

ROMANS - FAITH IMPOSTER SYNDROME  
A SERMON BASED ON ROMANS 3:21-31  
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH  
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO  
SUNDAY, JULY 14, 2019  
10 a.m.

David Dunning is a professor of psychology at Cornell University.

He is one of the two for whom the Dunning-Kruger effect is named.

I've referred to it before.

Basically, it identifies a cognitive bias  
in which people assess their cognitive ability  
as being greater than it actually is.

Basically, it is part of the human condition for you  
to think you are better, smarter,  
or more competent than you actually are.

In an article in the Gallup Business Journal<sup>1</sup>

Dunning makes the case that it is almost impossible  
to judge your own competence.

There is a strong gap in people's perceptions of their abilities  
and reality.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/102319/can-evaluate-your-own-abilities.aspx>

He says there are a few reasons for this.

He says we tend to spin feedback we get from the outside world.

We claim credit for our successes.

We blame failures elsewhere.

Second, what people say to your face

is not what they say behind your back

so you aren't getting a true picture there either.

Third, he says when you are incompetent,

you don't even have the information

to know that you are incompetent.

In other words, you don't even know what you don't know.

He says that in North American culture in particular,

we have a strong bias toward overconfidence.

In the article, the interviewer asks Dunning if being confident,

or even over-confident

is actually a bad thing.

She mentions studies that cancer patients

entering into treatment with confidence,

show better results.

Dunning wisely responds that it depends on context.

It depends where and to what the overconfidence is directed.

So he says, going into treatment with over confidence can be helpful.

It gives you the energy and momentum to get over a huge hill.

However, in keeping with the medical examples

in another context,

being over-confident that a lump is nothing,

and not getting it checked,

that is an example where over-confidence

and not recognizing you don't know what you don't know,

can be not only unhelpful but actually harmful.

There are areas in life where it is okay to be over confident and wrong,

but there are areas where over-confidence

can get you into trouble.

He says, “I wouldn’t want to be an overconfident airplane pilot.

I wouldn’t want to be a doctor who doesn’t know  
when he or she has to call in a specialist.”

He was asked, ‘How can you figure out what you can’t figure out?’

He answered,

“One of the pet phrases I have is

"The road to self-insight runs through other people."

Other people can often give us invaluable feedback

that can really correct an illusion that we're suffering from.

He shares, “One of my favourite,

but most chilling,

findings is from a study that surveyed surgical residents.

They were asked about their surgical skills,

and then they were given the standardized board exam.

The residents' views of their skills didn't predict at all

how well they did on the exam.

But the impressions of their peers and their supervisors

strongly predicted how well they did.

Thus, there are times

when what other people think of you

can be an invaluable source of what you need to work on

and what you're already good at.”

Dunning’s interview is for a business publication.

He speaks about medicine and business and psychology

What he doesn’t speak of is faith.

But it is easy to import the principle of thinking

we are doing better than we actually are when it comes to faith.

It is easy to import to faith

that perhaps we don’t know, what we don’t know.

Here too, in the life of faith, the road to spiritual insight

also runs through other people.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s ‘Life Together’

is a book that describes what it means to be a Christian community.

His last chapter is entitled confession and communion.

He begins the chapter with a verse from the Bible’s book of James 5:16

‘Confess your faults to one another.’

Bonhoeffer says,

‘He who is alone with his sin, is utterly alone.’

He goes on to explain that with confession,

with honesty and truth,

others would no longer see you as only the mask you wear,

the facade you show,

with honesty and truth you could be really known.

It is in that place of being really known,

in the acceptance and forgiveness of true

Christ-like community,

you could finally experience

and so believe that God loves the real you,

and not the made-up, well-presented you.

But one of the temptations we have

when we hear someone we love confess to us,

what they did,

or said, or thought, or what they didn’t do,

is deny the seriousness of it.

Or justify it for them.

Or let them off the hook.

We say things like,

“Of course you were right to let loose with your rage,  
look how you were provoked.”

“They had it coming.”

or “You are only human,

no one could blame you for doing what you did.”

or “Well, okay, maybe you did that thing, and that wasn’t very nice,  
but look at all the good things you do.”

But when we do this, for others, for ourselves,

when we deny the seriousness of our soul’s true condition,  
we will remain captive.

We won’t have the truth setting us free.

It’s just a lump.

It’s probably nothing.

In our heads we can think we are doing

better than we are in the life of faith.

I'm not perfect,

but I'm good, better than most.

Because look, I'm working hard.

Nice family pictures on the mantle,

pay my bills, mostly on time,

lent my neighbour the lawnmower,

held back what I really think

of my friend's new haircut,

and made it to church on a nice summer's day.

I'm good at an above average level.

So in this area of our lives, in the life of faith,

Here too, "The road to self-insight runs through other people."

Here too we need someone to speak to us.

who is actually competent in the life of faith.

We need someone to speak to us

who actually met truth and righteousness in Jesus Christ.

Someone who went through the journey and transformation

of thinking himself competent and righteous

and then saw himself through another's eyes,



through God's eyes,  
and so therefore knows what is needed  
for competence in faith.

It is why we listen to the wisdom of Paul.

We listen to the wisdom of Scriptures Paul shares  
more ancient than even Paul himself  
as he quotes it for us in the church.

He lays it out.

As it is written:

'There is no one righteous, not even one;

there is no one who understands;

there is no one who seeks God.

All have turned away,

they have together become worthless;

there is no one who does good,

not even one.'

There is no fear of God before their eyes.'

So do we just say to each other - oh, it's not that bad.

You are only human.

Do we just diminish the sin, dismiss it, avoid it?

Do we risk over-confidence before sin.

Do we discount the lumps on our souls?

Say, it's not a big deal?

Or is there a huge risk in doing so?

I would rather a raw, competent, truth from my doctor,

then the lie of incompetence.

It's not that bad.

Romans is a powerful book of the Bible.

In some respects, it is like a handbook to the Christian faith.

It's a tougher read as Paul lays out some theological fundamentals.

But most of your 'you need to know's', are in here.

One of the things you need to know,

one of the core beliefs of the Christian faith,

is the recognition, realization, admission and acceptance

that you sin, that you, when standing in the light of God's perfect

righteousness and goodness,  
are not without the stain of sin.

A classic definition of sin from St. Augustine states  
that sin is a word, deed, or desire  
in opposition to the eternal law of God."

The Bible presents some metaphorical ways to understand sin.

One is to cross the line, to trespass, to go to a place you should not go.

To be in a place you should not be,  
to violate something that is not yours.

You hear this in versions of the Lord's Prayer.

Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those  
who have trespassed against us.

It speaks to those times you have crossed the line.

A line God has drawn.

Another Biblical metaphor is missing the mark.

If you think of perfect righteousness as the bullseye on a dartboard,

our attempts to do good, be good, often miss the mark,

because our motivations are clouded, or selfish,

because even in our effort to do right, we harm others,  
because sometimes doing nothing is also the wrong thing,  
we miss the mark.

If you go back and read Romans chapter one  
the apostle Paul comes at you like he's leading an intervention.

We are told about the condition of our soul with brute force.

Paul lacks any gentleness.

He is the oncologist with horrible bedside manner  
pointing to the tumours on the CAT scan.

Here, here, here, here, here and here.

So Paul names our condition.

'They exchanged the truth of God for a lie,  
and worshipped and served created things,  
rather than the Creator.

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile  
to retain the knowledge of God,  
so God gave them over to a depraved mind,  
so that they do what ought not to be done.

They have become filled

with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity.

They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice.

They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent,

arrogant and boastful;

they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents;

they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.

Although they know God's righteous decree

that those who do such things deserve death,

they not only continue to do these very things

but also approve of those who practice them.

And in case you are caught up thinking

just how terribly bad 'those' people must be,

wondering who the 'they' are that Paul is talking about,

in case you are thinking that you are one of the competent ones

one of the Christians who are getting it right,

Paul smashes that thinking to bits.

He says, you have no excuse,

you who pass judgement on someone else,  
for at whatever point you pass judgement,  
you are condemning yourself,  
because you who pass judgement,  
*do the same things.*

You - do the same things.

This is not something you came to hear today.

But the road to self-insight runs through other people.

So today it runs through our letter from Paul

from the parts of Scripture he quotes.

‘There is no one righteous, not even one.’

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.’

The truth of this self-insight is the beginning of our freedom.

It is the beginning of our competence in the life of faith.

There is no one righteous. Not even. Me.

God knows.

God already knows what you are really like. Now what?

In this passage of Romans we read today,

there is a completely stunning, brilliant,  
picture of the freedom and restoration God gives.  
God does not abandon us or leave us trapped in our sin.

Romans 3 gives a stunning, brilliant picture  
of the complete freedom God gives when we embrace the truth.  
We sin. We are sinners.  
Paul shows our complete freedom in God  
by making reference and comparison and analogy  
to all the societal systems of the day  
where a person might need to be given freedom.

Paul writes this,

“This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ  
to all who believe.

There is no difference,  
for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,  
and are justified freely by his grace  
through redemption that came by Jesus Christ.  
God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement,

through faith in his blood.

There are three comparisons or metaphors Paul uses

for release from sin,

for forgiveness from sin.

Justification.

Redemption.

The sacrifice of atonement.

Paul takes us first to the courtroom - justification, justice.

Justified by his grace. Crime paid for. Free to go.

Paul takes us to the market.

Redemption. Redeemed by Jesus Christ.

This is a reference to buying a slave to set them free.

Paid for and free to go.

To redeem something means to buy it back.

You can redeem your pawned items at the pawn shop.

Jesus is our redeemer. He redeems us.

He buys us back from our indenture to sin.



And Paul takes us to the temple

Sacrifice of atonement. Sin atoned for.

The scape goat. Escape goat.

The one free to go because of the sacrifice of the other.

By his grace in Jesus Christ,

God justifies, redeems and sacrifices for the sinner.

God sets the sinner free.

And for simply coming to God with the truth,

I have sinned and I sin.

I need forgiveness. I need grace.

in your confession, in the raw truth

you will see, God loves you anyway,

in every way,

in every sphere;

the courtroom, the market, the temple

everywhere, in all of life, free.

In the competence of knowing

we need to lean into God's grace,

there is forgiveness and healing.

With faith in Christ,

through Christ,

with Christ

you can be free, redeemed, renewed, rejuvenated,  
regenerated, born again, saved.

Don't be deceived.

In matters of faith, the road to self-insight runs through Scripture.

There is no one righteous. Not even one.

Not even you.

Not even me.

Truth is God knows.

Righteousness can not be had by your own hand.

It is a gift from God,

and comes through faith in Jesus Christ

to all who believe.

We need to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

Be truthful about what is in your soul.

You have sinned. You sin. You will sin.

And sin will trap and imprison you

if you think it's not that bad a condition

or that you are competent to deal with it on your own.

In God's grace, you can receive

the forgiveness and righteousness of Christ

in all dimensions of your life,

in the courtroom, the market, the temple.

Be justified

Be redeemed.

Be atoned for

in Christ.

God wants to give you your freedom.

Confess.

Accept his grace.

Receive forgiveness.

Let the truth Jesus Christ set you free.

Amen.