**The Misery of Failure (and the Joy of Christ’s Success)**

Text: Romans 3:20

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**Scriptures:** Jeremiah 17:5-10; Romans 3.9-20

Songs Chosen: [SttL] 173, 34, 441, 103, 523

**Series:** Heidelberg Catechism (LD2)

**Theme:** We cannot make ourselves right with God because we cannot fully obey his law.

**Proposition:** The misery of failure to keep God’s perfect law drives us to rejoice in Christ’s success on our behalf.

**Introduction**

Do you like failing? Who does? We could say that failing feels miserable. Perhaps less if you believe that one day you can succeed if you keep on trying. Misery is a “*state or feeling of great physical, mental, emotional or spiritual distress or discomfort*”. Other words which are synonymous with misery include: unhappiness, distress, wretchedness, suffering and affliction.

‘Man’s Misery’ is the heading of the first section of the Heidelberg Catechism which covers Lord’s Days 2-4. This part of the catechism covers mankind’s inability to keep God’s good law and the His judgement on those who fail in their obedience. We could say that the Bible is a book about failure – the failure of every human being **apart** from one person. The Bible is also a book about success – the success of just **one person** who achieved what nobody else could.

In these terms you and I are complete failures and Christ is the only truly successful person who has ever lived. Success is the accomplishment of an aim or purpose. Other words which are synonymous with success include victory, triumph, gain, achievement.

The purpose of Jesus coming to this earth is summarised in the words of the angel of the Lord who appeared to Joseph in a dream saying: "*Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus,* ***for he will save his people from their sins***." (Matt 1:20b-21) Jesus is a success. He has saved His people from their sins – their failure.

Brothers and sisters, through faith in Him we share in the benefits of what He has done. We can live in the joy of **His** success, not the misery of **our** failure. We’re going to begin with misery though, as we focus our text from Romans 3.

1. **Our need to be justified**

Ask most people on the street if they are good or bad, they are likely to say something like: “*Well I might not be a saint, but I am really not too bad*”. “*I’ve done some good things, I try to help other people and there’s plenty of people who have more faults than me*”. In some churches people might even think “*Well I am a saint! And I regularly attend worship services, Bible studies and fellowship groups. I am actively engaged in serving others, I read my Bible and other Christian books, I think God is pretty pleased with me – I try to help Him out when and where I can!”*

Most people tend to think of themselves as ‘on the spectrum’ between pure white and pitch black. Sort of greyish – lighter or darker – when it comes to being good or bad. The Bible paints a different picture of each one of us in our natural state. The strength of the language of the Scriptures is truly shocking:

Listen to what Paul writes to the Roman Christians as he quotes from the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and the prophet Isaiah: *"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes."*

It sounds a bit OTT (over the top). Surely we human beings are not that bad! The truth is, naturally we are. This is not grey, it is pitch black. Listen to the prophet Jeremiah (17:9): “*The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?*”. Or the Word of God in Eph 2:1 as it describes the state of the Ephesian believers before they were born again by the Spirit of God: “*you were dead in the trespasses and sins*”.

The catechism of the Roman Catholic church states that: As a result of original sin, human nature is **weakened** in its powers, subject to ignorance, suffering and the domination of death, and **inclined** to sin (this inclination is called "concupiscence"). This is not true. The Bible teaches us that we are sinners from conception. David speaks for us all when he confesses: P 51:5 “*Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me*”.

We are sinners not because we sin, rather we sin because we are sinners. We cannot help ourselves, it is part of our fallen nature. That is why we cannot keep the law of God, no matter how hard we try. We are born failures in this regard. The message of the Scripture is as bleak as it could be in this. The news could not be worse.

If we are to be faithful in proclaiming the good news of salvation, we must be faithful in proclaiming the bad news of our human condition. Otherwise the truth about our need for a Saviour makes no sense; the best we can present then is someone to help us in our self-improvement.

To put this in theological terms, there can be no sanctification without there having first been justification. Here’s a reminder of the meaning of these terms from Westminster Shorter Catechism:

**Q33. What is justification?**  
Justification is the act of God's free grace by which He pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in His sight. He does so only because He counts the righteousness of Christ as ours. Justification is received by faith alone.

**Q35. What is sanctification?**  
Sanctification is the work of God's free grace by which our whole person is made new in the image of God, and we are made more and more able to become dead to sin and alive to righteousness.

Only the justified are sanctified, however…

1. **Our works do not justify**

The Apostle Paul writes in our text: **“***For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin*” (Romans 3:20). To be justified is to be made right with God. Justification is a legal term meaning to ‘acquit’, ‘declare righteous’. Paul is making clear to the Roman Christians that they cannot be declared right with God on the basis of their obedience to the law of God.

Why? Because they cannot obey that law **fully** and therefore they fail in God’s perfect test and standard of obedience. As James writes: “*For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it*” (James 2:10). The law is the great ‘tutor’ which teaches us that our efforts to keep the law are miserable. The law teaches us that we truly are failures.

As the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 7:14-15, 21-24: *For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?*

Perhaps the greatest barrier for most people coming to faith in Christ is accepting that they cannot do anything to earn any credit with God. However this truth is the clear teaching of Scripture: e.g. ***“****God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ- by grace you have been saved- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph 2:4).*

It can be hard for people like you and me to accept that we are failures when it comes to full obedience to His good law. Feeling like a failure is miserable, but knowing without doubt that you really are a failure is even worse. Knowing that no matter how hard you try, however long you persevere, you will never ever make the grade. It crushes our pride and that can really hurt!

What can happen in the life of a Christian is that pride fights back. This is what it can look like. We can be motivated to serve the Lord by guilt, not by love. We can be driven by a sense of duty rather than by desire for Christ.

Now there’s a fine balance here in the Christian life. On one side we can wait for a warm feeling of desire to serve the Lord in a particular way before we will even budge.

Good works are essential in the life of a Christian e.g. “*faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead*” (James 2:17); “*Each tree is recognized by its own fruit*” (Luke 6:44).

On the other side, we can be so driven by a sense of duty rather than a heartfelt thankfulness for what Christ has done seems completely absent. “*And the Lord said: "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men*” (Isaiah 29:13)

We could reverse James’s words and correctly say that ‘works by themselves, if not accompanied by faith, are dead’.

A loving parent may accept the weak efforts of a loved child:

* perhaps a simple painting where most of the colour ended up on the carpet,
* or an enthusiastic car wash which leaves the paintwork with patches of dirt and streaks of soap solution,
* or a beginner’s violin piece which sounds like the screeching claws of a cat on a tin roof.

A loving parent may **lower the standard** so that the works of the child ‘cross the line’ and effectively become acceptable. God is a loving Heavenly Father, but **He does not** justify this way.

1. **In Christ alone we are justified**

God does not look at our failures and ‘lower the bar’ for us like a doting parent who wants his children to get ‘over the line’. As a God of truth, justice and righteousness this would be against His holy nature. Justification does not take place by a reduction in God’s perfect standard, but through One who succeeds where we fail!

Paul writes about this later in chapter 3:23-25a **“***For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.*” The grace of God is seen in the sending of His only begotten Son to willingly take on human flesh, to be justified by perfect obedience to God’s Law and yet to willingly suffer the wrath of God for the failure of people like you and me to keep that law.

To make disciples of Jesus Christ we must present the bad news – that all of us cannot keep God’s good law. That we are not kind of good and kind of bad, but that we are all naturally unrighteous, worthless, with no fear of God. This is a hard message to proclaim to people who think and appear to be living good, caring, lives. Yet it is a true and necessary message.

However, this truth must always be joined to the gospel – the good news. That’s why this sermon goes beyond the topic of ‘Man’s Misery’ and why the title has the second clause: ‘the joy of Christ’s success’. Jesus is our champion, our victory, our hero. We rejoice in His accomplishments, we celebrate the faithful way in which he has fulfilled the promises and purposes of God His Father.

As James Hyslop noted last week, we praise those we respect and admire, declaring our enjoyment of and admiration for something or someone. A football team, a concert musician, a champion athlete. Brothers and Sisters, as the justified, those who, though natural failures, succeed in Christ, we praise Christ for what He has done on our behalf: "*Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth*." (Rev 5:9)

He turns our misery into joy. He turns guilt into thankfulness. He turns shame into acceptance by God. He turns our ugliness into beauty in the eyes of the Lord. He turns our present sufferings into means of growth. He turns our future destiny from darkness to light. Misery is unhappiness, distress, wretchedness, suffering and affliction whereas the victory, triumph, gain and achievement of Christ’s success is a great source of joy, contentment and satisfaction for the believer.

Brothers and Sisters, we are truly ‘*more than conquerors through him that loved us’* (Rom 8:37). We truly succeed in Christ. “*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*” (Romans 7:25)

AMEN