

# For People Like Us

By  
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From the Pulpit of  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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## **Psalm 18:28-33**

It is you who light my lamp; the Lord, my God, lights up my darkness. By you I can outrun a troop, and by my God I can leap over a wall. This God—his way is perfect; the promise of the Lord proves true; he is a shield for all who take refuge in him. For who is God except the Lord? And who is a rock besides our God? The God who has girded me with strength and made my way safe. He made my feet like the feet of a deer and set me secure on the heights.

## **Romans 3:21-26**

But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to demonstrate at the present time his

own righteousness, so that he is righteous and he justifies the one who has the faith in Jesus.

As far as I know, it's the only time that I was ever called a heretic. It occurred at Church on the Mall, the Presbyterian congregation that closed on Valentine's Day after 60 years of faithful witness at the Plymouth Meeting Mall. In early May of 2003, I wasn't there for worship, but to meet with the Presbytery's Committee on Ministry. I had agreed to become pastor of the Doylestown Church, and that committee examined all new ministers to the Presbytery.

As part of that conversation, I shared my statement of faith describing how, after the great flood of Noah's time, God tried a number of different ways to stay in relationship with human beings—a covenant with Abraham and release from slavery, the law and land, the leadership of judges, kings, and prophets, sending the people into exile and bringing them back. "In each instance," I wrote, "God's gracious persistence sought only human faithfulness in response, yet humankind fell short." Only then did God initiate a new covenant through Jesus of Nazareth.

After reading my statement to the group, there were some random questions about a point or two, until a retired college professor spoke. He referenced my sequence of steps God had taken before sending Jesus and said something like, "Are you saying that God didn't know all of those other attempts would fail?" "I wouldn't say that," I replied. "Maybe it was a hope against hope," I replied. "You know that's heretical," he continued. "I don't view it that way," I replied, "but certainly you are free to disagree with me." "No, it's heretical," he continued. "I like it, but it's still heretical." With that word, the exam ended, and I was approved for the move.

Perhaps I would have done better had I referenced today's second reading. In it, Paul was making his argument for why God had sent Jesus, too. Just

prior to our passage, the Apostle had talked about how Jews had tried to stay in right relationship with God by keeping the law; the commandments given to Moses at Sinai. Repeatedly, though, human beings fell short. “But now,” Paul wrote, “apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

Those words articulate an essential aspect of our tradition; namely, that our salvation comes through faith in Jesus. That we are justified—made right with God—not by our deeds, but God’s gift of Jesus. For since we are frail human beings, God sent Jesus to ensure that we could stay in relationship forever. Another way of describing it is to say that God is perfect. We are not.

Despite that reality, the push for perfectionism is all around us. It can be the expectation of a demanding boss or the pressure we put on ourselves to seek a perfect SAT score, a perfect marriage, or a perfect lawn. Such expectations can be placed upon others, too—our children or parents, physicians or financial advisors, judges or law enforcement. The hopes for perfectionism are limitless but ultimately unattainable, for while we and others can grow and there is value in striving to improve, the fact remains that as humans we often fall short of the ideal.

There is a story that came to me as true of a church a number of years ago that was adapting to computer technology. To save time, a template was created for funeral bulletins. The officiant would select hymns and scripture fitting for the deceased, of course, but many of the details

remained the same. The staff person preparing the bulletin also chose to use the “Find and Replace” feature of their word processing program, swapping the name from the last service with the newly deceased. It went well, too, until the funeral, when the gathered mourners came to the moment of reciting the Apostles’ Creed. In one voice, they boldly affirmed their faith in “Jesus Christ, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Edna.” (citation lost)

Our first lesson points to human imperfection in a Psalm written by David. The young man had defeated Goliath in a famous one-on-one showdown. He had been brought into the palace because David also had the ability to play a musical instrument in a way that soothed King Saul’s spirit. Yet when Saul saw the people’s affection for David, the king turned on the young man. The notes above Psalm 18 in your pew Bible note that it was composed just after David survived a threat by Saul and other enemies. If you read the entire Psalm, you will hear frequent references to adversaries and war. In our verses, David praises God in saying, “By you, I can outrun a troop.” The bulk of our passage, though, focuses on the uniqueness of the Creator.

“This God,” David says, “his way is perfect; the promise of the LORD proves true.” Later, he says, “For who is God except the LORD? And who is a rock besides our God?” By implication, the answer is “no one. A beloved hymn concurs by saying of the Almighty: “Only thou art holy; there is none beside then, perfect in power, in love, and purity.” Which again means we are not.

David himself would reveal the truth of his prose. Years later, after he becomes king, David has an affair with Bathsheba and orchestrates the battlefield death of her husband. While he does repent and seek God’s

mercy later, in that moment, he took his part in the endless Biblical litany of imperfect human beings that somehow still furthered God's purpose.

Abraham was chosen by God for an enduring covenant, yet twice, when fearful that foreign kings would kill him and take Sarah as their wife, he presented her as his sister. Rebekah deceived her husband, Isaac, so that the blessing would skip the firstborn and go to Jacob, who became Israel. Moses was hiding from authorities after having killed an Egyptian when God spoke from the burning bush and sent him to Pharaoh. Naomi schemed to ensure that her former daughter-in-law got the attention of Boaz, leading Ruth to become the ancestor of David. Peter denied even knowing his teacher, yet was chosen as the rock upon which the church was built. A different Saul was a fervent persecutor of Christians until he was transformed and became the first great missionary. Throughout the pages of Scripture are the accounts of women and men and children who did amazingly faithful things, yet not one of them was perfect. People like us.

I view that truth as good news, revealing all those who have gone before were imperfect, too. Given that shared attribute, I wonder why we humans—and I include myself in that number—still have times of struggling with perfectionism both for ourselves and others?

A favorite sports columnist, Jason Gay, writes for The Wall Street Journal. A few weeks ago, he had an article entitled "Who Will Yell at the Robot Umpire?" The column was about the "Automated Ball-Strike Challenge System" introduced this year to Major League Baseball. After years of testing in the minors, ABS is now part of every Major League game. There is still a human umpire to call the balls and strikes, but if the batter or catcher or pitcher disagrees with a call, it can be challenged by video

review. Each team gets two challenges per game. If the call is upheld, the challenge is lost. If overturned, the team retains that challenge for use later.

In his article, Gay argues that the ABS system will lead to the end of human beings calling balls and strikes. “If the plate umpire goes,” he says, “with it goes one of baseball’s most entertaining/maddening presences—a puff-chested judge and jury, a baked-in villain, an essential part of the game’s pacing and flow. How much baseball culture revolves around the home plate ump? A lot! Nobody’s screaming at a digital umpire to go to the optometrist.

“One of the most pernicious side effects of video-review challenge culture is its effect on school and youth sports. At the highest level, we have reinforced the idea that every call is important, or worse, that the standard should be 100% accuracy, when not even the robots themselves are 100% accurate.” As an aside, I checked online and saw that human umpires had been right 93.5% of the time this year.

“The purpose of perfection,” Gay continues, “flies in the face of a critical lesson sports should teach. Which is: In competition, stuff happens. Sometimes people get it right, and sometimes people get it wrong, but it usually evens out. Learning to accept this rhythm is a critical part of being an adult...I know what you are thinking: What’s the big deal? Almost every major sport has electronic reviews. Why worry about the occasional clarification from a robot umpire? Tennis moved on from line judges, and the planet did not stop. I’m probably not even going to notice ABS after a few months.

“That may be true. Still, in our endless chase of machine refinement, I think we’re missing the value of human irregularity. This is something that

gets lost in the conversation about AI and creativity—there's little doubt that AI can capably produce content, but it also introduces a sameness, a homogeneity in which nothing is too good or too bad. In outsourcing the human, it strips out the soul that connects the audience. I'm not saying there's virtue in an umpire being wrong," Gay concludes. "I'm just saying perfection is overrated." (Gay, Jason "Who Will Yet at the Robot Umpires?" The Wall Street Journal, March 26, 2026).

The sending of Jesus suggests to me that God would agree.