

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 5, 2012**

VERDICT BEFORE PERFORMANCE

Romans 3:9-12, 19-24

I want to tell you a bit about Mr. Garmong, my sixth grade teacher, today. Mr. Garmong wasn't just my sixth grade teacher. He was also the principal of our little elementary school in the hinterlands of northwestern Pennsylvania. And he was my first basketball coach. (In sixth grade, I was probably the best player on a team that didn't win a single game. It would have been different if my friend Roy Sanner and his family hadn't moved from Rockland Township to Seneca. But it is too late to change that now.)

About Mr. Garmong: I really liked him, in part, at least, because he liked me. What I remember most about sixth grade is that Mr. Garmong had one particular classroom policy I suspect would never be approved or permitted today. You have to remember that this was way back in the "dark ages" of the 1960s. It was a small school with about 180 students in grades 1-6. We didn't have Kindergarten. There were 30 students in my sixth grade class.

What Mr. Garmong did that would never fly in public education today is that he made seat assignments based on each student's academic performance and rank. The students with the best grades got to sit in the back of the classroom. The students with the worst grades got assigned to the front row. The student with the highest grades got to sit at the desk of highest honor in the back right corner of the classroom. The student with the distinction of having the worst grades had to sit in the front row in the left corner of the room. All 30 of us in the class were assigned desks based on how our grades compared with the rest of our classmates.

This means, of course, that everyone in our class knew exactly where everyone stood, grade-wise, in relation to everyone else. Everyone knew who the smartest kids were. Everyone knew who was numero uno. Everyone knew who the "not-smart" kids were. Everyone knew who the least smart boy or girl in the class was. You couldn't miss it. The inevitable result was a sense of embarrassment for the students who had to sit in the front of the room, and a kind of "I'm smarter than you are" pride on the part of the students who sat in the back of the room.

Mr. Garmong's seating chart was subject to change at the end of every grading period when report cards came out. Back then we had six grading periods during the school year instead of four. Report cards were sent home every six weeks instead of nine. Whenever report cards came out, your seat assignment could change – depending on how you did, and how your grades stacked up against everyone else's grades.

Just for the record: I sat in the same place the whole year – back row, far right corner, at the desk of highest honor. I *was* numero uno in my class for the whole year, and I was proud of it. I wanted everybody to know about it – my classmates and friends at Rockland Elementary, my parents, my family, and anybody else who would take notice. I wanted people to know that I was the smartest kid in the whole school.

I'm pretty sure Mr. Garmong had good intentions. I don't think he set out to embarrass or humiliate the not-so-good students in the class, or to give the best students (like me) big heads, heads puffed up with pride over being better than others. I think he did it as a way to reward achievement and to motivate us to do our best.

What it did for me, though – maybe I should say, what it did *to* me – is that it served to fuel my natural inclination to live a *performance-driven life*. It reinforced what I had already begun to believe, which is that my worth as a person was determined by my performance. By my achievements and accomplishments. I know I'm not the only person who has ever believed that.

But whether he knew it or not, Mr. Garmong's practice is the antithesis of the gospel. The gospel demonstrates the folly and frustration and futility of a performance-driven life.

Even after I came to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ when I was 11 years old (it was in the summer after sixth grade, in August 1967) –
 even after I placed my trust in Christ as Savior and Lord of my life and received the gift of salvation by grace and grace alone –
 even after I understood and embraced the gospel message that there is nothing I can ever do to merit or deserve God's forgiveness and acceptance, that it is all by grace –
 even after that defining moment when I opened my heart to the Lord Jesus in trusting faith and received forgiveness of my sins –
 even after the Holy Spirit came to take up residence in my life as a new believer and follower of Christ –
 even after all of this, I still thought I had to prove my value or worth or significance as a person through my performance.

I had been saved by grace alone through faith in Christ alone. I got that part. I knew that I had contributed exactly this much – zero, nothing – to my salvation. Nothing, that is, except for my sin and my need for a Savior. That's it. I understood that there was nothing I had done, and nothing I could ever do, to earn it. It was (and is) all by grace, which, as I love to say, comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. People like me. And you. (Cf. Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*)

I understood that much. But like lots of other Christians, more numerous than the millions of Americans celebrating gymnast Gabby Douglas' gold medal at the Olympics or watching the end of Michael Phelps' record-breaking Olympic career, I somehow thought that living my life as a Christian – living a God-honoring and Christ-exalting life – was dependent on *my* efforts. On *my performance*. I know I'm not alone in this.

Does living the Christian life require effort on our part? Yes.

Does it require self-discipline and the practice of certain spiritual disciplines through which we grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ and become more like Him (2 Peter 3:18; Romans 8:29)? Yes.

Does it involve a decision of our will to say “No” to ungodliness and self-indulgence, and “Yes” to a life that pleases God (Titus 2:12)? Yes, it does.

But I cannot do it on my own. It cannot be done in my own power. It cannot be done in your power. It is not just that it is *difficult*; it is *impossible*. Just as it is impossible for any of us – for anyone ever, except for Jesus – to be “declared righteous in (God’s) sight” by our most determined efforts to observe all the rules and regulations, all the duties and demands, of God’s law. That is the inevitable conclusion of Paul in Romans 3:20, after spending half of Romans 1 (1:18-32), all of Romans 2, and the first 20 verses of Romans 3 laying out the evidence and biblical testimony concerning the radical sinfulness and spiritual destitution of humankind.

Living a life that pleases God is impossible in our own power. My absolute best performance isn’t enough. And never will be. It cannot be done apart from the indwelling presence and life-changing power of the Holy Spirit at work in me. At work in you. At work in everyone who truly turns to God in repentance and faith, and trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ and His saving work on the cross for salvation and life.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in my life and yours is a gift. He is not a “reward” given to spiritual high-achievers on the basis of our performance. The power of the Holy Spirit at work in me and you is a gift, too. In fact, the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to us *before* we have done anything of spiritual value – except for believing or trusting in Christ and His saving work for us.

Even our believing, even our faith in Christ, is a gift. God Himself gives us the gift of saving faith, enabling us to believe the gospel and to receive the gift of salvation. As Paul makes clear here in Romans 3, God Himself gives us a righteousness not our own, a righteousness of life and character we can never achieve by our most devout efforts. God Himself declares us righteous in His sight – “not guilty” in the court of God’s justice – not on the basis of *our* performance, not on the basis of *our* righteousness, but on the basis of the righteousness of Jesus Christ and *His* perfect performance of the Father’s will in His life and death and resurrection from the dead. God Himself *justifies* us – He transfers our sin and guilt to His Son, and He transfers the righteousness of His Son to our account – by His free and sovereign grace. It is not about my performance or yours. If anything, it shows the utter inadequacy of our performance. It shows the utter futility of trying to win God’s favor by a performance-driven life.

I know it is time for me to wrap this up. Would it surprise you if I said there is much more I want to say about this, so we will come back to it next Sunday? It doesn’t surprise *me*!

Before I close, though, I want to share this with you, because the Lord has used it to give me a clearer and deeper understanding of how radical and how revolutionary the gospel is. You may hear it and say: “Well, of course. It is intuitively obvious to the most casual observer.” But it wasn’t so obvious to me.

While we were on vacation in South Carolina with the extended Smith family the last week of June, I read a little book by Tim Keller, the Presbyterian pastor in New York City who has written a number of books, including *The Reason for God*, *Prodigal God*, and *The Meaning of Marriage*. This book was on *The Art of Self-Forgetfulness*, or what he calls “gospel-humility.” That is, a quality of humility that is rooted in a proper understanding of the gospel.

He talks a bit about Madonna (the performer) and her self-admitted fear of being mediocre and her intense inner drive to prove that she is a “somebody.” In other words, Madonna lives a performance-driven life. Her sense of significance, her view of her own value as a person, comes from her performance and the recognition and applause she receives from others as a result. The *verdict* – the thing that gives her the sense of specialness she longs for – comes from her *performance*. It is dependent on what she does.

Keller notes that what Madonna is looking for – what we are all looking for – is an ultimate verdict that we are important and valuable. He writes: “We look for that ultimate verdict every day in all the situations and people around us. And that means that every single day, we are on trial. Every day, we put ourselves back in a courtroom... And everything we do is providing evidence for the prosecution or evidence for the defense.” But the message of the gospel, as Keller puts it, is that for those who trust in Christ for salvation, the trial is over and the ultimate verdict is in.

In the gospel, the way it usually works in the world is reversed. In the world – take the Olympics, for example – the performance leads to the verdict. The awarding of medals is based on the performance of the athletes, just as the seating arrangement in my sixth grade classroom was based on the performance of the students. In the gospel, though, the verdict comes before the performance. Here, the verdict refers to our justification, our being declared “not guilty” in God’s courtroom, our being accepted as righteous in God’s sight, not on the basis of our performance of righteous deeds, but really in spite of our performance. In spite of our failure to live God’s way.

As Keller says, “It is not the performance that leads to the verdict. In Christianity, the moment we believe, God says (of us): ‘This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.’ Or take Romans 8:1, which says: ‘There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.’ In Christianity, the moment we believe, God imputes Christ’s perfect performance to us as if it were our own, and adopts us into His family.... You see,” says Keller, “the verdict is in. And now I perform” – i.e., I live my life as a follower of Christ – “on the basis of the verdict.”

The verdict – forgiveness of my sins, acceptance by God and adoption into His family as a beloved son or daughter – precedes the performance. The verdict comes before the performance. It is not about trying to make myself acceptable to God. It is all about grace. It is all by grace.

You may have known this all your life. Like me, you may have had all the doctrine straight in your head, but you still persisted in trying to prove that you are a “somebody” by living a

performance-driven life. If you are still trying to do it, I urge you to give it up. If you are in Christ, the verdict is already in. And we know that He is ready to welcome anyone who comes to Him in trusting faith.

More next Sunday. For now, embrace the truth and rejoice that in Christ, the verdict comes before the performance. It is all by grace.

May this truth transform your life, to the glory of God. Lord, let it be so. Amen.