



**Date:** October 6-7, 2018  
**Speaker:** Shane Simms – Pastor of Adult Discipleship  
**Scripture:** Romans 3, The Apostle Paul

Its thanksgiving weekend, and I am thankful for lots of things. I am thankful for the way my family has found a new, fun hobby of watching races at the Delaware Speedway so I don't have to get my need for speed on the 401 (last weekend was pumpkin smash weekend.)

I am thankful that our family, survived our very first home renovation. My family loves to enjoy the kitchen, it's our favourite space. I have learned, that renovations can be hard on relationships. There are only so many times that cooking your dinner in the bedroom and eating it on the living room floor is cute anymore. So, to keep the romance alive, one night, in the midst of my painting, I had to remind Yvonne of our younger days when we would carve our love in the trunks of trees. I am thankful she accepted my love mural.

But as I reflect on this weekend, I am thankful for the way I was raised. I want to thank my parents for raising me in a way that has helped me to succeed. I grew up knowing that hard work was expected and hard work would be rewarded. It is one of the pillars that keeps me motivated every single day. I remember my dad made me and my brother work, and work we did. Whether it was helping to cut and pack in fire wood for the winter, whether it was working keeping the snow out of our driveway, whether it was helping changing tires on customer cars in his garage, we worked, and today, in those spare moments, when I am lazing around doing nothing, I can almost hear my dad's voice- "come on Shane, it's time to work...."

I remember once there was a frozen pile of gravel that my dad needed unfrozen and moved for some reason or another. As I recall, it was a massive pile of dirt, and I wondered how it would ever come to

be moved. Then I remember dad saying to me, "There's a jackhammer out there, have fun. I'll see you when it's ALL DONE". I remember thinking that this was a mammoth, impossible, unreasonable, and unfair task to ask anyone to do. But, to say "no" may have resulted in some actions that I did not want to be on the receiving end of, so my "no way" became "no problem SIR", and I took on the impossible task until my fingers had no feeling left in them. I think that some of that gravel pile may still be there today.

Have you ever been asked to do something that seemed impossible to do? Have you ever been asked to achieve something that seemed impossible to achieve? You're not alone

There's a story about a guy named Martin. His parents had great hopes for his life, they were hoping, praying, that he would become a lawyer. Martin really wanted to make his folks happy, so he earned an undergrad and a master's degree in law. He was well on his way for his parents dream for his life. One night, as Martin was on his way home from school, a thunderstorm closed in and he got struck by a bolt of lightning- yes, it happens! Martin, in absolute terror, calls out to whoever up there was listening and says, "If you don't let me die, I'll give in and go to Bible School, just don't kill me..."

Martin desperately wanted to do what God wanted, and please God at any cost. So, Martin went to Bible school, to become a pastor, just so God would be happy with him. OK, well the Bible school was actually a monastery, and becoming a pastor was actually becoming a monk. Martin was serious about earning God's favor. Sometimes, Martin fasted, went without eating, for 2 or 3 days, without

eating a single thing. Sometimes, at night, Martin would throw his blankets off the bed and suffer in the cold of night almost to the point of freezing. Sometimes, Martin was so proud of his own holiness he would say, “I have done nothing wrong today”. Then, insecurities would creep in, the little voice in his head would whisper, “do you think you fasted enough to make God happy?” “Are you poor enough to make God happy?” “Have you given up enough toys to make God happy?” Then, Martin would know he had more work to do if God was going to accept him. Martin even slept on his knees to deny himself the comfort of lying down, just to see if that would earn him favor before God. Whatever good deeds, self-sacrificial deeds, Martin could do to save himself, he was committed to doing them, all of them, whatever it took.

Martin wrote the following in his journal, “I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was me. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will say this is true. If I had kept these efforts up any longer, I would have killed myself with vigils, prayers, readings, and acts of human depravity...”

How much work does one have to do to reach the level of righteousness where God is? I’ve never fasted to the point of passing out and I’ve never given away every single material possession I owned and I’ve never deprived myself to a place of extreme uncomfot and I’ve never slept on my knees and I certainly have not had many days where I could say like Martin that “I have not done anything wrong today”, to be honest, I don’t think I could ever say there’s ever been a day where I could say “I’ve done nothing wrong today”. I am pretty sure I could not even say that about today... The story I told today, of Martin, was actually Dr. Martin. Dr. Martin, is actually Dr. Martin Luther, who was a pivotal figure in the church reformation, where the church took a strong movement away from works, what must I do, to grace, what must I receive?

Martin, Dr. Martin, Dr. Martin Luther, Marty, learned some things about God, things that I am very thankful for, but things I still struggle with. Some of the things that Martin learned about God, are things that many people struggle with, some of

the things that Martin learned about God, are probably things that you struggle with.

Some of the foundational things that we believe as followers of Jesus, don’t come so easy to us. They may compose our foundations, but they do not come natural. They may make up the core of what we believe, but they do not always translate to the centre of what we do.

One of the massive lessons of faith that Dr. Martin Luther grappled with, and brought to the church world, came from the teaching of another guy who struggled with things, his name was Paul. Paul, even though he was an apostle, and even though he wrote much of the bible, and even though he was a guy hand-picked by Jesus to do his work, he was also a guy who wrote words like this...

*Romans 7:15-20*

*I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. 16 And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. 17 As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. 18 For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature.[a] For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. 20 Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.*

Paul knew that this whole, trying to do what is good, while all the time being led to do the bad, was a struggle that he could not win. Paul knew, like Martin later lived, that trying to be righteous, while being a sinner, is a challenge that is too big for him. They both knew that trying to be accepted by God, while still being a sinner, represents a spiritual pile of gravel that was too big for either of them to move. What Dr. Martin was to learn, was something that was written by Dr. Paul. What Dr. Paul writes is found in the book of Romans, and many of you would be familiar with at least some of this passage.

Paul frames this spiritual predicament, with these familiar words,

*Romans 3:20- MSG*

*“And it’s clear enough, isn’t it, that we’re sinners, every one of us, in the same sinking boat with everybody else? Our involvement with God’s revelation doesn’t put us right with God. What it does is force us to face our complicity in everyone else’s sin*

So, Paul sets the record straight, real straight, there’s none of us who will make this connection with God on our own. To use the words that Eugene Peterson uses in the Message, “We are all in this same sinking boat together”. This spiritual pile of gravel, this attempt to get closer to God by what we can do, is impossible. We are all drowning.

Paul continues to build the case for our owning sinking spiritual ship, and he frames it this way, with these words,

*Romans 3:23*

*“For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God”*

The bad thing about this verse, is not just that we have come short, not just that we have fallen short, not just that we have tried once to move the gravel pile and failed, but the bad thing about this verse, the awful thing about this verse, the scary thing about this verse, the devastating thing about this verse, is that we continually have come short, we constantly come short, it is not a one-time attempt and a one-time failure, no no...it is a constant failure, an ongoing failure, a continual, progressive, step by step failure. Every time we try, every time we had tried, every time we will ever try, to gain God’s favor by what we do, we have failed, we are failing, and we will fail.

This is the most terrible predicament that humanity has ever been caught in. This is the most perilous spiritual dilemma that humanity has ever, or will ever face. Being called to the righteousness of God, but never being able to reach the righteousness of God.

I have heard it laid out like this, most clearly in the book entitled, “Just Walk Across the Room”- maybe this will paint the picture more clearly for you. The things that we do, the actions we take to be moral, the works that we do to reach God or to gain God’s approval, are laid out like rungs on the ladder. You will have to excuse me for my poor

artwork. Our 10-year-old Bella is the artist in our family, I am simply the 43-year-old family chauffeur. So, of course, the higher you go on this ladder, the more moral, more holy, more righteous, you are. And of course, God sits at the top of the ladder, because he is perfectly moral, holy and righteous. Then, we can put people that we deem as being morally corrupt on the bottom, mass murderers, and stuff. The rest of humanity is in between. So, we can put some really moral people, some really good people on here somewhere. We can put Mother Theresa in here, we can put Billy Graham in here, we can put Paul McIlwraith, our teaching pastor in here, and then we can put ourselves in here.

If this is the way we see things, and this ladder represents how good you are, and how close you are to God based on the good things you do, where do you see yourself on this ladder? Where would you rank? Where would your placement put you?

And then, there’s the question of the ages. If this is the plan, and if this is the way it works, what is your plan to make up the gap? Because if your plan is to hope to be good enough, I’ve got tough news for you. You are going to have to be better than Billy Graham and you are going to have to have better works than Mother Theresa. What is your plan? How short are you? What are you going to do? Thankfully, there’s more that Dr. Martin learned here from Paul. Thankfully, this predicament, and this passage in Romans 3, does not stop where I just stopped. That is one thing that you can be thankful for this thanksgiving.

Paul writes to us all, the whole crew of us who cannot make up this spiritual gap, those of us who cannot move this spiritual pile of gravel...all have sinned, and fallen short, continually, every day, keep falling short, of the glory of God...and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

This is one of the most amazing verses in the whole bible. We are constantly falling short, every single day, by our actions, we put it in the dish. There is no way we can move this spiritual pile of gravel, there is no possible chance in this lifetime or the next that we can do enough good to earn God’s favour. There’s no way you can get to the top of this ladder, because every time you try you don’t go up a step

on this ladder, you continually fall short, and you go down a step when you try to go up. But, because of what Jesus has done, because of the cross, we are justified freely, this word justified means, we are just as if we have never sinned, we are given the righteousness of God himself, when he sees you and sees me he sees Jesus in us and doesn't see ourselves. We are justified, seen in all the righteousness, in all the good works of Jesus, and God gives us this gift.....key word.....freely...

This is amazing, because just as in our own actions we keep falling short, in the actions of God he keeps justifying. Just as every time in our own actions we fail, in his own declaration he continually declares that we are righteous because of our belief in Jesus and what he did on the cross. Every day we fall short, and every day he declares us holy. Every day when we can't journey towards God on our own, God declares that we are the righteousness of Christ. Every day when we face down that spiritual pile of gravel and wonder how we can move it, God says, don't touch that pile, rest in me, you are the righteousness of Jesus, and through what I have done through Christ on that cross, you can come to me. Freely, without effort and works and a plan. You constantly fall short, you constantly miss the mark. God constantly declares "you are holy, you are loved, you are mine, you are just as if you've never sinned".....freely.

So, what's your plan? Billy Graham was a good man, with plenty of good works, but his plan, was to trust solely in the cross of Jesus Christ to make up the gap. Mother Theresa, was a saint of our time, but her plan, was to trust exclusively in the cross of Jesus Christ, to make up the gap. Their plan was to trust in the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ every day, to make up this gap.

I hope that this is your plan. It is God's only plan. It is a free plan. It is a foundational to our faith, but we often have times of relapse to our own plan about all the good things that we can do and must do...God just needs to help you to see, that there is nothing you can do to earn the favour of God. Once you accept what Jesus did on the cross for you, it is just as if you've never sinned. Receive it. It is the foundational truth of the gospel.

But sometimes, as foundational as things may be, we just need a revelation from God to believe it, to

really know. Sometimes God just needs to show it to you. Hopefully today, he showed it to you, or he will in these next remaining moments. Sometimes, we all need a revelation. One of Martin's moments of revelation, came in a very peculiar way.

Dr. Martin, really struggled with, what would one need to do, to acquire the righteousness of God? What act on our part is required, in order for us to possess the righteousness of God? It was a problem for Dr. Martin early in his life. Young Martin would spend hours confessing every sin and imperfection he could think of, only to leave and after an hour at most, he would think of something that he had forgotten to confess, which would put young Martin back in the state of despair, hopelessness, before God. While wrestling with this issue, young Martin embarks on a religious pilgrimage According to Martin's son, Paul, he recounts his father's visit to a holy site. At this famous site, there was a set of medieval stairs leading up to the house of Pontius Pilate, in Jerusalem, steps once believed to be stepped upon by Christ.

These stairs were known as the "scala sancta", or "holy stairs". It was the practice of pilgrims, like young Martin, to ascend these steps on their knees, praying as they climbed. At certain intervals on the ascent, there were stains said to have been caused by the bleeding wounds of Christ. The worshipper would bend over, kiss these steps, and pray for an extended period of time before anguishing in pain to the next steps. The remission of sins was promised to all who would perform this pious exercise. Martin began the ascent as countless others before him had.

These words seemed to echo over and over, growing more intense with each repetition, "the just shall live by faith", "the just shall live by faith". Dr. Martin realized he was not living by faith, but by fear- his old idea that he had to earn his way to God was now being confronted with his newly learned biblical reality: Each step he crawled his gut cried "By fear", said Martin; but he recalled the apostle Paul's words, "by faith".

"By fear", said his gut as he agonized each step. "By faith" said the Scriptures. "By fear" said those who groaned beside him on the staircase; "by faith", said God to Martin's young heart.

Fear vs. Faith. At last, Martin rose in amazement from the steps he had been dragging himself up to gain God's approval. He knew that his salvation came as St. Paul, the Scriptures, and God, had said, "by faith". Martin knew the truth that many others would learn and still need to learn, "the just will live by faith".

So today, if you want to climb the stairs, if you want to move the gravel pile, if you want to climb the ladder, you've got an impossible climb ahead. Whatever steps you climb today- stop climbing. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and God sees you just as if you've never sinned. Maybe you've believed on him and you've been trying to work your way up ever since. Stop climbing. Each step up only takes you further from the gospel.

Maybe you've not believed on him, and the reason why is because you've looked at the staircase required to get you there and you've determined you can't climb it. You are right. Accept Jesus today. Through His cross he has climbed the stairs on your behalf. Accept it today. Believe on him. This walk is not by fear, this walk is not by fortitude, this walk is by faith. Accept it today, and you'll be thankful you did.

## **Points to Ponder**

### **Foundations**

#### **Why We Believe What We Believe.**

#### **Romans 3 ~ The Apostle Paul**

**With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.**

1. In your childhood, is there a moments where you can recall being asked to do a task or accomplish a chore that you knew was simply impossible for you to complete? How did that make you feel?
2. Sometimes in life, we have moments that can only be explained as a "revelation from God." Have you ever had one of those moments? What did God reveal to you? Did it change your life?
3. If you are a Jesus-follower, what are the areas of the Christian life that you continually "struggle to improve" in? If you are not a Jesus follower, do you see the life of Christian faith as a life of "unmeetable expectations"?
4. As you reflect over your faith journey, what "steps have you climbed" with the assumption that "climbing these steps" would earn you increased favour with God?