When my kids were young, one of their favorite TV shows was “The A-Team.” The plots of all the shows were pretty similar. In order to help some vulnerable person or group, the team had to fight against a powerful and cruel enemy, using very limited resources. Team leader Hannibal was usually the brains behind each mission. His well-known tag-line was, “I love it when a plan comes together!” - which is the title of this sermon!

The last two Sundays, we have outlined an overwhelming challenge facing human beings. We have a sense within us that things are just not right in our world - that hunger, violence, racism, sexism, war, and personal betrayals should be so prevalent. And this often leads us to feelings of hopelessness. The Bible tells us that the primary reason that things aren’t right in the world is sin - our inability to live the way God intended us to live.

And sin is very stubborn. We can’t not sin! If you made a New Year’s resolution to stop sinning, I seriously doubt you got past Jan. 1, for sin involves any thoughts, feelings, or actions which are contrary to God’s plan for our world. Jealousy and envy. Gossip. Hurtful, critical comments. Lying or deceiving. A lack of gratitude. Resentments. Failing to do good when we have the opportunity. Sin is falling short of God’s intentions for us. Missing the target. We all sin.
Complicating things is our tendency to deny, rationalize, and excuse our sins, or to get so used to them that we don’t even notice them anymore. That leaves us in a devastating predicament, estranged from God and from the people God loves, at odds with our Creator and his plans for our world, and helpless to do anything about it. We’re stuck.

If that were the end of the story, we’d be in trouble. But as Lou reminded us last week, “The beginning is not the end!” And, like the A-team, God has a rescue plan for humanity. It is found throughout the Bible, but one of the best summaries of the plan is found in the book of Romans, a book that is near to my heart. When I was a kid, my pastor usually preached his way through whole books of the Bible, verse by verse, Sunday after Sunday. I remember that we spent over a year going through Romans! Really! Sometimes we thought we’d never get out of Romans, but it was one of his favorite books of the Bible.

The first few chapters of Romans outline the depth of the problem of sin. Chapter 4 talks about the importance of faith. We’ll pick things up in chapter 5, where Paul lays out God’s divine rescue plan.

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, *through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. *And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that*
suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Paul doesn’t soft-pedal the human predicament here. In just a few verses he calls us “ungodly”- meaning that we are both finite and sinful. He calls us “weak”- unable to stop sinning or make ourselves right with God, and he calls us “enemies” of God. That’s pretty strong language. Maybe you’re not perfect, but you probably don’t think of yourself as God’s enemy! But every hurt we cause to another person, every failure on our part to help someone in need, every lie we tell which causes someone to have trouble
trusting others- each of these things is an act that opposes God’s plan for our world- God’s plan to restore his creation to his original intent- a place of peace and wholeness and health. So in the sense that our actions serve to thwart God’s plan, we are God’s enemies. That’s the bad news. And it’s very bad news, indeed.

But there is good news! And there are several key words in these verses that help us understand the good news. Look at verses 1 and 2.

*Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,* 2*through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand;* (Rom. 5:1,2a)

Let’s start with the word “justified.” It has to do with the problem of our sin and the punishment we deserve for the wrong we do. The classic definition of “justification” is “just as if I never sinned.” The slate has been wiped clean; God no longer holds our sins against us! Now we couldn’t do this on our own. As writer Frederick Buechner put it, “You can no more absolve yourself of your sin than sit in your own lap!” But, what we could not do for ourselves, God has done for us. God has forgiven our sins and made us clean. We are justified in God’s sight, and so we no longer need to worry about being punished for our sins. As Paul writes in the first verse of chapter 8 of Romans, “*There is therefore no condemnation for those who*
are in Christ Jesus.” (Romans 8:1) No condemnation! That is indeed Good News. But there’s more.

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God… (Rom. 5:1) Or, as Paul says in verse 10, “we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son.” Not only have our sins been forgiven, but we are no longer enemies of God. We are now at peace; God welcomes us back into fellowship with him as his friends.

It’s a little bit like something you may have seen in human relationships. Sometimes, even after a long period of estrangement, people are able to reconcile. It usually begins with one of the parties taking the first step and offering forgiveness. Only then can the healing begin and reconciliation occur. In the same way, God forgives us and invites us to be reconciled to him.


6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. 8 But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)
This is a wonderful description of God’s grace toward us. It’s rare for someone to die for another person, even if they really love that person. But God’s love for us was so great that he died for us while we were still sinners, his enemies! That is simply unfathomable. We can’t understand it. The only truly righteous man in the history of the world took our sin on himself and died in our place. It demonstrates God’s great love toward us. And that’s grace—unmerited favor. We did absolutely nothing to earn it. What could we possibly offer to God to entice him to give us these wonderful gifts? We don’t have anything that God needs! So it is all offered freely to us—justification and forgiveness, peace and reconciliation with God.

So, how do we respond? Well, when someone gives me a gift for Christmas or a birthday or any time during the year just because they think I’m a wonderful pastor… the correct response is to say thank you and accept the gift! And, that’s the way it is with God’s gift to us. We stop trying to earn the gift, trying to reform ourselves or make ourselves righteous in order to impress God. We stop trying to rationalize and excuse our sins. Instead, by faith we humbly accept the gift of God’s forgiveness and offer of reconciliation, trusting that God will make good on his promises to us.
Pastor Tim Keller sums up God’s plan to rescue humanity like this:
“You are more sinful than you ever dared believe; you’re more loved than
you ever dared hope.”

John Newton was born in 1725 in London, England, the son of a
sailor. At the age of eleven he first went to sea with his father, the first of
six such voyages he would make before his father retired. John then
signed on with a merchant ship, but was captured and pressed into service
in the British Navy. He hated the Navy and tried to desert, but was caught
and severely punished. He was transferred to the slave ship, Pegasus, but
was so disliked by the crew that they left him in West Africa with a slave
dealer. There, he drank heavily and consorted with African slaves.
Finally, he was rescued by a sea captain hired by his father to find him. On
the voyage back to England, the ship encountered a wild storm and almost
sank. Newton cried out to God during the storm as the ship filled with
water. The cargo in the hold shifted just enough to plug up the hole in the
hull, and the ship drifted to safety. Newton converted to the Christian faith
on the spot.

He wrote the hymn, “Amazing Grace,” as an autobiographical
account of his life and conversion. “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind
but now I see.” You may have never done the things that John Newton did,
but like Newton, we all rely on God’s grace for the forgiveness of our sins and the restoration of our relationship with God. At the Lord’s Supper, we remember God’s grace and express our gratitude for it. And I think God says, “Yes! I love it when a plan comes together!”