

**SERMON: “Not Ashamed of the Gospel” Part 9  
“The Heart of the Gospel!”**

**April 25, 2010**

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Eternal God, you have destined us in love to be your beloved Children, and from your love in Jesus Christ nothing in all creation can ever separate us. Grant now that through the reading and preaching of your word, we may hear again the promise of the gospel, assuring us that no matter what may come our way, you are with us, upholding us in a love that will not let us go. And grant that in hearing the gospel, by the power of the Holy Spirit we may be empowered to believe and to obey, to your name’s honor and glory; through Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson: Psalm 139:1-12 New Testament Lesson: Romans 8:28-39

Over the past two and a half months we have been exploring Paul’s Letter to the Church at Rome. In all my ministry I don’t think I have ever been more energized by a series of sermons than this. Romans has a way of doing that. It has throughout the history of the Church. But still we have barely scratched the surface of Romans. And even when this series is over, we will still barely have gotten a toe-hold on this the greatest of all the letters of Paul—the ‘Mount Everest’ of Scripture that towers over all the New Testament.

At the beginning of this series I confessed that this is the first time in my 42 years as an ordained Presbyterian minister that I have attempted to preach an extended series on Romans. I wish I had had the theological courage to have tackled Romans years ago. Who knows how much it might have changed my whole ministry?

But I didn’t. Frankly, I was afraid of Romans. There is so much in the Letter that I do not understand and perhaps never will. Romans is deep and daunting. It stretches our minds and our hearts as wide as the gospel itself...yes, **as wide as the gospel itself.**

No where else does Paul scale the heights of the gospel of God’s invincible grace in Jesus Christ more profoundly than in his Letter to the Romans. The gospel Paul proclaims is not merely a matter of reassuring words we use in church to make us feel better about ourselves. The gospel, Paul insists, is nothing less than **“the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith,”** to Jew and Gentile, saint and sinner, insider and outsider alike.

The gospel is theological dynamite! It has power to blow apart all the human distinctions we prize so highly. The gospel transcends all the labels we put on ourselves or others. **“There is no distinction,”** says Paul, **“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** And yet, **“while we were still sinners, Christ died for the ungodly.”** So that **“Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.”** For **“God has consigned all to disobedience that he may have mercy on all!”** And in the fullness of time even **“The creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay to obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”**

That’s the gospel Paul is not ashamed of. It stretches our minds and our faith almost to the breaking point! It is the most radical word of grace imaginable.

There are many parts of the Letter to the Romans that I have neglected over the years of my ministry. But there is one passage in particular to which I have turned time and time again—the words we read this morning from Romans 8. If all I had was one chapter of one

book of the Bible to build my faith upon, it would be Romans 8. And the most precious part of Romans 8 are the words of our text this morning. **“If God is for us, who is against us?”... I am convinced that neither death nor life...nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

That is the very heart of the gospel! It is the good news beyond all other. If I had to sum up everything I most fervently believe, and everything that in one way or another, however inadequately, I have tried to say to you for 19 years it would be this: **God is with us and for us in Jesus Christ, and from his love nothing in all creation can ever separate us.** That’s the gospel in a nutshell.

Nowhere does the gospel of which Paul is not ashamed find more profound expression than in the 8<sup>th</sup> chapter of Romans. Like a climber scaling the heights of a great mountain, Paul advances step by step toward the peak. The base camp from which he sets out is this: **“There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”**

Then from that base-camp, Paul climbs higher and higher, with one affirmation serving as a foothold for the next. “There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,” for in him we are set free from the powers of Sin and Death. In him we are adopted as the beloved children of God, so that, as God’s children, we can address God intimately in prayer as “Abba, Father.” And in him we become heirs of the rich inheritance of his grace, provided that we suffer with him. Yet, even as we do, we are assured that **“the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory to be revealed to us...for the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay to obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.”** For in the end **“all things work together for good, for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.”**

With those words Paul approaches the summit of the gospel. As he looks back over the path he has traveled, Paul asks rhetorically, **“So what are we to say about these things? Just this—“If God is for us, who is against us?”**

**“If God is for us...”** Ah, but is he, and how do we know? That is the essential question for faith. **Is God for us or not?** Is the ultimate power from which all things come and to whom all things belong really and truly for us? There is no more important question in the life of faith. “If God *is* for us,” then no matter who or what may be against us is finally irrelevant. “If God is for us,” nothing else truly matters. But ***is* God for us?**

You know as well as I do that there is certainly plenty of evidence to the contrary that at least makes us wonder. “If God is for us,” then why in Heaven’s name is there so much senseless tragedy and outright evil in the world? We live in a fallen world where there is much that makes us wonder whether there is any meaning and purpose, much less love, behind it all. Countless people over the centuries have lost their faith, or never embraced faith at all, because of the things that make us wonder whether God is “for us,” or even whether there is a God worth believing in at all.

**So how can we know, and how can we trust, that God is for us?** Here and in the next three chapters Paul lifts up two great signs that God is for us. The sign of God’s faithfulness to Israel, and the sign of God’s faithfulness in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Let us look at each in turn.

Consider first **God's faithfulness to Israel**. One way the Old Testament can be read theologically is not just as a record of "the mighty acts of God," but as the story of God's long-suffering patience with his often-wayward people. The Old Testament is not a success story. It is not the story of an ever deepening faith. It is the story of God's steadfast refusal to let go those whom God had chosen to be his covenant people.

At least that is the way the prophets of Israel often tell the story. The prophet Hosea puts it poignantly as he overhears God say,

"When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me... My people are bent on turning away from me; so they are appointed to the yoke (of slavery in exile) and none shall remove it. But how can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger... for I am God, not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy." (Hosea 11:1-9)

In lovely poetic images the psalmist says the same thing from his own perspective.

"Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? Or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there thy hand shall lead me and thy right hand shall hold me. If I say, 'Let only darkness cover me, and the light about me be night,' even the darkness is not dark to thee, the night is bright as day; for darkness is as light with thee." (Ps. 139:7-12)

One way to read the whole Older Testament is as the story of the persistent, long-suffering faithfulness of God who never gives up on his often wayward Covenant People!

That's the issue Paul takes up in chapters 9-11 of his Letter to the Romans—the theme of God's relentless faithfulness of Israel! Paul asks, "**has God rejected his people?**" By no means! God forbid! Perish the thought! "**For the gifts and call of God are irrevocable!... God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.**" As if stunned by what he has just said, Paul breaks into a doxology of praise. "**O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and how inscrutable his ways!**" (Rom. 11:1,32-33)

What does all this have to do with the words of our text this morning from Romans 8? Something tremendously important it seems to me! Last week as I was working on this sermon it suddenly struck me in the middle of the night, in a way it never had before, just how important is Paul's understanding of God's unrelenting faithfulness to Israel to the whole gospel he proclaims.

The fact that God has not and will not give up on his chosen people Israel is a concrete sign of the faithfulness of God! If God were to reject Israel, his Beloved, it would call into question all the promises of God. If God should turn his back on those whom he had called to be his own, who's to say he might not do the same to us? God's faithfulness to Israel is a sign of God's steadfast, relentless love for all whom he has called and claimed and destined to be his own.

One great sign that God is for us is God's enduring faithfulness to Israel. The other is the **resurrection of Jesus whom we crucified**. How do we know that God is for us, even while we were still sinners, asks Paul? Because **"God did not withhold his own Son, but gave him for us all."** In the gift of Jesus Christ, God gives us all that we need to trust with our whole being God's promises of grace.

So in the light of what God has done in the Beloved Son Jesus to 'cross out' our sins, Paul asks rhetorically, **"Who can bring any charge against us?"** If God declares us **"not guilty,"** who is to condemn us? Who indeed. **"It is Christ Jesus who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us.** So, **Who or what will separate us from the love of Christ?"**

It is not too hard to think of some possibilities. But Paul beats us to the punch. **"Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?"** Will anything we suffer, for any reason we suffer it, separate us from the love of God? And even if it seems that "we are being killed all the day long, and are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered," can even the worst that may come our way separate us from the love of Christ? Can it?

**No,** says Paul. No indeed! For even those things that might cause us most to question God's love cannot finally separate us from it. In God's relentless love, we are **"more than conquerors through him who loved us"** and gave himself for us.

Here Paul comes to the summit of the gospel. Standing on the peak looking into the sunrise (Son rise!), he offers his own confession of faith.

**"I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, not depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!"**

No separation from the love of God in Christ Jesus! That is the gospel of which Paul is not ashamed and by which you and I are saved if we trust it. We have no iron-clad proof that it is true. Such proof would destroy faith. What we have instead are two great signs—the witness of God's persistent faithfulness to his covenant people Israel and the sign of God's raising to life again the Christ whom we crucified. Just as God does not let go his covenant people, so God will not let us go. We are held fast in a love that is steadfast and sure, a love that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things endures all things...and never ends."

Friends, if you remember nothing else I have said this day or across the years, remember and hold on to this: **God is with us and for us in Jesus Christ, and from his love nothing in all creation can ever separate us.** That is the gospel we are not ashamed of, for it is **"the power of God for salvation to all who believe,"** including us. Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

4C©April 25, 2010

Allen C. McSween, Jr.  
Fourth Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC