

Sermon for Sunday, March 7, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"GOD DOESN'T GRADE ON THE CURVE"

Romans 3:19-26

Text: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus."
--Romans 3:23-24

I have a friend down in Florida who is a Presbyterian minister. The unusual thing about him is that he is the pastor of the fastest growing church in our denomination and he has become known all over the nation for the evangelism program in his church. For example, several years ago he took in 250 members in one year and over half of them were on profession of faith.

Not long ago I had a chance to have lunch with him. Naturally, I was curious about his church and about what he was doing to win so many people to Christ. He told me that it was really simple. When he went to talk to people about Jesus he started by asking them two questions. You can imagine how curious I was until he told me what those two questions were. I want to share them with you this morning. The first question is this: "Have you come to a place in your spiritual experience where you know you have eternal life?" I would like to put that question to you this morning. If you were to pass away quietly in your sleep tonight, do you know for certain--do you know beyond the shadow of a doubt--that you would wake up in heaven with Jesus?

How do you answer a question like that? Would you say, "Well, I don't know if anyone can really know that." Maybe you would say, "Well, I surely hope so." Or maybe you would say, "I certainly would like to think that I would." But the Bible says you don't have to worry or wonder about it. The Bible says you can know beyond the shadow of a doubt. The Bible says, "These things have I written...that ye may know that ye have eternal life." So, eternal life is not something off in the future that we hope we will have. Eternal life is something we have right now and we can know if we have it. The fact is, you can leave here this morning with the assurance and the knowledge that you do have eternal life.

But before we talk about that let me share with you the second question that my friend asks people. Here it is: "When you stand before God and he asks you, 'Why should I let you into my heaven?', what will you say?" Now, that's a tough question, too, isn't it? How would you answer? I think most of us would say something like this: "Well, I never thought of anything like that. I've gone to Sunday School and church most of my life. I try to be pretty good although I know I haven't been perfect. I try to be a good neighbor and I don't think I've been too bad."

That answer would fit most of us, don't you think? So, maybe if we are good Americans, go to church, pay our taxes, stay out of serious debt and try to treat everyone fairly, maybe that will be enough to get us in.

But that raises a serious question. If getting into heaven depends on being good and all those things, how good is good enough? What is a passing mark with God? How much good works do we have to do to balance off the bad things? What grade would you give yourself this morning? Is it enough to pass?

The first thing I want to say to you this morning is this: God doesn't grade on the curve. In a way, I'm glad. I know some mighty good people who live saintly lives. They would break the curve and people like me could never get a passing mark. And if God is going to grade on the curve, I want to be the one who picks the people I'll be compared with. I know a few people who would make me look pretty good! It's like the fellow who was asked the question by a friend, "How is your wife?" He thought a minute and then replied, "Compared to whom?"

But God doesn't grade on the curve. If you want to know how good you have to be to get to heaven on your good works, the Bible tells you plainly enough--it gives you clear-cut answers. Here is how good the Bible says you have to be: "Be ye therefore perfect even as your father in heaven is perfect."

Since God doesn't grade on the curve, you have to make a perfect score. The second point I want to make is this: I don't believe there is a single person here this morning that can score that well. The Bible says, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The Bible says, "There is none righteous, no, not one." So, to get into heaven on our good works requires a perfect life. But the fact is, only one man ever lived a perfect life. The third thing I want to say is this: God isn't going to over-look and ignore our sin. God says of himself, "I am holy and just and righteous. I am of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. The soul that sinneth it shall die." And then St. Paul tells us, "The wages of sin is death."

Now, there are a lot of modern theologians who are telling people that because God is a loving God everybody will eventually get into heaven. Some of our modern theologians are telling us that all the church has to do is go tell the world that God is love and they can forget about their sins. But God is not only loving, he is also just. God takes our sin very, very seriously. God hates our sin. God despises our wickedness. God loathes our evil deeds. And even though he loves us very much, he takes our sins very seriously.

So, if we are sinners, and if God takes sin seriously, and if the wages of sin is death, each of us is condemned unless somebody comes along who loves us enough and cares for us enough to die in our place.

Jesus is that somebody. God can't overlook our sin, yours and mine. He can't pretend it didn't happen or that it doesn't matter. But he can and he did send somebody to die in our place, to bear the punishment of our sins for us. And that somebody was Jesus.

Jesus came to be your substitute. And whoever you are this morning, if you had been the only person in the whole world, God loves you so very much that Jesus would have still come to take your place and to die for you alone. That's what our text for this morning says, "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus."

It is hard for you and me to comprehend just what Jesus was going through on the cross. The physical pain of being crucified was perhaps the least he bore that day. There was a spiritual agony we cannot fully imagine as he bore the punishment of our sins. As one hymn writer puts it, "We may not know, we cannot tell what pains he had to bear; But we believe it was for us He hung and suffered there." No, it was no ordinary death that day on Calvary's cross. It was a death that suffered the wrath of a just God against sins--yours and mine. It was a death that bore the sins of the world. It was a death that cut to the very heart of God. It was a dear and costly death that paid for our sins. Yes, for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son...

I said in the beginning that the Bible tells us that we can know for certain if we have eternal life. It ought to be clear by now that you can't win heaven or earn it or deserve it, because God doesn't grade on the curve. The only way you can have eternal life is to accept it as a free gift from God. God hates our sin, but he loves us--loves us so much he sent Jesus to die for our sins. Isn't that what our text for this morning says? "We are justified by his grace as a gift."

Do you have that gift? There is only one way to have that gift. Suppose I have in my hands a package, all gift-wrapped. And suppose there is a card on the gift with your name on it. I hold it out to you and you know it is yours--except it isn't truly yours until you do what? Until you receive it. Until you stretch out your hands and take it.

God has a gift for you this morning. It is the gift of his Son; it is the gift of forgiveness; it is the gift of eternal life. But it isn't truly yours until you receive it. I'm going to tell you how to receive that gift. The Bible says, "By grace are you saved through faith." So you receive God's gift through saving faith. And saving faith is trusting Jesus to save you. It is trusting Jesus and what he did for you on the cross--not your good works, not your noble deeds, but trusting Jesus only.

About 1735 John Wesley came from England to America and spent some time in Georgia as a missionary. All his life, he had been a pious person. He got up at four in the morning and prayed two hours. Then he would read the Bible for another hour. Then he would go to the jails and prisons and hospitals to minister to people. He would teach and pray for and help others until late at night and he did that for years. If God graded on the curve, Wesley would have broken the curve! But when Wesley started back to England from America, his ship was caught in a great storm and he was scared to death. He thought he was going to die in that storm and if he did, eternal life was just a big, black question mark for him. But the ship weathered the storm and he finally got back to England. As soon as they landed he went to a little chapel and there he heard a man reading a sermon that had been written two hundred years before by a man named Martin Luther. It was a sermon about saving faith. It spoke of trusting only Jesus for salvation and not anything we did. That night John Wesley wrote in his journal, "About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the laws of sin and death." There it is! That is saving faith. That is trusting Jesus alone for salvation. And that is what one of our hymn-writers meant when he wrote, "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." And that's what Charlotte Elliott meant when she wrote, "Just as I am without one plea, except thy blood was shed for me."

Isn't it sad that there are a lot of people today waiting to be good enough to become a Christian? God doesn't grade on the curve and you can't be good enough. No, you can only trust Jesus for your salvation and receive him as a gift from a God who loves you.

You can have assurance of eternal life this morning by having a saving faith, by trusting Jesus alone for your salvation because he died in your place.

But there is a catch to it. You suspected there would be one, didn't you? It's all too good to be true if it is as easy as that, so there had to be a catch, didn't there? Here is the catch: Jesus can't be the Saviour of your life unless you let him be the Lord of your life as well. Everyone of us this morning has a control center in our hearts. Each of us has a throne in our hearts and the king who sits on that throne is our own ego, our own will. Jesus says to us, "I can't be the Saviour of your life unless you turn the control center over to me. I cannot share the throne of your heart with anyone. It must belong to me alone."

Have you come to that place in your life where by faith you are ready to receive Christ as your Saviour, to accept as a gift his death on the cross in your place? Have you come to that moment when you are willing to surrender the throne of your heart to him and make him the Lord of your life? You see, God doesn't grade on the curve. If you don't have Jesus as Saviour and Lord, when you get to heaven and God says, "Why should I let you in my heaven?", what will you say?

Let us pray.

I am going to pray a simple prayer. For those of you who would like to, you pray it silently after me. It is going to be a little prayer where you accept Jesus as Saviour and invite him to be the Lord of your life. But don't play games with God--don't pray if you don't really mean it.

Lord Jesus, I am a sinner. I confess my sin. I accept your death on the cross for me. I claim forgiveness--not because I deserve it, but because you love me and give it to me. But Lord Jesus, I want to surrender the throne of my heart to you. Come now, Lord. Take control of my life and help me to be what you want me to be. Thank you, Lord, for saving me. Thank you for eternal life. Amen.