

In the previous two commands, “Do not be condemned” and “Do not be judged” Paul continues to show us the danger of trying to earn your belonging, your approval with God, by your moral performance or your experiences of ecstasy. These commands, “condemn” and “judge” are accusation terms of *dis*-approval and of *not* belonging. We fall victim to such accusations because it is human nature to seek to belong, to seek to obtain some trophy, some proof, some achievement which we can look to as evidence that we will pass the test.

So, I don't think that it's an accident that Paul uses the word “seek” or “search” or “pursue” in this very important passage. It's right in line with the concept of belonging and acceptance that he first addresses with the image of circumcision and baptism, but now he moves to the important aspect of *seeking*. **Our hearts seek, they hunt, they strive to bring down the barriers to belonging between one another, and surely between me and God.** *How* do I gain the “badge of belonging?” *How* do I *prove* the right to belong there? *Where* can I find rest from this incessant turmoil in my soul? “How” and “Where” are seeking and pursuing words.

The biblical word for this approval, for this place of belonging, is the word “righteousness.” The heart of the gospel is the righteousness of God. In fact, it is a word almost always directly connected with the concept of salvation by faith in the Scriptures. What I mean is that wherever you read about salvation by faith, you will find the word “righteousness” nearby. For example, in Romans 3 the apostle writes, “But now the righteousness from God has been revealed apart from the law, although the Law and Prophets testify about it – the righteousness from God through faith in

Jesus Christ for all who believe...” (Rom 3:21-22a). In fact, the two words are almost always paired together in the whole book of Romans. When he wrote the Philippians, Paul claimed that if anyone had a reason to argue for his own righteousness, it was him, but that all his efforts to make himself right with God were “rubbish” so that he might be found in Christ, “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that [righteousness] which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God which is upon faith.” (Phil 3:9) He told the Galatians that Abraham was given the mark of circumcision for what reason? Because “his faith was reckoned as righteousness.” (Gal 3:6)

Righteousness is a relational word, not a moral word. How do I know that everything is *right* between me and another? You see, that is the idea behind the word

righteousness, and it’s the idea behind circumcision and moral dietary performances and esoteric experiences. Righteousness is not really about moral purity, but whether or not there is anything between myself and another, if there is a barrier to belonging.

And we know that we seek this because of the way that we relate to such people that we want to respect us, to approve of us, to whom we want to belong with. For example, Katie, Charlotte, and I went up to see Andrew Peterson perform last week. Andrew is the songwriter who wrote “Is He Worthy?” which we will sing together later.

But, what I found is that while we were standing in line to meet him, I found myself anxious about how I should address him. How could I impress him? “Hey, Andrew, I listened to your music before you were cool. I even have a sticker from your first tour that says ‘Andrew Peterson is my friend.’ You like me, right?” Or, “I noticed your

Taylor guitar. What is that, the 717 Builder's Edition with the sunburst pattern? I know guitars. Do you approve of me?" Or, simply, "You play good. I'm not weird."

Now, I'm fairly emotionally self-sufficient. But, right there I was worried about what a man whom I have only met three times would think of me. Specifically, would he approve of me. Was everything "right" between us? Does he think that I belong in his presence?

You see, that's what our hearts are constantly doing, worrying about whether or not we have done something or said something which would make us 'not right' with another.

Now, while you may be thinking that I'm weird for caring, even for a moment, about what Andrew Peterson thinks of me, this concept of righteousness is built into every every human heart. You may not care about Mr. Peterson's approval, but you care about someone's approval. The more you care, the more you *need* that righteousness between you.

Consider how you respond when you receive a wedding invitation that doesn't state the expected attire. Is this a casual wedding? Semi-casual? Formal? Am I supposed to wear a suit jacket or just a nice button-down dress shirt? Maybe it's a collared shirt, but with shorts, at least two pockets, with a belt that buckles and doesn't clip, no tie, but at least the second to top button open, with white socks only, no sandals, but deck shoes allowed, although penny loafers preferred?

Why, do you think, that we care? Because we don't want to make things between the group and ourselves to be "not right." We dress the way that they desire so that things are right, so that we are approved as right and there is nothing between us. If you

show up to a wedding underdressed, you know the feeling...you want to hide. That's shame, the absence of being right with someone.

Now, some of us struggle with this more broadly than others. That is, some of you care about what *everyone* thinks. You want to be right with *everyone*. Most of us have a number of people or groups of people that we want to be right with. Then, some of us have very few people whose approval of us we are actively seeking. But, we all have someone with whom we want to belong, want to be on the inside of their inner acceptability and approved circle, who let us walk their red carpet and past the velvet ropes of their lives. We seek such things. We hunt for them. We strive ceaselessly to obtain their acceptance.

And so much of our inner thoughts and conversation with ourselves is about these types of things, isn't it? Did I upset him? Is she mad at me? Do I disgust her, or is she embarrassed of me? Do they talk about me when I'm not around? These are questions of my righteousness, purely and simply.

In fact, this is so deeply and broadly true of all people, that Paul had to warn us in the previous paragraph that we can be manipulated by those who know that we desperately want to be right. Such manipulators will take advantage of our seeking their approval by threatening not to give it. To take it away. To control us by leveraging their approval and acceptance, or in the case of religious cults, by leveraging God's approval of you based upon such things. If you don't do X, Y, or Z, then God doesn't approve you. This is why people give away their livelihoods to con men in the name of God. Let such deceivers be accursed.

But this is also how controlling husbands manipulate wives who want to be accepted and loved and feel secure, by threatening to leave, by diminishing their ‘righteousness’, their security of *belonging*, by talking down to them and minimizing their significance if they don’t do the things that they want. It’s also how abusive wives control their husbands who desire so badly to be respected and desired. They belittle their decisions, lay doubt upon whether or not things are ‘right’ between them, always holding out his failures so that he knows he’s on the knife’s edge of belonging, and if he doesn’t toe the line the way that she wants him to, then he will fall onto the side of unrighteous, of not-belonging, of unapproved, of worthless.

These types of manipulative behaviors work because of our desire to be approved, our desire to belong, our “seeking” of righteousness between one another. Everyone has such a button, so everyone can be manipulated by others who can find that button.

That is why Paul warns us not to be condemned and not to be judged by anything that is not “according to the Christ.” Not just in religious things, but in everything. Don’t be manipulated by any judgement against your righteousness, your belonging, that is not based upon the finished works of Jesus.

In fact, these “finished works of Jesus” are the basis for your belonging with God. In Christ you are right with God, you are approved. You can rest and cease from striving to prove it. You are inside the rope, so to speak, because Jesus takes your arm and walks right down the red carpet with you. You belong there, because it’s his carpet. It’s his show. It’s his kingdom. He matters most.

This is what Paul means when he describes the “things above”, the things which we are to seek for belonging, as the place where Christ is seated. That’s how he chooses to describe the “things above.” “Where Christ is seated.”

First, isn’t that kind of weird? I mean, for him to mention that the things above are where Christ IS, would make sense. They’re heavenly things, things of God, the things which are consistent with the kingdom of God, etc. But he specifically uses the metaphor of Christ sitting. Why seated?

It’s because you sit down *when you are finished with your work*. There are other metaphors of Scripture used of Christ, where he is standing. For example, in the book of the Revelation, chapter 5, John sees, “a Lamb standing in the middle of the throne.” The Lamb was standing on the throne because he was about to go and do something, which was to take the scroll from the hand of the Father and pronounce and enact judgement upon the earth to set all things right. He stood because he was going to act.

So, when Paul tells us that the Christ is seated, he is indicating that his work has been finished. So, what was his work which he finished? It’s what was mentioned in the previous section. He was buried and raised up. And you, says Paul, are united to Him, which means that you were buried and you were raised up, too. Hence, the beginning of verse one, “If you were raised up with Him, then keep seeking the things above where Christ is seated...”

You see, it is your union with Him, having already been judged for your unrighteousness AND accepted by God in Christ Jesus, that compels us to seek out, to pursue, to treasure-hunt for the things which Christ has already completed! To seek to

know them, to know Him, to share in that resurrection even as you are scrutinized here on this earth.

I mean, that is our fear, right? To be scrutinized, to be evaluated, to be ‘looked over’ to see if everything is right between you?

We all know this fear of scrutiny. For example, what makes a job interview so nerve-wracking? Is it not scrutiny? They talk to your former boss and employees, your spouse, your third grade teacher, your grandmother’s second cousin, and so on. And why? Because they are looking for what is ‘not right’ with you! They are looking to see if there is anything which will make the fit between you and them ‘not right.’ They are looking for a reason to reject you.

This concept of being scrutinized for the purpose of rejection is terrifying and something which we all would rather avoid. I mean, nobody *likes* job interviews, right? Nobody goes to job interviews on their day off simply because they are fun. That would be weird.

I mean, why are we tempted to cheat? Is it not because we deem it better to pretend to be right than to actually be right?

That reality, that we are not right, is what makes scrutiny so scary and what makes us do deceptive things.

I mean, what is a first date? Scrutiny and anxiety. Which is why people always lie on the first date. It’s true! A first date involves each person trying to appear like something which they are not. From the clothes, to the makeup, to the washed car, to the fancy restaurant, it’s an attempt to pass the scrutiny of the other person. If you

were truly transparent on the first date and told the other person your deepest flaws and most embarrassing fears and most burdensome personality traits, would you expect a second date?

And the deeper the relationship, or the greater that we desire someone's approval, the more anxious we become. A job interview is stressful, but what about when you ask someone to marry you? What if they say, "ummm...nope." This possibility is terrifying, because we have been seeking to belong and may find that we do not.

This is why scrutiny terrifies us, not because we are afraid of being known for its own sake, but *because we are afraid of being rejected*, thrown out, found to be 'unrighteous' by another.

But, even if you think that you are great, and that your performance is acceptable, that you are enough...you are anxious that you might screw it up, and you get angry if someone questions it or points out your flaws.

When you have to rely upon your own performance to obtain God's smile, then you have to rely upon your own performance to keep God's smile, and therefore you are always anxious of being rejected by Him, of His frown. In fact, that is the reason that many of you try and obey God, because you fear the frown. You are anxious around God because of this. You feel that you are walking on the knife's edge.

Such anxiety can actually be very telling of the truth. Why do feel so anxious? Could anxiety just be a sign that you are being realistic? That you aren't really as godly as you pretend to be, and that not only your behavior, but your desires aren't as holy as you pretend to be? Of course!

I think that deep down we all know this. We may pretend to have it all together, but we all know that we really don't.

“Do not handle!” But, I handled. “Do not taste!” But, I tasted. Therefore, we are terrified of being found out that I am not in a state of rightness because we are nothings. This fear, however, often drives us to simply try harder, and to burn out in the process.

I mean, it is one thing to be sad because you haven't done well. We should feel sad when we do a bad job, because we should be concerned with doing well. But, if excellence in your job is your righteousness, your basis for belonging, then you'll be despairing, not just sad. You'll be overwhelmed by rejection, not just disappointed by failure. You should be concerned, if you love people, if a relationship is broken, but if your relationships are the things that make life worth living, then you'll be smashed when you're rejected, not just sad. There's a tremendous difference. Almost all of the turmoil in our hearts comes from an anxious seeking of these righteousnesses, these approvals. We are terrified of being truly known, truly scrutinized, and yet we desperately want to be fully accepted as we are. It's a conundrum.

But the gospel of our union with Christ solves this conundrum of the heart, because this truth is the root of the gospel, it is the heart of what God does through His Son, who is your life, and it is this:

When you entrust yourself to Jesus, you are already FULLY SCRUTINIZED BY GOD and YOU ARE FULLY APPROVED BY GOD based upon the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in your place.

In Him you are right with God, not because you are right in your own heart, but because Christ is right with God and He imputes His rightness to you when you were united to Him. Do you see why our union with Christ is so vital! “Since you were raised up with Him” and “you have died and your life is hidden” and “when Christ, who is your life, is revealed, you will be revealed with Him in glory.” These are union words which show what your actual identity is now!

And here is what is crazy! **What Paul is saying is that because you have died, it is RIGHT for God to approve you, to bring you down the red carpet and behind the velvet ropes.** You BELONG THERE. Because of Jesus, it is JUST for God to approve of you. It is not God merely merciful and letting you in with some kind of pity.

Now, the reason that I say this is because so many of you are afraid that God’s mercy is going to run out. You are afraid of being fully scrutinized, even by God, because you still fear His rejection. But, look at this! If you have died with Christ and been raised with Christ, it would be unjust for God to reject you.

I mean, why is Jesus at God’s right hand? He is interceding for us! Paul says that specifically in Romans 8:34, “Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised up – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.” He is our defense attorney who deals with all scrutiny and accusations against us.

John wrote of this aspect of Christ’s work in his first letter, when he writes, “My little children, I am writing to you so that you might not sin. But, if anyone does sin, we

have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, who is the atoning sacrifice for our sins..." (1 John 2:1-2a)

Jesus Christ the righteous. Jesus Christ the atoning sacrifice.

Do you see His finished work? He intercedes for us based upon His sacrifice, His death, His blood, is the foundation of His argument against all accusations and all scrutiny against us.

I think that some of us see Jesus in this role as primarily pleading for God's mercy. As if he were our defense attorney, and all the scrutiny keeps coming in and it is terribly obvious that we are guilty, that we still sin, and that Jesus' response is like this:

"Father, I know that you are righteous and just and that no sin can be acceptable in your sight. It is also clear that my clients have done terrible things, thought terrible things, rejected the good things and committed heinous treason against you and your kingdom...but can't you just give them a break?! Can't you just let it go? I mean, they're little and they tried really hard, so can't you just be merciful to them?"

Now, when you think like this, how secure is God's answer to that? Does God have to be merciful? How solid is such an argument. Because, like a defense attorney, your outcome as the defendant is only as good as your defense attorney. In fact, you are united to him in that courtroom. His argument is your argument. For all intents and purposes, he is you before the judge. If he is eloquent in your defense, you are eloquent in your defense. If he gives a lousy defense, you give a lousy defense. If he is accepted, you are accepted.

Jesus simply pleading for mercy is not a good defense. It is not a secure defense, and you will constantly be wondering about the verdict, striving to avoid handling, touching, tasting, seeking experiences which will tell you that you are on the right track, that the Father is pleased with you in some way, etc. You will live in anxiety and fear trying to add exhibits to Jesus's argument to justify yourself, to prove that God should show, or has definitely shown mercy. But...you will always wonder if he will.

However, what the gospel shows us is that Jesus doesn't make this argument before the Father. He doesn't plead for mercy for you. God has already shown mercy in sending your defense attorney from his own firm: the firm of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I mean, he sent a partner to represent you because He is merciful and loves you.

Instead, Jesus argues your case, in the light of all the scrutiny, like this:

“Father, I know that you are righteous and just and that no sin can be acceptable in your sight. It is also clear that my clients have done terrible things, thought terrible things, rejected the good things and committed heinous treason against you and your kingdom. However, I enter into evidence my blood. I have paid for them and paid down their deeds. What your law required has been met and fulfilled. Therefore, I ask for justice. It would unjust for you to require two payments for these things. *They have already died for their sins*, when I died. When you accepted my payment by raising me from the dead, their acceptance was included in me. Therefore, according to your justice, I ask that they be freed from all accusations and released into the joy of their Master to be your heirs for eternity, for I am their Life.”

That's more how Christ Jesus argues. Notice that his work has already been done. There is no more judgment to be laid out. There is no more payment, and there is no more question as to the verdict unless God is to be unjust. It is RIGHT for God to accept you in Christ. It is RIGHT for you to belong fully and completely and with all the rights as sons in His house because you were scrutinized and have already died under it. Not only that, you were raised up in triumph with Him, to true and abundant Life.

Therefore, you are secure and complete in Him. There is no scrutiny that can undo you, no knowledge of your weaknesses and sins and the terrible things that you have thought or done which can make God condemn you. In Christ, united by faith in Him alone, you are fully right before God.

This gospel, then, frees you completely! This gospel of grace enables you to be fully scrutinized AND fully accepted RIGHTLY. Not by sweeping our failures under the rug, but by killing them with Jesus and raising you up to the newness of life. This is the gospel, which scrutinizes you and sanctifies you to obey God, no longer out of a fear of rejection, but out of a grateful, explosive, joyful love.

If you have been raised up with him, then, stop seeking the things which you think will justify your existence, which will prove that you are OK, which you think will give you life. Stop listening to their false promises as an answer for your anxiety about being scrutinized. Andrew Peterson's approval will not calm my soul! The solution to scrutiny and all the fears which arise from it, is not to ignore the reality of your unrighteousness, or to ignore the justice which God requires, but to look to the things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God, having finished all that is necessary to gain you the verdict of "righteous before God" "beyond accusation" "fully

accepted and beloved and invited” and “belongs to God with all the benefits of sonship in the household of the Almighty.”

In the words of Rose Marie Miller, who struggled tremendously as a people-pleaser and one who was deeply afraid of God, even as a Christian, until she began to grasp the truth of this passive righteousness of Christ:

“Understand that a conviction of sin does not make you neurotic, but rather it spells the beginning of the end for neurosis. After all, what is a neurotic? Simply a hurting person who is closed off to criticism in any form and yet engages in the most intense, destructive self-criticism that produces neither hope nor help.

What a marvelous relief God’s grace in Christ offers. I had been totally criticized, and at the same time I was completely forgiven. As I rested in the work of another, my heart was at peace with God; and for the first time, I felt at peace with myself.” *From Fear to Freedom*