

SERMON FOR REFORMATION SUNDAY

(Cape Town - 31 October 2010)

Text: ...⁽²⁸⁾ For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works prescribed by the law. (Romans 3:21-28)

Let me start with a profound and extremely provocative statement. You may have heard before, but I am going to ask you to reflect on it today, because it may change your life to be never the same again. The statement is a quote from a man called John Hobbs. And this is what he said:

There is nothing you can do to make God love you more and there is nothing you can do to make God love you less. He just loves you.

It is very difficult for us to accept this statement, because it is in stark contrast to what we experience everyday in this world. The love that we know and experience amongst one another is one of give and reposit, inseparably linked to one another. I give - you give. I stop giving - you stop giving. That is the way it works in this world. Love finds a response. But the moment I start ignoring you even insulting you, your love dies. BUT God is different. That is what we need to reflect on today.

Let me tell you a story to illustrate: It is the story of a famous English writer called Sam Johnston. Sam Johnston senior, the dad, had a book shop in town of Litchfield. But the book shop didn't do well enough to provide the income he needed for his family. So every year in November he walked from Litchfield, where he lived, to a funfair in a Walsall to sell some of his books. On 21st of November 1736 it was bitter cold, and Sam was coming down with flue. His wife was concerned and said: "Why don't you ask your son to go to the funfair for you this year". The son, 27 years old, who always read his father's books had just graduated from Oxford university. But the dad said to his wife: "I can't task him. My son is not concerned about me and my health." But his wife encouraged him to ask nevertheless. But on being asked young Sam was disgusted. He said to his dad: "You ask me to sell books at Walsall, where my friends of Oxford will be present. They will laugh at me for doing such a miserable job." The dad said: "This job made it possible for you to go to school. It paid for your tuition". And saddened by his son's behaviour he added: "Honor father and mother. That's the only command with a promise of God's blessing." But young Sam got so angry. He stormed out of the house vowing not to "live on his father's expenses" ever again.

Sam, the sick father, went to Walsall himself. As noted it was icy cold. He caught pneumonia and died a few days later.

Forty years on it was again the 21st of November. Despite rain and snow whirling from the skies there was a festive atmosphere in Lichfield that year. The town had decided to honour Sam Johnston, now a famous writer in England. But Sam, travelling from London, didn't arrive on time. Hugely disappointed the people were ready to leave the banquet when his arrival was announced. Their joy was exuberant and their expectations reached breaking point. "This is *our* son", they said.

But oh dear, how did Sam look? His eyes were sad and depressed, his cloths were soaking wet from top to bottom. The great man was not only shivering from the cold, but he was overwhelmed with grief and sadness.

The guests were shocked. He told them that when he accepted the invitation, he didn't realise it would be on the 21st of November. He then told them that on this very day he by his shocking, dreadful, proud, arrogant and despicable behavior had caused the death of his father. And the departing words of his father, that he should honour his father and

mother, had haunted him all those years. Every year, therefore, come rain or snow, he would come to Litchfield and walk to Walsall on the 21st of November. There he would stand with his bare head in the cold for a few hours burdened by a conscience that could find no rest. What troubled him the most, Sam explained, was that he never had the opportunity to stand at the death bed of his father, to ask him for forgiveness. Then Sam apologised to his guests and left.

Eight years after this banquet Sam Johnston again wandered on the 21st of November from Litchfield to Walsall by feet to atone for his sin. But on his day he also was sick as his father was then. He returned to London and became very sick. Expecting his own death and tortured by his conscience he ordered someone to call the pious Anglican priest Wistanley to come. But Wistanley was sick and could not come. He therefore wrote a letter to his dying friend. The messenger read it to Sam. At the end of the letter Wistanley wrote: "Sam, wherever you look you will come to see that you trespassed God's commandment and that by your arrogant, despicable behavior caused the death of your father. And now in desperate and dire conflict of your conscience you ask: What I am to do to be saved and die in peace? In this pain and torture of your conscience I can only point at and refer you to Jesus Christ for he is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

When the messenger read this to him, Sam shouted: "Stop! Is it really written there?" The messenger read the line again. And Sam acknowledged and confessed his sin and confided in the one who - with the words of our sermon text - justifies us by faith, by faith alone.

Nothing we do makes God love us less.

But sometimes this isn't our problem. If Paul says in our sermon text: "***All have sinned and continue to fall short of God's glory***", we say: "Yes, ok, we all have sinned", but immediately we add: "I am not as bad as Sam or as some of the other people in our society. I go to church, I read my Bible, I say my prayers, I help the poor, surely that counts for something? Surely God must love me *more* than others.

That is how the ignorant speak. Nothing we do improves our status before God. Nothing we do will make him love us more. Now to many that is upsetting!! The Pharisees and scribes were upset with Jesus when he told them. Somehow we believe God only loves people, who "do" something all the time, or that somehow we can *earn* his love. No, "***all have sinned***" and "***all fall short of the glory of God***".

For us this is difficult to understand because we lack perspective. Nicky Gumble of the Alpha Course explained it like this. He pointed to pillar (like this container that I have brought along), and said: Who is the worst person that ever lived? People would say: "Adolf Hitler" or "Robert Mugabe". And he would place them right at the bottom of the pillar. Then he would ask, who is the best person that ever lived? And people would say: "Mother Theresa" or "Nelson Mandela". And he would place them right at the top of the pillar. Then he would ask: "How about you? Where would you place yourself on this pillar. And most people would go for the middle. And then Nicky Gumble would ask: "What is the yardstick from where God measures? The ceiling? No, not the ceiling, but the sky. And if you look down from the sky this pillar (container) is so small as this matchbox: Here (on this matchbox) you see no difference between Nelson Mandela and Adolf Hitler.

From our perspective, yes, we might see a difference and feel a bit better or more worthy than the other person. From God's perspective there is no difference: "***All fall short of the glory of God!***"

We don't know what we are saying, when we think that based on a few hours of Bible reading or service to the poor that we are better than others and that God should therefore

like us more.

In fact, Sam Johnston thought by punishing himself, by standing in the icy cold weather in Walsall every 21st of November, he could maybe “earn” God’s favour again. But I can tell you now, his actions did not impress God. In fact it grieved and insulted Him. What an insult to God to think that I can win his favour or love. He is love. Nothing I do makes him love me more or less!

God’s love is equal. And he treats all people equally. We read about it in Matthew’s Gospel. Jesus says: **“He [God] causes his sun to shine on the good and the evil, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous”**.

And God in his great love makes all of us righteous before him in the exact same way. He says, you are righteous and acceptable to him by just “trusting” Jesus. You are not righteous or acceptable to God *because* you went church or helped the poor and the sick. You are righteous because you stopped trusting yourself and allowed yourself fall into the arms of God.

The Gospel message is: In Jesus God came into this world, not to support us in our efforts to make it to heaven, but to pay the penalty for our sins. He died that we may live. He did it for Sam Johnston, Dieter Reinstorf, and for you.

This has a profound influence on how I live my life here and now. I am free from this chain of cause and effect: “If I do this, God loves me. If I do that, he does not love me.

Me sinning, does not make God love me less. But I don’t want to sin, because sin is so destructive. It kills me and suffocates my faith.

Let me illustrate again with a story. Not so long ago they still sold slaves in America. At the auction there was a visiting Dutchman who had an eye on a certain slave. But the slave fearing deportation to Holland resisted being bought. He insulted the Dutchman and spat at him. But the Dutchman kept his cool and won the bid. And he walked up to the slave and said: “You are no longer a slave, I have bought you to be free.”

One would surely expect the slave to jump up and cry aloud with joy: “Yippee I am free.” But no, not this slave. He turned to his new master who announced him to be free and told him. “Sir, I have never met a person as kind as you. And because you are so kind, I want to serve you voluntary by my free will. I will serve you freely.”

That is who we are: We go to church, we care for others. It makes us not more acceptable to God. But we do it because he made us “right”. He set us free.

I am no longer motivated to impress. I don’t have to impress. What motivates is love - a love that is totally foreign to this world. It is a love that cares for sinners.

There is freedom in knowing: “I am a sinner, but loved nevertheless”. Sam Johnston realised this on his death bed. There is a righteousness that comes “from” God (in Christ). I suggest that if you haven’t accepted it, you accept it now. Amen.

Dieter Reinstorf