

## Looking for Approval

### Romans 3:19-28 (NIV)

<sup>19</sup> Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. <sup>20</sup> Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. <sup>21</sup> But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—<sup>26</sup> he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. <sup>27</sup> Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the law that requires faith. <sup>28</sup> For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" This question was asked by the rich ruler in last Sunday's Gospel reading. Jesus answered by listing off those of the Ten Commandments that dealt with our relationship with our fellow human beings. The rich ruler declared, "All these I have kept since I was a boy!" If that's the case, if he really had kept them for that long, why was he asking Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life? What nagging voice did he still have that made him unsure of whether or not he would get there? This rich ruler needed Jesus' approval that he really had done what was necessary to inherit eternal life.

When we talk in terms of winning someone's approval, we are saying that we want another person to confirm that we are good, that everything is okay. We want to do something and have them say that I am accepted by them. Children grow up wanting their parents' approval. Even as adults, some of us are still trying to win the approval of our parents in the decisions we make in life, the person we marry, how we raise our kids, the job we get, etc. Sometimes you see it in the reverse that parents are trying to win the approval of their kids, especially if something tumultuous like a divorce happens. I remember the father of one my childhood friends who would basically give his sons whatever they wanted and let them do whatever they wanted. I didn't realize it at the time why their dad seemed so generous, but later on I realized that he was trying to win their approval of him. With a spouse, if you mess up, you do all those little things like buying flowers, doing extra chores unasked, express your love to them in hopes that you would win their approval again. Some of you may be working so that you can earn the approval of your boss, your higher ups. Students, you're probably working really hard to win the approval of your teachers.

We crave approval. We want to know that we are in good standing with others. Interestingly, winning someone's approval is not really something we teach to children, yet every person wrestles with being approved by someone. Then you drop into the mix this concept of God, of an almighty power who runs the whole show. Well, how do I win his approval?

Naturally, we have a sense of wanting to win God's approval. It's called the conscience. When we do something right, we feel good. We feel a little more honorable, a little more confident in ourselves. We feel approved. But at other times the conscience pings us when we haven't done what is right. Your gut kind of churns. You feel bad. Guilty thoughts plague your mind and weigh heavily on you. So, obviously, to us it would make sense that if you just do more good, have more times when you feel good about what you have done, that you have more times when your conscience is not pinging you, not making you feel guilty, then you probably stand as one approved by God, right? Right? Now we understand why that rich ruler that even though he claimed to have followed God's commands since he was a boy and had felt pretty good about what he had done in life according to his conscience, he still had doubt. He did not know where he stood with God. What more must I do to inherit eternal life, to be approved by you, God?

How do you win God's approval? It is natural for us to assume that if I do more good things than bad, then I will stand before God as one approved. But all my life I wonder how the scale is weighing in – more heavily on the approved side or on the disapproved side? I think of God's commands and start evaluating my life. I know that I haven't murdered anyone! But God says that anyone who hates his brother or sister is a murderer. I haven't committed adultery. But God says that anyone who looks at another person lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart. I haven't stolen! But I've not always dealt honestly with people, always helped them improve and protect their property, their means of income. I've honored my father and mother. Well, not as much as I should have. Do not give false testimony against my neighbor? Well, there were some lies. There were times when I wanted them to look bad and

used my words to paint that picture. Keep God's name holy? I've uttered the casual "Oh my God," sometimes used Jesus' name as an expletive. I like to think that God's my number one priority in life at all times, but I know I've pushed him aside too.

After an honest assessment, I know that the good things I have done in life do not outweigh the bad. Even if they did, God says that if I break just one of his laws, I'm guilty of breaking them all. He demands perfection – zero errors, no mulligans, no do-overs. I cannot claim that. I cannot claim to be one approved of by God by what I've done. "No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin." (verse 20)

God disapproves of me. What do I do? I did a Google search on "How to win someone's approval." Do you know what the top search results were? Here are the titles: "13 approval seeking behaviours you need to stop." "How to let go of the need for approval to start thriving." "Do you want to stop seeking approval?" "How to break approval seeking habits" And there also was a dictionary website with the definition of the word "approval." The world's solution to this innate need to be approved is to stop seeking it. Don't address it. Ignore it. You'll be better off for it. Let you be the only judge of how good you are. The only approval that matters is yours. But that doesn't resonate with us. It feels wrong. It doesn't make my need for approval go away. I want to be approved, but I am not as I am. The world tells you to stop seeking approval, God tells us, our conscience tells us, you need approval.

There is a way for us to stand approved before God. "But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

We will never have approval based on what we do. We will always come up short. That's why our conscience nags us to seek approval that we don't yet have. Instead of silencing that voice by hitting the mute button, silence it with the facts that God lays out here. All have sinned. There is no one in this room who can claim that they have lived perfectly for God as he demands in order to be approved by him. But here is a righteousness, an approval, apart from what you do. You cannot earn it. You cannot contribute to it. It has nothing to do with what you do. This righteousness that exists, the righteousness that God has revealed to us, is apart from the law. This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. It's not an action. It's not a good deed. It's not a cooperation with God. It's not a balancing act of good deeds and bad deeds. All have sinned and fall short of the glory or praise of God. All have fallen short of God's approval. And all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

All are approved by God. All are declared not guilty, acquitted of all bad deeds, freely. This is your gift from God. This free gift of being declared not guilty, of being approved by God, comes because of the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Redemption means to buy someone out of slavery, to purchase their freedom, to pay the ransom to release a captive. You, the one who was kidnapped, the captive, you the one who was held hostage to your conscience, to your guilty deeds against the law that God disapproved of, you don't contribute anything to that payment, to that freedom. An outside party did that for you. That's Jesus. That is what he did for you when he was pierced for your transgressions and shed his blood for your sins on the cross. God did this, Jesus willingly did this as true God and true man, so that you would stand as one approved by God. That's your status because of Christ. You stand before God as one approved because he has declared you such freely by his undeserved love for you expressed through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, his blood shed to pay for your deeds of disapproval.

You are approved by God because of what Jesus did for you. Christ won that approval for you. Let this knowledge free you to live for him, that you do not follow God's commands, his law, because you will earn anything buy it or pay him back. Live for him as one who is already approved before him in a status that will not change because it's not based upon what you do but because it is based upon what has been done for you. Live for him because you want to say thank you. Live for him because he has loved you so much. Live for him because he has given you his approval through what Christ has done for you, and no one can take that away from you. Amen.