

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Nothing to prove

Presented by Bob Smith

On a British Airways flight from Johannesburg, some time ago, a seemingly well to do woman complained stridently about having been seated next to a black man. The flight attendant tried to calm her down but she insisted that she be seated elsewhere. So the flight attendant went to see if there was another seat available. Meanwhile the black passenger just sat there in silence, totally humiliated.

Well it turned out that the only available seat was in first class, so the flight attendant came back to the disgruntled passenger and reported that, though it was unusual to make this sort of upgrade, the captain had agreed that, under the circumstances, it was outrageous that a passenger had to sit next to someone like that. Then, as the woman smugly reached for her handbag, the flight attendant turned to the black passenger and said; "So, if you would like to get your things, sir, I will show you to your new seat in first class." At that point the other passengers broke into spontaneous applause.

What is it that makes us want to assert our supposed superiority over other people? Could it be the very opposite, I wonder? Could it be that we have something to prove?

There is no doubt that an arrogant sense of superiority is one of the more unpleasant features of human nature. We probably don't see as much of it in our more egalitarian society as in some others, or even in our past. But it still shows itself. There is a compulsiveness in human nature that makes each of susceptible to the need to demonstrate our superiority over others, even if only in things like the title of our job or how well our kids are doing at sport.

Psychologists tell us that it really has nothing to do with any innate superiority, but rather is a reflection of our own sense of inadequacy and our need to prove ourselves – to ourselves as well as to others. We see it, for example, in adolescents who will gang up on other kids who don't wear the right clothes or listen to the right music, as if those factors actually proved something about the inherent worth of a person.

Sadly, though, it doesn't end there. In one form or another the need to prove ourselves tends to drive us throughout life: whether it be the job we do, the position we hold, the places we've been, the qualifications we have, or how successful our kids are. It's always with us and is probably our greatest cause of unhappiness.

The question is how to get rid of it? The answer to that goes beyond physical and emotional factors, though it includes them. It is, essentially, a spiritual problem and goes to the very core of our innermost being; our deepest sense of who we are and our own sense of personal worth.

The Bible, in the Book of Romans, chapter 5, verse 1, says this: *“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”* One translation puts it this way; *“By faith we have been made acceptable to God. And now, because of our Lord Jesus Christ, we live at peace with God.”*

So what is this saying to us? It says that the Gospel is the good news that we can be set free from all those things that make us feel we have to prove ourselves and our worth. It is saying that we don't have to, and indeed cannot prove anything to God. God knows exactly who and what we are, so there's no point in trying to prove otherwise.

But God accepts us as we are. Because of the sacrifice of Jesus our sins and failings are forgiven and to God we are his beloved children. Our part is to gratefully accept that and live in the joy of it. We accept that we are of infinite value because that's how God sees us, so much so that it cost the sacrifice of his son Jesus to make it real for us.

So we no longer have to be driven by a compulsive need to prove our acceptability; not to God and therefore not to anyone else, either. We can relax and be ourselves; the people God made us to be, and whose Spirit enables us to be. We don't have to prove a thing.

No longer need we compare ourselves with others, whose gifts and calling are different from ours. All we have to do and be is what God has created us to do and be.

We no longer need to hide behind class, race, sex, qualifications, achievements, money, family, sporting ability, appearance or any other thing to prove our worth. God accepts us just as we are, and His Spirit empowers us to be the people we were created to be.

I am not the sort of person who hoards things. However there are a few things I will always keep. One of them is the Queen's Commission. In 1975 I joined the Australian Army as a chaplain and was given a commission, which means I was given officer status. Chaplains, like doctors, dentists, nurses, psychologists and lawyers are commissioned as Specialist Officers on the basis of their civilian qualifications and experience. They don't have to go through the same arduous military training as General Service Officers.

I remember my early days as a chaplain, walking round wearing the same sort of insignia of rank as an army captain. I really felt like a fraud. I felt that, in some way, I had to prove that I was worthy of wearing the

same insignia. So I pushed myself to try to be militarily competent too. The problem, of course, was that I was so far behind there was no way I could catch up to them.

But an older and wiser officer one day said to me, “You have been given the Queen’s commission. You are an officer in the Australian Army because the Queen says so. We all accept that. Now you need to accept it and just get on with being who you are and doing what you are called to do. You don’t have to prove anything to us.”

It was good advice and I’ve never forgotten it. It also released me from the cruel taskmaster of trying to be something that I’m not. I’ve thoroughly enjoyed my Army chaplaincy ever since, but I’m not sure I would have otherwise.

It reminds me of that great spiritual principle that our standing as the beloved children of God has nothing to do with our own efforts. It is God’s gift to us which we accept by faith and live by faith. We don’t have to prove a thing to anyone. All we have to be is the person God has made us to be. All we have to do is what he wants us to do. We’ve been set free from the tyranny of having to constantly prove our worth. Now we can just be. Now this first verse of Romans chapter 5 is one of the great foundational texts of the Christian faith. *‘Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.’* God has accepted us. God has forgiven us. We are his beloved children. Now it’s time we started to live like it.

There is an interesting little textual problem associated with it. In some of the oldest manuscripts the Greek word which we translate in English as ‘we have’ can be translated as ‘let us have.’ It is all to do with the fact that in the Greek language there were two letters for our letter O. One is a short sounding O and the other is a long sounding O. The word that most modern Bible’s translate as ‘we have’ as in ‘we have peace with God,’ in some versions appears as ‘let us have’ as in ‘let us have peace with God.’ It all depends on which ancient manuscript of the text you take as being the most accurate, the one with the long O or the one with the short O.

Whichever you choose it doesn’t make any difference to the essential meaning of the verse, but the alternative rendering does add another interesting emphasis to it. It reminds us that if we have a problem about feeling we have to prove ourselves, the problem is of our making, not God’s. So it would read like this:

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, let us have with peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Or, *“By faith we have been made acceptable to God. And now, because of our Lord Jesus Christ, let us live at peace with God.”*

It means relax, accept what God says is so and stop playing the neurotic game of self justification – constantly having to feel you have to prove yourself. Doing this actually demonstrates a lack of faith. It shows we haven't really accepted God's acceptance of us. It is, in fact, a game we play to try to overcome those deep inner feelings of unworthiness and failure that are so much a part of the human condition.

Many of us drive ourselves the way we do because we have internalized what as children we learned were the demands and expectations of others – especially our parents. Some of us learned at a very early age that we could never be good enough to meet their expectations. We then projected those feelings onto God and always feel the need to have to try harder. Or, knowing that the bar will always be too high, we give up and turn our backs on the only one who can deliver us from that cruel taskmaster.

But the Bible says to us, *'By faith you have been made acceptable to God. And now, because of our Lord Jesus Christ, let us live at peace with God.'*

If there is one theme that is both explicit and implicit in Scripture it is that God loves us unconditionally and desires nothing more than that we should live at peace with him, with each other, and with ourselves. We do this when we stop trying to prove our own acceptability and accept that this is God's free gift to us through Jesus. Then, as we allow his Spirit to permeate our lives we discover daily what it means to be at peace, nothing to prove.