

Habakkuk 2:1-4

Galatians 1:13-17; 2:11-21

May 9, 2021

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

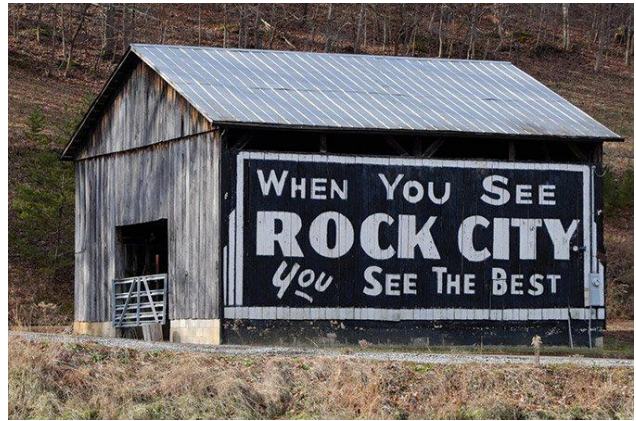
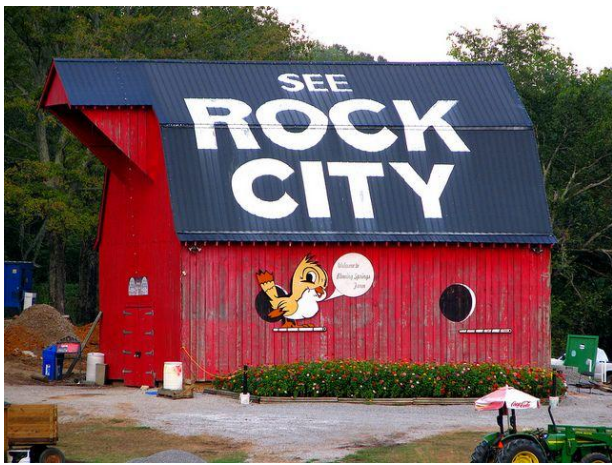
GOT RIGHT WITH GOD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

My family roots are in New Orleans, Louisiana where I was born. Because of my father's work, we moved to Shreveport, LA; Tupelo, MS; Birmingham, AL; Nashville, TN; and, four months after I turned 12, Atlanta Georgia. Because my grandparents lived in New Orleans, we made plenty of road trips — back in the days when you could sit in the way back of the station wagon and wave at the truckers. The family joke was that over the years we stopped and read every highway historical marker throughout the South. Since we were riding on state highways and my father was a history buff, we would frequently pull over to look at signs like this one:

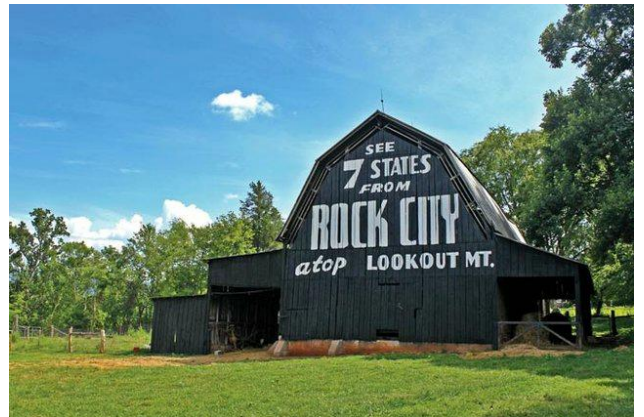


I suppose I learned some history on those long car trips, but mostly I remember not wanting to get out and stand in the hot sun on the side of the road while our dad read the sign to us.



Since we were traveling through the South, we would also frequently see these signs:

The painted barns were the brainchild of Garnet Carter who opened the Rock City tourist attraction on Lookout Mountain above Chattanooga, TN in 1932. Rock City wasn't a success until 1937, when Carter sent a sign painter named Clark Byers out to paint the advertisements on barns along the main highways running to Chattanooga. The signs weren't just in the



South. They stretched from Michigan to Florida and from the NC coast to Texas. At one point, there were as many as 900 barns encouraging tourists to "See Rock City!"¹

I also remember seeing signs like these up and down the highways:



The man in the photo is Henry Harrison Mayes, a Kentucky coal miner and freelance sign painter.

When he survived a mining accident, he began to make concrete crosses, paint them with religious messages such as “Get Right With God,” and



plant them (usually without permission) along the highways. He erected crosses in forty-four states over a sixty year period. For some reason, all these years later, I can remember wondering what “Get Right With God” meant and how you were supposed to “Get Right With God.”²

Here is one artist’s interpretation of how to “get right with God.” In 2002, Lucinda Williams won her third Grammy award for the Best Female Rock Vocal Performance of the song “Get Right With God.” The lyrics:

*I would risk the serpent's bite, I would dance around with seven
I would kiss the diamond back If I knew it would get me to heaven
'Cause I want to get right with God
Yes, you know you got to get right with God
I would burn the soles of my feet, Burn the palms of both my hands
If I could learn and be complete, If I could walk righteously again
'Cause I want to get right with God
Yes, you know you got to get right with God
I would sleep on a bed of nails Till my back was torn and bleeding
In the deep darkness of hell, The Damascus of my meeting
I want to get right with God
Yes, you know you got to get right with God
I asked God about His plan To save us all from Satan's slaughter
If I give up one of my lambs Will You take me as one of Your daughters?
'Cause I want to get right with God
Yes, you know you got to get right with God³*

In an interview, Lucinda Williams said, “I was making a statement about how far people will go to their faith, like sleeping on a bed of nails or snake handling. Those kinds of things show how deeply people believe in God.”

Well, that song might have won the Grammy award, but it's not very good Reformed theology — nor are the roadside signs — when it comes to describing how our relationship with God is made right. If we have to “get right with God” by the things we do (kissing snakes, walking across hot coals, sleeping on a bed of nails, giving a certain amount of money to the church, following all of the rules perfectly, etc., etc.) then, as the apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians, “Christ died for nothing.” (Galatians 2:21b)

In spite of last Sunday's story from Acts about all of the church leaders agreeing that the Gentile believers in Christ didn't have to “become Jews” to be saved, today we hear Paul's version of his encounter with Peter over the very same issue. Apparently Peter would travel north from Jerusalem to Antioch from time to time. While he was visiting the church there, he would mingle and eat with the Gentile believers, even though that was against the Jewish law and custom. But, according to the “truth of the gospel” which both Peter and Paul preached, salvation doesn't have anything to do with who you are, your ethnicity, your religious rules and regulations, and your long standing traditions. Salvation has everything to do with faith in Jesus Christ. So, when Peter felt pressured from some of the leaders in the Jerusalem church, he pulled away from eating and having fellowship with the Gentile Christians. And Paul called him out for his behavior — in a very public way!

Paul is very clear and very adamant in his letter to the Galatians and in his other letters (especially to the Romans): We can't “get right” with God on our own. When Paul talks about the “works of the law,” we might think he meant that the Jews believed you have to earn God's love and salvation. Actually, that's more of a problem that we tend to have — thinking that we somehow have to measure up to a certain ideal in order to receive God's grace, love, and mercy. Actually, what Paul meant by “works of the law” has more to do with what people often wear as badges to identify themselves as part of the “in crowd” of God's favor (and, sad to say, to exclude others from God's grace and mercy) — family heritage, church customs, religious rites, etc., etc.

I often see signs by the road around here advertising different churches and including some variation of “Visitors Welcome” or “We Love Everybody” or “Everybody is Welcome.” And, to be honest, I have to wonder if that's always true. Would they welcome someone who looks different? Who talks different? Who holds different political ideas? Would they welcome people of color? LBGQTQ people? Granted, these questions are really talking about church membership rather than somebody's salvation, but it's not much of a leap from the one to the other. In the section on

membership in our church's *Book of Order*, we read, "A congregation shall welcome all persons who trust in God's grace in Jesus Christ and desire to become part of the fellowship and ministry of his Church. No person shall be denied membership for any reason not related to profession of faith. The Gospel leads members to extend the fellowship of Christ to all persons. Failure to do so constitutes a rejection of Christ himself and causes a scandal to the Gospel." (G-1.0302) Or, again as Paul himself says, "if justification (that is, being made right with God) comes through the law (that is, who we are and what we do on our own account), then Christ died for nothing." (Galatians 2:21)

A bedrock principle of faith is found in Galatians 2:16, "yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ," words which echo Habakkuk's message, "but the righteous live by faith." One of the mysteries and beauties of the New Testament Greek language is that the phrase — "in Jesus Christ" — can also be rightly translated "of Jesus Christ." So then, the verse would read, "a person is justified not by works of the law but through the faith (or faithfulness) of Jesus Christ." That's the reason for my grammatically suspect sermon title today (and, no, it's not a typo!) — "Got Right With God." Do you want a scriptural basis for that idea? How about another sign you often see at NFL games? JOHN 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

One man who set out to find the remaining "Get Right With God" roadsigns discovered this sign in Smyrna, Tennessee. He commented, "For some reason Mayes' original message of 'Get Right With God' has been altered to say 'Made Right With God.'"⁴



That sign is a better expression of what Paul teaches about how we are put in a right relationship with God — through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, we are made right with God. But our faith **in Christ Jesus** is our response to God's gift. Archibald Hunter, in the classic *Layman's Bible Commentary* on Galatians puts it this way, "It is not to say one time, 'I believe in Christ'; it is to go on, day after day, month after month, year after year, believing with all one's heart in Christ as God's Son, who so loved us as to give his life for us."⁵

As someone said to me just the other day, "Hallelujah that God's grace and mercy are a gift and we don't have to earn them!" Amen! But our faith in Jesus Christ ushers us into the free life of God's Kingdom. When we embrace the good news that through Jesus Christ we "got right with God," then by the power of God's Holy Spirit we can "live right with God and our neighbors."

Here's how Question #21 of the Heidelberg Catechism so beautifully describes the faithfulness of Christ and our faith in Christ:

Q21: What is true faith?

A21: True faith is not only a sure knowledge by which I hold as true all that God has revealed to us in Scripture; it is also a wholehearted trust, which the Holy Spirit creates in me by the gospel, that God has freely granted, not only to others but to me also, forgiveness of sins, eternal righteousness, and salvation. These are gifts of sheer grace, granted solely by Christ's merit."⁶

Let us pray: Holy God, with great joy we receive the gift of salvation which is ours not because of our own efforts, but because of the saving work of Christ. Grant us full access to the glory of your salvation, an abundance that is more than enough for all humankind; for the sake of our redeeming Christ. Amen.