

Jesus life and death have deep meaning for us. They're inextricably tied to our present circumstances and our future. For us to simply acknowledge that Jesus died on a cross without acknowledging the lessons he taught is to give it only the significance of the Roman Empire getting rid of a just and righteous man because they perceived him to be a threat to their power. For Jesus to have lived and taught us without dying on the Cross and being Resurrected is to say only that he was a great teacher. Paul is telling his audience that we are justified by faith. That is, we are put in **right relationship** by faith. But whose? Ours in Christ? Or Christ's in God? Or is it that Jesus put his faith in God and we put our faith in Jesus?

What I want to talk to you about today is the context of this passage for Paul's audience and for us. Why did the Apostle Paul say all of this and why does it matter for us today?

In his letter to the Christian community in Rome, Paul discusses Jesus' Crucifixion and Resurrection as redemptive action in the context of the worldview that the world is full of error and sin directly because of Adam's behavior in the Garden of Eden.

Adam and Eve were given very explicit instructions not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil and they went against God's direction. In disobeying God, they destroyed the relationship they had with God and they were sent away. We're told that the penalty for eating that fruit was death. Since we know that they didn't physically die that day, the 'death' that is their punishment must be something else. What did actually happen? They became separated from God. And, I'll add, it appears that they became separated from each other.

The very first thing that happened when God asked if they ate the fruit was that the harmonious relationship Adam and Eve had with each other, with nature, and with God was destroyed. Adam blamed Eve. Eve blamed the snake. All of a sudden, all the relationships are out of whack.

Why did God even have to ask if they ate the fruit? Was it a rhetorical question? Was God asking them to take responsibility for their actions by claiming the actions as their own? They did, albeit with a lot of finger pointing. If you believe that Adam's sin takes us out of right relationship with God, then know that Jesus redemptive action on the Cross reconciles us to God.

Jesus had come to Earth to teach us how to be in relationship. He said "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself". He said, "Let the little children come to me." He said, "Let whoever is without sin cast the first stone." He said, "Father, forgive us as we

forgive others.” He didn’t just speak of physical connection, but also of spiritual connection.

An important point for us is the reminder that, if we choose to do so, we can commit ourselves to taking seriously our connection with God and with each other. In church, we covenant together. When we become members, we don’t sign a legal document, we enter instead into sacred, holy bond. That is much more powerful than a contract.

If Jesus can put all of humanity in right relationship with God, we ought to be in right relationship with each other as humans. And yet, we’re not. It may be a micro-managing boss or an unprofessional customer service representative that has had you feeling less than peaceful. Maybe there’s someone who has worn you down or chipped away at your sense of self. While you can ‘unfriend’ someone on social media or just stop taking their calls. But that doesn’t get to what I believe is God’s goal. That, I believe, is that we are in restored relationship with God and with one another.

We get out of right relationship with each other—and with God—all the time. Sometimes over misunderstandings, sometimes over misperceptions. Sometimes because we perceive a threat or we feel that something has been taken from us.

There are only two things that put us back into connectedness: faith and engagement.

The kind of love God has for us is agape. Agape is unconditional love, love that comes from grace. According to the McLean Bible College website, “Agape is called out of one’s heart by the preciousness of the object loved. It is a love of esteem, of evaluation. It’s not kindled by the merit or worth of it’s object. It delights in giving. This love keeps on loving even when the loved one is unresponsive, unkind, unlovable, and unworthy. It is unconditional love. Agape desires only the good of the one loved. It is a consuming passion for the well-being of others.” This is the kind of love that God has for us. It’s not something we can ‘win’ or get because of something we do. The power of that love is amazing!

Have you ever seen a beautiful ceramic bowl with golden veins running through it? The gold takes an ordinary bowl and makes it look very special. The technique is called Kintsugi. That’s the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with lacquer mixed with gold, silver, or platinum. Kintsugi means “golden joinery” or “golden repair”.

Imagine with me a bowl, dropped or otherwise broken... The artist that created it carefully picks up each piece and restoring it. That little bowl isn’t so different than you or me. Sometimes we feel let down, pushed aside, or just a little bit broken by circumstances. And when we’re restored by Christ, we are no longer the same as we were. We have changed. Once repaired, we may or may not serve the same purpose we

once did, but like a bowl with gold or silver or platinum veins, we are stronger. And, like the actual scars we bear on our bodies, the golden veins tell the story of what happened to the bowl.

We all have scars, some from surgeries or accidents and others from experiences we don't speak of. Those scars are the invisible ones. Something happened to us and we were somehow broken, but now we've "gotten it together" and are "whole".

The art form Kintsugi treats the break as part of one's history. Something to be acknowledged and possibly even celebrated, but not hidden or dismissed. Jesus, through his own faith in God, went to the Cross. He bravely moved forward to obtain scars. He brought healing to a cosmically broken relationship between God and humanity--Creator and creation.

Most of us don't want to admit that we've been 'broken' in some way, but life has a way of giving us dents, dings, and scratches. We've all got fractures even if they're not full-on breaks. Even if we think we've 'held it together', but then it takes only a word or action and then we fall apart. God can repair us because Jesus has reopened the door to that relationship.

I often say that there's nothing that can separate you from the love of God. And there is nothing that can set you aside from God's love for you. But there is something that can separate you from the love of God...and that is you. You have the choice to live in God's love and God's peace and accept Jesus lessons and teachings and bring them into your own life. You have a choice about believing that Christ walked faithfully and boldly forward, even to his death and resurrection, with full faith in God and God's ability to bring him home.

I think that Jesus believed in us, too, with more than a grain of mustard seed size faith. Jesus believed that his work and mission and message would continue beyond his physical death.

He had faith in God that he could end his earthly work preaching and teaching and that it would continue for all of time. For as long as we continue to tell his story. His grace in accepting the unjust judgment is inspiring. We can learn from his grace in only not condemning those who misjudged him and tortured him and even going a step further, by offering his forgiveness (remember, 'forgive them father for they know not what they do'), and his grace in saying to the criminal who led a life and placed his trust in Jesus in his final hours, "You'll be with me in Paradise today." (Not after righting all of the wrongs, but after seeking God's forgiveness.)

Let us put our faith in Christ and let us follow him, with grace and peace and hope. He will lead us to God and perhaps, even to heaven on earth. Blessed be and amen.