

## **Introduction**

This morning's text invites us to live and thrive. This invitation comes from God's grace shown to us through Jesus' death and resurrection, this invitation gives us hope for the future, and it frees us. Today's passage talks about us being justified, which means that we are made righteous in God's eyes thanks to Jesus. This is only available through faith. God's grace offers us the invitation to be justified and we accept the invitation with our faith. Realizing you are justified, you are made righteous, thanks to what Jesus has done and not what you have done, is liberating. A weight is lifted off your shoulders. It frees you to live.

## **Mr. Rogers**

Before I start off with a sermon illustration, I have to warn you: I'm reading a biography on one of our most beloved Presbyterian ministers whose work has shaped me. So who knows how often you'll hear me talk about him in the next couple weeks! But his work wasn't done from a pulpit when I was in a church or a seminary lecture hall when I was a student, it was done on public television when I was in preschool. His name was Fred Rogers, and his children's show Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood was broadcast nationally from 1971 to 2001. It was a show that invited every child to realize that they are special just as they are, and during the age of children's programming that was silly, slap-stick, and riddled with consumeristic commercials, Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood edifying, educational, and uninterrupted from ads drawing away a child's attention and imagination.

Fred Rogers's legacy, though he died 16 years ago, is still strong today. This week, just three days ago, the governor of Rogers's homestate, Pennsylvania, declared May 23 a statewide day of kindness in honor of Mr. Rogers, calling it "143 Day." May 23 is the 143rd day of the year, and 1-4-3 was a code Fred Rogers used with friends to tell them "I love you" - as 1-4-3 corresponds with the number of letters in each word of the phrase "I love you."

The biography, titled, "The Good Neighbor," came out last year and is one of the few books I've bought at full price shortly after it came out. During our vacation this week, I finally sat down and opened it up. So as I have the idea of this week's sermon, the idea that our justification, our righteousness in Christ frees us to live, was rattling around in my mind as I read about Fred Rogers' early life.

He grew up in a very wealthy family. At school he was socially awkward and lonely, so he focused heavily on schoolwork, music, and entertaining himself alone with his imagination. When he was deciding where to attend college, he chose Dartmouth to study language while also satisfying his father who wanted him to inherit and run the family businesses. He hated Dartmouth. Dartmouth in the 40s was notorious for partying, and Rogers was anything but a partier. Dartmouth was an environment where Rogers did not belong. He did not have the room to truly live and thrive. And so, at the recommendation of a music professor, he transferred to a small college in Florida called Rollins College. Rogers said in an interview that at first, Rollins felt perfect because Florida was so

much warmer than New Hampshire. But that was just a start. It was there that he found himself. It was there where he was given the freedom and environment to thrive as he studied music and French and was given opportunities to travel and grow in ways that he needed to be the person he became.

Rogers met his partner and wife, Joanne, at Rollins, learned from friends and mentors, and found his life-long calling of music and children's education at Rollins. From there, he believed that the new medium of television was an underused device for children's education, and so he went on to revolutionize it. It all started because he had the freedom at Rollins to live into the gifts God had given him.

## **Freedom**

It was a small taste of the kind of freedom we should feel when we know we belong to God and are justified in Christ. In Christ, God has given us the freedom to live and thrive. We can live in the abundance of Jesus without being held down by the world's myth of scarcity. We are no longer stuck in old ways or in an environment where we do not belong. Let's look at how Romans 5 informs us of this truth.

## **Romans 5**

Open up to Romans 5 if you want to follow along. With a passage like this, I want us to go through it and we'll stop at some highlights. So, let's start with the first paragraph. **Read from**

**Bible.** “Therefore...” Ok, we need to stop here. We might not get very far this morning... Remember our study tool? When we are reading the New Testament, especially one of Paul’s letters, when a sentence starts with the word, “therefore,” we need to find out what it’s “there for.” Here, Paul gives us a quick summary, “Therefore, since we are justified by faith...” Paul has spent the large part of the two chapters before ours creating the argument that whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, you are justified - or made righteous - by faith alone. Justification, being made righteous in God’s eyes, is the work of God through Jesus. It’s not us. It’s not our tribe or nationality. It’s not our good works or piety. It’s Jesus. It’s grace.

### **Read vv. 1-5**

Stop for a second and imagine what it means that God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. God’s love has been poured out for you.

Key word here: hope. We are justified by faith. Therefore, we have hope. Eternal, everlasting hope. Hope that will not and cannot be diminished by suffering, which has historically been a hope-killer. But Paul says, thanks to what Jesus has done, we know that suffering is never final. In fact, Jesus can take our suffering and redeem it. He offers restoration! Suffering can lead to endurance, endurance can lead to character, and character can lead to hope. So not only does our suffering not diminish hope when we are in Christ, suffering can also lead to greater hope through this process in Christ. When we know we are

justified in Christ, we can live and thrive. Even in the midst of suffering.

Paul continues in showing us why we have hope. We have hope because God loves us as we are and Jesus died for us as we are.

### **Read vv. 6-11**

While we were still weak...while we were still sinners. God loves you as you are. We are invited every week in worship, and every moment in prayer, to come to God as we are. We have received that invitation through Christ.

Here's what I want you to notice: the verbs in this passage are past-tense and final. Christ died for the ungodly. Christ died for us. We have been justified. We were reconciled to God. When you have faith in Jesus, you do not need to be justified. You do not need to earn reconciliation. God has already done that. You simply need to accept the invitation. That's what faith is. Accepting the invitation that was written freely for you before you could have ever earned it.

And because of these past-tense, final verbs, we have hope for the future. The hard part has been done; Jesus has already done the heavy lifting. Because we have been justified (past), we will be saved (future). If God reconciled us while we were still sinners, what will God do now that we are justified in Christ? We are not there yet, but we have hints of what God will do now. We are given hints of eternal life, hints of the Kingdom of God that is

already among us, hints of paradise, hints of true peace and justice, hints of a world where every tear is dried, where death is a thing of the past. That's our hope.

So here is where we are. We are justified, made righteous, and reconciled. That's our past. We have hope of salvation, that's the future. But here we are, in the middle. What now? Now we live in freedom. We live free from sin and fear. We live into the life God has called us to. We live with the gifts God has given each of us. We live. And we do even more than that. We thrive. Jesus told us in John 10 that he came that we might have life, and have it abundantly. Justification - being made righteous in God's eyes thanks to Jesus - gives us life abundant.

When we live abundantly, when we live out of abundance, we do not hold back the gifts God has given us. Gifts of life, relationships, money, time, love, mercy, talents, and abilities. We should be overflowing with God's love in such a way that it naturally pours out of us to our neighbors. We should be overflowing with God's forgiveness in such a way that it naturally pours out of us when someone wrongs us. Let's reclaim that in our lives. Christ came that we might have life, and have it abundantly. Let's live abundantly.

## **Conclusion**

The beauty of life abundant is that we can start right here, right now. We can start as we are. God loves us as we are, Christ came to die for us as we are. So today I want to close with a line

from Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. Every episode, Fred Rogers would end with a song, and then would look at the camera, at every child watching the program, with this:

"You always make each day a special day. You know how: By just your being you. There's only one person in the whole world that's like you, and that's you. And people can like you just the way you are. I'll be back next time. Bye-bye!"

It is so important for a child to hear that. It's still important for us as adults to hear it. People can like you just the way you are, and that is because God loved us all so much that he sent Christ to die for us just the way we are. Because of that, we are justified. Because of that, we are made righteous. Because of that, we are free. Free to live and thrive, because God's love has been poured out for us.