

Repeat offenders: Romans 1:16-17, 3:22b-28; Matthew 7:21-29

by [Maureen Dallison Kemeza](#) in the [May 8, 2002](#) issue

Justification by grace through faith has been a perennial theme throughout the history of the people of God. St. Paul's Letter to the Romans gives it classical articulation in the Christian Bible: "For all alike have sinned, and are deprived of the divine glory, and all are justified by God's free grace alone, through God's act of liberation in the person of Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:23).

St. Paul should know. In my small parish church, aptly named for that obstreperous saint, a large painting of his conversion on the road to Damascus is prominently displayed. When you see it you can't help remember that before he was struck down in a blinding flash of insight, Paul was one arrogant man. Certain of his righteousness, he did terrible harm to others in the name of God. Paradoxically, when he thought he was most righteous, he was most wrong. Left to his own thinking and instincts, and imbued with years of study of religion that failed to free his heart, he was a destructive man. Only his encounter with Christ brought him out of his closed world and liberated him.

Justification by grace is a perennial theme because we forget about it again and again. As religious people, we build buildings for the glory of God that dazzle us with pride, not in God, but in ourselves and what we've achieved. We develop administrative structures to channel grace into the world and are surprised when they become self-referential bureaucracies. We generate ritual and discursive cultures that become ends in themselves, vehicles of our status and security, constructs that distract us from the grace still moving among us. The church we build to convert the world becomes mired in sinfulness. Then we remember that the church is always in need of reform. All alike have sinned, Paul wrote, and all are justified by God's free grace alone. We know this but we forgot it, and we forget it often.

The theme is relevant to the Roman Catholic sex-abuse scandal. One does not need to be Roman Catholic to feel implicated in what is going on. Every denomination and faith community has known something of this sort of violation of trust. The values at stake, moreover, affect the entire community regardless of church membership.

Because values such as the well-being of children, truth-telling and moral openness are always at risk, the community as a whole has a stake in them. One way or another, we are all in this together.

Paul speaks to us in this situation. Where we have set church leaders apart from the rest of humanity, and projected onto them the moral rectitude we wish *somebody* would embody, we have a set-up for a crisis of trust. But that trust was never realistic to begin with because we human beings are morally and spiritually frail. If that realization leaves us disillusioned, remember—it is only illusion that we have shed. Once we do, the crisis becomes an opportunity for conversion to reality.

Once again we can discern the wisdom of this part of Paul's gospel, as if we were hearing it for the first time: All alike—all of us—are justified by God's free grace alone.

Wendell Berry's novel *Jayber Crow* illustrates Jesus' words: "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father." The narrator tells the story of his life as a barber living in the mid-20th century in a tiny Kentucky town called Port William. For 30 years the men of the town come to sit in his chair, talk to him and visit with neighbors who are waiting. Because the mothers bring in their children, he comes to know them too.

In time, Jayber Crow becomes something like a confessor or a parson. He knows the characters and values of Port William people well. He goes to church and contemplates the truths of the Gospels, which he's read all the way through, and he does his best to live them out.

He is faithful and honorable in love. He is honest in his dealings, loves his friends and, with considerable struggle, learns to love his few enemies. In this season of crisis in American religion, Jayber Crow is a consoling reminder of that faithful pragmatist in Jesus' sermon who builds his house on the rock so that it can withstand the storm and the flood. He is among the meek who inherit the earth.

Berry's hero leads us back to reconsider readings that speak to the church with tender and true words. All are sinners—how did we forget this? And all are made right with God and others only by grace. It is not what we build or what we make of ourselves that matters in the end. It is not the offices we occupy or the structures of power that govern our common life that save us. It is God who saves, and God will save. God in Christ invites us to live our faith—to walk our talk—by doing the will of

the Father in heaven. It is as simple and difficult as that.