

If you awoke in the middle of the night to discover that your house were burning down, and every second remaining in the inferno put your own life at risk, what would you grab on your way out, not counting people or pets? Perhaps you even have a response ready because you have heard it, or something similar, asked during a dinner party. After all, it is a good question because the answers make for good conversation. Not to mention the fact that your answer may also offer a glimpse into your personality and core values.

Anyway, what would you say? Do you gather your most *costly* items: Jewelry, a laptop, antiques, bonds, or cash from the safe? Do you grab what is most sentimental to you? Pictures of the children, grandma's quilt, your journals, a letter written from your mother before she passed? Or do you focus on the most practical items? Your Passport, phone, backup hard drive, wallet, and do you even try to back the car out of the garage?

If, for some reason, you need help with this question there is a great digital collection of answers from countless people online at “theburninghouse.com.” It's a community photo blog created by photographer Foster Huntington around this pressing question. People lay out and snap an image of everything they would bring from their burning home, then post it with a quick text description that others can comment on.

Items that people say they'd run out of the house with include: phones, journals, old print pictures, childhood keepsakes and favorite clothing items. One man from France said he'd grab his wedding ring, a lighter, and his cigarettes. A husband-and-wife couple from Australia would each clutch one side of a vintage record player cabinet, stacked with a mandolin. They'd also grab a quilt, a rare Louis Armstrong record, and the husband's favorite Italian leather shoes.

A 50-year-old woman in South Africa submitted a text without a photo: "If my house was burning, I would take nothing. I am a hoarder, married to a

minimalist, and it would take a burning house to allow me to start anew." Other surprising items include a box of multigrain cereal, a mounted deer hoof, an ABBA record (really?), and a bottle of Hendrick's gin "to drink while watching the house burn."

In short, the burning house question provides us with an opportunity to give a response that reveals our deeply held values and personality quirks. And you might say that Paul's letter to the Romans this morning asks a similar diagnostic question of us, but on a spiritual level. The question being: If your life were coming to an end and not your house, what would you carry with you into eternity? The apostle's answer, according to our second lesson, is: "Not a blessed thing -- except the righteousness of Jesus Christ."

Apparently Billy Graham used to pose a similar question: "If you were to die tonight and stand before God, and God were to say to you, 'Why should I let you into heaven?' what would you say?" Well, I would guess that most people who are unchurched, or who consider themselves to be spiritual but not religious, would certainly hem and haw at this type of question and perhaps at some point say something like, "Well, I'm not perfect, but I'm a good person." But how do you think those who claim to be followers of Christ would answer it? Or more important to Paul in Romans 4, how should they answer the question?

Before we try and come up with a response, I think it is important for us to understand that in this morning's text we are picking up midway through Paul's larger discourse on how humans can be in right standing before God. A few words of context can help us understand this passage for our own lives.

While painting with the broadest of brushes, Paul has argued that all people Jew and Gentile alike are separated from God. But now he also suggests that the grace and mercy of God has been extended to all, Jew and Gentile alike, including

the very righteousness of Christ to all who believe. And this change of heart and mind comes to us through faith alone!

It secures a judgment that we're not guilty, an acquittal, as it were. And this astonishing verdict is the result of nothing we humans have done, but it is the gift of God, freely given. Paul is also refuting objections from Jewish opposition, from Israelites who might claim their ancestry or adherence to the law as worthy of notice, or as qualifying them, at the very least, for special consideration.

Ok, so you may be sitting in your pew groaning that all of this sounds really theological. And it is. The good news, however, is that there's no need to fear any of it. Rather, this is an opportunity for us to explore some of the key ideas of the Christian faith and incorporate them into our lives both personally and as a congregation.

Taking a brief look at Abraham, Paul practically offers up a resume for his ancestor in the faith that would have certainly earned Abraham favor with God: He obediently agreed to transplant his family geographically. He hoped in God to fulfill the promise regarding his offspring. He was stunningly faithful during a sacrificial test involving his son Isaac.

Abraham also buried his wife in Canaan before seeing the fulfillment of all God's promises. And according to Scripture we understand that he did become the father of many nations! But here's the key to the passage -- despite these great works, "his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness." And likewise for all of us after Abraham, our right standing with God "will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead."

Ok, so what will it be? If our life were coming to an end, and not our house, what should we bring in our arms to present to God? Not good works. Not religious laws. Not the Christian legacy of our family. Not our denominational

affiliation. Not correct doctrine. Not a lifetime of prayer and love of the Scriptures. But simply a humble and grace filled faith in Jesus Christ.

In view of his *sola fide* understanding of justification in Romans, Luther stated that "faith grasps hold of Christ." Faith does not claim merit. It does not self-justify through good works. For Luther, this grasping of Christ was truly being grasped by him. Like a strong arm extended over the cliff edge to one precariously clinging to his endangered life, we grasp at Christ who has grasped and pulled us out of our sin condition and into a new standing in himself.

Now, to help us move beyond mere information, or knowledge, toward deeper life implications, let's connect the dots between justification and other aspects of Christian living. The implication of our being in a good and right standing before God, through faith in Christ alone, is that we can't do anything that will make God love us any more. Neither can we do anything that will cause God to love us any less. And Paul will take this idea up later in Romans Chapter 8.

In his book, *The Search for Significance*, author Robert McGee suggests that for many Christians, there is a subtle and unexamined equation to our faith: Spiritual Self-Worth = Our Performance + Others' People's Opinions of us. To feel good about our relationship with God, we need to pray more, sin less, love hard people, serve in hard ministries. The performance list goes on and on. McGee's answer to this broken equation? The doctrine of justification by faith alone.

He asks provocative questions to those trapped in a sort of Christian version of good works: "When God considers you, does God deceive himself in some way or does God know who you truly are? If you think of yourself differently than God thinks of you, who is mistaken, you or God?" In other words, justification replaces our performance with Christ's performance, and gets us to view ourselves as God does.

Author Neil Anderson poses an interesting experiment. Ask a Christian **who they are** in relation to their faith, and they'll probably answer with denominational or doctrinal tags, or they'll speak about their gifts or roles in church service. But is this who they are? What we do with our faith does not determine who we are. Who we are determines what we do, and what we think, and what we feel.

Paul argues elsewhere that Christians are new creations; that an entirely new set of realities describes us as justified by Christ. We're sons and daughters of God. Christ is not ashamed to call us his "brothers and sisters." We are the workmanship of God. We are saints, not sinners. That which God says is true of us, is true of us. It doesn't matter if we believe those truths. It doesn't matter how we feel about them. It doesn't matter how our past experiences condition our trust in them.

As we look at Paul's message of justification by faith, there's one glorious message that leaps off of the pages; "That which God requires, God provides." So, if we want to emerge from the often-burning wreckage of our false beliefs, we only need to carry one thing along with us. It's that which God already provides us through our faith in Jesus Christ – and that is our unqualified approval as we stand and walk with God, for now and all eternity. And thanks be to God for that! Amen.