

How to Win at Monopoly without Actually Playing

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The title of this sermon is “How to Win at Monopoly without Actually Playing.” So it’s one of those sermons that has a lot of *real life* application.

Everyone loves a winner, right? We throw parades for winners; we wear our Seattle Seahawks 2014 Super Bowl winner tee-shirts, although they may be kinda ragged; we put the winners on our shoulders and sing “Hail, the Conquering Heroes.”

And the only thing better than *celebrating* a winner is actually *being* a winner yourself!

Take Monopoly, for example. We *love* Monopoly, with the little Scotty dog and the little hat. We love Monopoly when we win.

But honestly, Monopoly is a terrible game. It’s the kind of game that has what’s called a “positive feedback loop,” namely, once a person starts to get ahead, it’s easier for them to become stronger and stronger, while the other players get weaker and weaker. There are hardly any “come from behind victories” in Monopoly. One person gains wealth faster and faster while grinding other players into bankruptcy, one by one.

Like I said, Monopoly is a terrible game. *Unless you’re winning!* Then there’s no better game! You get to watch the other players hand over all their money; then they have to sit there for two more hours watching you win!

One of the best parts of winning are the bragging rights. “Honey, you go ahead and go into the store, while I look for a place to park. Or should I say a *Park Place*.”

Switch to Palestine, in the 1st century. In their view of God’s plan, the Jews felt like winners, whether they were the traditional Jews who hadn’t accepted Jesus as the Messiah, or the Jewish Christians, who had. It was as if Israel wore God’s wedding ring—they were the *only* people God had chosen. And they were the *only* people who had received the Law. I once worked with a Jewish woman who told me, “We have a saying: ‘Even if God had not given us the Promised Land, even if He had only given us Torah, it would have been enough.’”

With Paul’s letter to the Romans we are still in an early stage of formation of the church’s talk about God. only in the mid 50s—about ten years before Mark’s gospel, which was the first gospel to be written. In the book of Romans we are at a spot where Paul must prove one of the primary pillars of what he calls “the gospel,” namely, that people are *justified by faith alone*. That no one wins with by skill or by virtue or by even by obedience.

Justified by faith alone. So we have to understand what is meant by “justified” in the Bible. It doesn’t mean what we usually mean when we use the word “justified,” as in “I was *justified* in calling my boss a tyrant

because he calls his staff total losers. It means that I'm acting "justly." It's what we mean when we say that "justice has been done."

But in the Bible, justification means to be right *with God*, that he and I are on speaking terms, that "we're good." In the Bible, justification and righteousness are always terms about relationships, namely, our relationship with God, not about how much we have stayed faithful to a set of laws or "done justice."

So Paul's challenge is to prove that people are justified by faith alone, and not by obedience to the Law.

The broader question—and the one more directly relevant to us—is there another way to God besides through Jesus? Is there a way to *earn* the right to be a winner? Through virtue perhaps? Or mysticism? Or at least good intentions? Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that when God calls a person, he bids that person to come and die. But isn't there a way around that? Can't we enjoy just a little bit of that feeling... that *wonderful* feeling, of being a winner?

It's not like the Jews thought you could *earn* your salvation; they just thought that obeying God made you just more of a *winner*. And that *God likes winners*.

So, to refute this, Paul he brings into the discussion the heavy hitter of the Jewish tradition, the greatest example of the devout Jew, the one to whom all Jewish thinkers turn when they think about the essence of their religion, when they ask about how to get right with God. He brings out Abraham.

"What then are we to say was gained by Abraham...? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about...." In other words, if Abraham is a winner in God's sight, if it is his obedience, his character, his virtue, his care for the disadvantaged, his church attendance—if it is the fact that he is *basically a good person--then* he has something to boast about. He can boast that he found another way, a sort of "Northwest Passage" that can lead to God apart from Christ and the crisis that God brings and which Christ resolves.

And make no mistake about it, *God brings crisis*. And he brings it in the form of the Law.

The leaders of the Reformation named three uses of the Law and it's the first use of the Law that is pertinent to us today: the Law as a mirror. Namely, that the Law can act like a mirror just after you've gotten out of bed in the morning. And you look at yourself and you say, "Ack!"

So when I look in the Mirror of "Have no gods before me," or the Mirror of "Love your neighbor as yourself," or the Mirror of "Do not murder, or covet or lie...", it's the *Law* that shows me how awful I look. *That's* the crisis that God brings.

And don't think this is just *Paul* talking. When the Rich Young Ruler asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus eventually says, "Come, follow me," but first he says, "If you want to enter life, keep the commandments" (Mt 19:17). So Jesus doesn't mind upholding the Law as a means of crisis. In another passage he says, "Don't think I've come to abolish the Law. It's not going away, friends" (Mt 5:17-18).

As Paul says in the third chapter of Romans, "through the law we become conscious of our sin" (R 3:20). So, you might suggest, why not do away with the law? Then we wouldn't be conscious of sin! So much better for our self-esteem! (And Paul deals with this very argument in chapter 7 of Romans.) But getting

rid of the law is like getting rid of the mirror. You'll still look the same in the morning--you just won't *know it*. But everyone *else* will know it.

So in comes Abraham, the one who is so obedient that he might *possibly avoid* the crisis. He might look terrific first thing in the morning. And the Jews pointed to the incident in Abraham's life—an incident we might find rather repugnant—where God asks Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. And Abraham just about does it, until an angel tells him to stop. But he is ready to obey God without limit. And a few chapters earlier Abraham obeys God's directive to be circumcised. At 100 years old. He is ready to obey God without limit.

It's a reference to Genesis 15:6, where Abraham has complained to God that he has no son, and that Eliezer of Damascus—who's not even *related* to him--will be inheriting all his money, and God replies that Abraham's descendants will be more numerous than the stars in the sky. And Abraham *believes* him.

So for the traditional Jews and for the Jewish Christians, these stories likely blended into an overall narrative about Abraham the Winner, the most Devout and Obedient Jew of all time. All were mixed together: the story of his descendants being more numerous than the stars, in Genesis 15; the story of his circumcision, in Genesis 17; and the story of his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, in Genesis 22. His obedience is a powerful argument. The writer of the book of I Maccabees has this to say about Abraham: "Was not Abraham found faithful when tested, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness?" (I Macc 2:52). Abraham was found faithful when God tested him. He passed the test. *He was a winner.*

"But wait just a minute," Paul argues. Was it really his *obedience* that was reckoned as righteousness? After all, the verse saying that he declared righteous comes from Genesis 15, the story of his descendants being like stars in the sky. Abraham complains about Eliezer of Damascus, God makes the "stars in the sky" promise, and Abraham *believes* God. So it's not his *obedience* that is reckoned as righteousness; it's his *belief*. His *obedience*—with circumcision and with offering Isaac—comes *later*. So, in terms of being right with God, Abraham has *nothing* to boast about. Abraham is *not* such a winner. There is no Northwest Passage around Christ. Or around the death of Christ. Or around our participation in that death. The Law is not a way to stay in God's good stead, because the promise to Abraham came through the righteousness of *faith*.

One more point from Romans 4. Paul writes, "...to one who without works trusts him *who justifies the ungodly*, such faith is reckoned as righteousness" (R 4:5). Listen again: "...trusts him [that is, trusts God]—who *justifies the ungodly*." Paul just sneaks this phrase into his letter, but it would have caught the attention of any Jew. God *justifies the ungodly*? How can that be? How can God be in a right relationship with the ungodly? That's like in Monopoly someone stealing \$500 from the bank, and then the judge says, "I find you guilty of taking \$500 from the bank. Here's another \$500."

How can God do this? It's totally counter-intuitive. It's the opposite of a lot of the Old Testament. But it's in line with the end of our passage, where Paul writes that God "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (R 4:17). In other words, God delights in the counter-intuitive without ever ceasing to be the holy God. Abraham, at 100, has a child with his wife Sarah, who is 90. Doctors do not recommend 90 year-old women to become pregnant. It is life to the dead, or to the "as good as dead." It's the reverse of the question of Nicodemus, who asks, "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" Namely, "How can anyone have a child at age 90?" Both are counter-intuitive. And

Jesus responds, “everyone who believes in the Son may not perish—[by the law or by any other means]—but may have eternal life.”

Jesus and Paul speak in one voice: Abraham, Nicodemus, you, and I—have eternal life not by winning, but only by believing.

So back to the title of this sermon—how to win at Monopoly without actually playing. There’s only one way I know of, namely, for someone to *declare* you a winner. For the referee to raise your hand in the boxing ring even though you haven’t laid a glove on your opponent.

It is belief that resolves the crisis that the Law brings. It is belief that makes it unnecessary for us to be winners. It is belief that God reckons as righteousness.

And in *this* time of threat, and of anxiety around our physical presence, and even of death, we would do well to remember the words of the Psalmist: “Surely, Lord, you bless the righteous; you surround them with your favor as with a shield” (Ps 5:12).