

Mark 4:35-41

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[0 : 00] you are a visitor this morning, let me inform you, if you are regular, you will quickly perceive that what we are about to hear is not typical. Usually, the sermon portion of our service seeks to explicate, explain some portion of scripture, and then discover God's word for it in it for us today. And occasionally, however, we like to take some personal drama, some person's story, someone's experience, and use that as a lens through which we see some particular scripture that will illuminate our experience in that particular scripture too. And today is one of those occasional times. So I offer you one person's story. In fact, the person who wrote one of those hymns that we earlier sang, interspersed with a few reflections.

On a hot summer day of the year 1505, a young student was returning from a visit home to continue his studies at university. As he trudged along the parched road just outside the Saxon village of Stotterheim. Ominously, the sky began to cloud over and soon completely darkened.

Then suddenly, from the black, roiling thunderhead, shot a bolt of lightning, hurling the panic-stricken scholar headlong. In utter terror, the prostrate traveler cried out, St. Anne, save me and I will become a monk. Well, it was not just the terror of the moment which had extracted this oath from the young Martin, for that was the student's name. It was his great concern for salvation. And in that terrible flash of lightning, Martin saw the denouement of the whole drama of existence, the inexorable final judgment of God. And he knew that he was not ready to face an all-holy and almighty judge. Hence, the terror-stricken appeal to St. Anne. St. Anne was his father's saint, the patroness of minors, and as such a household favorite in his home. But also, St. Anne, as the mother of Mary, who was the mother of Jesus, very well connected and able to interpose on Martin's behalf, or such was the hope. His panicked prayer, save me and I will become a monk, was more than a deal. It was a determination, a determination to take his salvation seriously.

For the common view of the day had it that the only way to play it truly safe when it came to salvation was to become a monk. Indeed, to novices entering the monastery came the assurance, keep this rule and I promise you eternal life. Now, Martin's father was irate for his son's resolve to take the cowl, verged from the carefully laid parental plans for their son, who was to become a lawyer and then support them in their old age. And the eliciting circumstance of a lightning bolt might have absolved him from his vow as one uttered rashly. I mean, after all, it was uttered in the midst of a thunderstorm. But Martin would not go back, even if he could. And within two weeks, he presented himself at the gate of the Augustinian Priory, with salvation at stake. And if the cowl alone could safely secure it, safely secure it, a monastery it must be. And so Martin exchanged his civilian clothes for his Augustinian habit. As the Priory of the monastery intoned,

[5 : 01] Bless thou thy servant, whom we have clad in the habit of a monk, that he may merit eternal life.

And so the zealous novice set himself to that task with all the vigor he possessed. What was this system of salvation to which he set himself? How did one go about to merit eternal life? Well, avoid as much as possible demerits by avoiding breaking God's laws, like the Ten Commandments. Don't break those. Now, of course, this could scarcely be completely avoided. So the need was to confess your faults, then make some amends for them. Render some satisfaction, as it was called. Things like extra prayers or extra austerities that you might take, kind of going the extra mile or going without. And this would give you some positive merit to compensate and offset the demerit that you had accrued. And the aim was to keep your moral ledger out of the red, if you could. And ideally, well into the black, if possible. Though such a more merit than needed accomplishment was a rarity. And that would put you into the saints class of super achievers. Now, this is where the system got complicated and creative. Since some, those super achievers, had more merit than they needed for salvation, their extra could be transferred to another, who

maybe found himself in arrears and needed a little bit of help. And all the extra merit was pooled into a great storehouse called the Treasury of Merit and could be dispensed by the religious authorities of the day, who were the caretakers of this treasury. And the typical means, there were many, many, many, many people, many people. But the typical means of obtaining such merit was by things like viewing with veneration, maybe a religious relic, such as a preserved piece of the cross of Jesus, or visiting some sacred site, like the burial place of St. James or St. Peter.

[7 : 58] Well, this prescribed system of salvation, the monk Martin set himself to assiduously. He swelled his already rigorous regimen of the monastery with extra prayers and with all-night vigils.

He scrupulously confessed all of his shortcomings, and for these, offered compensating satisfactions, often in the form of extreme mortifications or deprivations, such as sleeping blanketless in the cold winter months. In hindsight, he testified, I vexed myself with endless prayers and fastings.

If any could have been saved by his monkery, it was I. What impelled Monk Martin was, just as with the thunderbolt of that Stotterheim storm, terror, terror, terror of standing before a holy God. For he felt acutely that fierce wrath must be the stance of holy justice against the sinner. In the presence of God, my soul feels and drinks, he somberly confessed, nothing but eternal punishment.

[9 : 32] Desperately, he sought to clear himself in confession. Ever worried that he might have neglected some sin, he not infrequently would sit in the confessional six hours at a time, exhaustively and exhaustingly owning all of his offenses.

Good grief, Martin, ease up, said his confessor. Come back when you've committed some serious sin, like murder or blasphemy.

But all sin, realized Martin, all sin, small as well as great, has to be purged. Ease up. What? When eternal judgment awaits?

When the judge is holy? Then an opportunity presented itself to visit Rome, and the tormented Martin leapt at the chance.

It was neither the architecture nor the gelato which lured him to Rome, though that might have been plausible. Rather, the prospect of gaining additional merit by viewing all the religious relics with which the eternal city was brimming.

[10 : 54] Indeed, Rome was the greatest treasury of merit in all Christendom. From the prison chain that had bound St. Peter to the coin paid to Judas, Christ's betrayer, Rome was a virtual supermarket of spare merit, and Martin intended to do the rounds and to load up the cart.

I ran around Rome like a madman, Martin tells us. And capping off his cash of merit was an ascent of the 28 steps of the Scala Sancta, which it was said had once stood before Pilate's palace, up which Christ himself had ascended.

And Martin did his due diligence, ascending on his knees, reciting the Lord's Prayer on every step, even kissing each step for good measure.

But for all his efforts to earn God's favor, Martin found no peace. Back at the monastery, he poured over theological tomes in search of salvation.

But the current theology simply told him to do his best to earn God's favor and hope that God's grace would make up the shortfall.

[12 : 23] As the theology books of his day expressed it, do what is within you. God will not refuse grace to those who do what is within them.

But how will I know, asked Martin, if I've really done all that is within me? What's enough? How will I know that I've done enough to satisfy God with my part so that his part will kick in?

I hoped I might find peace of conscience with fasts and prayers and vigils with which I miserably afflicted my body.

But the more I sweated it out like this, the less peace and tranquility that I knew. The system of salvation offered to Martin in the monastery was not working for him.

And the terror of the judgment of God hung over him like that thundercloud of Stotterheim. Well, I want for a moment to break from our story and acknowledge that perhaps this Monk Martin's experience strikes you, some of you at least, as completely alien.

[13 : 59] Well, if this is so, if this is your reaction, I guess I want to ask you, is it really? Is it really completely alien? Is his experience entirely different from ours?

Perhaps for some, his terror of the judgment, fear of having finally to stand before a supreme judge seems a silly notion, a relic of a far distant and superstitious past?

Perhaps. But then again, in some form or other, that conviction that we are in this world because a supreme being has placed us here and that that being has expectations of us and will finally judge us according to those expectations, this, or something quite like it, has been the conviction of the majority of people who have ever lived in history and indeed is the majority conviction of people alive right now.

Now, truth, of course, isn't determined by popular vote, but this recognition ought perhaps to be sufficient to give us some pause if we're inclined to be dismissive of a notion of judgment.

Perhaps because clothed in the language of a different time and place clothed in a cowl and tonsured, so to speak, it seems very other. But the fundamental instinct to see ourselves somehow accountable for our lives seems within humanity to be a remarkably enduring instinct.

[15 : 59] And consider the alternative that there is and shall be no judgment, that all the awful mass of injustice and exploitation and victimization, all that horribly violates our deepest loyalty to good and the right and the true, will never be called out and never set to rights.

If there is no final judgment, what hope is there for final justice in our world? It's just an empty dream.

Well, if this is where you find yourself, I would urge you to recognize the importance of this question. Is Monk Martin right about the basic reality of our lives?

That we are accountable. Wrestle with that. Or perhaps you find yourself in sympathy with the general framework, a God who will finally judge us as to our lives lived on earth, but you find a smile, maybe even a smirk coming on at the quaint or bizarre means that Monk Martin employed in hopes of gaining God's final favor.

about narrowly religious, merit and satisfactions, vigils and macerations. But come on, casting off your blankets in winter, that's supposed to somehow satisfy God?

[17 : 45] Or exhaustively parading peccadilloes in the confessional booth? Oh, come on. Yeah, yeah, there is a certain oddity and alienness to these particular tactics to gain God's approval.

They certainly seem bizarre to me. But what about the strategy? What about the strategy? Is this not perhaps more present with us than we realize?

Practicing our own standards of respectability or religiosity and punishing ourselves when we fall short? Working hard at keeping up the respectability, being a mensch, being a good guy.

But when I screw up, sometimes pretty badly, making myself so miserable, I've got to be given forgiveness. Penance.

Perhaps our intuitions are closer to Martin's cowed colleagues. Relax, Martin. God is merciful.

[19 : 01] What do you think he expects of you? And buttressing this kind of breezy security is often a perception of relative goodness, relative, vis-a-vis the crowd of humanity.

I mean, after all, we make sacrifices, just like those monks who would forego forswear marriage and meet on Fridays. We volunteer at the book bank.

New Haven learns to read, recycle. We support an orphanage in India. Oh, I'm as good as the next guy. Privately, we flatter ourselves that in likelihood we're a little bit better.

And so we console ourselves confidently that whatever judgment there is to come, it will go well with us. It's what his friends urged Martin.

Well, why didn't this common line of reflection console Martin? I mean, was he simply neurotic? Pathologically unhinged? The unsettling worry of Martin was this.

[20 : 16] Well, it's all well and good to console myself that it will go well with me in the judgment if I'm the one who's supplying the standard. Be pretty good, or at least be better than the worst.

But, insisted Martin, surely, surely the question is, what is the standard God will use to judge?

On what basis will the real judge evaluate us? Now, surely, whatever he might be wrong about, Martin's got to be right about that.

I mean, what does it matter if we do okay on our own fancied test if the real exam will be something completely different?

It's like flattering ourselves with sanguine hopes for our impending LSAT because we've practiced up and do relatively well at trivial pursuit questions.

[21 : 26] And as Martin was aware, the judge has given us his standard. The law. Don't steal.

Don't lie. Don't covet. Keeping that is precarious enough. But the real gutting requirement for Martin, and likely for every one of us, was this.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. No wonder Martin couldn't be consoled by lame reassurances.

With such a standard, Martin's anxiety, even terror, in the face of judge and judgment, is the height of sanity.

Not neurosis. Well, we saw where this left him. Where does this leave us? Not in a good place.

[22 : 33] With the unsavory dilemma that if there is no judge, what hope is there for the world? But if there is, what hope is there for us?

Well, how did Monk Martin get out of this seeming checkmate? Back to our storyline. We left Martin poring over his theology books, which simply urged him to be sincere and to do his best.

But that was no help. How do you know if you've been sincere enough or done enough for God's approval? The path to Martin's breakthrough came when he laid aside his theology books and turned to the Bible.

Now, the Bible didn't help him either at first. Really? Well, how could that be? He found it very hard to understand.

At least, the bit that he was reading, which was Paul's epistle to the Romans, particularly that bit that we had read to us earlier.

[23 : 54] Chapter 1, verses 16 and 17. Let's take a look at it again and see if we can appreciate Martin's perplexity. In the Pew Bibles, if you have them, it's on page 939.

So, Romans chapter 1, verses 16 and 17. Page 939. Here was the puzzle.

It opens by announcing that with respect to salvation, there is good news.

Do you see that little word there, gospel? There in verse 16. Well, that word gospel simply means good news. So, you can imagine how this announcement would have riveted Martin's attention. salvation. Good news. Good news about the prospects for salvation. But then, the very next verse, verse 17, explained that this gospel announcement is good news because it reveals, it makes known, the righteousness of God.

[25 : 16] God. But how, thought Martin, could a revelation of the righteousness of God be good news for the prospects of salvation?

That God is righteous is no good news for a sinner. Surely, what a righteous God means for an unrighteous sinner is judgment and condemnation and hell.

His righteous nature requires that he require it of us and punish us if we lack it. I did not love, Martin tells us.

Indeed, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners. sinners. Do you see Martin's frustration? Can you, can you feel it? You say this is good news? Where's the good news here? I must be getting something wrong.

[26 : 33] But Martin was desperate to understand what the Apostle Paul could mean in these verses. So he kept wrestling with this text of scripture, like Jacob wrestling with the angel.

He would not let go. Then, he saw it. The good news, unspeakably wonderful good news, came flowing out as water from a rock.

Such good news as would change Monk Martin forever. So let's listen as he tells us of this great moment in his own words, reflecting back from the last years of his life.

I was seized with great earnestness to understand Paul in this epistle to the Romans. One term stood in my way, the righteousness of God.

I hated this phrase, the righteousness of God. For I had been taught to understand it as the active righteousness of God, whereby a righteous God punishes unrighteous sinners.

[27 : 58] However irreproachable my life as a monk, I felt myself in the presence of God to be a sinner with a most unquiet conscience. Nor could I believe him pleased by my satisfaction.

I did not love, indeed, I hated this righteous God who punishes sinners. I raged with fierce and disturbed conscience in this way, and yet I knocked with importunity at Paul in this place with a burning desire to know what St.

Paul could intend. At last, God being merciful, as I meditated day and night, pondering the connection of the words, the righteousness of God is revealed, and the righteous shall live by faith, I began to understand righteousness of God passively, whereby God supplies a righteousness.

At this, I felt myself to be born anew, and to enter through open gates into paradise itself. This passage of Paul became to me the gate of heaven. What was it that Martin grasped in this text of the apostle Paul that brought him from torment and terror to peace and paradise?
[29 : 50] peace. That the righteousness of God does not simply refer to God's character, but also to his gift.

That is, this righteousness of God should be understood as a righteousness from God. As the apostle puts it elsewhere, a righteousness that comes from God. We don't have it, and we'll never muster it, but Jesus does, and by trusting in him as Savior, his righteousness is counted as ours.

So our only standing and acceptableness, our only righteousness before a holy God is the one, the righteousness that God himself provides.

We don't achieve it, we receive it. It's not a personal righteousness, our own, it's an alien righteousness, that of another, Jesus Christ.

[31 : 09] It does not reflect our performance, but his. It's not our moral ledger, but his. God's love is the law of God.

In this insight, Martin realized that all his zeal to accrue merit was simply running along the wrong path. Accustomed as he was by training to formulate his insights into theses, here is how he expressed his newfound confidence.

righteousness. The law of God, although soundest doctrine of life, is not able to bring to righteousness, but rather stands in the way.

Another, God does not find, but creates that which is pleasing in us. rather than seeking good, he bestows it.

Or again, the law says do this, and it is never done. Grace says, believe in this man, and immediately everything is done.

[32 : 26] Immediately, everything is done for our acceptance before God. Nothing lacking that we must supply. No missing merit to muster.

For trusting in Jesus and his work for us, we receive his record, and it's perfect. Nothing lacking.

As the Father God said of his son at his baptism, this is my son in whom I am perfectly pleased.

The verdict that God the Father speaks over Jesus becomes the verdict God speaks over everyone who links their life to Jesus through faith.

Simple trust in him. What is the verdict spoken by the judge? For those in Christ, you are perfectly pleasing to me.

Righteous. As I see my beloved son Jesus, so I see you. And we then live in and under that wonderful verdict.

[33 : 48] Accepted. Acceptable. Well pleasing. Perfectly righteous. Linking our lives by simple trust to Jesus the Savior.

A wonderful exchange transpires. Think of a marriage, Martin would later explain by way of illustration. A husband's and a wife's assets are combined when they become one.

And that's what trust in Christ does. It marries us to Jesus, so to speak, so that our debts become his.

And his wealth becomes ours. Our failure and demerit and desert of judgment, Jesus takes.

And in return, he gives us his beloved favor with the Father. There is then, for those who put their trust in him, no future thunderstorm of judgment to fear.

[34 : 55] for our spouse, Jesus, has taken that storm upon himself and absorbed its fury. The storm has passed over for everyone who simply trusts in him, taking him as spouse.

What peace and joy is this? Upon grasping this astonishing provision, Martin sought to set it forth in a crest that he designed, not only musical, also artistic, a crest which he passed down through generations of his family.

Yes, monk Martin ended up getting married and had a family, but that's another story, quite a good one actually, we'll tell it some other time. His crest shows, and imagine it, shows a black cross upon a white heart surrounded by a red rose.

The black cross, Christ cursed for us, judged for us, makes clean the heart and brings us joy forever.

The red rose. And so it was that a tormented monk found peace with God and lasting joy from some wonderful words of the Bible.

[36 : 25] Now it may be that some of you are reacting to Martin's discovery with surprise, even shock. Really? Really, does the Bible say that?

Did Martin get it right? And the wonderful good news is, yes. Really? So you're telling me, you and Martin and the Bible are saying that if we simply put our trust in Jesus, that God will judge us, not on our record, but on Jesus' record?

Yes. But that's shocking. Yes. I understand. It goes against the grain of every expectation, every instinct, every experience that we've ever had from cradle to grave.

From cradle to grave, the verdicts we receive, our acceptableness in school, in marriage, on the playing field, everywhere, is always based on our performance.

What we do and how well we do it. Little wonder that we would imagine it's the same with God. God. But the wonderful good news is that it is not so with God.

[37 : 51] And if you find yourself surprised at this, as well we should, my appeal to you would be, don't let the story of Martin or these words from Romans simply leave you in a state of surprise.

put your trust in Jesus. Trust him. And his verdict becomes yours. May the good news become for you, as it was for Monk Martin, the open gate to joy and peace and paradise.

Now if all of this or much of this is new to you, you probably have a ton of questions. That's great. Find me or somebody else afterwards and let's talk about this together.

We'll get a drink and we'll sit down and we'll think through this together. This is so vital. So vital. But for many of you, your reaction to this discovery of Martins isn't surprise.

It's familiarity. Oh, that's old hat. I've heard this all my life. Am I acceptableness is based on Christ's performance, not on my performance?

[39 : 08] I've long known and believed this. Well, so have I. But here's the thing. Sometimes I think I know it theoretically and it hasn't really sunk in.

why would I say that? How do I suspect that I don't really get it? That my acceptableness is secured and secure in Jesus' acceptableness?

Because I often view the things in life as either assaults upon or buttresses to my acceptableness. I imagine that something I perform or fail to forms part of the verdict over my life and I react accordingly. Take marriage, for example, and the criticism that inevitably and rightfully comes from being intimately known.

how do I react when I receive such criticism? All too often, with denials and evasions, maybe even counter-assaults.

[40 : 34] No, no, I never did that. Well, yeah, but the circumstances were this, and yeah, but what about you? Why all the trauma? I'm just being criticized. It's as if some national treasure were under threat and I respond with the full-armed might of the nation.

Well, the truth is, a treasure has been threatened. The treasure of my reputation as acceptable, I've made my spousal righteousness part of what gets me the verdict.

And my spouse's criticism has made my home-spun project of righteousness vulnerable. about to be revealed as a house of cards and completely collapse.

But that calamity has to be averted. So I patch and I repair and I prop up what I've cobbled together like the Wizard of Oz with pulley and lever and curtain.

I project and I protect the treasured pretense. It's pathetic, isn't it? but it's inevitable.

[41 : 49] It is inevitable unless, unless I remember that my righteousness is in Christ and his righteousness.

righteousness. What happens when I remember my justification is in Christ and I live out of it? Well, that criticism can't threaten the verdict over my life.

My acceptableness can't implode because it's secured and secure in Jesus' acceptableness. so I can drop my denials and my evasions.

I can admit my faults and failures and face them. Criticism is no personal crisis. So I can receive it and repent and grow.

I have the security to be vulnerable. Wow. Well, thank you for that observation, dear. I think you might be right.

[43 : 02] I'd never seen that before. That was wrong. I was wrong. Please forgive me. You see, justification in Christ gives us the freedom to face our failures.

And facing them only makes God's grace and mercy more electrifying. God, wow, she's right about that. That's the way I am.

And yet, he loved me and gave himself for me. do you see how defensiveness can betray this disconnect with what we say we know?

It's not that I disbelieve in the justification in Christ. It's my lack of deep belief. Lack of deep belief. The heaven hasn't worked its way through the lump of my life.

life. How about work? Not everybody's married. How about work? Too many of us are workaholics. [44 : 13] We just can't put it down. Did you see the recent New York Times article recognizing our cultural obsession with work?

It mentioned a lady who was giving birth and they couldn't get her to give up her cell phone. Couldn't get her to put it down. I need this to take this call for work.

I kid you not. This is you. Why does work have such a stranglehold on us? I'm convinced it's because for many of us, myself included at times, our work performance is where we toil to gain the verdict of acceptable over our lives.

For many of us, our relation to work is like Martin in the monastery toiling for that ever elusive verdict, acceptable.

But what if we knew and felt deep in our bones that the verdict was in, I am acceptable.

[45 : 29] I don't need to prove anything. We would have rest from our toil. For that craving that's relentlessly driving the work, craving for gaining and maintaining acceptableness, that would be gone.

And our work would just be about work and not about the verdict to be passed over our lives. We could turn out the lights in the lab and go home. We could give up the cell phone and give birth. It's in remembering our justification in Christ that there is rest that remains for the people of God. I want to conclude with a word to our young people, including the very young.

I fear we have grown-ups as grown-ups have given to you a world to grow up in in which it is very easy to fear falling short.

[47 : 04] You hear at every turn that if you hope to succeed, you must achieve. It's how you perform that will determine your worth in the classroom, on the sporting field, in the performance hall, in fact, all of life ahead of you.

That's the way it is. Verdicts are on the line, and you anxiously ask, will I make the team? will I pass the test?

Will I get a spot? And it's very easy to feel that your achievements are your measure as a person. And that's scary and stressful. love. And I want you to know that in Jesus, linking your life to his in simple trust, the only verdict that really, really matters is already in.

You have the favor and the delight of your heavenly father. and you can never lose that favor and delight that he has in you.

[48 : 27] It cannot be taken away or forfeited by a mishap. He delights in you whether you pass the test or fail it, whether you cross the finish line first or trip and fall and finish last.

either way, either way, it will be and always be true what God says. You shall be called Hephzibah. My delight is in her for the Lord delights in you. And for all of you hoping for the little acceptances in life that seems so big, oh, that you would know and feel that surpassingly wonderful acceptance of your heavenly father that you don't have to earn because Jesus has earned it for you.

An acceptance that is for always and forever. I remember first knowing and feeling that kind of acceptance as a little boy.

I felt it from my dad. He was a great athlete and an excellent soccer player and he loved to win. But as much as he loved to win, whenever he would look out at the players to pick from when he was forming his team, despite the fact that they were all better players than I was as a little guy, he always picked me.

[50 : 22] I can still hear his voice. I pick my son. He is my first choice.

And I knew that as I ran out onto the field to play, I already had his smile and his favor.

I didn't have to earn it. Before I kicked the ball, I was his delight. And when I missed the ball and messed up, I was no less his delight.

See, playing from his love and acceptance instead of for it made me run as fast as my little legs could carry me.

And I got to be pretty good. You see, I ran for the joy before me instead of the fear that comes behind.

[51 : 33] And that's how God wants us to run through life, knowing and feeling his unfailing favor.

love. So, friends, brothers and sisters, won't you labor to let this wonderful good news that we are accepted in Jesus work its way like leaven into all of life and as with Martin, find it as the open gate to paradise itself.

Well, we come now to the place where we are reminded of the cost, the cost to God of making us acceptable, the Lord's table.

You remember Martin's illustration of marriage, how husband and wife are one and all that is his is hers and all that's hers is his.

And as we link our lives to Jesus in trust, what is ours becomes his and his ours. And we've spoken mostly this morning of the wonderful things that are his, that favor, that become ours.

[53 : 09] But the bread and the cup remind us of what he received from us and gladly received for us a broken body, shed blood, a life forfeit because of sin.

And here we rightly measure God's love by what he gave, the son of his love. you are my choice, you are my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.

That son he gave that he might receive us and place his delight upon us. and what he does and have fun and and for us to you of see Hamilton