

Florence Littauer was speaking at a Church Growth Conference in Atlanta, Georgia. Florence was winning the crowd with her great sense of humor and stories about everyday life. She told one delightful story about a speaking engagement during which she was focusing on the sinfulness of humankind and the **need for God's grace**. Spontaneously, Florence asked, *"Does anyone here know what grace means?"* A 7-yearold girl on the front row, all decked out in a white dress, stood up and raised her hand. *"I know, Miss Florence, I know,"* she said. *"Grace is unmerited favor from God!"*

Florence couldn't believe what she had just heard. She then asked the young girl to step up to the platform with her. "Great answer," Florence said, *"now tell the audience what that means."* The little girl folded her hands and shrugged, *"I don't have a clue!"*

Out of the mouths of babes.

It reminds me of a similar story that John H. Gerstner tells in his book, **A Primer in Justification**. He says he was once speaking to a group of business people on justification, and there was a journalist in attendance representing a local newspaper. Gerstner says, *"I preached justification emphatically, clearly, earnestly, and I hoped, persuasively. It was, therefore, rather discouraging to learn from the newspaper account that I had spoken the night before on the theme of "Just a vacation by faith!""*

Our text for the day has nothing to do with taking a vacation. It has nothing to do with sandy beaches or cabins in the mountains. But I wonder if some of the concepts we take for granted in the church grand old words and phrases like grace and justification by faith really have much meaning for most people even people in the church. We hear the phrases we may even on occasion use them ourselves, but the words have only vague meaning for us. They are head knowledge, but not heart knowledge. We know what the dictionary says, but the meaning is not existential, it does not hit us where we live. **Permit me, please, to be quite elementary today about what it means to be, "justified by faith."**

FIRST OF ALL, IT MEANS WE ARE ALL SINNERS.

You're a sinner; I'm a sinner. We may disagree with Paul on many points, but none of us would argue with him on this one point. He writes, *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*

The fine magazine from our past, The Lutheran, carried church bloopers. Some of those bloopers are hilarious. For example, The Austin [Minn.] Daily Herald ran a church notice for St. Olaf Lutheran Church in Austin. According to this notice the music ministry of the church "offers opportunities for children, youth and adults to participate in eight vocal and **handball** choirs." I would like to hear one of those handball choirs. Grunting in four parts. That must be exciting.

Or this one from the Sharon Evangelical Lutheran Church in Statesville, N.C.: "As we begin our Lenten discipline in the coming week **a sin up sheet is available in the narthex for those who wish to check a box for the Rite of Individual Confession.**"

I wonder what kind of response we would get if we had a "sin up" sheet?

To say that all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory says that we are separated from God on two levels: BY "DEEDS" & BY "OUR NATURE." Most of us, when we hear the phrase, "all have sinned" think exclusively of our deeds, usually our misdeeds the things we have done that were wrong. And sometimes, in a moment of spiritual clarity, we may reflect not only on our misdeeds, but also on our sins of omission those good things, necessary things we have not done like feeding the hungry and housing the homeless. And YES, the volume of our misdeeds, particularly our sins of omission, is impressive.

But we are also sinful by our very nature. To use theologian Paul Tillich's great phrase, *we are estranged from God. There is a chasm that separates us from God* and keeps us from the kind of peace, love and joy that God means for us to have.

A park ranger was leading a group of hikers to a lookout tower in Yellowstone National Park. Along the way he pointed out some of the famous sites in the park. He was so intent on the stories he was telling, that he paid no attention when his two-way radio received a message. He turned it down. Later he and his party stopped to look at some flowers and view some of the birds in nearby trees. Once again, his radio distracted the ranger, so this time he turned it off.

As the group neared the lookout tower, they were met by a nearly breathless ranger who asked why the guide hadn't responded to the messages on his radio. From their viewpoint, high in the tower, some other rangers had observed a large grizzly bear stalking the group. They had been trying desperately to warn the hikers. **Someone commenting on this near misadventure said that many times we are so involved in personal activities and pursuits in this life, we don't pay attention to the voice of God trying to get through to us.** Sometimes we turn down the volume. Sometimes we don't pay attention. Sometimes we even turn Him off. Then the writer continued, *"If God is trying to get through to us, we can be sure it is for a good reason."*

We ignore the voice of God because we are estranged from God.

Writing in Reader's Digest David J. Silvester tells about a friend's daughter who works in a large bookstore and is often amused by the combinations of books customers choose. She found it particularly funny when a woman approached the checkout counter with two bestsellers. The first was titled Conversations with God. The second? How to Argue and Win Every Time.

That sounds like many of us. **We are estranged from God not only by our misdeeds, but by our very nature.** All of us have fallen short of God's glory. **And that brings us to a critical second truth:**

WE NEED A SAVIOR.

Notice I did not say, a good example. Mother Teresa was a good example. Gandhi was a good example. Billy Graham is a good example.

But a good example cannot bridge the gap between ourselves and God. A good example cannot even make us more Christlike. A good example is like the Law that Paul fought against after his conversation. A good example is just like the brokenness that Martin Luther fought against in the church. **A good example can give me a picture of what I ought to be, but it cannot transform me or give me the will to change.** Indeed, it can even be destructive if I look at the life of someone like Gandhi or Mother Teresa and say to myself, *"I can never measure up to that," and thereby even quit trying.* **NO, A GOOD EXAMPLE IS NOT ENOUGH!!**

And notice that I did not say that we need a good teacher. There are many good teachers. I had good teachers in school and I am thankful for them. Every time I meet a dedicated teacher, I want to salute her or him and say to that teacher, you have a critical role in the wellbeing of humankind. But good teachers, like good examples, can only show us the way. **The courage to take the right way must come from within.** Jeremiah the prophet writes, *"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."*

Jeremiah is talking about something far different from a good example or a good teacher. **Jeremiah was talking about a change in the inner persona change that many people are hungering for today.**

All have sinned, says St. Paul. BECAUSE OF OUR 'SIN' we need a Savior. And that brings us to our final thought for the morning:

JESUS CHRIST ALONE CAN FILL THE VOID IN OUR LIVES.

He alone can bridge the gap between ourselves and God.

One day in Sunday school the teacher of an upper-grade class was trying to get the students to understand what "**justification**" meant. After explaining it thoroughly, the teacher asked the clinching question: "**What does it mean that God justifies us?**" The class was silent. The teacher waited patiently. But then the class clown raised his hand and said, "**I suppose it means, no matter what I've done BAD God sees me JUST AS IF I'VE DONE NOTHING WRONG.**" He was right! But it's no joke. It's true as true can be! And it's true for you and me.

In Jesus Christ, we are free, for God sees you and He sees me, "JUST AS IF WE'VE DONE NOTHING WRONG. When you and I could not overcome the barriers between ourselves and God, God took the initiative and removed those barriers through what Christ did on the CROSS.

Now how do I respond to grace in Christ? Do I sin more because I know that through Christ my sins are forever done away? Or do I accept that free gift of grace and allow it to transform my life into the image of Christ?

Margaret Jensen is a storyteller, and many of her best stories revolve around her family, especially her mother, Ella Tweten. Margaret's father was a pastor, and her mother was the glue that held the family together through the lean years and the many moves the family made. ***The family was poor in material goods, but rich in faith.***

Ella Tweten's faith in God was especially irresistible. She just shone with love and gentleness, and few people could remain unconvinced of God's love when they were in her presence.

In her later years, Mrs. Tweten was asked to become the director of the Norwegian Children's Home in New York. She became a loving mother and an example of faith to dozens of lonely, hurting children. One visitor to the Children's Home ran across some boys who had once been major troublemakers. This visitor was surprised to see that the boys were now all model students. When he asked what changed them, they all replied, "Mother Tweten."

On her first night at the Home, the boys had planned some pranks for their new director. But she came by their rooms that night, read to them from the Bible, sang them some songs, prayed for them, and gave each boy a motherly kiss. **Before she left, she said, "God bless you, my boys."** From then on, that was Mother Tweten's nightly routine. And those hardhearted youngsters just couldn't do anything that would disappoint such a saintly lady.

Only the most hardened of persons will respond to love with hostility, to gentleness with violence, to grace with perversion.

You and I have been justified by our faith in Jesus Christ.

Even though by both 'OUR DEEDS' and 'OUR NATURE' we are sinners, Jesus Christ has bridged the GAP between ourselves and God.

We can turn away from that GIFT OF GRACE, or we can allow it to work within our hearts to transform us into the IMAGE OF CHRIST. **WHAT WILL YOUR NEXT MOVE BE?** Amen.