

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
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August 16, 2020

“Falling Short: A Common Core”
Romans 3:21-25

We're starting a new series today called “Falling Short.” I have to give credit to Chris Jaffurs for getting the ball rolling on this series. Last Fall when we were asking folks for their thoughts on what might be good for us to focus on in worship and in our sermons this year, Chris offered a gem of a thought. And I think he was looking into the future somehow because first he said, “Jay, a year from now, there will be fewer than 50 people in the sanctuary on Sunday mornings.” My reaction was, “What did I do!?”

He didn't really say that, but he did share something that I think gnaws at many of us. Definitely gnaws at me. He said, “I find myself always trying to please God and when I fall short, which is most of the time, I tend to beat myself up feeling like I should know better.” That feeling of falling short is something that for so many of us hangs over our heads. A looming fear of failure, of not measuring up, of not meeting expectations. And for you this could mean that like Chris you feel like you're always trying to please God, or depending on where you are with this whole church thing, it might not have anything to do with God, but instead it's a sense that you're living your life trying to please someone else, live up to someone else's standards. To do this, to do that, and then inevitably when you don't, it's like the entire world crashes.

If this is a burden that weighs on you today, through the next month and a half we'll be looking at how the gospel speaks into what we do and why we do it, and in perhaps the first step, we begin with admitting the hard truth that we simply are not going to measure up, and why that's good news. Will you pray with me?

Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours.
Amen.

Frances has told me in no uncertain terms that I'm just not going to be very good help to the boys when it comes to their homework when they get to that age, in particular their math homework. And the reason why is that apparently they've changed how math is taught.

It's pretty much like that joke that was going around back in March and April, back when schools closed and everyone was at home, and then it was pointed out that all the kids who, say, were learning how to add big numbers were all of a sudden going to find out about “carrying the one” from their new homeschool teachers. And it was referring to the fact that, in many cases, math is taught differently.

I've run into this before. For a number of years when we were in Memphis, I used to help at this after-school tutoring ministry, so I'd help the students with multiplication. Now, when I learned multiplication, it was a bunch of flashcards—you learned your 2's, as in 2x1 2x2 2x3, your 3's, and so on. Everyone had a poster of an ice cream sundae, and for every number you learned you got to put another “topping” on your ice cream sundae. And that was how I learned multiplication, point being, you memorized them first. Didn't matter whether I understood it. I

just had to memorize by 2's and 3's and 4's, and I was graded on whether I got the right answer when I was asked.

It is taught somewhat differently now, I learned. Today's method uses shapes and grids and line groupings, but this was the surprising thing: when I would help these students—and “help” is a strong word since I was usually teaching them a completely different way to do it than their teachers were—I learned that they were being graded not just on whether they got the right answer at the end but on whether they showed they understood the method that got them there. Point is: there was a completely different method, a different rubric, a different way their work was measured.

Now this should in no way be heard as something for or against how math is taught today, just noting that there's this different way of grading it, of measuring it, and someone who might have graded poorly under my way maybe wouldn't have been in another. Work that might have been graded a failure under one way might look very different under another way.

A new grading scale, a new rubric, a new measurement is something like what Paul is talking about in these verses in Romans chapter 3.

Paul has spent much of the first two and a half chapters of this letter bringing home this one point: that *everybody*—Jew or Gentile, trying to follow Jewish law or otherwise doesn't care--*everybody* was “under the power of sin” (3:9). And he sums it up in this one sentence, starting at the end of v. 22: “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Now on one hand, you might hear that and think, well, at least we're all in the same boat. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” No reason for anyone to think they're superior to anybody else. And that's true. But then on the other hand, you might hear that and think, well gosh that just leaves us inadequate at every step, doesn't it?

And the tough answer, the honest answer is, yes, it does. To say that we've sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, right in there is falling short; we haven't measured up; we haven't lived up to what we could or should be. Now falling short, that's something we've all got in common. That's a universal status. If you're tempted to think your life is a runaway success in all categories, just ask yourself: is your life everything it should be? Do you have everything in order? Do you consider yourself a success in all arenas? Of course not.

There is no limit to the sorts of expectations we put on ourselves or that others put on us. Whether it's in family, or among friends, or in the workplace, or in school, or in sports, or my goodness in church, it's like we're constantly being measured or constantly being held up to what the expectation is. And whether for you it's something religious like trying to live up to the glory of God or whether it's something in your family or in your workplace or in your school and you're trying live up to something there, you can inevitably look at yourself in the mirror and think of yourself primarily in terms of your failures.

But what if I told you that they're teaching multiplication in a whole new way now? What if I told you there was a whole different rubric out there? What if I told you that there was a way to be free of that looming sense of failure, of inadequacy?

It's what Paul tells us in v. 21. “But now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

What that means is that there was once this rubric, this measurement, this expectation that was all about having everything together, and living a holy life, a life pleasing to God, a life with everything in sync and in right relationship, and that's called righteousness, and it's a good thing. It's a very good thing. Trouble is, no one can do it, not all the time, not perfectly. And so under that rubric, the message is inevitably one of failure, one of falling short.

But the good news of the gospel says, as in v. 24, that "they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." *Justified*, meaning one is reckoned as righteous, even if one is not. *Grace*, meaning it is not earned, but is a gift. *Redemption*, meaning it sets us free, delivers us, and all of this finds its center not in our own achievement or ability to live up to whatever expectation is out there, or whatever moral code is out there, or whatever some self-help book tells you to do. Instead it centers on Jesus, who was put forward as a sacrifice of atonement, and it is in his righteousness that our righteousness is found.

That means that this new rubric out there, this new measurement, has little to do with what we are able to do or achieve and instead has everything to do with what Christ has done and achieved, that is, our salvation, our liberation from a life spent trying to live up to whatever set of rules or expectations have been laid down before you. It means that the gospel speaks even into what we would often call our most basic identifiers and says you will not be measured by your success or failure.

And I find that encouraging. Because those basic identifiers, those words you might put on your tombstone if you had to choose them, I'm going to fail at each one of them. I'm going to fail and fall short as a father. I am going to fail and fall short as a husband. I am going to fail and fall short as a pastor. I will fail and fall short as a son, brother, friend, colleague, citizen, you name it, and the danger is, if I put all my chips on whether I succeed as any one of those things, I am bound to fall short and simply think myself a failure, and so will you.

But hear the good news. Your righteousness, your success, your ability to have everything in sync and in the right place or rather your failure to do that, will not be measured by any of those things, but by Jesus.

It's telling to me that our Confirmation Class's recognition was rescheduled for today, because when we celebrate these new Confirmands, one thing we do is recognize how the Lord has stirred faith within these young people and confirmed the promises made at their baptisms years ago. But while we are welcoming them into full membership in the church, we also remember that coming into the church isn't a statement of "I've got it all together; I know all the answers; and everything is in the right place." It's a confession of "I have failed and fallen short, but thanks be to God, I am not judged by my failure but instead by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

And so whether you are a confirmand stepping into life in the church, or whether this church thing you're just giving a listen to, or whether it's something you've been around but honestly you've never taken it all that seriously, the invitation I offer you isn't, "Come here and live up to the expectations put on you." The good news is, "This is the body of Christ, the church, a gathering of failures redeemed by grace. Come on in."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**