

**SERMON: “Not Ashamed of the Gospel” Part 3
“But now...Grace for All!”**

March 7, 2010

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Holy God, your word is a two-edged sword, cutting through all our self-deception, to reveal to us the depths of our sinfulness, and the even greater depths of your divine mercy. In the power of your Spirit speak to us your word of gospel, that we may trust whole-heartedly your covenant faithfulness, which even now and even in our lives is calling forth the obedience of faith; through Christ our Lord.

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 14:1-3

Epistle Lesson: Romans 3:1-4, 9-12, 21-26

Like the composer of a great symphony, the Apostle Paul sounds a theme at the beginning of his Letter to the Romans to which he keeps returning as the epistle unfolds. His theme-song is this: **“I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”** For those with ears of faith, that melody of grace resounds throughout the symphony of Romans.

The gospel of which Paul is not ashamed is far more than music to be heard. It is a **word of Truth** that has power to accomplish all that God intends.

But in our time words in general are suspect. Our politicians have seen to that. “Don’t tell me, show me,” we sometimes say. And yet there still are words that have power to bring into being a new reality. For example, at the end of marriage service when I declare, “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” they are. The words accomplish what they announce. In the eyes of God and the laws of the State, the couple are now husband and wife. Some words do have power to affect a new reality.

So it is worth noting that when Paul speaks of the **“power of God for salvation,”** the word he uses in Greek is the same word, *dunamis*, from which get our word **“dynamite.”** The proclamation of the gospel is not something tame and harmless, as we often think. It is dynamite, with power to accomplish the salvation God intends through it. When the gospel is proclaimed with unashamed power, who knows what kind of explosion of grace will result, or how far-flung its impact may be?

In the words we read this morning, Paul brings the first movement of his symphony of grace to a grand crescendo. **“But now...the righteousness of God has been disclosed...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”**

“But now...” The words signal a major turning point in the case Paul is making. Look at what has come before this turning point--a long and sustained treatment of the **wrath of God.**

Two weeks ago we suggested that the “wrath of God” is a part of the gospel. It is our most powerful symbol of God’s relentless opposition to all the powers of Sin and Death that wreak havoc in God’s good creation. Wrath is **“God’s steadfast and holy**

hatred of sin,” and thus it is an expression of the depth and intensity of God’s passionate rejection of everything that is contrary to God’s holy love.

No sooner has Paul declared that he is not ashamed of the gospel, than he makes clear why the grace of God is so absolutely essential if any are to be saved. **“For the wrath of God, he says, is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.”**

Without pausing to take a breath, Paul launches into a full scale indictment of **human sinfulness**, expressed primarily in terms of **idolatry**—worshipping and serving the **“creature rather than the Creator.”** We may tend to think of idolatry as something primitive people do when they manufacture objects to worship--“images resembling humans or birds or animals or reptiles,” as Paul says. But idolatry is far more pernicious than that. John Calvin called the human mind “a factory for making idols.” We are continually tempted to give our highest allegiance to things or causes or people, instead of the living God. Our idols are not harmless little statues of wood or stone. They are **economic systems** like capitalism or socialism. They are **nation-states** with their national security systems. They are **ideologies** that shape the way we see life and that inevitably set us against those who see things differently. Whatever we think is “too big to fail” or “too important to fail” is an idol, that has us in its grasp. Like a boa constrictor, idols of any kind can squeeze the life out of whatever they wrap themselves around. Even what we call our **“freedom”** can become a deadly idol, when that freedom becomes a license to do as we please.

Paul begins making his case for the **universal sinfulness of the human race** first by cataloging what his readers in Rome would all agree were the worst sins of the pagan world. Paul reaches into the storehouse of familiar stereotypes of “godless gentiles.” He begins with what we today call “homosexuality,” although in Paul’s day there was no such word. Paul writes, “God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise...were consumed with passion for one another.” But Paul doesn’t stop there. He’s just getting going. “They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice...envy, murder, strife, deceit...they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.” It is easy to imagine Paul’s readers nodding their heads in agreement. “Right on! Preach it, Brother Paul! Stick it to them!”

But watch out. It’s all a trap Paul is setting. As his readers, and as we are rubbing our hands in judgment over those godless sinners whose ways of life we despise, suddenly Paul springs the trap. **“Therefore YOU have no excuse...not THEY have no excuse, YOU have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge another; for in passing judgment upon the other you condemn yourself, because you, the judges, are doing the very same things.”**

Having exposed the stereotypical sins of gentile pagans, Paul now lays into his Jewish readers. Do you think you are any better than the gentiles you look down on? No!

By no means! We are all **equally** under the power of Sin. Scripture itself declares, **“There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless. There is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one...”**

Paul quotes one snippet of scripture after another to make it clear that we all are sinful in the sight of God. **“There is no distinction, since *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** We keep trying to qualify that little word ALL, and God keeps asking, “Just what part of ALL don’t you all understand.” We are all captives to the law of Sin and Death. **“There is no distinction!”** All the lines we draw, all the categories in which we place people to make ourselves feel superior—morally, or socially, or religiously—are torn up by God. Or more precisely, all of them are **nailed to the cross of Christ.**

“But now, says, Paul, **“But now,** apart from the law—apart from how well we perform as human beings--**the righteousness of God has been disclosed...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”**

With those words Paul circles back to his opening theme. **“I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to *everyone* who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”** Our relationship to God does not depend on anything we do or intend or achieve or promise, however laudable it may be. Our relationship to God is solely a matter of the **faithfulness of God.** Paul spends two long, agonizing chapters detailing the sinfulness of the whole human race in order to make clear how startling is the good news of God’s faithfulness to the whole human race—the divine faithfulness that absolutely and eternally refuses to let Sin and Death have the final word.

No matter how bad others may tell you that you are, or that you may tell yourself, and no matter how good you may think you are, or that others may tell you that you are...the gospel truth is that **“There is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”**

And yet, nevertheless, God remains faithful to his plan to set all things right, including us. Soon Paul will exclaim, **“God has consigned all to disobedience that he may have mercy on all.”** The universality of Sin is caught up in the **universality of Grace!** All our human judgments about who deserves the wrath of God are nailed to the cross. There God takes the judgment we all deserve into God’s own divine life. The Judge is himself judged in our place to take away all that would separate us from God and one another. On the cross we see how utterly faithful God is in God’s purpose to redeem the whole lost race of sinful humanity. God will not let anything, not even the most godforsaken death imaginable, thwart his purpose of redeeming love.

I hope all this doesn’t just sound like theological “gobbledygook.” It may. It may sound like nothing more than preacher-talk--empty religious rhetoric. If so, I have not said it very well. Let me try again. In Jesus Christ God comes to us where we are...mired

in a world of deadly idolatries, where our persistent self-centeredness leads to the brokenness we see all around us. And no matter how hard we may try, we cannot get ourselves out of the mess we are in and the messes we make of our lives. The harder we try, the more stuck with ourselves we are. Think how many times you have told someone, or have been told *by* someone, **“Get a hold of yourself”**? “Get a grip on your life.” But you can’t. We all can’t “get a hold of ourselves,” until a gracious Power outside our conflicted selves lays hold on us with a love that will not let us go. The faithfulness of that love has power to call forth our own response of faith as nothing else can.

And so, let me leave it this way: ...if you are troubled by something you have done that you have no power to undo...

If you feel you have wasted much of your life pursuing unworthy goals...

If you are overwhelmed by the responsibilities you face as a parent of a young child, or as the child of an aging parent...

If you are afraid that if other people knew you the way you know yourself, they would have nothing to do with you...

If you realize how much you are caught in systems that exploit others, that deface God’s creation, and that trap people in cycles of generational poverty...

If you are haunted by an ugly secret you can hardly dare admit to yourself...¹

If any of you find any of yourself mirrored in these feelings, then I have good news for you. Or better put, the **gospel has a powerful word of good news for you**, and for everyone who trusts that it is true. The promise of the gospel is this: **“We are set right by God’s grace as a free gift through the redemption that is ours in Christ Jesus.”** It is not just when we finally manage to “get our act together,” or when we finally clean up our lives and let go our self-defeating patterns of behavior. **“But NOW...,”** here and now, today, apart from performance of any kind, **“the righteousness of God has been disclosed...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”**

And not only has the faithfulness of God been “disclosed,” it has been sealed upon your heart and placed in your hands in the bread we break and cup we bless. So **“Take, eat, drink...says your faithful Savior, “this is my Life given for you for the forgiveness of your sins, and the redemption of your life.” “Do this in remembrance of me!”** And so we shall. To Him be all glory and majesty, all dominion and power, now and forever more. Amen.

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¹ These examples of how we are “caught in a web of our own making but unable to extricate ourselves” were suggested by a somewhat similar listing in Fleming Rutledge’s *Not Ashamed of the Gospel* (Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007, p. 77). This whole series of sermons on Romans is strongly influenced and inspired by her strong theological preaching. I know of no one who does it better.