

SERMON: “Not Ashamed of the Gospel” Part 10

May 2, 2010

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: Gracious God, in calling us to yourself in Jesus Christ, you have made us members one of another in the body of Christ on earth. Grant now by the power of your Spirit, that we may receive your word in faith, so as to be formed in the image of Christ and transformed by his redeeming love. Thus may our whole lives be an offering of thanksgiving unto you, the Lord and Giver of Life. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Romans 12:1-13

“So much to say—so little time to say it.” I can almost hear Paul saying that to himself as he writes the words we just read. “So much to say—so little time to say it.” How do I put into words, he seems to be thinking...how do I put into words what it means to live by the gospel of God’s grace in Jesus Christ? The gospel is the **“power of God for salvation to all who believe.”** So how do I help people experience that power in their own lives here and now? “So much to say—so little time to say it.”

I know the feeling well. Someone asked me the other day if I was going to try to pack everything I had intended to say to you over the years into my last sermon. I assured them that I would not.

But reading the 12th chapter of Romans, it seems as if Paul is trying to pack into one chapter almost everything he has to say about how the gospel is embodied in the life of the church. We could easily spend a month of Sundays on Romans 12 and never exhaust its riches. “So much to say—so little time to say it.”

The words of our text seem particularly appropriate this morning as members of this year’s Confirmation Class confirm the promises made at their baptism. Paul’s appeal to the believers in Rome to let the gospel of grace form

every aspect of their life together serves well as a charge to new disciples as they are received into active membership in the church. It also serves to remind all of us of the ways by which the grace of God is being embodied in our own lives and in the life of this congregation.

Paul begins, **“I appeal to you, *therefore*, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”**

Before we turn to the rest of what Paul is saying here, pay careful attention to the word **“therefore.”** It is key to understanding everything else Paul is saying in Romans 12. Apart from **“therefore,”** Romans 12 sounds like Paul has gone from preaching to moralizing. “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice...do not be conformed to this world...do not think of yourself more highly than you ought... Let love be genuine... rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.” It sounds like a check list of things we are supposed to do. Do all this and you will be “holy and acceptable to God.”

But that is exactly the attitude Paul has been fighting against throughout the previous 11 chapters of Romans. He calls it “living by the law”—focusing more on the things **we** are supposed to do than on what **God has done for us** in Jesus Christ.

Paul knows how impossible it is for us on our own to do what God desires. In words we all can identify with all too well, Paul confesses, **“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.”** Merely checking off duties, following good advice, cannot set us free from our

self-centered selves. Instead of making us righteous before God, it more often makes us *self-righteous*, one of the worst sins of all.

The gospel does not say, “**IF** you do these things, you will be loved by God.” That is not good news at all! It is the worst possible news. It means that I have to earn the love of God. It puts me in charge of my own salvation—a terrifying prospect indeed. The gospel does not say, “*If* you do this or that or the other, you will be saved.” The gospel says, **Because** Christ died for us while we were **still sinners... Because** all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God... **Because** nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord... **Because** of all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ, and all that God is doing in our lives today by the power of the Holy Spirit, **therefore, by the mercies of God**, as an expression of gratitude, offer your whole self to God—body, mind, and soul--as an act of worship.

The Christian life begins and ends in the **grace of God**. We do not *earn* our salvation by anything we do. We *receive* God’s salvation as a pure gift of grace. And then, we, in turn, say “**thank you**” by the way in which we live our whole lives. **Therefore**, brothers and sisters in Christ, says Paul, **therefore** in response to the goodness and mercy of God in Jesus Christ, “**present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.**”

Did you hear anything a bit odd in what I just said? If not, let me say it again. “Present **your bodies** as living sacrifice to God. “Present **your bodies.**” Paul will not let us forget for a moment how important bodies are in Christian faith. How we treat our own bodies, and what we do with or to the bodies of others is vitally important in a religion that looks “for the **resurrection of the body...**” Bodies matter in Christian faith. The body of the world is the beloved creation of

God. In the fullness of time the Son of God became embodied, for us and our salvation. At the end of time we await the resurrection of our bodies to share in the life of God's New Creation. In the Christian life **bodies matter**.

“Present your bodies,” says Paul, as an act of thanksgiving to God for the gift of life itself, and as an expression of gratitude for the grace that stands at the beginning and end of all of God's ways. **“Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, for that is your spiritual worship.”**

The phrase **“spiritual worship”** can perhaps better be translated as “logical or reasonable service” to God. To offer our whole selves to God—body, mind, and will--is what worship is all about. The worship God desires is not merely a matter of warm feelings or lofty thoughts. It is not a way of escaping from the world of bodies that age and decay and die. The right worship of God, the Creator of all that is, involves offering all that we are in gratitude for all that God has done for us. That is our logical, reasonable worship.

That kind of logical worship, Paul goes on to say, can save us from being **conformed** to the way things are, so as to be **transformed** by a whole new way of thinking. Goodness knows, the world around us does its deal-level best to squeeze us into its mold. Every minute of every day our moral character is being formed by forces we may not be aware of, especially by television and the dominate media. The truth is, we all conform to some pattern of expected behavior. Even those who pride themselves the most in “doing their own thing,” still conform to the expectations of some person or group whose opinion they value. Otherwise, why is their “own thing” so much like the “own thing” of so many others?

Conforming to the expectations of others may be a particular problem for young people, but it is something none of us ever out-grows. Ask yourself as honestly as you can, who or what really calls the shots in your life? Whose standards do you seek to live up to? Who do you most want to be like, and who do you most want to be liked by? Who or what is forming your character?

In just a moment eight young people in our church will confirm the promises made at their baptism. They will state publicly that they want their lives to be shaped more by the **transforming power of God's grace** than by the pressures of their peers, or the expectations of their parents or the values of their culture. None of you can know at this point in your life just how significant that commitment may be, or where it may lead in your journey of faith. But just as God has been faithful to the promises of your baptism, so God will be faithful to the promise to transform you inwardly, by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern the will of God for your life.

In that process of seeking to discern the will of God and follow it, it is important for us to remember that we are not on our own. We are joined to a great company of fellow travelers on the way to the truth and the life that is ours in Christ. Christianity is always a team sport.

But it is important to remember that as we are being formed and transformed by the grace of Christ, we do not all end up thinking and acting alike. God never makes copies—only originals. God loves diversity!

In the rich diversity of the life we share together, Paul encourages us not to think of ourselves too highly, or too lowly. He warns us not to think that our particular gifts, or our particular way of worshipping or serving God, is better than

that of others. In response to God's grace given to us, Paul encourages us to think modestly as we reflect on "**the measure of faith that *God has assigned***" us.

Have you ever thought of it that way--that the measure of faith that is yours is not something you give yourself? It is not something you achieve by trying hard to believe certain things. The measure of faith that is yours is what God wants you to have. It is what **God has assigned you**. If that's true, then it seems that God not only wants "true believers" to inspire us, but at least a few good skeptics to keep us honest and to challenge us to think more deeply about what we believe and why we believe it. The measure of faith that is ours is **assigned us** by God for reasons known only to God.

And so are the **gifts of grace** that are ours. We are clearly not all gifted alike. Some are good at math, some are good at literature. Some are good with their hands, some with their words. Some are good at challenging people; some are good at comforting them. We all have different gifts, different interests, and different abilities. And all the rich variety of those gifts is important for building up the church, the body of Christ on earth.

Using a familiar image, Paul reminds us that just as the human body has many different members that go together to form an organic unity, so we in the one body of Christ are all **members one of another**. Our unity in Christ enables us to cherish a rich diversity in the church in accord with "**the grace given to us.**"

Now there is always the danger that the diversity we experience will strain or disrupt the unity God intends. But how can the diversity that comes from the faith God has assigned us and the grace God has given us serve to build up the body of Christ instead of dividing it?

Here's how, says Paul. Here's the key. Listen again to Paul's gracious charge to us all. **“Let love by genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast what is good. Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope—for “the God of hope has filled you with all joy and peace in believing”—be patient in suffering—for the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing to the glory to be revealed to us.” Persevere in prayer—for the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.” Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice hospitality.”**

Paul still has a lot more to say, and so little time to say it. But this is enough for now. By the grace of God in Jesus Christ we are called to offer our whole lives in service to God. By the power of the Holy Spirit we are being transformed inwardly so as to discern and to do the will of God. And by the mercies of God we are joined one to another in the body of Christ on earth. And so as an embodied sign of our gratitude, **let us love one another with mutual affection**, to the praise and glory of God. Amen.