

Grace

April 4, 2018

“God’s Form 4868”

Text: Romans 3:21-26; Ephesians 2:8-10;

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I’ve noticed that there are certain times of the year where people tend to show a little more religious observance than others. They pray a little more, show up at church and generally are a little more aware of what their relationship with God should look like. One of them is Christmas time. A day that many give thanks to God, for the gift of our savior. Today, April 15<sup>th</sup> – tax day, is another one. Now I realize that since today is a Sunday; and tomorrow is Emancipation Day, a federal holiday in DC; we actually have until Tuesday, April 17<sup>th</sup> to file our taxes this year. I realize that the church isn’t packed to overflowing today, but there are probably a lot of people home, feverishly working on their returns – and praying. In the 90’s I spent 6 years working for a public accounting firm. You’d be amazed how many devoutly religious people I observed as they waited for their meeting with one of the tax partners. Lots of prayers as they prepared to find out what kind of financial hit they were going to take that year!

But most people recognize April 15<sup>th</sup> as a National Day of Stress. As a matter of fact,

- 56% of Americans find tax day to be a stressful time of the year.
- 18% consider it “very” stressful

And yet, despite that stress, studies show that one third of us have not filed our tax returns yet. Not me! I did mine yesterday.

Why is that? Why do we wait so long to complete a process that we consider stressful? One reason is that many of us, that owe money, want to hold on to that money until the last possible moment. But we also procrastinate because we don’t want to have to deal with the Internal Revenue Service, more commonly known as the IRS. The IRS is a powerful government organization, and I think that as an organization they have an elevated opinion of themselves. Even to the extent as having a bit of a God complex. Really! Consider the similarities.

1. They expect you to fear and obey them. However it is understood that the bible reference to the “fear of God” is more closely translated as awe or reverence. With the IRS, it’s fear!
2. You are encouraged to tithe to them. Of course the tithing they expect is a little different from God’s.
  - a. First off, they usually aren’t satisfied with the measly 10% that God asks for.
  - b. They REALLY don’t care if you are cheerful about it.

3. But on the bright side, they are willing to offer us grace. They just call it something different. They call it Form 4868, or an extension, and there are some serious differences between it and God's version of Grace.
  - a. You have to request it
  - b. You have to file for it by the tax deadline – this year, Tuesday April 17<sup>th</sup>
  - c. Oh and there's one minor item that they is sometimes overlooked. You see the caution section that I circled? It says, "Although you aren't required to make a payment of the tax estimate as due, Form 4868 doesn't extend the time to pay taxes. If you don't pay the amount due by the regular due date (this year April 17<sup>th</sup>), you'll owe interest. You may also be charged penalties."

God's 4868 is a little different. For one thing, we don't have to ask for it. He just gives it to us. And while many of us believe that we deserve a refund, or shouldn't even have to pay taxes, I think many of us can agree that we definitely do not deserve God's grace. And by we, I'm referring to mankind in general; and you and me specifically. Why don't we deserve it? Let's conduct a short audit. God created us so that he could have a relationship with us. He didn't burden us with a ton of requirements or restrictions to that relationship. There was just one little thing that he said not to do. Now my bible is 1800 pages, not counting index's, maps etc. That little part where Adam and Eve made their mistake is on page 5. It's in chapter three of the first book of the bible. But to be honest, I'm surprised it didn't happen even earlier. But it didn't stop there. Over and over again, throughout the Old Testament, God shows his people favor. They mess up, God gets angry, then he forgives, and it starts all over again. And if you think that the New Testament was better; look at what we did to Jesus after only three years of ministry!

And then we have the book of Romans, written by the Apostle Paul. From Romans 1:18 through 3:20, Paul explains how unworthy we are; how much we lack faith; how unrighteous we are. He finishes with

<sup>20</sup> Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. Romans 3:20 (NIV)

The Old Testament can be looked at as three separate sections: The Law, The Prophets (major & minor), and The Writings (Psalms, Proverbs etc.). The law is given to us through Moses from God and makes up the first five books of the bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Through following these laws, we thought we were supposed to learn how we could have a righteous relationship with Him. What does the word righteous mean? It simply means the relationship is right – there is nothing wrong about it. Now on God's side of the relationship that's true. He is right, pure, sinless. On our side of the relationship? Let's just say that we have a hard time balancing our books. Our sin disrupts and destroys our attempts to be right.

What the Old Testament really shows us is that we cannot possibly follow the law to the extent that we need in order to appear righteous to God. Even when we are trying so hard to be good, we often fail. Last month I went down with a group to Cast You Cares in Kensington to feed the homeless. It was cold; really cold. I found myself feeling sorry for myself at one point because I was so cold. Then I really got a chill. I realized that in a couple of hours I would return to my

nically heated house. The people I was serving would go from this cold, outdoor patio meal back to their even colder, outdoor bedrooms. At a time that I was supposed to be serving those less fortunate than me, I found I was immersing myself in self-pity.

So, back to Romans, after 64 verses of our shortcomings (to put it mildly), Paul delivers two small words to give us hope – But now. No, no, I meant small as in only three letters each. That’s better. Two small 3 letter words that have been referred to as a “hinge pin for the fate of humanity”, or a huge turning point.

But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. Romans 3:21

So the law was not getting us to righteousness, but now Paul is saying we are receiving it another way – and in such a way that the very same Old Testament prophesized about. The law and the prophets pointed towards the coming of Jesus through multiple prophecies.

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Romans 3:22-24

And there you have it. The answer to how do we go about securing that relationship with God. He gives it to us. Illustration: To have a right relationship with the government and be a good citizen, we need to fill out our 1040 form, and demonstrate what we owe. This is our attempt to justify ourselves. If we fill out the form correctly and pay what we owe, we have a right relationship and continue to walk free in our society. If we don’t pay our part, we wind up in jail. Unfortunately, when it comes to our relationship with God, there’s no form and no payment that will fully justify what we owe for years of sin. We become imprisoned by sin. This is why Jesus steps in to make the payment for us – not with cash or check but with a cross. He justifies. Because of Jesus we are justified or declared “Not Guilty” by God

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. Notice that Paul doesn’t say ...by faith in Jesus Christ, but rather **through faith** in Jesus Christ. He is indicating that the important point is that it is not about what we do, by our faith, but rather who our faith is in – Jesus.

Not because of what I've done  
But because of who you are

“Who Am I?” by Casting Crowns

“There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” Romans 3:22-23

Believe it or not, in some ways this is good news. Dig into that. All of us sin. All of us fall short of the glory of God. Think how much more difficult it would be if there were some that didn’t sin; that we didn’t ALL fall short. We would then be competing with each other to try and be better than the other.

So – “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.” Romans 3:23-24

We are justified. What does that mean? Well it’s more than forgiveness. It is being made right in God’s eye. The IRS can forgive interest and penalties for previous year’s tax returns. They can’t forgive penalties and interest for future tax returns. By justifying us, God has done just that. He has justified us for anything we did, are doing or will yet do.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Ephesians 2:8-1.

There is another notable difference from the IRS’s grace and God’s. After you file your 4868, you are not done; you haven’t been forgiven much less considered right in the eyes of the government. You still need to file your tax return. You still have to work at getting all of your tax information, finish filling out your tax return and mailing it in, or filing online. You also have to begin looking ahead. Making estimate payments; recording expenses and generally preparing for the next tax year. Your stress meter never gets a break. And not just with taxes. Work, school, family responsibilities – even recreation.

God not only wants us to understand that we cannot possibly earn righteousness, but he doesn’t want us to worry about it either.

<sup>28</sup> “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Matthew 11:28

Jesus tells us to come to him when we are stressed out. He is there to take our burdens from us, no matter where we are.

There is no list that we have to complete for God’s grace. In fact there is no list that we **can** complete for righteousness. That is the whole point. I don’t come to church every Sunday because I have to. I go to praise and worship Him, and thank Him for everything he gives me. My Friday morning men’s group isn’t mandatory. I don’t get any bonus points. I go to fellowship, and learn more of what God has planned for me by studying scripture. The monthly Recovery Café is not a way for me to showcase my activities to God, or to people. It was created and I go because there is a need. A need to bring joy to people that are struggling and maybe to get the chance to introduce people to Jesus.

But I also don’t check off every item on the back of the connection card every week – to prove myself.

## Professor Takes Students' Tests for Them

In the spring of 2002, Denise Banderman left work early so she could have some uninterrupted study time before her final exam in the Youth Ministry class at Hannibal-LaGrange College in Missouri. When she got to class, everybody was doing their last-minute studying. Finally it was time to take the test. "Leave them face down on the desk until everyone has one, and I'll tell you to start," the professor, Dr. Tom Hufty, instructed.

I want to use Denise's words for what happened next. "When we turned them over, to my astonishment every answer on the test was filled in. My name was even written on the exam in red ink. The bottom of the last page said: "This is the end of the exam. All the answers on your test are correct. You will receive an A on the final exam. The reason you passed the test is because the creator of the test took it for you. All the work you did in preparation for this test did not help you get the A. You have just experienced grace.""

Then he said, "Some things you learn from lectures, some things you learn from research, but some things you can only learn from experience. You've just experienced grace. One hundred years from now, if you know Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, your name will be written down in a book, and you will have had nothing to do with writing it there. That will be the ultimate grace experience."

*Denise Banderman, Hannibal, Missouri*

I'll hazard a guess here that there were students in that class that were thrilled to get the "A" that was given. There was probably a student or two that got annoyed because they had studied so hard and now they had the same grade as everybody. Grace is like that.