacrifice that we cannot even imagine. If you have children, how precious are they to you? Perhaps you have grandchildren. How valuable are they to you? There is nothing that adequately explains how a parent or a grandparent feels about their kids and grandkids. Whatever answer they give doesn’t fully explain the depth of what those children mean and how immeasurably precious they are.

The last morning our granddaughters were with us last week, when we got up Laurie had a jolt when she saw 4 year old Cara because it looked to her like something terrible had happened. Cara’s nightgown was stained red all over part of it and Cara had red on her arm. Was she bleeding profusely? Just the thought of it was a nightmare. It turned out that she was fine. She had decided to do a little coloring before she went to sleep the night before. When she stopped she didn’t put the cap on her marking pen. She just went to sleep. That red pen had bled all over Cara’s arm and her nightgown. This was less than ideal, but it was world’s better than what Laurie feared. Just the thought of something bad happening to one of our grandchildren, or our children for that matter, is enough to make me feel sick. I would do anything, give up anything to protect them, to keep bad things from happening to them.

That raises the question, do you think we love our children and grandchildren more than God loves his Son? We most certainly do not. God is pure, unadulterated love. He has a perfect relationship with his Son. How do you think it felt to him to put his Son in the situation where he cried out in agony, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” How could the Father have let that happen? I have no doubt it was like a knife right through the heart for him. He did that because he loves us. His love for us is so intense and so massive that he was willing to make that inconceivable sacrifice.

Paul’s question is, given that he loves us so much that he went to that extreme to rescue us, what good thing is he going to keep from us? Imagine a parent who would do anything for their child, and has given the children everything he or she could ever want. That parent has not spared any amount of money to provide far more than the child will ever need. Then the child says to the parent, “But what I really want is a Happy Meal from MacDonald’s.” Is that parent going to say, “I’m sorry, but that’s asking too much”?

There are situations where the parent might say no to the Happy Meal. They call them Happy Meals because McDonald’s is really happy when you buy them. The big lure of said meal is the toy that is included. In our case recently it was a little plastic Super Sonic the Hedgehog. Actually I guess these were Happy Meals because they made the grandparents happy that the kids were so enthralled with those dumb little plastic toys. But let’s go back and imagine again that child whose parents have given so much. Let’s imagine that child has so many toys they make a solid carpet in his or her room. Let’s also imagine that this child has just eaten a big, nutritious lunch, but upon driving by McDonald’s the child has a revelation that they absolutely need a Happy Meal or they will die. Might a parent say “No” in that situation? The parent knows this isn’t about food. The child wouldn’t even eat the food if they bought a Happy Meal because the child is already full. This is about the child wanting the toy, even though the parents know within a day it will get tossed in with the massive number of toys piled up in the kid’s room. In that case, the parent might say No. They would deny the request because the child does not need either the food or the toy and won’t use either of them for more than a minute.

This passage tells us that God will never deny us that which he knows is good for us. He has already given the unimaginably costly, the most precious thing in existence, so, no, he’s not going to withhold trinkets and Happy Meal toys from us, unless there is good reason.

It would be helpful if we think clearly about who God is. It is easy for us to think that God seems to go out of his way to keep us from good things. We have all been disappointed in life. It happens so often that we come to expect it. I sort of tend to think that God is kind of disapproving of me and is looking for ways to keep me from things that I really want. This requires that I fail to take note of the massive number of spectacular blessings that he has given to me, but that’s easy to do when I see that he’s not giving me the latest Happy Meal that I think I want.

This time of year is always a challenge for me. That’s because Laurie’s birthday comes up this time every year right about the time of Mother’s Day. This is a challenge for me because I want Laurie’s birthday to be an EVENT! I want it to not merely be special. I want it to be spectacular. I want her to be overwhelmed with love and with gifts. It frustrates me that I am limited by both financial constraints and lack of imagination and creativity. But if I could remove those restraints and could have my preferences I would blow her mind with gifts. I don’t wish to do that because it is required, because it’s what you’re supposed to do. I wish to do that because I love her so much I can’t help myself. That’s because that’s what love does. It gives. It gives eagerly, joyfully and abundantly.

Do you think I love Laurie more than God loves us? The correct answer is “absolutely not,” as verified by the cross on which Christ died. Then the way we need to think about God is to see him as eager, excited to give to us, wanting to blow us away with the gifts he gives us. Psalm 84:11 says, “The Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless.” The only reason that he wouldn’t shower us with some gift we might fixate on, is that particular Happy Meal is not going to be good for us.

Verse 32 was a pivotal verse in Laurie’s life. She came to a point where there were things she wanted so much in life, as we all do, but she thought if she really committed to trusting and serving God he wouldn’t give them to her. Maybe he’d do something terrible to her. Maybe he’d make her be a missionary to Africa. Or even worse, the wife of a pastor. But she read this verse and the implications were clear and profound. If God was willing to give up his own Son to rescue her, if he loved her that much, would he really keep good things from her? Because of that truth she chose to trust God, believing he really did love her and wanted to give her good gifts, not bad. And God gave her…me. Okay, so that’s not a very good illustration. If you ask her, Laurie would tell you that she has never regretted her decision to trust God, and that he has filled her life with goodness.

WE SHOULD BE UNDEFEATED

We saw last week that because we live in the weedpatch there is going to be suffering for all of us. Paul got the full measure of his share. In verse 35 he asked “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?” He brought up those because he had gone through all of them. He had faced hardship, persecution, hunger, poverty, dangers of various kinds and violence. He had experienced violence that should have been fatal. His resounding answer is that none of those things separated him from the love of Christ.

Consider what Paul has told us in this passage. God is for us. He loves us, and nothing, absolutely nothing, not the worst that life can dump on us, can separate us from that love. He loves us so much that he is joyfully eager to shower us with gifts and blessings. Given all of that, Paul says, through all of that stuff that life throws at us, we are more than conquerors. We are not defeated. We win. We win big. The Greek word for “to conquer” is *nikao*. The noun form that means “one who conquers,” is *nike*. Wait, you mean like the shoes? Well, that’s where Nike shoes got that name for their company. The implication is if you wear their shoes you’re going to be a winner.

The word that Paul used here, though, is slightly different. It is *hupernikomen*. The last part, *nikomen*, means “we conquer.” The first part means “hyper.” So it means we hyperconquer. Paul claims that because God is with us, because he is for us, because he loves us and will never stop loving us, because he wants to give to us continually, we don’t just survive in this difficult world. We don’t just conquer. We hyper conquer. That means we go way beyond merely conquering. We win in a rout. We leave no doubt.

But what does it mean to win? What does hyper conquering look like in Paul’s mind? We think it means beating Goliath, always coming out on top, everything going our way, being successful, getting the Happy Meal that we want. Recently I saw on TV the last 20 minutes of one of my favorite movies, *Apollo 13*. There’s a great moment in the movie when they are near the end of the mission, when the badly damaged spacecraft is about to re-enter the earth’s atmosphere. One of the men in Mission Control is talking to a high up administrator and telling him about all the things that could go wrong. He says this could be NASA’s greatest disaster. Overhearing this, flight director Gene Kranz says, “With all due respect sir, I believe this is going to be our finest hour.” Indeed it was. The mission failed. They never got to walk on the moon. But in overcoming the deadly dangers and the numerous obstacles and disasters NASA faced on that mission getting those astronauts back safely was a huge win. Wins aren’t always defined by getting everything we want.

When Paul wrote Philippians he was in jail. He was waiting to have his case heard before Nero, a nut job who didn’t like Christians. Paul didn’t know how that was going to go. Given who Nero was, if I’d been alive then and someone had forced me to bet on the outcome, I’d have put my money on adios, amigo for Paul. But look at what Paul wrote in Philippians 1:19. “I know that through your prayers and God’s provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.” There you go, Paul was sure he was going to win. He would be delivered. Things would go well for him.

So he believed he would be acquitted by Nero and set free, right? Not exactly. Later he says he thought that might happen, but that was not what he was confident about. In verse 20 he explains what deliverance, or winning, looked like. “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now, as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.”

We usually think that winning meant Paul would win his case, be released and continue serving Christ. But that is not how he defined winning. He said that winning was having courage to stay faithful so that Christ would be exalted, whether he lived or died. Winning didn’t have to do with living or dying. It had to do with exalting Christ, no matter what else happened.

Now we begin to see what it means to hyper conquer. It is to exalt Christ no matter what happens. That’s why Paul could be so confident going through persecution, danger, poverty and violence. He wasn’t aiming at being safe, defeating enemies, having worldly success. He was aiming at exalting Christ in all of it. This is how we win. It is how we win big. It is exalting Christ in whatever may happen in our lives. There are many people who will tell you that God wants you to be a winner, to be on top in this world. The church likes to feature those who win in the way the world defines it. Paul would not have been one of those people. The church today doesn’t like to highlight people who are “the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world.” Yet in what appeared to be a tsunami of losing, Paul hyper conquered because he exalted Christ.

This is how we defeat our Goliaths. We keep our eyes laser focused on what it means to win. Winning is exalting Christ, it is glorifying God. We can win in any circumstance life puts us through. There is a man I admire tremendously. His name is Tony Dungy. He was a football coach. But more important, he is a follower of Jesus. At points he missed out on opportunities to be a head coach in the NFL because people said he was “too nice.” Because of his faith in Jesus he treated people with dignity and respect, he sought to love them. He cared about them. He did get a coaching job and was highly successful. But he got fired eventually. Later he got another job, and eventually his team won a Super Bowl. But he also went through the nightmare of his own son taking his own life. The thing that has marked him, through the unfair rejections, through the successes, through the firing, through searing tragedy, has been his godly character, his faith in God. He said about all that he has been through that he can tell people in no uncertain terms, “despite these ups and downs, God is with us. God is for us. He won’t ever abandon us.” Dungy has exalted Christ in every situation, so he has hyper conquered.

CONCLUSION

God is for us. Do you get this? He is in our corner. He is on our side.

God is anxious, eager, to give us good. He loves us, and can’t help himself. He will never stop giving us good gifts.

God wants us to win. But we win when we exalt Christ. If we get anything else, the best this world has to offer, but we don’t exalt Christ, we lose. But as we exalt Christ, we hyper conquer.

Laurie and I launched into pastoral ministry 43 years ago. We began a new church here meeting in a school. Our grand opening there were 40 people there. If you had told us then that if we stayed faithful and worked hard, 43 years later we would have a church with fewer than that number, I suspect we would have quit right there. What we have to show for decades of ministry does not look to most people like a big win. It could be discouraging. But we must ask, did being beaten, smuggled out of town in darkness, being the scum of the earth, being jailed for years and finally executed fit most people’s definition of winning? No, but Paul hyper conquered. Are we exalting Christ? Yes, we are. Then that’s what matters. What we are doing isn’t just winning, it is hyper conquering. That makes the difference between being discouraged, defeated, disappointed, giving up, and being joyful, thankful, and persevering.