



THE MAN AND HIS MESSAGE

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1189

Romans 1:1-6

First Message

Gary Vanderet

February 28th, 1999

In his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Dallas Willard writes:

How many people are radically and permanently repelled from the way by Christians who are unfeeling, stiff, unapproachable, boring, lifeless, obsessive and dissatisfied? Yet such Christians are everywhere; and what they are missing is the wholesome liveliness springing up from a balanced vitality within God's loving rule. Spirituality wrongly understood or pursued is a major source of human misery and rebellion against God.¹

Many of you have seen the musical version of Victor Hugo's masterpiece *Les Miserables*, the story of the triumph of God's gracious love over human raggedness. John Ortberg, in his book *Love Beyond Reason*, summarizes the story this way:

The escaped convict Jean Valjean, imprisoned for twenty years because he stole a loaf of bread, is shown hospitality by a bishop. But the temptation is too much; he takes some of the bishop's silver and steals away into the night. Stopped by a constable he tries to lie his way out of trouble: The silver was a gift, he says. The constable takes him back to the bishop and Jean Valjean waits to hear the words that will return him to prison until he dies. Nothing in his life prepared him for what he is about to hear.

"You are mistaken," the bishop says to Valjean. "Of course this silver was my gift. But only part. You forgot the most valuable part. You forgot to take the silver candlesticks."

Jean Valjean waits for the condemnation that he knows he deserves. Instead he is blindsided by grace. One moment he faces poverty and prison, the next freedom and abundance. Before Valjean leaves, the bishop says to him, "You must never forget this moment. Your soul and your life have been bought back. You are not your own. From now on, you belong to God."

And because of grace, Jean Valjean's life becomes an act of love. He honors the promise given to a dying prostitute: he devotes himself to raising her child, Cosette. Later he faces danger to save the man who loves Cosette, even though he knows it may mean living life alone.

Opposed to Jean Valjean is a man committed to the law, to "spirituality wrongly understood"; the constable Jauvert. Jauvert is convinced of his own right-

eousness. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. He is a champion of morality and justice. He spends his life seeking to recapture Jean Valjean.

Let us give Jauvert his day in court. He believes in many good things. He is committed to truth. He wants wrongdoing stamped out. He desires a society without thievery or deceit or corruption. He makes personal sacrifices to pursue such a society. He sincerely believes himself to be an agent of good.

In his world, though, there is no room for grace. And because he is blind to his own need for grace, his capacity to love withers and dies. He cannot offer mercy. The crisis of his existence occurs when Jean Valjean risks his own life to save that of Jauvert, his relentless pursuer. But Jauvert cannot bring himself to receive grace. He despairs. He kills himself, rather than admit the truth: his own raggedness has been as great as that of the criminals he devoted his life to punishing.

In the end it is Valjean, the convict, who is able to love. He comes to see what is expressed so beautifully in the musical *Les Miz*: "To love another person is to see the face of God."²

The book of Romans is one of the most powerful and influential documents that has ever been written. Our Judeo-Christian ethic comes largely from this letter, written by the apostle Paul. Romans has changed the face of Western civilization. It has been the means and the force behind some of the most significant conversions in church history.

Augustine, the great philosopher and theologian, was converted by reading just a few verses from the 13th chapter of Romans. Martin Luther, the great reformer, was a professor of exegesis at Wittenburg University. He was a brilliant, confused young man, but this letter ignited his soul and triggered the Reformation. In his preface to his commentary on Romans Luther wrote:

This epistle represents the fundamental teachings of the New Testament and is the very purest Gospel, well worth not only to be memorized verbatim but also to be used daily by every Christian as the daily bread of his soul. For no one could ever exhaust this epistle by study and meditation. The better one becomes acquainted with it, the higher one will treasure it and all the more delight in it.

John Wesley, listening to a reading of Luther's preface to his commentary on Romans, found his own heart

strangely warmed, and out of that came the great evangelical awakening of the eighteenth century. John Bunyan, studying Romans in the Bedford jail, was so caught up by the themes of this great letter that he penned the immortal classic *Pilgrim's Progress*, which has taught so many believers how a Christian relates to the world.

If you don't know or understand Romans, it is my prayer that this letter will become everyday reading for you. It will provide nourishment for your soul.

The Book of Acts doesn't give any information about how the church at Rome was founded. It was probably started by a group of Jews who went to Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. Listening to Peter's message that day, they became believers, returned to Rome and started the church. There may have been as many as five house churches in the city. The church had been established for several years by the time this letter was written (14:14; 15:23). The faith of that group of first century Christians became known throughout the world. They had a tremendous impact upon Rome and indeed the Roman Empire.

The structure of the book is easy to follow. It has three benedictions, the first comes at the end of chapter 8; the second at the end of chapter 11; and the third at the end of chapter 16. Paul divides the book into three sections, and each section is sub-divided.

The first two and a half chapters, 1:1–3:20, deal with *sin*.

Paul writes, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." He means every one of us, bar none. We are sinful to the depth of our being. The proof is that we all die, because death is the result of sin.

The second two and a half chapters, 3:21–5:21, deal with *salvation*.

At 3:21, there is an abrupt change in the thought. Paul says, "But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested." The situation is critical: We are all going to hell. But now, the righteousness of God has been revealed. And from 3:21 through 5:21, Paul declares the truth about our Lord's mighty saving acts.

The next three chapters, 6:1–8:39, deal with *sanctification*.

These chapters help us understand how to grow as Christians, how to deal with the entrenched sin in our lives, the long-term habits that hold us in their grasp.

The next three chapters, 9:1–11:36, deal with *sovereignty*.

These chapters discuss the nation of Israel and their place in God's plan to bring salvation to the world. And we use the term sovereignty, because the emphasis in these three chapters is on God's sovereign election of his people.

Then, beginning with chapter 12, the next two and a half chapters, 12:1–15:13, deal with *service*.

These chapters set out what it means to respond to

the grace of God in service. Chapter 12 begins with the word "therefore." Paul writes, "Therefore, by the mercies of God, present your bodies as a living sacrifice."

Finally, the last one and a half chapters are *salutations*.

In these verses Paul greets a number of people in Rome.

John Stott gives another way to break this book down:

1:1–3:20 deals with the wrath of God;
3:21–8:39 deals with the grace of God;
9:1–11:36 deals with the plan of God;
12:1–15:13 deals with the will of God.³

The introduction to the book extends through verse 17, but we will take the text only through verse 6 this morning. Paul begins the letter in the customary format of his time. Today we address the person we are writing to first and identify ourselves at the end of the letter. In the ancient world, however, the custom was to reverse the order. Paul follows that format, but deviates from it somewhat in that he gives a much more elaborate description of himself than was normal for the time. Since he didn't found the church, perhaps he felt the need to establish his credentials.

The apostle's opening words are very instructive. Verse 1:

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God (NASB)

Paul says three things about himself. First, he is a "bond-servant of Jesus Christ." The apostle knew that everyone has to serve somebody. He dispels the myth of neutrality, the notion that somehow we can take the middle ground and not serve either side. That is not an option. We are either going to serve the Lord Jesus Christ and be his slave, or serve the evil one and be a slave to our own passions. Isn't it astonishing that this wonderfully productive apostle views himself as a slave of Christ? No matter who we are, whether a pastor, teacher, software engineer or corporation president, if we are to be productive in God's eyes, we must be servants. This is what Jesus said of himself: "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve" (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45). Paul says he chose to serve the Lord Jesus. That can be true of all of us.

The next thing the apostle says is not true of all of us, however. Paul says he was "called to be an apostle." That is a unique calling. By New Testament definition, the apostles were men who had seen the resurrected Lord and been sent out by him to speak with his authority. They had the same role as the Old Testament prophets: the prophets wrote the Old Testament, and the apostles wrote the New Testament.

This two-fold designation as "slave" and "apostle" is particularly striking when these words are contrasted with one another. "Slave" is a characterization of great humility. The word expresses Paul's sense of personal

insignificance. He was without rights of his own, having been purchased to belong to Christ. "Apostle," on the other hand, is a title of great authority. It expresses his sense of official privilege and dignity by reason of his appointment by Jesus Christ.

The third thing that Paul says about himself in this opening verse is that he has been "set apart for the gospel of God." We have drained away much of the meaning of this word gospel. It means, simply, good news. Many who call themselves Christians are unfamiliar with the good news, however. They call themselves Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists, Roman Catholics or whatever, but they don't know the good news. To them, the Christian truth that they know is not good news at all; it is a burden, a form of piety that is unrealistic and obnoxious.

But the gospel is the good news about God, the good news that he is doing something about the mess we have made with the world and our own lives. God is accomplishing great things right in the midst of everything that appears to be going wrong. Our government is in moral chaos. Marriages are falling apart. Amidst all the ugliness and turmoil of our world, however, God has done something right. That is the theme of this introduction. Six times in this opening chapter Paul uses this word "gospel." Whenever we come to it I would like you to translate it "good news," because that is what it is.

Paul underscores a number of things about this good news, this gospel. First, notice that it originates with God. It is the "gospel of God." The apostles did not invent it; it was revealed and entrusted to them by God. This is crucial to our spreading the good news. John Stott reminds us that what we have to share with others is not a collection of human speculations, one more religion to add to the list. In fact, it isn't a religion at all. It is, rather, the "gospel of God," God's own good news for a lost world. Without this conviction evangelism is separated of its content, purpose and drive.

And it wasn't an afterthought, says Paul. Verse 2:

which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures,

The "holy Scriptures" is Paul's term for the Old Testament. He is saying that when God revealed the good news to the apostles, it did not come to them as a complete novelty, because God had already promised it through his prophets in the Old Testament Scriptures. There is an essential continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Jesus himself made it clear that the Scriptures bore witness to him; that he was the Son of Man in Daniel 7 and the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53. In the book of Acts, Peter quotes the Old Testament in reference to Jesus' resurrection and exaltation. Also, in Acts Paul reasons with people from the Scriptures, that the Christ must suffer and die, and that he was Jesus.

Way back when Adam and Eve made that fateful de-

cision that threw the world into sin, right then God made the promise that a seed would come to set everything right. And throughout the entire Old Testament, as C.S. Lewis observed, "The leaves rustle with hope." Over and over we hear the refrain, "a man is coming, a savior is coming!" He will be a Semite. He will be an Israelite. He will be from the Tribe of Judah. He will be one of David's descendants. He will be born in Bethlehem. He will live in Nazareth. He will sojourn in Egypt. He will suffer and die. He will rise again. Each one of these events is written about in the Old Testament. Everyone was looking forward to the One who was coming. The gospel was "promised beforehand."

This leads us to Paul's next observation, namely, that the essence of the gospel is Jesus Christ. Look at verses 3-4:

concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord,

John Stott writes:

If we bring verses 1 and 3 together, by omitting the parenthesis of verse 2, we are left with the statement that Paul was set apart for the gospel of God *regarding his Son*. For the gospel of God is 'the gospel of his Son' (9). God's good news is about Jesus. As Luther [wrote]: 'Here the door is thrown open wide for the understanding of Holy Scripture, that is, everything must be understood in relation to Christ.' Calvin [wrote]: 'The whole gospel is contained in Christ.'⁴

You can take Mohammed out of Islam and the message of Islam remains. You can take Buddha out of Buddhism and his message retains its integrity. But remove Jesus Christ from the gospel and you destroy it. That is because Jesus *is* the gospel. Jesus Christ is absolutely central and indispensable to Christianity. Christianity was never meant to be an intolerable religion of rules and ritual, which it had become by Luther's time, and by which he had been enslaved until he read this book of Romans. Christianity is a person, Jesus Christ, who came to earth to do for man what man could not do for himself.

Who is this Jesus? Paul describes this Son in two contrasting clauses: "who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh," and "who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord."

These clauses stress both the humanity and deity of Jesus. Humanly, he was a descendant of David. As the son of David he had the right to sit on the throne of Israel; and as the Son of God he has the right to sit on the throne of the universe. That is the point he is making. "Son of God" is a messianic title. Jesus has been exalted to sit at the Father's right hand. He is the One who came to set things right; and by the resurrection, God

affirmed that he had indeed set things right, and he was exalted to the place of authority.

John Stott summarizes it this way:

So here is a balanced statement of both the humiliation and the exaltation, the weakness and the power of God's Son, his human descent traced to David, his divine sonship-in-power established by the resurrection and gift of the Spirit. Moreover, this unique person, seed of David and Son of God, weak and powerful, incarnate and exalted, is *Jesus* (a human historical figure), *Christ* (the Messiah of Old Testament Scripture), *our Lord*, who owns and rules our lives.⁵

The third thing that Paul says about the gospel is that it extends to all nations. Verses 5-6:

through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles, for His name's sake, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ;

Paul says he received from God "grace and apostleship." He links those two together because he always saw his apostleship as an undeserved privilege, a gracious decision on God's part. Remember what Paul was doing at the time of his conversion. He was on his way up to Damascus with oaths on his lips to persecute Christians. He hated Christians. He hated Christ. And the Lord stopped him along the way and expressed his love for him. It was grace that knocked him down that day. Grace was the light that blinded him, and grace was the power that took the scales away from his eyes. Paul never got over the wonder and power of that grace. Grace became his invocation, his benediction, and everything in between. Grace is what brought him to his knees over his sin, and grace is what took his sin away.

On that day Paul discovered, as John Newton was to discover centuries later,

*Amazing grace! how sweet the sound—
That saved a wretch like me!*

When we were in Ghana last year, a number of us had the opportunity to visit the castles where millions of African men and women were kept before they were sold into slavery. It was a very moving experience. They say that somewhere between sixty and a hundred million people were captured and sold as slaves, but only about twenty million of them survived the cruel voyage to the Americas.

John Newton was a slave trader. When at last he was confronted with the gospel, he could hardly believe that God could love a wretch like him: "Amazing grace! how sweet the sound—That saved a wretch like me!" That was Paul. He was on his way to kill Christians, and the Lord loved him on the way.

Paul, of course, thought God loved him because he merited being loved. And why not? After all, in Philipians he wrote this lofty description of himself: "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless" (Phil. 3:5-6). Paul felt God was getting a good deal. He was like Jauvert. He had devoted his life to pursuing and punishing people who were not devoted to the law as he was. He was sure of what he believed and passionately committed to his values.

But something was missing from his life: he had no grace. It was only when he saw Jesus face to face that God opened his eyes to see that this One he had imagined to be a misguided street preacher was, in fact, God incarnate. When Paul changed his view of Jesus, he changed his view of himself. Henceforth, the proud Saul would become the humble Paul, the slave of Christ. Paul went on his way, preaching the gospel, the good news of that grace. He preached the gospel to the Gentiles, that is, to everybody. It was that good news that liberated from all his prejudices and pride of race, nation, tribe, caste and class.

That is what I desire for us as we study through this marvelous letter: that God might meet us in our need, and show us his marvelous grace.

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¹ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989) 80-81.

² John Ortberg, *Love Beyond Reason* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998) 136-137.

³ John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 36-43.

⁴ Stott, *Romans*, 49.

⁵ Stott, *Romans*, 51.



THE MOTIVATION FOR MINISTRY

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1190
Romans 1:7-17
Second Message
Gary Vanderet
March 7th, 1999

Last week was a difficult time for me emotionally. On Tuesday, I will say good-bye to my oldest son who is going into the military for four years. There is nothing like a loved one leaving to remind one of what is important in life. Only two things are lasting in this world: people, and God's Word. The most important things therefore are loving people and imparting truth. As I tried to write a letter to my son last week, I found myself wanting to do both of those: to connect and to impart.

Also last week, I watched again one of my favorite movies, *Mr. Holland's Opus*, a film that beautifully captures the importance of relationships. In one scene the music teacher, Glen Holland, is driving a student driver car like a madman, rushing to the hospital where his wife has just given birth. His joy at holding his firstborn child and kissing the woman who carried and delivered the fruit of their union, is wonderfully portrayed. But within a year, the Hollands discover that their son, Cole, is deaf. Joy turns to grief, especially for the music-loving father. He will never be able to connect with his son with music, the thing is so close to the center of his soul.

Larry Crabb, in his book, *Connecting*, describes one of the most moving parts in the movie:

Mr. Holland recognizes in Cole, perhaps now sixteen, a passion for life that lies behind his deafness. It finally dawns on him that Cole longs to be part of his father's world, and could be, through a medium far richer than music, one that deafness can't block. During a concert, Mr. Holland, who is a wonderful director, pianist and composer, but not a vocalist, puts down his baton and announces that he wants to sing a song dedicated to his son. He then sings (and signs) "My Beautiful Child," by John Lennon. As Cole reads the signing and his father's lips, in that moment, the two connect. Something very powerful comes out of the father and pours into the son, leaving Mr. Holland trembling with joy and Cole glowing with received love. The father's dreams of a lesser connection have died, and he enters into the joy of something far greater.¹

Larry goes on to say, "In the gospel, the good news, God offers mankind a richer joy than anything else provides in life. It is the joy of listening to God sing to us a love song in sheer delight, despite all of our deficiencies, and giving us the privilege of singing that song to others."

There is no greater joy in life than sharing the gospel of God's grace. This is what the apostle Paul communicates in the opening verses of his letter to the church in Rome. We come now to the second half of his introduction to this letter, where he speaks of his own burning motivation to minister in the capital of the Roman Empire. In our first study we looked at Paul's description of himself and his gospel; today, beginning with verse 7 of chapter 1, he addresses himself to his readers. Romans 1:7:

to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle wrote this letter in 56 or 57 A.D., when Rome was the center of peace and civilization in the world. But it was corrupt to the core. Senators, soldiers and educators were a common sight in Rome, but so were prostitutes and pimps. But, miraculously, one by one, people of such diverse backgrounds were learning of the grace of God. In fact, in chapter 16 of this letter, Paul greets all types of people, from Roman officials to slaves, who had come to know Christ, reminding us that God bestows his grace on everyone, those who think they are somebody and those who think they are nobody.

Notice the first thing Paul tells these Romans is that they are loved. Many people think that God is mad at the world. They imagine he is cranky, out of sorts and insecure because people don't respond to his love, so he stomps around heaven shouting judgments at everyone. But nothing could be further from the truth. God loves us! As a consequence, when he sings his love song to us, our hearts begin to reverberate. That's where that longing, that yearning, that ache we feel inside comes from. We want something so bad we can taste it, but we don't know what it is. It is God singing his love song to us, wooing us to move toward him. So everything begins with God's love for us.

And notice that Paul addresses these people in Rome as "saints." Do you know that if you have come to Christ, that is what you are, a saint? Not that there is anything in us that is saintly. It is simply that God wants to love us and call us to himself. This word "saint" is used in the Old Testament for the people of God, the Israel of God, the covenant people. God said to Israel, "I will be your God and you will be my people." He called them the Hasidim, the saintly ones, the holy ones. After Christ's death, burial and resurrection, that

word was carried over into the New Testament to speak of God's people. Ray Stedman used to say that there are only two kinds of people in the world: the "saints" and the "aints." Christians are saints, not because we look saintly, but because of Christ's death and our faith in the good news.

In verses 8-13, Paul goes on to share his feeling for these believers, saying three things. First, he expresses his thanks for them. Verse 8:

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world.

Of course, it was this faith that had got them into trouble. Nero, the emperor, set in motion a vicious persecution of the church and many Christians were put to death for their faith. Notice these believers weren't talking about their children's ministry, their magnificent building or their paid clergy. They didn't have any of those things. The church didn't even own buildings until the fourth century. What the people of God talked about was their faith. They were counting on the risen Christ, not themselves anymore, and news of their faith had spread throughout the world.

Secondly, the apostle says he prays for them. Verses 9-10:

For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the preaching of the gospel of His Son, is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you.

In Paul's ministry, preaching and praying went hand in hand. Praying is the way to get truth from the head to the heart. John Stott comments, "He assures them that even though he doesn't know most of them personally, he still intercedes for them *unceasingly*, and *always*."²

Thirdly, Paul says he longs to see them. Verses 11-13:

For I long to see you in order that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; that is, that I may be encouraged together with you while among you, each of us by the other's faith, both yours and mine. And I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented thus far) in order that I might obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles.

The apostle wants to see them, for two reasons. First, to encourage them in their faith and to be encouraged by their faith. He is not coming to impart a spiritual gift in the way the New Testament refers to the gifts of the Spirit, which are given by the sovereign God. Paul would never claim to be able to do that. He is using the word in a more general sense. The gift that he wants to give in this context is to encourage them in their faith. And he wants to be encouraged by their faith, too. So there will be mutual encouragement.

The second reason Paul wants to go to Rome is to share the good news. He wants to evangelize, to go in the streets and preach. He is keen to go into the schools and the marketplaces, because he wanted to share the gospel with everyone.

In verses 14-16, Paul makes three strong personal statements about his desire to preach the gospel in Rome. When I compare these statements with my own casualness and complacency at times in sharing the gospel, they almost seem exaggerated. Verse 14: "I am under obligation"; verse 15: "I am eager"; verse 16: "I am not ashamed."

Why did Paul feel that way? For two primary reasons. Verses 14-15:

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. Thus, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

The first reason Paul feels such a powerful inner compulsion is that he views the gospel as a debt to the world. John Stott helps us understand what the apostle is saying here:

There are two ways of getting into debt. The first is to borrow money *from* someone; the second is to be given money *for* someone by a third party. For example, if I were to borrow \$1000 from you, I would be in your debt until I paid it back. But equally, if a friend of yours were to hand me \$1000 to give to you, I would be in your debt until I handed it over. In the former case I would have gotten myself into debt by borrowing, in the latter it is your friend who has put me in your debt by entrusting me with \$1000 for you. It is in this second sense that Paul is in debt. He hasn't borrowed anything from the Romans that he must repay. But Jesus Christ has entrusted him with the good news for them.³

Paul is saying, in effect, "Wherever I find people with a need I want to share the good news with them. *I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish.* I don't care how much education people have or how successful they are in business, I owe them the love of God." Do you realize that this is an obligation for us, too? We owe people love. That is a debt we will never fully pay off. You owe love to the cashier at the grocery store, the mechanic who fixes your car, your associate at work in the next cubicle, your teachers at school, your students.

David Roper shared this story of a woman who was listening to someone teach on the parable of the Good Samaritan. The point the teacher made was that the next person you meet who has a need is your neighbor. It isn't necessarily the person living next door. Later, this woman happened to be driving in a rainstorm when she noticed a young couple standing on the side of the road. One of them was black, the other was white, and they were carrying a baby. She stopped to help them. They were obviously down and out, and she

put them in her car. When she asked them if they were interested in spiritual things, the young woman said that the man she was with had a Spanish Bible, but she couldn't read Spanish. The woman gave them her Bible. She took them home and gave them her phone number. She found out later that they had gotten thrown out of their apartment because they had not paid the rent. She brought them to her home and ministered to them. Eventually the young woman came to know Christ.

Years later, the first woman was browsing in a Christian bookstore and saw a tract entitled, "The Woman Who Came Out of the Rain." It was the story of the young woman's conversion. The man who was with her on that rainy day was not her husband and he had left her. She had gotten involved with what used to be called the American Mission to the Jews, which had an outreach in the San Jose area. She ended up marrying one of the executives in the organization. They moved to New York City, and she herself became involved in leadership.

God loves to do that sort of thing. It doesn't have anything to do with how intelligent, articulate, or filled with the Word we are. It's a matter of making ourselves available to God and being willing to love those whom he puts in our path. I am not recommending that we all go out and pick up hitchhikers. The point is, we owe a debt of love. We are under obligation to make this good news known to others.

Secondly, Paul felt this obligation because he knew this was the power of God for salvation. Verse 16:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Education doesn't change people; it just makes them more intelligent in their evil practices. Bettering social conditions doesn't change people, either. Doing something to help meet their material needs is good, but it doesn't change their hearts. The only thing that can change the heart of a man or woman is the gospel, the good news about Jesus. That was why Paul preached it and that is why he was not embarrassed by it. The gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."

In order to have made this statement, Paul must have felt tempted to be ashamed of the gospel at times. He must have felt the same reluctance and embarrassment we feel on occasion. The Romans prided themselves on their power, just like Americans do today. They had military might that could conquer all nations that stood in their path; they had a tremendous program of road-building; they had some of the greatest law-makers in history; they had the ability to write great literature and create breathtaking art. Everyone hoped to visit Rome at least once in his lifetime, to enjoy the beauty and wonder of that magnificent city. But, as John Stott comments, "Paul wanted to visit the city, not as a tourist, but as an evangelist. He believed he had something to

share that people in the city needed to hear. What folly and presumption is this?"⁴

And Paul was no powerful physical specimen, either. I have always thought of him as a very masculine-looking individual, but the author of a third century book, Onesiphorus of Iconium, in *The Acts of Paul and Thekla*, describes the apostle in these words: "He was a man of moderate stature with curly hair, scanty, crooked legs, large knit eyebrows, and a long, ugly nose." Paul may have had a physical deformity as well. So what did a man like this think he could accomplish in the sophisticated city of Rome?

But Paul knew that as powerful as they Romans were in so many ways, they were powerless when it came to changing hearts. They were powerless to eliminate slavery. Half the population of the empire were slaves. They were powerless to change the stubborn, hostile, hateful hearts of men and eliminate violence, suicide, and corruption. But they could do nothing about these things. Paul says that is why he was so proud of the gospel—because it is the power of God to do the very things that men cannot do. So we don't need to apologize for the gospel. It is absolutely without rival.

The reason this gospel has such saving power is that it reveals God's righteousness. Verse 17:

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."

In the good news, the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed. It is brought into our experience from heaven down to where we are: the righteousness that is from faith to faith. The NIV translates this: "a faith that is from first to last" (lit., "from faith to faith"). What the apostle is saying is that it goes from faith to faith to faith to faith.

Paul, the rabbi, is thinking here of the Old Testament concept of righteousness, which refers to one's loyalty to keep his promise. In the Semitic world, when a man entered into a contract with another, if he kept his side of the contract, he would be known as "righteous"—he had done what was right. That is what Paul is saying. God is going to do what is right. He will be loyal to his covenant; and he will bring that righteousness into our experience. As the letter unfolds, Paul will say how all this becomes manifest.

In his book, *The Cost of Commitment*, John White illustrates this truth from the life of Abraham. God had called Abraham out of Ur and brought him to Palestine. He promised to bless him, to give him a land and a seed, and that through him all nations of the world would be blessed. The promises were very clear. Then God made a contract with Abraham. Contract making back then was very different from what we do today, and included an unusual ceremony. They didn't use contracts written on paper like we do, they used animals. They would slice animals in half, lay them a few feet apart, and the parties to the contract would walk

through the divided remains of the animals. This act was a way of saying, symbolically, "If I break the contract, may this happen to me: may I be cut in half." Now, when God made all these promises to Abraham he said they were going to make a contract, and Abraham got certain animals and cut them in two and waited for God to walk through the parts with him. He waited and waited and waited. Every once in a while he would have to drive away the vultures which tried to scavenge the scene. Finally, he fell asleep waiting for God. Then God came down in the form of a fire and a torch and all by himself walked between the animals while Abraham slept. When it was all over, Abraham said, "I believe it," and God told him, "You are righteous." God had made all of these promises to Abraham. God would fulfill the covenant he had made. That was his part of the deal—that he was going to come through with salvation for Abraham and bless the world through him. Abraham's part was to believe it. That's all. God wouldn't even let him walk through the animals. And when Abraham believed it, God said, "You are righteous."⁵

Maybe you are thinking, "I wish God would give me such a visual object lesson. If he did, it would be much easier to believe." John White goes on to say:

Stand at Golgotha as the horror of darkness falls. Look at the God-man who hangs in extremis from a gibbet. Dare you demand further evidence of God's good will in his negotiations with you? The brazier and the torch pass between the animals. God has committed himself. He has spoken the irrevocable word for your comfort and your assurance. Perhaps you too are waiting as the sun goes down. Perhaps vultures would snatch away the evidence that any contract exists between you and God. Go to the Scriptures. Read in the gospels all that took place. Christ's body was of human flesh, and it was lifted up on the cross. The darkness actually descended and the veil was torn in two. These things happened and were recorded that you might know God has committed himself to anyone, anyone who trusts him. He has gone to great pains to assure you that the gamble of faith is no gamble...But you must believe!⁶

That is our part. God's part is to come through with salvation; our part is to believe that the righteous man or woman shall live by faith. That righteousness can be yours if you will believe what God has said. If you have been depending on yourself all your life, and if every well you have dug has come up dry, let today be the day when you turn away from all that and believe, by faith, in what God has done in your behalf, and accept the righteousness that he offers as a free gift in Christ.

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¹ Larry Crabb, *Connecting* (Nashville: Word, 1997) 122-123.

² John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 56.

³ Stott, *Romans*, 59.

⁴ Stott, *Romans*, 58.

⁵ John White, *The Cost of Commitment* (Downers Grove: IVP) 87-88.

⁶ White, *Cost of Commitment*, 88.



MAN'S DESCENT AND GOD'S WRATH

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1191

Romans 1:18-32

Third Message

Gary Vanderet

March 14th, 1999

One of my favorite Peanuts cartoons has Charlie Brown walking along the street rewinding his kite string and following the string to his downed kite. As he goes he is waxing expert to his friend and nemesis, Lucy. He explains: "In kite flying the ratio of weight to sail-area is very important. This ratio is known as 'Sail Loading,' and it is measured in ounces per square foot. For example, a three-foot kite with a sail area of four and one-half square feet should weigh about two or three ounces." Lucy observes, "You know a lot about kites, don't you, Charlie Brown?" He replies, "Yes, I think I can say that I do." By this time the string has led them to the mouth of a storm drain—where the string disappears. In the last frame, Lucy asks, "Charlie Brown, if you know so much about flying kites...why is yours down the sewer?"

We like to think we're doing well even though we know we're not. John Stott makes the following statement:

What keeps people away from Christ more than anything else is their inability to see their own need for him or their unwillingness to admit it. Jesus himself put it this way: "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). We only go to a doctor when we admit that we are ill and we can't cure ourselves. In the same way, we only go to Christ when we admit we are guilty sinners and we realize that we can't save ourselves.¹

If we deny that we have a problem, there is no help for us. Alcoholics Anonymous understands this principle very well. That is why the first step in their 12-step program is: "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable." Those of us who are Christians could make the same statement about our sin: We admitted that we were powerless over sin and that our lives had become unmanageable. Someone has well said, "a man's greatest need is to know what is his greatest need."

We have already seen that the message of the book of Romans is the proclamation of the good news of the salvation that God has provided. But, before the apostle Paul lays out the good news, he spends the opening chapters relating some decidedly bad news.

If someone says to us, "I have some good news and some bad news. Which do you want to hear first?" almost invariably we reply, "The bad news." That is what

Paul is doing here in the opening chapter of Romans. We have some bad news to face before he can share the good news with us. And the bad news is that the human race is in big trouble. The situation is critical. The crisis is real. Paul will spend two and a half chapters making his point. He will conclude, in chapter 3, by showing that we have all sinned. Right across the board, every one of us has gone astray and established our unrighteousness before God. We need help, and that help is found in the salvation that God offers.

But first, the bad news. Here is what Paul has to say. Romans 1:18-20:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

In these verses the apostle makes three important declarations concerning God's self-revelation. I think it will make more sense if we take them in reverse order. Paul's first declaration is this: *Everyone in the world knows about God.* From the Aborigine in the Australian outback to the person in the deepest, darkest part of Africa, everybody knows about God, because the invisible God has made himself manifest through his creation. Creation is God's first missionary. No one was missing when the knowledge about God was passed out.

The Old Testament agrees with the apostle. Listen to the words of David, from Psalm 19:

**The heavens are telling of the glory of God;
And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.
Day to day pours forth speech,
And night to night reveals knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
Their voice is not heard.
Their call has gone out through all the earth,
And their utterances to the end of the world (1-4).**

To the question, Is there a God? nature answers with a resounding, Yes! Every star proclaims it. Every leaf reminds us of it. The glaciers are megaphones. Nature is a song with many parts, but its common theme and verse is that God exists. Creation is God's first missionary.

A number of years ago, I read the fascinating book, *Life And Death In Shanghai*, by Nien Cheng. The book is a marvelous testimony of courage. After the communists overthrew Chiang Kai Chek, in 1949, Nien and her husband decided to stay in Shanghai, where he was a general manager for Shell Oil Company, which was the only multi-national company that chose to remain. When her husband died in 1957, Shell hired her as a special advisor. In 1966, Mao Tse Tung launched his proletarian revolution, and Nien was arrested. She was beaten and taken to prison, where she remained in solitary confinement for six years.

One account in this woman's book parallels what Paul is saying here in Romans. In her second or third year of imprisonment, a spider crawled into her cell one day and began to climb up one of the bars. She writes:

I watched it climb steadily up the iron bar, and it was such a long walk for this tiny little creature. When it reached the top, it swung out and descended on a silken thread spun from its body. After it secured its thread to the other end of the bar, it crawled back to where it had started and swung out in a new direction. I was fascinated by the fact that this spider knew exactly what to do and where to take the next thread, without any hesitation or mistakes. The spider knew its job. When it had made the frame, it proceeded to make a web that was intricate and absolutely perfect, with all the strands evenly spaced. As I watched this architectural feat, I was flooded with questions: "Who had taught that little spider to make the web? Could it really have acquired that skill through evolution? Or did God make that spider and endow it with the ability to make a web so that it could catch food and perpetuate its species?"²

The spider helped her to see that God was in control. From then on, Mao Tse Tung and his revolutionaries seemed much less menacing. She says, "I felt a renewal and a hope surge inside of me."

This what theologians call "general revelation" as distinct from special revelation, the revelation of Scripture, which tells us a lot more about God. But general revelation tells us a few things about God.

The argument from the created order in the world is overwhelming. In his book, *Romans, Righteousness From Heaven*, Kent Hughes writes:

If I were to number ten pennies from 1 to 10 and put them in my pocket and then put my hand back in my pocket, the chances of my drawing out the number 1 penny would be 1 in 10. If I put the number 1 penny back in my pocket and mixed the pennies up again, the chances of drawing out penny number 2 would be one in a hundred. The chances of repeating the same procedure with penny number 3 would be one in a thousand. To do so with all of them (1 through 10, in order) would be one in ten billion! Noting the order and design of our universe, Kepler, the founder of modern astronomy, discoverer of "Three Planetary

Laws of Motion," and originator of the term "satellite," said, "The undevout astronomer is mad."³

Paul's second declaration is this: *Mankind suppresses this knowledge*. We "suppress the truth in unrighteousness," says the apostle. The NIV translates it this way, "we suppress the truth by our wickedness." The problem is not intellectual, but moral. We are very good at constructing intellectual arguments against God, but the core issue is accountability. We don't want to be accountable to anyone. We want to run our own lives, to call the shots and be in charge. It has nothing to do with the intellect.

It is easy to be intimidated by someone's intellectual arguments against the existence of God. Many who take this position are sharp and their arguments fairly weighty. But after a while you begin to see that though their debating points are skillful, and they are good at steering the conversation away from the existence of God, when you get down to the central issues they don't want God in their lives. Intellectual arguments are nothing more than an attempt to keep God at arm's length. So man is without excuse. If we were made to stand before God today, we would admit that we knew he existed.

As a consequence of man's rejection of God and man's suppression of the truth, Paul's third declaration is this: *God's wrath is revealed against the sin of man*. The term, "wrath of God," does not imply that God is an arbitrary, capricious being who loses his temper whenever his rules are broken and tries to get even with the transgressor. Rather, the term implies an orderly God who has created an orderly world. The tides come in and go out. We can calculate the precise moment when the sun rises and sets. We know that if we step off a 20-story building, we will fall. We live in an orderly world.

And not only is the universe orderly in the physical sense, it has moral and spiritual order as well, so that God's wrath against evil is built into its very structure. Notice Paul says that the wrath of God is *now* being revealed. He is not talking about the wrath of God which will be revealed at the Second Coming but, rather, the wrath that is being expressed or revealed from heaven right now. This is the law of inevitable consequences: we reap what we sow. As C. S. Lewis reminds us, "God gives us that terrible freedom we have longed for."

Richard Halverson put it this way in his book, *The Gospel for the Whole of Life*: "This isn't speaking of a careless casting aside of someone who is loved, but God's reluctant capitulation to man's freedom which he himself guaranteed in creation." If you have a NASB or KJV, you will notice as we read on in this passage that Paul uses the phrase, "He gave them over," three times. That is the wrath of God. He lets us have what we want. That is when we proceed to trash our lives. If we want to live that way, God will not stop us. That is when life becomes dull, grim, meaningless and dead, as the Bible describes life lived apart from God.

What is the nature of this wrath? And what are the consequences of rejecting God? Verses 21-23:

For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

We are like spoiled children, refusing to give thanks for what we receive. God gives us so many good gifts—love, laughter, children, health and beauty—but we don't even give him the time of day. Instead, we think of ourselves as self-made men and women. When we act that way we become intellectually confused and morally darkened. We tune into the talk shows to learn how to live, looking to talk show hosts for ethical and moral guidance. We don't know right from wrong or up from down. We are befuddled in our thinking. We claim to be wise, but we have become fools. We take leave of our senses and no longer know where reality lies.

And we become idolaters. That is the consequence of rejecting God—always. It leads to idolatry, because man is incurably religious. If he will not worship the true God, he must find a substitute. He must have some kind of God, so he becomes like the god he worships. Notice the progressive degeneration that results from idolatry. First, man worshipped an image of a man, then birds, then quadrupeds, and ultimately reptiles, crawling things. He couldn't go any lower. He exchanged the invisible God for an image of insects. Paul is saying that when we degrade God, we end up degrading ourselves, worshipping insects, snakes, and people. That is what humanism is—another form of idolatry. It is worshipping man instead of God. Martin Luther said, "Whatever your heart clings to and relies on is your god."

So man refused to worship God for who he is and instead reduced him to his own level through idolatry. We shake our heads at the superstitions and idolatry of the Eastern world, but the cultural idolatry of the West is no better. Exchanging worship of the living God for an obsession with wealth, power and fame is equally foolish.

Paul goes on to describe the result of all this. Verses 24-25:

Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

We ought to be praising the Creator, but instead we end up praising the creation. That is why people refer to "Mother Nature." We praise the creation as though it

were self-perpetuating and self-propagating. Now we can have debates over the age of the earth and change among species, but the Bible emphatically declares that God created the heavens and the earth. That is the beginning. Evolution doesn't have a beginning. Evolutionists obscure the very notion of a beginning by pushing everything back, the idea being that if a sufficiently long period of time elapses, anything can happen. That is like saying that if a number of monkeys were to be seated behind a bank of typewriters, given enough time they will type one of Shakespeare's sonnets. But evolutionists do not answer the question of ultimate origin. No matter how far back the dates are pushed, the question remains: Where did the heavens and the earth come from in the first place? They can't answer that, because man has "worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen."

And the descent continues. Verses 26-27:

For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

I appreciate David Roper's wise words on this issue:

These are very difficult verses. Let me say first that we need to have compassion for those who are in the homosexual community. When we see gay parades and marches, it ought not make us angry, it ought to break our hearts, because we know the pain and loneliness inside their hearts. But what we need to know from this passage is that Gay is not good. Homosexuality is a sin. Period. We need not to be confused about that. We constantly debate: Is it right, or is it wrong? Is homosexuality sin or is it a sickness? Is it something genetic, or is it something environmental? Paul takes out all that confusion and says it is sin. It is not the worst sin in the world, but it is one of the most undignified things you can do to your body.⁴

Paul does not think homosexual activity is natural. He calls it unnatural, a perversion. That is what that word "error" means. And there are consequences for this error. At the heart of the homosexual condition lies a longing for love. Homosexuals want to be accepted, to be complete, just like everyone else. But we do not help homosexuals by condoning their behavior. There is only one way out of this or any other sin, and that is through repentance.

About this point many start to feel a little self-righteous. But Paul goes on. Verses 28-32:

And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, mal-

ice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

I don't know about you, but I find myself included here. This list of 21 vices is hard to classify. John Stott offers the following helpful divisions:

It begins with four general sins in which people *have become filled*, namely *every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity*. Then come five more sins which they are *full of* and which all depict broken human relationships: *envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice* (29). Next come a couple on their own, which seem to refer to libel and slander ...These two are followed by four which...portray...extreme forms of pride: *God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful*. Now comes another independent couple of words, denoting people who are "inventive" in relation to evil and rebellious in relation to parents (30). And the list ends with four negatives, *senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless* (31), which [the Jerusalem Bible] rather neatly renders "without brains, honour, love, or pity."⁵

What the apostle is picturing here is a society gone astray, because it has abandoned worship and love of God. We do the things we shouldn't do even though we know they are wrong. We see the wrath of God revealed in these verses as man is left to himself, with no restraints and no inhibitions, an existence that leads only to increasingly monotonous and unending boredom and frustration.

And people not only continue to practice these wrongful things, they actively encourage others to do the same. If you don't believe that, turn on your favorite television talk show any day of the week and you will see studio audiences clapping and cheering wildly as they watch violence, deceit and destruction portrayed before their eyes. "...*although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.*"

The wrath of God is a terrible thing, but the grace of God is very sweet. That grace is available to all today, free of cost, whenever we are ready to repent.

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¹ John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 67.

² Nien Cheng, *Life And Death In Shanghai* (Penguin, 1988).

³ Kent Hughes, *Romans, Righteousness From Heaven* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991) 34.

⁴ David Roper, "The Descent of Man" (Cole Community Church, Boise ID, 9/27/1987).

⁵ Stott, *Romans*, 79.



JUDGING THE JUDGMENTAL

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1192

Romans 2:1-16

Fourth Message

Gary Vanderet

March 21st, 1999

In our weekly home fellowship meetings we are studying Philip Yancey's wonderful book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* We have had some interesting discussions about forgiveness, and the difficulty many of us have in this area.

In his book, Yancey raises the matter of Jeffrey Dahmer's conversion. Dahmer, the mass murderer, abused and murdered 17 young men. He cannibalized them and stored body parts in his refrigerator. Eleven corpses were found in his apartment. He was the epitome of the word vile. During his trial he sat serenely in court, showing no signs of remorse. In November of 1994, Dahmer was beaten to death in prison by a fellow prisoner. Television news reports included interviews with relatives of Dahmer's victims. They said their only regret about his killing was that it had ended his life too soon. They wanted him to suffer more.

Yancey writes,

One network showed a program taped a few weeks before Dahmer's murder. The interviewer asked him how he could possibly commit the crimes he was convicted of. Dahmer said that these things happened before he believed in God, when he wasn't accountable to anybody. He said it all began with petty crimes and small acts of cruelty, and he just kept going, further and further. Nothing restrained him. Dahmer then told of his recent religious conversion. He was baptized in the prison whirlpool and spent all of his time now reading his Bible and Christian literature.¹

The prison chaplain affirmed Dahmer's conversion, saying that his repentance was sincere and that he was one of his most faithful worshipers.

Some find reports like this troubling. Grace for a cannibal? Our natural response is to fold our arms and say, "No, it's not that easy. God isn't going to let you off just like that, not after what you did. God is forgiving, but he is no milquetoast. Grace is for average sinners like us, not deviants like you." When we read chapter 1 of Romans, many of us think, "Go get 'em, Paul. It's about time someone stood up and spoke the truth. We decent, law abiding people are behind you."

This is the attitude that the apostle addresses in the opening verses of Romans 2, to which we now come. Here he speaks to the self-righteous, judgmental moralist who views God's grace through the lens of his own prejudice. The moralist is an outwardly decent, good-living person. The problem with such people, however,

is that they delude themselves. They think that because they have maintained a certain respectable facade that God will overlook their inner sins; that there will be no judgment for them because everything appears fine on the outside.

Remember the apostle's purpose in these opening chapters of Romans is to confront this mistaken faith we have in the goodness of man. Somehow we cling to that notion even though we know it doesn't correlate to the world we live in. We want to believe that we're doing fine. But Paul says we are not. All kinds of things are wrong with us.

To convince his readers Paul uses a literary device, common in the Greek world of his day, called a diatribe. Today, of course, a diatribe means a harsh and bitter harangue, but in Paul's day, it was a method of learned discussion. An individual would take the place of his opponent and actually state and respond to the questions that arose in his mind. That is what Paul is doing here. He is anticipating the questions that a reader would raise regarding what he had said in chapter 1. The "you" in the verses is singular. Paul is thinking of one person, a man or woman who, after reading chapter 1, would say, "Wait a minute. I'm not like that. I'm not perverted. I don't read pornography. I don't cheat on my spouse."

It is to these self-righteous moralists that Paul addresses these words now, beginning at 2:1:

Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. And do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment upon those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?

The apostle reveals a human frailty that many can identify with: the tendency to be critical of everyone but ourselves; to be self-righteously indignant over other people's mistakes while at the same time overlooking our own.

The apostle points out some interesting things in this paragraph. First, man's universal tendency to judge as-

sumes an understanding of right and wrong. Everyone is aware of a standard. Every society has rules that are based on a common understanding of right and wrong. People know the difference.

Sociologists have demonstrated that every society, every tribe and culture has rules. These standards may not always be exactly the same, but they are much more in agreement than we might imagine. For example, no culture honors cowardice. All societies recognize that bravery, courage and fortitude are good traits. Paul says that everyone has a standard. We don't need a rule book entitled, "The Rules Of Life." If you drive out of the parking lot today and someone cuts into line ahead of you, you will respond verbally, or in your mind, "Hey, what are you doing? That's not right. I was here first." Where did that notion of rightness come from? Paul will tell us later that it is inscribed on our hearts. We know the difference between right and wrong.

The second thing the apostle points out is that even though we all know the standard, and we enforce it with others, we don't keep it ourselves. Paul writes, "Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things." We do the very things we tell others not to do. We tell our children that patience is an admirable virtue, and then we lose our temper. We tell them not to speed, but we exceed the speed limit. We tell them not to lie, but we lie. A few years ago I was skiing in Squaw Valley with my son Stephen (he had just celebrated his thirteenth birthday a week earlier). I noticed that the sign for the lifts said, "Adults, \$40; children 0 to 12, \$5." I said to Steve, "Why don't you go over there for a minute." Then I bought two tickets, one adult and one child. Later that day he asked me, "Why do I have a child's ticket?" He has never let me live that down.

Paul hits his target. We do the very things we tell others not to do. We are hypocrites.

Why do we do this? It is because we think that the judgment of God somehow doesn't apply to us; to everyone else yes, but not us. We don't understand the nature and extent of our own sins. Others lie, but we simply are "stretching the truth." Others steal, we "borrow." Others are prejudiced, we have "convictions." If we are the one who cuts into line, when challenged we generally will not question the standard but, rather, hasten to explain why it is all right for us to violate it, because "we were in a hurry." We don't say, "It's all right to cut into lines." We think we are an exception.

Not only do we fail to understand the nature of our own sin, but our blindness extends to our view of God: we confuse his patience with indifference. That is what Paul means, in verse 4, "Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?"

God is very patient. He does not immediately judge acts of sin, he waits. And at times we misinterpret his patience. We think he is much too kind to punish anybody. Forgiveness is his job, we say. We think he's like Santa Claus, who isn't supposed to give presents to boys and girls who are naughty, only to those who are nice. But we know Santa Claus would bring us presents even though we weren't good. We think God's attitude is the same. But when we do that we are misinterpreting God's patience. God does care about sin. The reason he is waiting is that he is calling us to himself.

However, interpreting God's kindness as an excuse to continue sinning is a sure sign of a stubborn and unrepentant heart, according to Paul. Verse 5:

But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,

When hogs are placed in a pen all they do is eat. They don't go anywhere; they just eat and get bigger and bigger. The more they eat, however, the sooner and more inevitable their "judgment" comes. That is what Paul is saying. We are merely "storing up wrath." The word is "treasures," the same word that Jesus used when he said, "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (Matt. 6:20). Those who are unrepentant are making deposits into a bank account from which, one of these days, they are going to collect.

The apostle continues. Verses 6-11:

who WILL RENDER TO EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to every man who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.

At first glance it appears that Paul is teaching a doctrine of salvation by works, but let me explain what I think he is saying.

A day is coming when the divine judgment which is now going on in secret will be made public; and on that day, the evidence for that public judgment, namely, our lives, will be visible. John Stott put it this way, "The presence or absence of our faith in Christ will be evident by the presence or absence of love and good works in our lives." There are only two types of people in the world: those who are inclined toward God and those who are inclined away from him; those who are growing more alive every day, and those who are dying. And the person who yearns for God, who longs to do what is right, will find God, or, to put it as Paul does, God will find him.

And if we choose God, then God will come and meet us. I think he gives us more truth. He will give us the knowledge of the Savior. And when we hear about the Savior, if our hearts are inclined to him, we will believe.

C.S. Lewis put it this way:

People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain, in which God says that if you keep a lot of rules I will reward you, and if you don't I will do the other thing. I do not think that is the best way of looking at it. I would much rather say that every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part that chooses, into something different than it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices all your life long, you are slowly turning this central thing either into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature; either a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war with God and his fellow creatures and with himself. To be the one kind of creature is heavenly, that is joy and peace and knowledge and power; to be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.²

The righteous God judges evil and assesses wrath against it. God cannot be fooled. He is absolutely impartial. It doesn't matter whether we belong to a church or were raised in a Christian home. God is no respecter of persons. Such defenses will never meet the righteous standards of a holy God.

And God's judgment is completely impartial: He judges everyone with faultless discrimination. Verses 12-16:

For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law; and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; for not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them, on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

This is the clearest answer to the question we hear asked all the time, "What about the people who have never heard of Jesus Christ?" Paul's answer is that they will be judged by their own standards. God judges men not according to what they do not know, but according to what they know. His judgment will be based on the truth that we know. God chose to give the law and his revelation to the Jews. They had truth, they had light,

and they were held responsible for that revelation. But Gentiles have a law too, even though they don't have the Torah. They have a law in their hearts. Paul says that God holds us responsible only for the truth we have. He doesn't judge us because of our ignorance. And the way we know that we have this law within us is that we have a conscience which reminds us.

Paul is saying that even those who don't know God's standard still have a standard, but they don't keep it. Our conscience operates off the standard that we have and reminds us when we fall short. It keeps nagging us, like the little red light on the dashboard that tells us something is wrong inside. We know it, it nags us, and it's always there. And Paul says that the conscience that bothers us now is going to speak to us when we stand before God. He won't even have to tell us we are sinful; we will know it. That is what Paul means when he says, "they [the Gentiles] show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them."

That is happening now: our conscience nags us about our failure to live up to the standard that we have. And it will also take place on the day when God will "judge the secrets of men." God knows our secrets. He knows about the lust, all the garbage that is in our minds and all that has occurred in our past. Like Adam and Eve, we want to cover it up and hide it. But they couldn't keep their secret from God, and neither can we. God knows my secrets and he knows your secrets. He knows what is going on inside your mind right now, and he still loves you.

And we know that God loves us because, as Paul will say, in chapter 5, verse 8, "For while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." And when we know that God sees us and loves us, then we don't have anything else to hide. We can come to him and say, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." One of these days we are going to stand before him and it's all going to come out anyway. Then it will be too late to accept salvation. The day of judgment is coming. It would be wise to "settle out of court." Now is the time to accept salvation. Peter wrote, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Peter 2:24).

God does not force us. His relentless love will track us down, but he will not force us. The choice is ours.

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¹ Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997).

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Collier Books, 1952) 86.



THE DANGERS OF RELIGION

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1193

Romans 2:17-29

Fifth Message

Gary Vanderet

April 11th, 1999

Years ago when I ministered among students I was asked a number of times whether it was easier to win to Christ young people who come from pagan homes rather than Christian homes. Many youth pastors I knew back then said it was easier to win kids from Christian homes. Having wrestled with this issue in the intervening years I would have to disagree. It is easier to win to Christ kids from pagan homes than from homes that are religious but that fail to deal realistically with life.

In his book, *Early Christians of the Twenty-first Century*, Chad Walsh wrote:

Millions of Christians live in a sentimental haze of vague piety, with soft organ music trembling in the lovely light from the stained glass windows. Their religion is a thing of pleasant emotional quivers divorced from the intellect, divorced from the will, and demanding little except lip service to a few harmless platitudes. I suspect that Satan has called off the attempt to convert people to agnosticism. If a man travels far enough away from Christianity, he is always in danger of seeing it in perspective and deciding that it is true. It is much safer from Satan's point of view to vaccinate a man with a case of mild Christianity so as to protect him from the real thing.¹

Sadly, this is the position of many in the evangelical world today.

In our studies in the book of Romans we have seen that the thrust of the apostle Paul's argument in the opening chapters is to deliver us from our illogical faith in what some term the basic goodness of man. We tend to cling to the notion that man is basically good, even though we know that, given the state of the world we live in, that is an irrational concept. We like to think we're doing all right but, according to Paul, we are not. We have all sorts of things that are wrong with us. If we think we are doing well we are living in a fool's paradise.

As we have already noted, Paul argues his point by anticipating and responding to objections to what he has to say. In his wide ranging critique of the human race he has already leveled the depraved Gentile and the critical moralizer. At this point he anticipates the Jews protesting, "Paul, you can't treat us like Gentiles. Don't forget, we are the chosen people. God gave us the Law and sealed our relationship with the rite of circumcision. These are the greatest privileges in the world. Are you saying that we aren't any better off than the Gentiles? If you are, are you not completely disregard-

ing those two gifts which protect us from God's judgment?"

Paul responds to this argument in the second chapter of his letter. He comments on the two gifts of the Law (verses 17-24), and circumcision (verses 25-29). In the process he warns the Jews about two dangers; first, the danger of thinking they are acceptable to God because they possess the truth (verses 17-24); and second, the danger of thinking they are acceptable because they are affiliated with God's people (verses 25-29).

The Jews realized that with respect to the truth, they were privileged far above everyone else. Paul describes this sense of privilege now, in verses 17-18:

But if you bear the name "Jew," and rely upon the Law, and boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law,

Here Paul lists six things concerning the sense of privilege felt by the Jews. First, says Paul, "*you bear the name 'Jew.'*" So proud were they of their identity that many of them who lived in Gentile cities used the word "Jew" as a surname.

Second, says the apostle, they "*rely on the law.*" They thought that because they had received the Torah at Mt. Sinai they had a unique standing before God; and that possessing it (not living by it) was their protection against disaster.

Third, they "*boast in God.*" This phrase is used in other places of a positive quality, but in this context it refers to their boasting that they were God's favorites, i.e., they had a monopoly on God.

Fourth, they prided themselves on the fact that they "*know His will*"; literally, "the will," i.e., the will to which every other will must be compared.

Fifth, they "*approve the things that are essential.*" They prided themselves on their ability to make better moral decisions.

Sixth, they were "*instructed out of the Law.*" The Law was their guide.

Now these six things are wonderful privileges but, as great as they are they had a beguiling effect on the Jews. These privileges made them feel very good about themselves compared to the theologically uneducated Gentiles. They were deceived into thinking that these attributes made them acceptable to God.

We recognize their spiritual blindness. But we must remember that this is a double-edged sword. It pierces the heart of the religious Jew, yes, but it scores us too. We may feel superior about our Biblical knowledge compared to the average person. After all, we have the Bible in twenty-five different versions, and we take great pride in owning a specific version. Some of us say, "I am a King James Christian!" Those who know much of the revealed will of God (the Bible) think that because they have a patent on truth, they are fine. It is easy for us, as it was for the Jews who rejected certain attitudes and actions in life, to think that God is impressed by the things we don't do: We don't dance, we don't drink, we don't go to the movies, we don't play cards, we don't drink coffee, and so on.

This deception that arises from our sense of privilege can produce in one's life a feeling of pride and arrogance that sees oneself as superior to others. This is what Paul now goes on to describe, in verses 19-20:

and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth,

Such pride can make people obnoxious and intolerant. That's what it did to the Jews. They saw themselves as guides, lights, correctors and teachers. They looked down with scorn on the "unwashed" Gentiles. Instead of trying to create a just society that would shine as a light to the Gentiles, they narrowed their vision and began competing with each other, becoming absorbed in their own spiritual calisthenics. They regarded strictness as a means of achieving status. The Gentiles sensed this and resented it. Tacitus, a Roman writer in the second century, said, "Among themselves their honesty is inflexible, their compassion quick to move, but to all other persons they show the hatred of antagonism."² Kent Hughes summarizes it well: "The very privileges which should have produced saints produced arrogant, loveless egotists instead!"³

This is true today among many who hold to the truth of the gospel. Rather than producing humility and grace, the religious privileges they have received have cultivated self-righteous, self-centered, and self-deceived snobs. It is this very thing that may have provoked this parable by Jesus, from the gospel of Luke:

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I

tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14, NIV)

Hughes writes: "Whenever a follower of Christ feels superior, he should beware, for such an attitude is not a sign of God's grace. To come into a position of spiritual privilege only to succumb to self-righteous arrogance indicates that one's soul is in great danger."⁴ Have you ever asked yourself why it is that the very people who are drawn to Jesus seem repelled by Christians?

Philip Yancey shares this story about a prostitute who came to a friend of his for help. She was in bad shape: homeless, sick, and unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. In her tears she confessed that she had even been using her daughter in sexually abusive ways to support her own drug habit. The friend could hardly bear listening to this sordid story, and now knew he was legally liable to report this case of child abuse. What stuck with Yancey about the story was her answer to a question this friend asked her nearing the end of their time. She asked the woman if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. She said she will never forget the look of pure, naive shock that crossed her face. "Church!" she cried. "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."⁵ What a sad commentary on the state of the Church.

Continuing, Paul has some penetrating rhetorical questions for those who are feeling self-righteously arrogant. These are good questions for all of us to ponder. Verses 21-24:

you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one should not steal, do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For "THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU," just as it is written.

It was common knowledge that many of the Jewish leaders were guilty of these offenses. Though blameless in their theology they found ways to justify their unethical business practices, enabling them to carry out a little "refined" stealing. One commentator quotes Rabbi Jochanan Ben Zakkai, a contemporary of Paul's, who complained in his day about "the increase of murder, adultery, sexual vice, commercial and judicial corruption, bitter sectarian strife, and other evils."⁶

Paul concludes this section with a crushing accusation: "*the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.*" Though the Jews claimed to have so much and to be so knowledgeable, they were blaspheming, and turning people away from God by their actions. How relevant this is to evangelical Christianity! By our attitudes we too cause people to turn away from God. But God is not impressed with our conservative theolo-

gy, and neither are our neighbors.

Having dealt with the danger of the Jews thinking they were acceptable to God because they possessed the truth, Paul now turns to a second danger, that of thinking they were all right because they were associated with God's people. They thought they were secure because they were God's chosen people, and the symbol which proved that truth was the rite of circumcision. They believed, almost superstitiously, that circumcision actually secured their salvation. One rabbi wrote: "Circumcised men do not descend into Gehenna." And another: "Circumcision will deliver Israel from Gehenna."⁷ Verses 25-29:

For indeed circumcision is of value, if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. If therefore the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? And will not he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

If possessing the law does not exempt the Jews from God's judgment, then neither does circumcision. The rite of circumcision was very significant. It was a God-given sign, and it did seal their covenant. When it was given to Abraham it was a symbol that all of his life belonged to God, and that is what it was meant to symbolize in his descendants. But it wasn't a magic charm, a permanent life insurance policy against God's wrath.

I have in my hand a gold ring. Years ago it cost a very pretty preschool teacher a few hundred dollars. My wife Kathy gave this ring to me to me on the day we were married. It is a symbol of our love, but it is not the substance or the source of it. When we struggle, I don't rub it for good luck or pray to it. If I were to lose it, I would be disappointed, but our marriage would continue unharmed. It is a symbol, that's all.

But what if I tried to make this ring more than that? What if I decided to be abusive and unfaithful to Kathy? Suppose I started refusing to care for my family's needs and Kathy said to me: "You don't want to be my husband. You don't love me or the children. I want you to leave." And what if I responded: "How dare you talk to me that way or challenge my love! Look at this ring you gave me. I haven't taken it off for 24 years. I may have beaten you and cheated on you, but I've worn your ring." Do you think that Kathy's response would be: "Oh, I'm sorry. I forgot. You have worn the ring and made a tremendous sacrifice in doing so"? Of course not. And why is that? It is because apart from the love

that it symbolizes, the ring means nothing. The symbol represents love, but it cannot replace it.

Paul's response is direct and clear to the superstitious, false confidence of the Jews: "*circumcision is of value, if you practice the Law.*" He doesn't deny circumcision's divine origin, but he does say that if the Jews want to depend on that for salvation, then they had better understand and live out its intended significance and keep the whole Law. If the meaning behind circumcision is disregarded it is as meaningless as a wedding ring on an adulterer's finger. John Stott summarizes Paul words in this way: "We may perhaps express Paul's double assertion in terms of two simple equations. Circumcision minus obedience equal uncircumcision, while uncircumcision plus obedience equals circumcision. The consequence Paul infers from this will have been profoundly shocking to Jewish people. [Rather than them] sitting in judgment on uncircumcised pagans,...the roles will be reversed."⁸

We don't have to stretch to apply Paul's words to ourselves. All we have to do is substitute the word "circumcision" for baptism or church membership. Many rest upon the fact that they have been baptized, confirmed or accepted as members of a church as the sign that they belong to God. The church where I served before I came to PBC emphasized the rite of baptism so much so that if one was not baptized, it was an open question as to whether he was Christian. Consequently, if you were to ask a teenager in that church how to become a Christian, as I did on many occasions, he would say, "You must be baptized." I felt that way growing up in the Catholic church. If someone asked me if I was a Christian, I would say, "Yes, I'm a Catholic."

Don't misunderstand what I am saying. I am not suggesting that symbols are unimportant. Some symbols, baptism and communion for example, which illustrate the meaning of the cross and resurrection, are very important. They symbolize and even articulate salvation. But they do not and cannot impart salvation. It is a critical mistake to exalt the symbol at the expense of what it symbolizes.

Paul's conclusion about the religious man is set out in verses 28-29. I like Eugene Peterson's paraphrase:

Don't you see: it's not the cut of a knife that makes you a Jew. You become a Jew by who you are. It's the mark of God on your heart, not of a knife on your skin, that makes a Jew. And recognition comes from God, not legalistic critics.⁹

In redefining who is a Jew, that is, who is really a member of God's covenant people, Paul draws a sharp contrast. John Stott puts it clearly: "[It] is not something outward and visible, but inward and invisible; ...[it is] in the heart, not the flesh; ...it is effected by the Spirit not the Law; and...it wins the approval of God [not man]."¹⁰ One of the great dangers of religion is that we are comfortable with what is visible and outward and superficial, but what matters to God is that which is

deep and inward, and only his Spirit can accomplish this in our hearts.

Paul did not introduce this concept into the Bible. Throughout the Old Testament God complained of his people's uncircumcised hearts. He appealed through Jeremiah: "Circumcise yourselves to the LORD, circumcise your hearts, you men of Judah and people of Jerusalem" (Jer. 4:4). He even promised to do that. He said in Deuteronomy: "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live" (Deut. 30:6).

And this promise is fulfilled in Christ. Paul says in Colossians:

For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ. (Col. 2:9-11)

The question is, Where does your confidence lie? In your knowledge of God's word? In your religious affiliation? In the fact that you have been baptized or confirmed? If it is, then you are deceived. True salvation is a matter of the heart. It is not a question of whether you are baptized, galvanized or pasteurized. Do you have faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? and have you received the gift of righteousness which God gives to those who do not deserve it and cannot earn it, but receive it by his love and grace?

¹ Chad Walsh, *Early Christians of the Twenty-first Century*. Quoted by Ray Stedman.

² William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957) 35.

³ R. Kent Hughes, *Romans* (Crossway Books, 1991) 64.

⁴ Hughes, 65.

⁵ Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 11.

⁶ C. H. Dodd, *Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1947) 39.

⁷ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Vol. I (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975) 172.

⁸ John R. W. Stott, *Romans* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994) 93.

⁹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1993) 307.

¹⁰ Stott, 94.

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GUILTY AS CHARGED

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1194

Romans 3:1-20

Sixth Message

Gary Vanderet

April 18th, 1999

Hans Christian Anderson's classic, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, is a tale about an emperor who loves clothes and is very conscious of his appearance. He is easy prey for some con men posing as weavers, who offer to make him a very expensive magic garment that would be invisible to everyone except the wise and pure in heart. The delighted emperor commissions these crooks to make the garment despite the extravagant cost. And so the con men get started, pretending to weave at the empty looms.

The curious emperor sends his chief ministers to monitor the progress of this wonderful project. They can't see any cloth on the looms but, because they don't want to be thought of as unwise and impure, they return and give a glowing report of the beauty of the cloth. Upon hearing this, the weavers ask for even more money. The emperor sends another official to check things out. He gives an even better report. Finally, the emperor goes down himself to check on the progress. Though he can't see anything he doesn't want to be thought a fool, so he lavishes them with praise and even gives them medals.

When the day comes for the grand parade and the unveiling of this magic garment, the con men dress the emperor in his nakedness and skip town. As the emperor parades through the town *au naturel*, the whole population praises the garment. They don't want to be thought of as fools. The absurd parade continues until one little boy cries, "The emperor has no clothes!" and suddenly everyone knows the truth. The innocent words of a little boy who didn't know any better strips away the hypocrisy of the whole town.¹

Anderson's classic reveals our universal tendency to remain quiet in the face of deception, because we don't want to appear foolish. In the second chapter of the letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul charges that the Jews imagined themselves to be clothed with a righteousness that really didn't exist, thus they deceived themselves with a sense of false religious confidence. They fancied themselves as guides, lights, correctors and teachers, but Paul strips away their deception, telling them that having God's word was no guarantee of life, and that their superstitious confidence in circumcision would not save them. John Stott put it this way: "The Law and circumcision guaranteed neither Jewish immunity from the judgment of God nor Jewish identity as the people of God."² Obviously, Paul's words would arouse their strident objections. He seemed to be

undermining the very foundations of Judaism, questioning God's covenant, promises and character.

In the opening verses of chapter 3 Paul anticipates the Jews' response. That is what he has been doing all along, anticipating and answering questions that would naturally arise from his argument. To accomplish this, all he would have to do was recall his own frame of mind as an unconverted Pharisee.

At this juncture the apostle raises and answers three important questions. First, What advantage has the Jew? or, What is the benefit of circumcision? Here is what Paul has to say. Chapter 3, verses 1-2:

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God. (NASB)

The apostle responds by saying that the Jew has a great advantage, because he has been exposed to and entrusted with the truth of God; he has heard the utterances from Sinai. The Psalmist says, "He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws..." (Psa 147:19-20) The Jews knew the truth. That is the great advantage of being a religious person—he has been exposed to the truth.

Remember Paul has already declared that everyone possesses some degree of truth. And further, he has shown that everyone is under law. Even people who have no knowledge of the Bible or the Ten Commandments still have the Law written in their hearts. Nobody is without a moral standard. No one lives in total darkness. Everyone has light. But the Jews had an additional degree of light: they had God's word written on tablets of stone. Thus they had knowledge of the mind and will and character of God that other people did not possess. This gave them a tremendous advantage. Translating this to our day, we might ask, What is the advantage of being raised in a religious home? Some who are raised in Christian homes reject the truth when they go to live on their own. What is the advantage of being raised in such a home, especially if they had that truth, or even had extra-Biblical rules forced upon them? It is that though they might have rejected the truth, they had been exposed to it. They might not have believed it, but they couldn't get away from it.

Paul's second question concerns God's faithfulness. Verses 3-4:

What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, "THAT THOU MIGHTEST BE JUSTIFIED IN THY WORDS, AND MIGHTEST PREVAIL WHEN THOU ART JUDGED."

The argument is as follows: "If we Jews have so totally failed to keep our part of the covenant, doesn't that cast God in a bad light, making him seem unfaithful since we are unfaithful? After all, a true covenant is enacted when both parties keep their part of the agreement."

Paul responds to this argument in verse 4, saying, in effect: "May it never be! How can man's unfaithfulness to his part of the covenant possibly imply that God will in any way be unfaithful to fulfill his part? God will never break his covenant." Paul will further develop this truth in chapters 9-11. For all of time, God has been a faithful husband to Israel. He even sent Jesus Christ to fulfill man's portion of the agreement when Israel totally failed. God remains faithful even when man is unfaithful. In fact, even if every single human being were a liar, God would still be true to his word, because that is who he is. Then Paul quotes Ps. 51:4, David's acknowledgment that he had sinned and done evil in God's sight in his affair with Bathsheba, thus affirming God's justice and proving that God remains faithful and true no matter how individuals may sin.

Next, Paul deals with a third argument that attempts to impugn God's justice and character. Verses 5-8:

But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.) May it never be! For otherwise how will God judge the world? But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner? And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say), "Let us do evil that good may come"? Their condemnation is just.

The point is, if their being bad makes God look good, then aren't they doing him a service by being bad? God ought to be grateful for their making him look good! If evil behavior causes good consequences (because it manifests God's gracious character and promotes his glory), then let's increase evil so as to increase good. Paul doesn't even answer this ridiculous argument. He takes up this topic later, in chapter 6. If the end justifies the means, one could do evil so that good could come of it. That would be like telling a judge after we are caught in a crime that we broke the law to show everyone how merciful he was. Paul doesn't bother to refute this silly argument. He simply says, "*Their condemnation is just.*" Evil never promotes the glory of God.

Having dealt with all the objections, the apostle comes to the conclusion that everyone is guilty. Verse 9:

What then? Are we [Jews, religious people] better

than they [those who would never even come near a church]? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;

It is an inescapable fact that we are all sinful. We have to deal with this. Every time we try to do something about society's problems or our own personal problems we have to reckon with the fact that there is a deadly defect that runs through every one of us. That is why Paul says we "*are all under sin.*"

In these chapters the apostle has divided people into two groupings, the religious and the irreligious. The irreligious live for the weekend. Life for them is having a good time. That is the limit of their morality. If life were a baseball game, their batting average would be about .025. The religious person is the Bible reading, church going man or woman. They do a little better, batting around .225. But God is not impressed by either one, because he bats 1.000. That is the standard of righteousness that he holds up before us. If we are trying to win our way into God's heart by being good, then we are in big trouble, because we are "all under sin."

In his book, *Whatever Became Of Sin?* Karl Menninger pointed out how our view of sin has changed over the years. It used to be that the priest dealt with sin, because everyone realized that sin was a moral problem. Then sin was put solely in the hands of the police, because it was seen as a civil problem. Society began to hold the view that anything that was not illegal was moral. Then sin was taken out of the province of the police and put in the hands of psychiatrists and psychologists, and man was no longer held responsible. We were told that sin was a disease, like cancer. So we have tried to do away with sin.³

But Paul says we cannot do that. We are "all under sin." We try to justify it, to protect ourselves and hide behind our objections and facades, to no avail. It doesn't matter whether we are a religious, church going, Bible reading person or one who cares nothing for God or the church. The holy and righteous God is unimpressed with our righteousness. We stand condemned before him.

Paul goes on now to quote the Law. He is addressing religious people, those who know the Law, thus he quotes the Bible. In these verses he follows the practice of the rabbis of that time, stringing together a number of verses to make a point (they called it a "string of pearls"). He takes a number of verses from Psalms, Isaiah and Proverbs to powerfully drive home his conclusion that all mankind is under the power of sin. Verses 10-11:

as it is written,

"THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;

There is not one righteous. Lest someone say, "What about me?" Paul adds, "Not even one."

THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS,

THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;

There may be some who casually search for God, but no one really hungers after God.

There is not one righteous. If we evaluate ourselves by God's standard we all fall short of his glory. God is the only one who is righteous. If we were to illustrate this in terms of a compass, God is due North. Some are going due South, and there may be some who are going Northeast or Northwest, but no one is going due North.

Verse 12:

**ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS;
THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD,
THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE."**

Paul is not saying that no one on earth has ever done a good deed. What he is saying is that no one exclusively or habitually does what is good. We may occasionally do some good things, but even our best actions are tinged with evil.

Listen to these words from Malcolm Muggeridge:

It is precisely when you consider the best in man that you see that there is in each one of us a hard core of pride or self-centeredness that corrupts our best achievements and blights our best experiences. It comes out in all sorts of ways, in the jealousy which spoils our friendships, in the vanity we feel when we have done something pretty good, in the easy conversion of love into lust, in the meanness that lets us depreciate the efforts of other people, in the distortion of our own judgment by our own self interest, in our fondness for flattery and our resentment for blame, in our self-assertive profession of fine ideals which we never begin to practice.⁴

That is our problem, and that is why our deeds are worthless: We are self-centered. And that is what sin is—the revolt of self over God.

So what is Paul saying in this passage?

In 10b-12, he indicts everyone. We are all affected by sin, everyone in the world. No one is untouched.

We don't have to be a genius to understand what he is saying:

v. 10: *There is none...not even one.*

v. 11: *There is none...There is none.*

v. 12: *All...There is none...There is not even one.*

We are sinful in our origins. We come into the world with a proclivity for doing wrong. This is what theologians call original sin. They are not saying that we sin in original ways. We all sin pretty much the same way. Our life is like a baseball with a spin on it. Sooner or later it breaks, and it always breaks away from God.

The clearest statement on original sin that I have ever read comes from the report some years ago of the Minnesota Crime Commission, a totally secular agency. They came to this frightening and factual conclusion:

Every baby starts life as a little savage. He is completely selfish and self-centered. He wants what he wants when he wants it—his bottle, his mother's attention, his playmate's toy, his uncle's watch. Deny him these wants, and he seethes with rage and aggressiveness, which would be murderous, were he not so helpless. He is dirty. He has no morals, no knowledge, and no skills. This means that all children, not just certain children, are born delinquent. If permitted to continue in the self-centered world of his infancy, given free reign to his impulsive actions to satisfy his wants, every child would grow up a criminal, a thief, a killer, a rapist.⁵

In verses 13 -18 Paul shows that not only are all of us affected by sin, but every part of our being is affected. Sin is pervasive. This is what theologians call total depravity. We don't like to hear that phrase. It doesn't mean that we are as depraved as we can be. It means that we are depraved in the totality of our being. If sin were a color we would be some shade of that color all over.

Notice how Paul demonstrates this. He lists certain parts of the human body to show how pervasive sin is. Sin affects every part of us: our minds, our emotions, our wills, our sexuality. We can't get away from it.

Verses 13-14:

**"THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE,
WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING,
"THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS;"
WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS;"**

The apostle covers the whole realm of human speech. Sin begins deep down in the throat, then it proceeds to the tongue, then the lips, then the whole mouth, from the inward parts to the outward parts. "*THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE.*" They are corrupt. That is why corruption comes out of their mouths, as if someone had opened a grave: all the garbage, all the corruption comes out. This explains people's obsession with four-letter words, sexual innuendoes and profanity. All this is a manifestation of what is in their hearts. Jesus said that the mouth simply speaks out of what is in the heart. And not only vulgarity, but hypocrisy: "*THEIR TONGUES KEEP DECEIVING.*" He is speaking of the facades we put up, the white lies we tell. "*THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS.*" We poison with our words, slandering reputations. We use caustic words to put people down.

Next, Paul moves to deeds. Verses 15-17:

**"THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD,
DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS,
AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN."**

Wherever man goes ruin follows. Do we need any more documentation of this? Will Durant wrote in his book, *Lessons from History*: "In the last 3,421 years of recorded history only 268 have seen no war."⁶ The search for peace goes on unabated, because we don't know the way to peace. Ray Stedman used to say that verse 17

would be an appropriate slogan for the United Nations: "The path of peace have they not known."⁷ Man is helpless to stop the constant wars because he does not know the way of peace.

Next, Paul identifies the cause of all this war and turmoil. Verse 18:

"THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES."

At the root of all our sin lies the fact that we do not fear God. We do not respect him. And, as Paul said earlier in chapter 1, when we reject God, we lose everything.

Verse 19:

Now we know that whatever the Law says [i.e., the verses from Psalms and Isaiah that he has just quoted in verses 10-18], it speaks to those who are under the Law [i.e., people who are religious], that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable [guilty] to God;

In other words, if we have to be approved before God on the basis of our goodness, we don't have a chance. We are guilty. We have heard the word of God spoken to us and we stand condemned before him, because we have not lived up to the truth that we have.

Verse 20:

because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

Paul introduces an idea that he is going to develop later in the book, namely, that the Law was never given to save us. God did not expect Israel to keep the Law and thereby win their way into his heart. He knew they couldn't keep it, but they thought they could. They said to Moses: "Give us the Law. Tell us what God says and we will do it." But before Moses ever got down from the mountain Israel was breaking every commandment.

The purpose of the Law is to indict and condemn, to drive people back to grace. It is designed to reveal how sinful we really are. Once we had a vague notion that we were sinful but, having read the Law, now we know how really sinful we are. That is the purpose of the Law—to make us take a good look at ourselves so that we can see just how bad we are, that we might rely on God's grace and his power to keep it.

If we are basing our relationship with God on our own efforts we will never get to know him. We have to live up to the light that we have and never falter, not even once. But we have not, we will not, and we cannot keep the Law. When we finally come to accept this we are driven to grace.

And so God's word strips away our emperor's clothing of self deceit, displaying our nakedness. The world may say that we are doing fine and that our clothes are beautiful, but God's word reveals our wretchedness.

In Revelation 3:17-18, the apostle John wrote these words to the church at Laodicea:

"You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see."

The only answer to the predicament of sin is the cross of Christ. That is where our Savior took upon himself the wrath that was justly ours to bear. As we stand before that cross, naked, guilty, and devoid of any righteousness, let us resolve today to cling to Christ, who fulfilled the Law on behalf of sinners like us.

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THE MIRACLE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1195
Romans 3:21-31
Seventh Message
Gary Vanderet
April 25th, 1999

The tragic events in Littleton, Colorado last week have had a profound impact on our nation. When death comes after a long and full life, it comes as a welcome guest, as with the dawning of a new day. When death comes after a long and painful illness, it often comes as a merciful friend. But when death comes in such a horrific and violent way, taking away teenagers, with all their potentialities unfulfilled and their years unrealized, we are left shattered.

I was struck again with the truth that when we reject God, we lose everything, and we become intellectually confused and morally darkened. The events of last week are a staggering reminder that all is not well with humanity. They are a sobering illustration of Romans 1, where Paul describes a world gone astray because it has given up the worship and love of God. There the apostle describes what happens to mankind when standards disappear and society begins to disintegrate: "being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents" (Rom 1:29-30). The wrath of God leaves man to himself, without restraints or inhibitions: senseless, faithless, heartless, and ruthless (Rom 1:31). The fact that we do not see more of this kind of violence and chaos is due solely to God's restraining grace.

It is significant that we come to these verses today in Romans, because in this book we find the only answer, the only hope for our hurting world. In the opening two and a half chapters, Paul has made—and sustained—the charge that all mankind is under the curse of sin. He has clearly shown that the entire human race is guilty. Each one of us has blown it. Here is how Eugene Peterson translates the apostle's conclusion to all that he has said, in 3:10-12:

*There's nobody living right, not even one,
Nobody who knows the score, nobody alert for God.
They've all taken the wrong turn:
wandered down blind alleys.
No one's living right;
I can't find a single one.*

Paul summarizes this again in v. 23 of this chapter by saying, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The Old and New Testaments use a number of words to describe sin. This word which the apostle uses here means "to miss the mark." We miss the glory of God. We were created in his image and intended to dis-

play his glory, and we missed. "Glory" was used in the classical literature of Paul's day to refer to a person's worth, assets, wealth, or value. Glory is the essence of God's character. Now, if we are going to earn salvation, then we have to be exactly like Jesus Christ, who perfectly manifested God's character while here on earth. To say that we don't measure up is an understatement.

In contrast to our human condition is the divine character. God is holy and just. There is no sin in him. Sin is repulsive to God. He hates it. That may come as a surprise to some. We are inclined to think that God is easy-going and tolerant, and we are shocked at his reaction to sin in both the Old and New Testaments. The Bible uses some interesting metaphors to describe how much God hates sin. One says that sin makes him sick to his stomach. God says of a particular church in the Book of Revelation, "You make me sick to my stomach. I want to throw up." God is holy and just and righteous. He keeps his distance from sin. That is the picture we get from the Ark in the Old Testament. The people did not just walk up to the ark. When the priests picked it up and placed it on their shoulders, the people followed a thousand yards, more than half a mile, behind. God was communicating that he is separate from sin.

So we are confronted with a dilemma, a problem that needs a solution. God loves sinners, but he has to judge sin. We are sinful, and as a result are separated from God. But he loves us desperately. How then can we put together God's justice and love? How can he judge sin and yet justify sinners at the same time?

Someone might ask, "Why doesn't God declare an amnesty?" "Amnesty" comes from the word amnesia. Why doesn't God forget our sin and forgive it? is the point. But that simply would not work. That is not our concept of justice in the world. What about the drug dealer who destroys young people, simply for money? What about the murders and mayhem of last week? John Stott comments that if we say that God should just forgive, "we understand neither the gravity of sin nor the majesty of God." That is the predicament.

Given this dilemma, we come now to what one commentator calls the great divide of Paul's letter to the Romans. Donald Grey Barnhouse superinscribed a drawing of a heart over these verses in his Bible because, he said, "I am convinced today, after these many years of Bible study, that these verses are the most important in the Bible."¹ These verses are certainly the turning point in this book. I hope they will mark a turning point in

your life, too.

The solution to the dilemma is given in these verses. Romans 3:21-26:

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (NASB)

Here Paul describes the miraculous arrangement whereby sinners are made just before a holy God. The word righteousness is used a number of times in these verses. Here is the answer to the dilemma of man's sin and God's holiness: the *righteousness* of God. God is righteous. He always does what is right. And that righteousness is clearly seen in the cross of Christ. It was there that God's righteousness was made known. There God took the initiative to give us a righteous status in his sight. It was there that he saved us.

What does that mean? Paul uses three terms to help us understand what happened at the cross.

The first word is *justification*: "being justified as a gift by His grace" (verse 24). The second word is *redemption*: "being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (verse 24). The third word is *propitiation*: "whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed" (verse 25). So Paul uses these three words to describe how God solved the dilemma of judging sin and justifying sinners at the same time. God accomplished this by justifying us, redeeming us, and atoning for our sins. These theological words are hard for us to understand, but Paul's readers would have understood them. In his day, justification was not a theological, but a legal term. Redemption was a term from the market place. The third term, propitiation, was the only one that had religious connotations.

Justification is a legal term. There is a catchy phrase that some use to define it: "Just as if I've never sinned," they say. That is helpful, but it is not inclusive enough. The word is actually the equivalent of the legal pronouncement, "Not guilty." Justification implies more than just a pardon. It has not merely a negative but a positive aspect, too. Christians are given a righteous status, and now have favor with God. When we look back on our lives and review all the things we have said

and done, all the cruel acts and the pain we have inflicted on others, we wonder how a righteous and just God could declare us not guilty. Well, it is because, as Paul puts it in verse 24, "being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." God put our guilt upon the Lord Jesus. He bore our sins in his own body on the cross. He paid for them so that we don't have to. He took the rap. He bore the consequences. Someone had to pay for sin. God did not want to send us to hell, so he sent his Son to hell that our sins could be paid for and we could be redeemed.

Dave Roper illustrates the point in this way. Suppose I defraud someone and get caught. There is no question about my wrongdoing, so I stand before the court and plead guilty. The judge sentences me to pay a ten-million dollar fine, slams the gavel down, and goes into his chambers. How am I going to pay that fine? I am guilty, the fine is just, but I can't pay. Then the judge returns. He doesn't have his robes on anymore. He comes around to the front of his desk, and he has his checkbook out. He writes a check for ten million one hundred dollars, with my name on it, and he hands the check to the clerk of the court and says, "This is to pay his fine. I am taking the responsibility of paying the consequences for this man's evil act." That is justification. I am declared "Not guilty," because of the sacrifice of the judge. The extra hundred dollars is for me to take my wife out to dinner, because justification demands a celebration! The judge paid the price.

The second word is redemption. God redeemed us. In Paul's day, slaves were captured in war and taken to Rome and sold. They would stand there, naked and in chains, and buyers would barter for them. Now, suppose you were on that auction block and someone in the crowd wanted to buy you. He kept bidding and raising the price until finally he bought you for an exorbitant price. Then, after the auction, he removed your chains and handed you a new wardrobe. You asked him, "What do you want me to do?" and he replied, "You are free." "But," you responded, "I thought I was your slave. You just purchased me." And he said, "That's right. I did. But you are free, because I have bought you and set you free." That is what redemption means. We could not free ourselves, we were slaves to our own sin and guilt, but God redeemed us. He bought us out of captivity—and it cost him immeasurably: the price was the life of his Son.

The third word is propitiation (or atonement, NIV). The word means "to appease the wrath of the gods." Some people are embarrassed or even shocked by that word. They feel it doesn't seem right to have to placate God's anger, so they substitute the word expiation, meaning, to wipe away sin, to take away sin. Both of those ideas are present here. Paul is describing God's answer to our problem, which is not only our sin, but God's holiness, and his wrath upon sin. John Stott put it this way: "Where there is divine wrath, there is the need to avert it."²

This idea of appeasing the wrath of God was well known in the ancient world. In pagan religions, everyone understood that the gods were angry and had to be appeased. But, unlike the pagan gods which demanded sacrifice of children, God sacrificed his own Son. He was the sacrifice, the propitiation, the expiation, the atonement for our sins. Many translations use the word atonement because this is the term that is used in Exodus 25 concerning the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, the high and holy day for Jews. On that day the sins of the people are atoned for, and the wrath of God is appeased.

And so it was through the cross of Christ that God justified us, that he redeemed us, that he atoned for our sins. As Isaiah put it: "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa 53:6, NIV). This was not an afterthought. As Paul declares in verse 21, the cross was witnessed to by the law and the prophets. This was planned from the foundation of the world: that the Son of God would come as the Lamb of God to take away our sins.

Finally, Paul sets out the means by which we can enjoy this salvation. It is simply to believe it. It is by faith. That idea is communicated in a number of ways in these verses from chapter 3. In fact, the word faith is used nine times here:

"The righteousness of God [comes] through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe" (verse 22).

"Whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in his blood through faith" (verse 25).

"That he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (verse 26).

"For we maintain a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (verse 28).

This righteousness that we receive is apart from Law. We do not earn it; it is a gift. We cannot earn it by doing our best to be pleasing to God. Anyone who approaches God on those terms has already failed. There is no way anyone can measure up to God's standards. The sweetest, dearest little old lady you know cannot, because God knows her heart. The key to having the righteousness of God is faith. When Martin Luther translated verse 28 into German, he felt the sense of it so strongly that he added the word, "faith alone."

And, as Paul says in verse 26, it is not just faith in general. Many people have a vague belief in God. They have faith that everything has a purpose and everything will work out. But Paul declares that it is by faith in Jesus: faith in his person and work, that he bore our sins in his body on the cross so that we do not have to pay the consequences. We can't earn it or contribute to it in any way whatsoever.

This is what separates Christianity from all other religions. "No other system, ideology or religion proclaims a free forgiveness and a new life to those who have done nothing to deserve it but a lot to deserve judgment instead."³ Every other religion is based on human achievement in one way or another, but Christianity is based on divine accomplishment. It is not a religion at all. It is the good news that God's grace has turned away his wrath; that God's Son has died our death, and bore our judgment, and there is nothing left for us to do. We can't pay the bill. We can't even leave the tip. The only function faith has is to receive this gift that God's grace offers. It doesn't cost us anything because it cost God everything.

That is why Paul concludes, in verses 27-31:

Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.

Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.

Who can boast? No one, absolutely no one. How can we boast when we receive the gift of grace without any merit on our part? Thus, any ground for self-righteousness is done away with. This is why self-righteousness is the ugliest sin among Christians. When we look down on other people, imagining that we are better than they, then we have denied what God has done for us. All boasting is excluded. The only ground of acceptance is the gift of grace.

And no one, neither Jew nor Gentile, is excluded from grace. No special privilege or favor counts in God's sight. God has no most-favored-nation. Salvation is the same for everyone. Paul argues: "Is God the God of Jews only? Then there must be two Gods—one for the Jews and one for the Gentiles. But that cannot be; there is only one God; God is one." Therefore, God is equally the God of the Gentiles and the God of the Jews, because both Jew and Gentile must come on exactly the same grounds. This is the wonderful thing about the gospel. All mankind is on the same level—guilty, and in need of grace. No one can stand on any basis other than the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Justification is truly a miracle. It is my prayer that you will receive and live in this marvelous gift of grace.

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1. D. G. Barnhouse, *God's Remedy, God's River* (Scripture Truth) 2:6.
2. John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 114.
3. Stott, 118.



BY FAITH ALONE

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1196

Romans 4:1-12

Eighth Message

Gary Vanderet

August 1st, 1999

The book of Romans is one of the most influential books of all time. Romans has transformed millions of lives. It has been the force behind some of the most significant conversions in church history. The apostle Paul's letter is the clearest presentation of the gospel, the good news that God has found a way, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, to justify the ungodly. That includes all of us, because we are all ungodly, as Paul has clearly shown in the opening two and a half chapters of his letter.

In those chapters Paul divided humanity into two types. First, the irreligious, whom he identifies as the average Roman citizen. He is speaking of the sophisticated, intelligent, beautiful people of the world. They have knowledge of God from creation, but they have turned from that and exchanged worship of the living God for worshipping idols. Such people are without excuse. They know the truth, but they deny it.

The second type identified by Paul is the religious person, in particular the Jew who has the light of Scripture. The Jews know the truth, and they teach it, but they do not practice it. So Paul concludes that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Some people are better than others, but everyone falls short of the character of God. God's glory is what he is, and regardless of who we are or what we have done, we have fallen short of God's character. And Paul says that the Law does not help us. It only makes matters worse by defining sin for us. It makes the burden greater, making us feel more guilty and more responsible. The Law can't save us. That is the bad news.

But the good news is that in the person of his Son, God has done something about our problem: Jesus became the sin-bearer for us. Our sins were placed upon him and he bore them in his own body on the cross. By believing in Jesus we are delivered from our sins. We are declared, "Not guilty!" and given the gift of righteousness. Later Paul will say, "There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus."

But as long as we remain self-righteous, we don't have a chance. That is hard for us to accept, because we have been taught from childhood that the way to succeed in this world is by working hard. All our lives we are told, "the early bird gets the worm"; "no pain, no gain"; "there is no such thing as a free lunch"; "you get what you pay for"; "don't let them see you sweat." But, the greatest discovery one can make in life is the grace of God.

The lesson we will learn in our study in Romans today is that salvation by grace, freely given on the basis of faith, has always been God's way of salvation. Never in human history did God save people by works. Some think that in the Old Testament people were saved by keeping the Law and in the New Testament we are saved by faith. Some of you probably believe that, but it's not true. People have always been saved by faith.

Paul has to establish that fact for some of his readers, particularly Jews who would take exception to the statement he made in verse 28 of chapter 3: "For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law." Hearing that, a Jew would ask, "What does this do to the Old Testament, to the Law?" Paul anticipates that question, in verse 31: "*Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.*"

In this letter, Paul uses the word "Law" in a few different ways. Here he is using it to refer to the entire Old Testament. He asks, "By preaching faith in Christ as the way of salvation, do we nullify the Old Testament?" In other words, are there two different ways of gaining God's favor? Is the first, found in the Old Testament, accomplished by keeping the Law, while the New Testament has another, different way to gain God's favor, based on faith? Does this mean we can put our Old Testament Scriptures away because we don't need them anymore? To that, Paul says, emphatically, "No! That is not true. On the contrary, we uphold the law. We establish the Old Testament Scriptures."

In chapter 4 now, Paul takes two examples from the Old Testament of men who were justified by faith. He could have selected from numerous others, but he picks these two because these are the most prominent people in the Old Testament, models to the Jews: Abraham, Israel's most illustrious patriarch, and David, Israel's most illustrious king.

Paul begins with Abraham. Verses 1-5:

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about; but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness... (NASB)

Abraham, one of the great men of history, is honored throughout the world. He is revered by three faiths, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. He stands head and shoulders above most of the human race. Obviously, Abraham was held in high regard by the rabbis. To the Jews, he was the epitome of righteousness. He was the one who received the covenant and the promises. He was called the friend of God. The question Paul will answer is: How did Abraham get to be that way? The rabbis took it for granted that Abraham was justified by his works of righteousness, that he had earned his way into God's good pleasure. All the Rabbinic literature testifies to this point. In one place we read: "Abraham was perfect in all his dealings with the Lord and gained favor by his righteousness throughout his life" (Jubilees 23:10). The rabbis quoted the Scriptures where God promised to bless Abraham because of his obedience, neglecting to recognize that the very verses they were quoting referred to his life of obedience *after* he was justified.

What was it that made Abraham a friend of God? Here Paul says that the reason Abraham achieved his favored status is because God justifies the ungodly. Verse 5: "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness." Abraham an ungodly man? Yes! That is what he was!

Paul is assuming his readers have some knowledge of the story of Abraham's life. Abraham lived in the city of Ur of the Chaldees, in the Mesopotamian Valley. He came from a family of idolaters, probably moon worshippers. He apparently had a heart for God, but didn't know him. Then God appeared to him and introduced himself. God promised to show him another land, to give him a large posterity, and through him to bless all the families of the earth. So at 75, Abraham responded to the call and set out for Ur of the Chaldees, without a map. He trusted God to lead him to a land he had never seen, and God brought him over to the land that we call Israel.

When famine struck the land, Abraham, deciding that he couldn't eat a promise, went down to Egypt. His ungodliness became evident at this point in his treatment of Sarah, his wife. The Scriptures say that Sarah was a beautiful woman. In fact, she was still turning heads when she was 90 years old. Abraham feared that if Pharaoh saw how beautiful she was, he would covet her and kill Abraham to possess her, so he told Sarah to say she was his sister. Thus Abraham jeopardized Sarah's life and character to save his hide. But God protected her, sending plagues on the house of Pharaoh until the truth came out. Pharaoh responded by giving gifts to the couple, and then sent them back to Canaan. Abraham followed this practice at least one other time in his marriage to Sarah. He almost threw away the promise that God had made to him. Abraham was an ungodly man. But the apostle's point is that God justifies ungodly men on the basis of faith.

Back in Canaan, ten years passed and Abraham still had no children to brighten his days. One night, God took him to the top of a mountain and showed him the millions of stars shining in the heavens. God said, "Can you count them?" Abraham said, "No!" Then God said, "You are going to have more children than these stars." At that point in his life, of course, Abraham had no children. And, to make matters worse, he was impotent. His body was "dead," according to the text. Furthermore, Sarah had already passed through the change of life.

What made Abraham a friend of God was not his good behavior. It was the fact that he believed what God had told him. He knew that God was able to bring something out of nothing, as Paul will say later in the chapter. God created the world out of nothing. Surely he could create a child out of nothing. Abraham knew the facts. He was 75 years old when God first made the promise. He was 85 now, and he would be 100 years old before the child was conceived. He faced the facts squarely, but he had confidence in God. The text says that when God gave him the promise, he looked up and said, in effect, "I believe it. I don't know how you are going to do it. But I believe it." And God said, "You are a righteous man."

Now, that sounds strange to us, because we think we have to do something in order to be right with God. But what Paul is trying to get us to see is that in the Old Testament, before there was even a Law to obey, Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. He was not counted righteous on the basis of works. How then were people saved in the Old Testament? It was by faith. That is the point the apostle is making.

That word "reckoned" (verse 5) is used five times in six verses in this passage and six more times in the verses that follow. It is translated "credited" in the NIV, or "count." "Reckoned" was used with regard to financial or commercial matters. It is an objective, non-emotional word. Our word "logical" comes from it. There is probably nothing more objective and non-emotional than accounting. Numbers don't lie, as they say. Accounting procedures are very objective. You don't know how your bank feels when it sends out your monthly statement. It doesn't matter really. The statement is totally objective. That is the term that Paul uses here.

My friend Dave Roper uses an illustration that communicates what Paul is saying. Almost all accounting is done by computers today. This makes accounting very objective. Now, imagine a computer, a celestial computer, that has your name on its screen. This is your ledger. Every rotten thing you have ever done, ever thought you ever had, everything you said is listed there. All your lies, your murderous and adulterous thoughts, your pride, arrogance and selfishness—it's all there. Another screen has Jesus' ledger, and all of his righteousness is listed there. Not a speck of sin is itemized, because he knew no sin. He never lived even one second

when he was anything less than an exhibition of the grace and glory, the very character of God. He never sinned once. All that is on his ledger, and all of our unrighteousness is on ours.

Now, according to Paul, on the basis of our faith, God makes a totally objective decision. He takes all of the unrighteousness in our account and credits it to Jesus' account. That's what Paul means when he says, "He made him to be sin for us who knew no sin." God takes all the righteousness out of Jesus' account and credits it to ours, "that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor 5:21). When we believe in Christ, all of Christ's righteousness is imputed, credited, reckoned to our account; and all of our wickedness, past, present and future, is taken out of our account and credited to Christ's account.

Salvation for Abraham, the model of models for the Jews, was by faith alone.

Having established that fact, that Abraham was reckoned as righteous by faith, before his good works, Paul now presents the experience of another great Old Testament saint, David, Israel's greatest king. Verses 6-8:

just as David also speaks of the blessing upon the man to whom God reckons righteousness apart from works,

**"BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN,
AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED.
BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT."**

There is more written about David than any other person in the Bible, apart from the Lord Jesus. Sixty-six chapters of the Old Testament are devoted to David's life. There are fifty-nine references to him in the New Testament. David possessed tremendous natural assets. Someone has said that he had the literary skill of Shakespeare, the musical ability of Beethoven, the military skill of Alexander the Great, the political savvy of Abraham Lincoln, and the hand-eye coordination of Joe Montana. It's no wonder that Michelangelo's sculpture of David stands 18 feet tall. David was a giant of a man. Now God said of David, "he is a man after my own heart." How did David get to be so close to God? Was it through a lifetime of good works? No. David was quite flawed in his origins. He was abused as a child, unloved by his parents, and at times was controlled by obsessions like pride, ambition, and lust. It is interesting that the passage which Paul quotes comes from Psalm 32, words written by David after he had committed adultery, murder, and mass murder.

One spring during David's reign, his army went off to battle against the country of Ammon. It was normal for kings to accompany their armies into battle, but for some reason David stayed home. Then one night while he was walking on the rooftop of his house he saw Uriah's beautiful wife, Bathsheba, bathing. Uriah was one of David's best friends. He was one of the mighty

men who left their secure positions in Saul's army when the future king was in exile, fleeing from Saul. The fact that Bathsheba was his friend's wife should have stopped David on this evening, but his motor was running. He called for Bathsheba. She became pregnant, and to cover up his adulterous affair, David arranged to have Uriah murdered. Many others died in battle that day, and he covered that up, too. Then he married Bathsheba, thinking he had concealed everything.

A year later, the prophet Nathan came to David with a story he had concocted. Nathan said that as he traveled through the countryside he happened upon a situation that required David's judgment. He came upon two men, one wealthy, with vast herds, the other, a poor man who had only one ewe lamb. The wealthy man took this poor man's only lamb, his pet, and served it up for dinner to a traveling stranger. David stopped Nathan at that point. He was outraged. "The man deserves to die," he cried. David got a little carried away. Stealing sheep was not a capital offense in Israel. Nevertheless, that was how he felt. His own guilt was getting to him. Nathan looked at David and said, "David, you are the man!" David became unraveled. He put his face in his hands and cried out, "I have sinned against the Lord." He confessed his sin, and shortly thereafter wrote Psalm 32, from which Paul quotes these words, in verses 7-8:

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN,
AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED.
BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT.**

Paul uses a double negative for emphasis in verse 8. That is not good English, but it is perfectly acceptable in Greek. "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not, by no means, take into account." In other words, he will never, ever, count his sin against him. So David was justified. But not without consequences. Sin always has consequences. Much pain and heartache would follow in David's life as a result of his bad choices. But he was justified freely through God's grace. He didn't deserve it, but he served a God who justifies the ungodly. We may not have committed murder or adultery, but we are all ungodly. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," yes, but the Lord justifies us freely on the basis of faith.

In the remainder of this paragraph Paul goes on to establish that this salvation that Abraham found in the Old Testament is available to us today. Verses 9-12:

Is this blessing then upon the circumcised, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say, "FAITH WAS RECKONED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." How then was it reckoned? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of

all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.

Paul is saying that Abraham was declared righteous while he was a Gentile. Back then, there were no Jews in the world; there was just Abraham and all the other Gentiles. When God revealed himself to Abraham and gave him that promise, Abraham believed it. Fourteen years would pass before he was circumcised. Therefore the rite of circumcision does not have any saving value. That is not what imparted righteousness to Abraham. He was already a friend of God years before he was circumcised. Paul says that circumcision was a seal which confirmed the righteousness Abraham already possessed.

And Paul is saying that God's grace is available to everyone, both Jews and Gentiles. It doesn't make any difference whether you are circumcised or uncircumcised. Your religious background is irrelevant. It makes no difference whether you have been confirmed or baptized or even belong to a church. The issue is not even the state of your moral life. Those things may be confirmations of a relationship with God, but they don't make the relationship. A relationship with God is established by one thing: faith alone, nothing more and nothing less. That is why Paul can say that we are justified freely by faith.

Paul concludes by saying that what matters is not whether we are circumcised or uncircumcised, but whether we are walking in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had. That is the point. Are we fol-

lowing Abraham in our faith? Do we understand our need for God's grace? Do we know how radically sinful we really are, and how much we need the righteousness that comes from God alone, through faith in Christ? It is faith alone that saved Abraham, that saved David, and that saves us as well.

Horatio Bonar captured this thought beautifully in this poem which he wrote in 1861:

*Not what these hands have done
Can save this guilty soul;
Not what this toiling flesh has borne
Can make my spirit whole.
Not what I feel or do
Can give me peace with God,
Not all my prayers and sighs and tears
Can bear my awful load.
Thy work alone, O Christ,
Can ease this weight of sin;
Thy blood alone, O lamb of God,
Can give me peace within.
Thy grace alone, O God,
To me can pardon speak,
Thy power alone, O Son of God,
Can this sore bondage break.
I bless the Christ of God;
I rest on love divine;
And with unfaltering lip and heart,
I call this Savior mine.*

This is the wonderful good news of the letter to the Romans. Christ bore all of our unrighteousness on the cross, and through our faith, God imputes his righteousness into our hearts. Our part is to believe what God has said and Christ has done.

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THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1197
Romans 4:13-25
Ninth Message
Gary Vanderet
August 8th, 1999

Our modern, materialistic world does not regard faith to be a valuable commodity. People feel that the only things that are real are those that we can detect with our five senses. The result is that we tend to think that faith is a matter of psyching ourselves up to accept improbable facts that are hard, if not impossible, to believe. Some think that faith is actually self-deception—believing what we know to be untrue.

But in the Scriptures, faith is regarded in a very different light. David Roper writes that faith is the capacity to look beyond the seen to the unseen world of reality where the invisible God is at work:

There is...another realm of reality—more actual, more factual, more substantial than anything we can see, hear, touch, taste, smell in this world. It exists all around us—not out there somewhere... Faith is the means by which we gain access to that invisible world... Faith is to the spiritual realm what the five senses are to the natural. It is the means by which we grasp spiritual reality and bring it into the realm of our experience.¹

“Faith,” says the writer of Hebrews, “gives substance to things that are not seen.”

Most people profess belief in some sort of god, but they have no relationship of trust with their entity. Their life’s circumstances are such that they find it difficult to trust God. When they hear that verse from Hebrews, that faith is being certain of what we do not see, they think they will never be able to achieve that kind of belief. That is tragic, because faith is the most important thing in the world. Faith, the writer of Hebrews says, is what pleases God.

Faith is the theme of the fourth chapter of the Book of Romans. As we have seen, Paul has already made and sustained the charge that all mankind is guilty: we all have “sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” But the good news is that in the person of his Son, God has done something about the problem of sin. Jesus bore our sins in his own body on the cross, and by believing in him we are delivered from our sins. We are declared, “Not guilty!” and given the gift of righteousness. Faith and faith alone is what saves us.

In our last study covering the opening verses of chapter 4, we saw that salvation by grace, freely given on the basis of faith, has always been God’s way to salvation. There has never been a time in human history when God saved people by works. To make his case, Paul

uses the life of Abraham as an illustration of an Old Testament saint who was saved not by his works, but by his faith. The rabbis took it for granted that Abraham was justified by his works of righteousness: that he had earned his way into God’s good pleasure. But Paul took us back to Genesis 15, saying that before there was even a Law to obey, Abraham believed God and that was reckoned to him as righteousness.

Since Paul assumes that we know the Abraham story, let me quickly review it again for those of you who were not here last week.

Abraham lived in the city of Ur of the Chaldees, in the Mesopotamian Valley. He came from a family of idolaters, probably moon worshipers. He apparently had a heart for God, but didn’t know him. One day God appeared to Abraham and introduced himself to him. He called him out of Ur and promised to show him another land. He promised him a large posterity, and through him to bless all the families on the earth. And so, at 75, Abraham responded to the call. He set out to march, without a map, trusting God to lead him to a land he had never seen, and God brought him over to the land that we call Israel today.

One night God took Abraham on top of the mountain and pointed to the millions of stars in the heavens. God said, “Can you count them?” Abraham replied, “No.” Then God said, “You are going to have more children than these stars.” Abraham had no children at that point. To make matters worse, he was impotent. His body was dead, according to the text. And Sarah had already passed through the change of life. Abraham faced the facts squarely, but in spite of the seeming impossibility of this promise, he had confidence in God. The text says that when God gave him the promise, he looked up and said, “I believe it. I don’t know how you are going to do it, but I believe it.” And God said, “You are a righteous man.”

In our passage this morning, Paul continues his defense of Abraham’s justification by faith. He makes one further point. He declares that if Abraham was not justified by works (since God said that he believed and was justified), and he was not justified by circumcision (since he was circumcised 14 years later), then his justification had nothing to do with the Law, either.

We pick up Paul’s argument in chapter 4, verse 13:

For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through

the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation. For this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace, in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all... (Rom 4:13-16, NASB).

Paul is saying that the promise that God gave to Abraham, that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars, was made without any restrictions or stipulations. According to Paul, God's word came to Abraham as a promise, not a law. In these verses, Paul's reasoning is very clear as to why Abraham could never have been justified by the Law.

First, historically, Abraham received the promise of righteousness long before the Law was ever given. Paul says in Galatians 3 that the Law came 430 years after Abraham was counted righteous because of his faith. Secondly, Paul reminds us that Law and promise are two entirely different, and quite incompatible, things. Law language is different from promise language. John Stott is very helpful on this point. He writes: "Law-language...demands our obedience, but promise-language...demands our faith. What God said to Abraham was not 'Obey this law and I will bless you', but 'I will bless you; believe my promise.'"² To make the promise conditional on obedience to the Law would negate the whole arrangement. So Paul concludes, in verse 16: "For this reason it is by faith, that it might be *in accordance with grace*." Paul brings together God's grace and our faith. Salvation originates in the graciousness of God. The only proper human response is faith. Stott comments: "Grace gives and faith takes. Faith's exclusive function is humbly to receive what grace offers."³

Thirdly, the reason justification is by grace through faith is, "that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all." Only the gospel of grace and faith can ensure the promise of salvation to all the descendants who follow Abraham's faith. It unites Jews with Gentiles, and places everyone on the same level—at the foot of the cross. Thus, all believers belong to Abraham's seed and receive Abraham's promise.

Abraham was justified by faith alone, and so are we.

The content of Abraham's faith is defined and illustrated in verses 17-21. Here we have a picture, an instant replay as it were, of Abraham's state of mind on the occasion when God gave him that promise. As we look at his example we will come to a better understanding of faith, one that will help us examine our own faith. Verses 17-22:

(as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE

YOU") in the sight of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. In hope against hope he believed, in order that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken, "SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE." And without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what He had promised, He was able also to perform. Therefore also IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS.

There was a rationale behind Abraham's faith. Those who think that faith is merely psyching oneself into believing things that are impossible to believe otherwise are given this insight into Abraham's thinking. Faith is trusting a person, and its plausibility depends on how reliable is the person in whom one is trusting. And there is no one more reliable than God! Abraham knew that.

John Stott points out that Abraham was sure of two things: God's power, and his faithfulness.⁴ Those two qualities were the basis of Abraham's faith.

First, God's power. Paul makes two statements at the end of verse 17 describing what Abraham knew about God: He is the God "who gives life to the dead [resurrection] and calls into being that which does not exist [creation]." These two elements formed the glorious content of Abraham's faith. God takes the things that once were alive and vibrant but have died and brings them to life again. And God calls into being that which does not exist. He is the God of resurrection and he is the God of creation. Stott comments that "nothingness and death," the two great mysteries of humanity, "are no problem to God."⁵ He created the world out of nothing, and out of death he raised Jesus.

God is the creator God of Genesis 1. He began with a chaos that was empty and dark. Then he spoke in the midst of that darkness, creating light, filling the emptiness with teeming life, redeeming the chaos, and blending all things into a system of such perfect order that it boggles the greatest of minds. God called each created item into being from nothingness. That which had not previously existed suddenly was brought into being by his word. Remember Jeremiah's words in prayer to his sovereign Creator when he declared, "Ah, Lord God, Behold, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm!" And then he declared: "Nothing is too difficult for you" (Jer 32:17). And remember Paul's prayer in Ephesians, that we might know the surpassing greatness of God's power which he displayed in Christ when he raised him from the dead.

God is the God of creation and resurrection. That

firm conviction of God's power is what gave Abraham the strength to believe *in hope* and *against hope*, according to Paul. On that starry night when God told Abraham that he would have more children than the stars of the heavens, Abraham and Sarah hadn't have a single child. Abraham faced the facts squarely. He didn't retreat into a fantasy world, ignoring reality. The text says, "*he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb.*" Some people think that a person of faith inwardly agrees to ignore the facts. But it is never that! Abraham faced the facts head-on. He thought about the hopelessness of his situation, his dead body and Sarah's barren womb. Humanly speaking, the situation was impossible. He was 100 years old and Sarah was 93, way past her childbearing years.

Yet, verse 20 says that behind all of those observable impossibilities lay the promise of God. Abraham was faced with a critical choice. He could focus on his absolutely impossible circumstances or trust the promise of God, the God who raises the dead and creates out of nothing. Paul says what his choice was: "*yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what He had promised, He was able also to perform.*" When Abraham looked at his dead body, he remembered that he had a God who raises the dead; and when he thought about Sarah's womb, he remembered that he had a God who calls into being that which does not exist. Thus in hope, against all human hope, Abraham believed. And he grew strong in faith. We see that later, when he faced the greatest test of his faith. He was asked to sacrifice his only son Isaac, the one through whom God had said his promises would be fulfilled. The writer to the Hebrews says that Abraham reasoned that God would bring him back from the dead.

And so Abraham glorified God through his faith. He trusted God to be faithful to his promise. Stott writes, "Behind all promises lies the character of the person who makes them."⁶ Abraham knew that. He knew the impossibility of his situation. He wasn't ignoring the facts. But he also knew that the facts were not always as they seemed. He reminded himself of God's power and faithfulness. He faced his problem through the lens of God's promise. Citing Hebrews 11:11, "By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered Him faithful who had made the promise" (NIV), Stott comments that Abraham "knew that God could keep his promises (because of his power) and he knew that he would do so (because of his faithfulness)."⁷

But it isn't merely Abraham's faith that Paul is concerned with. It is our faith too. The apostle concludes the chapter by applying these lessons to our lives. Verses 23-25:

Now not for his sake only was it written, that it was reckoned to him, but for our sake also, to whom it will

be reckoned, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, He who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

The whole Abraham story, like all of Scripture, was written for us. The same God who reckoned Abraham's faith as righteousness will reckon righteousness to us if we "believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead." Abraham was not unique in his experience of being justified by faith. This is God's way of salvation for everyone.

Let me ask you: How is your faith this morning?

Some of you are living in situations similar to Abraham's. Humanly speaking, all you have is faith in the unseen realities. You can't walk by sight. Others of you are living in terrible family situations. There are no promises that God will make your home into the haven you long for, but he has promised to give you stability and supernatural help when the heat is on and all hell breaks loose. Can you trust God even though others never come through? Can you trust him that he is there even though you can't see him? That is the deeper faith to which God is taking you.

Maybe you struggle with an habitual sin. Just when you see progress you fall flat on your face. Yet, God says that "sin will not have dominion over you." Can you keep trusting his word? Can you pick yourself up and go on even though you keep falling down? Can you believe that one day you will be perfectly pure even though you are not now? Will you trust Jesus and side and struggle with him against your sin?

Some of you are out of work and you are depleting precious savings. You are beginning to wonder if the right job will ever come along. Can you continue to believe that God will never leave you or forsake you? that he knows your needs and will not withhold any good thing from you? that you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you?

Are you suffering physical or emotional pain which seems endless? Do you believe that "momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:17)? Do you believe that suffering is making you a man or woman of God, drawing you to him and purifying you of self-interest and self-glorification so that *His* glory can be seen? You can, if you look at the "things which are not seen" (2 Cor 4:18).

Second Kings 6 tells the story of Elisha and his servant in the city of Dothan. The Syrian army had surrounded the city, because God had been tipping off Elisha concerning the whereabouts of Ben Hadad, the king of Syria, and the king determined to put an end to him. When Elisha's servant awoke to see the surrounding army, he roused Elisha with the bad news. Undaunted, Elisha told his servant, "Don't worry. There are more of us than there are of them." We can imagine the servant saying, "Really? But there's only you and

me. What do you mean?” Sensing what was going on in his servant’s mind, Elisha prayed, “Lord, open his eyes that he may see.” The text says that the man’s eyes were opened to see the myriads of angels surrounding the Syrian army.

What we can see with our eyes alone is not the ultimate reality. Behind what we can see is the sovereign, powerful God who is in control of all events. Let us believe him, like Abraham, that we may by faith enter into his glorious salvation.

1. David Roper, *Seeing Through* (Multnomah Books, 1995) 204-205.
2. John Stott, *Romans* (Downe’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994) 131.
3. Stott, 131.
4. Stott, 134.
5. Stott, 133.
6. Stott, 134.
7. Stott, 134-135.

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THE JOY OF JUSTIFICATION

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1198

Romans 5:1-2

Tenth Message

Gary Vanderet

August 15th, 1999

The fifth chapter of the Book of Romans is one of the most glorious passages in all the New Testament. The opening verse begins with the conjunction “therefore,” which connects the verses that follow with all that has gone before. Up to this point the apostle Paul has clearly shown our *need for justification*. He has painted a grim picture of the plight of mankind: We stand guilty, hopelessly lost in our sin, living under the wrath of God. Paul then went on to explain the *way of justification*: Jesus Christ came to earth and became the sin-bearer. Our sins were placed upon him, he bore them in his own body on the cross. By believing in him we are delivered from death, we are declared “Not guilty!” and given the gift of righteousness.

In the first eleven verses of chapter 5 now, the apostle will give the *results of justification*. Paul is not arguing a point, as he has been doing in the previous four chapters. He simply states his case in a series of positive claims, setting out what is our inheritance as believers. Now that we have been justified there are certain things that are true for us, and he lists the multitude of benefits. The list is so rich I will divide this passage into two parts. This morning we will look at the first three results of our justification, given in verses 1 and 2. We will conclude the section in our next study.

In these verses Paul gives not only the results of our justification, but also what should be our proper reaction to them. He uses the word “exult” or “rejoice” repeatedly throughout this passage. “Exult” is a nice religious term, one that is never used in normal 20th century conversation except in dry theological circles. “Rejoice” is a bit more familiar, but it is still not quite accurate. Almost invariably the word is translated “boast.” Boasting is simply the outward expression of where our inner confidence lies. Paul is declaring where our confidence lies, or ought to lie, as believers, as people who are justified by faith. These verses can be used as a gauge of how well we have understood and applied to our lives the first four chapters of Romans. Viewed in that light, this text is a measure of maturity, showing us whether we are growing in Christ.

The first result of our justification is that we have peace with God. Verse 1:

Therefore having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...
(NASB)

J.B. Phillips renders this, “let us grasp the fact that we have peace with God.” Let us understand that we have

peace with God. Paul is not referring to a subjective feeling of peace, although certainly that too is ours as a result of our relationship with Christ. He is not talking about that “peaceful, easy feeling,” that the Eagles used to sing about, that is based on nothing but emotion. This peace is based on an objective fact.

Notice that Paul is not talking about the “peace of God,” but “peace with God.” The point, which the apostle will repeat later, is that we were God’s enemies. There was a barrier, a state of enmity between us and God, and now we have been reconciled. In the book of Colossians, the apostle says that God reconciled us to himself through Christ, making peace through the blood of the cross (Col 1:20). The war is over. We don’t have to be afraid of God any longer. We don’t have to hide from him and stay out of his way. When we kept silent about our sin, we hid from him. We regarded him as an enemy, and we avoided him. But when we confessed our sin, our eyes were opened and our perception of God changed.

The fact is, God has never been mad at us. What he is mad at is sin. And throughout eternity God has looked to the cross to take out his wrath on sin. Now that that wrath has been alleviated we are at peace with him. He is not at war with us and we are not at war with him. We belong to his family. The conflict has ended. Let us grasp that fact. That is why at the birth of Christ the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14, NIV). John Stott reminds us that this peace was the paramount blessing which the prophets foretold about the Messianic age, “the *shalom* of the kingdom of God, inaugurated by Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace.”¹

I will never forget the time I first grasped the significance of this peace. As a frightened, deeply insecure 18 year-old college sophomore, worried about the future, I began to read the New Testament and became deeply convicted about my sin. Then I came to understand God in a new light. I discovered that God was not the heavenly policeman I thought he was. He was not an angry judge waiting to pronounce sentence on me for everything I did wrong. God wanted to be my father. And when I received Jesus Christ, the burden that was lifted from me that night was my fear of God.

Years ago, I read a story about some Japanese soldiers who were stranded on remote islands in the Pacific after World War II. They had been living in caves, completely out of contact with the outside world, under

the impression that Japan was still at war with the United States. The Americans who found them offered them food, clothing and medical help. These men finally learned that Japan had lost the war and that peace now reigned between the former enemies. I have met some believers whose Christian lives are like that. They live as though they do not know that their war with God is over. But, the first thing that Paul says we have as a result of our justification is “peace with God.”

The second result has to do with the favored status we now enjoy in God’s presence. Verse 2a:

through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand;

J.B. Phillips translates this: “*through him we have confidently entered into this new relationship of grace, and here we take our stand.*” This translation communicates Paul’s meaning. I don’t think the apostle is referring merely to God’s undeserved love, his unmerited favor, as we normally think of grace. It is broader than that. He is referring to the “sphere of God’s grace,” as the NEB translates it. This is the privileged position of acceptance that we enjoy as believers.

Paul uses two verbs in relation to this grace, both of which describe our entrance into it and our continuance in it. First, he says, “*We have obtained our introduction...*” This verb is used in two other places in the New Testament (Eph 2:18; 3:12). One scholar says that the word “has a certain touch of formality” about it.² The image is of our being ushered into the presence of royalty. And we needed to be introduced. There was a time when we were in sin and unfit to enter God’s presence. We needed someone to bring us in.

Now, says Paul, as a result of our justification by faith through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have our introduction. Christ met us outside the throne room, took us by the hand, and walked us into the presence of God. And in his presence we found grace and mercy. Once we feared the King. It was unimaginable that we would ever be granted an audience with him. Now we not only are privileged to meet him, but welcomed in his presence. Earlier, we could never come before him, because our clothing was unsuitable and unworthy. Our righteousness was like “filthy rags,” the Scripture says. But in Jesus we have one who has the right of access, one who, having dealt with our sins, can take us and present us to the Father. He clothed us with his righteousness and took us by the hand and became our advocate.

And not only have we obtained this introduction, we stand firmly in his grace. Now that we are justified, our relationship with God comprises much more than a mere periodic visit with the King. As John Stott reminds us, we live in the temple, in the palace. He writes: “The perfect tenses [of the verbs] express this. Our relationship with God, into which justification has brought us, is not sporadic but continuous, not precarious but secure. We do not fall in and out of grace like courtiers

who may find themselves in and out of favor with their sovereign, or politicians with the public. No, we stand in it, for that is the nature of grace. Nothing can separate us from God’s love.”³ Paul will declare later, in Romans 8: “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:38-39, NIV).

Experiencing and enjoying our standing in grace is a hallmark of Christian maturity and stability. In “Surprised by Grace,” an essay summarizing his life, J.I. Packer describes the secret of his life and ministry in these words: “I am a shy, freaky, bookworm type person whom God has taken and set upon a rock. My stability comes from an ever fresh realization that God is my Father and I am his child. Adopted. Assured. Therefore I’m living in a less nervy, more relaxed way.” What a great, practical description of what it means to be standing in grace!

Thus we have these first two treasures as a result of our justification: peace with God through Jesus Christ our Lord, and this amazing grace in which we stand in our Father’s unconditional acceptance. These are great riches, but perhaps the greatest miracle of all is found in the final phrase of Romans 5:2:

and we exult in hope of the glory of God.

We rejoice in our present peace and grace, and we rejoice in what is coming. This word “glory” which Paul uses throughout the book refers to character or worth. God’s glory is the full manifestation of his character, which is what we were destined for. God created Adam and Eve to manifest his glory, contain his person, and reflect his character. That was our destiny, too, but, as Paul puts it in Romans 3:23, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Beginning with Adam and continuing to this day, every human being who has ever lived has fallen short of the glory of God. We have not been god-like. Jesus Christ came to earth and manifested completely the character of God. And one of these days the curtain will be raised and the glory of God will be fully disclosed. Jesus Christ will appear with great power and glory. Scripture assures us of the remarkable truth that we will not only see his glory, but we will be changed into it. We will be just like him! The apostle John wrote in his epistle: “Beloved, now we are children of God and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is” (1 John 3:2).

At that moment we will be transformed. We are being remade now, slowly being transformed into the image of Jesus Christ, and that process will be completed when we see the Lord Jesus. We will be like him. Paul says that is our hope, and we rejoice in it. And that hope is not a contingency. It is not like hoping the

Giants will win the pennant! That is not the hope Paul is talking about. Hope in the New Testament is an eager anticipation of something that is real and assured. Our destiny is secure. It is going to happen. We just have to wait for it

Ray Stedman used to tell the story about a friend of his who lived North Dakota. One stormy morning in the dead of winter, when it was about 30 degrees below zero and a couple of feet of snow lay on the ground, this man looked out his window and saw the mailman leave something in his mailbox, about a quarter of a mile from his house. Wanting to see what it was, the man dressed warmly and went out into the bitter cold, the snow swirling about him, and walked to the mailbox. To his disappointment, all he found was a seed catalog. He thumbed through it and as he turned the pages, he began to be filled with the thought that spring was coming. He visualized the beauty and brilliance of the flowers and vegetables. As he stood in the snow, suddenly he felt as though spring had come. He could taste the crunch of a cucumber, smell the fragrance of red roses and feel the juice of a red-ripe tomato running down his chin. It seemed as though winter faded away for the moment and he was caught up into the beauty of spring and summer.

That is something of what Paul is trying to get us to understand and experience. Here, in the midst of the “winter of our discontent,” he wants to show us something of the glory that is waiting beyond. Even though things are tough now, heaven is our home. That is our hope. We are bound for glory.

What a blessed privilege we enjoy as people who are justified by faith! The fruits of justification relate to the past, present, and future. As we look back, because of our past forgiveness, we rejoice in the peace we have with God. In the present, we are “standing in grace” in a relationship of unconditional acceptance with God. And as we look to the future, we rejoice in the fact that our destiny is secure. We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

As we prepare for communion this morning, I want to close with a story which Phil Yancey shares in his book, *What's So Amazing About Grace?*⁴

A young girl grows up on a cherry orchard just above Traverse City, Michigan. Her parents, a bit old-fashioned, tend to overreact to her nose ring, the music she listens to, and the length of her skirts. They ground her a few times, and she seethes inside. “I hate you!” she screams at her father when he knocks on the door of her room after an argument, and that night she acts on a plan she has mentally rehearsed scores of times. She runs away.

She has visited Detroit only once before, on a bus trip with her church youth group to watch the Tigers play... she concludes that is probably the last place her parents will look for her. California, maybe, or Florida, but not Detroit.

Her second day there she meets a man who drives the

biggest car she's ever seen. He offers her a ride, buys her lunch, arranges a place for her to stay. He gives her some pills that make her feel better than she's ever felt before. She was right all along, she decides: her parents were keeping her from all the fun.

The good life continues for...a year. The man with the big car—she calls him “Boss”—teaches her a few things that men like...She lives in a penthouse, and orders room service whenever she wants. Occasionally she thinks about the folks back home, but their lives now seem so boring...that she can hardly believe she grew up there.

She has a brief scare when she sees her picture printed on the back of a milk carton with the headline “Have you seen this child?” But by now she has blond hair, and with all the makeup and body-piercing jewelry she wears, nobody would mistake her for a child. Besides, most of her friends were runaways, and nobody squeals in Detroit.

After a year the first sallow signs of illness appear, and it amazes her how fast the boss turns mean...before she knows it she's out on the street without a penny to her name...When winter blows in she finds herself sleeping on metal grates outside the big department stores. “Sleeping” is the wrong word—a teenage girl at night in downtown Detroit can never relax her guard. Dark bands circle her eyes. Her cough worsens.

One night as she lies awake listening for footsteps, all of a sudden everything about her life looks different. She no longer feels like a woman of the world. She feels like a little girl, lost in a cold and frightening city. She begins to whimper. Her pockets are empty and she's hungry. She needs a fix. She pulls her legs tight underneath her and shivers under the newspapers she's piled atop her coat. Something jolts a synapse of memory and a single image fills her mind: of May in Traverse City, when a million cherry trees bloom at once, with her golden retriever dashing through the rows and rows of blossomy trees in chase of a tennis ball.

God, why did I leave, she says to herself, and pain stabs at her heart...She's sobbing now, and she knows in a flash that more than anything else in the world she wants to go home.

Three straight phone calls, three straight connections with the answering machine. She hangs up without leaving a message the first two times, but the third time she says, “Dad, Mom, it's me. I was wondering about maybe coming home. I'm catching a bus up your way, and it'll get there about midnight tomorrow. If you're not there, well, I guess I'll just stay on the bus until it hits Canada.”

It takes about seven hours for a bus to make all the stops between Detroit and Traverse City, and during that time she realizes the flaws in her plan. What if her parents are out of town and miss the message? Shouldn't she have waited another day or so until she could talk to them? And even if they are home, they probably wrote her off as dead long ago. She should have given them some time to overcome the shock.

Her thoughts bounce back and forth between those worries and the speech she is preparing for her fa-

ther. “Dad, I’m sorry. I know I was wrong. It’s not your fault; it’s all mine. Dad, can you forgive me?” She says the words over and over, her throat tightening even as she rehearses them. She hasn’t apologized to anyone in years.

[The trip seems endless. Night falls and the snow starts falling.] A deer darts across the road and the bus swerves...A sign posting the mileage to Traverse City. *Oh, God.*

When the bus finally rolls into the station, its air brakes hissing in protest, the driver announces in a crackly voice over the microphone, “Fifteen minutes, folks. That’s all we have here.” Fifteen minutes to decide her life. She checks herself in a compact mirror, smooths her hair, and licks the lipstick off her teeth. She looks at the tobacco stains on her fingertips, and wonders if her parents will notice. If they’re there.

She walks into the terminal not knowing what to expect. Not one of the thousand scenes that have played out in her mind prepare her for what she sees. There, in the concrete-walls-and-plastic-chairs bus terminal in Traverse City, Michigan, stands a group of forty brothers and sisters and great-aunts and uncles and cousins and a grandmother and great-grandmother to boot. They’re all wearing goofy party hats and blowing noise-makers, and taped across the entire wall of the terminal is a computer-generated banner that reads, “Welcome home!”

Out of the crowd of well-wishers breaks her dad. She stares out through the tears quivering in her eyes like hot mercury and begins the memorized speech, “Dad, I’m sorry. I know...”

He interrupts her. “Hush, child. We’ve got no time for that. No time for apologies. You’ll be late for the party. A banquet’s waiting for you at home.”⁴

That is what those of us who have been justified by faith experienced when we came to Christ. After years of running, feeling alienated, and living under the wrath of God, we turned homeward to our heavenly Father and found him waiting for us with open arms. Instead of condemnation we found mercy, grace and compassion, because we have been justified by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ who paid the penalty for our sin.

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1. John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 139.
2. James Denney, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Eerdmans, 1970) 623, quoted by Stott, 140.
3. Stott, 140.
4. Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997) 49-51.



A PERSPECTIVE ON PAIN

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1199
Romans 5:3-11
Eleventh Message
Gary Vanderet
August 22nd, 1999

One of the most glorious passages in the New Testament is found in the opening verses of Romans 5, where the apostle Paul in a series of positive claims speaks of the unquenchable joy of people who have been justified by faith.

I want to begin by reading the words of a fellow pastor describing a difficult year in his life:

This past year has been the most difficult year of my life. My wife has been through five major surgeries, radiation treatment and chemotherapy. I'm thankful now knowing she's going to make it. During the same year I suffered the loss of several key staff teammates, whose moves were very guided for them but a source of pressure and uncertainty in my work. Problems which I could have tackled with gusto under normal circumstances seem to loom in all directions. Discouragement lurked around every corner, trying to capture my feelings. Prayer was no longer a contemplative luxury, but the only way to survive. My own intercessions were multiplied by the prayers of others. Friendships were deepened as I was forced to allow people to assure me with words I had preached for years. No day went by without a conversation, letter or phone call giving me love and hope. The greatest discovery that I made in the midst of all the difficulties is that I can have joy when I don't feel like it, artesian joy.¹

That is the kind of joy that Paul describes here in Romans 5, the unquenchable joy of the believer.

Up to this point the apostle has clearly shown our *need for justification*. Every one of us was hopelessly lost in sin and living under the wrath of God. And Paul has explained the *way of justification*: Jesus Christ became the sin bearer and carried our sins in his own body on the cross. By believing in Jesus we are delivered from our sins, declared "Not guilty!" and given the gift of righteousness.

In our text today, Paul will go on to describe, again in a series of positive claims, the *results of our justification*. In our last study, we looked at the first three of these results. First, we have "peace with God." The war between God and us is over. Second, we are "standing in grace." We live in a relationship of unconditional acceptance with God. And third, we "rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." As we look to the future we rejoice in the fact that our destiny is secure.

The word "exult" is used throughout this passage in the NASB. We do not use this word much today. The NIV translation, "rejoice," is much better. The word really means boasting, which is simply the outward expression of where our inner confidence lies. Paul is stating where our confidence lies, or ought to lie, as believers, as those who are justified by faith. That is why this passage can be used as a gauge of how well we have understood and ap-

plied the first four chapters of Romans. Viewed in that light, this text is a measure of Christian maturity.

It seems quite natural to rejoice, to be confident in what is positive, but the rejoicing that comes next is supernatural. We not only rejoice in our present relationship of peace and grace with God, and in our future prospects, we also rejoice in our personal problems. Romans 5:3-4:

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; (NASB)

Some of you are probably thinking, "That's easy for Paul to say, but he doesn't understand my pain. He doesn't know how much suffering I have experienced." But, if you think about it, Paul would understand. Everywhere he went he suffered. He was beaten. He was thrown into prison. He was shipwrecked. It is possible that his wife and family left him because of his conversion. Just like many of you, life was tough for Paul. Many of you have had struggles in the past or are presently battling with things like substance abuse, broken marriages, and other painful circumstances. You have suffered seemingly unbearable losses.

Paul was not a masochist. He did not find pleasure in pain. He is not telling us that when tragedy strikes, we are supposed to enjoy the pain even though our hearts are breaking. Some people enjoy torturing themselves. They aren't happy unless they're miserable. But Paul is not talking about that. When his enemies were hurling rocks at him, I am sure he didn't stand there, asking for more. He tried to avoid pain, as we do. He would flee when he knew people were out to kill him. But he also knew something that we too often forget: "*knowing that tribulation brings about...*" Suffering accomplishes something. Suffering is valuable, it is productive, and that is what causes us to rejoice.

What does suffering produce? Paul goes on to say:

knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope;

Suffering is the process that perfects us. Far from being an obstacle to our spiritual growth, pain is actually the condition that supports it. Suffering produces perseverance. This word *perseverance* is very colorful. It is a compound word derived from two Greek words which mean, "remain," and "under." Suffering literally means, "to remain under." It is the capacity to remain under the pressure without collapsing. It signifies stability and staying power. What a wonderful quality that is! We all want to be stable and strong, able to stand when the hurricane winds blow. Have you ever asked God to make you a strong and

stable person? Facing adversity is the only way to become that way. Perseverance comes through suffering.

It's not that suffering makes you tough inside. The process is not like that at all. James says that suffering "tests our faith," that wonderful quality of centering ourselves on God and trusting him completely. Suffering makes us cling to Christ. It strips away the facade of self-sufficiency, the illusion that we can live on our own strength, using our own resources. When God puts us in circumstances that take us to the end of ourselves so that we are unable to cope, then we can turn to him and discover that he supplies everything we need to face the circumstance. Peter puts it this way in his epistle: "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Pet 1:6-7).

The only way for God to build our faith is to take us through times of testing, as gold is purified by fire. The goldsmith melts the gold to bring the impurities to the top to be ladled off, and he continues that process until he can see his face reflected in the gold. Suffering is like that. It is the heat that melts and purifies our faith. Suffering pulls out all our supports and leaves us vulnerable and needy. And as the impurity of our fleshly self confidence comes to the surface it is ladled off, and the character of Jesus Christ can be seen.

That is why Paul goes on to say that perseverance produces proven character. The word simply means "proven"—tested and found approved. In the Ancient Near East, the word appeared on pottery that had gone through the furnace intact, without cracking—an ancient version of the Good Housekeeping seal of approval. This was necessary because unscrupulous potters would fill cracks with wax, paint over their handiwork, and sell the vessels as sound. Consumer advocates would check for cracks by holding pots up to the sun. If there were none, they would stamp them *sina* (without) *sera* (wax). That is where the word sincere comes from. In the Greek world they wrote *dokimos*. That is the word Paul uses here. It means "tested and approved."

A feeling of stability and reliability is ours when we refuse to view troubles as an intrusion but, rather, as an opportunity to trust God and do his will in the midst of our circumstances. Someone has said that God wants to squeeze us like grapes to make sweet wine, and the pressures we experience is due to his fingers effecting that purpose.

As we go through that process of suffering, clinging to God, our character blossoms and we become more mellow and easier to live with. We sense God's working in our life we have a sense of expectancy about the future. Paul says that proven character produces hope. Again, the hope he is talking about is something that is sure and certain. It is no fantasy or illusion. The kind of hope he is referring to is an irrepressible optimism. God's work in our lives gives us a sense of optimism about the future. We become steady and reliable, less nervous about the future. We know that God is at work making us into the kind of people he wants us to be. This is the confidence that Paul writes about in 2 Corinthians 1:8-10:

I think you ought to know, dear brothers, about the hard time that we went through in Asia. We were really crushed and overwhelmed, and feared we would never live through it. We felt we were doomed to die and saw how powerless we were to help ourselves; but that was good, for then we put everything into the hands of God, who alone could save us, for he can even raise the dead. And he did help us, and he saved us from a terrible death; yes, and we expect him to do it again and again (2 Cor 1:8-10, Living Bible).

And then Paul goes on to say that this certainty will never disappoint. In fact, the very experiences of suffering and pain that we want to be freed from are exactly what we need in order to become assured of God's love. This is striking, because our natural reaction to suffering is to doubt God's love.

In these next few verses Paul elaborates on the theme of God's love. These words have been used so often in evangelistic messages we tend to forget what they meant in their original context. Paul is not talking to non-Christians, but to Christians. He wants to assure believers in the midst of their pain that they are loved. Verses 5-8:

and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Our hope rests on God's love. John Stott comments: "The reason we know our hope won't let us down is that God won't let us down; his love will never give us up."² This is the first time in Romans that the love of God is mentioned. There is no more important time in a believer's life to be assured of God's love than in the midst of pain. When we find ourselves in difficult circumstances, our first reaction is to think that God is mad at us, that he is not good or he doesn't have our best interests in mind. If that is how we respond, we sink into a deep depression or lash out and start complaining. And in our bitterness and anger we blame God for ruining our life. But rather than regarding pain as an evidence of God's wrath, Paul says our difficult circumstances are the arena where God wants to communicate his love.

There are two major means which God has provided so that we can be assured of his love. The first is the Holy Spirit. This is also the first mention in the book of the Holy Spirit and his work in our lives. Every believer receives the gift of the Holy Spirit at the moment of his conversion, when he or she was justified by faith. Now one of the most important ministries of the Spirit is to make us aware of God's love. Paul says that God has poured out that love within our hearts through the Holy Spirit. The image is of a cloud bursting open, letting loose a downpour in a parched desert. In the midst of our wilderness the Holy Spirit's desire is to refresh us deep inside with a downpour of God's love.

And the second objective way we know that God loves us is that he died for us. God proved his love for us through Christ's death on the cross. John Stott writes: "The

essence of love is giving...The degree of someone's love is measured partly by the costliness of the gift, and partly by the worthiness of the receiver. The more the gift costs the giver, and the less the recipient deserves it, the greater the love is seen to be. Measured by these standards, God's love is absolutely unique. For in sending his Son to die for sinners, he was giving everything, his very self, for those who deserved nothing from him except judgment."³

So let us not evaluate God on the basis of our circumstances. If we desire insight into the character of God, all we have to do is look at the cross. Jesus' sacrificial death is the foremost display of love in history.

Paul continues, verses 9-10:

Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

If Christ died for us while we were sinners, if he demonstrated his love while we were his enemies, how does he feel about us now that we are his friends? The apostle's point is clear: If God demonstrated his love then, certainly he loves us now. The fact that we are suffering and that life is hard should never persuade us that God doesn't love us. He gave his life for us on the cross, and has poured out that love to us through the Holy Spirit. He is surrounding us in that love.

This leads Paul to his final statement. He has one more point. Verse 11:

And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

The ultimate mark of maturity is that we rejoice in the person of God. Mature Christians don't rejoice so much in the gifts that God gives, they have come to the place where they love God and worship him.

And this is the place where suffering leads us: it enables us to know God as we've never known him before. Job said, out of his own misery: "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you" (Job 42:5).

As my friend Dave Roper writes: "Sorrow is the means to that end to all things—God himself. Suffering brings us heart to heart with him...When repeated strokes rob us of health, friends, money, and favorable circumstances, God becomes the only thing in life for us. He alone becomes the object of our devotion. We cry out with the psalmist, 'Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.'"⁴

That is the place to which God wants to bring us. So we can see a progression in this entire passage, over the course of our last study and again today. We begin our Christian life rejoicing in the fact that we are forgiven. The burden has been removed and we are freed from all of our past guilt. We are at peace with God and no longer face his wrath. And we rejoice in this new relationship of unconditional acceptance that we now enjoy. We rejoice as we

think about the future, and the assurance that we will one day experience the glory for which we were created. But then we begin to face the tribulations that Jesus said we would endure. Life becomes hard and we suffer loss. It is then we learn that the suffering we are going through is not a negative but actually a positive thing. It is refining our faith and producing character. In the depths of such painful times we grow to experience our Heavenly Father's love in a way we never had done before and we richly enjoy his presence and his love. We begin to see God not so much as someone who merely dispenses good things, but as a Father whom we love and worship.

Where do you find yourself in this process? These positive declarations of all that is ours now that we have been justified are a helpful gauge to measure own spiritual growth. I pray that you are not only growing older, you are maturing, too. If not, perhaps a good response to this message would be to tell the Lord that you want to grow up. That is certainly his desire for you, to bring you to the place of enjoyment of which Habakkuk spoke: "Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior" (Habakkuk 3:17-18).

Let us close this morning by singing *It Is Well With My Soul*. This hymn was written by Horatio Spafford, an attorney who lived in Chicago in the last century. He was a dynamic Christian man who was influential in the founding of the Moody Bible Institute. Following the great Chicago fire in 1871, wanting to get his family away from the city while it was being rebuilt, he put his wife and children on a ship and sent them to Europe. As they were crossing the Atlantic Ocean the ship was struck by another vessel in the middle of the night, and both ships sank. This mother saw her four children drown. She was struck by a falling mast, but was miraculously saved by holding on to some floating debris. She was rescued and taken to Wales. While she was in a hospital there she telegraphed back to her husband the two words: "Saved alone." Dr. Spafford took the first ship to Wales. As the vessel neared the place in the Atlantic where his children had perished, he walked along the deck, contemplating all that had happened. It was then that he was moved to write *It Is Well With My Soul*:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

This is the message that Jesus wants to communicate to us this morning: the unquenchable joy of the man or woman, boy or girl who has been justified by faith.

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1. Lloyd John Olgilvie, *Drumbeat of Love* (Waco, TX: Word, 1978) 176-77.
2. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 1994) 142.
3. Stott, 144.
4. David H. Roper, *A Man to Match the Mountain* (Discovery House, 1996) 21.



GUILT AND GRACE

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1200

Romans 5:12-21

Twelfth Message

Gary Vanderet

August 29th, 1999

In Romans 5 this morning we will be dealing with the subject of why we die and what to do about death. Why do we have to die? Why can't we just go on living?

As we study these ten verses, some of you will be asking, "What in the world is the apostle Paul taking about here? This story about Adam's sin and how it relates to Jesus doesn't seem to make any sense." The problem is that Paul does not complete a key sentence. That is why this passage is so hard to understand. However, as we will see, he actually does finish this sentence later in the passage. He begins by making a profound statement, and halfway through his thought realizes that his statement has given rise to certain questions so he answers those, and then completes the sentence. Knowing this, the passage is much easier to understand.

We can complete Paul's sentence by connecting the end of verse 12 with the second clause in verse 18: *"Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned — so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men."*

Everything that comes between these verses is parenthetical. When someone begins a statement with the words "just as," he is expected to continue later by saying "so." In this instance, Paul takes a while to complete his thought.

This passage is one the great theological sections in all of Scripture. A lot of truth is condensed into these ten verses, which are set out like a carefully constructed musical composition. Paul's brilliance is evident in the craftsmanship of his writing and his ability to make a sweeping, comprehensive overview summarizing the theology of the previous chapters about our fallen humanity (chapters 1-3), and God's gracious provision and rescue through his son Jesus Christ (chapters 4-5). Here in just a few words we have the philosophy of history and man set out by the inspired apostle.

The passage divides into three short sections, and the progression of thought can be traced in one verb which is repeated throughout the passage. (We saw the same thing last week in the repeated use of the verb "to exult," or "to boast.") The main verb in this passage is the verb "to reign." It is used five times: in verse 14; twice in verse 17, and twice in verse 21. Paul uses this verb to summarize each of the three main sections of this passage. If I were one who wrote in my Bible, I would underline those verbs, because they are a great help in fol-

lowing Paul's thought: sin reigns, death reigns, grace reigns, and we reign. You will notice also in the text that there are a series of comparisons and contrasts between what Adam did and what Christ has done. Paul is referring to the effect that one person had upon the whole world. Adam acted and the whole world suffered the results of his action; Jesus acted and the whole world enjoys the result of his action.

As we study this passage it will be helpful to understand its context, i.e., its relationship to what has gone before. Paul has just described the magnificent benefits accruing to those who have been justified by faith. We have peace with God; we stand in a relationship of unconditional acceptance with God; we can rejoice in our present sufferings knowing they are producing our future glory; we are assured of our final salvation, and we rejoice in the person of God. And it is through Christ that all these blessings become ours. At this point Paul anticipates someone who has heard all of the results of justification asking, "How could one man's actions affect the entire human race?" So he launches into his argument about the one and the many.

My purpose this morning is to try and simplify this complex, condensed and extremely important theology. It is easy to get lost in the details of the argument and miss the main point which the apostle wants to make. The great expositor Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse, of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, preached every Sunday for seven months on these ten verses. Though the text is certainly worthy of such an in-depth analysis, it is possible to get lost in the forest while analyzing the trees. We will take all ten verses in one message, summarizing and focusing on the main points.

Romans 5, verses 12-14:

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned—for until the Law sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. (NASB)

Verse 12 sums up the ruin of mankind, the fall of man, stated in three logical steps: sin entered the world through one man, sin leads to death, and death spread to all men because all sinned. Paul's logic is very much like the law of transitivity: $A > B, B > C, \text{ so } A > C$. The logic is clear: Sin led to death, death spread to everyone,

therefore everyone sinned. Although Paul doesn't name Adam yet, he introduces him, and will compare him with Christ throughout the passage.

At this point someone might well be saying, "You don't really believe in the myth of Adam and Eve, do you?" To that I would say, yes. I very much believe that Adam and Eve were historical figures who lived in space and time.

Let me take a moment to share with you some of my reasons. If Adam and Eve are not to be regarded as real human beings, than I have a difficult time with the genealogies of the Bible. Oftentimes these will begin with Adam, who seems to be just as real as anybody else in the list. The Book of Chronicles begins with Adam's name. In the New Testament, Luke traces the lineage of Jesus and goes all the way back to Adam. In fact, the details given in the Genesis story lead us to believe that the author wants us to take it that way. In chapter 2, the author takes great pains to tell us where the Garden of Eden was. And the literary style of Genesis 1-11 is the same as that of Genesis 12-50, which no one challenges as history.

But the primary, overwhelming reason I am compelled to believe the story of Adam and Eve is that Jesus and the apostles believed it. The apostles spoke with the authority of Jesus, and in this passage and in a number of others it is quite evident that they believed that Adam and Eve were real human beings who lived in time and space here on the earth. Thus as believers we are compelled to believe it too.

Some Christians may have different views about Genesis—whether the days in Genesis 1 are 24-hour periods, whether the tree was real or symbolic, etc. We may have to be agnostic about some of those issues. But Adam and Eve were historical beings, because Jesus and the apostles said so. Everything depends on that. Paul argues that Adam was real, and Adam's sin was real. Genesis 2 records the prohibition given to Adam, that he was not to eat the fruit from that one tree, whatever it was, and Adam trespassed. He sinned.

The second thing we learn from reading Genesis is that Adam died (Gen 5:5). Eve said to the serpent when the serpent seduced her, "God told us that if we eat of the fruit, we will surely die." The serpent told her, "You will not die." But Adam died, and death entered into the world. That is what Paul means when he says that sin and death entered the world through one man. Adam sinned and Adam died. And now we have that same bias. We would rather do our own thing, not God's. It is that inclination to choose our own way rather than God's way that the Bible calls sin. We have inherited it from Adam. This is one of the clearest statements in all of the Bible on what is called "original sin." We come into this world with a deviant twist, an inclination toward evil. We got this from Adam.

How did we get it? There are many theories, but I agree with my friend Dave Roper, who put it this way:

"The Scriptures teach that Adam passed on to us a genetic flaw. Sin is seminal; it is in the seed. It is passed on from one generation to the next. We come into the world tainted and flawed by this genetic tendency to do what we please and go our own way."¹ The results of that inward condition of sin (the self centeredness, and self sufficiency that says to God, "I don't need you") are the outward "sins" that we commit. Perhaps in Silicon Valley we should say that Adam's sin was "downloaded" to the next generation. We have in our nature the same inclination. We are like loaded dice. We have an inherent tendency to roll in a certain way, to go in a certain direction.

I attended a birthday dinner last week for the two-year-old daughter of good friends. The birthday girl is a beautiful, delightful little tot with a mesmerizing personality, but during dinner her mother told me of the frustrating times of discipline and training. Her daughter is only two years old and she already knows how to resist instruction and command. She wants to do what she should not do.

I think this universal tendency to evil has been stated most clearly by a totally secular agency. The most revealing statement on original sin that I have ever read comes from the report of the Minnesota Crime Commission. In studying humanity, the commission came to this frightening and factual conclusion:

Every baby starts life as a little savage. He is completely selfish and self-centered. He wants what he wants when he wants it — his bottle, his mother's attention, his playmate's toy, his uncle's watch. Deny him these wants and he seethes with rage and aggressiveness, which would be murderous, were he not so helpless. He is dirty. He has no morals, no knowledge, and no skills. This means that all children, not just certain children, are born delinquent. If permitted to continue in the self-centered world of his infancy, given free reign to his impulsive actions to satisfy his wants, every child would grow up a criminal, a thief, a killer, a rapist.

Although Scripture does not speak much to this issue it seems clear that a child's sins are covered by the grace of God. But there comes a time, and I don't know when that time is, when we begin to understand our actions, and then that inclination becomes a conscious choice on our part. We choose to deny the truth and to break away from God; and sin then begins to reign. We think the unthinkable and act in terribly destructive ways—all because we are dominated by sin. "Total depravity," is what the theologians call this. That term troubles some people, because they don't like to think mankind is totally depraved. What do we mean when we say that? We mean that sin has touched the totality of our being. If sin were a color, we would be that color all over. This is what we have inherited from Adam.

And because we have a sinful nature, Paul says, we die. That is why we die—because we are sinful.

Death is not natural. It is the result of sin, the judgment of God upon us because of our sin. Adam sinned and he died; that was the judgment of God. And Adam passed on to us the proclivity to sin. We sin and we die. The reason no one has been able to solve the problem of death is because no human being has been able to solve the problem of sin. That is why science will never come up with a solution to the problem of death. Someone else had to do that.²

At this point Paul gets derailed. He imagines someone putting another question: "Well, all right. We agree that death is the result of sin. But there wasn't any law from the time of Adam until the time of Moses. How could there be sin when there wasn't any law to define sin?" Paul responds that before the Law came into the world sin was still in existence, even if there was not an exact description of every sin. So he concludes, in verse 14, "*Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come.*" Even though the revelation was not as complete from Adam until Moses, we know that sin still reigned because people died. Death is the reason we know sin is universal—because death is universal. That is the evidence.

Paul concludes this section with a word of hope. He states that Adam was a type of one who was to come. From Genesis on the hope was that Someone was coming who would solve the problem of sin and death, breaking their dominion and setting us free. Like Adam, the coming one would be the head of a whole humanity.

Verses 15-17:

But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification. For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.

Having said that Adam is a type or a pattern of Christ, Paul is quick to point out that it is only a superficial similarity. In fact, the only similarity between them is that what each of them did affected countless numbers of people. There is no other similarity between the Lord of glory, our Savior, and the agent of death. So Paul ends up contrasting Adam and Christ, declaring that both the character and the effects of their actions are very different. Paul says the free gift was not like the trespass. Adam's act was a trespass, a transgression. He insisted on going his own way. Rather than being

self centered, however, Christ's gift was an act of self sacrifice.

Adam did give us a gift of sorts, but it was like getting booby-trapped. He gave us sin and death. He injected into our genes the fatal flaw that is killing us, this decaying, degenerative force. But Jesus gave us the gift of righteousness. One man sinned and gave a gift to the whole world: the gift of sin and death. Jesus came, and acted in righteousness. He gave to the whole world the gift of himself, and the result was life. He not only did away with death, he restored what had been destroyed.

Notice how Paul highlights the miracle of God's grace. He says that God's judgment followed only one sin. We would say that is proper and fair. But God's gift followed "many transgressions." One would think that would bring greater judgment, but grace operates on a "new math" basis. Instead of judgment and condemnation, our transgressions were taken care of in a single act of righteousness: the cross of Christ, the central point of all history. Jesus' death brought forgiveness for billions of transgressions. So the ultimate effects of the two actions are very different: namely, life and death. For all of history one tyrannical king, death, has ruled with an iron fist over all of humanity. Death is the one who stalks us all and will claim us if the Lord tarries.

And not only physical death, but the absence of life in all its forms: depression, emptiness, boredom. Martin Lloyd Jones put it this way: "Ever since Adam fell death has reigned over all mankind, world-wide. The world is a place of cemeteries; it is a place of death and gloom and end."³ But into that world God sent a little baby boy. He grew to be a man, lived a life of total obedience, and died on the cross to offer a way of salvation. The cross was the greatest coup in history. At the cross Jesus defeated sin and by his resurrection defeated death and ushered in an eternal reign of grace. He delivered us so radically from that rule of death that we not only exchanged it for a kingdom of life, but we will reign in that kingdom, sharing the kingship of Christ, with death under our feet and one day destined to be destroyed.

Paul concludes with one final comparison emphasizing Jesus' act of obedience. Verses 18-21:

So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous. And the Law came in that the transgression might increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

One man's disobedience brought condemnation and death. One man's obedience brought justification and life. It is as though Adam passed on to us a hideous,

shocking disease, injecting into our genes this fatal flaw that is killing us. But Jesus came and brought life.

Paul emphasizes that Jesus' death on the cross was an act of obedience. It wasn't an easy decision for the Lord, but not because he was afraid to die or that he lacked love for you and me. He understood the implications of what it would mean to become sin for us. We are told that when Jesus was in the garden, he became "heavy." The word literally means to be "away from home." He began to feel homesick. He was already feeling the weight of our sin and the Father was beginning to withdraw from him. He had never before experienced this. The horror of it is summarized in his cry from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Through his obedience, Jesus solved the problem of sin and death.

In closing, let me trace these verbs once again. Paul says that sin reigns, death reigns, grace reigns, and we reign. Whose reign are you living under? Paul sees two archetypal men, Adam and Christ, at the head of two lines. All of humanity falls in one line or another. If you have never received the grace of God, then sin and death are reigning in your life, dominating everything you do. But if you have received that grace you have been freed from the disease of sin. God the Father has received you into his grace, through Christ, who has delivered you from sin and death.

The hymn writer put it well:

*Sin and despair, like the sea-waves cold,
Threaten the soul with infinite loss;
Grace that is greater—yes grace untold—
Points to the refuge, the mighty cross.*

*Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within,
Grace, grace, God's grace
Grace that is greater than all our sin!*

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1. David H. Roper, *Romans 5* (sermon preached at Cole Community Church, Boise ID, Nov. 29th, 1987).

2. Roper.

3. D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 5* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan) 261.

I want to express my appreciation and indebtedness to David H. Roper, whose insights were invaluable in my preparation for this message.



FREE AT LAST

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1202

Romans 6:15-23

14th Message

Gary Vanderet

March 5th, 2000

Some time ago I had an opportunity to share my faith with a young man who was seeking counsel. He told me he was a frequent user of drugs, was deeply in debt and entrenched with a group of friends whom he described as “burnouts and potheads.” He was working in an unfulfilling job at minimum wage, and could foresee nothing exciting in his future. I thought he would be responsive to my sharing my faith in Jesus Christ, so I asked him if he any interest in spiritual things. He replied, “No. I want to retain my independence and enjoy my freedom.” How ironic, I thought, after he had left. He was in bondage, in chains, enslaved to chemicals, indebtedness and a wrong crowd. His future was bleak. He looked like a prisoner. Then I thought that he probably saw me in the same way—a slave, only bound with religious chains. He probably regarded my lifestyle as very restrictive. He thought I was enslaved to God, and what could be worse than that? What an irony! He thought he was free, and I think I am free. Which of us had it right?

The passage from the book of Romans to which we come this morning will speak directly to this issue. We have already pointed out that Paul’s letter to the church in Rome is one of the most powerful and influential books ever written. For almost two thousand years it has been transforming lives. It has been the tool and the force behind some of the most significant conversions in church history. Here we have the clearest description of the gospel, the good news that God has found a way through the death and resurrection of Jesus to justify the ungodly. That includes all of us, because we are all ungodly.

In the opening chapters of this book, Paul made and sustained the charge that all of mankind is guilty. Paul concluded that “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Some people are better than others, but we all fall short of the character of God. God’s glory is what he is, and regardless of who we are or what we have done we have fallen short of God’s character. That is the bad news.

But the good news is that in the person of his Son, God has done something about our problem. Jesus came to earth as the sin-bearer and our sins were placed upon him on the cross. When we believe in him, we are delivered from our sins, declare, “Not guilty!” and given the gift of righteousness. Later, Paul will say, “there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). That is the good news.

In chapter 5, Paul reminded us that, having been justified by faith, we are privileged to live in a relationship of unconditional acceptance with God. Now we have a boundless optimism about the future. We used to belong to Adam, the author of sin and death, but now we belong to Christ, the author of salvation and life. Paul made the statement at the end of chapter 5 that “where sin increases, grace increases all the more.” So we have grace increasing and grace reigning. The picture almost seems unbalanced. In his emphasis on the security of God’s people, Paul doesn’t say anything about growth or struggle. As John Stott puts it, “He seems to jump from justification to glorification without the intervening stage of sanctification.”¹

After reading chapter 5, someone might well say to Paul, “If what you are saying is true, what prevents us from continuing to live a sinful life, since we are forgiven, our destiny is fixed and secure, and there is no more condemnation over the past? If grace abounds where sin increases, why don’t we just live it up? If our acceptance before God depends entirely on God’s free grace, irrespective of anything we do, then shouldn’t we be able to live as we please. If God justifies the ungodly, then what is the point in being godly?” Paul has already established that we can’t out-sin the grace of God. No matter how often or how grievously we sin, grace prevails. So the question remains, Why not live it up, because we are going to go to heaven anyway?

The theological term for this position is “antinomianism.” The word literally means “against law” (lawlessness). Some in Paul’s day argued this truth. Jude called them “godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord” (Jude 4). That is the question Paul addresses in chapter 6. His response to the assertion that God’s grace gives us a license to sin is emphatic: “May it never be!” “Of course not” (TLB); “God forbid” (KJV); “What a ghastly thought” (Phillips).

Paul reveals the source of that question as ignorance, especially ignorance of what occurs at conversion. Four times in this chapter he uses the word “know.” He wants us to understand that justification is more than mere forgiveness. Grace does more than forgive our sins; it frees us from sinning. As we will see in the coming chapters, grace sanctifies as well. Our salvation results in a radical change in our being. Something happened to us which makes it impossible for us to say, “Let’s just go on and sin, because God is going to be gracious.”

The structure of our passage, 6:15-23, is similar to the opening fourteen verses of the chapter. However, the emphasis of our text is different. How all of these changes came about in our lives when we became Christians is described in two different ways. In the first half of the chapter, Paul's emphasis was on what happened to us when we became Christians: we were united to Christ through baptism. Here in these verses the emphasis is more on what we did at what we might call our conversion, which, of course, only grace enabled us to do.

Paul begins with the same sense of astonishment in his question as he expressed in 6:1. Romans 6:15, 16:

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be! Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? (Rom. 6:15, 16, NASB)

The apostle sets forth a couple of remarkable principles in verse 16. He says that every human being is a slave of something. That's what Bob Dylan reminded us of back in 1979 in his song, "You Gotta Serve Somebody."

Genesis 2 says that we are made in the image of God. We were created to rule and reign with God, but our ability to rule comes from our relationship to God. We can rule only when we are being ruled. The extent to which we allow God to master our lives is the extent to which we can master our environment.

When man disobeyed and ate from that tree he began to do what God does, i.e., relate everything to himself. Man thought of himself as the center of the universe and he became like God. But it was all a lie. Man isn't the center of the universe. He can never be that. But that is the seductive lie that the serpent has whispered into the ears of man ever since: "This is your world. Everything relates to you. What you like is right; what you don't like is wrong. Don't let anyone make you do what you don't want to do. You are the center of things."

By the very nature of our humanity we are made to serve and be controlled by forces beyond our power. All humanity serves under one of two slaveries. There is no middle ground. Slavery, of course, was common in Rome. It is estimated that about one third of the population of the city were slaves. In fact, it is likely that one half of the church to which Paul wrote this letter were slaves. No member of the church was unaware of this metaphor and its implications. And Roman slaves were not just the unfortunates who were captured in war or bought in the marketplace, there was such a thing as voluntary slavery, too. Poor people offered themselves as slaves in order to be housed and fed. Stott reminds us, "Paul's point is that they couldn't give themselves to a slave-master and at the same time expect to retain their freedom."²

It is the same with spiritual slavery. Thus the second principle that springs from this verse is that self-surrender leads inevitably to slavery, whether we become slaves to sin, leading to death, or to obedience, leading to righteousness. "Conversion is an act of self-surrender, leading inevitably to slavery; and slavery demands a total, radical, exclusive obedience. Jesus said that no one can be a slave of two masters. Once we have offered ourselves to him as his slave, we are permanently and unconditionally at his disposal. There is no possibility of going back on this. Having chosen our master, we have no choice but to obey him."³

Paul now applies this principle, explaining again that our conversion involved an exchange of slaveries. Verses 17, 18:

But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. (Rom. 6:17, 18)

Here Paul gives an outline of the conversion process, gathering up every Christian's conversion in four steps: What they used to be; what they did; what happened to them, and what they had become.

The first step is: *You were slaves to sin*. Everyone is a slave to one of two slaveries, either a slave to sin or a slave to God. Conversion is a transfer from one to the other. At one time all of us were slaves to sin. Before we knew Jesus Christ we were bound and enslaved to sin. Some of us have no problem understanding that. We remember what our lives were like before we knew Christ. We not only had a sin nature, we were sin enthusiasts, accomplished doers of iniquity. We could sin without blushing. If something felt good, we did it. We rarely thought of God and how he felt about what we were doing. And it didn't matter what others thought of our actions. As long as some kind of pleasure resulted we rose to whatever bait was put on the hook. Sin was a way of life for us. In fact, some of us became so accustomed to sin we regarded people who lived according to the Scriptures as if they had come from another planet. That is what we look like now to many of our friends. Students know exactly what I mean. If you read and follow the Bible, you are considered strange. For a girl to be called a virgin is a put-down, a slur, in some circles. People become so accustomed to sin that when they meet someone who leads a righteous life, they wonder what is wrong with them.

But not all slaves of sin are that obvious. Many are simply chronically self-willed. Some people are quite moral but they are slaves to self-centeredness. They are proud, arrogant, and critical. You can be a spectacular sinner or a boring sinner, but the point is that it is natural for you to act that way. All sin enslaves, whether sinners are aware of it or not. Sinners are pawns, puppets whose strings are manipulated by the evil one. Like alcoholics, they deny that they have a problem. Deception

and denial run so deep they are convinced they are free, like the man I referred to earlier, but they are not.

Second: *You became obedient from the heart.* When the gospel was shared with you, you accepted the truth wholeheartedly. Do you remember that day? As a sophomore in college in January of 1970, I had already read the entire New Testament. Following a campus ministry meeting, one of the leaders shared the gospel with me and asked me if there was any reason why I couldn't invite Jesus Christ into my life. There wasn't, because the truth already had a grip on me.

But notice what Paul says they had become obedient to. It is a bit unusual. It isn't God or Christ they are said to have obeyed, but a certain form of teaching. This probably refers to some structure of apostolic teaching they had received when they became Christians. Notice that Paul regards conversion not only as trusting in Christ but also believing and acknowledging the truth. Further, Paul doesn't say that this truth was committed to them, but that they were committed to it. At our recent marriage conference, Dr. Paul Stevens was discussing the covenant of marriage and he made a statement that struck me. Referring to his marriage vows, he said, "It isn't so much that I hold on to these vows, it is that they hold on to me." That is exactly what Paul is saying here. When we come to Christ, it is not only that the truth has been given to us, but that we have been given over to the truth.

Third: *You have been freed from sin.* As we explained in a previous message, this doesn't mean we are incapable of sinning, but, as Paul puts it in Colossians, "He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son" (Col. 1:13).

In the first half of the chapter Paul explained that on the cross, Jesus became the sin-sacrifice as the sins of the world were transferred to him. The condemnation of the holy God fell on him and he died. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). So Jesus descended into the grave, laden with sin. But at Easter, when God resurrected him, Jesus burst forth from the grave not as a sinner, but glorified, purified, in newness of power and life. Having already paid the price for sin when he burst forth in power on that resurrection morning, he broke the back of death and sin. He conquered the grave and the power of sin. Jesus went into the grave as a sinner (because the sins of the world were transferred to him) but he came out of that grave spotless, glorified, and pure. The resurrection of Jesus Christ severed the chains of sin and death, not only for himself, but for everyone who would turn to him for forgiveness, grace and salvation. Paul declares that if any of you have trusted Christ, you, too, in a symbolic way, have gone to the grave as a sinner with Christ and have burst forth from the grave with him. You are now clean and pure. Your enslavement to death and sin has ended. Paul says that once you are in Christ, Christ is in you.

Now because that has happened we are identified with Christ and the power of death has been broken in

our lives. We no longer fear death. We certainly don't escape it, but death for us now is simply the doorway to eternity. It is no longer an ultimate defeat, because the power and sting of death has been broken. Death is the doorway to the ultimate victory.

At conversion, the Holy Spirit takes up residence in the life of the believer and the puppet strings of Satan's control are cut. Our whole attitude toward and interest in sin has changed now that we are in Christ. The work of Jesus Christ has emancipated us, liberating us from death and sin. So we can cry, "I'm free at last, free at last!" Jesus told some Jews who had come to faith, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. . . . but if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (Jn. 8:31-36). The man I referred to who was enslaved and addicted to sin was so deceived by it he didn't know the difference between freedom and slavery, right and wrong. He was blind. But when Jesus Christ emancipates you, he liberates your mind. The blinders fall off and your perception about sin changes. Your moral discernment improves dramatically. The fog lifts and you see things you never saw before.

And fourth: *You became slaves of righteousness.* Our desire for sin changes. We are freed from the power of it. The desires of our hearts change over time. The "old things pass away and all things become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). Our desire to seek revenge when we are wronged is softened. We may have had an insatiable desire for power, but now we want to serve and empower others. Once we sought men's applause, but now we want to please God and sense his smile. Once we couldn't care less for what God thought, but now that means everything. Once we wanted to have all the toys, but now we want those eternal trophies, now we want to win the real race. Once we had an insatiable desire for all those fleeting pleasures, but now all that looks like silliness to us. We wonder how we could have thought those things were worth all our time and energy. Our internal desires change as we grow in Christ, as we yield to him.

Verse 19:

I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in further lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification. (Rom. 6:19)

Paul almost apologizes for the human terms he uses to describe the conversion process because, in many ways, slavery may not be the best metaphor to describe the Christian life. It does explain clearly our devotion and obligation to Jesus Christ, but certainly not the way God views us. In fact, Paul says in Galatians, "When the

time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, Abba, Father. So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir" (Gal. 4:4-7). And remember the words of Jesus: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:29).

Paul declares that neither slavery is static but that both develop. One gets better and better while the other deteriorates.

He concludes his argument in verses 20-23:

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 6:20-23)

Paul invites us to assess the claims of each kind of slavery by examining its fruit. What are the benefits of each? Our past slavery to sin only brought us regret ("the things of which you are now ashamed") and the ultimate end of that path ("death"). But our enslavement to God reaps sanctification in the present, and in the future, eternal life. Verse 23 sums it up: Sin pays a wage that we deserve, but God gives us a gift that we don't deserve.

Thus we have two completely different ways of living which are totally opposed to each other. Jesus represented them as two roads, the "broad road which leads to destruction and the narrow road which leads to life." Paul calls them two slaveries. Stott summarizes: "By birth we are in Adam, slaves to sin; by grace and faith we are in Christ, the slaves of God. Bondage to sin yields no return except shame and ongoing moral deterioration, culminating in the death which we deserve. Bondage to God, however, yields the precious fruit of progressive sanctification, culminating in the free gift of life."⁴

I want to close by sharing a scene from the movie "The Shawshank Redemption." In the story, Andy is a prominent New England banker who, though he proclaims his innocence, is convicted of murdering his wife and her lover. He is sent to the maximum-security state prison at Shawshank, Maine. An introvert, he doesn't make many friends until Red, a 30-year-veteran of the system, decides to take him under his wing. The movie centers on their 20-year friendship.

In one scene, Andy and Red are sitting with their backs against the wall of the cold prison. Andy has already decided that he is going to try to escape. They are sitting there talking about what it would like to be out of Shawshank, to be free. You would think that both men would long to get out, but Red has been in there so long he has grown accustomed to prison life. He is tired and no longer even tries to impress the parole board at his hearings.

Andy is talking about getting out and going to Mexico, buying a little hotel and a boat and starting a fishing business. He looks at Red and says, "You know, I could use a guy who knows how to get things." But Red says, "I don't think I could make it on the outside, Andy. I've been in here most of my life. I'm an institutional man now." Andy says, "I think you underestimate yourself, Red." Red responds, "No. I don't think so. I mean, in here, I'm the guy who can get things for you, sure! But outside, all you need is the yellow pages. I wouldn't know where to begin. The Pacific Ocean? That would scare me to death, something that big, Andy, I don't think you should be doing this to yourself. This is all pipe dreams! I mean, Mexico is way down there and you're in here, and that's just the way it is." And Andy says, "Well, I guess it comes down to a simple choice really, to get busy living or get busy dying!"

That is where some of you find yourselves this morning. Listen carefully to this point. There is only one Master in the entire world whose enslavement liberates. To the extent that you are totally yielded to Jesus Christ you are free. Conversely, to the extent that you are keeping back your full devotion to Jesus Christ, someone or something has a grip on you and you are jeopardizing your Christ-purchased freedom.

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1. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994) 166.
2. Stott, 183.
3. Stott, 183.
4. Stott, 186.



THE ROLE OF THE RULE BOOK

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1203

Romans 7:1-13

15th Message

Gary Vanderet

March 12th, 2000

I wonder what were you were thinking when you heard the law of Moses being read earlier in the service. Many people have an uncomfortable relationship with this great law. They wonder if they are held accountable under it. In chapter 6 of Romans, the apostle Paul twice writes that Christians are “not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14, 15). Does that mean that we may disregard the law? Does the law help us to control sin in our lives? If we put a copy of the Ten Commandments on the refrigerator, will it help us live according to those rules?

The statement that Christians are “not under law” must have come as a shock to Paul’s readers, especially Jewish believers in Rome. What on earth did he mean by that? For centuries they had been laboring to live up to the Mosaic law. It was one of their most treasured possessions, the thing that separated them from every other nation. God had revealed his will to them, how they were to live and worship, how they were to die, even. The law was the centerpiece of their social structure. To talk down about the law or to speak about being delivered from it as a privilege, would seem blasphemous to Jewish ears.

But Paul knew that he was writing to a people who had misused the law. The Jews felt that it was the means to make their way to God. They thought that God wanted a law-abiding people who would keep his rules impeccably and thereby earn his pleasure. But that was never the case. The law was not intended to justify man, to bring him into God’s presence. The law doesn’t work that way. It didn’t work for Israel then and it won’t work for us now. In chapter 6, Paul said that when we died and were buried and then raised with Christ, we put an end to this old life of trying to keep the law as a way of pleasing God. It is over, finished with. There is a new way, which the apostle will now begin to set out.

The outline of our passage is quite simple. The interpretation is difficult, but not the outline. Commentators disagree as to how to interpret this text, and I am not going to try to explain every nuance of it. There are too many difficult concepts here that I don’t think we will fully understand until we meet Paul face to face. But the structure of the passage is very simple. Paul sets out a principle in verse 1; he illustrates the principle in verses 2-3; applies it in verses 4-6; and uses a personal example from his own life to show how it worked out for him as an individual, in verses 7-13.

First, Paul establishes the principle:

Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives? (Rom. 7:1, NASB)

Paul is writing to Jews who had come to Christ and well understood the law. The gentiles knew it as well, because they had been taught it in church. They didn’t have a New Testament, they had only the Hebrew Scriptures, so they understood it well. Paul uses the law in different ways here. At times he refers to it as a principle (“I see a law at work in my members,” i.e., “I see a principle at work in my members”). He will also use it to refer to the entire Old Testament. At times he will refer to the first five books of the OT (the Pentateuch); at other times he refers to the Ten Commandments, as I believe he is doing here, because he quotes from them.

Now Paul says that the law, any law for that matter, has jurisdiction over a person only for as long as he is alive. That is the principle. Regardless of how big a scoundrel a person has been, once he dies the law can’t touch him. Dead people are not served with subpoenas. Their relationship to the law has ended. That is the easily understood principle.

The illustration that follows, that of marriage, comes out of domestic life. Verse 2:

For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. So then if, while her husband is living, she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress, though she is joined to another man. (Rom. 7:2,3)

That is easily understood as well. Even though her marriage might not be sublimely happy, a married woman is bound to her husband by law. She cannot be joined to another; that would be adultery. But if her husband dies, she is set free from the law so she can marry someone else. The law bound her, but his death frees her. That is an illustration of the principle that Paul just established in verse 1. ¹

Now he applies the principle, and here is where we encounter interpretive problems, because his application does not logically follow his illustration. I am not going to go through all of the illogic, but a careful reading of what follows will show that the principle doesn’t quite follow. Verse 4:

Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, that we might bear fruit for God. For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death. But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter. (Rom. 7:4-6)

This is somewhat confusing. In the marriage metaphor of verses 2-3, the husband dies and the wife remarries, but here in Paul's application, it is the wife (who was formerly married to the law) who does both the dying and the remarrying.

We could spend a lot of time trying to figure out who died, but the point is that a death took place, which rendered free the person who died. In the husband-wife relationship it is the death of one which renders the other free to marry again. In the Christian life it is our own death (in Christ) which sets us free to marry again. Jesus Christ (his body) died on the cross. Through our union with Christ (which Paul explained in chapter 6) we have shared in his death, and so we have died through his body. The point of Paul's illustration is that death has secured our release from the law. We are no longer under its jurisdiction. We are now free to be joined to Christ in order to bear fruit for God.

Paul says we no longer regard the law as heretofore, when we saw it as the means to gaining God's acceptance. All that is in the past now. We have seen that the law cannot change one's character. Some of you made resolutions a few months ago. Have you kept them flawlessly? Hardly. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak. It doesn't matter what law you place yourself under, the Ten Commandments or your own commandments, before long you will break your own rules and God's rules. The problem is not with the law but with the material that the law has to work with. The problem is with us, not with the law. The law is a perfectly good instrument. It came down through Moses. It was mediated through angels. God didn't risk any mistranslating by Moses; he wrote it himself on stone. There is no question that the law is a perfect expression of the character of God. It is good and holy and just, as Paul will say later.

So there is no problem with the law. It is a wonderful gift, but it comes without batteries. No matter how willing the spirit is, the flesh is weak. You are familiar that principle. You have tried to reform yourself, to conform to some code that was set before you but you couldn't do it. The difficulty lies in what Paul calls "the flesh," our basic humanity. The flesh is what we are apart from God. The word is sometimes used in a neutral sense to refer to our bodies and souls, our material and immaterial parts. But at other times the word flesh refers to something that is morally wrong. That is what the flesh

means in this context. It is referring to man and woman without God, trying to live their lives apart from him. Our flesh will never make us spiritual, no matter how hard we try or how much we determine to do better. That is why the law doesn't work—because it has to work with our flesh. There is a better way: our death and burial with Jesus Christ ended the rule of the law in our lives. We are no longer under its tyranny, condemnation and domination.

So what is next? Believers are motivated by the Holy Spirit to lead pure lives. Freedom from the law doesn't mean we are free to live any way we like. We have already seen that at conversion, we exchanged slaveries. As John Stott puts in his book *Men Made New*: "We are indeed free from the law, but free to serve, not sin. Our new slavery, says Paul, is not in the oldness of the letter but in the newness of the Spirit."¹ It is the difference between the old covenant and the new. The old covenant was a letter, written upon stone tablets outside of us; the new covenant, the good news, the gospel, is Spirit, for the Holy Spirit writes God's law in our hearts. That is our new bondage. A dramatic change has taken place in the disposition of our hearts. Our motive and method have been changed. Stott continues:

We no longer serve because the law is our master and we have to, but because Christ is our husband and we want to. We no longer view obedience to the law as leading to salvation. Our salvation is what leads us to obeying the law. The law says, 'Do this and you will live'; the good news proclaims, 'You are now alive, so do this.' For the Christian, our obedience is no longer to an external code, but surrender to an indwelling Spirit. Everything has changed. We are still slaves, but the master now is Christ, not the law. The power by which we serve is the Spirit, not the flesh. The Christian life then is serving the risen Christ in the power of his indwelling Spirit.²

Next, Paul goes on to describe how this process worked out in his life. Verse 7:

What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; (Rom. 7:7)

That is what the law is designed to do. The purpose of the law is not to lead us to God in the sense that if we keep it, he will be pleased with us. The purpose of the law is to *reveal sin*, to tell us what is sinful.

Recently my wife got a gift one of those make-up mirrors that has a light attached to it. The mirror magnifies everything. When I looked in it I wondered why anyone would want to look at themselves through that mirror. It magnifies all the imperfections. James says the law is like that. We think we look fine until we gaze at God's perfect law. The law magnifies sin. A razor blade sees to be a fine instrument, and is extremely sharp, but under a microscope it looks like a jagged saw blade. We think we are doing well, but then the law comes along and points its finger at specifics in our lives, revealing us for what we are.

Continuing, Paul says he would not have known what sin was without the law. Verse 7b:

for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "YOU SHALL NOT COVET." But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead. (Rom. 7:7b,8)

Without the light of the Word we are unaware of sin. So many things are natural for us, we don't see them as sin. Paul says that when the law comes, sin springs to life. The law not only reveals sin, it *arouses sin*. It not only exposes sin, it stimulates it. Paul says, "sin taking opportunity" (the word is used for a military base, a springboard for military operations). The producers of the television show *Candid Camera* often capitalized on this principle. In one episode they set up cameras on a busy downtown sidewalk. They cut a 2-inch in diameter hole in an adjoining plywood construction fence, and people by the hundreds passed by and paid no attention to the fence, the hole, or the construction. Then they posted a sign on the sidewalk that said, "Whatever you do, don't look in this hole." They put another sign on the fence that said, "Don't look in this hole." Suddenly there was something behind that fence that everyone wanted to see. Soon there were people standing in line to look through the hole. There was nothing behind the fence, but the sign stimulated their interest. Next time you see a "wet paint" sign, look closely and you will see fingerprints in the paint. People just have to touch it to see if it's really wet.

Verse 9:

And I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive, and I died; [i.e., when the commandment came home. Paul had it from the time he was a child, but when it finally dawned on him what the law really said, he died.] and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me, and through it killed me. So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment [i.e., the specific tenets of the law] is holy and righteous and good. Therefore did that which is good become a cause of death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, that through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful. (Rom. 7:9-13)

Let me try to illustrate what the apostle is saying through his own life. I am indebted to my friend David Roper for this possible scenario of how Paul came to this awareness. ³Paul was a pious Pharisee, a very good man. He describes himself thus in *Philippians*: "circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless." Paul felt good

about himself. One of the problems with trying to please God by keeping the law is that it makes people proud. They become self-righteous, stuffy and uptight. And they become critical of others, because they seem to be doing better than they are. Such people are upright and uptight.

Perhaps, one day Paul was meditating on the tenth commandment: "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife or his male servant or his female servant or his ox or his donkey [those are things that really counted in those days] or anything that belongs to your neighbor." Maybe Paul found his neighbor's wife desirable. Maybe he wanted his neighbor's possessions, his new 700 MHz. computer, for instance. It was so natural to want things that it never occurred to him that it was sin. Suddenly it came home to him that to desire something that belonged to someone else was sin.

That is why the commandment, "Do not covet," is the bottom line of the Ten Commandments. This is the one that leads to all the others. It is placed there to kill you, because you can't stop wanting things. I'm sure that Paul, being the good Pharisee that he was, put his head down and determined not to covet anymore, only to discover that the law was like a spoon that stirred up the sediment of sin in his life. He couldn't stop coveting. That is why he says it killed him. The law not only reveals and arouses sin, it *condemns sin*. It doesn't mean it killed Paul literally. It killed him existentially. He died. He experienced boredom, guilt, frustration, despair, all of those death-like feelings that you and I know so well.

Paul says that is the purpose of the law: to kill you. That was the purpose of the law for Israel. It was never intended to bring salvation, but, rather, to drive them to God so that they would receive grace, forgiveness and power from him. And that is the purpose of the law today. That is how many of you came to Christ: you realized what a terrible person you were. You couldn't stop yelling at your kids. You couldn't deal with lustful thoughts or your sexual impulses. You were driven to Christ. That is the purpose of the law. The law does that for Christians as well. It points out in fine detail the areas of need in our lives so that we are driven to Christ. He is the only one who can change us. We can't change ourselves, and the law can't change us.

The law can condemn, and it does a great job of that. It can point out depravity, but it cannot save, it cannot forgive, it cannot cleanse. It can only stand there and be what it is: rigid and true and rather condemnatory, by nature of what it is. It can reprimand and rebuke, but it cannot justify. It cannot renew. It cannot revitalize. It can show us what we are doing wrong, but it cannot empower and enable us to do what is right. So in many ways it is a ruthless kind of rule book. Rule book religion is a dead-end road. It is frustrating. It is depressing. It is confining. And it is lifeless and powerless! Which of course is why many people steer away from church

and religion in general. Which is why Paul's bombshell about being released from the law is so important for us to understand.

The law was designed to lead us to the only person who can change us, Jesus Christ. And his promise is that he will—but not all at once. Some of our habits are long-standing, deep-seated things that may harass us to the end of our days. We will struggle and fail. The Christian life is not a bed of roses. It is a fight, a struggle filled with pain and heartache. But there is hope ahead. Our Lord is slowly conforming us to his image, and the job will not be complete until we stand before him. In the meantime we are totally forgiven. He is infinitely gracious. We cannot out-sin the grace that he continually offers to us.

How then should a Christian view the Ten Commandments? Are they still binding? The answer is both No and Yes; no in the sense that our acceptance before God depends on our obedience to them. Christ and his death fully met the demands of the law. It no longer has any claim on us. But the answer is Yes in the sense that we are now slaves of Christ, forgiven, cleansed, and empowered to bear fruit for God. As Christians, then, our attitude toward the law has changed. Our disposition to the rule book is radically different. We used to view it as confining, restrictive, old fashioned and burdensome, and we would stiffen and rebel against it. Paul is saying that no one who is a Christian should view Christianity that way, because all of that has changed. In Christ we have been released from that kind of drudgery, from the oppressive, restrictive nature of the law. Because of the Holy Spirit's presence and his transforming work in our lives we have a whole new attitude now toward the rule book.

As we conclude, I want to contrast a few of the changes that ought to have taken place in our lives as believers. As I describe these, I hope and pray that those of you who know Christ can identify with these changes, that you can say, "That is what happened to me." If you can't, you have some learning to do.

First, before you were in Christ, *God's word seemed to you to be restrictive and overly negative in nature*. It seemed that everything that was pleasurable in life was off limits to you. But now that you are in Christ and you have died to the law, the Holy Spirit is operating in your life. Instead of looking at the laws of God as being restrictive, now *you look at them as being protective*. You marvel at the wisdom of God who loves us so much that he wants to warn us of those areas that are harmful.

Second, before you were in Christ, *your motivation for obedience was to avoid punishment*. You thought, "I will do this because if I don't, God will bring some calamity my way. I will do a minimum to stave off his anger." *After you are in Christ your motivation for obedience is gratitude and love*. These are totally different ways of looking at the rules.

Third, before you were in Christ, *you always had the feeling that no matter how much you obeyed, it was never enough*. You were always falling short, always feeling guilty and condemned. Why keep trying? you wondered. *But, in Christ you are released from that "never enough" attitude*.

Friends, we are no longer under the tyranny of the ruthless rule book, no longer under bondage to the letter of the law. We have been released from that. The Holy Spirit has now energized us to enjoy pleasing God. Now we love to obey him and give him glory. Because of the work of Christ we are free at last.

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1. John R.W. Stott, *Men Made New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984) 65.
2. Stott, 66.
3. *The Death of the Law*, a sermon by David H. Roper, Cole Community Church, January 3, 1988.



WHY DO I DO WHAT I DON'T WANT TO DO?

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1204
Romans 7:14-25
16th Message
Gary Vanderet
March 19th, 2000

In the story, “The Little Engine That Could,” a little engine loaded with toys, food and goodies for boys and girls on the other side of a mountain broke down as it chugged up a hill. It was deeply disappointed for the children who wouldn’t get the goodies. Along came a sleek passenger train that was much too busy to stop and help. A freight engine came along but it had a lot of weighty matters on its mind. And then an old rusty train that could hardly move came by but he said he couldn’t help, either. People thought there was no hope to help the boys and girls get the goodies, until finally a little blue train came along. He said he thought he could help. The first train emptied all its goodies onto the little blue train and it went on its way up the hill. You know the refrain it made as it struggled up the slope: *I think I can, I think I can, I think I can*, all the way up the hill until it reached the top. And it did! And all the way down it said, *I thought I could, I thought I could, I thought I could*.

I don’t want to detract from the beauty of that little classic but, together with all the nice sentiments it communicates, it perpetuates the myth that while we can do immediately that which is possible, the impossible takes a little longer.

This, too, is a part of the American dream: given enough time, energy and gusto, nothing is beyond our capabilities. There are a number of things about us that we cannot change, however, irresistible forces that we cannot deal with. Certain passions, lusts and urges surge within us. Emotions, fears and angers dominate us. In the immortal words of Pogo, “We have met the enemy and he is us.”

What can we do about the sin that so easily entraps us? In our studies in the apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans we have already looked at two wrong ways to deal with sin. The first is to let the flesh have its fling. In chapter 6 we learned that we can’t do that. The second response is to legislate against sin, resolving that we are not going to sin anymore. This is what some conference speakers advise. They lay out the five secrets of dealing with the flesh, and people return home convinced they would never again lose their temper.

Romans 7 declares that the law is good, whether it is Moses’ law or someone else’s way of dealing with sin. God’s law is holy, righteous and good. The problem lies with the material that the law has to work with. The Spirit may be willing but the flesh—our human nature—is weak. Flesh cannot respond to the demands of

the law. Furthermore, using the law to correct ourselves in that way is improper. The law was not given as an instrument to change our lives. All that the law can do is point out sin, identify it and reveal how sinful sin is. But it can’t change us. On the contrary, it condemns us. It stirs up sin, making us want to sin. That is the irony of legalism. It doesn’t stop sin, it arouses it.

Paul continues to elaborate on this theme, the weakness of the law, in the remainder of chapter 7. This particular section of Romans gives rise to all kinds of controversy. Here is where the theologians do battle. The questions that they wrestle with are as follows: Is Paul writing about his own experience or someone else’s? Is he writing about his pre-Christian experience (i.e., is this how he lived as an unregenerate man?) or is he referring to life after his conversion? I will leave the details of this controversy to those who are more gifted than I, but several things strike me about this passage.

1. It is clearly autobiographical. Paul uses the word “I” all the way through. Unless we want to debate what he means by the word “I” (a popular occupation these days), we must conclude that he is writing about himself.

2. Notice that Paul uses the present tense all the way through. This is a striking change. In the previous paragraph the verbs are predominantly in the past tense. If he were referring to his pre-Christian experience, he would say, “I was this way,” as he did in the previous paragraph. Thus I conclude that he is writing about his present experience.

3. One of the strongest reasons why I believe Paul is describing his Christian experience is his view of God and his word. He calls God’s word “good” (verse 16); he longs to obey it (verse 19); he delights in the law of God (verse 22). This isn’t the language of an unbeliever. Paul has a deep love for God and for his word. This doesn’t sound like the words of someone’s pre-Christian experience.

4. The last reason, and certainly not the strongest or the most important, is that I have to say that what Paul describes here is in accord with my own experience. Paul is speaking my language. He is talking about me. I have a deep love for God and I want to do his will, but I find myself doing things that I don’t want to do and not doing things I know I should do.

Before we delve into these verses I want to say that our understanding of this passage is critical to our ma-

turity as Christians. A genuine, humble admission of the evil of our flesh is the beginning of fruitfulness. Many of us struggle because we have too high an opinion of ourselves. But we will never cry for deliverance unless we come to terms with our wretchedness. The power of the Holy Spirit is discovered on the road to self-despair. Our only hope is constant watchfulness and dependence.

This passage, Romans 7:14-20, describes the struggle that we face every day. Paul states the same truth twice, first in verses 14-17 and again in 18-20.

For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the wishing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish. But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. (Rom. 7:14-20, NASB)

Both sections begin with Paul's honest admission of his own sinfulness.

Verse 14: For we know that the Law is spiritual; but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin.

Verse 18: For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh;

Even though Paul is an apostle, chosen by God for a special task, he confesses that he is an unspiritual man. Notice that he doesn't say that he is unconcerned about spiritual things. On the contrary, he is very concerned about them. But even though he is a Christian, the flesh dwells in him. It assaults him; he is no match for it. Left to myself, says Paul, I am its unwilling slave.

Paul had habits that he couldn't conquer. Maybe he lost his temper or had problems with lust. From time to time he felt enslaved by sin. It encourages me to know that others struggle with sin. It doesn't make me happy, but it comforts me. Unfortunately, many evangelicals who revere the Scriptures engage in what Ray Stedman used to call a "conspiracy of silence." We have agreed that we are not going to admit our sin so we hide behind a façade, acting as though we are doing well. We have problems at home, we struggle with compulsive behaviors, but we never talk about these things. Meanwhile, everyone else thinks that they're the only ones who struggle with sin. But here Paul says, "I am of flesh. I am not spiritual. From time to time I am enslaved by sin." Knowing that there are people like the apostle Paul who struggle with sin in their lives is a comfort to me.

Both middle sections, verses 15-16 and 18-19, vividly describe our inner conflict. Paul brings two problems to our attention. Both are stated in verses 15:

For that which I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I would like to do,

Everyone can identify with Paul's yearning. His whole being longs to do good. For our part, we long to spend time in the Scriptures and in prayer; to be more courageous in sharing Christ; to be a more caring person; to be a better husband or wife. But when we try to act this way, at times we find we are unable to do so.

but I am doing the very thing I hate.

This is the flip side. We don't want to slander others, but when someone shares information about another, we find ourselves going right along. We don't want to be bitter and unforgiving, but we react sharply when someone hurts us. Like Paul, we know we shouldn't be doing those things but we do them anyway.

Paul says the same thing in verse 19:

For the good that I wish, I do not do; but I practice the very evil that I do not wish.

David Roper explains:

This is the law of inertia in the spiritual realm. This law states that bodies in motion tend to stay in motion and bodies at rest tend to stay at rest. When we are at rest it is hard to get going. We know we ought to serve but it is hard to get up and do it. The other problem is that bodies in motion tend to stay in motion. When we are sinning it is hard to stop.¹

That is what Paul is talking about.

This is the conflict that every Christian man or woman knows all too well. Paul continues:

But if I do the very thing I do not wish to do, I agree with the Law, confessing that it is good.

This is a mark of Paul's conversion. Deep inside of him he not only knew God's law, he wanted to do it. So we agree that the law is good. The very fact that we do not do the things that we know we should do bothers us. It underscores that we are committed to the truth. We want to do what is right. If we sin it is contrary to what we think, contrary to our will. That is the conflict.

Then each section ends with an almost identical conclusion. Paul says in verse 17:

So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which indwells me.

And again in verse 20:

But if I am doing the very thing I do not wish, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

He seems to be saying, "The real me knows that God's law is good, and the real me wants to do it. But I find there is an alien intruder living inside me, and eve-

ry time I want to do something, this alien intrudes.” Paul says this isn’t really him, it is something inside of him. The real Paul wants to do what is right, but the moment he wants to do it, this intruder takes over and he finds himself doing something wrong.

David Roper puts it well:

There is a certain dynamic that is quietly, insidiously working away inside. We are not even aware of it until we decide to do something good. We may resolve to read through the Bible in a year, so we set our alarm for 5:30 A.M. in order to get up and read for half an hour. We do that for a few days, but one night we get home late and fail to set the clock. Weeks go by and we realize that we haven’t spent any time with the Lord, and we wonder why. We aren’t always aware of this dynamic going on inside us until we try to do something good. There is an evil, an alien intruder, that we always have to reckon with: sin is at work in our members.²

In these verses Paul is attempting to expose the corruption of our flesh. He plainly states in verse 18: “For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh.” He stops and has to qualify his remarks. What he is saying is, it is true that Christ dwells in me, but in my basic humanity, apart from Christ, there is nothing good to be found. Society today places a lot of emphasis on feeling good about ourselves. That is a good thing in itself. But we are not supposed to feel good about the sinful part living inside. We ought to feel very good about the fact that we belong to Christ. We are God’s children, completely forgiven and greatly loved. But we should not feel very good about the flesh, because it is corrupt to the core.

So Paul has been describing his condition and the conflict that every believer struggles with. In verses 21-25 his analysis goes deeper. Here he expresses it almost as a philosophy, in terms of laws and principles at work.

I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wishes to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind, and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. (Rom. 7:21-25)

Paul has been describing our present condition and conflict, now he brings it down to a basic principle which he states in verse 21. He says, “I find.” John Stott explains:

This is the philosophical conclusion to his experience: “I find this principle, *that evil is present in me, the one*

who wishes to do good.” He breaks down that principle into two laws, two forces which are in opposition to one another: *the law of my mind*, and *the law of sin*. The law of my mind is a force in my inner man that loves the law of God; but the law of sin is a force in my members that hates the law of God. This is the philosophy of our Christian experience. Our experience is that we do not do the good that we want to do, and we do the evil that we hate to do. The philosophy behind this is these two laws that are in conflict, the law of my mind and the law of sin; or, more simply, my mind and my flesh, my renewed mind and my old, unrenewed, unrenovable flesh.³

On the one hand I have the will to do what is right; on the other hand there is the sin in my body that emerges at the most inopportune times, enslaving me, leading me on, ruining my life and my family and business relationships. None of us feel that we are ever going to get on top of this thing. “Miserable, wretched man that I am,” cries Paul, “who will set me free from the body of this death?”

Larry Crabb is one of my favorite authors. During one of the lowest points of his life he became deeply aware of his own sinfulness and selfishness. Out of the struggle of those circumstances he wrote the book, *Finding God*. Listen to his struggle:

During the day on Sunday, March 17, I felt restless, uneasy. That night, I couldn’t sleep. At midnight I slipped out of bed, reached for my Bible, and headed for the privacy of my study. For reasons still unclear, within seconds of my sitting down the dam burst. Tears gushed from my eyes and poured down my face. I sobbed, I wailed, I heaved for perhaps twenty minutes, without one recognizable word coming from my mouth, just the groaning of a soul in wrenching pain. I felt an unspeakable sorrow beyond any I had ever known. With terrible clarity I realized that I, along with everyone else, was out of the garden of Eden and had no way back in.

And then words began to come, out loud, subdued at first, then with the intensity of a scream. I cried out to the Lord, ‘I cannot endure what I know to be true. Life is painful. I am selfish. Everything is intolerable. Nothing satisfies. Nothing brings relief. Nothing good is certain. There is no rest. Sorrow outweighs joy. I cannot go on without knowing you better.’ Then, as suddenly as they had begun, the tears stopped. I sat quietly, aware that I was doing business with God, that my deepest being was engaged with him. He must be pleased, I thought, with my zealous longing for communion with him.

I felt good for perhaps a minute. And then, with the impact of a battering ram, the realization hit me: ‘I am preoccupied with me! I’m not even close to touching God. He’s not on my mind, I am!’ The tears flowed again, this time with even greater violence.⁴

What a powerful, brutally honest admission of one man's inner struggle to do the right thing, only to find selfishness instead!

Let me state again what Paul is emphasizing here. An honest and humble admission of the hopeless evil of our flesh is the beginning of fruitfulness. Many of us struggle for the simple reason that we have too high an opinion of ourselves. But we will never cry for deliverance unless we first see our wretchedness. That is when we cry out, "*Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?*" But we are not left with that cry. There is an even greater cry, a cry of victory: "*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!*" That isn't even a sentence; it is a declaration of praise.

In chapter 8, Paul will expand on this theme and describe the basis on which he can thank God. But we must realize that it takes Christ to live a Christian life. That is why there is no mention in this passage of Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit. Paul wants us to understand that we cannot live the Christian life without Christ. It takes Christ to make us Christian.

We will always struggle with what the apostle calls the "law of my mind" (our hunger for goodness), and the "law of the flesh" (sin in our human nature which from time to time engulfs and enslaves us). There will always be conflict, hurt and pain and struggle, but in the end, there will be victory in Jesus.

There are no shortcuts to maturity. Our flawed personalities resist change. We are in recovery, gradually being delivered from evil. God is working even now for that distant end. We are becoming today what we will inevitably be.

Goodness is a job for God. Whatever conformity to goodness we achieve is the fruit of his doing. Fruit is exactly the right word, suggesting some hidden element quietly at work. Augustine said: "There is no true virtue without a miracle. Any progress we make toward authentic goodness is the product of our association with him. We must again and again come to him with our desires and lofty ideals and lay them at his feet." We must bring our weaknesses, shame, compulsions, doubts, fears, misjudgments, weariness and staleness, and ask God to complete us.

Time is on our side. God is wonderfully patient. He will never give up on us until his work is done. He is working even now toward that distant end. We are becoming today what we will inevitably be. And so

*Wait for God's silent molding,
Wait for His full unfolding,
Wait for the days to be.*

—Francis Havergal

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1. *Contradiction Within*, a sermon by David H. Roper (Cole Community Church, Boise ID, 1/10/1998).
2. Roper.
3. John R.W. Stott, *Men Made New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984) 77.
4. Larry Crabb, *Finding God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 24-25.



LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1205

Romans 8:1-17

17th Message

Gary Vanderet

March 26th, 2000

We come with great anticipation to the eight chapter of the Book of Romans this morning. In chapter 7 of Paul's letter we learned of both the beauty and the weakness of the law. There is nothing wrong with God's law. It is good and perfect. The problem lies with us. Paul's passionate conclusion is the cry of every Christian who has ever tried to please God by relying on his own efforts:

So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? (Rom. 7:21-24, NASB).

Every believer can identify with that admission. We want to do good, but we end up doing the very thing we do not want to do. We want to please God, but the power to do so is out of our grasp. But we are not left there. Romans 8 presents another experience that is also true of every Christian.

Unlike chapter 7, which is preoccupied with the law, chapter 8 is preoccupied with the Spirit. In chapter 7 the law and its synonyms are mentioned some 31 times, but the Holy Spirit only once. In the first 27 verses of chapter 8, however, the Holy Spirit is mentioned 19 times by name. In these two chapters there is a contrast drawn between the weakness of the law and the power of the Spirit. John Stott put it well: "The Christian life, essentially, is life in the Spirit, that is to say, it is a life that is animated, sustained, directed and enriched by the Holy Spirit."¹

The ministry of the Holy Spirit and his work in the life of the believer is the focus of the opening 17 verses of chapter 8. The Spirit has come to liberate, indwell, sanctify, lead, assure, and finally, resurrect us. The major point that Paul argues in this chapter revolves around the assurance and security of God's children. Notice that the chapter begins with no condemnation, and it ends with no separation.

Romans 8:1-4:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending

His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. (Rom. 8:1-4)

Once more, Paul begins by using the word "therefore," summing up what he has written thus far. He goes back not only to chapter 7, but to chapters 3, 4, and 5, reminding us of the salvation that is ours through the death and resurrection of Christ. By emphasizing the word *now*, Paul wants us to understand and experience once again the blessings that are ours in Christ.

The first blessing is that we are *eternally secure*. Paul writes, "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." This is nearly a parallel statement to that which he wrote at the beginning of chapter 5, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." John Stott makes the point that the "no condemnation" there is equivalent to justification; in this case, in 8:1, it is simply its negative counterpart. He writes: "Later in the chapter the apostle puts these two ideas together again, arguing that no one can accuse Christians because God has justified us (33), and that nobody can condemn us because Christ was raised and is at God's right hand, interceding for us (34)."²

Do you believe that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus? God will not turn us aside; he will not throw us out of his family. If we are born into the family of God by faith in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit has come to dwell within us and he will never, ever leave us, no matter what we do. God will never separate us out of his family or treat us as anything less than sons and daughters

The fifteenth chapter of Luke's gospel, the stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the wayward son, reveals how deeply people matter to God. The stories were a reaction on Jesus' part to the confusion of the Pharisees regarding the true character of God. The third story is the tale of a rebellious boy who foolishly squandered his inheritance, not by making bad investments, but on parties and whores. This son frittered away his father's money in big-time sin. At last, deserted by his friends, and feeling the pangs of hunger even as he is feeding pigs, he comes to his senses and realizes how foolish he has been. Waves of remorse and billows of shame crash in on him. He thinks about going back home, but as what? A hired hand? A son? No! So sure

was he that he had forfeited his right of sonship, so sure was he of his father's condemnation, all he desired was a bunk in the slaves' quarters.

The people listening to Jesus wondered how the story would end. They probably thought the son would return to a stern lecture from his father. But no. The father was outrageously gracious and fiercely committed to his son, so much so that instead of condemnation he greeted him with a celebration, a warm embrace and words of love. Picture the Father as he listens to his son: "Father, I know that I have forfeited my sonship. All I am asking for is a bunk in the servants' quarters." Now picture the father putting his hand over his son's mouth and saying, "Don't talk that way. You are no servant, you are my son, and you will always be my son! Yes, you will be occasionally wayward, periodically foolish, and now that I think of it, stupid once in a while, but I love you, son! And my love can handle your folly." Jesus was saying, "Once a son, always a son." But, even more importantly, he was saying, "Once a father, always a father."

When I pastored our high school students, I made it a point to get to know their parents, too. Periodically, students would tell me about something they had done wrong. They would say, "My parents are going to kill me!" Once a high school boy asked me to call his parents. "My dad is going to disown me!" he said. I told him, "Your dad may be a little disappointed, and, depending on how his day went, he may even be a little angry. But I can tell you, with certainty, he has never even entertained the thought of disowning you. Count on it. He loves you." There is no ultimate condemnation in a healthy father for even the most bizarre behavior by his wayward child. Our heavenly Father has an enormous capacity to forgive and to receive his errant children back into his fellowship. "There is therefore no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus."

I want speak for a moment to those of you who are believers but have stumbled. You have done things that you didn't want to do and you are buried under a mountain of discouragement and shame. You have been victimized by the evil one, the Accuser (Rev. 12). He is telling you that you are done, that you should bail out. God's word to you this morning through the apostle Paul, however, is not to buy that condemnation lie. Never allow the evil one to intensify your guilt to the point where you become incapacitated. Take your failures and shortcomings and confess them to your loving Father. Lay them down at the cross. He will forgive and restore you, and even celebrate your homecoming. Don't underestimate his love for you.

The second truth that these verses makes clear is that we are *internally free*: we have been set free from the law of sin and death. Though the law was not sinful in itself, it revealed and provoked sin. Thus, God's holy law, which is good and perfect, brought out both sin and death. So to be free from the law of sin and death through Christ is to no longer be under the law, i.e., we

no longer look to the law for either our justification or sanctification.

Paul explains how the gospel liberates us from the law. God took the initiative to do what the law was powerless to do. The law could neither justify nor sanctify, because it was weakened by the flesh. So what the sin-weakened law could not do, God did. He made provision for both our justification and sanctification. Paul says that God sent his Son to justify us and the Spirit to sanctify us.

Paul explains in five expressions exactly what God did. I am going to leave the first four of these for now, because I want to focus on them when we celebrate the Lord's Table in a few minutes. But because of the work of Christ, his incarnation, his crucifixion, and his atonement, we are free. We have no condemnation because the condemnation we deserve was borne by him.

The apostle writes that the ultimate reason God sent his Son was for our sanctification, our holiness. When God puts his Spirit in our hearts he also writes his law there. That was the great promise of the New Covenant, of which Jeremiah wrote: "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD. "I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Jer 31:33).

We are now infused with the power to live in a manner that is pleasing to God. As the poet stated:

*To run and work the law commands,
Yet gives me neither feet nor hands;
But better news the gospel brings:
It bids me fly, and gives me wings.*

Through the Holy Spirit the virtue and perfection and power of Christ's life is communicated to us. We can love God with all our hearts, and we can love our neighbors as ourselves—which, as one man put it, "is as great a miracle as when the Spirit hovered over the face of the deep and with power materialized a new creation at the spoken word of the Father."³

With that in mind, Paul now goes on to explain why this heartfelt obedience, this sanctification, is possible only to those who walk according to the Spirit. Verses 5-8:

For those who are according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace, because the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God, for it is not even able to do so; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. (Rom 8:5-8)

Paul is describing two groups of people: those who are in the flesh and those who are in the Spirit. They each have two mentalities or outlooks (the mind of the flesh and the mind of the Spirit), which lead to two

styles of behavior (walking according to the flesh and walking according to the Spirit), resulting in two spiritual plights (death and life). Remember that “flesh” here is not describing our physical body—the soft tissue that covers our bones. “Flesh” is our fallen, self-centered human nature, that which we are apart from God: depraved, unredeemed, and self centered. By “Spirit,” Paul is not referring to some higher aspect of our humanness that is “spiritual,” but, rather, the personal Holy Spirit himself who not only regenerates us but, as we will discuss in a moment, actually indwells the people of God. These two groups are not two types of Christians (carnal and spiritual). Paul is exposing the difference between a non-Christian’s fleshly life and a Christian’s spiritual life.

The apostle is saying that our mind-set, as Christians or non-Christians, expresses our basic nature. We act in a certain way because that is who we are: the ambitions that drive us, the issues that absorb us, the way we spend our time and money, what we give ourselves to, all of these are determined by who we are, whether we are still “in the flesh,” or are now, by a new birth, “in the Spirit.”

Paul continues (verses 9-13):

However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. And if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you. So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. (Rom 8:9-13)

Paul wants his readers to know that the distinguishing mark of a true Christian, the thing that sets him apart from unbelievers, is the Holy Spirit. John Stott writes: “Indwelling sin is the lot of all the children of Adam, but the great privilege of the children of God is possessing the indwelling Spirit to fight and subdue indwelling sin.”⁴

In fact, in these verses Paul writes a great deal about the Holy Spirit’s liberating ministry in the life of the Christian. First, we find here a truth that many Christians are confused about: *If you are a Christian you possess the Holy Spirit.* You don’t have to ask for the Spirit. You don’t have to have a special experience to receive him. If you know Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, you possess the Holy Spirit. Paul declares in verse 9 that if you do not possess the Spirit you are not a Christian at all.

The second thing we learn is that *the Holy Spirit resides within us*, somewhere in our human spirit. Four

times in this passage Paul says that the Spirit dwells within us. You do not need to go to a special place to get more of the Spirit. There is no more of the Spirit in this building than there is your home, at your place of work or in a restaurant. That is because the Spirit does not reside in buildings; he lives in people. Some people travel to Israel because they think that is where they really “feel” the Spirit and they can draw closer to the Lord. Although the Holy Land it is a wonderful place to visit we are not any closer to the Spirit there than here. Wherever we go, he goes. That is why the New Testament declares that we are God’s temple—because the Holy Spirit makes our bodies a sanctuary.

The third thing we learn here is: *the Holy Spirit is nothing more than the Lord Jesus come to dwell inside us.* Paul calls Holy Spirit the Spirit of Christ in us (verse 9); and in verse 10 he says that Christ is in us. When we become Christians, then, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within us. And he is nothing more and nothing less than the Lord Jesus himself. In fact, that is the purpose of the Holy Spirit: to indwell us and make the life of Jesus continuing and real. That is what Paul describes in 2 Corinthians as the “treasure within an earthen vessel.” Do you realize that the same Lord Jesus who walked on this earth and did those mighty works, now lives in you and he will never leave you? Even when you sin you cannot drive him out of your life.

We had an old basketball at our house that leaked air. After we played with it a bit we’d have to pump it up again before shooting some more baskets. Many Christians think that, as far as their possessing the Holy Spirit is concerned, they have a slow leak. They imagine they continually have to go to meetings to get pumped up in order to get more of the Spirit. But Jesus says that Christians possess the Spirit and he is with us forever. He will not leave us. He will not leak out. We don’t need to get pumped up. When we came to Christ we received all of the Holy Spirit we will ever receive, nothing more and nothing less. We don’t receive part of him. He is a Person. He does not come in doses. He is not poured into our lives.

The result of having Christ by his Spirit dwelling in us, according to Paul, is life – life for our spirits now and life for our bodies in the end. The Holy Spirit has made us alive! Therefore, says Paul, we are debtors to the Spirit who has given us life. By his power we must put to death anything that threatens this new life. We are under a most solemn obligation to be what we are, to conform our conduct to our character, to do nothing that is inconsistent with the life of the Spirit within us, but, rather, to nourish and foster it.

We can grow only by laying hold of his power within us. We are effective because we keep reaching down and laying hold of the One who resides with us. Did you know that the trolley cars that go up and down the hills of San Francisco do not have motors? They are fitted with a clamp mounted underneath, and when the brakeman pulls back on a lever that is attached to the

clamp, the clamp grabs hold of a moving cable that runs beneath the street and the cable car moves. In ourselves, there is no power resident in us. We are not going to change anything. We can't change our own lives, never mind the world. But there is an endless cable inside: the life of the risen Lord Jesus available to us. When we reach down and clamp onto that life we are able to stand in the face of adversity. That is what empowers us to do whatever we are called to do. That is what gives us the moral courage to make decisions that are tough but which we know are right.

Finally, the Spirit's ministry is one of assurance: it reminds us of our identity. Verses 14-17:

For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him. (Rom 8:14-17)

What is immediately evident in this paragraph is that God's people are identified as his sons (that includes daughters, of course). That is stated in each of the four verses, and this is attributed to the work of the Spirit. This entire paragraph is concerned with the assurance that the Holy Spirit brings inside each one of us who belongs to Christ. In our new relationship with God the Spirit replaces fear with freedom. The slavery of that old age which led to fear, especially fear of God as a judge, is over. The new age gives us boldness to approach him as our loving Father. The Spirit prompts us in our prayers to call God "Father." "Abba" was the common Aramaic word used by children to address their father in those days. Everyone used this everyday, homely, family word. It is like our word dad or daddy. No Jew would have dared to address God in this manner, but Jesus did. He used it in all his prayers which are handed down to us, with one single exception: his cry from the cross. Jesus transformed man's relationship with God into an intimate bond, and he taught his disciples to pray with that same intimacy. That is now the Spirit's ministry in our lives. Paul writes in Galatians, "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father.'"

The truth that God is our Abba-Father is one of the most healing doctrines in all of Scripture. It is a truth that we must cultivate for the health of our souls.

As we come to the Table of the Lord now, I want to draw our attention to verse 3 of our text.

For what the Law could not do, weak as it was

through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh (Rom 8:3).

God took the initiative to do what the law (even though it was his own law) could not do.

What God did is given in four expressions:

He sent his Son. Remember Jesus' words to Nicodemus, in John 3: "For the Heavenly Father did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, [He could have done that from afar, without my involvement] but to save the world through him." He sent his only Son, the one with whom he had a close, loving, intimate relationship, to redeem, love, and restore the world. The sending of the Son demonstrates the Father's sacrificial love. God does not function with a spirit of condemnation.

The sending of the Son involved his becoming a human being.

Jesus came "in the likeness of sinful flesh." John Stott writes, "Not in sinful flesh, because the flesh of Jesus was sinless; not in the likeness of flesh, because the flesh of Jesus was real; but *in the likeness of sinful flesh*, because the flesh of Jesus was both sinless and real."⁵

God sent his Son to be a sin offering.

In that body of flesh, one that was without sin, Jesus became sin. As we see in this text, he was an offering for sin. In the mystery of the cross, which we can never comprehend, at that hour of darkness the Lord Jesus gathered up all the sins of the world, all the terrible evil, all the foul injustice, crime and misery from throughout history, and brought it to an end by dying.

God condemned sin in the flesh.

God judged our sin in the sinless humanity of his Son, who bore it in our place. The reason there is no condemnation for us is that the condemnation which we deserve has been fully borne by Jesus.

There is no greater love than this.

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1. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 216.
2. Stott, 88.
3. R. Kent Hughes, *Romans* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991) 150.
4. Stott, *Romans*, 255.
5. John R.W. Stott, *Men Made New* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984) 80-81.



THE GLORY AND THE GROAN

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1206

Romans 8:18-27

18th Message

Gary Vanderet

April 2nd, 2000

One of my favorite Peanuts cartoon strips has Schroeder, garbed in an outsized catcher's mask and chest protector, striding out to the mound. He hands Charlie Brown the baseball, and laments, "The bases are loaded again, and there's still nobody out." "So what do you think?" Charlie Brown asks. Schroeder ponders the question for a moment, and replies, "We live in difficult times."

Indeed we do. Someone has said, "If it's not one thing it's another, and some days it's both." Painful, mortifying and costly circumstances seem to hit us continually. We tell ourselves that things will get better, that life will become easier as we get along in years, but that's a fool's dream. Sometimes the harder tests come farther down the road.

In our last study in the book of Romans we pondered the wonderful truth proclaimed by the apostle Paul in the opening verse of chapter 8: "there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus." We studied the marvelous, liberating ministry of the Holy Spirit in our lives. This is the new arrangement for living, predicted by the prophet Jeremiah centuries earlier, that there was coming a day when God would write his laws in people's hearts, not on tables of stone. God would live with them, they would be his people, and he would be their God. They would be able to draw upon his wisdom, energy and power for all the demands that life threw at them. God would settle the question of their guilt once and for all by forgiving their sins; and they could rest upon that constant washing, cleansing and forgiveness all through their lives. That is the glory of the New Covenant.

But, as we saw in chapter 7, our salvation is not complete. We are physically frail, mortal creatures. Together with the physical creation, we share in the frustration of bondage to decay and pain. That is why we experience a mysterious blending of suffering and glory throughout our Christian life. We could say that suffering and glory intermingled, accurately sum up the ages, the age we are living in and the age to come, the present and the future. As Christians, then, we live in two worlds—the world of the "already" and the world of the "not yet." What we experience here on earth is not all there is; there is much more yet to come. God has prepared something incomparably beautiful for those who love and trust him: something that lies beyond time, an experience so beautiful, vast and breathtaking that only eternity is big enough to contain it.

Suffering and glory, therefore, are the themes of our passage from Romans 8 this morning. First, the suffering and glory of God's creation (verses 19-22); and second, the suffering and glory of God's children (verses 23-27). If you are presently experiencing hurt and heartache, then I pray these words will comfort you and give you hope and a determination not to give up.

Paul begins with a summary statement. Romans 8:18:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to [or better translated "in"] us. (Rom 8:18, NASB)

Upon hearing these words we are tempted to say, "Paul, you can't possibly mean that. You don't know what I'm going through. You don't know how it feels to be abandoned by your spouse, or what it's like to hold a dead child in your arms. You can't possibly understand my feelings."

But Paul understood pain. Just read his epistles. Listen to his own description of some of the things that befell him:

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (2 Cor 11:24-28)

Paul knew about pain all right.

But he knew something else. Here he reveals a number of important and encouraging truths about the relationship between suffering and glory. The first truth is this: suffering and glory belong together. That was Christ's experience, and it will be ours, too. Suffering is an integral part of the glory. And that glory is not going to be revealed *to* us, says the apostle, but *in* us. It is something that God is doing inside all of us. We will not be spectators in a cosmic grandstand, watching a beautiful performance in which we play no part. No, we are to be on the stage and very much involved. It is

a glory that will be “revealed in us,” because we are part of it.

God is making us into glorious beings—and suffering is an indispensable element of that. John Stott put it this way: “Suffering and glory are married; they can’t be divorced. They are welded; they can’t be broken apart.”¹ Paul wrote in 2 Cor 4:17 “For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.” Our afflictions are not only preparing us for glory, they are creating it!

But, though suffering and glory are inseparable they are not comparable. They must be contrasted, not compared. It doesn’t make any difference how much pain you are experiencing right now. You may be confined to a wheelchair; you may be dying; you may have learned that you have cancer; you may have discovered that your mate has committed adultery. These are terrible circumstances but, no matter what we have gone through, what we are presently going through or will go through in the future, the sum total is not worthy to be compared with the glory that awaits us.

That word “glory” means something that fills us with awe. Paul is saying that one of these days we are going to be totally awesome! In fact, C. S. Lewis reminds us that when we relate to each other we are not really dealing with mortals. One of these days we are all going to be as glorious as God’s Son. If we could see ourselves now as we will be then, we would be tempted to fall down and worship.

We won’t have any more aches and pains then. We won’t have to worry about disease or death. We won’t have to concern ourselves with the habits that enslave us, the warped personalities, the neuroses, the psychoses, the things that have haunted, disturbed and distressed us and made life hard. All that will be finished. This is what helps us get through the tough times—because we know that this is not all there is. There is glory on ahead. God is going to make something glorious out of us. This is Paul’s thesis throughout the rest of this section.

And suffering and glory affect both God’s creation and his children. First, as to creation. Verses 19-22:

For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. (Rom 8:19-22)

J.B. Phillips translates verse 19: “The whole creation is on tiptoe, eagerly awaiting for the time when the sons of God come into their own.” That is an excellent rendering of that verb, “to wait eagerly.” It means to crane the neck forward, waiting and watching. Creation longs

for the day of liberation.

In these verses Paul is describing the fall of creation, everything that exists apart from man: animals, mountains, streams. When man fell the whole creation fell. The world is not what God originally designed it to be. God is not attempting to run the world properly today and failing in his efforts. The world exists in a fallen state. That is what the apostle means when he says that creation is subjected to futility, by God’s will. In other words, the world is under the judgment of God because of sin.

And not only is the world fallen, it is falling apart. This is what physicists call the second law of thermodynamics, the law that states that energy is becoming less and less useable. The world is degrading, going downhill, decaying. And that is frustrating to creation. That is why creation sighs and groans. That is why nature has become our enemy rather than our friend. That is why we fear animals rather than evoking fear in them. There is something desperately wrong with creation. We are locked into the law of entropy and the whole thing is running downhill and decaying. Things are not as they should be. But not only is creation decaying, we are decaying as well.

Next, Paul moves from creation to the church, which is the new creation of God. Verses 23-25:

And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one also hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it. (Rom 8:23-25)

Not only does creation groan, people groan, too. The human race groans and struggles as well, because we are part of the fall. And Christians are not immune from suffering. They struggle, too.

But we do have the Holy Spirit indwelling us, in Paul’s words, the “first fruits of the Spirit.” He is the down payment of our inheritance, of everything that was promised to us when we were adopted as sons. Paul makes use of two metaphors, redemption and adoption, to describe our ultimate salvation. Though we have already been redeemed, our bodies have not. Our spirits are alive, and one day the Spirit will give life to our bodies. We will be set free from the slavery of our bodies, from the law of entropy, and decay. We are, of course, already adopted by God. It is the Spirit who assures us that we are his children. But we will experience a richer, fuller father-child relationship when we come into our own. On the day that we see the Lord, either when we go to him or he returns to take us, whichever comes first, then we will come into our own and be fully revealed as God’s children. That is when we will receive our inheritance.

It’s foolish to think we are going to have it all now:

the perfect body, the perfect marriage, perfect health, perfect children, etc. That won't happen until we see God. Some contemporary teachers today say that God's plan doesn't involve suffering. They hold that God wants to make us prosperous; that sickness and painful circumstances are not in his plan; that we just need to have enough faith. That is very wrong. Scripture clearly teaches that creation suffers and we suffer, too—because we are locked into creation. If we imagine we are going to go through life without suffering, then we simply don't understand the nature of the world we live in. We are residents of a fallen universe. We are fallen beings and daily we suffer the consequences of that fall. So we will have hurt and pain.

But, one of these days that law of entropy is going to be reversed and we will come into our own. What an encouragement this is to people who are living with bodies that are afflicted, or to people who just can't seem to fit in. Maybe you were abused as a child and the resulting neurosis has haunted you all your life. One of these days you are going to come into your own and you will have everything you have ever longed for. You may not have it in this world, but you will have it then. One day you will have a body that is unhindered and unharassed. That is why we can endure suffering now, what Paul calls it in 2 Corinthians, "light, momentary affliction." But all of this is nothing compared to the glory that will be revealed in us when we stand before the Lord.

Remember that when the cross of ministry is heavy to bear; when the rigors of righteous living become exhausting; when the responsibilities of discipling people get overwhelming; when the routine of serving others gets discouraging; when the sacrifices of giving your money, time and talents get tiring; when your efforts to lead people to Christ seem futile. Stay faithful! Endure! Press on—because it is all going to be worth it. The light, momentary affliction you are experiencing today is producing in you an eternal reward that is beyond your wildest dreams. Paul had a stranglehold on the fact that we are only here for such a short period, just an instant on the continuum of eternity.

We don't have glory now; we have to wait for it. But we don't need to be restless and irritable, discouraged and depressed. That is our hope. By "hope," Paul is not implying any element of contingency. He is saying, "That is my certainty. I am sure of it. I know that, and I am waiting for it." This is not all there is. There is more to come.

In the meantime, the Spirit is praying for us. Verses 26-27:

And in the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groan-

ings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Rom 8:26-27)

Creation groans, we groan, and the Spirit groans. So integrated are we with the Spirit that when we groan, he groans.

What encouraging words! David Roper summarizes these verses by saying that what Paul is declaring is that we can't go wrong in our prayers. When the pressure is on, when we are afflicted in some way, we wonder how we should pray. Should we pray for God to take the pressure off? to alleviate the pain? to be healed of our illness? to take a difficult person out of our life? We don't know how to pray. Most of our prayers are inarticulate cries: "Lord, I don't know what to do. Please help." We don't need to worry that God won't know how to help us because we don't know how to pray. The Holy Spirit knows the mind of God. Our Lord knows what is best for us, and he reveals that information to the Holy Spirit, who prays according to the mind of God.²

We may pray, "Lord, please take this difficult person out of my life," but the Holy Spirit counters, "No, Father. Don't do that. He needs to be more patient. He needs to learn to be less of a private person. He must learn to be more sensitive, sweeter, easier to get along with." In God's mind the problem is not the difficult person. It's me, but I don't realize that. So the Spirit interprets my prayer. He knows that there is more important work to do, something that is more eternal and deeper than simply releasing me from pressure.

God desires something glorious, and all through life we are being groomed for that as we are being changed into the likeness of Christ. The tough times are the tools that shape us and make us what God intends us to be. God knows what he is doing. He is infinitely wise. He knows when we need to be left in tough circumstances and when we need to be delivered from them. He turns our inarticulate cries into the proper requests. God hears the Spirit praying for us according to his will, and he answers that prayer to make us into the people that he has destined us to become.

Paul's message to us today is a word of assurance. He is exhorting us to not give up. Though the road may be long and difficult, our destiny is sure. Don't give up! Wait patiently for the coming glory. The apostle assures us that the wait will be worth it.

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1. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 237.
2. *A Perspective On Pain*, a sermon by David H. Roper (Cole Community Church, Boise ID, 1/24/1998).



UNSHAKABLE FOUNDATIONS

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1207

Romans 8:28-39

19th Message

Gary Vanderet

April 9th, 2000

It is probably true to say that life has not turned out the way most of us imagined it would. Listen to what one ten-year-old said in his poem, "If I Were In Charge Of the World":

If I were in charge of the world
I'd cancel oatmeal,
Monday mornings,
Allergy shots, and also
Sara Steinberg

If I were in charge of the world
There'd be brighter night lights,
Healthier hamsters, and
Basketball baskets forty-eight inches lower.

If I were in charge of the world
You wouldn't have lonely.
You wouldn't have clean.
You wouldn't have bedtimes.
Or "Don't punch your sister."
You wouldn't even have sisters.

If I were in charge of the world
A chocolate sundae with whipped cream and nuts
would be a vegetable.
All 007 movies would be a G.
And a person who sometimes forgot to brush,
And sometimes forgot to flush,
Would still be allowed to be
In charge of the world.¹

But we are not in charge of the world. Much of the time we feel an unsettling sense of insecurity and paranoia, an awareness that we are not immune to mishaps and perils. Our lives are a tossed salad of tragedies and triumphs, profanity and purity, despair and hope.

Perhaps that is why many view history as a random succession of events devoid of any trace of divine purpose. John Stott said on one occasion, "Many see history as a set of tracks made by a drunken fly whose feet are wet with ink, staggering across a piece of white paper. History seems to have no purpose."

Scripture has a radically viewpoint, however. The Bible records the activity of God in and through history. God is good, and his plan is good. Our Christian faith is rooted in the integrity, character and faithfulness of almighty God.

If we didn't already know it, in our study in the opening verses of chapter 8 of Romans last week we learned that life is hard. Christians suffer, and even groan at times, but in the midst of our trials we are sustained by a certain hope—the hope of glory. And though that hope is still unseen and unrealized, it is sure, because it is grounded in the loyal-love of God.

The focus of this entire chapter is on the security of God's children. Today we will see that that security is based on the unalterable purpose of God, which itself is based on his eternal loyal-love. I find this passage greatly encouraging. I love to share it because it speaks directly to people's needs. Let us see what Paul has to say. Romans 8:28:

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (Rom 8:28, NASB)

Here we come to one of the best-known verses in the entire Bible. It begins with the statement, *we know*. There are a lot of things that we don't know. Earlier in the chapter, for instance, Paul said that we don't know what to pray for. In fact, for much of our Christian life we are caught in the tension between what we know and what we don't know. While there are many areas that we ought to be agnostic about, because God hasn't plainly revealed his mind, here we find unshakeable truths about his providential care—which *we know*.

Notice that Paul does not say that all things are good. Cancer is not good. Broken marriages are not good. The apostle is saying that in all these things, however, God is working for our good, not necessarily our temporal good, but our eternal good. The good thing that God is doing is producing glory in our lives, moving us along to that awesome state that he has envisioned for us. God takes everything, all of our suffering and groanings, even our sin, and these become the tools in his hand to produce good.

Notice that Paul isn't expressing a general, superficial optimism that everything tends to work towards everyone's good in the end. John Stott writes, "The good which is God's objective is our completed salvation; and the beneficiaries are his children, who are described as 'those who love him, those who are called according to his purpose.'"²

God has a purpose. We don't always know what he is doing, and we don't like it all the time, but we do know

that in all things he is working for our supreme and eternal good. We see that throughout Scripture. Joseph's brothers threw him in a pit, and then sold him as a slave in Egypt. There he was falsely accused of rape, and imprisoned. But God miraculously rescued him and installed him as the second in command of all Egypt—because the Lord was with him. God put Joseph in that place to equip Pharaoh and his nation to supply food to the world during a seven-year famine, which Joseph had foretold. Years later, during the terrible famine, Joseph again met his brothers. In his famous words in Genesis 50:20 he captured the whole tale of their treachery: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive."

Oftentimes there are two different intentions, the human and the divine, behind the events in our lives: the human intention, "you meant it for evil"; and the divine intention, "but God meant it for good." These describe the same historical event, but it could be ascribed in two different ways: to the evil of men (who will be held accountable for their actions, as was the case with Joseph's brothers), or to the goodness of God's providence, because human beings and God were behind the same events and God overruled evil for good.

Remember Jeremiah's words to the Jews who were in exile in Babylon after the catastrophic destruction of Jerusalem. Speaking in God's name, he wrote, "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jer 29:11) And maybe the clearest event in history involving both human evil and the divine plan is the cross, which Peter attributed both to human wickedness and the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23).

Paul now goes on to spell out God's good purpose.

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren; and whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. (Rom 8:29-30)

These difficult verses, involving sovereignty and free will, election and choice, are hard to understand. I propose to leave these issues for chapter 9 of Paul's letter; there we will come face to face with them. So for the moment I don't want to talk about the logical tension between these concepts. If we do, we will miss the point the apostle is making, because he is trying to comfort us. In these verses Paul is revealing how God gets us from A to Z, from an unregenerate, ungodly state to the glorious being he has purposed we become. He traces God's good purpose through five stages, beginning in God's own mind and consummating in glory.

Everything begins with God's foreknowledge. Some people think "foreknowledge" means that God knew those who would choose him, and on that basis he

chose them. But no, it doesn't mean that at all. It can't possibly mean that. That would mean that God's decision is based on our decision. If that were the case, we would be running the universe. Our salvation would be based on our merit, not God's mercy. In any event, that isn't what the word means. The word "know" expresses much more than intellectual awareness; it speaks of a personal relationship of affection. The word is used in the Old Testament to refer to sexual intercourse, the most intimate of all relationships: "Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore a child" (Gen 4:1), God looked down through eternity, before you were born, and he had a loving relationship with you. He already chose you to be one upon whom he had bestowed his love.

And those whom he "foreknew" he "predestined." That word means "to decide upon beforehand," or "to mark out with a boundary beforehand." Just as a new house is first marked out by stakes to define where the foundation should be laid, so our character and life is marked out with a predetermined boundary line. God already knew what our character would be like, having perfected it in his first-born Son. His purpose is to conform us to Christ's character by teaching us to let the Spirit live out in us the life of Jesus Christ. So it's a sure thing. One of these days we will have a body like Jesus and a spirit and soul like his, free from evil.

Paul goes on to say that those whom God predestined, he also "called." This is where we get into the action. Up to this point the passage has been concerned with God's mind and purpose, but now we become involved in the picture. We can't begin to describe the mystery and wonder that is involved in this as the Holy Spirit starts to work in our lives. We may be far removed from God; we may have grown up in a non-Christian family; we may be involved in a totally non-Christian faith, or we may be from a Christian home; it doesn't make any difference. God begins to draw us to himself. He brings us to the place where we hear the good news and we respond in faith. And "whom he called, these he also justified." As we have learned in studying this letter, this term means far more than mere forgiveness of our sins. It is a declaration that we sinners are now righteous in God's sight.

And finally, when history is over and time is no more, we will be glorified. Paul writes: "whom He justified, these He also glorified." He puts that future event in the past tense, because it is certain

The point that the apostle is making here assures us that no one will get lost in this whole process, no one will fall through the cracks, because God is responsible for it. It is going to involve pain and toil, death and tears, disappointment, bereavement, sorrow, sin, stumbling, failure, falling, forgiveness, all these things, but it is going to happen, because what God sets out to do, he accomplishes, no matter what it takes.

What is our response to all of this? Verse 31:

What then shall we say to these things?

“In light of what I have just written,” asks the apostle, “what is left to say?” What can we add? His response is to ask five more questions, challenging anyone to answer them and disagree with the truth they contain. But there is no answer, because nothing or no one can harm God’s children.

If God is for us, who is against us? (Rom 8:31)

If Paul had simply asked, “Who is against us?” immediately we would be flooded with answers. Indwelling sin nags us. The unbelieving world persecutes us. Tragedy keeps striking us. But that isn’t the naïve question which the apostle poses. He asks, “If [or, better translated, *Since*] *God is for us, who is against us?*”

Four words that dominate that verse deserve our attention: *God is for us*.

God is for you. Your parents may have abused you; your teachers may have misunderstood you; your boss may not like you; your friends may be ashamed of you, but God, the Creator of the universe, is for you.

God is for you. Today, this very moment, while you are sitting in this room, he is for you. He couldn’t be any closer than he is right now. There is nothing you can do to increase or take away from his loyal-love.

God is for you. He likes you. He is on your side. He is cheering for you.

God is for you. This isn’t a blanket promise for all of humanity. Everyone cannot make this claim; only those who have been justified in Christ can do so.

It doesn’t make any difference who is against us. The important thing is that God is for us. But how do we know that? As we look at events of the day disasters seem to keep coming with tragic regularity. But Paul tells us how we can know.

He asks another question in verse 32:

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? (Rom 8:32)

The cross demonstrates that God loves us. We cannot look at creation and come to that conclusion. There is only one event in history that establishes that fact, and that is the crucifixion. The cross is where he revealed his love for us.

The apostle is arguing from the greater to the lesser. Since God has already given us the costliest gift of all, the gift of his own Son, will he not now provide us with everything we need? In giving his Son he gave everything. The cross is the guarantee of his loyal-love, his never-ending generosity. But we still worry. We worry about our IRA’s and SAT’s. We worry that we don’t have enough money; and when we have enough money, we worry about how we should manage it. But we already have everything.

Next, Paul asks two questions about guilt and grace. Verses 33-34:

Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. (Rom 8:33-34)

Can anyone bring a charge against us that will cause God to reverse his decree of righteousness? No! Paul’s point is that no prosecution could ever succeed since God, our judge, has justified us. We can never be condemned because Jesus Christ, our Advocate, has died for our sins. He was raised from the dead and is seated at God’s right hand and is interceding for us. So who will accuse us?

If that question stood by itself, we would be flooded with voices. Our conscience accuses us. The devil never ceases to accuse us. Even his name, *diabolos*, means, “slanderer.” In the book of Revelation he is called “the accuser of the brethren, who accuses them day and night before our God.” If that were not enough, all of us have human enemies who delight in pointing accusing fingers at us. But the apostle’s point is that none of the charges will be sustained. All the accusations will fall to the ground like arrows off a shield.

Maybe Paul was reminded of the words of the Servant in Isaiah:

He who vindicates me is near. Who then will bring charges against me?

Let us face each other! Who is my accuser?

Let him confront me!

It is the Sovereign LORD who helps me.

Who is he that will condemn me? (Isaiah 50:8-9)

Once the judge has released us we need not fear the court. We can confidently challenge the universe with all its inhabitants, human and demonic. *Who is the one who condemns?* No one.

And so the final question, concerning endurance. Verse 35:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?

This is the bottom-line question, the one that Paul has been trying to get us to see with all of the other questions. This is what everyone wants to know: How long will God’s love endure? Can anything stop God from loving us? Paul looks around for answers, and lists seven possibilities:

Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution [all the strains and stresses that come with living in this hostile world], **or famine, or nakedness** [lack of adequate food or clothing], **or peril, or sword?** [the risk of death or the experience of it] **Just as it is written, “For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” (Rom 8:35-36)**

Paul says that every day we endure circumstances over which we have no control. We are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. We feel pain, misery and loss, circumstances that are hard to bear and which challenge our faith. Nevertheless, our suffering does not alienate us from Christ; it is evidence of our union with the one who was crucified.

Verses 37-39:

But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us.

We not only endure them, we triumph over them.

For I am convinced [Paul began with, *I know*; here he ends more personally, saying, *I am convinced*] **that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.** (Rom 8:37-39)

The apostle began by asking whether anything will separate us from Christ's love. Now he knows that nothing can, so nothing will. Nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God. What an unshakable foundation that is!

Ruth Harms Calkins summarizes this passage with this poem from her book, *Tell Me Again, Lord, I Forget*:

God
I may fall flat on my face
I may fail until I feel
Old and beaten and done in
Yet your love for me is changeless.
All the music may go out of my life
My private world may shatter to dust
Even so You will hold me
In the palm of Your steady hand.
No turn in the affairs
Of my fractured life
Can baffle You.
Satan with all his braggadocio
Cannot distract You.
Nothing can separate me
From Your measureless love:
Pain can't
Disappointment can't
Anguish can't.
Yesterday, today, tomorrow can't.
The loss of my dearest love can't.
Death can't
Life can't.
Riots war insanity unidentity
Hunger neurosis disease -
None of these things
Nor all of them heaped together
Can budge the fact
That I am dearly loved.
Completely forgiven
And forever free
Through Jesus Christ
Your Beloved Son.³

1. Judith Viorst, *If I Were in Charge of the World and Other Worries* (Aladdin, 1984).

2. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 248.

3. Ruth Harms Calkins (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1986) 150-151.



LET GOD BE GOD

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1208

Romans 9:1-33

20th Message

Gary Vanderet

August 13th, 2000

In the ninth chapter of the book of Romans we come to one of the most difficult texts in the New Testament. Almost every commentator that I have read has different views on what this chapter is saying. The text has things that we cannot fully understand, and there may be issues on which we disagree, but that is all right.

I will begin by quickly reviewing what we have already learned in Romans. In the first two and a half chapters of this book the apostle Paul describes the terrible plight of mankind. It's a grim picture. All of mankind is guilty, hopelessly lost in sin, and living under the wrath of God. We are sinful, self-centered and separated from our Creator. Paul clearly shows us our *need for justification*. Over the next two and a half chapters he goes on to explain the way of *justification*. Jesus Christ came to earth and became the sin-bearer. Our sins were placed upon him and he bore them in his own body on the cross. Now, by believing in him, we are delivered from our sins. We are declared "Not guilty!" and given the gift of righteousness. We don't have to worry about the guilt of the past; sin's power over us is broken in the present, and we don't have to worry about the future: death no longer holds us in its grip. That is the good news. Then, in chapters 6 through 8, Paul reveals the process that God uses to bring believers into a mature relationship with him.

Everything slows down in chapter 9, however. Many people skip these difficult sections and move right on to chapter 12. But it will be helpful to understand what is behind this complicated part of Romans, and why Paul appears to take a little detour. As we will see, it is not a detour at all.

For two thousand years, Israel was God's instrument to proclaim the good news to the world that God loves mankind. In the ancient world, people were afraid of God. They even sacrificed their children to appease him. To let people know that he loved them, God called into being one nation. They would be his missionaries to proclaim to the world that God cared about people very much. Over the span of two thousand years that was the Jews' mission to the world. Finally, God himself came to earth in the form of a Jew: Immanuel, God with us. God became an Israelite. He lived among mankind and died for us. What a wonderful announcement that is!

When Paul finally understood that good news he wanted to proclaim it to his countrymen, so he went from synagogue to synagogue preaching it. He would take out the Torah scroll, or the Isaiah scroll, and preach. But people didn't respond positively. Some got very angry at what he had to say and had him ushered out the front door. On several occasions he was stoned. Paul wondered why the Jews hated him. The very people whom God had chosen to announce the good news were rejecting the gospel. So

Paul took to the streets with the gospel. Finding a Roman businessman or any passerby who would listen, he would chat with him about the good news. Oftentimes, wanting to hear more, the person would ask Paul over to his home. He would invite all his neighbors to hear the apostle share the good news of God's love, and all kinds of people responded eagerly to the gospel.

Paul wondered why his own people would not accept what he had to share, while the Gentiles had no difficulty with it. He had to rethink all his theology. Thus, here in chapters 9-11 of Romans is his explanation of why his countrymen failed to believe the gospel. He explains to them that God was moving the Jews off the center stage of world history and moving in another group, a new Israel.

Paul begins by sharing his anguish of heart and perplexity of mind. The people of Israel, with all their unique privileges, had rejected their own Messiah. How could the favored people of God have failed to recognize their Messiah? How could he reconcile their unbelief with God's covenant and promises? And what about their future? If God's love had been poured out upon the nations in general, and if God's concern was to work through the church, the new Israel of God, what about the old Israel of God? Did God still have a plan for them?

Listen to what the anguished Paul has to say:

I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh (Rom 9:1-3, NASB).

Paul wants to assert once and for all that God has not rejected his people. He loves them with all his heart. In fact, the apostle expresses his willingness to give up his salvation if it meant they could be saved. Those of us with loved ones that are lost know something of this pain. We may enjoy their company, but we always feel a deep anguish underneath. I have to confess that this verse leaves me convicted. I don't love people the way Paul did. But that is the heart of God, a broken heart, because people don't respond to his love. That was the heart of Paul, too, because his people, his fellow Jews, refused the gospel.

Paul goes on to explain some of the unique privileges of the old Israel. Romans 9:4-5:

who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons [They were God's adopted children. Hosea wrote, "God said, out of Egypt I have called my son." In Jeremiah, God said, "I am Israel's father."] and the glory [the cloud of fire that was suspended over the tabernacle by day, and the pillar of fire at night, which represented the presence of God, the visible splendor of God]

and the covenants [those great agreements that God made with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and all the renewals of those agreements: that he would give them a land, that he would bless them and that through them the seed would come] **and the giving of the Law** [they were given the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai, that unique revelation of God's will, spoken by his voice and written by God himself] **and the temple service** [centered around the sacrifice of the lamb, which symbolized the coming of the Lamb of God who would one day take away the sin of the world] **and the promises**, [and especially those promises that he would bring the seed, the promised Messiah, through the nation] **whose are the fathers**, [Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the twelve sons of Jacob, and many others] **and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.**

Last but not least, God himself came through the nation of Israel in the form of a man, the long-awaited Messiah. One would think that with all of these eight benefits, Israel would recognize and welcome her Messiah. But they didn't. This is what broke Paul's heart. But, says the apostle, in spite of the fact that Israel rejected their missionary call, God's program did not go astray. Everything is intact. God is not wringing his hands, wondering how he is going to get the job done.

So how can we reconcile Israel's privileges with her prejudices? How can we explain her hard heart? Paul now addresses this mystery, asking a series of questions in the process. First, in verses 6-13, he asks, "Has God's promise failed?"

But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "Through Isaac your descendants will be named." That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. For this is a word of promise: "At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son." And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived twins by one man, our father Isaac; for though the twins were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God's purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written, "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I hated." (Rom 9:6-13)

If God promised to bless Israel, and they forfeited the blessing by not believing, has God's promise failed? Not at all, says the apostle. Here Paul declares that there always have been two Israels: the physical descendants of Israel or Jacob, on the one hand, and on the other, his spiritual offspring. God's promise has always been given to the latter, who did receive it. In chapter 2, Paul has already made that distinction between those who were Jews outwardly, whose circumcision was only in the body, and those who were Jews inwardly and were circumcised in the heart by the Spirit.

Here the apostle elaborates on and illustrates this with a history lesson. He reminds us of what happened when God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees and brought him to the land that we call Israel today. God

promised Abraham a son, and said that he was going to work through that son. Abraham and Sarah tried to have a child, but they remained childless. Finally, they became too old to have children. They did what was perfectly acceptable in that culture. Sarah gave Abraham Hagar, her handmaiden, a slave girl, and Abraham had a child, Ishmael, through her. They thought that this was the child of promise, but God told them, "No. That isn't the one! Stop trying to help me out. Sarah will have a child." Then God took Abraham out beneath the night sky and asked him if he could count the stars. God promised him that his descendants would be more numerous than the stars of the heavens. And the text says, "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." God regenerated their bodies and opened Sarah's womb. She gave birth to a boy, whom they named Isaac. God said that he would work through Isaac, not Ishmael, to get the message out to the nations.

Isaac married Rebekah, and she gave birth to twin boys. Esau was born first and then came Jacob. Normally the firstborn would inherit all the privileges, but God said that before the children were even born, before they had a chance to establish any merit, to do anything good or bad, God said, "the older will serve the younger." God turned history on its head. He is God and he has the right to do that. He could have chosen Esau (that would have been the natural choice), but he didn't. He chose to work through Jacob.

Paul is saying that down through history, God in his sovereignty chooses those through whom he will work. He worked through Abraham, through Isaac and through Jacob to get the gospel out. David Roper¹ wisely notes that in this text, Paul's primary concern is not election to salvation. Paul is talking about national entities, or individuals, or whomever God chooses to work through to get the gospel out to the world. The text that Paul picks from Malachi makes that very clear: "*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.*" That sounds terrible! How could the God who loves people hate Esau? But Malachi is not referring to an individual. He is talking about the nations that sprang from their loins, the Israelites, whom he calls Jacob, and the Edomites, whom he calls Esau. God has chosen to work through Israel, not Edom. "Hate" is a Hebrew idiom for preference. Jesus used the same idiom when he said, "If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:26). Jesus was not suggesting that we should hate our parents. He was saying that our love for God should be so intense that at times it may appear that we hate our parents. That is what Malachi had in mind: that God chose Jacob, he chose Israel. Paul is saying that God has the right to move an individual, or a group of individuals, off the center stage and move another group on. If he chooses to work through Isaac instead of Israel, that's all right. If he chooses to work through Jacob and Esau, that's all right. If he chooses to work through Israel and not Edom, that's his prerogative. God has the right to do that.

Next, Paul anticipates some objections to what he has written.

What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will

have compassion on whom I have compassion.” So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, “For this very purpose I raised you up, to demonstrate My power in you, and that My name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.” So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires. (Rom 9:14-18)

The next question follows naturally. We object at this point because it seems unjust of God to make what appear to be arbitrary choices. Is God unjust to exercise his sovereign choices? Choosing some for salvation and passing by others seems like a violation of justice. But, Paul defends God’s justice by proclaiming his mercy. This doesn’t seem to follow, but it does. John Stott writes, “the question itself is misconceived, because the basis on which God deals savingly with sinners is not justice but mercy.”² The illustration that God uses is the redemption of his people out of Egypt. Throughout the Old Testament, this idea of Israel being brought miraculously out of Egypt is an illustration of salvation, of the redemption of an individual.

Paul summarizes how God delivered Israel from Egypt. He did this through two very different men, Moses and Pharaoh. God had mercy on Moses and he hardened the heart of Pharaoh. The passage that Paul quotes here comes from Exodus 33. Moses was a timid, insecure man. He did not want to be the deliverer of Israel, but God pushed him into it. A known murderer, Moses went reluctantly, counting on God. He was the instrument God used to deliver the nation. He had mercy on Moses and revealed his character to him. That was what enabled Moses to become the man whom God used to deliver the nation of Israel.

What happened to Pharaoh? As the king of the ancient world at the time he thought he was a god. Moses said to him, “God says to let my people go,” but Pharaoh refused; he hardened his heart. When a plague struck the land he changed his mind, but then he hardened his heart again. Finally, God hardened Pharaoh’s heart irrevocably so that he could no longer soften his heart. Why did God do that? As Pharaoh continued to harden his heart, God then hardened his heart, and that became the means of delivering Israel out of Egypt. Paul says these are two historic examples. God has the right to do as he pleases. He has the right to show mercy on one individual, and use him to bring salvation to his people, and to harden the heart of another.

Paul anticipates another objection at this point, so he asks a third question:

You will say to me then, “Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?” (Rom 9:19)

That appears to be a valid question. If God blesses one person to bring salvation to his people, and if hardens the heart of another to save his people, if either of these men stand before God at some point in the future, they are going to say that they didn’t have any choice in the matter. In other words, is it fair of God to hold people accountable to him when he makes the decisions? Notice that Paul doesn’t answer that question, because this is really not the question. There is an underlying question that he addresses. Verse 20:

On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, “Why did you make me like this,” will it? Or

does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use? (Rom 9:20-21)

Paul is not trying to stifle sincere questions, but, rather, to put in his place one who wants to “quarrel” or “talk back” to God. It is that spirit of rebellion that refuses to allow God to be God and acknowledge one’s status as a sinful creature that the apostle is addressing. We must also state that Paul is not saying that we are pieces of inanimate clay. He is simply taking an illustration out of ordinary life and saying, wouldn’t it be ludicrous if, instead of making a piece of fine china out of a lump of clay, the potter decided to make a common vase, and the vase said, “You don’t have any right to do that. I am the one who determines what I should be”? Paul is not saying that God treats us that way. He is simply drawing an analogy from life. Just as a potter has the right to determine what form the clay will take, so God has the right to deal with sinful humanity according to both his wrath and his mercy. Paul is saying that God is sovereign. No one coerces him. No one tells him what to do. No one counsels him.

Paul now asks a hypothetical question:

What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And He did so in order that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. (Rom 9:22-24)

At times we wonder why God seems to withhold judging ungodly men and women. Does God have the right to tolerate evil so that his glory is displayed through it in his people? Does he have the right to tolerate evil so that Jews and Gentiles may come into a relationship with him? What if he permits evil men to rise to positions of power if that draws people into the love of God?

David Roper illustrates this truth well in one of his messages on Romans. He asks, “What if in the near future God allowed a totalitarian atheistic government. And they padlocked all the churches. And they put all pastors in prison. And they burned all the Bibles. And they passed laws forbidding people from talking about God. They went about expunging all mention of God from literature. And we had a completely atheistic totalitarian regime. Suppose that happens? What do you think would be the result?”³ Well, we can predict what would happen, because that is what happened in China after the unleashing of Mao’s Red Guard and Christians by the thousands were slaughtered and church buildings destroyed. Thousands came to Christ during that time. Today, there are more Christians in China than in any other place in the world. Does God have the right to do that? Does he have the right to allow a Hitler, a Stalin, or a Mussolini to rise to power? Does he have the right to raise up that sort of government in order to produce good. Yes, he does! That is the apostle’s point.

God has the right to harden the nation of Israel after they have repeatedly hardened their hearts to the gospel. It is not that God dislikes the Jews; it is that he has the right to move this national entity off stage and put another group of missionaries into a position of prominence and give them the opportunity to proclaim the gospel so that both Jews and Gentiles can be brought in.

In case there is any question about God's right to do this, Paul quotes two Old Testament prophets, Isaiah and Hosea, who predicted before the time that this is exactly what would happen (verses 25-30).

This brings Paul to ask one final question:

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, just as it is written, "Behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in Him will not be disappointed." (Rom 9:30-33)

What a picture! The analogy that Paul uses of a huge rock (representing Christ) that is embedded in the ground is used by Isaiah and others in the Old Testament. That is the way Jesus is. He is that immovable stone of stumbling. Jesus is right there in the middle of the road of life. Those who insist on resting on their own righteousness refuse to see it and stumble over it headlong to destruction, but others come and rest on it by faith and find salvation. Those are the only two options: you either fall over Jesus or you take your stand upon him. But he is available to all, Jew and Gentile alike. If you believe in him and what he has done for you, then you are included. Scripture never says, try to determine if you are chosen. It says, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31); and, "to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (Jn 1:12). That is the good news, the gospel.

If I could leave you with one exhortation this morning it would be this: Let God be God! He has that right. Stop second-guessing God. Stop fighting him. Stop running away from him. Stop trying to be in control of all the events in your life. That was the message that came to Job after all

his suffering. God is in control. He reigns. He is the final authority and arbiter. Nothing happens outside of his control. Nothing takes him by surprise. He is working relentlessly in history. The wheels have not fallen off his program. He is still at work to bring salvation to the world. God has the right to tolerate some evil that comes into your life that he will use to draw you closer to him. We may cry out to him to remove some circumstance or person from our life, but God says, "No. I am going to tolerate that evil. I will use it to draw you closer to me." And, viewed in terms of eternity, that "light, momentary, affliction is working an exceeding weight of glory." God has the right to do that.

Heavenly Father, I confess that I stand in awe of you this morning. You selected me. You chose me. I wasn't looking for you, but you found me. It is obvious that you called me and wooed me. You brought me to a place where I could hear the clear call of the gospel message. You softened my heart. I can't say that I made an agonized decision of my will. You just put me into your family. There are more than five billion people on this earth, and you chose me. I don't deserve it. Thank you!

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy... (Titus 3:4-5)

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1. *How Odd of God to Eschew the Jew*. A sermon by David H. Roper (Cole Community Church, Boise Idaho, 4/17/1998).

2. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 268.

3. Roper.

I am indebted to David Roper for his insights into this passage.



GIVING AWAY THE GOOD NEWS

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1209

Romans 10:1-21

21st Message

Gary Vanderet

August 20th, 2000

One of the lasting marks for me of our time in the Philippines was that I gained a renewed sense of the importance of people. God loves people. People matter to him. This is the thrust of the book of Romans. In the opening eight chapters the apostle Paul explains how God reached out to mankind and took the initiative to love us. For two thousand years Israel had that role of proclaiming to the nations that God loves people. But now there is a new Israel, the church of God, made up of both Jews and Gentiles, who are his missionaries.

In chapters 9-11, Paul addresses the problems of Jewish unbelief. The focus in chapter 9 is on God's sovereignty, i.e. God's right to choose according to his purposes. In chapter 10, the focus is on human responsibility, the need to understand the gospel, to proclaim it, and people's need to respond in faith. It is true that God chooses and draws those who come to him, but it is also true that no one comes without voluntarily responding to his call. What can we say about Israel? Can they still come to God? Yes, on the same basis as Gentiles. Jews can come to God not by keeping the law, but by believing the good news that God has done everything necessary in the person and work of Christ. Man simply has to accept that and receive Christ.

Thus in chapter 10 there is a switch from the past to the present, from Paul's explanation of Israel's unbelief to his hope that they will yet hear and believe the gospel. Jews must come to God on the same basis as Gentiles; therefore the proclamation of the gospel to Jews is precisely the same as that made to Gentiles. The significance of this chapter is that it teaches Christians how to evangelize, how to share their faith, not only to Jews but also to Gentiles. This chapter is a primer on evangelism.

The first thing that Paul says is that we must love people. We need to be concerned about others. The apostle models that in the opening verses.

Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation. (Rom 10:1, NASB)

Paul begins this chapter just as he began chapter 9, by sharing his love and longing for his Jewish brethren. That is where evangelism, or any ministry, must begin — with loving people and making friends. There is nothing difficult about that. In order to love people we have to be with people. We have to mingle more. That is the whole point of the incarnation. God came to earth and mingled with us. He was Immanuel, "God with us."

In my travels I have found that people in the East understand this truth much better than Westerners. There, everything is based on relationships. In Mother Teresa's *A Simple Path*, she quotes a certain Brother Jeff:

In the West we have a tendency to be profit oriented, where everything is measured according to the results. And we get caught up in being more and more active to generate results. In the East, especially in India, I find that people are more content to just be, to just sit around under a Banyan tree for half a day just chatting to each other. We Westerners would probably call that wasting time, but there is value to it. Being with someone, listening without a clock, and without anticipation of results, teaches us about love. The success of love is in the loving, not in the result of loving.¹

Effective evangelism is based on relationships. That is why we need to evaluate our relationships occasionally. A good question to ask oneself periodically is, How many non-Christian friends do I have? Unfortunately, many Christians are inclined to spend all their time with their believing friends. They find that lifestyle to be safe. But you can't love people if you are not with them. When God wanted to impart truth to us, he became one of us. If we want to impart truth to our friends, we have to be one with them.

Preparing for our trip to the Philippines, I read a lot of material on evangelism. I was amazed at the number of things that focused on strategies and techniques that were so non-relational. Sharing the gospel is not about getting our lines down pat and learning when to smile. We need to get to know people and understand them. And, most importantly, we need to care about them. As one person put it, "People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." There is no lasting influence without sustained, loving contact.

The second thing we learn from Paul's model is that we need to pray for people. Prayer is the highest expression of our dependence on God. Paul prays that God might open the hearts of his unbelieving Israelite friends so that they will be able to hear the gospel; only then will they understand it for what it is. In another place Paul says that the God of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving, so that they cannot see the face of Christ. It takes a work of God inside to change. The same God who caused light to appear in the beginning must do that again in people's minds, so that the light "comes on" and they see.

That is where prayer comes in. Prayer delivers us from the feeling that we need to convince people about the good news, that persuasion is important. But we don't have to argue with people. Our job is to love them and impart whatever truth we know. It is God's job to open their eyes so that they see it. That is very liberating. If they ask you a question you can't answer, you can say you don't know. Evangelism is God's business. He delights to use us as his mouthpiece, but it doesn't depend on us. Our job is to make friends and impart truth, and put the whole process in God's hands.

Thirdly, we need to understand people. Here the apostle reveals some things that are helpful to know about non-Christians.

For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. (Rom 10:2-4)

Paul is referring to the zeal of his fellow Israelites. If you have seen *Fiddler on the Roof* or read the writings of Chaim Potok, you will understand what the apostle is saying. God is the most important element in the thinking of the Jews. But I have found this to be true of some Gentiles as well. On our trip to the Philippines we were constantly running into Mormon missionaries at our basketball games. They were zealously attempting to capitalize on our being there. But notice Paul says that sincerity is not enough, because one can be sincerely mistaken. He is referring to zeal without knowledge, an enthusiasm without understanding. That is dangerous.

The particular ignorance that Paul identifies in the nation of Israel is a failure to recognize their own need of righteousness. They honestly feel that they can muster up enough of their own righteousness, somehow, some way, to make themselves acceptable to God. But this ignorance is not limited to the Jews. The average person thinks the same way. He tries to approach God on his own. He imagines that all his good deeds will outweigh the bad things he has done and that will ensure him entry into heaven in the end. People do not understand the concept of God's righteousness, his utter holiness, and their complete inability to measure up to his standards. They fail to grasp how sinful they are compared to how holy God is.

With our twisted minds we tend to look at upright, religious, moral people and think, "Those people are almost perfect." We think that if perfection were a 10, certainly they are at least a 9.5. How could God send someone to hell for a measly half-point? When we think like that we are manifesting a spiritual absent-mindedness that is scary, a fuzzy rationalizing that should have no part in a Christian's thinking. The Scripture is very clear. Paul used the opening chapters of this book to show that no human being comes close to moral perfec-

tion. God is so holy that our best deeds of righteousness are like filthy rags in comparison.

At times when I share the gospel, someone will say to me, "You must think I'm a bad person, that I would need all this forgiveness or righteousness. But I'm really not that bad." Then I'll take a glass of water, and say, "To the human eye, this looks like pure water, doesn't it? You wouldn't hesitate to drink it. But remember what you saw when you took a single drop of tap water and put it under a microscope in biology class. Do you remember the dirt, the sediment, the living creatures, the herbicides, all the contaminants in just a single drop of water, in what appears to the naked eye to be crystal clear water? Now multiply that drop by all the drops that are in that glass and you will get the point. This glass of water is not as pure as you think it is. In the day of reckoning, our lives are going to be put under God's microscope. Every little piece of dirt, every imperfection, every contaminant, every impure thought and improper motive, every devious plan, every self-centered perspective, all of that will become magnified. Then it will be obvious that we are not scoring in the 9's. We will never be able to muster up enough righteousness to make ourselves acceptable to a holy God."

We need to abandon our righteousness and receive Christ's righteousness. What usually taints our thinking on this subject is the irresistible urge to compare ourselves to other human beings instead of to God's holiness. Some of you will relate to this because you did it for years. I pray you are not still acting this way. Usually it starts by identifying the dregs of society: the porn kings, the drug czars, the serial killers, the rapists. They are way down at the bottom. But, they are made in God's image, so that on a scale of 1-10 we have to give them a 1. That automatically bumps our own righteousness quotient up to about a 5, because we are way better than that.

We continue to explain to ourselves and anyone else who will listen that there are a lot of nasty people loose in society. Colleagues at work or school friends lie without batting an eyelid. They run roughshod over other people's feelings. They cheat and cut corners if it serves their purposes. But they are much better than those other folks, so they must be at least a 5 — which puts us at least in the 7's. Now we start to count the long list of admirable character qualities that we possess. We are gainfully employed. We haven't stolen too much from our company. We are kind to most. We keep our word for the most part. We are faithful to our spouses for the most part. We attend PTA meetings, buy Girl Scout cookies, and support public television. Not very many people do those things. Clearly this puts us several steps above these others. We are at least in the 8's now.

But we aren't done yet. We go on to list our religious involvements, our spiritual merit badges. We go to church almost every Sunday. We are involved in a home fellowship. We've done some ushering on occasion. We may even have gone on a missions trip. We

think we're rather spiritual people. We are definitely in the 9's, maybe even 9.7 or 9.8. Compared to all the other people on the planet, we are way up there. That must be good enough for God, isn't it? Would a loving God quibble over a few tenths of a point? This way of thinking is widespread.

This mindset permeated the thinking of the Jews in Paul's day. That is why they tried to establish their own righteousness. They didn't think they needed a Savior. It dominates our day as well. Most people that you know are confounded by your need for a Savior. Who needs Christ's righteousness when our own is sufficient? they ask. Until men and women subject their righteousness to the measuring rod of God's holiness, however, they will wrongfully rate themselves in comparison to other people and will wind up with a score way higher than they deserve. If someone is thoroughly convinced that he is an 8 or a 9, then we are wasting our breath talking to them about their need for a Savior, because in their own minds they don't need one.

But the law has a good purpose. It is designed to drive us to Christ. That is what Paul means when he says, "Christ is the end of the law." We try and try to be good and we fail, because we discover that God demands absolute goodness. Then we find ourselves standing before Christ and learn that he is the answer. He is the righteousness of God. He bore our sins in his body on the cross. God puts our unrighteousness on Christ. Then he imparts his righteousness to us, so that we have sonship. We are adopted into God's family and we belong to him on the basis of Christ's death, his sacrifice for us, and not anything that we have done.

So we need to care about people, to love them, pray for them and understand them.

But we also need to understand the gospel itself.

For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness. But the righteousness based on faith speaks thus, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down), 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)." But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" — that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call upon Him; for "Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved." (Rom 10:5-13)

Paul says that Moses knew that it was not by keeping the law that one becomes righteous. He taught salvation

by grace through faith, just like Paul. Moses knew that the law would not work. Paul quotes Deuteronomy, and says that if we try to keep the law as a means for salvation, then we have to keep all of it, every jot and tittle. If we are going to get to God by being good, then we have to be absolutely, perfectly good. And Moses knew that was impossible. No, salvation by faith has always been available and accessible. In fact, salvation is as close as your mouth and your heart. You don't have to take any long journey to heaven or hell to find Christ. God has already done everything necessary. Christ has already come, he has already died, and has already risen. He is available to us now. Our part is simply to inwardly believe and outwardly confess: to believe in our heart that Jesus rose from the dead, and confess with our mouth that he is Lord. John Stott writes, "The content of the belief and that of the confession need to be merged. Implicit in the good news is the truth that Jesus Christ died, was raised, was exalted, and now reigns as Lord and bestows salvation on those who believe."²

Paul is saying that a person's nationality, spiritual background and religious heritage make no difference. Everyone who enters heaven does so on the basis of the person and work of Christ. The up and out and the down and out, the rich and the poor, the moral and the immoral, Jews and Gentiles — everyone goes through the same door, the person and work of Christ, to get to heaven.

So Paul says we ought to proclaim this good news. He exhorts us to do this, using four rhetorical questions:

How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring glad tidings of Good things!" (Rom 10:14-15)

Paul is not referring to the "clergy" here. If we have heard the gospel, and if we have believed, and Christ is dwelling in our hearts through the Holy Spirit, then we are "preachers."

Feet are not the most beautiful parts of the body. But Isaiah said, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel." He was speaking about those who brought to Jerusalem the good news that the days of captivity were over. Our message is similar, and it is indeed beautiful. God could have written all of his messages in the sky, but he condescended in a very real sense to preach the gospel through us. We are his spokesmen to share it with others.

Paul goes on to say that not everyone will respond, and why they won't.

However, they did not all heed the glad tidings; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our report?" So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. But I say, surely they have never heard, have they? Indeed they have; "Their voice

has gone out into all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.” But I say, surely Israel did not know, did they? At the first Moses says, “I will make you jealous by that which is not a nation, by a nation without understanding will I anger you.” And Isaiah is very bold and says, “I was found by those who sought me not, I became manifest to those who did not ask for Me.” But as for Israel He says, “All the day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.” (Rom 10:16-21)

Israel’s scandal is that they don’t believe the very message they were called upon to preach. But Paul says it’s not because they haven’t heard. They have heard enough of the gospel. The problem is that there is something wrong with their hearts. The Gentiles didn’t understand all of it any better than the Jews did, but they believed it. And so we have the other side of the coin concerning Israel’s unbelief. In chapter 9, Paul explained it in terms of God’s purpose of election, but here in chapter 10 he attributes it to Israel’s own disobedience. Thus we see that election and evangelism are not incompatible. Our responsibility is to share the

good news of the gospel throughout the world so that everybody is given the opportunity to hear and respond. But we know that not everyone will respond. Paul reminds us that it is not because it is not intellectually credible. The problem is a moral issue: it is hardness of heart. They do not want to submit to God’s righteousness. They want to do their own thing. They want to make up their own rules.

So we are left with the question, How will people hear if we don’t share the good news with them? There isn’t any other way. We must spend our life doing something in this world, and there is nothing more significant than telling people how they can know God and helping them find eternal salvation. We had a great time playing basketball in the Philippines but, in terms of eternity, basketball is very insignificant. What was important was to use the game as a platform to share the good news about Christ. And what an awesome responsibility it is, to affect the eternal destiny of another human being! That is why as Christians we must love people and be concerned about them, that we might be used of God to lead them to the Savior.

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1. Mother Teresa, *A Simple Path* (Ballantine Books, 1995).
2. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), p. 283.



GOD'S UNSEARCHABLE JUDGMENTS

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1210
Romans 11:1-36
22nd Message
Gary Vanderet
August 27th, 2000

Anyone who wants to submit to Christ's love and lordship can come to the Savior. That is the thrust of the opening eight chapters of the book of Romans. As far as the good news of the gospel is concerned, racial, social, cultural, or indeed any kinds of differences between people are irrelevant. Anyone can come to Christ.

Paul's concern in chapters 9-11 centers on the question, What about Israel's unbelief? What about this uniquely privileged group of people whom God chose? Does God have a plan that ultimately includes Israel? The answer is yes, God does indeed have a plan for the nation.

The apostle summarizes this entire issue in chapter 11. The argument revolves around the author's two rhetorical questions, both of which he responds to with an unequivocal "No." The first question is, "God has not rejected His people, has He?" (Rom 11:1). One might expect that since they rejected God that God would reject them. But no. God has not abandoned them. Their rejection is only partial; a remnant remains.

Paul's second question is: "I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall did they?" (Rom 11:11). He is asking, Does God no longer have a purpose for the nation of Israel? Again, his answer is a very emphatic "No." Israel's fall is not final; it is only temporary. Her fall has resulted in unexpected blessings: God is going to bring even more blessing. John Stott summarizes: "There is still an Israelite remnant in the present and there will be an Israelite recovery in the future."¹

Let's look more closely at the apostle's first question:

I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? "Lord, they have killed Thy prophets, they have torn down Thine altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life." But what is the divine response to him? "I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace. What then? That which Israel is seeking for, it has not obtained, but those who were chosen obtained it, and the rest were hardened; just as it is

written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not, down to this very day." And David says, "Let their table become a snare and a trap, and a stumbling block and a retribution to them. Let their eyes be darkened to see not, and bend their backs forever." (Rom 11:1-10, NASB)

Paul answers his own question and then defends his answer with sweeping evidence.

The first piece of evidence is Paul's own conversion. He himself is living proof of his argument. And what an example he was! Once he was a bloodthirsty enemy of the church. He hated Christians and Christ. He probably had heard Jesus preach and regarded him as a fraud. But, when Paul was on his way to Damascus with letters giving him permission to put Christians in prison, the sovereign God stopped him in his tracks and brought him, kicking and screaming, into the kingdom. Christians had such a low opinion of Paul that, even after his conversion, only Barnabas, the peacemaker par excellence, would accept him. Paul was the most unlikely candidate for the kingdom. He could never get over God's mercy and always marveled at the wonder of grace. He was living proof that God isn't through with the Jews.

Next, Paul lists biblical evidence, namely, the situation in Israel during the time of Elijah, the eighth century prophet. Elijah prophesied during a time of great apostasy in the land. Ahab was king at the time, and the notorious Jezebel was his wife. Ahab had married into the Phoenician royal house in order to establish an alliance with Phoenicia, and Jezebel came over into Israel, carrying all of her gods. The result was that the whole nation fell into Baal worship, so much so that that became the religion of the land.

Then Elijah had his classic shootout with the prophets of Baal on top of Mt. Carmel, and won a decisive victory. Hearing that Jezebel wanted him dead, he took refuge in a cave at Mount Horeb. There he sang the blues to God: "They have killed your prophets and have torn down your altars. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life." But God said that Elijah's arithmetic was lacking: "You aren't the only one left," God assured him. "I have 7,000 who have not bowed to Baal." During Israel's deepest spiritual failing there were 7,000 people whose hearts were tender toward God.

Now, says Paul, just as in Elijah's day when there was a remnant of 7,000, so also there was in Paul's day a remnant chosen by grace. It was probably a sizeable

number. Soon, James would tell Paul that there were thousands of believing Jews (Acts 21). This is where we stand at the present time as well. Some Jews have hard hearts, while others are more receptive to the things of Christ. We have worshiping Jews here among us who have acknowledged Christ as their Messiah. Paul is saying that there are more Jews than we imagine who are part of this believing remnant. They are a reminder that God has not rejected Israel.

Why do the rest remain in unbelief? Paul explains that they have been hardened because they persist in thinking that they can make themselves righteous through good works. Some of the quotations that Paul uses from Isaiah and Psalms sound as though God indiscriminately hardens hearts, but a reading of the circumstances in which those words were written makes it clear that it was only after people repeatedly hardened their hearts that God finally hardened their hearts. This is the judicial result of a long-term hardening of the heart. The same sun that melts the ice hardens the clay. In verse 8 the apostle combines two quotes from Deuteronomy 29:2 and Isaiah 29:10. Isaiah was speaking to people who had turned their backs on God and worshipped the Baals. The verses that precede that say, "Blind yourselves and be blind." So, God says, keep on blinding yourselves to the truth and one of these days when you try to open your eyes you will discover that you can't see at all. That is the point.

The passage from Psalm 69, a familiar one that is quoted elsewhere in the New Testament, describes the persecution of a righteous person. David loved God with all his heart, and he loved the ark because it represented God's presence. He wanted to build a house for God but the people, his own wife included, ridiculed him. David prayed that God would vindicate him and that God's just judgment would fall on his enemies. So it is not a matter of God choosing some to be hard and some to be soft. Paul is saying that if you keep closing your heart to God's love, after a while you won't be able to open it up any more. This is serious business. Don't play games with God.

So the thrust of the apostle's argument here is that Israel's fall is not total, it is only partial. God has not rejected his people. A remnant remains.

Before we move on I want us to pause and take an honest look at the state of our own hearts this morning. Is your heart soft toward God? If God wanted to communicate to you right now, would you hear him? Paul's word about hardening our hearts should be sobering to us all. If anyone continues to hear the truth and does not respond, the time may come when we will not be able to respond. It isn't our struggle or failure that will destroy us, but our indifference.

This brings us to Paul's second question.

I say then, they did not stumble so as to fall, did they? May it never be! But by their transgression salvation has come to the Gentiles, to make them

jealous. Now if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be! But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them. For if their rejection be the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? And if the first piece of dough be holy, the lump is also; and if the root be holy, the branches are too. But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive, were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches [i.e. the Jews]; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." Quite right, they were broken off for their unbelief, but you stand by your faith. Do not be conceited, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you. Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off. And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in; for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut off from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a cultivated olive tree, how much more shall these who are the natural branches be grafted into their own olive tree? (Rom 11:11-24)

It is clear that Israel's fall, which Paul has just explained, is not total; it is not final, either. In fact, it isn't a downward spiral at all. In God's merciful providence both Israel and the Gentiles will experience greater blessings than if Israel had never fallen.

There is a sequence of thought in these verses that is important to see.

The first element in that sequence is that as a result of Israel's fall, salvation has come to the gentiles. This is Paul's theological interpretation of the historical events he had witnessed. Following his conversion, he went right to the Jews with the gospel, going from synagogue to synagogue preaching the good news, but they threw him out. That is why he went to the gentiles. He discovered among them a hunger for truth and longing for God that his own people didn't have. The book of Acts records that on many occasions the rejection of the gospel by Jews led immediately to gentile conversions. On their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas said to the Jews: "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the gentiles" (Acts 13:46). This happened over and over again. Thus the apostle turns history into theology. John Stott comments, "implying that the first event took place with a

view to the second. God thus overruled the sin of Israel for the salvation of the gentiles.”²

The second element in this sequence of thought is that the salvation of the gentiles will make the Jews envious and provoke their conversion. It is God’s intention that the members of this new community be so alive, so full of Christ, so full of love that many unbelieving Jews will say to themselves, “What are we doing? These blessings were intended for us. They have something we want.” And thus many will wake up and be saved.

The picture that Paul uses is that of a cultivated olive tree, representing the nation of Israel. The tree was not bearing fruit, so in order to reinvigorate it the gardener grafted in a shoot from a wild olive tree, with the result that the tree began to bear fruit again. We gentiles, we wild olive branches, have been grafted into this holy tree. The exhortation is that we remain humble and dependent, realizing that we have no life in ourselves; we are merely branches. But, as we abide in the vine we live lives that bear fruit, radiating such reality that many unbelieving Jews will wake up and be saved. And there is a word of hope and promise to Jewish unbelievers. If those that were grafted in were cut off, then those that were cut off could be grafted in again. If God can engraft wild olive branches like you and me, how much more the natural branches?

God’s ultimate purpose is to save the world.

Finally, Paul assures us that there is a future salvation for Israel.

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and thus all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob.” “And this is My covenant with them, when I take away their sins.” From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God’s choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, so these also now have been disobedient, in order that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. For God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all. (Rom 11:25-32)

Paul is saying that God does have a purpose, still in the future, which involves Israel. There is a great debate as to whether God has a plan for Israel here on earth. Will Israel be returned to their land? Will they have a king? Will the temple be rebuilt? Will the priesthood be

reintroduced? Will sacrifices be reinstated? Some say that all of this is fulfilled in the church. There are good Christians on both sides of this issue. Some people believe that what Paul is saying is that right before the Lord comes back there will be a large influx of Jews into the church. I have to admit that I don’t know what God’s future plan for Israel is. But I do know that he has a plan.

God has a plan. We are not drifting through history. We are moving toward a day when our Lord Jesus will make everything right. Right now, he is drawing both Jews and gentiles into his kingdom. At some point he has a plan for Israel which he is going to fulfill, because of his covenant with the patriarchs. Then he is going to wrap everything up. We will lay down all of our feelings of sadness, our heaviness of heart, our despair over broken relationships, our depression over painful circumstances, our memories of past sin. John reminds us in Revelation: “They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; neither shall the sun beat down on them, nor any heat; for the Lamb in the center of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them to springs of the water of life; and God shall wipe every tear from their eyes.”

That is God’s promise to us. Things are not out of hand. He is in control of history, as he has always been. And even more, he is in control of your life

Knowing this we can worship with Paul.

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! Who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to Him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:33-36)

God is worthy of our praise. He is patient and merciful throughout the ages. His loyal love endures forever. He is faithful to keep his covenant. In spite of God’s people being stiff-necked, rebellious and obstinate, he has not turned his back on them. Though we are covenant breakers, God is a covenant keeper. His heart still longs for Jewish unbelievers to come back.

Do you think that God has had it with you? Think again! He is so much more patient than that. He is not like a man. Maybe you have neglected him for a long time and you think he doesn’t want anything to do with you, that he is sick and tired of your inconsistency. Think again! Just because you are a covenant breaker, don’t think he is. He is a covenant keeper, and he is continuing to keep his covenant with you.

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1. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 291.
2. Stott, 295.



LIFE ON THE ALTAR

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1211

Romans 12:1-2

23rd Message

Gary Vanderet

September 3rd, 2000

We began our studies in Romans with an outline that had each section of the letter open with a word starting with the letter "S". The first 2-1/2 chapters of this book, 1:1-3:20, are all about *sin*. "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," says Paul (Rom 3:23). Every one of us, bar none, is self-centered to the core. The proof of that is that we all die, because death is the result of sin.

The second 2-1/2 chapters, 3:21-5:21, are about *salvation*. At 3:21 there is an abrupt change in the apostle's thought. Paul writes, "*But now* apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested..." The situation is critical. Everyone is going to hell. *But now* the righteousness of God has been revealed. From 3:21-5:21, Paul declares the truth about our Lord's mighty saving acts.

The next three chapters, 6:1-8:39, are concerned with *sanctification*. Here we learn how to grow as Christians, how to deal with the entrenched sin in our lives, the long-term habits that hold us in their grip.

The next three chapters, 9:1-11:36, deal with *sovereignty*. These chapters are all about the nation of Israel and their place in God's plan to bring salvation to the world. The emphasis here is on God's sovereign election of his people.

Beginning with chapter 12, the next 2-1/2 chapters, 12:1-15:13, deal with *service*. This section sets out what it means to respond to the grace of God in service.

One of the most helpful features of the apostle Paul's teaching is that he always combines doctrine with duty, belief with behavior. Thus he now moves from explanation to exhortation; from an exposition of the good news to an exhortation on how this new community which Jesus has brought into being by his death and resurrection should behave. In these chapters at the end of Romans he reveals how all of our relationships have changed: our relationship to ourselves, our relationship with one another in the family of God, our relationship with our enemies, our relationship to the government, and so on.

First, our relationship to God.

I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is,

that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom 12:1-2, NASB)

The opening conjunction is probably the most important connector in the Bible. Someone has said that when you see a "therefore" in Scripture, you should always ask, what is it there for? There is no more significant time to do that than here. Paul is instructing us on why we ought to behave, giving a reason for righteous behavior.

Occasionally when I tell one of my sons something I think he should do he will say to me, "Don't preach to me." They don't want me nagging them, correcting them in a condescending way. Most of the time we don't need someone telling us what we need to do; it is the "why" that needs addressing. Why should we behave? Why should we be the kind of people that God has called us to be?

Here Paul is giving us a reason for righteous behavior. He begins by saying, "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God." Phillips translates it this way, "With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies, as a living sacrifice." God's love is the reason for our being righteous. In the opening chapters of the book Paul details that love, setting out what God has done for us. We were lost and lonely and desperate in our longing, and God became one of us. Then he died for us to bring us to God so that he can fellowship with us.

The first eleven chapters of Romans tells the story of God's love. What an enormously motivating thing it is to know that God loves us! Some think that if one focuses too much on God's grace it encourages or condones sin, but the opposite is true. John Stott comments, "God's grace, far from encouraging or condoning sin, is the spring and foundation of righteous conduct."¹

Everything starts with God's love. God loves us. Many people feel that God is mad at them. They think God is a cranky old man who is always out of sorts, that he is so insecure that when people don't respond to his love, he stomps around heaven shouting judgments, angry at everyone because they can't get it right. But no. We are deeply loved by God.

God set his love upon us in eternity, as we learned in Romans 9. He chose his people in love. No explanation of the mystery of God and his election is given, except God's love. This is the consistent teaching of Scripture.

We have this word in the Old Testament, from Deut 7:7-8: “The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”

God loves you because he loves you. That is the only explanation for his love. There is no other. He chose you because he loves you and he loves you because he loves you. He doesn't love you because you are lovely or lovable. The hymn writer put it this way: “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my heart, my soul, my all.” When we understand how much God loves us we will want to give him our bodies. That is the apostle's point.

So, on the basis of God's mercy, Paul makes an appeal that involves both our bodies and our minds: the presentation of our bodies to God, and our transformation by the renewal of our minds.

You ask, Why does God want my body? The answer is, because he loves human bodies. He came to earth in a human body. He didn't come as an angel, as a disembodied spirit. He loves bodies, and he wants to indwell them. That is a uniquely Christian concept not found in other religions today. It certainly wasn't found in the religions of Paul's day. The Romans' world, influenced by Greek philosophy, taught that the body was merely a prison for the soul. There were two reactions to that thought: Either you got your body in line through discipline, or you gave up on it. Whether you were a stoic or an Epicurean, a monk or a drunk, it didn't make any difference what you did to your body. What mattered was the soul, the spiritual world.

But throughout this book Paul declares that God wants our bodies. He wants us to present the members of our bodies, our eyes, our hands, our feet, our sexual organs, to him for his use. The offering that we make to God is to say to him, “Whatever you want me to do, wherever you want me to go, I am yours.” Perhaps you are thinking, I can see why he would want some people's bodies, but not mine. My body is not attractive. Maybe you have a debilitating illness or disease that has crippled your body and you can't walk or talk. Maybe your body has been trashed by drugs. Maybe you have a sexually transmitted disease and you wonder why God would want your body. Remember that God loves broken things. He doesn't want us to fix our body or shape it up first. Bring it, with all its problems, with all the difficulty you have with it, with all the temptations, bring it just the way it is and he will fill it with his presence and put it to its intended use.

That word “present” or “offer” is significant. The word tense is often used for a once-and-for-all action. Something that we do that governs the rest of our lives. It doesn't mean that we can never do it again. Paul is

saying that there comes a time when we need to make a decision that from that point on, God is going to use our body. Our part is to say, here it is. Use it as you see fit.

Have you ever done that? This act is a sacrifice that is “holy and pleasing to God.” These words, which come from the Old Testament, refer to the sacrifices that were installed through the law. They were holy, i.e. set apart for God. Certain animals were taken off to the side and prepared for sacrifice. When they were offered, it is said that God smelled the offering and it was pleasing to him. Paul says that when we offer our bodies, that it is pleasing to God.

Furthermore, says Paul, this is the only thing that makes sense. The word that is translated “spiritual” is actually the word from which we get our word “logical.” The most sensible, logical and appropriate response to God's mercy in your life is to offer him your body. It is the greatest act of worship you can perform. I hear a lot of people talking about worship these days. They are usually referring to the music at a church service. When we come together as a church we worship corporately, but worship doesn't start or end in a church service. You are worshipping or not worshipping all week long, depending on what you do with your body. Is it God's to use right where you are — at work, in your home, with your family?

So the first part of Paul's appeal involves the presentation of our bodies to God.

The second involves our transformation according to his will. Paul writes:

And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect (Rom 12:2).

Positively, we are to present our bodies to God; negatively, we are not to be conformed to the world. God's call to his people has always been a call to nonconformity. His word to Israel through Moses was, “You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices” (Lev 18:3). As William Barclay puts it, “We are not to be chameleons that get their color from their surroundings.”²

What does Paul mean by “world”? He is not talking about people but about the world system — the ideas and attitudes that shape our world. Human beings are naturally imitative. If we are not careful, the world will, as J.B. Phillips renders this, “squeeze us into its mold.” We must refuse to be conformed to the prevailing culture. Don't be conformed to this world.

What we should be is transformed according to God's will. We get the word metamorphosis from this word transform, meaning, a change from one form to another. We use it to describe the change that occurs when an ugly worm spins a cocoon around itself and fi-

nally breaks out as a beautiful butterfly. Matthew and Mark use this word to describe the transfiguration of Christ, when the Lord was completely changed and his garments radiated like the sun. Paul uses this word to describe the process that God wants to work in our lives. He takes us as we are, self-centered and self-absorbed, and transforms us, changing us to people who are other-centered and loving — like his Son.

The verb is also passive. An active verb means that the subject does the acting. A verb in the passive mood means that the subject is being acted upon. Paul is saying, “be being transformed.” This is the secret to change in the Christian life. It isn’t our self-determination that changes us. When we give our bodies to God and allow him to work inside us, he begins to change us from the inside out. Little by little we are being conformed to his character. As we read the word the Spirit of God begins to make it real in our lives. Paul expressed it this way in 2 Corinthians, using the same word, “But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:18). The process of true change is simply one of looking at the face of Jesus, getting to know him, worshipping him, and loving him. The Spirit of God takes the written word to lead us to the Living Word, and as we spend time with the Lord and get to know him we are gradually transformed. When we present our bodies to him, and we make that decision to allow him to transform our character, he begins to work to accomplish that.

If you have never done so, I invite you to offer your body to God, to say to him, “Here is my body. I am finished trying to control it. Take it and do with it as you see fit.” When you do, Paul says, you will discover not only what God’s will is, but that it is good and acceptable and perfect. Most of us don’t know what to do with our bodies. We have a love-hate relationship with them, alternately trashing and treasuring them. But they will never truly please us until we give them to God. He made our bodies and only he knows what they are for. Give your body to him and he will let you know how to use it. Given God’s love for you and your body, this is the only reasonable thing to do.

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small,
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my heart, my soul, my all.*

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1. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 321.
2. William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1990) 157.



A SOBER SELF-IMAGE

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1212

Romans 12:3-8

24th Message

Gary Vanderet

September 10th, 2000

In the opening verses of Romans 12 we learn that the way we grow as Christians is first, by presenting our bodies to God. Paul writes, "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship" (Rom 12:1, NASB). We must offer our bodies to God to use them as he sees fit. We will go wherever he wants, we will do whatever he wants. And second, we grow by refusing to conform ourselves to the value systems of the world: "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good, acceptable and perfect" (Rom 12:2). We must allow the Spirit of God to use the Word of God to change us from the inside out, to conform us to the character of Christ and transform our thinking. Our behavior is based upon our thought processes. As we allow God to transform us we will begin to think the way he thinks. As Paul puts it elsewhere, we begin to have the "mind of Christ."

The remainder of the book of Romans is a description of this "mind of Christ." It's remarkable to note how many of the apostle Paul's exhortations refer directly or indirectly to the teaching of Jesus (15 references alone in chapters 12-15). Here we find described how God looks at the world and what our minds will be like when they are conformed to him. One of the first things Paul says is that when we begin to think like God thinks, that is when we will begin to think differently about ourselves.

For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. (Rom 12:3, NASB)

It is worth noting what Paul is not saying. He is not saying we should not think highly of ourselves. The problem is, we tend to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. Paul could just as well have said to avoid having too low an estimate of ourselves. Many Christians struggle with feelings of insignificance. In these verses he addresses the opposite but equally destructive problem — that of an independent spirit. Some believers feel they don't need others in the body, that they can function on their own. Both sides, those who think they are inferior and those who imagine they are superior, err in their view of themselves.

We need to see ourselves as God sees us. He created us in his image. We are the most nearly God-like beings on the earth. Though we are fallen creatures we have

been redeemed by God's grace. He loves us deeply and delights to give us gifts that equip us to serve. Denigrating ourselves is not a sign of humility. Being humble is recognizing who we are and what God intends to do through us. We can agree with the psalmist that we are "fearfully and wonderfully made." Maybe you don't like your body very much, but God made it and you are very special to him.

Paul goes on to say that God sees us as uniquely gifted individuals.

For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. (Rom 12:4-5)

As members of the body of Christ, Christians have certain gifts and privileges that come with that membership. Paul's favorite analogy for the church is the human body. If you want to see what the church is like, don't look at our church building; stand in front of a mirror and look at yourself. You are one body. You are not multiple bodies. In the same way, there is only one church. All Christians belong to it, whether they have a denominational label or not. If you have been born of the Spirit of God, you are a member of that one church.

The second thing that will strike you as you look at your own body is that it has members. It has arms, legs, feet, toes, fingers, eyes, ears, and a number of other interesting parts. These parts are quite diverse. They have different functions. But there is unity, too. There is diversity in the midst of unity. Though the members are different, they all serve one another. The eyes don't do what the feet do and the mouth doesn't do what the ear does. The members of your body are all different

Our bodies have several extremely critical systems that are invisible to the naked eye, things like the circulatory system, the nervous system, the immune system, the digestive system. Our bodies have all kinds of functioning parts. They are often unseen and unthanked, but they are absolutely essential to our good health. Paul says that is how it is with the body of Christ. We are all different. We tend to gravitate toward the more apparently prestigious members and gifts, but that is not the way God views them.

The body is designed to work in a cooperative fashion. On our recent trip to the Philippines we had a very intense basketball schedule, playing 26 games in 16 days. On occasion many parts of my 50-year-old body were really tired. They protested when I got up in the

morning. But even though they were reluctant to function, they didn't let me down. They didn't refuse, and demand the right to sleep more. That is because the different parts of our bodies don't compete with one another, they cooperate. Even when a certain part of our body hurts the other parts immediately compensate and rush to their aid. During one of our games I fell while I was passing out tracts and got a painful gash in my shin. The rest of my body felt so bad about it that it sat up most of the night to keep my shin company!

We are one body. We belong to each other and need each other. While we are not the same, our differences are God-given. What a terrible caricature of the body it would be if we were all an eye. But that is how we think at times. We all gravitate to the prominent positions in the body, but God has a different way of viewing things.

Paul has a word to describe these differences. "Gifts," he calls them. He goes on to explain what these are and how they function.

And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, (Rom 12:6)

That is what is different about us. And we can see that we are different. We have different personalities and different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. But the fundamental difference between us in the body of Christ is that we have different gifts. The word comes from a root word that means "grace." It is a graciously given gift of God. It is important to understand that Paul is not referring to natural talents, things like athletic or musical ability. All of us, whether we are believers or not, have natural abilities, but spiritual gifts are given only to Christians.

"Gift" here is a supernatural capacity to serve the needs of others in the body of Christ. We are not told when they are given. We can assume they are imparted when the Spirit himself is imparted — at conversion — but we don't know. But spiritual gifts are given only to Christians — and no one is left out. Every Christian has at least one and probably more. God's blueprint for the body of Christ is so marvelous and beautiful that he has arranged an infinite variety and combination of gifts.

Here we find a sampling of spiritual gifts. It is not an exhaustive list. There are a lot of gifts, some of which may not even be listed in the New Testament. We do, however, find four lists of spiritual gifts in the NT: Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4, and 1 Peter 4. No one list is exactly the same as the other, which leads me to think that we do not have an exhaustive list of gifts. I think that God has an infinite amount of gifts to give out — and he is a lavish giver.

Paul now goes on to list a sample of the kinds of gifts that God bestows.

And since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let each exercise them accordingly: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; (Rom 12:6)

Some people define this gift of prophecy simply as

the gift of preaching. But if we look at this gift biblically, we see it is a little more narrowly defined. Deuteronomy 18 sets out the requirements of a prophet. Moses prepared the people before they entered the land of Canaan, because they would likely face many false prophets, so he gave them some information to distinguish between a true and a false prophet.

A prophet must meet three requirements. First, he must be a Jew. "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your countrymen, you shall listen to him" (Deut 18:15). Second, he must receive direct revelation. It's not just a matter of studying the Scriptures and making proclamation. Moses continued: "and I will put My words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him." And third, a prophet must be able to predict the future with 100% accuracy. Moses declared, "And you may say in your heart, 'How shall we know the word which the LORD has not spoken?' When a prophet speaks in the name of the LORD, if the thing does not come about or come true, that is the thing which the LORD has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; you shall not be afraid of him" (Deut 18:21-22). A prophet must be 100% correct in his predictions.

A biblical prophet was one who spoke under divine inspiration. Paul writes in Ephesians 2:20 that apostles and prophets are the foundation on which the church is built. Given these criteria, there are no prophets today who speak with the same divine inspiration. Prophets were needed in the early church, before the Canon of Scripture was complete, but now that we have a completed set of Scriptures they are no longer needed. This means that Joseph Smith was not a prophet; neither was Mary Baker Eddy.

However, it is possible that Paul is referring to a lesser prophetic gift that is subordinate to that of the biblical prophet. Paul exhorts the church in Corinth to test or judge the words of prophets in the church. If that is the reference, then the regulation that Paul places on the exercise of the prophetic gift is important: *according to the proportion of his faith*. There is a definite article before the word faith, thus it could be translated, *according to the proportion of the faith*, or *in agreement with the faith*. That is, the prophet is to make sure that his message does not in any way disagree or differ from the Christian faith.

if service, in his serving;

We get the word deacon from this word. This is one of those often-unseen gifts. A person with the gift of service quietly helps others who have physical needs so that people are built up and blessed. Some months ago we set aside a number of men and women as deacons to care for the needy in our body. Their ministry is one of the most exciting ministries in our church. When I hear their monthly report of all the things they are doing among us, I get goose bumps. This is one of the most worthwhile things going on here among us. You will

notice that Paul puts this gift right in the same breath with the more prominent gifts. It is a special gift. If you have it, use it!

or he who teaches, in his teaching;

Teaching is the ability to make the Scriptures understandable and clear. We tend to glamorize and exalt teaching, but here it is listed after serving.

or he who exhorts, in his exhortation;

This is a wonderful gift. The verb has a wide spectrum of meanings. Literally, it means, someone who moves in alongside. It involves encouraging, exhorting, comforting or consoling. It can be exercised publicly, through the gift of stirring speech, or through writing. When I was high school pastor, a man on my volunteer staff had this gift. Every night he would reflect on the day and write notes of encouragement to people. His notes were used by God in mighty ways. He is still doing that to this day.

The gift of exhortation can be used privately in counseling, in coming alongside one who is hurting, or giving hope and courage to one who has lost heart. Barnabas (his name means, the son of encouragement) had this gift. His name was Joseph, but no one called him Joe; they called him Barney. In the Scriptures Barnabas is always found with his arm around somebody's shoulder, encouraging and comforting. This is a marvelous gift. If you have it, start using it.

he who gives, with liberality;

This is the gift of giving money. Paul exhorts those with this gift to give with liberality. That is one possible meaning for that word. Another, perhaps better meaning is, with simplicity. This word is also used in the NT for a simple act. It means, give without ostentation, without calling people's attention to what you're doing. Don't make a big deal out of it. Don't give with strings attached. Don't be like the Pharisees who had a trumpet sound whenever they gave. And one other thing: you don't need to be wealthy to have this gift.

he who leads, with diligence;

If you are a leader, then lead diligently. The gospel doesn't completely remove authority, it softens it. Leadership is still necessary in the body of Christ. The word means someone who "stands before others." If you have an up-front position of leadership, realize that is a gift. Don't become casual or careless, but see those abilities as a gift and use them diligently.

he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

Mercy is showing pity on the helpless. It is the ability to express compassionate, loving action and lift up one who is hurting. Those with this gift have hearts filled with mercy for the weak, the helpless, the poor, the sick, the handicapped.

This is not an exhaustive list of gifts. The apostle's point is this: if you have the gift of service, then serve! If

you have the gift of teaching, then for goodness sake, teach! Part of making your body available to God is using the gifts he has given you. We worship through service.

Perhaps you don't even know what your gift is. You can attend a conference and pay a lot of money to discover what it is, but I will tell you for free how you can discover it. Let me ask you a question, using the analogy that Paul uses. How did your hands and feet learn to function? How did you learn to walk? Nobody had to teach you. You simply started using your feet. What class did you take to learn the intricacies of using your hand? When did your parents lecture you on the advantages of the opposing thumb? You simply started trying things and it worked.

If you are believer, you have a spiritual gift. No one was behind the door when the gifts were given. You have at least one, and probably many. How do you find out what your gift is? Start by getting involved in the needs of other people. Start loving people. Ask yourself how you are burdened to love people. It is important to note that every passage on gifts (1 Cor 12, Rom 12, Eph 4, 1 Pet 4) is followed by a discourse on love. The purpose of our gift is to benefit others. Spiritual gifts are the means by which we love other people. And each of us loves differently. Get involved in the needs of people around you, on campus, at home, here in our group.

You might also gain some insight into your gifts by noticing the type of people you feel burdened for. Be willing to do anything. Don't give up if you fail at something. Gifts take a while to develop. Like talents, they may lie undiscovered for years until a certain combination of circumstances brings them to light. Soon you will know that you either have a certain gift or not. And if you don't, you can try something else. Seek input from others in the body. They can tell you how you minister to them, so ask — and listen.

It is not leadership but love that makes a church impressive. The way to demonstrate the power of the Spirit in the world is not through the powerful exhibition of these more prominent gifts. It is not through impressive programs, as important as these are. The way to demonstrate the power of the Spirit is to love: bringing meals to the needy, mowing lawns, giving financial assistance, counseling and encouraging each other. These are the things that count. All the gifts of the Spirit are to no avail if they don't help us love each other. We need to learn to do that in tangible ways, and the proof of that love will be found in the extent to which we realize that we are all members of one body and we belong to each other. We share a common life. What other motivation do we need to start giving of ourselves in acts of service and love, caring for one another?

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WHAT LOVE LOOKS LIKE

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1213

Romans 12:9-21

25th Message

Gary Vanderet

January 7th, 2001

*Knowing you, Jesus, knowing you,
There is no greater thing.
You're my all, you're the best,
You're my joy and righteousness.*

(Graham Kendrick, *Knowing You*)

Several of the hymns that we sang this morning speak of knowing God: knowing his love, dwelling in his presence and seeing him. What a wonderful way to begin a new millennium — giving voice to our desire to know God and to be known by him. That is what we were created for: to know God and to be deeply and profoundly loved by him. Nothing else will fulfill us. We all have had someone in our past that didn't love us enough, a father or mother, perhaps. This is why the holidays are difficult for some. Our expectations for love and intimacy are at their highest at times like these. But we are often disappointed. Our love tank is so big that only an infinitely loving God can fill it.

The Book of Romans teaches us this. We return this morning to this marvelous book that is, in essence, the story of God's love. We were lost in our sin, lonely and desperate in our longing, and he became one of us. He died for us to bring us to himself so that he could fellowship with us. Romans, then, is the story of God's love. The writer, the apostle Paul, says at the beginning of chapter 12 that the only proper response to that love is to love God in return. The way we do that is by giving him our bodies so that he can fill them and flood them with his love.

In chapter 12 we come to a change in Paul's argument. Up to this point all of his references to genuine love, *agape* love, have been to God's love. From here on the apostle's emphasis is that we allow that love to transform us and to shape all of our relationships, both in the church and in the world. In verses 9 through 21 of chapter 12, Paul sets out a detailed description of what God's love will look like when it is manifested by his disciples. Remember, Jesus said on the night before he was crucified, "By this will all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." That love is now described in detail.

The definition of genuine love is given not in terms of abstract theology but of concrete ideas. It is very similar to 1 Corinthians 13, and is spelled out in terms of what genuine love looks like and how it behaves. These are operative definitions. Verses 9-16 picture love in the family of God, the church. This is clear from the use of the words "one another" (used three times in the section), and the word "saints," in verse 13. Then, verses 17-21 describe what genuine love looks like when it is practiced out in the world. This outline will be our guide as we look at this passage together. First, love in the church is described, in verses 9-13:

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. (Rom 12:9, NASB)

"Hypocrisy" is actually the Anglicized form of the Greek word that Paul uses here. Literally, it means, "under a mask." In classical Greek, the *hypokrites* was an actor who held up a mask to his face to portray either a comic or a tragic character. A hypocrite, therefore, was one who spoke from behind a mask. He was a play-actor. Later, the word would take on a negative connotation to describe one who who treats the world as a stage on which he plays a part. He lays aside his true identity and assumes a false one. He is a phony. He is no longer himself. He is impersonating someone else.

Paul says that our love ought to be genuine. It ought to be real and sincere. It ought to ring true.

When I joined the staff of PBC in January 1977, Ray Stedman was preaching through Romans. I well remember his sermon on this passage. He called it, "How to Hug." Ray told the story of a man who was walking by a used bookstore and he noticed in the window a book called, *How To Hug*. He was taken by the title and, being of a romantic nature, went in to inquire about the book. To his chagrin, he discovered that it was a volume of an encyclopedia that covered the subjects "How" to "Hug." I think that is what happens in church at times. Everyone knows that love ought to be evident in church, and many come to church hoping to find a demonstration of love, only to be confronted with an encyclopedia on theology. But our love should not be like that. The love that we have for each other ought to be genuine.

How do we love like that? Everyone wants love. It is a much longed-for commodity. We get no help from our culture, which says that image is everything. How do we love genuinely, with a love that is authentic? The second phrase helps us here. Paul says that we must "*abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.*" It isn't enough that we are commanded to love, because we are so fallen that we don't know what love is. We have to be told how to love. That is what Paul does in this passage in which he spells out the implications of this statement.

Love is doing what is best for another person — and we need truth to determine that. Love is not blind sentiment. Tolerance isn't the highest virtue. Love is discerning. It is so passionately devoted to others that it hates anything that isn't compatible with their highest welfare. Perhaps a better translation of verse 9 might be, "*Let love be without hypocrisy, by abhorring what is evil and clinging to what is good.*" These last two verbs are participles, not commands. God is the only one who can teach us how to love. He and he alone is able show us what is good and what is evil.

In verses 10-13, Paul describes what genuine, un hypocritical love in the family of God looks like. His argument

revolves around a series of prepositional phrases: “in brotherly love, in honor, in diligence, in spirit, in hope, in tribulation, in prayer, in the needs of the saints, in hospitality.”

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; (12:10a)

Here Paul brings together two words that are used to describe family relationships. The word “devoted” translates an adjective that describes our natural affection for relatives, typically, the love of a parent for a child. The word translated “brotherly love” is the word *philadelphia*, which is the love between brothers and sisters. Paul takes these two words which were originally applied to blood relationships in the human family and reapplies them to describe the kind of warmth, affection and tenderness that should characterize our relationships in the family of God. Genuine love is warm. It is not cold, aloof, distant and austere. One can feel the warmth radiating from a person who loves like this. Brotherly love is affectionate.

Secondly, Paul says,

give preference to one another in honor; (12:10b)

This phrase can either mean that we ought to esteem others more highly than ourselves (as the apostle commands in Philippians 2), or that we ought to try and outdo each other in showing honor. Either way, this goes against our natural inclination, which is to try to attain glory and honor for ourselves. We are gluttonous for glory! We love to be the ones on whom glory is bestowed. We would like to walk down the center-aisle and have everyone give us a standing ovation! But what we ought to do is seek honor for others and be delighted when they are so honored. Have you ever been in a meeting where someone else said something that you had been saying for a long time and suddenly, everyone thought it was a great idea and began praising that person? That really gets to us, doesn't it? “That was my idea,” we say. Paul corrects that attitude. Not only is it proper for someone else to get credit, we ought to be looking out for ways to give honor to them. Phillips translates this verse: “Be willing to let other men have the credit.” Ray Stedman had a plaque in his office that said: “There is no end to the good that you can do if you don't care who gets the credit.” *The Message* translates it this way: “Practice playing second fiddle.” But that is contrary to our human nature. We want to be on center-stage. But love honors others rather than seeking honor for itself.

not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; (12:11)

The NIV translates this verse: “*Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.*” In other words, love labors, it works hard. Love persists, it endures. It keeps its enthusiasm despite setbacks and lack of response. That is precisely what God did for us: “While we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Even though we were unresponsive he kept loving us and pursuing us. The only way we can love like this, “fervent in spirit,” is to keep our eyes on the Lord, knowing that we are following and serving him. It is for his sake and his name that were doing all of this.

rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, (12:12)

At the heart of this verse is this reference to hope. This is

similar to 1 Corinthians 13:7, which says that love “*bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*” In other words, we are confident that God can change others. You can never have a significant ministry in the lives of others without an incurable confidence in God's ability to change them. Love remains optimistic about the growth of others. We realize that God will finish the good work that he began, so we don't give up on them. Our expectations of others are critically important. If we have negative feelings and thoughts, that will be communicated whether we want it or not. Love perseveres with others through the hard times. And finally, we are to be devoted to prayer, because no one can change apart from prayer. As I am always reminded by my friend, Dave Roper, growth in the Christian life is not merely a cognitive process. It is prayer that gets truth from our head to our heart and to our actions. So one of the greatest acts of love that we can be involved in is to pray for people.

The next quality has to do with love's generosity.

contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. (12:13)

Love is generous with its money and possessions. One way to determine what someone loves is to look at how he spends his money. Jesus put it this way, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” A renewed mind loves people and uses things. But oftentimes it is the other way around: we love things and use people. Remember the generosity of the early church: “And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need” (Acts 2:44-45).

Secondly, says Paul, we should practice *hospitality*. If generosity is shown to the needy, then hospitality should be shown to visitors. *Philadelphia* (lover of sisters and brothers) must be balanced by *philoxenia* (lover of strangers). That is what hospitality literally means. It is not having our friends over to dinner. In Paul's day, when someone opened up his home to a visitor the visit might extend for a month or more. Many Christians who had been released from prison had no place to live; someone had to feed them and house them. Traveling evangelists and teachers couldn't stay in local inns, which were few and far between, and those that did exist were unsafe and unpleasant places. It was essential for Christians to open up their homes. In fact, Paul doesn't urge Christians to practice hospitality. This would be better translated “pursue hospitality.” The idea is not that we wait for strangers to show up at our doorstep, but that we seek them out.

Origen wrote:

How finely does he [Paul] sum up the generosity of the man who pursues hospitality in word! For by saying that hospitality is to be pursued, he shows that we are not just to receive the stranger when he comes to us, but actually to inquire after, and look carefully for strangers, to pursue them and search them out everywhere lest perchance somewhere they may sit in the streets or lie without a roof over their heads.¹

We will look at verse 14 in a moment, because it really anticipates the next section. In verse 15, Paul says that genuine love is not only sympathetic, it is empathetic.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. (12:15)

Love is never indifferent to other people's joys or pains; it identifies with them. It feels what others feel. It is sensitive to their moods. Some of you who are childless find it painful to watch a child being dedicated, but we are called to rejoice over that. If you are single, how do you respond when you hear of someone's engagement? That is what Paul is talking about. There are times when words are inadequate and all we can do is weep with people. We don't need to have the right thing to say on every occasion. Do we have a heart of understanding and sensitivity that demonstrates itself with empathy that can sing or suffer with others? Love enters deeply into their experiences and emotions, their laughter and tears, and feels solidarity with them whatever their mood.

Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. (12:16)

In other words, don't be a snob. Snobbishness is the worst kind of pride. Snobs are obsessed with issues of status and class and keeping everyone in their place. They are very concerned with the company they keep. Are we willing to associate with the down and out or do we gravitate toward the rich and famous? Jesus fraternized with all classes. He freely and naturally made friends with social rejects, and he calls on his followers to do the same. He warned about going to a party and sitting at the head table. "Don't do that," he said. "Sit at the end of the table. If the head master comes and invites you to a better place, that's fine. But don't seek that place." The Jerusalem Bible translates part of this verse this way: "Never be condescending, but make real friends with the poor." Eugene Peterson renders it in *The Message*: "Don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody."

What a picture of genuine Christian love! It is sincere, discerning, affectionate, and respectful. It is patient, generous, and hospitable toward others. It is sympathetic and empathetic, and marked by both harmony and humility.

In verses 17-21, the apostle switches his focus from our relationships with one another to our relationships in the world. How is our love exhibited to the non-Christian world? Tomorrow morning you will be back at work or in school and you are to manifest Christian love in those places just as you do here in church.

Paul gives us some very practical help here. The focus in these verses is on how love reacts. So far we have looked at how we are to extend love. Now we will look at how we should respond when we are offended. We will read verses 17-21, and we will include verse 14:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the LORD. "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (12:14, 17-21)

Paul is not dealing with the legal, moral or political rights of nations to protect their citizens against evil. There is a place for law and order and for punishment of evil-doers. (Paul will deal with these matters in the next chapter.) But that is not his focus here. He is speaking about our personal conduct and how we should interact with evil people.

The passage has four reverberating negative imperatives:

1. Verse 14: Do not curse.
2. Verse 17: Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.
3. Verse 19: Never take your own vengeance.
4. Verse 21: Do not be overcome by evil.

John Stott comments: "All four prohibitions say the same thing in different words. Retaliation and revenge are absolutely forbidden to followers of Jesus. He himself never hit back in either word or deed. And in spite of our in-born retributive tendency, ranging from the child's tit for tit to the adult's more sophisticated determination to get even with an opponent, Jesus calls on us to imitate him."²

"Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men." Martin Luther King said that violence sets in motion a chain reaction that can go on for generations. Look all around the world: the Middle East, Yugoslavia, South Africa, Ireland, our own country. Feuds are going on for so long that no one can remember what they were about in the first place. Retaliation is the name of the game. Jesus put it this way on the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not resist him who is evil." People know that refusing to retaliate is the proper way to behave. That is what Paul means when he adds, "*respecting* [a participle] *what is right in the sight of all men.*" Even the world recognizes that there is honor and dignity in non-defensiveness.

If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. (12:18)

Jesus said in the beatitudes, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they are the sons of God." In other words, one mark of a follower of Christ is that he makes peace wherever he goes. He doesn't pick fights and create controversies. There is a story told about a man who saw a fight break out. He asked, "Is this a private fight or can anyone join in?" Some people are like that. They are always looking for a fight. I must confess that this is hard for me. I grew up in a very difficult environment. I have been a fighter all my life. Some days I wake up and feel that it is me against the world. My wife told me early in our marriage, "You just love to fight. You are aren't happy unless there is conflict." I had to confess she was right. But that is not how a son of God ought to behave. We should be peacemakers. Paul recognizes that this isn't always possible, however. Sometimes people aren't willing to live at peace with us or they lay down conditions for reconciliation that are morally unacceptable. But we ought not let it start with us or allow the peace-making process to be held up by our attitudes or actions.

Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. (12:19)

Retaliation is forbidden to us not because it is inherently wrong, but because, as John Stott puts it, "it is God's prerogative, not ours." We are to trust God to work in the life

of the one who wronged us. God is the only one who can do it right. His wrath is redemptive. One day it may come in ultimate judgment to those who abuse us, but it may also bring our enemies to repentance in this life. Though our desire may be to punish those who hurt us, God wants to redeem them. And one of the lessons that God is slowly teaching me is that I don't have to fight for myself. God will do it. But that means we have to stop fighting and get out of his way.

Does that mean that we just take things lying down? No! There is a lot we can do. We can react positively. We can love those who have wronged us. That is what Paul means in verse 20:

“But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” (12:20)

If we react non-defensively, we get out of the way and turn God loose to do his work. When we do that, often-times it has the effect of turning our enemy into a friend. It is hard to know exactly what is meant by “you will heap burning coals upon his head.” I think what Paul is hinting is that our loving, gracious response to evil will make our enemy embarrassed. He will become red in the face because he feels the heat of that kind of love.

Paul concludes with a summary statement that is the climax of his argument.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (12:21)

If someone speaks harshly to us and we respond in kind, cursing and repaying evil for evil, then we have been overcome by evil. But when we return a soft word, when we respond positively, as peacemakers, when we love and serve our enemies, then we are overcoming evil with good. If you want to have an impact upon your workplace, your campus or your home, this is the way to do it.

If we act like this our lives will have tremendous impact. In the beatitudes, Jesus spells out the characteristics of a son of God. He says that people who are humble and meek are the salt of the earth. Back then, salt was a preservative used to arrest the spread of corruption in meat. Jesus is saying that when people act like this they actually arrest the spread of evil. Whenever we respond in an evil way, we merely contribute to the spread of evil in the world. But whenever we respond in a gracious way, we arrest its spread.

There is only one way to produce this kind of love, and that is to know the love of God. We can't love people in this way unless we know how much God loves us despite our failings and lack of love. Knowing that God loves us sets us free to love others with the kind of love that Paul describes here in this chapter.

1. C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans, Vol. II* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 640.

2. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 334.

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RISE AND SHINE

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1215
Romans 13:8-14
27th Message
Gary Vanderet
February 4th, 2001

In the opening twelve chapters of the book of Romans the apostle Paul details the marvelous story of God's love. God saw our pitiful human condition. We were lost in our sin, lonely and desperate in our longing, and he became one of us. Then he died to bring us to himself so that he could fellowship with us. The book of Romans is the story of God's love.

In chapter 12, Paul describes the process by which God changes us. At times it is hard to see much change in ourselves. Change seems sporadic and haphazard. But God has a plan, and some of that plan is revealed in chapter 12. Our part in the process is to make ourselves available to God, to present our bodies to him as a living sacrifice. We are to let God know that we are available to him to be put to his intended purpose. We will go anywhere he wants us to go, do anything he wants us to do, and become anything he wants us to become. Once we do that we give him the freedom to work in our minds and hearts. He begins to transform us as the Spirit of God takes the word of God to renew our minds. And that becomes the key to change. As the Holy Spirit changes our thinking and attitudes, change naturally flows into our actions.

The primary change that we see is that we become more loving. Love is Paul's concern in these chapters. In John 13, Jesus told his disciples that love would be the primary mark of his disciples. And Paul has been explaining that love is the way we change the world too. We overcome evil by loving people, even our enemies.

We come now to verse 8 of Romans 13.

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another;
(Rom 13:8, NASB)

This verse flows out of verse 6, where Paul says, "render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to who fear; honor to whom honor." This reference to debt provides the transition to this section. While I believe that it is wise to live debt free, the apostle's point here is not to give a command that one should never buy anything on time. What he is saying is that while we ought to be conscientious about paying all our bills, including our taxes, there is one debt that we can never completely pay, and that is the debt of love.

It is important think about people in this way. We owe them love. That includes the clerk at the store we

frequent, the mechanic who works on our car, the teachers and students on campus, our employers, secretaries, spouses, children, our parents. We owe love to all of them. That is our obligation. We tend to forget that when people become hard to live with. But the apostle makes it very clear that we have a debt of love to everyone around us. It doesn't make any difference how they treat us. We must treat everyone with Christ's love.

According to Paul, this is how we fulfill the law.

for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law. For this, "You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; love therefore is the fulfillment of the law. (13:8b-10)

David Roper reminds us: "This was the purpose of the law in the Old Testament — to teach people how to love. Because of the profoundness of our depravity, it has to be spelled out to us."¹

Without these guidelines we would not treat women with dignity and respect. We would think that it was all right to trade our wives in for newer models if the law didn't say we could not do that. That is the purpose for the detailed instructions in Deuteronomy. They tell us how to live in the world in a loving, gracious way.

Roper continues: "It is not that the law can save anyone. It can't. But the assumption of the Old Testament is that once you come into covenant with God, once you are related to him by faith, then his will is expressed through these loving actions."² Paul's emphasis here on fulfilling the law is not based on the means of fulfillment but on the nature of it. John Stott writes: "Love and law need each other. Love needs law for its direction and law needs love for its inspiration."³ That is why Paul can say, if you love your neighbor, you have fulfilled the law. And our neighbor is not necessarily the person who lives next door to us. It is the next person we meet who has a need that we can legitimately fulfill. Jesus made this point in the story of the Good Samaritan.

In these verses, Paul is quoting from the second table of the law, the last five commandments, which deal with our relationships with people. When we love our

neighbors we will refrain from breaking these relational commands: “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” and “Do not covet.” To these, Paul adds, “and whatever other commandment there may be.” Then he declares that all of them are summed up in this one rule, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” as Jesus had said before him.

Love doesn’t commit adultery. That is not a loving thing. We may call it an affair and think of it as adventurous and invigorating, but in reality it is deceitful and destructive. Adultery is unloving to our spouse, our children and our friends. It creates chaos and hardship for everyone. Love doesn’t take another’s life or assassinate his character. If you love someone you will not steal from him. You will not covet what he has. You will not drool over his house, his computer or his car.

Why does love sum up all the commandments? Because love does no harm to its neighbor. John Stott writes: “Certainly, the last five sins forbidden in the Ten Commandments harm people. Murder robs them of their life, adultery of their home and honor, theft of their property, and false witness of their good name, while covetousness robs society of the ideals of simplicity and contentment. These things do harm to our neighbor, whereas it is the essence of love to seek and to serve our neighbor’s highest good. That is why love is the fulfillment of the law.”⁴

Why should we do this? Why should we submit to the government, pay our taxes and love our neighbors? Paul goes on to remind us of what time it is, and to live appropriately. In verse 11-14 he give an scatological foundation for our behavior.

And this do, [everything he has been saying] knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. (13:11)

It’s time to wake up, time to get up. Do you know what time it is? Some of you are looking at your watches. You are wondering whether I know what time it is! What time is it? Paul says that this is the hour to wake up. It’s time to get out of the sack and get your eyes open. Rise and shine! He is not talking about waking up from a boring sermon. He is not referring to physical sleep. He is talking about waking up from moral slumber, because salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.

Our Lord Jesus is coming back any day now. That is what we look forward to. In his second letter to Timothy, Paul describes Christians as “those who love his appearing” (2 Tim 4:8). We love Jesus. We long for him to come back and set things right. Man is having his day now. He is allowed to do pretty much as he pleases, hurting others and destroying his own life. But, God is going to have his day. There is coming what is re-

ferred to in many places in Scripture as the “Day of the Lord.” That is when the Lord will have his day and set everything right. The night is nearly over. The day is at hand. The prophet Malachi describes the Day of the Lord as “the day when the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings” (Mal 4:2). One of these days the sun will come up and darkness will be dispelled. It is a sure thing.

The Book of Acts describes incidents from the 40-day post-resurrection ministry of Jesus to the apostles, and says: “After this Jesus took them up to the Mount of Olives and as he was talking with them suddenly he was lifted up, and then he disappeared. And as they were looking up two angels appeared and said to them: ‘Men of Galilee,’ they said, ‘why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.’”

One of these days Jesus is going to appear in all his glory. No matter what your eschatological beliefs are, he is coming back; that is the point. That is his promise to us, and we live in the light of it. This is what keeps us going during these dark days. This is why we continue to love in spite of our family struggles, when we would like to give up on our marriage or when our children are breaking our hearts.

Do you ever have nights where you awake feeling tormented with all kinds of worries and fears? You can’t seem to stop thinking about damaged relationships and all the things you have done that hurt others. Perhaps you fearful about your finances or what is going to happen to your children. One thing I have learned to do, in addition to praying and reading my Bible, is to remind myself that in a few hours the sun will going to come up and things will look differently in the daylight. That is a picture of what Paul is saying here. No matter how bad things may appear in the dark, one of these days the Lord is going to return and make everything right.

According to Paul, each day that passes our salvation is closer than the day before. Maybe you are thinking to yourself, “Wait a minute. Paul wrote that over nineteen hundred years ago, and he said the day is about to dawn. How could that be?” Paul lived with the constant awareness that Jesus could come at any time. It was the next and the culminating event in salvation history.

The Bible divides history into “this age” and “the age to come.” The age to come was initiated by Jesus. At the present, those two periods overlap. And so we wait expectantly for the Second Coming, when that old age will finally end. There is also a sense in which the apostle Paul knew that at his death, that would be his Lord’s coming for him. And in that sense the night is nearly over for every one of us. How far away is the Lord’s coming for you? If I achieve the average life expectancy

for males in this country, I have about 25 years left. Every day I am one step nearer to home. It's time to wake up because salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.

It isn't enough to understand the time; we have to behave accordingly. Paul now issues three appeals, stating each one both positively and negatively.

The night is almost gone, and the day is at hand. Let us therefore lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. (13:12)

The first appeal concerns our clothing. Understanding what the time is, what should we wear? The picture here is that we not only need to wake up and get out of bed, we need to get dressed, too. Rise and shine! We need to get of our pajamas, our nightclothes (the deeds of darkness), and put on clothes suitable for the day. And the appropriate dress for the believer is military dress, because the Christian life is not a snooze, it is a battle. In verse 14, Paul says that it is Jesus Christ whom we are to put on. He is both our adornment and our protection. He is both our defensive and offensive armor.

From appropriate clothing, Paul goes on to speak of appropriate behavior. Knowing our destiny changes the way we live day to day. It helps us know how to live in the here and now.

Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, (13:13)

We might use the term "parrying." Some people live to party. "TGIF" is their creed. They can hardly wait for the weekend. They live for "good times."

not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality,

The word for "sexual promiscuity" is based on the Greek word for bed. The appeal is not to live for sex. "Don't sleep around," is how Eugene Peterson translates this in *The Message*. Sensuality is simply living for what feels good. If you live for what feels good you will miss out on the excitement and glory of loving people. Here is how C. S. Lewis described this: "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition, when infinite joy is offered us. Like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a vacation at the beach. We are far too easily pleased."⁵

Christians do not party their way through life. We do not trivialize life. We certainly are fun loving. We have every reason to enjoy life and have a good time. But at the same time we need to be serious about life. We need to be thinking about what we are here for, where we came from and where we are going, and what our purpose is. It is not merely to retire, to make money or ac-

quire possessions. We are here to "seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

Paul is saying that if we really understand what time it is, and that everything we have is going to burn up one day — our real estate, cars, boats and computers, all the things that we spend a great deal of time and money amassing — that's going to change our perspective on things. Not that it's wrong to have any of these things. But if we are preoccupied with them, then we really don't understand the significance of life. We are investing ourselves in a treasure that is going to burn up.

Lastly,

not in strife and jealousy.

Here the apostle points up the more secret sins of our hearts. He deals with the characteristics that bring us into conflict with others. He is referring to the kind of person who causes things to be unsettled, one with a controlling personality who causes conflict and gets others angry and upset. It is good to examine the effect we have on others. Do we promote peace? Are we making others happier as a result of our being around, or are we making them unsettled and upset? These three couplets are incompatible with a life of love. They are old clothes that we need to get rid of.

But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts. (13:14)

We "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" by immersing ourselves in him from the moment we get up in the morning. We remind ourselves of all that we possess in him, and say, "Thank you, Lord, for this new day. Thank you that you are adequate for whatever you ask me to face today. I don't know what new issues are going to arise. I don't know what kind of mood my co-workers, my boss or my teachers will be in. But you do. Thank you for the grace you will give me today to love them, to be patient with them, to care and listen. I offer my body to you today. Take it and use it for your purposes. Thank you for my salvation, for saving me from the guilt of my sin. I don't need to go through the day burdened by the past, by how I have hurt and damaged others. Thank you that you don't keep an account of my sins. And thank you for the hope of heaven, that if I die today, I will merely graduate from this life to a much better one." Immerse your heart and mind in the Lord Jesus and walk with him through the day.

If we center our lives on anything other than God — our children, our marriage, our job, parrying, a vacation home — we are always going to end up with an empty feeling. If our education about life comes from the media, we are going to be deceived. Rationalized evil always looks good; rationalized good always looks boring. But in real life it isn't so. Paul is trying to save us from a lifetime of pursuits that do not satisfy. So he says, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provi-

sion for the flesh in regard to its lusts." In other words, don't plan to sin. Don't set yourself up to fall. As Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation." Let us not put ourselves in situations where we are inclined to fail. Every one of us is going to sin, and God has made provision for that in the cross. The point is, don't plan to sin.

I want to close with Eugene Peterson's contemporary translation of verses 12-14 in *The Message*:

But make sure that you don't get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-to-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God. The night is about over, dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing! God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work he began when we first believed. We can't afford to waste a minute. We must not squander these precious daylight hours in frivolity and indulgence, in sleeping around and dissipation, in bickering and grabbing everything in sight. Get out of bed and get dressed! Don't loiter and linger, waiting until the very last minute. Dress yourselves in Christ, and be up and about!

That is the way to live and love.

1. David Roper, "Dress for Success," a message delivered at Cole Community Church, June 19, 1988.
2. Roper, "Dress for Success."
3. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 350.
4. Stott, *Romans*, 350.
5. Quoted by Ray Stedman, *From Guilt to Glory*, Vol. II, 135.

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DISAGREEMENT WITHOUT DIVISION

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1216

Romans 14:1-12

28th Message

Gary Vanderet

February 11th, 2001

It was wonderful to hear our deacons share today. I am thrilled at how God is using their ministry among us

Some years ago I came across this quote by Marion Leach Jacobsen, from her book, *Crowded Pews and Lonely People*. Her words have remained with me in a special way:

If any group of Christians who claim to believe and practice all God has said in His book, will face up to their personal responsibility within the family of Christ, and to the real needs of Christians around them, their church will impress its community with the shining goodness of God's love - to them *and* among them. Such a transformation probably would do more to attract others to Jesus Christ than any house to house canvass, evangelistic campaign or new church facility. People are hungry for acceptance, love and friends, and unless they find them in the church they may not stay there long enough to become personally related to Jesus Christ. People are not persuaded, they're attracted. We must be able to communicate far more by what we are than by what we say.¹

The world ought to recognize about Christians the fragrance and beauty of our Lord Jesus, an aroma so sweet that they can't get it out of their minds. Being a Christian is not a matter of becoming rigidly correct in everything we do; it is a matter of loving people the way our Lord did. This authentic love is what the apostle Paul is emphasizing in these closing chapters of the book of Romans.

We have reached chapter 14 in our studies. At this point Paul will give a lengthy example of what it means for Christians to love one other. His example, which runs from 14:1 through 15:13, deals with two groups of people in the church at Rome, believers whom the apostle refers to as the "weak" and the "strong."

Before we come to the text, it is important to understand what Paul means by these terms. When he uses the word "weak," he is not referring to someone with a weak character, one who gives in easily to temptation. He is speaking of one who is "weak" in faith, whose faith doesn't permit him to do certain things. This person does not lack self-control; what he lacks is freedom.

The structure of the passage is simple. In 14:1, Paul gives a command, which lays down a principle. Then, over the next chapter and a half, he develops the rea-

sons why Christians should act this way. Today we will cover the opening twelve verses.

First, the principle:

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions. (Rom 14:1, NASB)

This is the principle of unconditional acceptance, especially of the "weak in faith." That word "accept" means more than a mere acknowledgment of their right to belong. John Stott comments: "It implies the warmth and kindness of love."² The word is used elsewhere in the New Testament of Philemon giving Onesimus the same welcome that he would give an apostle. It is also used of the welcome that believers will receive from Jesus when we are ushered into his presence in heaven (John 14:3). The "weak" are not to be rejected, ignored or treated as second class believers. Paul adds, "but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions." We don't accept one who is "weak" in order to debate or argue with him. Our acceptance and welcome come without ulterior motives or hidden agendas. We are to respect the opinions of others.

That word translated "opinions" in the NASB, or "disputable matters" in the NIV, deals with areas that Christians do not have to agree about. The sixteenth century Reformers called these "matters of indifference." In matters where Scripture is unequivocally clear and absolute, where truth is stated in such a way that is unmistakable, it is sinful for us to debate those issues. Adultery is sinful. Homosexual behavior is sinful. Stealing is wrong. Gossip, greed, envy, jealousy, resentment, all are sins. But there are all kinds of matters about which the Bible is not clear. Christians may disagree in these gray areas. This is what Paul is dealing with in this text.

Let's continue and try to understand what was happening in Paul's day that prompted him to write these words.

One man has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables only. (14:2)

One man regards one day above another [the "weak" man], another regards every day alike. [the "strong" man] Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. (14:5)

The church in Rome, like the city itself, was very cosmopolitan. Jews and Gentiles from all over the Empire

made their home there. The church was made up of a remarkably heterogeneous group of Jews and Gentiles. Their backgrounds had little in common. Some who had attended Greek centers of learning had one way of looking at reality. Others who hadn't had that opportunity were less sophisticated. There were vast differences of outlook even among the Jews. In addition, there were enormous differences between Jews and Gentiles. Such was the makeup church in Rome to which the apostle was writing.

Paul raises two issues in this chapter. One has to do with eating and drinking, the other with the Sabbath and holy days. Some Jews in the church continued their conscientious commitment to Jewish regulations with respect to diet and days. David Roper writes: "For 1,500 years the Jews had observed certain dietary laws. The book of Leviticus lists certain animals that they could and could not eat. They could eat four-footed animals that had divided hoofs and chewed their cud, but they couldn't eat four-footed animals that didn't chew their cud, like a pig. And we are told in Leviticus 11 why those rules were given. They were getting ready to go into Canaan, and there was to be a difference between them and these pagan nations."³ These regulations were symbolic of God's desire for their holiness and their distinctiveness as God's people.

But Jesus had swept all that away. Our Lord declared that it isn't what goes into your mouth that defiles you, it is what comes out of it. Mark tells us, "Thus Jesus declared all things clean" (Mark 7:19). The book of Acts records that very graphic message that Peter received on his housetop when God was preparing him for a ministry to Gentiles. Peter had never eaten with a Gentile, and God was preparing him to preach the gospel to Cornelius in Caesarea. When a sheet descended, covered with all kinds of animals, and God said, "Kill and eat," the horrified Peter cried, "No, I have never eaten anything unclean." But God said, "Don't call unclean what I have called clean. Now kill and eat" (Acts 10:9-16). Thus was this whole dietary system swept away in Christ. It was no longer relevant for Christians.

But this was difficult for many Jews who had always avoided pork. For them, eating a ham sandwich presented a major problem. They had been diligent to eat only clean items. They ate kosher meat, making sure the animal was slaughtered in the correct way. You can imagine the potential problems. Say you are a member of the church in Rome, and a young Jewish family moves into your neighborhood. You find out they are Christians, and you invite them over to your house for a barbecue. You are preparing to cook pork ribs, but your guests say they can't eat pork. This was a common problem in the church. In fact, this was such a problem that many Jews gave up eating meat at all, because they couldn't be sure that the meat was kosher.

Secondly, Jews had always worshipped on Saturday, the last day of the week. Many of them still observed the Sabbath and the Jewish festivals. Now they were

worshipping with Christians, celebrating the resurrection of Christ on the first day of the week. This was a source of tension for some Jews.

Notice that the one who is described as "weak" observes a lot of rules. Paul is saying that such people have not yet progressed to the point where they believe that the world is theirs to enjoy. Remember that there was only one forbidden tree in the garden, not a grove of trees. For Christians, there are not a lot of absolutes. The world is ours to enjoy. The person who is strong in faith understands that, but the one who is weak in faith needs a lot of rules and regulations to control his life. He finds it difficult to escape the thought that keeping a lot of rules is pleasing to Christ. But Paul has great compassion toward these weak Jewish believers. He does not want the strong to damage their weak consciences.

Those were the issues in Paul's day. What are our gray areas, the issues that potentially divide us? We can start with one issue that Paul mentions here, the Sabbath. Some Christians will not take part in certain activities on Sunday, because it has been ingrained in them that Sunday is the Sabbath day and it must keep it holy. But the New Testament is silent about when we should worship. There are a couple of references that the early church worshiped on Sunday, but this was never mandated. So it is optional. You can worship on Tuesday night or Saturday night. It makes no difference. Every day is alike. In fact, every day is a day to worship.

What about alcoholic beverages? Is it wrong for Christians to drink any alcohol at all? No, it's not. Jesus and his disciples drank wine. What the Scripture forbids is drunkenness. Some people who come from an alcoholic background or who have some genetic problems with alcohol choose not to drink. That is a wise choice. Others who know the dangers and abuses of alcohol choose not to drink at all. Some Christians choose to drink in moderation. What about smoking? Is smoking a sin? Depending on whether you live above or below the Mason-Dixon line may determine how you feel about this issue. But Jesus made it clear in Mark 7 that nothing that you put in your mouth is sin. Smokers may die earlier, but smoking isn't a sin.

What about theology? Can we differ over theological issues and still be evangelical? What about the mode of baptism? What about issues like eschatology, when and how the millennium will be established, or the frequency and importance of certain spiritual gifts? Scripture is not clear about these things. What about musical tastes in worship? Are you really more spiritual if you prefer old hymns to contemporary choruses? Are you more spiritual if you prefer praise choruses, or if raise your hands when you sing? Of course, the answer to both of these questions is no.

What about schools? Young parents face the choice of whether to send their children to a Christian school, public school, or teach them at home. Some feel strongly that it is the parents' responsibility to teach their chil-

dren, so they home school them. Others feel the importance of integrating Christian truth into every subject. For a number of reasons they send their children to Christian schools rather than public schools. Others have convictions about our need as believers to be integrated into the world, not isolated from it. They want to be involved in the public school system. People who hold to all of these different positions are listening to me right now. The point is, we must accept the person who has made his or her choice.

What about politics? Can a person be a liberal Democrat and still be an evangelical Christian? Certainly! I know some.

We could go on and talk about scores of other Christian “taboos,” things like dancing, movies, cosmetics, fashion, etc.

Paul is saying that Christians will differ on these issues, but that shouldn’t make any difference with respect to how we treat one another. We should accept one another, but not for the purpose of sinful debate. David Roper puts it this way: “Don’t accept your brother into the fellowship and then invite him over to your house to straighten him out. That seems to be the Christian’s favorite indoor sport — straightening out other Christians. There is really only one person in the world we can do very much about. Where the Spirit of God has been ambiguous, we must not be definitive. Where God has been clear, we can be clear. Where God has commanded a truth, we can believe it with assurance. But where Scripture is not clear, we must not be dogmatic.”⁴ That doesn’t mean we can’t have personal convictions about these issues. Paul says that each person should be convinced in his or her own mind. But we have to accept one another.

Paul will go on to develop his argument as to why we should accept one another (through 15:12). But here, in verses 3-12, he gives a number of reasons why we should do so. First, we should not condemn fellow Christians with differing viewpoints because *God has accepted them*.

Let not him who eats regard with contempt him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats, for God has accepted him. (14:3)

How dare we reject someone whom God has accepted! In fact, John Stott writes: “the best way to determine what our attitude toward people should be is to determine what God’s attitude toward them is.”⁵

This brings us to the second reason why we should accept each other: we shouldn’t try to change others because *they are not accountable to us*. Stott writes: “If it is inappropriate to reject one whom God has welcomed, then it is equally inappropriate to interfere in a relationship between a master and his servant.”⁶ Verse 4:

Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and stand he will, for

the Lord is able to make him stand. (14:4)

We are not their lord. The Lord himself paid the price to be their judge. He died for them, purchasing them with his own blood. They belong to him. We don’t have to change them. How liberating that is!

There is a third reason we shouldn’t judge one another: *we can’t see their hearts, but God can*. He reads their hearts and sees things that we can’t see.

One man regards one day above another, another regards every day alike. Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. (14:5-8)

God sees their motivation. Many differences arise out of honest conviction, which God sees even though we can’t. Some of the things that people do that seem so wrong are done for all the right reasons — out of a deep love for God. In fact, these verses give some helpful guidelines for determining whether a certain activity is proper. John Stott puts it this way: “If we are able to receive something from God with thanksgiving, as his gift to us, then we can offer it back to him as our service to him.”⁷

So we have two valuable and practical tests: Can we thank God for this? Can we do this unto the Lord? The one who drinks beer gives thanks to God for the refreshment and taste of it. That is perfectly proper. The one who says he can’t drink beer but has a cup of coffee, gives thanks for the coffee. It may be as harmful physically as the beer, but in either case, it isn’t a moral question but, rather, a question of what the heart is doing in the eyes of God. The one who regards Sunday as a special day that ought to be kept different from other days is doing so unto the Lord. Therefore, we must honor and respect that viewpoint. The one who thinks that every day is alike, and wants to honor the Lord each day, is doing so as a conviction of his heart. We should respect that. Paul’s exhortation is, “Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind.” Be convinced in your own mind about what God wants you to do. The problem with many of us is that we don’t think. Whatever our mother taught us, whatever we learned as a child in Sunday School, that is what we believe. We don’t think! Find out for yourself what you believe.

Paul continues:

For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written,

**“As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me,
And every tongue shall give praise to God.”**

So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God. (14:9-12)

God is the one who will judge. One of these days we will stand before him. It will not be a judgment with a view to condemnation but, rather, an accounting that we will give to our Father. Paul says that our brother is going to have to account for his beliefs before the Father, and so will we. We have no warrant to climb on the bench, put on our judicial robes, place our fellow believers on the stand and start pronouncing judgment and passing sentence. God alone is the judge.

Paul has more to say on this subject. We will take that up next week. But, in the meantime, here is an important principle that we must follow. We need to stop judging each other in these gray areas and stop looking down on each other with contempt. Jesus in his High Priestly prayer prayed for unity not only for his disciples, but also for us. I will close with his words:

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” (John 17:20-21)

1. Marion Leach Jacobsen, *Crowded Pews and Lonely People* (Tynedale House, 1972), 88.
2. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 359.
3. David Roper, “How to Disagree.” A message delivered at Cole Community Church, Boise ID, June 26, 1988.
4. Roper, “How to Disagree.”
5. Stott, *Romans*, 361.
6. Stott, *Romans*, 361.
7. Stott, *Romans*, 362.

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LIMITING OUR LIBERTY

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1217

Romans 14:13-23

29th Message

Gary Vanderet

February 18th, 2001

The world ought to see in Christians the fragrance and beauty of our Lord Jesus. It is an aroma so sweet that they can't get it out of their minds. Being a Christian is not a matter of being rigidly correct but of loving people the way our Lord did.

In the closing chapters of his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul emphasizes what authentic love looks like. In 14:1 through 15:13, he sets forth an example to help us. He describes two groups within the church at Rome, referring to them as the "weak" and the "strong."

I will begin by summarizing what we have already learned in the opening twelve verses of chapter 14. When Paul refers to one who is "weak," he is not talking about weak character, but about one who is weak in faith, one whose weak faith does not permit him or her to do certain things. It isn't self-control such a person lacks, but freedom.

Paul raises two issues. The first has to do with food, the second, the Sabbath and holy days. The church in Rome was a very cosmopolitan, diverse body. Jewish believers in that fellowship were "weak" in their conscientious commitment to Old Testament regulations regarding diet and days. For 1,500 years, diet had differentiated Jews from their pagan neighbors. But Jesus swept all that away when he said that it isn't what goes into your mouth that defiles you, it is what comes out of it. In his gospel, Mark comments, "Thus Jesus declared all things clean." Issues like whether certain foods were clean or unclean no longer were relevant for Christians. But what about Jews who had always avoided consuming pork? Eating a ham sandwich was a major problem for them. Many Jewish believers in the church in Rome gave up eating meat altogether, because it was hard to find kosher meat in the city.

As for holy days, these "weak" Jewish believers were still observing the Sabbath and the Jewish festivals. They had always worshipped on Saturday, the last day of the week, and now they were part of a fellowship that celebrated the resurrection of Christ on the first day of the week. There are numerous historical references indicating that the early church worshipped on the first day of the week, including a couple of references in the New Testament, but that was never mandated. Christians can worship on Tuesday night or Saturday night. It makes no difference. Every day is a day to worship. The fact that we gather on Sunday morning is a convention.

So, the issue in this lengthy text is what do Christians do with these gray areas in which we disagree. This is not a question of morality. Where Scripture is absolute, and truth is stated in such a way that it is unmistakable, it is sinful to debate those areas. But there are all sorts of matters about which the Bible is not clear, and in these gray areas, Christians may disagree. We discussed some of these last week. The lists differ, depending on where you live. They include things like alcohol, smoking, political preferences, educating our children, musical tastes in worship, and certain areas of theology.

So these opening twelve verses of chapter 14 reveal what the attitude of a stronger Christian should be toward a weaker brother or sister. The apostle's primary exhortation is that their attitude should be one of genuine acceptance. Paul commands, "Now accept the one who is weak in faith, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his opinions" (14:1). Do not challenge others to debate these issues. Don't accept your brother into the fellowship and then invite him over to your house to straighten him out. That seems to be the Christian's favorite indoor sport – straightening out other Christians.

In the verses that we will look at today, Paul's argument moves from how we should regard "weaker" Christians to how we should treat them. There is a switch from our attitudes (not despising or condemning) to our actions (not causing them to stumble or destroying them).

Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, [this summarizes what he has said in the first 12 verses] **but rather determine this— not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way.** (Rom 14:13, NASB)

John Stott points out that there is play on words in the original Greek, which has a double use of the word "judge." The NEB catches this with its translation, "Let us therefore cease judging one another, but rather make this simple judgment..."¹ Christians should refuse to do anything to harm the spiritual walk of a "weaker" believer. We must choose to limit our freedom if it causes our brother or sister to stumble or fall in their Christian walk. We will talk more about what that means, but we must commit ourselves to this principle.

Next, Paul gives the rationale behind this call to careful living. As always, he gives the theological foundations for his exhortation.

I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. (14:14-15)

Paul acknowledges the predicament that every strong believer faces with regard to these peripheral issues. First, the strong believer knows, "nothing is unclean in itself." Paul wrote to Timothy: "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude" (1 Tim 4:4). There was only one forbidden tree in the garden, not a whole forest of trees. There are not a lot of absolutes. The Christian who is strong in faith understands that the world is ours to enjoy. But there is another truth that must be faced that poses a dilemma for the strong Christian: "but to him who thinks anything to be unclean [because of his conscience], to him it is unclean." So the "strong" Christian faces what looks like a paradox. Some activities can be both good and bad at the same time. The "strong" Christian believes that a certain activity is all right while the "weak" Christian thinks it isn't. What does the one who is "strong" do in such cases?

Stott writes: "Although the "strong" believer is correct, and he (Paul) shares his convictions (because the Lord Jesus endorsed it), he must not ride roughshod . . . over his brother's conscience (even though his conscience is mistaken)...by imposing his view on him."² The reason is that we may harm our brother. And not merely because he sees us doing something he disapproves of; that isn't the issue. The concern is that he may be swayed to follow an example that goes against his conscience. When we do that we are no longer walking in love, because love never disregards a weak conscience. Love limits its own liberty out of respect for others. Wounding a weaker brother's conscience by imposing our views on him is not only to distress him, it may destroy him. If exercising your freedom leads your brother to sin, then don't do it. Don't force people to do things they don't feel free to do.

Imagine crossing a swaying bridge over a mountain stream. Some people can run across a bridge like that even though it doesn't have handrails. They are not alarmed by that; they have good balance. But others can't do that; they are afraid of falling into the torrent below. They shake and tremble, inching their way along. They may even get down on their hands and knees and crawl across. But give them time, let them go at their own speed, and they will make it. After a few crossings they gain courage, and eventually they are able to run right across.

It is the same with these issues that Paul is speaking about. Some people just can't see themselves moving in a certain area which they have been raised to think is wrong. As with the swaying bridge, it would be cruel for someone who has the freedom to cross boldly to take the arm of one who is timid and force him to run

across. He might even lose his balance and fall off the bridge.

This is what Paul is warning against. It is unloving to force people to move at your pace. Refusing to indulge a freedom that you enjoy, for the sake of someone else, and adjusting to his pace, is surely one of the clearest and truest exercises of Christian love. And notice the clear perspective that love has on the weaker brother's worth. He is one "for whom Christ died." If Christ loved him enough to die for him, ought we not love him enough to refrain from wounding his conscience?

The issue here is not a matter of offending a brother or sister, but the possibility of injuring them spiritually. It is matter of someone's conscience being weak, not of someone's prejudices being irritated. There are many instances of people being offended by our actions that have nothing to do with losing their faith or hindering their growth.

That is not what Paul is talking about. If that were the case, we could scarcely do anything without offending someone. The church would be controlled by the narrowest and most prejudiced person in the congregation. The gospel itself would become identified with that viewpoint, and the watching world would think that Christians are narrow minded people whose only concern is to prevent the enjoyment of the good gifts of life that God has given. No. Jesus offended a lot of people. He offended the Pharisees. He offended the Sadducees. He offended politicians. He offended the Jews. He offended the Gentiles. Paul is referring to acting in such a way that someone will be damaged by our behavior. He is speaking of people who, if they emulated us in that behavior, would be in danger of damaging their spiritual life. That is the issue.

Paul continues his rationale for the limiting of our liberty. He moves from speaking about the cross of Christ to the Kingdom of God:

Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles. (14:16-21)

There are more important issues than eating and drinking. We should not regard as central the things that are peripheral and trivial. Don't confuse external and eternal things. What matters is the kingdom of God and his gracious rule in the lives of his people. We need to be concerned not with personal freedom but with the building of the kingdom of God and helping people grow. It is righteousness, peace and growth in grace

that counts. God is in the process of building a glorious new community. If the exercise of your freedom is going to curtail that process, don't do it. It isn't worth it. If your use of alcoholic beverages is turning a family member off, so that he or she will not listen to you, then don't do it. You can do without it. That is the apostle's point. Let us pursue the things that build up others. Anyone can destroy things, but it takes a craftsman to build something.

In particular, says Paul, don't tear down God's work for the sake of food. In verse 20, the Greek sentence begins with that clause: "Surely for the sake of a plate of meat we aren't going to wreck God's work." Stott comments: "Paul uses a little irony to expose our tendency to value food above peace, the health of our stomach over the health of the community."³ Paul concludes that thought by saying, "It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or to do anything by which your brother stumbles" (verse 21). That word "good" could be translated "beautiful." It is beautiful not to eat meat, not to drink wine, not to do anything that causes your brother to stumble. It is beautiful because it is loving. It is beautiful because it is unselfish. It is beautiful because it puts others first. It is beautiful because it so Christ-like.

More than once I have said to a young man about to embark on a ministry in a small community where believers are not well taught, and often are caught up with these peripheral issues, to teach freedom, but to be very careful how he exercises it. If he immediately demands to exercise his freedom, he will lose the right to be heard.

Paul concludes by drawing a distinction between belief and action, between our private convictions and public behavior.

The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin. (14:22,23)

Whatever you believe about these neutral issues is between you and God, says Paul. Keep it that way. Whether you are "strong" and feel free to do a lot of things, or whether you are "weak" and feel that you can't, keep it a secret. You don't have to put your views on display or force them upon others.

In terms of behavior, Paul concludes with a word to both groups. John Stott puts it this way: "To the 'strong' Christian, he writes: 'Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.' The 'strong' Christian is blessed because his conscience approves of his eating everything, and he can follow his conscience without guilt. To the 'weak' Christian, he writes: 'But he who doubts [he who is plagued by misgivings because

his conscience keeps giving him vacillating signals] is condemned if he eats, [probably by his conscience, not by God] because his eating is not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin."⁴ Here Paul seems to elevate the significance of our conscience. Though conscience certainly is not an infallible guide, and we ought to educate it, we ought not go against it.

Let me conclude with a story that Ray Stedman shared about Dr. Harry Ironside, which illustrates the apostle's point:

At a church picnic, Dr. Ironside met a man who had been converted from the Moslem faith. While they were talking, a girl brought a basket of sandwiches up to this man and asked if would like one. He said, "What kind do you have?" "Oh," she said, "I'm afraid all we have left are ham and pork." He said, "Don't you have any beef?" She replied, "No, they are all gone." "Well," he said, "No thank you. I don't eat ham or pork." The girl responded, knowing he was a Christian, "I am really surprised. Don't you know that now you are freed from those food restrictions and you can eat whatever you want?" He said, "Yes, I know that. I know I am free to eat pork, but I am also free not to eat it. I'm still involved with my family back in the Near East, and I know that when I go home once a year, and I come up to my father's door, the first question he will ask me is, 'Have those infidels taught you to eat the filthy hog meat yet?' If I have to say to him, 'Yes, father,' I will be banished from that home, and have no further witness in it. But if I can say, as I have always been able to say, 'No, father, no pork has ever passed my lips,' then I have admittance to the family circle and I am free to tell them the joy I have found in Jesus Christ. Therefore I am free to eat, or I am free not to eat, as the case may be."⁵

We are just as free to say to no as we are to say yes when it comes to choosing whether to exercise our liberty. That is true freedom. If you cannot limit your liberty for the sake of building up others, then you may not be as free as you think. True freedom is the power to give up your rights for the sake of others. That is the kind of freedom the watching world needs to see.

1. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 364.

2. Stott, *Romans*, 365.

3. Stott, *Romans*, 367.

4. Stott, *Romans*, 368.

5. Ray C. Stedman, *What's Behind Your Influence?* A message preached at Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto CA, October 22, 1978.



OUR MODEL FOR MINISTRY

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1218

Romans 15:1-13

30th Message

Gary Vanderet

February 25th, 2001

The apostle Paul's letter to the Romans details the marvelous story of God's transforming grace. As we have been discovering in our studies of this great book, Christians are to be God's instruments to penetrate the world with the transforming gospel of Jesus Christ. That is our mission: that people may see that Jesus Christ is the authentic voice of God to mankind; that in him rests the ultimate issue of human destiny, and in him we come face to face with all that is important in human affairs. It is a difficult mission. Having been on the other side of the fence, we know that worldlings live in confusion and blindness. But the strategy for accomplishing our mission has as much to do with our manner as it does our message.

The night before our Lord was crucified, he spent a lengthy time in prayer both for his disciples and for us. Here is part of what he prayed:

"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, [that is us] that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (John 17:20-23, NIV)

The quality of our unity as Christians is what will either attract or repel the world.

The third verse of the great hymn, *Onward Christian Soldiers*, says:

Like a mighty army moves the church of God.
Brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod;
We are not divided, all one body we.
One in hope and doctrine, one in charity.

There is a parody of that verse that unfortunately often rings true, however:

Like a mighty turtle moves the church of God.
Brethren we are treading where we've always trod.
We are much divided; many bodies we;
Strong in truth and doctrine; weak in charity.

We are in the midst of Paul's detailed description of what it means for Christians to love one another. The example that he gives concerns two different groups of people in the church, whom he describes as "weak" and "strong." Certain Jewish members of the church in Rome who had always eaten kosher foods, and had

been meticulous in keeping the Sabbath, were having difficulty accepting their new Gentile brothers and sisters, who had no problem eating pork, and celebrating the resurrection of Christ on the first day of the week.

In this section therefore the apostle teaches Christians how to love each other in the midst of our diversity and appreciate and respect each other's differences. The issue here does not concern morality. Where Scripture is absolute, where truth is stated in an unmistakable way it is sinful for us to debate those issues. But there are all sorts of matters about which the Bible is not clear, and in these gray areas, Christians disagree.

In our text today, Paul will conclude his illustration by focusing on our model. Jesus Christ is the supreme example of one who lived for others rather than himself. We pick up the apostle's words in chapter 15.

Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not just please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. (Rom 15:1-2, NASB)

Paul begins, "Now we who are strong..." This is the first time he refers to the "strong" by name. He has made frequent references in chapter 14 to the "weak," but now he not only identifies them, he includes himself as one of them. The "strong" man or woman, of course, is the one who has a broader and more Biblical understanding of his or her freedom in Christ. The natural response of people who are right is to win the argument and insist on their way, to wield their strength and crush the weak one. But the apostle's call here is for the strong to make some compensation for the weak, to give them slack and bear with their weaknesses.

Our call is to live lives that are other-centered, not self-centered. Paul says that the strong ought not to live to simply to please themselves. That is our problem, isn't it? In our fallen nature we are self-centered and self-seeking. It is natural for us to use our strength for our own advantage. But that's not God's way. In God's household, strength denotes obligation. That word "ought" comes from the same word that Paul uses in 13:8, where he instructs Christians to owe no one anything except to love one another. It isn't merely that we should act that way; we owe it to our brothers and sisters in Christ to forego our rights for them. If we can't behave like this, then we aren't as strong as we think.

We should not confuse this idea of pleasing our neighbor with Biblical warnings about man-pleasing. There is a negative kind of pleasing others that is really

self-centered — flattering them so that we can get something in return. Maybe that's why Paul qualifies the statement to please our neighbor with the clause, "for his good, to his edification." Instead of causing him to stumble or tearing him down, we are to build him up. Paul is speaking of the determined adjustment of our lifestyle to whatever will contribute to the spiritual good of our brother or sister.

Next, the apostle gives the theological foundation for his appeal. He holds up the example of Jesus, who is mentioned in almost every verse. Why should we live so as to please our neighbor and not ourselves?

For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on Me.' For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. (15:3-4)

The simple statement, "Christ did not please himself," summarizes the life of our Lord. John Stott writes: "It...sums up the meaning of the incarnation and the character of Christ's earthly life. Instead of pleasing himself, Jesus gave himself in the service of his Father and of human beings."¹ Paul expands on this in Philip-
pians:

Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:5-8)

Jesus Christ is God! There is no question about it. Jesus manifested the character of God. He had all the attributes of God. He could have held on to his rights to act independently as God, but he didn't. Setting all that aside, he became dependent upon the Father in the same way that we are dependent upon him. He lived his entire earthly life in humble dependence upon his Father. That is why he could say things such as, "The words that I speak, the works that I do, they are of the Father. I can do nothing of myself" (John 8:29). "I always do what pleases him." And in John 4, "My food... is to do the will of him who sent me." Jesus never acted as God, although he is God. He always acted out of a sense of dependence upon God.

It is interesting that Paul does not refer to some incident from Jesus' earthly life to make his point. He quotes from Psalm 69, which describes the unjust, unreasonable sufferings of a righteous man. This verse is used a number of times in the New Testament to refer to Christ. Stott writes: "As an example of refusing to please himself, Christ so completely identified himself with the name and the will of his Father that the insults intended for God fell upon him."² And we are called to follow his example.

Having mentioned Christ's fulfillment of the Old Tes-

tament, in Psalm 69:9, Paul cannot resist adding, parenthetically, a word about the nature and purpose of the OT Scriptures and how helpful they are to us: "For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." Remember, that is why the Scriptures are given — that through the written word we might see and hear the living Word. God continues to speak through what he has spoken.

Paul now returns to his main point, with a prayer.

Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (15:5-6)

These two verses, which are in the form of a benediction, are a prayer for unity. It's important to understand what kind of unity the apostle is talking about. When he says, "be of the same mind with one another," he is not suggesting that we think alike about everything. After all, his focus is to help us accept one another despite our differences.

The NIV translates the text this way, "May...God... give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus." The unity that Paul is praying for is not that we would all love the same things, but that we would all possess the same love. In the midst of all our diverse personalities, our differing gifts, our unique theological distinctives, Paul is praying that we should be unified in our love of Jesus and our focus on him. He prays not for uniformity, but for harmony.

A danger in evangelical circles is defining unity as a common set of beliefs. The Apostles Creed is a common body of belief, passed through the apostles. The second century document describes what the early church believed. It is the very core of faith, and it speaks mostly of the things of Christ. But Christians disagree in many other areas. We are all different. We worship in different ways. Charismatics, Baptists, Episcopalians, evangelical Catholics, all are different from one another. But there is a unity that our Lord has created which is a spiritual unity. Jesus said, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me; and you are in me; and we all love one another."

Suppose we could bring together Christians from different generations who have impacted the world for Christ: Augustine of Hippo from the fourth century; the saintly mystic and poet Bernard of Clairvaux from the tenth century; the peerless reformer John Calvin from the sixteenth century; from the eighteenth century would come John Wesley, the great Methodist advocate of free will and the evangelist George Whitefield; from the nineteenth century, Charles Spurgeon and D.L. Moody. These men would not be in unanimous agreement on very many things, but in the midst of all their diverse personalities, their gifts and theological distinctives, they would be unified in their love of Jesus and their

focus on him.

We are not called to think alike about everything: raising our children the same way, reading the same books, thinking alike politically, having the same hobbies. Unity is not loving the same things but possessing the same love.

That same mind to which Scripture calls us is the mind of Christ. That is the mind we are called to share, to give up our own rights and humbly care about the needs of others. This is the opposite of the selfish pursuit of our own interests, which only produces quarrels.

Harmony in diversity is the goal. The church is meant to be a symphony. But when everyone insists that his or her own particular role or emphasis is the only true one, and does whatever they want to do in spite of how it affects others, it becomes a cacophony. An orchestra made up of musicians all playing the same instrument and the same notes would never produce the beautiful chords that strike our hearts so deeply. The same is true of God's congregational orchestra. It needs all the different instruments playing the full score to produce the rich, harmonious sound that is pleasing to his ears.

That is why Paul concludes by saying that the result of our unity will be worship: "so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Unless there is unity, our worship will not be what it is meant to be. We ruin our worship when we stubbornly refuse to give up our rights. As the psalmist says, "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!"

Paul concludes this long illustration of what it means to love one another in the same way he began it, with a call to acceptance.

Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. (15:7)

In 14:1, the apostle said, "accept the one who is weak in faith." Here he says, "accept one another." Both appeals are based on God's acceptance of us. Paul reminds us that the place to begin is not by gritting our teeth and determining to act lovingly. Love comes naturally out of a heart that is conscious of being loved. When Jesus had difficulty loving his men he didn't grit his teeth and try to be nice. He began to reflect on how the Father loved him, how wonderful it was to be approved and loved of God. He strengthened and steadied himself with the fact that the Father cherished him.

It is the same for us. The way to love other people is to remind yourself of how much God loves you. When someone irritates you, review Christ's love for you. Stop and think of what the Lord did for you. He gave up his life for you. Think of how patient he is with you; how much he cares for you; how patient he is with your failures; how he supports and acknowledges you as one of his own; how he tenderly provides for you. It is that

wellspring of love that will enable you to love others. You can't love from a vacuum. We love, John says in his first letter, because God first loved us.

Again, this final exhortation is backed by the example of Christ, who has accepted us, not strong and weak now, but Jew and Gentile:

For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises given to the fathers, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, 'Therefore I will give praise to you among the Gentiles, and I will sing to your name.' Again he says, 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people.' And again, 'Praise the LORD all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise Him.' Again, Isaiah says, 'There shall come the root of Jesse, and He who arises to rule over the Gentiles, in Him shall the Gentiles hope.' Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (15:8-13)

Here Paul reviews all that God has done for us. To the Jews in Rome, he says, in effect, "Christ became a servant of the Jews, but not because you particular Jews in Rome were attractive or worthwhile or had anything going for you. It is because he made promises to the patriarchs. So you have benefited because he keeps his promises." To the Gentiles, he says, "You may glorify God for his mercy. You don't deserve anything you have received, but a merciful God has included you as well." And he quotes four OT passages, one from the Law, one from the Prophets, and two from the Writings, the three divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures, to show God's intention to include both Jews and Gentiles in this Messianic community. Think of the amazing diversity of the Jews and Gentiles whom Christ has accepted!

Jesus desires that the world may be persuaded. He longs for them to know him. But we need to remember that our mission is not merely one of proclamation. It is not only verbal, it is visible. It is relational as well as audible. Jesus said this to his disciples: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

Evangelism is a community act. It is the proclamation of the church's relationships as well as its convictions. The greatest barriers to effective evangelism are not outdated methods or inadequate presentations of the gospel. The barriers are our insensitivities, gossip, jealousy, backbiting and bitterness, our unforgiving spirits, self-absorption and greed.

1. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 369.
2. Stott, *Romans*, 370.

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TO GOD BE THE GLORY

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

Catalog No. 1219
Romans 15:14-16:27
31st Message
Gary Vanderet
March 4th, 2001

Two years ago we began this study of the book of Romans. We are not going to cover the last chapter and a half this morning. I will briefly summarize what the apostle Paul has to say in these closing verses, and then I want to focus on the marvelous benediction at the end of chapter 16.

The grand exposition of chapters 1-11 and the powerful exhortation from 12:1 to 15:13 are over. The benediction in 15:13 might lead us to conclude that Paul has concluded his letter, but he hasn't. He ends by answering questions about his relationship with the church at Rome, which he briefly mentions in chapter 1. He tells them why he hasn't visited them and when he plans to do so. He is concerned about how they are going to receive the letter and, as John Stott puts it, "whether he has been presumptuous in writing so strongly to a church he didn't found and hadn't even visited. Has he given them the impression that he considers...*them*... immature?"¹ If he has, the rest of the letter will certainly disarm and reassure them.

Paul's sentiments are very personal in these final verses. He makes frequent use of the words "I" and "you." His tone is warm and affectionate. He asks humbly for their prayers and sends many personal greetings.

In the remainder of chapter 15, Paul elaborates on the unique nature of his ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. He summarizes ten years of powerful ministry, using two images, those of a priest and a pioneer. Don't assume that my lack of exposition of these verses indicates that I consider them superfluous. I do this because of time considerations. I want to conclude our studies in this great book in my current stint in the pulpit. I urge you to read through chapter 16, which covers the greetings that Paul sends to twenty-six different individuals. There is wonderful truth in these verses about personal relationships and the unity and diversity of the church. I commend them to you.

What we will do then is focus on the last paragraph of the letter, 16:25-27. At this point it is likely that Paul took the pen and wrote these closing words in his own hand. This was his normal practice, as he says in 2 Thessalonians (3:17). He did this to protect his letters from forgery, for one thing, but also that he might send a personal greeting to those to whom he was writing.

Paul's beautiful doxology is praise to God for both his work and his wisdom.

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom 16:25-27, NASB)

These remarkable words are a summary of the whole letter to the Romans. What a beautiful finale to this great epistle! It sums up the great themes of the book and relates them to each other. I want to focus on four points in these verses: the power of the gospel, its essence, its origin, and its scope.

All of this leads Paul to praise God for his wisdom.

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, (16:25)

It is no accident that the apostle begins and ends his letter with a reference to the power of God through the gospel. In chapter 1, he says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." That word translated "power" is the same word translated "able" here in verse 25. We ought not be ashamed of the gospel, because it is the only thing that can change people. Education doesn't change them. It just makes them more intelligent in their evil. Bettering social conditions doesn't change them. Doing something to help meet their physical needs is a good thing, but it doesn't change their hearts. The only thing that can change the heart of a man or woman is the gospel, the good news about Jesus. Paul says that is why he preaches it. He is not embarrassed by it. It is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

Further, Paul reminds us here that the gospel is God's power not only to save us but to establish us. That word *establish* is a term that is used in the New Testament for nurturing new believers and young churches. It implies the idea of making Christians strong, firm and stable. God is able to bring us to a place of security where we are not easily shaken by things, either doctrinally, through false teaching, or morally, through temptation. God wants to put us on solid, stable ground. Have you ever set up a picnic table and tried to have all four legs touch the ground? You tried to "establish" it so that it

would not rock or become shaky or uncertain. That is the idea that Paul has in mind with this word *establish*. God wants to take us to a place where we are no longer rocking or shaky or unstable, but solid and secure. That is what all human beings are looking for: an inner security from which they can handle the problems of life. They want to become dependable, to have a true sense of worth so that nothing gets to them, shakes them up or throws them off balance.

The gospel (the good news) is the instrument that God uses to do this. The word has been robbed of much of its meaning, however, so that many people are unfamiliar with the good news. They may have some church background, but they don't know the good news. What they know is not good news at all, but a burden, an unrealistic and obnoxious form of piety. The gospel is the good news about God, the good news that he is doing something about the mess we have made of our world and our lives.

In the opening two and a half chapters of this book, Paul describes the terrible plight of mankind. We are sinful. All of us, bar none, are sinful, self centered and separated from God. If sin were blue, we would be a shade of blue all over. All of us are tainted by sin. We are ungodly. That's the bad news. But the good news is that in the person of his Son, God has done something about our predicament. He came to earth to become the sin-bearer. Our sins were placed upon him, in his own body on the cross. By believing in Jesus we are delivered from our sins, declared "Not guilty!" and given the gift of righteousness. "There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). There is the good news.

That is why Paul says in the next phrase, which I take to be synonymous with the first, that the gospel is essentially *the preaching of Jesus Christ*. The gospel of God is the gospel of his Son. God's good news is about Jesus. John Calvin said, "The whole gospel is contained in Christ." The heart of the gospel is the revelation of a Person, Jesus himself. All through this letter, Paul has emphasized that fact again and again: everything centers in Christ. He is the heart of it all.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except by me" (John 14:6). In these words, Jesus declared the uniqueness of his position. There is no one like him in the whole realm of theology. There is no one that is equal to him or that can be remotely compared to him in all the religions of the world. Therefore, any gospel that minimizes Christ, or puts him on the same level of others, is a perversion of the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christ is the central figure of all history, all time and all faith. Take Mohammed out of Islam and the message of Islam remains. Take Buddha out of Buddhism and his message retains its integrity. But remove Jesus Christ from the gospel and the good news is destroyed. Jesus Christ is the gospel. Jesus Christ is absolutely cen-

tral and indispensable to Christianity. The gospel is about Jesus Christ, God's Son. This is what makes it good news. Christianity is not meant to be the intolerable burden of rules and rituals that it has become for many, and by which Luther was enslaved until he understood Romans. Christianity is a person, Jesus Christ, who came to do for man what man was incapable of doing for himself.

The third clause that Paul uses to describe this gospel declares that it is revealed truth.

according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, (16:25b-26a)

Paul is not referring to something mysterious. The word simply means that it is a secret, something we would not know unless it was revealed. What is that mystery? Paul doesn't explain it here, but he does elsewhere. The mystery is Jesus Christ himself in his fullness, and in particular, Christ for and in the Gentiles, so that they have an equal share with Israel in God's promises.

Listen to what Paul has to say about this in Colossians:

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness — the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Col 1:24-27, NIV)

There is the mystery. Ray Stedman put it this way: "All that God is, wrapped up in a Person and given to you and to me — the only hope we have of ever discovering the glory that God intended for us as human beings: *Christ in you, the hope of glory.*"²

And in Ephesians, the apostle declares:

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise of Christ Jesus. (Eph 3:2-6, NIV)

Gentile and Jewish Christians have become fellow heirs of the same blessing, fellow members of the same body and fellow partakers of the same promise. This was a new revelation. It is true that the Old Testament

reveals that God had a purpose for the Gentiles – that all the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham, and Israel would be given as a light to the nations. But the OT does not set out the radical nature of God’s plan, which is that the theocracy would be replaced by a new international community, the church; that this church would be the body of Christ, organically united to him; and that Jews and Gentiles would be incorporated into Christ and his church on equal terms, without distinction. It was this complete union of Jews, Gentiles and Christ which was radically new, and which God revealed to Paul, overcoming his entrenched Jewish prejudice.

There is one more truth about this good news. Not only has this mystery which was hidden been revealed through the life, death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus, the fourth fact is that this good news is already, and must continue to be, made known throughout the world.

but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to obedience of faith; (16:26b)

The good news is being made known, first of all, by the Scriptures of the prophets, the prophetic writings (which we refer to as the Old Testament Scriptures). That sounds a bit strange. John Stott comments: “How can God make known his mystery through the OT when it has been in existence for centuries? What Paul means is that following the saving events of Christ, God has given his people a new understanding of the OT so that they can now see that it all bears witness to Christ.”³ They can now see that Jesus is the Son of Man of Daniel 7 and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. In Acts, Peter quotes the OT in reference to Jesus’ resurrection, exaltation and the gift of the Spirit; and Paul reasons with people out of the OT Scriptures that the Christ (the Messiah) must suffer and die, and that the Messiah is in fact Jesus.

When Adam and Eve made that fatal choice that threw the world into sin, right then, God made the promise that One would come who would set everything right. And throughout the whole OT, as C.S. Lewis says, “The leaves rustle with hope.” A Man is coming! A Savior is coming! He will be a Semite, an Israelite. He will be of the Tribe of Judah. He will be one of David’s descendants. He will be born in Bethlehem. He will live in Nazareth. He will sojourn in Egypt. He will suffer and die. He will rise again. All of that is in the OT. Everyone was looking forward to the One who was coming. The gospel was promised in the OT.

Through the apostles, who demonstrated through the OT Scriptures that the Christ, the Messiah, is Jesus, the good news spread to all the nations. So the scope of this good news is universal; it is to be made known to every nation. Throughout this letter, Paul says that the good news is for everybody. God’s purpose is to save and

unite Jews and Gentiles in Christ. And if we are going to be committed to spreading this good news we will have to be liberated from our own prejudices and pride of race, nation, tribe, caste and class, and acknowledge that God’s gospel is for everybody, without exception and without distinction.

What a miracle! God’s salvation extends to all races. All who receive it are in Christ and he is in them. Through Christ, all Jewish and Gentile believers stand together as brothers and sisters and will be established for eternity.

to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen. (16:27)

John Stott summarizes Paul’s intent in these words:

God’s wisdom is seen in Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge; above all in his cross which, though foolish to human beings, is the wisdom of God; in God’s decision to save the world, not through its own wisdom, but through the ‘foolishness’ of the gospel. His wisdom is seen in the forming of his multi-racial, multi-cultural church, and in his purpose ultimately to unite everything under Christ. No wonder Paul breaks out in praise of the riches of wisdom in chapter 11, saying, “Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!” No wonder he does so again here at the end of his letter.⁴

I would like to close with a story that I believe captures the heart of this book. Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables* is the story of the triumph of God’s gracious love over human raggedness. John Ortberg, in his book *Love Beyond Reason*, summarizes the book:

The escaped convict Jean Valjean, imprisoned for twenty years because he stole a loaf of bread, is shown hospitality by a bishop. But the temptation is too much; he takes some of the bishop’s silver and runs off into the night. Stopped by a constable, he tries to lie his way out of trouble. He tells him the silver was a gift. The constable takes him back to the bishop, and Jean Valjean waits to hear the words that will return him to prison until he dies. Nothing in his life prepared him for what he is about to hear.

“You are mistaken,” the bishop says to Valjean. “Of course this silver was my gift. But only part. You forgot the most valuable part. You forgot to take the silver candlesticks.”

Jean Valjean was waiting for the condemnation that he knows he deserved. Instead he gets blindsided by grace. One moment he faces poverty and prison, the next, freedom and abundance. Before Valjean leaves, the bishop says to him, “You must never forget this moment. Your soul and your life have been bought back. You are not your own. From now on, you belong to God.”

And because of grace, Jean Valjean’s life becomes an act of love. He honors the promise given to a dying

prostitute: he devotes himself to raising her child, Cosette. Later he faces danger to save the man who loves Cosette, even though he knows it may mean living life alone.

Opposed to Jean Valjean is a man committed to the law, to "spirituality wrongly understood," the constable Jauvert. Jauvert is convinced of his own righteousness. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. He is a champion of morality and justice. He spends his life seeking to recapture Jean Valjean.

Now, we must say that he believes in many good things. He is committed to truth. He wants unrighteousness stamped out. He desires a society without thievery or deceit or corruption. And he makes personal sacrifices to pursue such a society. He sincerely believes himself to be an agent of good.

In his world, though, there is no room for grace. And because he is blind to his own need for grace, his capacity to love withers and dies. He cannot offer mercy. The crisis of his existence occurs when Jean Valjean risks his own life to save that of Jauvert, his relentless pursuer. But Jauvert cannot bring himself to receive grace. He despairs. He kills himself, rather than admit the truth: his own raggedness has been as great as that of the criminals he devoted his life to punishing.

In the end it is Valjean, the convict, who is able to love. He comes to see what is expressed so beautifully in the song: "To love another person is to see the face of God."⁵

The book of Romans was written to turn Javerts into Jean Valjeans. Our world is tired of Christians who proclaim they know the right beliefs and are committed to the right values, but in whom there is no grace.

God in his wisdom makes it possible for people who are bound by their sinful depravity to know the freedom of his love and grace, and to become his children. For all this there can only be praise, "to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen."

1. John R.W. Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 377.
2. Ray C. Stedman, *From Guilt to Glory*, Vol. 2 (Waco: Word, 1978), 202.
3. Stott, *Romans*, 405.
4. Stott, *Romans*, 405.
5. John Ortberg, *Love Beyond Reason* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 136-137.

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