A Sermon to the People, preached on a Thursday in the Restored Basilica

Treading a fine line between different kinds of presumption

1. This is a psalm about God’s grace, and about our being justified by no merits whatever on our own part, but only by the mercy of the Lord our God, which forestalls anything we may do. It is a psalm to which the apostle’s teaching has called our attention in a special way, as the reading that preceded the psalm has made clear to us all. And this is the psalm which I, insignificant though I am, have undertaken to expound to you, dearest friends. So I must begin by commending my weakness to your prayers. As the apostle says, *May the right word be given me when I open my mouth* (Eph 6:19), so that I can speak in a way that will not be perilous for me, and will be salutary for you. The human mind dithers between opposite dangers, wavering between confession of its weakness and rash presumption, and for the most part it is tossed between these two and battered on either side, and whichever way it is driven there is a ruinous fall awaiting it. If it veers entirely to the side of its own weakness, it begins to think that God in his mercy forgives all sinners, provided only they believe that God sets them free, so that at the end his mercy is ready to ensure that no one among sinful believers shall perish. In other words, no one will be lost of those who promise themselves, “I can do anything, I can defile myself with any crimes or shameful deeds, I can sin as much as I like. God frees me in his mercy because I have believed in him.” Now if a person takes the view that no one in these circumstances will perish, he will be inclined by this evil notion to think he can sin with impunity. And then our just God, whose mercy and judgment are sung about in another psalm—and it is not mercy alone, mind you, but mercy and judgment—finds this person self-deceived by presumption and abusing the divine mercy to his own destruction, and then God must necessarily condemn.

An attitude like this brings a person crashing down. But then, suppose someone is terrified of that, and exalts himself in rash self-assurance, trusting in his own strength of character, and mentally resolving to fulfill all the righteous requirements of the law and to carry out all it enjoins without offending in any point whatever. If such persons think they can keep their lives under their own control and slip up nowhere, fall short nowhere, with never a wobble, never a blurring of vision, and if they claim the credit for themselves and their own strength of will, then even if they have carried out the whole program of righteous conduct as far as human eyes can discern, so that nothing in their lives can be faulted by other people, God nonetheless condemns their presumption and boastful pride.

What happens, then, if someone has thought to justify himself, and takes his stand on his own virtue? He falls. But if anyone considers himself and thinks about his weakness, and presumes on God’s mercy, neglecting to purify his life from sin and sinking into a whirlpool of iniquity, he too falls. Presuming on one’s righteousness is the danger on the right hand; thinking that one’s sins will go unpunished is the danger on the left. We need to listen to God’s voice warning us, *Turn not aside, to right hand or to left* (Prv 4:27). Do not presume on your virtue to get you into the kingdom; but do not presume on God’s mercy and go on sinning. The divine command calls you back from both: from trying to climb the steep bank on the one hand, and from sliding down on the other. If you scramble up to the first you will fall headlong; if you slip down the second you will drown. *Turn not aside, to the right hand or to the left,* scripture warns us. I will say it again so that you can all fix it in your minds in a brief formula: don’t presume on your virtue to win the kingdom, don’t presume on God’s mercy and think you can get away with sinning.

This psalm indicates the fine line

You will ask me, “What am I to do, then?” This psalm teaches us. Once we have read it through and discussed it, I think that with the help of the Lord’s mercy we shall see the road clearly, the road on which we may be walking already, or which we must take. Each of us must listen according to our own capacity and, as our conscience dictates, either bemoan our need for correction or rejoice that we have something that deserves approval. Any who find that they have gone astray must return to the road and walk on it; and any who find that they are on the road must go on walking until they arrive. Do not be stubborn if you are off the road, or dilatory if you are on it.

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1. Basilica Restituta, the most famous of the Carthaginian basilicas, also called Basilica Maior. In it were held the African Councils of 390 and 401. This sermon has been tentatively assigned to the winter of 412-413.
2. An indication that the reading had been from Romans 4, by Augustine’s choice, as appears from 2 below.
3. Cum vestra Caritate.
4. See Ps 100(101):1.
Abraham and faith: Paul’s teaching

2. The apostle Paul bore witness to the fact that this psalm deals with the grace that makes us Christians; that is why we arranged for this particular passage to be read to you. When the apostle was explaining about the righteousness that depends on faith, in opposition to those who boasted about a righteousness derived from works, he asked, What are we to say that Abraham obtained, he who was our father according to the flesh? If Abraham was justified by works, he has ground for pride, but not before God (Rom 4:1-2). May God keep that kind of pride far from us! Let us listen to a different injunction: Let anyone who boasts, boast of the Lord (1 Cor 1:31). Many people do boast about their works, and you will find plenty of pagans who are unwilling to become Christians because they think their upright lives are enough. “The important thing is to live a good life,” such a pagan will tell you. “What further command would Christ lay upon me? That I should live a good life? But I am doing that already, so why do I need Christ? I commit no homicide, no theft, no robbery; I do not covet anyone else’s property, or defile myself by adultery. Let anything that deserves rebuke be found in my way of life, and the one who rebukes me for it shall make me a Christian.” A person like this has ground for pride, but not before God.

Not so our father Abraham. This passage of scripture is meant to draw our attention to the difference. We confess that the holy patriarch was pleasing to God; this is what our faith affirms about him. So true is it that we can declare and be certain that he did have grounds for pride before God, and this is what the apostle tells us. It is quite certain, he says, and we know it for sure, that Abraham has grounds for pride before God. But if he had been justified by works, he would have had grounds for pride, but not before God. However, since we know he does have grounds for pride before God, it follows that he was not justified on the basis of works. So if Abraham was not justified by works, how was he justified? The apostle goes on to tell us how: What does scripture say? (that is, about how Abraham was justified). Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Rom 4:3; Gn 15:6). Abraham, then, was justified by faith.

Paul and James do not contradict each other: good works follow justification

3. Now when you hear this statement, that justification comes not from works, but by faith, remember the abyss of which I spoke earlier. You see that Abraham was justified not by what he did, but by his faith: all right then, so I can do whatever I like, because even though I have no good works to show, but simply believe in God, that is reckoned to me as righteousness? Anyone who has said this and has decided on it as a policy has already fallen in and sunk; anyone who is still considering it and hesitating is in mortal danger. But God’s scripture, truly understood, not only safeguards an endangered person, but even hauls up a drowned one from the deep.

My advice is, on the face of it, a contradiction of what the apostle says; what I have to say about Abraham is what we find in the letter of another apostle, who set out to correct people who had misunderstood Paul. James in his letter opposed those who would not act rightly but relied on faith alone; and so he reminded them of the good works of this same Abraham whose faith was commended by Paul. The two apostles are not contradicting each other. James dwells on an action performed by Abraham that we all know about: he offered his son to God as a sacrifice. That is a great work, but it proceeded from faith. I have nothing but praise for the superstructure of action, but I see the foundation of faith; I admire the good work as a fruit, but I recognize that it springs from the root of faith. If Abraham had done it without right faith it would have profited him nothing, however noble the work was. On the other hand, if Abraham had been so complacent in his faith that, on hearing God’s command to offer his son as a sacrificial victim, he had said to himself, “No, I won’t. But I believe that God will set me free, even if I ignore his orders,” his faith would have been a dead faith because it did not issue in right action, and it would have remained a barren, dried-up root that never produced fruit.

Apparent good works before faith are wide of the mark

4. What are we to make of this? That no good actions take precedence of faith, in the sense that no one can be said to have performed good works before believing? Yes, that’s right, because although people may claim to perform good works before faith, works that seem praiseworthy to onlookers, such works are vacuous. They look to me like someone running with great power and at high speed, but off course. This is why no one should reckon actions performed before belief as good; where there was no faith, there was no good action either. It is the intention that makes an action good, and the intention is directed by faith. You should not pay too much attention to what a person does, but consider where he is aiming as he does it, and whether he is directing his efforts toward the right harbor, like a skilled pilot. Imagine a very expert steersman who has lost his bearings. What is the use of keeping a firm hold on the jib, making fair speed, putting the vessel’s prow to the waves, and taking good care that she is not caught sideways onto their force? Such a pilot may be so competent that he can turn the ship whatever way he will, and turn her away from anything he wants to avoid; but if you ask him, “Where are you making for?” he replies, “I don’t know.” Or rather, he does not say, “I don’t know,” but “I am making for such-and-such a port,” when in fact he is speeding not into port but onto the rocks. The more handy and efficient he thinks he is in steering his ship, the more dangerous is his mastery of her, surely, since it just brings her more swiftly to
shipwreck. A swift athlete who is off course is just like him. Would it not be better and safer if the pilot were somewhat less skilled, so that he steered the vessel laboriously and with difficulty, and yet held her to a straight and proper course, and if the athlete were running more lazily and feebly, but keeping to the track, rather than running so impressively off it? The best thing of all is to keep to the right road and maintain a good pace on it; but we may have good hopes for someone who straggles along in the rear, limping a little perhaps, but not so badly as to lose the way altogether or just sit down. Such walkers do make progress, even though slowly, and we may be confident that they will reach the goal sooner or later.

But faith cannot be sterile: it works through love

5. Well now, brothers and sisters, Abraham was justified by faith, but if no good works preceded his justification, they certainly followed it. Is your faith sterile? No, of course not. You are not sterile yourself, and neither is your faith. If you believe something bad, you scorched the root of your faith in the fire of that bad belief. So make sure to hold fast to your faith with a mind to work. You may object, “But that is not what the apostle Paul tells us.” Oh, but it is. Paul speaks of faith that works by choosing to love (Gal 5:6). In another place he says, The fullness of the law is charity (Rom 13:10); and elsewhere, The whole law is summed up in one word, when scripture says, “You shall lovingly cherish your neighbor as yourself” (Gal 5:14). Can you really contend that Paul does not want good works from you, when he says, You shall not commit adultery. You shall not murder. You shall not covet. And if there is any further commandment, it is covered by this one word, “You shall lovingly cherish your neighbor as yourself.” Love of one’s neighbor prompts no evil. The fullness of the law is charity (Rom 13:9-10)? Does charity allow you to do anything harmful to a person whom you lovingly cherish? Perhaps, though, you refrain from doing harm, but do no good to your neighbor either. Does charity allow you to withhold from someone you lovingly cherish anything that it is in your power to give? Is it not charity that impels us to pray even for our enemies? Can charity leave a friend in the lurch, when it wishes well to an enemy?

If faith is devoid of the will to love,7 it will equally be devoid of good actions. But don’t spend too much time thinking about the works that proceed from faith:

[add hope and the will to love8 to your faith, and you will have no need to ask yourself what kind of works you should perform. This deliberate love9 cannot remain idle. After all, what is it in any one of us that prompts action, if not some kind of love?10 Show me even the basest love11 that does not prove itself in action. Shameful deeds, adulteries, villainies, murders, all kinds of lust—are they all the work of some sort of love?12 Purify this love, then, divert onto your garden the water that is going down the drain, let the current that drove you into the arms of the world be redirected to the world’s Maker. Do you want people to ask you, “Don’t you love anything, then?” Of course not. If you loved nothing you would be sluggish, dead, loathsome and unhappy. Love13 as much as you like, but take care what you love. Love of God and love of your neighbor are called charity; but love of the world, this passing world, is called greed or lust. Lust must be reined in, charity spurred on.

A good conscience and hope

Now when people perform good actions their charity endows them with the hope that proceeds from a good conscience; for it is a good conscience that gives rise to hope. As a bad conscience plunges a person into complete despair, so a good conscience fills us entirely with hope. Then there will be the three realities of which the apostle speaks: faith, hope and charity (1 Cor 13:13). In another place he mentions this triad again, but this time he substitutes a good conscience for hope. He refers to the finishing of the commandment (1 Tm 1:5). What does he mean by its being finished? He is thinking of the commandments being perfectly fulfilled, not done away with. We have two different ways of speaking about a thing being finished: we say, “The food is finished,” and in a different sense, “This tunic which I was weaving is finished.” Food is finished up and so exists no longer, but the tunic is finished by being brought to completion. Yet we use the word, “finished,” in both cases. So when Paul spoke about the commandment being finished he did not mean that the commandments were being abolished, but that they were being brought to perfection, accomplished, not abrogated.14 The commandment is “finished,” then, because of these three realities: the finishing of the commandment is single-hearted charity, and a good conscience, and unfeigned faith (1 Tm 1:5). The apostle substituted “a good

5. Augustine uses three different words for love in this section: dilectio, the love that is directed by choice, a cherishing love; caritas, charity; and amor, a general word for love which may have connotations of sensuality or lust, in some contexts.
6. Diliges.
7. Dilectione.
8. Dilectionem.
10. Amor.
11. Amorem.
13. Amant.
14. Consummatur, non consumantur.
conscience" for hope, because anyone whose conscience is clear does have hope. Those who suffer from a bad conscience, on the contrary, have estranged themselves from hope, and can look for nothing but damnation. If we are to hope for the kingdom we must have good consciences, and in order to have good consciences we must both believe and do good. Believing is the province of faith, good work that of charity. So in one text the apostle began from faith, saying, Faith, hope, and charity; but in the other text he made charity itself his starting-point: single-hearted charity, and a good conscience, and unfeigned faith. But we began just now with the middle term, conscience and hope. Yes, and rightly, because anyone who wants to have good hope needs to have a good conscience, and to have a good conscience we must both believe and work. So from this middle term, hope, we can work backward to the beginning, that is, to faith; and forward to the end, which is charity.

Paul himself gives the complementary teaching on “works”

6. How can the apostle assert that a person is justified by faith, independently of works, when in another place he speaks of faith that works by choosing to love (Gal 5:6)? It is not just a case of pitting the apostle James against Paul; we can pit Paul against himself, and challenge him like this: “On the one hand you seem to give us permission to sin with impunity by saying, Our argument is that a person is justified by faith, apart from any works (Rom 3:28); and on the other hand you speak of faith that works by choosing to love. How can I be free from anxiety on the basis of the first, having done no good works, while according to the second I do not seem to have either sound hope or even sound faith itself, if I have performed no good works in love? I am listening to you, apostle. You obviously want to urge upon me faith without works, but faith’s work is willéd love,15 and this willéd love cannot remain idle; it must refrain from doing evil and do all the good it can. What does love do? Turn away from evil, and do good (Ps 36:37:27). You extol faith apart from works, yet in another place you declare, If I have such perfect faith that I can move mountains, but have no love, it profits me nothing (1 Cor 13:2). So if faith profits us nothing without charity, and charity must always be at work wherever it is found, then faith itself works by choosing to love. How then is it possible for anyone to be justified by faith apart from works?”

The apostle has an answer for us. “I told you this, stupid, to save you from the mistake of relying on your achievements and thinking that you earned the grace of faith by your works. Put no reliance on works accomplished before faith. You know well that when faith came to you it found you a sinner, and although it is true that once faith was given it made you righteous, it was an ungodly person that faith found to transform into a righteous one.” When someone believes in him who justifies the impious, that faith is reckoned as justice to the believer—so says Paul (Rom 4:5). If the impious is justified, then the impious person is changed from being impious into being righteous, but in that case what good works can he or she have performed while still impious? An impious, ungodly person may boast about his good deeds, claiming, “I give alms to the poor, I rob no one, I do not covet anyone else’s wife, I kill nobody, I commit no fraud, I return promptly anything entrusted to me even though there were no witnesses.” All right, let the unbeliever say all this, but still I ask, is the speaker a godly person, or impious? “How can I be impious,” he or she will reply, “if I conduct myself like that?” In just the same way, I reply, as those of whom scripture says, They served creatures rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever (Rom 3:25). In what sense are you impious? It may be that on the basis of all these good works of yours you either hope for what is worth hoping for, but not from God, from whom you should hope for it; or else you hope for something unworthy, even though you hope for it from God, from whom you should be hoping for eternal life. On the strength of your good actions you have hoped for worldly advantage, and so you are impious. The reward of faith is not like that. Faith is a precious thing, but you have cheapened it. You are impious, therefore, and those works of yours are null and void. Though you employ all your muscle in good works, and appear to pilot your ship with expertise, you are rushing toward the rocks.

But suppose what you hope for is the true object of hope, life eternal, but you do not hope for it from the Lord God through Jesus Christ, through whom alone eternal life is given, but think to arrive at eternal life through the host of heaven, through the sun and the moon, through the powers of air and sea and earth and stars? What then? You are still impious. Believe in him who justifies the impious, so that those good works of yours may be good too. I should not even have called them “good,” as long as they do not spring from the root of faith. Think about it. Either you are hoping for temporal life from the eternal God, or you are hoping for eternal life from demons. Either way you are impious. Correct your faith, direct your faith, and set your course. If you have good strong feet, walk without fear, run, and stay on the road. The more strongly you run, the more easily you will arrive. Or perhaps you are slightly lame? At least do not leave the road; you may take longer, but you will get there. Only do not stand still, do not turn back, do not get sidetracked.

The grace of faith presupposes God’s forgiveness

7. In the light of this, who are to be judged blessed? Certainly not people in whom God has found no sin, because he has found it in all of us. All have sinned,
and are in need of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). Now, if sins are found in everyone, it follows that only those can be blessed whose sins have been forgiven. This is the point the apostle made by saying, Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. But to anyone who does some work (that is, anyone who takes his stand on works, pretending that the grace of faith was given to him on the strength of them) wages are given not as a free grace, but as something owed (Rom 4:3-4). And what does that mean, if not that the only recompense we have is called grace? And if it is grace, it is given gratis. Given gratis? How is that? It consists of a free gift. You have done nothing good, but forgiveness of your sins is granted to you. If your actions are scrutinized, they are all found to be bad. If God awarded you just retribution for those actions, he would certainly condemn you, for the wage due to sin is death. What is owing to evil deeds, except damnation? And what to good deeds? The kingdom of heaven. You were found in your evil deeds, so if you are awarded what is due to you, you are to be punished. But what happens? God does not mete out to you the punishment you deserve; he bestows on you the grace you do not deserve. He owed you retribution, he awards you forgiveness. So it is through being forgiven that you begin to live in faith: that faith gathers to itself hope and the decision to love and begins to express itself in good actions; but not even after that may you boast and preen yourself. Remember who planted you on the right road; remember how even with your strong, swift feet you were wandering off it; remember how even when you were sick and lying half-dead by the wayside you were lifted onto a mount and taken to the inn. To anyone who does some work, Paul tells us, wages are given not as a free grace, but as something owed (Rom 4:4). If you want to be excluded from the domain of grace, vaunt your own merits. But God sees what is in you, and knows what he owes to each.

But what about the person who does no work (Rom 4:5)? Think here of some godless sinner, who has no good works to show. What of him or her? What if such a person comes to believe in God who justifies the impious? People like that are impious because they accomplish nothing good; they may seem to do good things, but their actions cannot truly be called good, because performed without faith. But when someone believes in him who justifies the impious, that faith is reckoned as justice to the believer, as David too declares that person blessed whom God has accepted and endowed with righteousness, independently of any righteous actions (Rom 4:5-6). What righteousness is this? The righteousness of faith, preceded by no good works, but with good works as its consequence.

17. Dilectione.
18. See Lk 10:30-37.

Good will is needed for right understanding

8. You must pay careful attention to what I am saying, my friends, because otherwise you will hurl yourselves into that abyss I mentioned, assuming that you can sin with impunity. It won’t be my fault if you do, any more than it was the apostle’s fault when many people misunderstood him. They misunderstood on purpose, so that they would not need to produce any good work after justification. Do not be like those folk, my brothers and sisters. One of the psalms speaks about them (about all such people, that is, but expressing it in the singular): He refused to understand that he should act well (Ps 35:4(36:3)). Notice that it does not say, “He was unable to understand.” As for you, you must want to understand that you should act well. What you need to understand is perfectly clear, and well within your grasp. And what is this clear truth? That no one must boast of any good actions before faith, and no one must be lazy about performing good actions once faith has been given. So then, God grants forgiveness to all the ungodly, justifying them on the basis of faith.

Verses 1-2. Forgiveness and truth: the example of Nathanael

9. Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one to whom the Lord will impute no sin, and in whose mouth is no guile. Now we get to the beginning of the psalm, and so to the beginning of understanding. This comprehension, this understanding, teaches you that you must neither vaunt your merits nor presume that you can get away with sinning. The title of the psalm is, For David himself, for understanding, so this is a psalm that promotes understanding. The first stage of understanding is to recognize that you are a sinner. The second stage of understanding is that when, having received the gift of faith, you begin to do good by choosing to love, you attribute this not to your own powers but to the grace of God. Then there will be no guile in your heart, which means in your inward mouth, for you will not have one thing on your lips and something different in your thoughts. You will not be one of the Pharisees to whom the Lord said, You are like whitewashed tombs: outwardly you appear righteous to other people, but inwardly you are full of guile and sin (Mt 23:27). When people who are wicked pass themselves off as righteous, are they not full of guile? Nathanael was not like that; of him the Lord said, Look, there is a true Israelite, in whom there is no guile (Jn 1:47). But why was there no guile in Nathanael? When you were under the fig tree, I saw you, the Lord told him (Jn 1:48). He was under a fig tree, which symbolized being subject

19. Cum ex fide per dilectionem bene coeperis operari.
to the condition of our flesh. If he was subject to the fleshly condition, being held prisoner by the impiety we all inherit by human descent, then he was under that fig tree another psalm groans about: *Lo, I was conceived in iniquity* (Ps 50:7(5:5)). But he who saw Nathanael was he who had come to bring grace. What does “saw him” mean? He had mercy on him. So when he commends a man free from guilt, what he is commending is his own grace in that man. When you were under the fig tree, I saw you. What is special about saying, I saw you? Nothing, unless you understand it in a particular sense here, because otherwise what is remarkable about seeing anyone under a fig tree? If Christ had not espied the human race under that fig tree, we should either have withered away completely, or else only leaves would have been found on us, but no fruit, as with the Pharisees in whom there was plenty of guile, for they justified themselves by their words, but were wicked in their deeds. It was just such a tree that Christ saw, and cursed; and it withered. “All I can see is leaves,” he said; that is, words only, and no fruit. “Let it wither,” he said, “so that it may not even produce leaves.” Why did he strip them even of words? It is a withered tree that cannot bring forth even leaves. The Jews were like that; the Pharisees were that tree; they produced a luxuriance of words but no deeds, so they deserved to be condemned by the Lord to wither.

May Christ see us too under a fig tree; may he see us in our fleshly condition producing not leaves only but the fruit of good deeds, lest we wither away under his curse. But because all fruit grows from his grace, not from any merits of ours, the psalm declares, *Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered:* not those in whom no sins have been found, but those whose sins are covered. Their sins are covered over, they are out of sight, they are done away with. If God has covered our sins, he does not want to see them or be aware of them; if he does not want to be aware of them, he does not want to punish them; if he does not want to punish them, he does not want to convict us, he wants not an imputation but commiseration. *Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered.* You must not interpret this statement that our sins are covered over to mean that they are still there, still alive. Why, then, did the psalmist say that sins are covered? Because they are thrust out of sight. What would it mean for God to look at our sins? To punish our sins. I can prove to you that for God to look at our sins is the same thing as to punish them: another psalm prays to him, *Turn your face away from my sins* (Ps 50:11(5:9)). May God not look at your sins, so that he can see you. See you how? In the same way as he saw Nathanael: When you were under the fig tree, I saw you. The fig tree’s shade was not so dense that the eyes of God’s mercy could not see through it.

Forgiveness and truth: the example of the Pharisee and the tax collector

10. In whose mouth there is no guile. Very different is the case of those who refuse to confess their sins, and struggle vainly to excuse them. The more they exert themselves to defend their sins and brag about their merits, turning toward their sins a blind eye, the more do their strength and vigor wane. The only truly strong person is one who is strong not in himself but in God. So Paul admits that in his trouble three times I begged the Lord to take it away from me, but he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you.” Notice that God says, My grace, not “your own power.” *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power finds complete scope in weakness* (2 Cor 12:8-9). Accordingly a little further on Paul himself confesses, *When I am weak, then I am strong* (2 Cor 12:10). Any who aspire to be strong, relying on themselves and displaying their own merits, whatever these may be, will be kin to that Pharisee who managed to boast even about what he admitted was the gift of God, saying, *O God, I thank you.* Take note, my brothers and sisters, of the sort of pride God is warning us about here, the kind that can creep into a righteous person and sneak up even on someone of good promise. *O God, I thank you,* he kept saying. By repeating, I thank you, he was avowing that he had received what he had from God, for what have you that you did not receive? (1 Cor 4:7) Acknowledging that much, he said, I thank you, yes, I thank you that I am not like other people: robbers, cheats, adulterers, or like that tax collector there. Why was this a proud attitude? Not because he thanked God for the gifts he had, but because he was exalting himself above his neighbor on the strength of those gifts.

11. Close attention is required here, my brothers and sisters, because the evangelist tells us something at the outset to indicate what provoked our Lord’s parable. Christ had asked, *When the Son of Man comes, do you think he will find faith on earth?* (Lk 18:8). But that might have given an opening to some heretics who would seize on it and think that it meant the whole world had fallen away (for all heretics are very elitist and out of touch) and might take occasion to brag that in themselves alone remained the faith that had vanished from the rest of the

20. Perhaps we should translate here “under the guise of that fig tree”; see the next note.
22. When Augustine describes the climax of his struggle for conversion in The Confessions VIII, 28, he says he flung himself down under a fig tree. At least in retrospect he must have been aware of its ambivalent symbolism, alluded to here. Adam and Eve after their fall made themselves loincloths of fig leaves, a sign of their sinful condition (see Gen 3:7); the Lord curses a barren fig tree that represents unfaithful Israel (see Mt 21:19 = Mk 11:13-14); but Nathanael’s call from beneath a fig tree suggests his vocation, like Augustine’s own, to grace.
23. Non alit ignoscere, maluit ignoscere.
world. To guard against this the evangelist added to the Lord’s question, When the Son of Man comes, do you think he will find faith on earth? the further statement, He spoke to certain people who considered themselves righteous and despised others the following parable. A Pharisee and a tax collector went up to the temple to pray (Lk 18:9-10), and so on; you know the story.

So the Pharisee kept saying, I thank you. Was that pride? Yes. Why? Because he was despising others. How do I prove that? From his very words. The gospel tells us that the Pharisee despised another man who stood a long way off, but God came close to that man as he made his confession. The tax collector stood a long way off, we are told, but God was not standing a long way off from him. And why not? Because, as another verse of scripture tells us, The Lord is close to those who have bruised their hearts (Ps 33:19(34:18)). Ask yourselves whether this tax collector had bruised his heart, and there you will see how close the Lord is to the brokenhearted. The tax collector stood a long way off and would not even raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast—beat his breast, you see, as a token of his bruised heart—and said, O God, be merciful to me, a sinner. And what was the Lord’s verdict? Truly I tell you, that tax collector went down to his house at rights with God, more than did the Pharisee (Lk 18:13-14). Why? This is God’s judgment. The one boasts, I am not like other people: robbers, cheats, adulterers, or like that tax collector there; I fast twice a week, and give tithes from everything I own. The other does not dare to lift his eyes to heaven; he examines his conscience and stands a long way off, and he is justified rather than the Pharisee. How can this be? I beg you, Lord, to explain to us this just sentence of yours; explain to us the equity of your law. And the Lord does explain. Would you like to hear him give his judgment? Anyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

12. Now listen, beloved.26 We have said that the tax collector did not dare to lift his eyes to heaven. Why was he not directing his gaze heavenward? Because he was directing it toward himself. He was scrutinizing himself so that he might initially find himself displeasing, and so become pleasing to God. But you, Pharisee, bear yourself arrogantly, standing with head held high. And the Lord says to any such proud person, “So you are not willing to take a hard look at yourself? I am looking at you. Do you want me to stop looking at you? Then look hard at yourself.” The tax collector did not dare to raise his eyes heavenward because he was looking into himself, and dealing severely with his own conscience. He took the role of judge over himself so that the Lord might be the intercessor; he was punishing himself so that another might set him free; he was accusing himself so that the other might defend him. The Lord did not merely plead the case in his defense; he went further and decided it in his favor: the tax collector went down to his house at rights with God, more than did the Pharisee; because anyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. “This man looked so hard at himself,” says the Lord, “that I did not want to scrutinize him. I heard him entreating me, Turn your face away from my sins.” Who said that? The same who also said, I know my iniquity (Ps 50:11,5(51:9,3)).

Obviously, my brothers and sisters, the Pharisee was a sinner too. Not because he was able to say, I am not like other people: robbers, cheats, adulterers, nor because he fasted twice a week, nor because he gave tithes. None of these things made him a sinner. But even if he had been free of all other sins, pride such as this would have been gravely sinful in itself, and yet he did reel off this list. But in any case, who is free from sin? Who can boast of having a pure heart, or of being clean from sin in all respects?26 The Pharisee was indeed guilty of sin; but he was looking the wrong way, and failed to realize where he was standing. He was like someone in need of healing who had come to a doctor’s surgery, but presented only his sound limbs and covered up his wounds. Let God cover your wounds; don’t cover them yourself. If you cover them up out of embarrassment, the doctor will not heal them. Allow the physician to cover and cure them, because he covers them with a dressing. Under the physician’s dressing the wound heals; under the patient’s covering it is merely hidden. Anyway, from whom are you trying to hide it? From him who knows everything?

Verse 3. Growing old in the wrong silence

13. Take heed now, brothers and sisters, to what this psalm says about the matter. My bones grew old because of my silence, in consequence of my shouting all day long. What does that mean? It sounds like a contradiction: because of my silence, my bones grew old in consequence of my shouting. If it was due to his shouting, how can he say he kept silence? The answer is that he kept silence about one thing but not about another. He refrained from saying something that would have helped him, but did not keep quiet about something that harmed him. He kept silence from confession, but shouted his presumption. When he says, my silence, he means, “I did not confess.” That was how he ought to have spoken. He should have kept quiet about his merits and shouted his sins; but he got it all wrong: he was silent about his sins and shouted his merits. So what happened to him? His bones grew old. If he had shouted his sins aloud, and kept quiet about his merits, you see, his bones would have been rejuvenated—his virtues, that is.

25. Caritas vestra.

He would have been invigorated in the Lord, because he knew he was weak in himself. But as things were he wanted to be strong and steady in himself, and so he became weak, and his bones grew old. He was stuck in decrepitude because he refused to embrace newness by confessing. You know who are renewed, brothers and sisters: blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. This man did not want his sins forgiven, so he piled up more sins, and defended them, by boasting about how good he was. And so, because he kept silence from confession, his bones grew old. In consequence of my shouting all day long. What can that mean, shouting all day long? Obstinately defending his sins.

Yet, after all, he does come to recognize himself. In a minute he will gain understanding, for he will turn his gaze on nothing else but himself; and in knowing himself he will find himself unlovely. You are going to hear about this, for your own healing.

Verse 4. The weight of God’s hand

14. Blessed is the one to whom the Lord will impute no sin, and in whose mouth is no guile. My bones grew old because of my silence, in consequence of my shouting all the day long. For day and night your hand lay heavy upon me. What are we to understand by your hand lay heavy upon me? This is something momentous and real, my friends. Keep your eyes on that clear distinction drawn between the two of them, the Pharisee and the tax collector. What were we told about the Pharisee? That he is humiliated. And what of the tax collector? That he is exalted. Why is the former humiliated? Because he exalted himself. And why is the other exalted? Because he humbled himself. In order to humble a person who exalts himself, God puts a heavy hand on him. That person disdained to be humbled by confessing his iniquity, so he is brought low by the weight of God’s hand. How could he ever endure the heavy hand that squashed him down? But how light the hand that lifts up! A mighty hand it was in both instances: powerfully pressing down the one, powerfully lifting up the other.

Verses 4-5. God forgives even before the confession is out

15. Accordingly, day and night your hand lay heavy upon me. I was reduced to bitterness, when the thorn stuck fast in me. This heavy weight of your hand upon me, this very humiliation, has reduced me to bitterness; I became wretched, the thorn stuck fast in me, and my conscience was stabbed. What happened when the thorn stuck into him? It hurt badly, and he realized his weakness. So what did he do, now that the thorn was lodged in him, this person who had kept silent from confession of sin, but shouted in defense of it, so that his strength waned and his bones wore out with age? I perceived my sin. Ah, so he does perceive it now. If he looks at it, God will overlook it.29 Listen to how it goes on, and see if this is not his own admission. I perceived my sin, and did not cloak my unrighteousness: I explained this point just now. Do not cover it yourself, and God will cover it for you. Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Those who draw a veil over their sins are stripped naked, but the speaker here stripped the cover off his so that he might be clothed. I did not cloak my unrighteousness. What does he mean by saying, I did not cloak it? Until very recently I kept my mouth shut, but now I said. . . . Some reversal of his silence is taking place. I said. . . . What did you say? I will declare against myself my unrighteousness to the Lord; and you have forgiven the impiety of my heart. He tells us, I said. . . . Said what? He is not declaring anything yet, only promising that he will make a declaration; yet already God forgives.

Pay close attention, brothers and sisters, because this is very important. The psalmist says, I will declare. He does not say, “I declared”; yet you, Lord, have already forgiven him. This is what he says: I will declare, and you have forgiven. By the expression, I will declare, he made it obvious that he had not yet declared anything with his tongue, but he had made the declaration in his heart. The very resolve that I will declare is itself a declaration, and for that reason you have forgiven the impiety of my heart. My confession had not yet reached my lips; I had only got as far as saying, I will declare against myself; yet God heard the voice of my heart. My words were not yet in my mouth, but already God’s ear was in my heart. You have forgiven the impiety of my heart because I said, I will declare.

Free will, not fate

16. It would not have been enough, though, for him to say, I will declare my unrighteousness to the Lord. He had good reason to say, I will declare it against myself. There is a difference. Plenty of people declare their unrighteous conduct, but against the Lord God himself. When they are found out in their sins they say, “God willed it so.” People who say, “I didn’t do it,” or, “This action that you are finding fault with is no sin,” are not making any declaration, either against themselves or against God. But if someone says, “Yes, I did it, to be sure, and it is a

27. Variant: “in my bitter hardship I was converted, when the thorn. . . .”
28. Variant: “caused me to writhe in my bitterness.”
29. Si ille cognoscit, ille cognoscit.
sin. But God willed it, so what fault is it of mine?” that is to make a declaration against God. You may object, “But no one would say that. How could anyone maintain that God willed it?” On the contrary, many people do say just that. And others there are who do not express it so bluntly, but what else does it amount to when they protest, “It was my fate. My stars were responsible”? They are simply getting at God by a roundabout route. They want to accuse God in this devious way, instead of taking a short cut to making their peace with him, so they say, “Fate did this to me.” And what is fate? “Well, my stars did it.” And what are the stars? “Those things we see in the sky, of course.” And who made them? “God.” Who set them in their courses? “God.” Look what you are trying to say, then: “God made me sin.” That means he is in the wrong and you are in the right, because if he had not made them, you would not have sinned! Have done with these excuses for your sins; remember the prayer in a psalm: _turn not my heart aside into dishonest words, to seek excuses in its sins with people who commit iniquity_ (Ps 140(141):4).

Yet these people who defend their sins are persons of high repute, persons of good standing who count the planets, and calculate astral conjunctions and significant times; they predict who will sin, and when, and who will live honorably; when Mars will drive someone to murder or Venus someone to adultery. They are people of substance, learned men, who seem to be the privileged ones of this world. But what has the psalm to say? _Turn not my heart aside with people who commit iniquity; I will have no part with their privileged ones._ Let others call them wise, those privileged, learned ones who count the planets; let others call them wise, those pedants who fiddle human fate on their fingers and map out human conduct from the stars, God created me with free will; if I have sinned, it is I myself who have sinned, so my business is not simply to declare my unrighteousness to the Lord, but to declare it against myself, not against him. _I myself said, Lord, have mercy on me:_ this is a sick person crying out to the physician: _I myself said._ Why this emphasis, _I myself?_ It would have been enough to write, _I said._ But the emphasis is deliberate: I said it _myself_. I, myself, not fate, not my horoscope, not the devil either, because he did not compel me, but I consented to his persuasion. _I myself said, Lord, have mercy on me; heal my soul, for I have sinned against you_ (Ps 40:5(41:4)). Our psalmist made the same decision here too. He made up his mind: _I said, I will declare against myself my unrighteousness to the Lord, and you have forgiven the impiety of my heart._

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30. A pun: _qui digerunt in digitis._
31. _Quare: Ego dixi? Sufficeret: dixi._

Verse 6. The time of grace

17. _Every holy person will pray to you about this matter, when the time is right._ What time would that be? The right time for _this matter._ What matter? Impiety. And what would one pray for about that? For sins to be forgiven, obviously. _Every holy person will pray to you about this matter, when the time is right;_ and the only reason why all holy persons will pray to you is that you have forgiven their sins, for if you did not forgive sins there would not be a single holy person to pray to you. But _every holy person will pray to you about this matter, when the time is right,_ when the New Covenant shall be revealed and the grace of Christ be made manifest. That will be the right time. _When the fulness of time had come, God sent his Son, made from a woman_ (that means one of the female sex; the ancients applied the term to married women and virgins indiscriminately), _made subject to the law, that he might redeem those who were subject to the law_ (Gal 4:4–5). From what did he redeem them? From the devil, from perdition, from their sins, from him to whom they had sold themselves. _To redeem those who were subject to the law._ They were indeed subjects under the law, for it weighed heavily upon them. Its terms oppressed them by showing up their guilt without saving them. It certainly forbade wrongful deeds, but since they had in themselves no power of self-justification, they were forced to cry out to God in the same way as Paul did when he knew himself to be a prisoner under the law of sin: _Who will deliver me from this death-ridden body, wretch that I am?_ (Rom 7:24). All men and women were under the law, not within it, as long as it oppressed them and declared them guilty. The law brought sin into the open; it drove the thorn home, evoked compunction of heart, and warned all that they must acknowledge their guilt and cry to God for pardon. _Every holy person will pray to you about this matter, when the time is right._ That is why, says the psalmist, I pointed to a right time: _when the fulness of time had come, God sent his Son._ The apostle says elsewhere, _At the acceptable and favorable time I have heard you, and on the day of salvation I have helped you._ And since the prophet envisaged all Christians when he foretold this, the apostle added, _See, now is the acceptable time, lo, this is the day of salvation_ (2 Cor 6:2). _Every holy person will pray to you about this matter, when the time is right._

32. Augustine is alluding to the virginal conception of Christ, not excluded by the general word, _mater._
33. Variant: _"Christian times."_
The floods that keep us from God

18. Yet they will not draw near to him amid the flood of many waters. What is meant by to him? To God. This shift from second to third person is quite usual. We have another example of it in the verse, salvation is from the Lord, and may your blessing be upon your people (Ps 3:9(8)). It did not say there, “Salvation is from the Lord, and may his blessing be upon his people,” did it? Nor did it say, “Salvation is from you, Lord, and may your blessing be upon your people”; but having begun in the third person, salvation is from the Lord, speaking about him, not to him, the psalmist then turned to him and continued, and may your blessing be upon your people. So too in the present psalm. When you hear it beginning, to you, and then shifting to to him, you must not think it is referring to someone different. Every holy person will pray to you about this matter, when the time is right. Yet they will not draw near to him amid the flood of many waters. What is meant by the flood of many waters? It means that people who swim in the flood of many waters do not draw near to God. Well, then, what are these many flood-waters? They stand for the multiplicity of variegated teachings. Try to concentrate, my brothers and sisters. The many waters are the variety of doctrines. God’s doctrine is one. There are not many waters, but one single water, whether we think of the water of baptism or the water of salutary doctrine. Of this doctrine, with which we are irrigated by the Holy Spirit, scripture says, Drink water from your own cisterns and your own wellsprings (Prv 5:15). The ungodly have no access to these springs, but those who believe in him who justifies the ungodly approach once they are justified. The many other waters are the many teachings that pollute human souls. I was speaking of some of them not long ago. One alien doctrine is: “Fate did this to me.” Another is: “Chance made this happen to me,” or “My horoscope was responsible.” If human beings are ruled by chance, nothing is effected by Providence; and this too is a doctrine. Another teacher said, “There is a hostile race of darkness which has rebelled against God, and it causes people to sin.” Swimmers in this flood of many waters do not draw near to God.

What is the real water, the water that wells up from the most secret inner spring, from the pure channel of truth? Yes, what is that water, my brothers and sisters? It is the water that teaches us to confess to the Lord. What other water admonishes us that it is good to confess to the Lord (Ps 91:2(92:1))? What water are we talking about, but the water that inspires the cry, I said, I will declare against myself my unrighteousness to the Lord, and I myself said, Lord, have mercy on me; heal my soul, for I have sinned against you? This is the water that urges us to confess our sins, the water that humbles our hearts, the water of a way of life that leads to salvation, of those who abase themselves, do not presume on themselves at all and refuse any proud attribution of their achievements to their own strength. You will not find this water in any of the books of the pagans, whether Epicurean, Stoic, Manichean or Platonist. You will find throughout those books excellent precepts of morality and self-improvement, but nowhere humility like this. The way of humility comes from no other source; it comes only from Christ. It is the way originated by him who, though most high, came in humility. What else did he teach us by humbling himself and becoming obedient even to death, even to the death of the cross? What else did he teach us by paying a debt he did not owe, to release us from debt? What else did he teach us, he who was baptized though sinless, and crucified though innocent? What else did he teach us, but this same humility? He had every right to say, I am the way, and the truth, and the life (Jn 14:6). By this humility, then, we draw near to God, because the Lord is close to those who have bruised their hearts; but amid the flood of many waters, amid the torrent of those who exalt themselves in opposition to God and peddle proud blasphemies, no one will draw near to him.

Verse 7. Joy amid groaning

19. But what about you, who are already justified: are you immersed in these flood-waters? They are all around us, my brothers and sisters; even when we confess our sins those torrential waters raise their din on every side. We are not in the flood, but it swirls all round us. Its waters splash us, yet do not swamp us; they drive against us but do not drown us. How are you going to manage, then, in the middle of the flood as you are, wading through this world? Is the psalmist deaf to those teachers, those proud professors? Does he not endure daily persecution in his heart from their pronouncements? What has this psalmist to say, already justified as he is and relying wholly on God? What is he to say, surrounded by the flood? You are for me a refuge from the distress that besets me. Let those others take refuge with their gods, or with their demons, or in their own strength, or in defending their sins. As for me, I have no refuge in this flood except yourself, my refuge from the distress that besets me.

20. You who make me dance with happiness, save me. If you are already dancing with happiness, why ask to be saved? You who make me dance with happiness, save me. I can hear the voice of joy when he says, You make me dance with happiness; and I hear groaning when he prays, Save me. You are joyful, yet you groan. “Quite so,” he replies, “I both groan and rejoice. I rejoice in hope, but still groan over present reality. You who make me dance with happiness, save me.” The apostle entreats us, Rejoice in hope, and so the psalmist is right to pray, You who make me dance with happiness, save me. Paul continues, Be patient in

35. See Phil 2:8.
36. See Ps 33:19(34:18).
anguish (Rom 12:12), and the psalmist is in accord: You who make me dance with happiness, save me. The apostle too was already justified, and what had he to say? Not creation only, but we ourselves, though we have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly. So why the psalmist’s prayer, save me? Because we ourselves groan inwardly as we await our adoption as God’s children, the redemption of our bodies. That is why the psalm begs, Save me: we are still groaning inwardly as we await the redemption of our bodies. But why then does he also say to God, You make me dance with happiness? The apostle’s next words make it clear why: in hope we have been saved. But if hope is seen, it is hope no longer, for when someone sees what he hopes for, why should he hope for it? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it in patience (Rom 8:23-25). If you hope, you rejoice; if you are waiting with patience, you still groan; for there is no need for patience when you have no evil to put up with. What we call endurance, what we call patience, what we call bearing up, what we call steadfastness, has no place except amid misfortunes. Where you are hard pressed, there you feel the pinch. If we are still waiting in patience, we still have reason to say, Save me from those that hem me in; but because we are saved in hope, we can say both these things simultaneously: you make me dance with happiness, and save me.

Verse 8. Keep your eyes on the Lord

21. Now comes God’s answer: I will give you understanding. Remember, this is a psalm about understanding. I will give you understanding, and set you on this road you must enter. What is meant by that: I will set you on this road you must enter? He does not mean to set you there so that you stay put, but so that you do not stray off it. I will give you understanding so that you may always truly know yourself, and always rejoice in hope toward God, until you arrive in your heavenly homeland, where there will be no place for hope, but only the reality. If I will keep a firm eye on you. I will not take my eyes off you, because you will not take yours off me either. Now that you are justified, now that your sins are forgiven, lift your eyes to God. Your heart went moldy when it wallowed in the mud. There is good reason for the exhortation you know well: “Lift up your hearts,” because they may go bad if you don’t. You, for your part, must now lift your eyes to God all the time, so that he can keep a firm eye on you. Need you be afraid that when you keep your eyes on God you may trip over something, and fail to see what is before your feet, and even fall into a trap? No, you need not worry, for his eyes are alert, those eyes of God that he keeps fixed on you. Do not be anxious (Mt 6:31), ...vs the Lord; and the apostle Peter tells us, Cast all your anxiety on him, for he takes care of you. If you hang in there, I will keep a firm eye on you. Raise your eyes to him, and, as I said, you will have no cause to fear that you may stumble into a snare. Listen to what another psalm recommended: My eyes are on the Lord continually; and then, as though someone had objected, “But how can you take care of your feet, if you are not looking where you are going?” the psalmist continued, He will pluck my feet from the snare (Ps 24(25):15). I will keep a firm eye on you.

Verse 9. Mulish obstinacy

22. God has promised to this one who prays both understanding and protection; but now he turns to the proud folk who defend their sins, and gives us an idea of what kind of understanding is in view. Do not be like a horse or a mule, devoid of understanding. The horse and the mule toss their heads. Neither horse nor mule is like the ox that recognizes its owner, or the ass that knows its master’s manger. Do not be like a horse or a mule, devoid of understanding, for what kind of treatment are those creatures subjected to? Rein in their jaws with bit and bridle, those who will not approach you. Do you aspire to be a horse or a mule; Do you want to throw your rider? Your mouth and your jaws will be reined in with bit and bridle; yes, that mouth of yours with which you vaunt your merits but keep quiet about your sins will be reined in. Rein in their jaws with bit and bridle, those who will not approach you by humbling themselves.

Verse 10. Breaking in the horse

23. There is many a scourge for the sinner. We need not wonder if after the bit has been inserted the whip is also used. The sinner wanted to be like an unbroken animal, and so must be subdued with bit and whip; and let us hope that he or she can be broken in. The fear is that such persons may resist so obstinately that they deserve to be left in their unbroken state and allowed to go their own sweet way, until of them it can be said, Their iniquity will leak out as though from folds of fat (Ps 72(73):7), as it is of those whose sins go unpunished for the present. May such people, when the whip catches them, be corrected and subdued, as the psalmist tells us he too was tamed. He admits that he was a horse or a mule, because he was obstinately silent; and how was he subdued? By the whip. I was

37. Variant, in this and the following sentence: “on this road where you must walk.”
38. Ubi iam non spes, sed res erit.
39. Familiar from the liturgy; see note on Exposition of Psalm 10, 3.
40. See Is 1:3.
reduced to bitterness, he says, when the thorn stuck fast in me. Whether we think of this as a whip or a spur, God tames the beast he rides, because it is to the beast's own advantage to be ridden. It is not because God is weary of walking on his own feet that he mounts. Isn't it a very mysterious episode, when a donkey is led to the Lord?41 This donkey stands for the humble and docile people that provides a good mount for the Lord, and it is making for Jerusalem. He will guide the meek in judgment, as another psalm predicts; he will teach his ways to the gentle (Ps 24(25):9). Who are these gentle ones? Those who do not toss their heads in defiance of their trainer, who patiently accept the whip and the rein, so that later, when they have been broken in, they may walk without the whip, and hold to their course without the need for bit and bridle. If you refuse your rider, it is you who will fall, not he. There is many a scourge for the sinner; but everyone who hopes in the Lord is encompassed with mercy. How does the Lord prove himself a refuge from the distress that surrounds us? The person who was at first encompassed with distress is later encompassed with mercy, for he who gave the law will grant mercy too;42 the law when he applied the whip, and mercy when he handles us gently. Everyone who hopes in the Lord is encompassed with mercy.

Verse 11. The true rejoicing

24. Now for the last verse. Rejoice in the Lord and dance for joy, you just. Woe betide you who rejoice in yourselves! You are impious and proud if you rejoice in yourselves; but once you come to believe in him who justifies the impious, your faith will be reckoned as righteousness. Rejoice in the Lord and dance for joy, you just. We must understand, “dance for joy in the Lord,” of course. Why is that? Because they are now just. And how did that happen to them? Not by their own merits, but by his grace. In what sense are they just? Just because justified.

25. And make him your boast, all you who are right of heart. What is it to be right of heart? The right of heart are those who do not resist God. Let me have your attention, beloved ones,43 and try to understand this rectitude of heart. I will explain it briefly, though it is a point of major importance; and I thank God that it comes at the end, so that it will stick in your minds.

This is the difference between a right heart and a crooked one. When a person has to suffer many things willy-nilly, such as sickness, grief, toil and humiliations, and attributes them solely to the just will of God, not concluding that God is unwise or that he does not know what he is doing when he chastises this one and spares others, that man or woman is right of heart. People with perverse hearts, hearts crooked and misshapen, complain that all the woes they suffer are undeserved, and so they charge God, by whose will they undergo these things, with acting unjustly. Or perhaps they do not dare to accuse him directly of injustice, so they assume that he cannot be in control. "This must be the way of it," they say, "because he cannot do anything unjust, and yet it is unjust that I should suffer while someone else is exempt. I admit that I am a sinner, but there are others who are greater sinners still, and they make merry while I am in trouble. It is unfair that those who are even worse than I should be happy, and I, who am a righteous person, or at any rate less sinful than they are, should have to put up with all this. By my reckoning this is certainly unjust, and by my reckoning it is equally certain that God cannot act unjustly. So I conclude that God is not in control of human affairs, and does not care about us."

So the people with crooked, twisted hearts propose three opinions. Either God does not exist; so the fool says in his heart, “There is no God.”44 And as I have already said in connection with the flood,45 there has been no lack of such teaching among the philosophers, no lack of teachers who denied the existence of a God who governs all things and created all things, but postulated a plethora of gods who were engrossed in their own affairs, distanced from the world and unconcerned with it. So then, either “There is no God,” which is the opinion of the impious person who is angry about anything unpleasant that happens to him or her, but does not happen to someone else deemed to be less deserving; or, secondly, “God is unjust, since he enjoys this sort of thing, and acts like this”; or, thirdly, “God is not in control of human affairs, and does not concern himself with any of them.” All three of these opinions entail grave impiety, whether it is denial of God’s existence, or charging him with injustice, or doubting his governance of the world. Why does anyone hold such views? Because they are crooked of heart. God is straight and true, and therefore a crooked heart is not at peace with him. Another psalm exclaims, How good is Israel’s God to those who are right of heart? But the psalmist had once held a perverse opinion himself: How does God know? Can any knowledge be attributed to the Most High? and remembering that, he added, Even I almost lost my footing (Ps 72(73):1,11,2). If you lay a warped beam on a hard, level surface, it does not fit or square up properly or lie flat; it will always shake and wobble, not because the surface where it was placed is uneven, but because the beam itself is lopsided. So too as long as a heart remains crooked and twisted, it cannot be aligned with the rectitude of

41. See Mk 11:7.
42. See Ps 83:9(84:7).
43. Cartias vestra.
44. See Ps 13(14):1.
45. See 18 above.
God; it cannot be bedded close to him and cling to him. In such a heart the saying cannot come true that anyone who clings to the Lord is one spirit with him (1 Cor 6:17).

Make the Lord your boast, then, all you who are right of heart. How do right-hearted people boast? Listen to their boasting: What is more, we even glory in our sufferings. It is no great thing to glory amid joy or boast when we are happy; right-hearted persons glory even in tribulations. And listen to how they do it, how no one who glories amid afflictions is doomed to disappointment or boasts in vain. Look at this righteousness of heart, as evinced by Paul: we even glory in our sufferings, knowing that suffering fosters endurance, and endurance constancy, and constancy hope; but hope does not disappoint us, because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (Rom 5:3-5).

26. This is what a right heart is like, my brothers and sisters. If any misfortune befalls right-hearted people, let them say, “The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away.” This is righteousness of heart: “as it has pleased the Lord, so it has turned out. May the name of the Lord be blessed.” They do not say, “The Lord gave, and the devil has taken away.” Pay careful attention to this, my dearest ones, so that you may never say, “The devil has done this to me.” No, by no means; refer the scourge that falls on you to God, because the devil does nothing to you unless by permission from our powerful God, who may allow it either as punishment or as discipline: punishment for the ungodly or discipline for God’s children. God scourges every son whom he acknowledges. Do not hope that you will be spared the lash, unless you also plan to be disinherit. He scourges every son he acknowledges. Every single one? Yes. Where did you think to hide? Every one without exception, every single one, will be liable to scourging. What, is no one spared? No. Do you need to be convinced that this rule admits of no exceptions? Even the only-begotten Son, he who was sinless, even he was not exempt. The only-begotten Son himself, bearing your weakness and representing you in his own person, as the Head which included the body in itself, even he was deeply saddened in his human nature as he approached his passion, in order to give you joy. He was saddened that he might comfort you. Undoubtedly the Lord could have faced his passion free from sadness. If a soldier had the power to do so, surely the commander-in-chief had? But did a soldier have that power? Yes: listen to Paul shouting with joy as he approached his suffering:

Already I am being poured out like a sacrificial libation, he says, and the time for my dissolution is upon me. I have fought the good fight, I have run the whole course, I have kept the faith; all that remains for me now is the crown of righteousness which the just judge will award me on that day, and not to me alone but to all those who love his coming (2 Tm 4:6-8). Look at that for triumphant cheerfulness in the face of suffering! So the man who is due to be crowned rejoices, while the One who is to crown him is deeply saddened. What does this suggest that he was carrying? The weakness of others, who are grieved when trouble or death looms.

But observe how he leads them toward rightness of heart. Think about it: you were wanting to live, and not wanting any calamity to fall upon you; but God willed otherwise. There are two wills, then; but your will must be straightened to fit the will of God, not God’s will twisted out of shape to fit yours. Yours is crooked, his is the ruler. The ruler must stand steady so that the crooked thing may be conformed to it. Our Lord Jesus Christ teaches us this. Listen to him: my soul is sorrowful to the point of death; and Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me. His human will shows through here. But look at his rightness of heart: not what I will, but what you will be done, Father (Mt 26:38,39). Do likewise yourself, and rejoice in the troubles that befall you; and if your last day is upon you, rejoice. If any of the frailty of your human will tries to take over, surrender it swiftly to God, that you may be among those to whom the psalmist says, Make him your boast, all you who are right of heart.

46. Or, with the addition of one word by the editors of the Latin text, "...cling to him and be straightened."
47. See Jb 1:21.
48. Caritas vestra.