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February 25, 2018 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent

Text: **Romans 5:1-11** (NIV)

*Peace and Hope*

**5** Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we<sup>[a]</sup> have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **2** through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we<sup>[b]</sup> boast in the hope of the glory of God. **3** Not only so, but we<sup>[c]</sup> also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; **4** perseverance, character; and character, hope. **5** And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

**6** You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. **7** Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. **8** But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

**9** Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! **10** For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! **11** Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

**Footnotes:**

- a. Romans 5:1 Many manuscripts *let us*
- b. Romans 5:2 Or *let us*
- c. Romans 5:3 Or *let us*

It's one of those sayings I suspect most kids have heard from their parents on more than one occasion. You're sitting at the dinner table with nothing left on your plate but a pile of steamed broccoli. You say, "I don't wanna. I don't like broccoli." You come home from school and want to go out and play or you get up on Saturday morning and want to watch cartoons but your parents say you have to do your chores first. You say, "I don't wanna. I want to play." To which dear old dad responds, "It's good for ya. Builds character."

That response does very little to make the job at hand any more exciting. All it really does is say you've been given a job and your parents don't feel inclined to explain why you're supposed to do whatever is, just that you have to go do it. It usually leads to some sulking and grumbling as you trudge off to do whatever it is you've been told to do or eat what you've been told to eat.

This nebulous concept of “character” doesn’t mean much and certainly isn’t anything you’re really interested in at the moment. You have other priorities. You can list off a whole bunch of things you’d much rather be doing. You don’t really see how it could be of any use to anyone and really just sounds like an excuse to force you to do something you don’t really want to do.

As you grow into adulthood, the “builds character” explanation is no longer sufficient. Now you might eat your vegetables, you might even eat them intentionally because you know they’re good for you. You might still not like them, but you try and eat them anyway. It isn’t really an issue of “building character.” It’s about being healthy and living better.

You probably do chores, even if you don’t like them. You’re not really thinking about building character when you do them. You’re thinking about having clean clothes, clean dishes, a presentable lawn, or whatever else needs to be done. They aren’t fun. In fact, they’re often dull and boring. But you do them anyway because the outcome is worth it.

It’s interesting to me to look at how the western world responded to the 9/11 catastrophe. Here in America, it stirred up a lot of hostility toward Muslims and Muslim nations. It also led to a tightening of security across the board, and especially at border crossings and airports. People here were determined to stand up to terrorism and not to be victims of it again. America wanted everyone to know this wasn’t going to be tolerated and we would take the fight to the source. That led to the operation that tracked down and killed Osama bin Laden and the ongoing military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

America’s reaction wasn’t the only reaction out there. 9/11 also wasn’t the only terrorist attack to occur in the western world. The French have an unfortunate reputation of caving in to outside pressure. France was the victim of terrorist attacks also, but its response seemed to Americans to be more of accommodation, rather than resistance. It sounded more like France was seeking to appease terrorists and buy them off, instead of standing up to terrorism and trying to wipe it out.

A lot of Americans looked at this with scorn and derision. “France is just giving up and letting terrorism run rampant,” they’d say. “Don’t they know you can’t negotiate with terrorists? Giving them what they want just encourages them. We certainly aren’t going to support that sort of thing here.” It got to the point where people would start referring to French fries as “Freedom fries” and that sort of thing, refusing to even dignify the French by naming them.

I say all of this is interesting because, for all of our moral superiority, the attitude the French seemed to be exhibiting is one we are all very familiar with. Why should they be eager to fight off a bunch of terrorists? I'm sure there are a number of other things they'd much rather be doing and if paying them off or otherwise giving them what they want makes them go away, why should that really upset us? We're happy to do things like that in our own lives. Why should we begrudge them the same thing?

"But you have to fight back or they'll keep walking over you!" you might say. "They'll just keep spreading and doing terrible things." That all may very well be true. It's quite possible a terrorist might be encouraged. It's possible all sorts of bad things could happen. So what? "They should stand up to them, they'll be more like us," you might continue. Which really all boils down to, "It's good for you. It builds character."

In the minds of many Americans, standing up to terrorism is a good thing. It won't be any fun. In fact it will bring a lot more grief and suffering, but the end result will be worth it. At least from their perspective. Obviously there are others who disagree. There are others who say avoiding all of the grief is a much better option. The goal is all kind of nebulous anyway. Why expend a lot of effort and grief on something I may never achieve when I could have a little peace right now? It's not so different at all from the attitude we've had ourselves.

Suffering and grief aren't going to make you happy. That's kind of the point. If they aren't going to make you happy, then why put yourself through the ordeal, especially if you don't have to? If your goal is to live your life in peace and contentment, then why subject yourself to any of that? Just because someone else thinks something is good for you doesn't mean you think it is and it may not be something you care about at all.

That's why what St. Paul says here doesn't make a whole lot of sense. It sounds as though he's saying you should embrace grief and suffering willingly because there's some sort of good that will come from it, maybe even to just prove you did it. That doesn't sound very smart. It doesn't sound very productive at all.

Now, I will admit, as a guy, there are times when you have to put yourself through some potentially painful things, just to prove you can do it, to be able to look back and show off to the other guys how tough you are. It's just part of being a guy, often we even enjoy doing it. Now, as most of you ladies know, guys are wired a bit differently in that regard.

However, that's still different than what Paul is talking about. When guys are

challenging each other to goofy stunts, there's some thrill involved, some excitement. Paul doesn't talk about fun or excitement, just suffering, just dealing with the grief that comes at you and telling yourself it'll be a good thing, it'll build character, as if that's somehow supposed to make you feel better.

How does any of this help you? Why should you even care? Is this supposed to make you more willing to suffer the various evils and injustices of the world? No, no it isn't. It isn't going to take the pain away. It isn't suddenly going to make unemployment palatable. It certainly isn't going to make the death of a loved one a happy experience. It isn't going to magically patch up a broken marriage or somehow make it a fun thing to do. It isn't going to make the steady, downward decline of old age something to look forward to. No, they're all bad and nothing will change that.

There are folks who echo the sentiment Paul seems to be expressing when he says, "we rejoice in our sufferings." The whole "just think positive" crowd will tell you you don't have to be sad, you don't need to grieve. Just make up your mind to be happy. "Rejoice in our sufferings," he says. You're unemployed, so you have the perfect opportunity to take a nice, afternoon walk merrily singing the lyrics to your favorite musical or Disney movie and enjoying the weather, taking a moment to visit with the folks you meet. Why not? It's a day to rejoice! Your wife died, your husband died, invite some friends over and have a party, it's a great day!

No, none of that makes any sense. In fact, if that's really the way it's supposed to work, the entire season of Lent doesn't make any sense. This is the time we remember our sins. This is the time we follow Jesus on his last trip to Jerusalem where he goes to face suffering. Jesus isn't throwing parties and having fun. In fact, aside from Palm Sunday, everything seems rather subdued. Good Friday in particular is anything but fun. No, Christ goes to suffer and he knows it and it's going to hurt.

St. Paul starts off talking about being justified by faith and through that, peace with God in Christ Jesus. We have grace through faith, and because of that we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. That puts a little different spin on things. Paul isn't telling you to laugh and sing because you're miserable. He's not saying it will be any fun at all or that you should expect it to make you happy. He's saying instead, because you've been justified by faith, you will make it through your suffering and come out the other side.

We get caught up in those who say we can out-happy our sorrows, and we get mad when

that doesn't work. We get caught up thinking we will never survive this misery and we get mad at God for putting us there. Like little kids, we get pouty and mad when we face the prospect of something we won't like. We'd rather be doing just about anything with our lives, but instead we're stuck and miserable. Often it feels very much like our Heavenly Father is inflicting it on us intentionally.

We feel like we're being punished, when instead God is taking a larger view. Like Jesus, suffering with every bloody, agonizing footstep he takes up the road to Calvary, he has something more important in mind. God, forgive us for our lack of trust! God, forgive us for our narrow focus on what we face today and not looking to you to provide for tomorrow!

Building character sounds like a cheap excuse, a nebulous idea a parent might use to avoid giving you a real reason, but here it actually means something and it is quite important. St. Paul talks about faith, suffering, endurance, character, and hope. There are times you will suffer in life. There is no denying that. But you have been justified by faith, faith in the one who promises you will see the other side of that suffering and what comes after will be much better than what comes before.

In one sense, all of these unfortunate things that come up are just getting us ready for the main event. God is always telling us he will be with us, but there are also those nagging doubts. What will happen at the end? Is death all that awaits us? Will it just be pain and suffering before we're all gone and there's just nothing? No heaven, no perfect world, nothing waiting for us at all? And even if there is, will we really see it?

God tells you you will see the other side. Whatever you may face and however awful it is, it will come to an end and you will still be there when it does, even if that means death and God will be right there with you. As you pass through each time of suffering, you will be able to look back and see how God's promise came true and you had nothing to worry about. The end was never in doubt. Yes, you suffered for a time, but now that suffering is done. Each time you suffer, you can look back on the last time and see that it came to an end, and this one will too. That means, even in the midst of suffering, you have hope because God has promised to see you through it. You will endure and by enduring, you will see the glory of God evident in your life. What's more, as you survive whatever ordeal you are going through, others will see it too. Everyone else out there who thinks they've come to the end of the line and think that's all there is. No, you will be proof that there is hope. As one who has been justified by faith, as one who

follows Christ, the one who suffered on our behalf, he went through ultimate suffering and came through it, revealing his glory. As you endure suffering and see it come to an end, his glory is revealed in you as well, glory that others will see. Your life becomes a testimony to the glory of God who sees his people through their suffering and promises them something greater.

This world is full of suffering. There is no denying it, but we endure because we know, by faith, that it isn't the end. We have hope in the promises of God and the example of Christ himself, that no suffering will bring us down forever, not even death. He will see us through to the other side and his glory will be revealed to us and to the world.