



Trusting Jesus

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Romans 3:21-31

We talk readily about trusting Jesus. We sing songs about trusting Jesus. All too often, however, we are unsure about how to apply that slogan to our lives. What does it mean to trust Jesus? Where are we to trust, and where are we to take initiative? What does trusting Jesus really mean?

Nationally and within our religious framework we speak rather consistently of sin, guilt, and shame. We may not always use that terminology, but we are consumed with the concept of determining where to point fingers, how to designate responsibility for disasters and tragedies of various kinds. Our insurance companies want to know who is at fault in a traffic accident. We want to assign blame in our justice system as though it were possible to make the world a safe place by punishing and blaming those who are guilty of one or more misdeeds.

This week's events in Boston serve to highlight the lengths to which we will go to ascribe blame, identify an offender, and bring the offender into our justice system. We breathe a communal sigh of relief at locating the offending party. We feel safe with him in the hands of the authorities. We find security in the mass show of force expended this week to locate one man on the run. We shut down a metropolitan area twice the size of Charlotte to locate one man on the run. Our sense of security is off balance. The fertilizer plant explosion in West, Texas this week claimed many more lives, but did not make us feel threatened. Our trust is misplaced.

We actually like to judge others. We like sensational captures. We like a fast chase with shows of force. We like to pin down an individual we can readily accuse of instigating a tragedy. At heart we desire to condemn, to accuse, and to declare others guilty, as though somehow we ourselves are all that different from those we would condemn.

We struggle with issues of needing to be perfect, holy, without blemish. We think of God as the righteous judge. We consider it necessary that sin be punished, that evildoers be wiped off the face of the earth. We look to the destruction in the Genesis flood narrative as though such is and should be not only the norm of God's actions, but the standard by which God must also be tested. We want to condemn. We want to judge and find others guilty. Only, we want mercy for ourselves, as though we are actually superior to those we condemn.

We seem to miss the basic truths behind Paul's words here to the Roman believers. He cites the Psalms and themes from Isaiah declaring that we are all sinners. Paul is not so concerned with condemnation. He is not worried about telling us how bad we are, how awful some of our actions can be. He is not concerned with casting the Boston bombers as belonging to some lower caste of humanity than we ourselves. He focuses rather on the fact that we are all guilty in one way or another. None of us is perfect. We have no legitimate claim to any right to escape judgment or condemnation on the basis of some personal quality. Every single one of us falls short. If judgment and relationship with God depend on the quality of our actions and attitudes, there is no redemption for any of us.

Being right with God is not something we can earn. God doesn't rank people. God does not reward us according to our performance. That was something the legal code tried to do, but something at which it failed miserably. That is why Paul insists that God's plan goes far beyond the limitations of the law. Being right is about a wholly other category. It is about grace and forgiveness and love.

I watched a video this week on human trafficking. My natural response is to dream of violence against those who abuse their victims. It is natural to want to make those who abuse others suffer for the crimes they commit. We want to see those responsible for the bombings in Boston pay for their violent deeds. We know we cannot make what they have done right. We know we cannot undo the fertilizer plant explosion in West, Texas. At heart, however, what we want is not justice. What we really want is to feel justified, exonerated in comparing the quality of our deeds to those guilty of greater atrocities. We want to be secure in ourselves. We want to depend on no one else.

I cannot do enough good deeds to overcome my failures. I can repair a car I have wrecked, but it will never be the same again. I can buy another car to replace it, but it will never be the same or mean the same to the owner. I can pay for medical treatment for the driver or passenger I have injured, but I can never undo the damage, cause them to unfeel the pain, unlive the trauma. I have no power to make things right in that sense. Imprisoning or killing the Boston bombers cannot bring back the dead, turn back the clock, or restore those who lost limbs in the blasts. We can't undo the carnage or rewind the trauma. Our actions in the name of justice cannot make us safe and secure. They don't address the real issues, and indeed they cannot.

Security is not real when it depends upon force, violence, and intimidation. It is not real when we attempt to place people in categories and elevate ourselves to some higher plane. Security is not about those external categories. It is an issue of confidence and trust. Security is internal, not external. It depends on expectation and not on power. It is about trust.

Paul was not talking about bombs and fertilizer explosions here in Romans chapter 3. He was, however, addressing an issue that brought much violence to his life. At one stage he had participated in being an instrument of violence. He had attempted to keep life secure by forcing others to live by the patterns established by Jewish legal tradition. He had attempted to use violence and intimidation to force others to find security within an established code of action. With his encounter with Christ Jesus, he had finally understood that such a means to security was hopeless. God showed him a different way forward.

In his new path forward, he began to enjoy life on the receiving end of the persecution and violence he had once meted out to others. He could no longer look upon his abusers as living according to a higher code. He could no longer justify their actions. Neither could he justify the actions and attitudes he had once shared with them. He now saw himself as no different from them. He was just as guilty. He was just as condemnable. He fell just as short as the rest of them in not living according to a standard of perfection.

The biggest difference, however, was that he was no longer trusting himself and the quality of his own deeds and strength. He was aware of his failings. He was also aware of something far more important. He had come to recognize that his security did not depend on the quality of his actions. It never had. In order to gain true security, he had been forced to give up on depending on himself. He set down the burden of being responsible for his own security and cast that on God.

He had finally learned trust. No longer trusted himself to be better than others. He began trusting Christ Jesus to accept him with all his faults and failures. Rather than trusting in the quality and character of his actions, he began to place his security in Christ Jesus alone. It was a wholly other way of living for Paul. It was a way of life that looked beyond the limits of this world. It was a way of living that depended on God's attributes, and not his own. It forced him to give up on measuring himself against others to trust Jesus. Are we ready for that kind of new living? Trusting Jesus is real security.

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