

**SERMON: “Not Ashamed of the Gospel” Part 5
“Who Me?”**

March 21, 2010

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: O God of awesome holiness, whose Spirit searches the deep places of our hearts, exposing that which we would keep hidden even from ourselves, open now our hearts and minds to the power of the gospel, that through the reading and preaching of your Word, we may see ourselves as we are, and even more, see your grace that forgives and redeems us for service in your kingdom of love; through Christ our Lord. Amen

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 51:1-9,17

New Testament Lesson: Romans 7:12-25

Throughout this Lenten season we have been exploring Paul’s Letter to the Romans. Romans, as we have said, is the Mt. Everest of scripture. It towers over all the rest of Paul’s letters to the churches. Preaching on Romans is not easy. But it *is* invigorating! No where else do we find a more powerful and compelling presentation of the gospel than in Paul’s Letter to the Romans.

As I approach the end of my active ministry in the Presbyterian Church, it seems appropriate for us to focus on that which is absolutely central to the life of the Church--the **gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ**. Throughout his letter to the Romans Paul delves deeper and deeper into the gospel of which he is “**not ashamed,**” for “**it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith.**” We need not be ashamed of the gospel, either, if we understand it rightly.

But understanding the gospel in our time and in our culture is not easy. There is no shortage of counterfeit versions of the gospel vying for our attention. The most common of which are the ones that turn the gospel into a technique to secure our own health and wealth. “Name it and claim it,” some would say. God wants you to be a success. Let God give you “your own best life” now.

One Sunday morning a number of years ago the teacher of an adult church school class stayed home and video-taped portions of as many worship services on television as he could find. When he showed the excerpts to the class, we were stunned by some of the stuff that goes by the name of Christianity in our culture, as too often the gospel gets peddled as a technique to get what we want out of life.

A number of years ago I remember seeing a book by Lewis Smedes on the grace and forgiveness of God listed under the heading “**Religion/Self-Help.**” That is the way a good many people view religion, as a pious form of self-help.

But if there is anything the grace of God is clearly not, it is “self-help.” Paul makes that point forcefully and frequently throughout his Letter to the Romans. If we could help ourselves to our own “best life now,” if we could get ourselves out of the mess we are in by ourselves, we would not need the grace of God. Over and over Paul insists that self-help is of no help at all to selves who are **slaves to sin**.

Here is one of the places where the gospel of which Paul is not ashamed cuts most sharply against the grain of what goes by the name of *religion* in America. “**Slaves to sin**”? Oh, come on, Preacher, you know that not true! “Slaves to sin”? No way--we are the freest people on the face of the earth! We may make some bad choices at times, but at least we are free to choose. No one tells us where to live, or whom to marry, or what college to attend, or what political party to vote for.

We even have over 100 channels from which to choose in High Def. Don't tell us we are not free to choose for ourselves the things that matter most in our lives.

But Paul would not be much impressed by what we call our "freedom to choose." So what if you can choose between all sorts of trivial things, he would ask? Who cares whether you choose to eat Oatmeal or Frosted Flakes for breakfast? Who cares whether you drive a Toyota or a Ford? Who cares if you have a hundred ties in your closet from which to choose? The freedom to choose is not the same as the **freedom to choose wisely** the things that make for the flourishing of life.

Over against what we think is our freedom of choice, set the words of Paul we read a moment ago.

"I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ... I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."

Any of that sound familiar to any of you? It sure does to me, and not just to me, but to a lot of folks I know quite well. Scholars debate whether Paul is speaking autobiographically when he says, **"I do not understand my own actions."** Is he talking about himself or someone else? Is he describing what his life was like *before* the risen Christ waylaid him on the road to Damascus and called him to be an apostle to the Gentiles? Or is he talking about Israel as a whole, as N.T. Wright insists? Who is the **"I"** of whom Paul speaks when he says, **"I can will what is right, but I cannot do it"?**

I don't know. And at least as far as I am concerned, I don't have to know. For what I do know—and what I know very well indeed—is that those are my words every bit as much as they are Paul's words. Paul is giving voice to the conflicts in my own divided heart. And not only mine, but the hearts of all of us. H. G. Wells once said that all of us are "a walking civil war." It is hard for me to imagine that anyone would not be included in the **"I"** that says, **"I do not understand my own actions....I can will what is right but I cannot do it."**

The words take us into the deep mystery of our nature as human beings and the contradictions of our humanity. Over against every one-dimensional portrait of human nature—that would see us either as innocent paragons of virtue or as depraved little monsters--the Christian faith reveals a far wider range to the heights and depths of our humanity. We are not fundamentally good or essentially corrupt—we are a puzzling mixture of both at the same time. No wonder we have such a hard time thinking of ourselves as we ought.

We are both creatures of nature and children of God. We are caught up in the perpetual perishing of time, yet we are made for eternal fellowship with the living God. We have a freedom possessed by no other creature, yet we persistently misuse our freedom for destructive ends. We are capable of the most beautiful acts of love and the most brutal acts of hatred. We can act with selfless courage in the face of mortal danger, and with craven cowardice in the face of nothing worse than the ridicule of others. At times we think of ourselves too highly and fall into pride—other times we think of ourselves too lowly and fall into despair. It is not easy standing as we do, at the intersection of nature and spirit, freedom and necessity. We are a mystery, even to ourselves, "a walking civil war."

In his lovely little book *Man the Believer*, Samuel Miller says, "It is not an easy thing to be human; to bear the burden of contradictions; to feel all manner of opposites in our own nature;...to

will one thing and to do another; ... to dream of beauty and to find our hands unable to make it; to set our hearts to act with great compassion and then to find ourselves too cowardly to accomplish it; ...to bear in our life a strange mixture of sophistication and stupidity, of freedom and fear, or joy and despair.”¹

That according to scripture is who we are, and no one-dimensional portrait can ever do justice to the heights and depths of our humanity half so well as Paul does in the words we read this morning. **“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate... I can will what is right, but I cannot do.”**

In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, William Faulkner said that the most important subject in literature is “the human heart in conflict with itself.” Paul would agree, and Paul would insist that the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ addresses most profoundly of all “the human heart in conflict with itself.”

After the Apostle Paul, the one who has probed most deeply the human predicament is Augustine of Hippo. Recently Bill Sibley gave me a series of lectures from the Teaching Company on “Augustine: Philosopher and Saint.” The teacher, Phillip Cary tells how surprised his students are discover how relevant Augustine is to their own situations.

In dealing with the issue of whether the human will is free or not, Augustine uses the analogy of what happens when your mind tells your hand to move. The mind gives the body an order and the body responds immediately.²

But look what happens when your mind gives your *will* a command. That’s a different matter all together. Suppose I command myself to be more loving. Does it work? Not often. Okay, so let’s try something simpler. How about if I command myself to get a good night’s sleep, or not to be such an introvert, or to be more energetic. Doesn’t work, does it? **“I can will what is right.”** I know what I **ought** to do, but somehow, for some reason **“I cannot do it.”**

The poet Agnes Rogers Allen puts it humorously when she acknowledges,
 “I should be better, brighter, thinner,
 And more intelligent at dinner.
 I should reform and take some pains,
 Improve my person, use my brains.
 There's a lot I could do about it,
 But will I?...Honestly I doubt it.”³

But to make matters worse, Paul goes on to say, **“I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”** That’s a deeper, more troubling aspect of the human predicament. We boast of the freedom of our wills, and yet all too often what we freely will is trivial or selfish or even harmful. Something stands between our good intentions and our shabby performance. Something twists and perverts even our best and most sincere efforts at doing good to produce consequences we never intended. The poet T.S. Eliot says that

¹ Samuel H. Miller, *Man the Believer* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968) p. 27.

² This material from Augustine was suggested by Fleming Rugledge in her sermon “Frodo and Free Will,” in *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*, 2007.

³ In Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin* (New York: Hawthorne, 1973) p. 188.

“Between the idea and the reality,
Between the motion and the Act,
Falls the Shadow.”

The “**shadow**” of which Eliot speaks is what Paul calls “**the law of sin.**” The gospel of which Paul is not ashamed insists that the brokenness of life we experience all around us and within us does not come from anything within our power to cure. The brokenness of life is not just a matter of lack of education or unjust social systems or inadequate laws. You can’t blame it on the way you were potty trained, or the fact that your parents did not give you a BMW for your 16th birthday. The human predicament is the result of **a deep, persistent, self-centeredness...a fundamental break in our relationship with the God who created us to share God’s own triune love, in a word Sin.**

Our faith insists that we are created in and through the love of God “to glorify and enjoy God forever,” as we Presbyterian never tire of saying. And yet instead of receiving life as a gift from God, we center life around our own wants and desires. Instead of worshipping God, the Lord and Giver of Life, we worship at the shrine of our own “sovereign Self.” Sometimes in pride we act as if we were answerable to no one, a law unto ourselves. Other times we submerge ourselves in a world of numbing distractions--not the least of which is what someone has called the “plug-in drug,” television. It seems that we will do just about anything to escape the anxiety of the civil war in our own souls, because deep down we know, whether we acknowledge it or not, that, “**I can will what is right but I cannot do.... So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand.**”

That's what we are up against. That's our human predicament in a nut shell. Call it what you will, it feels like a “civil war” in our own souls.

But we can't stop here. There is more that can and must be said. An elderly woman after hearing a sermon on sin stomped out of the church. As she passed the minister at the door, she said sharply, "If all of us are really as bad off as you say we are...**God help us!**" God help us indeed!

Facing the human predicament with relentless honesty, Paul exclaims, “**Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?**” But then, without so much as a pause for breath, he declares, “**Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord!**” No matter how powerful and persistent Sin may be, it will not have the final word. **God’s grace will!** In the cross of Christ the power of Sin is broken. No longer can it separate us from the relentless love of God, hell-bent on setting all things right. In the gospel “**the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith**” has been set loose in the world. Even now and in our own lives today, the Lord of sovereign love is at work, giving us new strength to love, and forgiveness when we fail, and courage to take the next small step of costly obedience...and the next and the next after that. The gospel of which we need not be ashamed is the power of God, to redeem us for usefulness, in the work of Christ’s reconciling love among us. “**Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord!**” To him be all glory and majesty, all dominion and power, now and forever more. Amen.

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