

FROM GUILT TO GLORY:

STUDIES IN ROMANS

Ray C. Stedman preached two separate series of messages on Romans at Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, California.

This second Romans series consists of 39 messages, (Discovery Papers #3501-3539 inclusive), dates from 1975-77 and is also available in book form.

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Reformatting and error-correction by Ben Whitney , July 23, 1997.

INTRODUCTION TO LIFE

by Ray C. Stedman

I don't know any letter that is more fundamental and foundational than Paul's letter to the Romans. It is unquestionably the greatest of all of Paul's letters and the widest in its scope. It is most intent and penetrating in its insight into the understanding of truth; therefore, it is one of the books of the New Testament that every Christian ought to be thoroughly familiar with. If you haven't mastered the book of Romans and aren't able to think through this book without a Bible before you, then I urge you to set that as your goal.

Master the book of Romans -- be so acquainted with it that you can outline it and think of its great themes without a Bible open before you. That requires reading it and studying it and thinking it through in careful detail. I think it is safe to say that Romans probably is the most powerful human document that has ever been penned.

This week, the Freedom Train is in this area, bringing to us some of the great documents of our American history, such as one of the original copies of the Constitution and Thomas Jefferson's copy of the Declaration of Independence. I hope all of you will see this exhibit. We value these great documents. In many ways, our freedom rests upon them, and we Americans rightly honor and respect them. But even these great documents of human liberties could not hold a candle to the effect and impact the epistle to the Romans has had upon human history. To this letter we owe some of the greatest leaders of the church of all time:

- * St. Augustine, whose shadow has loomed large over the church since the fourth century, was converted by reading just a few verses of the 13th chapter of the book of Romans.
- * Martin Luther, studying the writings of Augustine, came to an understanding of faith. The 16th verse of the very first chapter of the letter spoke volumes to Luther's heart as he thought and meditated on the great phrase, "The righteous shall live by faith." This book's effect on Luther ushered in the great Protestant Reformation, the greatest awakening that our world has seen since the days of the apostles.
- * John Bunyan, studying Romans in the Bedford jail, was so caught up by the themes of this great letter that out of it he penned

Pilgrim's Progress , which has taught many people how a Christian relates to the world in which he lives.

- * As you know, John Wesley, listening one day to Luther's preface to the commentary on Romans, found his own heart strangely warmed and out of that came the great evangelical awakening of the eighteenth century.
- * In our own day, Karl Barth has been associated with studies in Romans that have shaken the theological world. We may not always agree with everything Barth writes, but one thing is clear -- his arguments on the book of Romans absolutely demolished liberal Christianity about two or three decades ago.

somewhere around the middle of the first century, when the apostle was in Corinth on his third missionary journey.

As you read this letter, you can catch glimpses of the conditions in the Greek city of Corinth. Those of you who have visited the site of Corinth know this city was located at the crossroads of trade in the empire. It was one of the notoriously wicked cities in the Roman world and much of that atmosphere is characterized here in the letter to the Romans.

This letter was written only about 30 years after the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Today is December 7, Pearl Harbor Day, and many of us realize that it was 34 years ago today that the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. The events of that day are etched unforgettably in the memory of many of us who lived through that time. Anyone of us who was over 10 years old then knows what he was doing when the news of the bombing of Pearl Harbor came. Such was the impact of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. The memory of it still was sharply etched in the minds of Christians all over the Roman Empire.

This letter was sent to them to teach them and instruct them and bring to their remembrance the meaning of these fantastic events that had so startled and amazed men in that first century.

The first seventeen verses of this letter constitute an introduction. In this introduction are the great themes of this epistle, the things that Paul is going to return to again and again as he boldly puts forth these tremendous concepts that have so fantastically altered and changed the lives of men. There is both a literary and a logical order to these themes. The literary order, of course, follows the pattern in which they appear here in the epistle to the Romans. The logical order is not quite the same, but I am going to combine the two orders. The progression forms a kind of target. The bull's-eye, the heart of the target, is the theme: Jesus is Lord. We can see this theme in the first seven verses of the introduction.

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God -- the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith. And you also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.

To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord
Jesus Christ. {Rom 1:1-7 NIV}

At the heart of Paul's argument is this central personage: Jesus Christ, our Lord. That, certainly, is the theme of the epistle to the Romans, as it is the theme of all Paul's writings and all of the New Testament. Union in Christ is the central truth that God wants us to see. As Paul himself wrote in the letter to the Colossians, "Christ in you, the hope of glory," {Col 1:27b}. That is the great truth from which all others flow.

Now, sometimes commentators and Bible teachers identify certain of the great emphases that come from that truth as being the central truth. For instance, they emphasize justification by faith, or sanctification, that is, solving the problems of sin. But these themes all stem from the great central theme -- union with Christ. That is why the person of the Lord Jesus is central in all of the apostle's thinking, just as it is central in God's program for mankind everywhere.

We are not simply followers of a philosophy, or even of a philosopher, but of a savior, a redeemer, a person -- and he must be central in all things. From this central point, Paul builds a logical progression of concentric circles, like a target. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is the next theme flowing out from the central personage of Jesus. Next, the gospel is brought to us through the apostle, so Paul will speak of himself as the great apostle to the Gentiles, through whom the gospel is spread. Then, the recipients of that gospel are the Christians, the Roman Christians to whom this letter was written, and to ourselves as well, the twentieth century recipients of the letter to the Romans. Then, as the final out thrust of this tremendous involvement which begins with the Lord himself and flows through the apostle and the Christians, the gospel reaches out to the nations of the world -- Jew and Gentile alike.

We'll see this logical order as we go through the introductory paragraph of this letter.

In his introduction, Paul points out that the Lord was promised to us; he came as predicted in the Old Testament. The gospel was promised beforehand through the "prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son." One of the most important {things} that we can learn about our faith is that it comes to us through the anticipation and prediction of centuries of teaching and preaching. We are familiar with the predictive passages in the Old Testament. We remember that when Jesus walked with the two men on the road to Emmaus, beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he taught them "the things concerning himself," {Luke 24:27 RSV}. Jesus saw himself predicted in the Old Testament. We can see clearly the great messianic passages in the Old Testament that point unerringly to Jesus. When you read the Old Testament, you are gripped by the feeling that someone is coming! All the prophets speak of him, all the sacrifices point toward him, all the longings and dreams and

yearnings of men are hoping for someone to come who will solve the problems of man. When you close the Old Testament, he has not arrived yet. But the first thing the New Testament tells us is that the angels appeared to the shepherds abiding in the fields at Bethlehem and sang a great song of hope to them: "Unto you are great tidings of joy, for unto you is born this day in the city of David, a savior who is Christ the Lord," {cf, Luke 2:10-11}. The promised one appears on the scene. Paul reminds us, in his introduction, that Jesus is the one who was promised beforehand.

When he comes, he is presented to us in two unique ways: first, concerning his human nature, the apostle says he was a descendant of David. Now the actual Greek here is much more blunt and earthy than that. It says he comes of the very sperm of David, emphasizing his intense humanity. We all came that way. We came by the union of sperm and ovum in the miracle of conception, and Jesus came in the same way, through the sperm of David. Thus, his humanity is emphasized and underscored. But secondly, linked with that, is the deity of him who, through the spirit of holiness, was declared with power to be the Son of God. And there Paul begins with that phrase, "the Son of God," that unmistakably declares the deity of our Lord. He was God. Paul will emphasize this many times throughout his letter. But he also stresses the fact that in the uniqueness of his personality he combined together all that was human and all that was divine. And yet, as we will learn in this letter and in other passages of Scripture, he laid aside the exercise of his deity. He didn't come to act as God; he came to act as a man filled with God. This is what is hopeful and helpful to us. If we are called on to act like God, we might as well give up right now. We can't make it. But if we are called on to be men possessed by God, then that is the level on which Christ lived and the level on which we too can live.

That is the heart of the gospel.

This is what God has made it possible for us to do. We can live as he lived and follow his example in that way. Paul will develop these thoughts much more thoroughly in this epistle.

There were three things, Paul says, that marked the deity of Jesus:

First, there was power; he came by power. This is a reference to the miracles that he did, the displays of remarkable power that he manifested among men. These miracles were a sign that he was the man of God, the man fully indwelt and possessed by God.

Second, he came by the spirit of holiness. I've always been concerned about this word holiness because I find people misunderstand it so. We don't like the word holy. We think of it as something that is bad -- good, but bad. We don't like to be called holy ourselves. When we say somebody is a "holy Joe" we are using a term of disparagement. And yet it is a great word. I think its meaning can be recaptured for us if we will use a similar term that comes from the same root, the word wholeness. Paul is saying that when Jesus came, he was a whole person. He demonstrated whole humanity -- humanity as it was intended to be, exactly. And that is how we are called to live. We are called to be whole persons. The glory of the good news is that God's goal for us is to make us whole, so that we are capable, able to cope, able to handle life, to walk through the midst of the pressures and the turmoils and the tragedies of this world and be able to handle them -- whole persons -- holy persons. That wholeness is what Jesus demonstrated.

The third great mark of Jesus' deity was the resurrection; his deity was authenticated "by his resurrection from the dead." That is where our faith ultimately rests. We can have confidence that God has told us the truth by the unshakable fact that he raised Jesus from the dead. No one can remove that fact from the annals of history. It happened, our faith rests on it, and whenever anybody pursues you and tries to shake your faith, ask them to explain the resurrection. Ask them what they do with it -- because it cannot be explained away. It is the unshakable fact through which God has broken into our time, and he rests the whole story upon that great fact. This, too, will be explored further in this letter.

Now, in the literal order of this letter, the apostle says much about the Roman Christians. And what he says about them also applies to us. In Verses 6-7, he says, and you also are among those "who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ."

First, Paul says the Roman Christians, the saints, are called . This word called is an adjective, not a verb. We are not self-made saints, we are not man-made saints; we are called saints. God called us. Now, every one of us can tell a different story of how it happened -- how God's voice was heard, how you felt the drawing, the pulling of God's spirit in your life. You were called that way. This is true of every Christian. It reveals a remarkable thing: God sought us! We really didn't seek him -- we thought we did, but he sought us. That is why Jesus said to his disciples, "All that the Father has given me will come unto me, and him who comes unto me I will never cast out," {cf, John 6:37}. And thus we came, called of God, sought of God.

The remarkable thing about that calling is underscored here by these words of Paul's: "We are loved by God." Paul always starts out on the basis of God's love for us. He may have to scold these saints he is writing to, he may have to correct them, he may have to speak very sharply to some of them; but he always starts out by reminding them they are loved by God.

Paul understands that this is the fundamental relationship we have with God. He loves us. That is a fact we ought to remind ourselves of every day, as I am sure these Roman Christians did. The grace and peace God gives to his saints is proof of his love for them. The word grace stands for all the empowerment and enrichment that God can give; all that he is able to pour into human life, We don't earn grace, but it is given to us in terms of our daily needs. All those moments when strength and courage are infused into our lives, when we are discouraged and God's word comforts and heals us -- that is God's grace. And the result is peace , rest! Grace and peace are our inheritance as Christians. These two things ought to characterize Christians everywhere, all the time, so that we live differently before the world. That is the inheritance we can draw upon and reckon on.

Paul points out a second characteristic about the Roman Christians in

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world. {Rom 1:8 NIV}

Notice that it was the faith of the Roman Christians that was being talked about -- not the number of buses that they operated or the size or cost of the organ, or the size or cost of the building in which they met. It was the faith of these Christians that startled the Roman world. These were vital Christians. Now a clue as to why that was true is given in the next thing Paul says.

God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times; and I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you. {Rom 1:9-10 NIV}

Their faith was reported all over the world because the apostle and other Christians were praying for them.

Now Paul had never been to Rome, had never met these people. He had met some of them elsewhere, but he had never known many of them. He prayed for them, he prayed for them constantly! "How constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times." That is why this church flourished. If there is one thing that I would say we need more than anything else today, it is to recover again this sense of concern and prayer for one another. I am as guilty as the rest of you in not doing this. But I think it would make all the difference in the world if we began to uphold each other in prayer regularly.

The third characteristic about the Roman saints that Paul points out is

I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong -- that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. {Rom 1:11-12 NIV}

That is what makes a congregation strong, the exercise of spiritual gifts in its midst. When Paul says, "I want to impart to you some spiritual gift," he doesn't mean that he has all the gifts in a bag and he goes around like an ecclesiastical Santa Claus doling them out to people wherever he goes. He doesn't mean that. Impart really means "share with you." It isn't something Paul gives to them; only the Holy Spirit can give spiritual gifts. Paul wants to share with them the gifts God has given. He wants to minister to them, as they are expected to minister to him with the spiritual gifts that they have; thus they will be mutually strengthened by one another's faith. That is how God wants a church to function -- the saints ministering to each other, building up one another by their faith and sharing and exercising the gifts God has given them.

Next in this logical outline is Paul himself as the great apostle to the Gentiles. God is building a structure with Jesus at the center, then the gospel, then the apostle. It is through the apostle that the Christians

are being reached. What does Paul say about himself as an apostle?

Called is used as an adjective again here. Paul is not called to be an apostle -- he is a called apostle. God did the calling. This happened, Paul tells us in Galatians, before he was born. That is when God calls us -- before we are born. This is the wonder of the God we serve. He doesn't have to wait until we appear in human history. He calls us long before we are even conceived, long before our family tree ever began to take shape. Then he sets us apart. Now that is the process of history, and that is what happened to Paul. All the events of Paul's young life, including his training under Gamaliel and his rising up in the group of the Pharisees and his antipathy against the gospel, all this was part of God's process of setting him apart to be an apostle. And when the time came, God pulled the trap door and Paul fell through. He was caught. That is what happens to us all; that is the way God works in our lives.

his name's sake we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith," or, more literally, "the obedience of faith." An apostle is to call people out. As Paul himself tells us in Verse 14,

I am obligated both to the Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and foolish. {Rom 1:14 NIV}

Paul had a deep sense of an imperative to tell people the gospel because he knew they desperately needed it.

If you were the sole possessor of a remedy for cancer, would you be quiet about it or would you feel an imperative to share with others the secret? That's what Paul says urged him on -- this constant consciousness that he had the secret of release that people desperately needed.

As an apostle, he journeyed out to carry that secret to them. He tells heart in preaching the gospel of his son..." Here is a whole-hearted man, single-minded, with his spirit fully engaged in this work. Then he

That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome. {Rom 1:15 NIV}

If Paul is going to reach the nations, why does he preach the gospel to the Christians at Rome? It is by means of the Christians that the nations are to hear. It is the changes God works in the lives of his people that cause others to begin to take note. That is how evangelism occurs. Paul says, "that is why I want to preach the gospel to you at Rome." Now, by the gospel, Paul does not mean simply explaining how to become a Christian. That is what we often think it means, but that isn't what Paul means here, because these Romans were already Christians. The gospel is all the great facts about humanity and about God that God wants to impart to us and that will enable us to be whole persons.

That, therefore, brings us to the message itself -- the gospel which the

apostle will preach to the Christians, and thus reach all the nations.

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, Just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith." {Rom 1:16-17 NIV}

This quotation from Habakkuk that Paul uses is the Scripture that gripped Martin Luther's heart. Paul says that this is the great fact that he is expounding in the gospel. He is not ashamed of it, he says, and that is a way of saying that he is proud of it. He can't wait to get to Rome.

Paul especially is not ashamed of the gospel in Rome because the Romans appreciated power, just as Americans do. The Romans prided themselves on their power. They had military power that could conquer all the nations that stood in their path; they had a tremendous program of road-building; they had some of the greatest law-makers of history; they had the power to write literature and create art. But Paul knew that the Romans also were powerless when it came to changing hearts. They were powerless to eliminate slavery; half of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves. They were powerless to change the stubborn, hostile, hateful hearts of men and eliminate violence; the Roman Empire was full of violence and corruption and the suicide rate was extremely high. The Romans could do nothing about these things. And Paul says that is why he is so proud of the gospel -- because it is the power of God to do those very things that men cannot do. We never need to apologize for the gospel. It is absolutely without rival.

a book by Charles Colson, one of the men who went to prison in the conversion of Charles Colson -- how he became a Christian. Halverson said the story is so remarkable it can only be compared with the conversion of the Apostle Paul. It is so drastic and so different that even today people struggle with accepting and believing it. But he said there is no question -- this man is a changed man. Now what got hold of his heart and changed him like that? The gospel of the blessed God -- the good news about Jesus Christ. It is the power of God to salvation.

Second, Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because it reveals a righteousness from God. Righteousness is an old word that we don't understand very much. I would like to substitute for it the word worth, a worth before God. A sense of acceptance before God is given to you. You can't earn it, you certainly don't deserve it, but it is given. God really accepts you because of the gospel, because of the good news of the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Therefore, it is something that you, or I, or anybody else can have, and it is complete, perfect. That is what Paul is going to be talking about throughout the book of Romans -- the gospel of God.

The last thing Paul says is that this righteousness is received by faith. It is not something we can ever earn; it is something we can take anytime we need it, and that is good news. Our worth before God is not something we receive once, by faith, at the beginning of our Christian lives. It is something we remind ourselves of every time we feel

depressed, despairing, discouraged, defeated, etc. God has loved us, restored us, and we have perfect standing in his sight. He already accepts us and loves us as much as he possibly can; nothing more can be added to it. That is the righteousness that is revealed in the gospel, by faith, to all who believe, no matter what their background or training may be.

These are the great themes of Romans.

As we go through this book together, I hope these themes will have their effect upon our hearts as they had an effect upon the hearts of many in the first century church.

Prayer

Our Heavenly Father, as we come now to celebrate the Lord's supper, we pray that we may understand again what this means to us -- how hopeless, how dark and bitter our condition would be were it not for the gospel of the grace of God. How thoroughly we would be enmeshed in evil and how deeply we would be involved in horrendous and hurtful things were it not for the intervention of the gospel of the grace of God. Keep us, Father, from vainly imagining that we have arrived at this stage of deliverance, even the deliverance we now experience by ourselves. Help us to know that nothing could have saved us from the wicked machinations of the evil one had it not been for the intervention of the gospel of grace. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Introduction to Life
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 1:1-17
Message No: 1
Catalog No: 3501
Date: December 7, 1975

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THE TRAGIC SENSE OF LIFE

by Ray C. Stedman

The first sixteen verses of Paul's letter to the Romans are an introduction that concludes with a great statement by the apostle: "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ for it is the power of God for salvation unto everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek, for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith," {cf, Rom 1:16-17}.

By that tremendous declaration, Paul sets in focus for us the great theme of this letter: The power of God to heal the hurts of men and to give us liberty and freedom from the bondage of evil in our lives. With the power of the gospel comes the righteousness of God, the sense of worth to give significance and meaning to our lives. The power of God frees us from the control of sin; God frees us from the meaninglessness of despair and guilt.

This power and righteousness is available to us, the apostle says, "by faith." That means the gospel can reach anyone, anywhere, at any time. Now that is the good news, that is the startling message that the church of Jesus Christ has for the world. There is nothing like it anywhere in the world, there is no rival to it. There is nothing that remotely approaches it in its possibilities in human affairs; therefore, we can say with Paul, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ."

sounded. This section introduces the most extensive, careful and logical analysis of the human dilemma that has ever been found. It extends from

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities -- his eternal power and divine nature -- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. {Rom 1:18-20 NIV}

In the preceding verses, Paul has already spoken of the Son of God -- the key and the heart of the gospel. He declared the power of God that is released among men by believing the gospel; he declared the righteousness of God which is granted to us as a gift which we cannot earn or ever deserve, but which is ours, nevertheless, by faith. But now Paul speaks of the wrath of God. This is the first negative note that has been sounded in this letter, yet it is a very necessary note because it introduces this passage that tells us why we need the gospel of God. We need it because men everywhere are suffering from the wrath of God.

What do you think of when you hear that phrase, "the wrath of God"? Most people think of the wrath of God as something that is yet to come, something that follows death -- the judgment of God. It is true that

hell and all that may follow are an expression of the wrath of God. But that is not what it means at this point. Most people think of the wrath of God as thunder and lightning and judgment, fire and brimstone and the sudden destruction and catastrophes that come upon obviously guilty sinners. And these are all manifestations of the wrath of God. But actually, the wrath of God is not something to come, it is present now. As the text says, it is "being revealed from heaven" -- that is, it is going on right now. When something is revealed from heaven, it doesn't pour down from the skies upon us. No, it is everywhere present because it is coming from invisible forces at work in our lives. Therefore, it is absolutely inescapable; everyone is confronted with, and suffers from, the wrath of God -- without exception. His wrath is everywhere present, it is being manifested by the invisible resistance of God to the evil of men. And that is what is meant here by "the wrath of God."

In 1962, I visited Mexico City with a group of businessmen from this area and we were invited to hold witnessing sessions in homes with some of the businessmen and wealthy leaders of Mexico. In order to properly orient us to the culture of Mexico, we had a session in a downtown hotel in Mexico City. Dr. Baenz-Camargo, a local Christian and a very wise university professor, instructed us in the uniqueness of Mexican culture. In a most beautiful and elegant way, he captured the heart of Mexican life and set it before us. He said there were five traits of Mexican society that he wanted us to understand. I won't dwell on these at any length, but for your interest, here they are:

- 1 He said that the first thing about Mexican people is that they have a sense of the dramatic, they love eloquence and oratory.
- 2 With that comes a love of beauty and pageantry.
- 3 Thirdly, and stemming from these first two characteristics, is a deeply embedded sense of inferiority -- the Mexicans feel they are a small nation and an inferior people, desperately trying to catch up with the rest of the world.
- 4 That sense of inferiority, of course, produces the fourth mark of Mexican society, a resistance to authority. Rebelliousness and revolution are close to the surface in Mexico.
- 5 All of these traits find their ultimate expression in a kind of fatalism.

As Dr. Baenz-Camargo developed the first characteristic for us, this awareness of the dramatic in life, he used the phrase "the tragic sense of life." Mexicans are aware of the tragic aspects of life. I have not forgotten that because I find that it applies not only to Mexican people, but to people everywhere. We are continually confronted with this tragic sense of life. It is the wrath of God Paul is talking about.

Why is it that tragedy is so close to the surface? Even in the moments of joy and gladness, we experience it. We've all felt this bitter-sweet character of life, when, in the midst of all the warmth and joy of the home circle, there is an underlying sense of fear, of the probability of the whole thing suddenly being turned into tragedy and sorrow. Why is that? This is Christmas time, the season of the year when men are traditionally more glad and joyful, more mellow, perhaps, than at any other time of the year, and yet statisticians tell us that the suicide rate mounts alarmingly at Christmas time. Anyone who has experienced it knows that the loneliness which can be borne throughout the year can be deeply etched in bitter symbols upon our hearts during Christmas. That sorrow and grief seem to be more dark and gloomy and foreboding than at any other time. Now why is that? It is because of the wrath of God. God's resistance against human evil is creating this sense of tragedy and darkness that we live with. I think Moses, in the 90th Psalm,

expresses this perfectly. He says.

four-score;
{Psa 90:9-11 RSV}

The shortness of life, the brevity of it, the sorrow of it, the tragedy of it -- this is all part of what Paul captures here under this phrase "the wrath of God ... being revealed from heaven." No one escapes God's wrath; it is revealed, and we have to face it.

explains that it is "the godlessness and the wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" that cause God's wrath. The tragic aspect of life is caused by the attitudes men have and the subsequent actions that follow. Notice the order of this -- godlessness and then wickedness. The order is never reversed. It is the godless attitude that produces the wicked actions, and that is why the wrath of God is being revealed constantly from heaven against man. What is godlessness? Godlessness isn't necessarily atheism, the belief that God doesn't exist. Godlessness is acting as though he doesn't exist, disregarding God. That attitude is widespread in our society today; it is what we call the "secular" attitude. It doesn't necessarily deny that there is a God, but it never takes any account of him; it doesn't expect him to be active. That is the attitude of godlessness which the apostle speaks of here.

As a result of godlessness, there is unrighteousness or wickedness, selfish and hurtful acts of men toward one another. Why do we act selfishly? Why do we hurt each other? Because we disregard God. That is Paul's analysis. By means of these hurtful and selfish acts, the truth is suppressed. Now that is the problem!

Here we are in a world in which truth from God is breaking out all around us, but we are busy covering it up, hiding it, suppressing it, keeping it from being prominent and dominant in our thinking. That's the picture. Against that attitude of hiding truth, suppressing the truth, the wrath of God burns among the human family. The reason why life has turned tragic in so many cases is because the world is deprived of the truth that is necessary for life and liberty and freedom and godliness, and it is hidden by men and suppressed by them.

suppressed:

... since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities -- his eternal power and divine nature -- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. {Rom 1:19-20 RSV}

The truth that men labor to suppress is the existence of a God of eternal power and majesty; they suppress the greatness of God. This is hidden. There is, as you know, an evident conspiracy not to mention God.

Don't talk about him; don't act as though God has anything to do with our common affairs in life; admit that there is a God if you want to, but don't expect him to interfere or to do anything with us. Don't, above all else, mention his name.

Isn't that strange? Somebody has put it this way in a little poem entitled, The Humanist .

He exists because he was created.
He's here because he was placed here.
He's well and comfortable because divine power keeps him so.
He dines at God's table.
He's sheltered by the roof that God gave him.
He's clothed by God's bounty.
He lives by breathing God's air which keeps him strong and vocal to go about persuading people that hether God is or not, only man matters.

Man, in his puniness and weakness, struts about acting as though there were no God. That is the truth that men suppress. But there are times when men cannot evade the fact of God; and when those times come, when they just have to speak of God, people resort to euphemism. They don't use the name of God, they call him something else. They may call him "nature." "Nature" is responsible for the way we are. Well this, of course, is because nature is what we are; nature is the sum total of all the phenomena of the natural world. To say that the sum total of the phenomena of the natural world accomplishes what is the phenomena of the natural world is nonsense. Yet everywhere this is the way men talk. That is simply a way to avoid mentioning that God is at work in human affairs.

Sometimes men call it fate, or karma, or destiny.

And yet, I think it is one of the ironies of life that God, who sits above the heavens, often laughs at the foolishness of men. He has arranged it so that they can't even rip off a round oath without mentioning the name of God. You never hear people go about saying, "By nature I'm going to do this." You never hear them say, "Fate damn you!" But, in order to be emphatic, men must use the name of God. Though they will not use him in other ways, God sees to it that they recognize his presence when they swear. Isn't that strange? But that's what happens. The great God who made all things is ignored and treated with this conspiracy of silence, and yet we can't even swear without him.

How has God made truth plain? The Scripture says that God has revealed himself to man. Truth is not a vague, invisible, difficult thing to comprehend; it is clearly seen. God himself has insured that. How? The Scriptures say, "It is seen in that which is made," i.e., creation. From the creation of the world it is visible; i.e., it has been always and everywhere present. There is no one who is left out -- all can read this revelation of God if they want to do so.

One night my daughter, Laurie, and I were walking at Forest Home in the mountains of Southern California. It was one of those beautiful nights when the stars were out in all their glory -- we were above the smog -- and we walked through the darkness and looked up into the skies and saw

the stars and felt the sense of awe that comes upon the human spirit on occasions like that. I began to point out the Milky Way and explain to her that it was part of the galaxy that we belong to. I told her there were millions of galaxies like that whirling on in their determined courses in their appointed ways, never late, always on time, strange and almost unexplorable by man. I pointed out the Big Dipper, the North Star, Pleiades -- and we talked about the universe. And then, in a joking way, I said to her, "But remember, dear, all this happened just by chance; all these things came together by chance." And she began to laugh! How ridiculous that in all this vast, impressive, imposing display of beauty and light and order anybody should ever say it all happened by chance! She sensed the nonsense of that claim. How can we say that only by intelligence and wisdom and skill can a watch be built, but hearts beat and babies grow and roses smell simply by chance. Isn't that ridiculous? You only have to put it that way to see how foolish, how absurd, a statement like that can be.

This argument from design and order has never been answered. Those who disregard God cannot explain it because truth about God is breaking out everywhere around us. Elizabeth Barret Browning wrote,

blackberries.

Thus, says the Scripture, men are without excuse. No one who really wants to find God need miss him. One of the great verses that confronts the problem of what happens to those who never hear the gospel is Hebrews 11:6. It says: "He that comes to God must believe that he is and that he is the rewarder of those who diligently seek him." Just two things are necessary:

First, he must believe that God is there. Everything in his life is telling him that. Everything about himself is yelling at him, shrieking at him, that God has planned all these things. The easiest thing in the universe to believe is that God is there. You must work hard at convincing yourself that he is not there, and only the very intelligent are able to do it. The rest of us, who simply see facts and believe them, will accept the fact that God is there.

Those who never hear the gospel first must believe God is. Then they must diligently seek him. If men don't find God, it is because they don't seek him. The Scriptures promise us that if we seek after him, he will give further light on himself, and that light will eventually lead, as other Scriptures tell us, to the knowledge of Jesus Christ; for without the Son, no man can come to the Father. There is no other "name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" {Acts 4:12b KJV}, but the name of Jesus. It starts with where you are and the revelation that is in nature and in yourself about the majesty and the power and the greatness of God.

the truth about God.

For although they knew God they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be

wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. {Rom 1:21-23 NIV}

Paul tells us in detail how men suppress the truth about God. There are three steps traced for us here and the effects they have upon the race:

First, they neither glorify God nor give thanks to him. In other words, they ignore him. There is this obvious conspiracy of silence. That is why we are not allowed to sing carols in our public schools at Christmas time; that is why there is great resistance against having the Bible read on almost any public occasion today. No one wants to admit that there is a God They do not glorify him as God, neither do they give him thanks.

Last year Senator Mark Hatfield led the Senate in passing a resolution calling this nation to a day of prayer and repentance, and many of us sought to fulfill this by having public meetings on that day. At Foothill College, a number of our young people tried to hold a public meeting for this purpose. Two of our young men went there dressed like the prophets of Israel in burlap sack cloth and with ashes on their foreheads. They held up a sign that said. "Repent and give thanks." They told me that people would pass by and glower at them, and two people came over and spit at them. One man even left his appointed path and came over and kicked them. That is testimony to this statement in Romans. Men resist acknowledging the presence of God.

The effects of this are immediate. Paul says two things are immediately created in society when this attitude prevails. First, the peoples' thinking becomes futile; second, their hearts become darkened. Futile thinking means that clever ideas and procedures and programs will fall apart and come to nothing. In my own lifetime I have lived through the New Deal, the Fair Deal, the New Society, Peace with Honor, and the Great Recovery. All of them have failed dismally! They all started with brilliant promises, glowing words of hope and expectation; and every one of them came to the same dismal end.

When hearts are darkened, human needs which ought to evoke emotions of pity and response are passed by. People lose compassion and awareness of the struggles and needs of others. Some of us have been horrified at the accounts in the paper of people in desperate need, calling out for help, while people wait right by and ignore them because they don't want to get involved. That is the sign of a darkened heart, and it is the result of ignoring God. The first device men employ to suppress the truth is to ignore God.

The second device they use is to claim to be wise. In other words, they imitate God. They claim to know and be able to know everything and to run anything. The result of that is put in one brief, blunt, pungent word: They become fools!

Remember the old story of the sorcerer's apprentice who, picking up the magician's wand, loosens powers that he doesn't know how to handle? Finally he cowers in terror at the tremendous forces that he has unleashed. Just read the intellectual magazines of our day and see how clever the secular writers are. They are masters at taking some simple discovery and making it sound impressive and profound, as though it were on a parallel with the creation of the universe as recorded by Moses.

They claim to be wise, but they become fools.

The third device men employ to suppress the truth is that they exchange the glory of the immortal God for images made like mortal man. They exchange the glory of the undying God for images made like dying men, and birds, and animals, and reptiles. Notice the descending order. When idolatry begins, it begins first with men making images of men. The world is filled with statues, most of them reflecting the images of the ancient Greek and Roman world. These, of course, are merely symbols of ideas that men worship, and we still have such images today. But these images invalidate God; they debase him by substituting something for God and making God seem to be less than what he is. That is what idolatry always does. It is a very destructive force in human affairs. Idolatry begins first with men, then birds (which are at least heavenly), then animals, and finally it ends up with reptiles. Man is at one end and a snake at the other.

Do you think people don't worship images and bow down before idols now? What are movie stars and football heroes? They are dying men and women who are idolized and worshipped in our day. And I, personally, don't believe that it is any accident that we tend to name our cars after animals. We once named them after men: Lincoln, Ford, Chrysler and Dodge. But now we are naming them after animals: Impala, Cougar, Mustang, Pinto, Jaguar, Rabbit, Panther, and there's even a Greyhound bus! It is God's ironic way of forcing men to name what is going on inside. We already have a car called the Cobra. And perhaps we will soon be naming our cars for the python, vipers, and maybe, for the slower models, the crocodile.

These are our gods, aren't they? We worship rockets, planes, guns, bombs, tanks. We worship power, military power, or forces like sex, and money, ambition, and greed; or concepts like comfort, beauty, youth, adventure, life. We've exchanged the glory of the undying God in all his majesty and greatness for images. What are movies but images? What is television -- images of mortal men, birds, animals, and reptiles.

The effect of idolatry upon a society is profound and terrible to contemplate, and that is what we are going to see next week. Paul is going to analyze our society for us as he analyzed the society of the first century, and we will find it is exactly the same. We are right where they were. We will see what happens in a society when men everywhere begin to worship men and women, birds and animals, reptiles, and the ideas that these represent.

The amazing thing to me is that this description of the wrath of God is wholly and fully met by the righteousness of God. God's righteousness wipes out his wrath.

Wouldn't you think, therefore, that men everywhere would be eager to discover this marvelous gift of the righteousness of God? That is what heals our hurts and corrects our errors and gives a sense of peace and joy and forgiveness to the heart. The wrath of God creates the hurts of life; all the pain and heartache and darkness, the death, the depression, the despair all come from the wrath of God. They are the products of ignoring God, trying to imitate God, and invalidating God in our lives.

Wouldn't you think that men everywhere would long to hear this good news? Yet the wonder of our times and the revelation of the twisted, demoralized, distorted world in which we live is that we cling to our

hurts and refuse the healing of God.
Prayer

Oh mighty God, our Father, we are amazed as we think about what is happening in this world. In our own hearts we see it through these apostolic eyes and we know indeed that this is the truth. It is confirmed and supported by every fact we can observe in life around us and in our own affairs. Help us, therefore, Lord, to heed to the righteousness of God, the gift of God which is Jesus Christ, our Lord. May there not be one among us that does not open his or her heart to the healing thrust of the Son of righteousness who rises with healing in his wings that he might forgive and heal the hurts of humanity. We pray in his name, Amen.

Title: The Tragic Sense of Life
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 1:18-23
Message No: 2
Catalog No: 3502
Date: December 14, 1975

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THE DEEPENING DARKNESS

by Ray C. Stedman

It may seem strange to preach a Christmas message from the latter part of the first chapter of Romans, but I think this section is exceedingly appropriate. Romans is probably the most contemporary, the most continuously up-to-date human document that ever has been written. In this chapter, Paul has been analyzing the civilization of the first century Roman Empire. He describes the moral life of great cities like

Ephesus and Corinth and Rome. But the letter describes exactly what happened last night in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Palo Alto, and New York. The moral climate of today is the same as the moral climate of the first century Paul wrote about. That gives rise to the question, "Just how much progress have we made in twenty centuries of human existence?"

The apostle says there were two characteristics of the civilization he lived in, and those characteristics describe our society today too. The first characteristic is godlessness; the second is wickedness. Godlessness is a disrespect of God, and this results in wickedness -- injury and hurt done to other human beings. The fundamental thesis upon which this epistle to the Romans is built is that in every generation there is godlessness, which results in wickedness.

The apostle has traced for us how this godlessness came about. He begins with the self-disclosure of God in nature; God has spoken to this world and has shown himself in the natural scene. Nature includes mankind itself, for we are part of nature too. God has made himself visible in every age and place. The truth about God pours out toward us from every direction, if only we have eyes to see. This truth, the apostle says, has been met with an unspoken agreement among men to suppress it. There is a conspiracy of silence everywhere to ignore the truth that is everywhere present.

In the first part of this chapter, Paul explains that mankind follows a three-fold process in suppressing the truth:

First, he ignores God. He does not glorify him or give thanks to him. This is characteristic of our day in the way the media ignores God. We act as though he does not exist and has nothing to do with our world.

The second step in the process of suppressing truth is that men imitate God. They claim to be wise; they claim that they are able to handle all the problems of life and that they understand all that has happened in human affairs.

Some of you have followed the rather remarkable presentation by Jacob Bronowski and the Public Broadcasting System, called *The Ascent of Man*. Here is a very clear example of man's attempt to trace all that has happened to mankind without a single reference to God.

The third process by which man suppresses truth is to choose substitute gods and to make God appear to be much less than he really is.

By these means, men suppress the truth of God and have become godless.

of this godlessness in human society -- the wickedness which inevitably follows. When men lose God, they always lose themselves. They do not understand what is happening in human affairs and are not able to diagnose the sicknesses and problems that break out in society because says hell is made up of people who live at an infinite distance from each other. That is the result of the loss of God in our life.

This wickedness at work among human beings also follows a three-step process which is identified for us in this passage by the thrice-repeated phrase, "God gave them over." Paul repeats this phrase on in our culture. Let's look at the first reference to this phrase in

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. {Rom 1:24 NIV}

The first mark of wickedness in a godless society is widespread sexual immorality -- the degrading, or the dishonoring, of the body. Note that the sentence begins with the word "therefore." This immorality is a result of the idolatry into which men fall. Idolatry is common in our day. We do not worship idols and images so much anymore, but concepts and ideas are idolized and deified as much as any of the idols of the ancient world. The result of idolatry is widespread sexual immorality. Many people think this account describes all the evil things men do and then says that God, in effect, gives up on the people who do them. They think God washes his hands of them because they are so filthy and dirty. That certainly is not what this account says. But because men run after other gods and refuse the testimony of their own hearts and the world of nature around them, because they run after other gods and do not glorify or thank the true God, God removes his restraints from society so that what is done in secret is allowed to break out into openness and acceptability. That is the mark of the wrath of God at work. The first sign of wickedness in a civilization is that sexual immorality, which is always present in human life, becomes widely accepted.

God allows us to experience the full effects of our attempts to satisfy our hungers and our cravings and our desires without him. He allows us to discover that we don't have the answer. God removes the societal restraints to let these things come to the surface. By that means, he forces us to experience the full effect of what we do. God forces us to harvest the crop we insist on sowing. We like to sow our wild oats, but, when they begin to sprout and the results begin to appear, we want to abandon the field and run to another one, and just keep sowing our wild oats. But God says you cannot do that. You are going to have to live with the results. This is what Paul, earlier in the passage, calls "the wrath of God" at work among us.

You may ask, "Why is it that sex always seems to be singled out as the sign of God's judgment? Why is sexual immorality the first sign of a disintegrating civilization?"

There is a good reason. Many Christians have wrongly concluded that sexual sins are the worst kinds of sin. But that is not true. Sexual this fact very accurately. In a paragraph from his book, *Mere Christianity*, he says,

If anyone thinks that Christians regard unchastity as the supreme vice, he is quite wrong. The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual. The pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronizing and spoiling sport, and backbiting; the pleasures of power, of hatred. For there are two things inside me competing with the human self which I must try to become: they are the animal self, and the diabolical self; and the diabolical self is the worst of the two. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig, who goes regularly to church, may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute. But of course, it's better to be neither.

Those words are true, and this passage in Romans bears it out. It begins with sexual impurity and proceeds to sexual perversity. But the final result, the ultimate climax of the chapter, is not sexual sins, it is the sins of the spirit. Widespread animosity, hatred of the heart -- these are the worst sins.

There is good reason, however, why God allows heterosexual practices to become publicly detectable. He allows it to show us what is going on in our spiritual lives. It highlights the fact that sex is linked with worship. Any serious reading of the Scriptures will make this crystal clear. Sex is man's longing after worship. Sex, you see, is a desire to possess another body and to be possessed by another. It is a deep-seated craving inherent in every human being.

We have all heard the statement, "Girls give sex in order to get love; boys give love in order to get sex." This is true, superficially. But what both are really after is not sex at all; they are after worship. They really want to worship and to be worshipped. They really want a sense of total fulfillment, a oneness, an identity. That is what they think they are getting when they indulge in illicit sex.

The Scriptures tell us that only God can give that fulfillment. Only God can satisfy that deep sense of longing for complete identity and unity with another person. That is what we call worship. When we worship, we are longing to be possessed of God, and to possess him fully. That is why the highest description of the relationship possible to a believer you," {cf, John 14:20}. When men think that they are going to find that fulfillment in sex, God, in effect, says to them, "Look, it won't work. But you won't believe that until you try it out." So he removes the restraints and allows immoral sexual practices to become widely accepted, understanding that men indulging in these things will finally find themselves just as dissatisfied, empty and hopeless as they were when they started. Thus they will learn that God is trying to teach them that sex is not the way by which men find fulfillment. This is true even in marriage. Men only find their fulfillment in a relationship to God.

This brings us to the second mark of a godless and wicked society, found

They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator, who is forever praised, Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion. {Rom 1:25-27 NIV}

Homosexuality is the second mark of a godless and wicked society. In the first step of this process, bodies were dishonored. In this second step, Paul speaks of shameful lusts arising from inside, desires that are part

of the soul of man. The apostle describes the growth of widespread psychological confusion. Notice the irony of this. This is God's silent way of forcing men to demonstrate their sin so they can see what is going on in their lives. Paul says because they have exchanged truth for a lie and exchanged the Creator for created things, God allows them to exchange natural functions for unnatural functions -- to use a man for a woman, and a woman as a man. The restraints are removed, so homosexuality becomes widely accepted in society. In this first-century world in which Paul lived and wrote, homosexuality was a commonplace thing. All the great philosophers extolled it and practiced it, for the most part. Men like Socrates, and other great names of Greece, were homosexuals. Out of the first fifteen Roman emperors, fourteen of them were homosexuals, and some gave themselves blatantly and openly to this vice. This was common in the Roman world, as it is becoming common in our own day. Once again, the restraints are being removed, and these things are thrusting themselves into public view.

The truly awful thing about the rise of homosexuality today is that homosexuals are allowed to believe the lie that this is a biological condition which they cannot help, but to which they should adjust. Even churches are falling into this trap and consenting to this deceit. The papers carried a report this week that the Santa Clara County Council of Churches accepted into membership the Homosexual Church of San Jose. The arguments reported in the local papers were unbelievable. Pastors stood up and said they could not make a judgment as to whether homosexuality was good or evil. Yet I was encouraged this week by a paper which was sent to me by a Christian who is an ex-homosexual. The paper was written by a group of Christians who were homosexuals, but who have been delivered by the grace and the gospel of the Lord Jesus, by the power of Christ in their lives. In order to help those still enmeshed in this vice, they are publishing a paper that makes a forthright plea to those trapped in homosexuality not to believe the lie so widely circulated today, that this is a biological condition and they cannot help themselves. This lie is what holds them in a fatal grip. As long as homosexuals believe that, there is no help for them. But if they understand that homosexuality is a sin, like other sins, that it can be forgiven and they can be delivered and freed from this sin by the power and grace of Jesus Christ, then there is tremendous hope in the midst of their darkness.

Paul speaks of a "due penalty" for this perversion. Anyone who has spent any time with those involved in this unfortunate condition know what this penalty is. It is a loss of their sense of identity, an uncertainty as to their role and place in life. It creates an almost unbearable tension as to who he is, and what he is, and what he or she is here for. We see this manifested in considerable degree in the Women's Liberation Movement, as well as in dress styles and the emphasis on unisex in education. This sexual confusion that abounds on every side is an attempt to mar and to defeat God's precise delineation when he made them male and female.

The third and final mark of a godless and wicked culture is given in

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are

gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.
{Rom 1:28-31 NIV}

This is a terrible list of sins, but it is the mark of a civilization that is nearing collapse -- this growing spirit of contemptuous and arrogant disregard for other human beings. In one word, this describes a desire to exploit other people. Godlessness eventually brings us to the place where we will see these things in society.

"Depraved mind," used here, literally means an unacceptable mind, a mind that cannot be lived with, that simply will not fit into any kind of civilization or culture or society. A depraved mind destroys, rends, and fragments everything it touches. It is an unacceptable mind, and its public hostility is marked by increasing cruelty and violence. I think the most vivid demonstration and documentation of this in our day is probably given in Alexander Solzhenitsyn's book, *The Gulag Archipelago*, where you find an entire culture characterized by this terrible, senseless cruelty. But we in the Western world are not escaping either. Every day our newspapers report the skyrocketing rise in senseless vandalism and vicious and unprovoked attack upon innocent and often helpless people. The rise in child abuse is a symptom of this in our society.

of callous disregard:

Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things, but also approve those who practice them. {Rom 1:32 NIV}

Knowing that harm is coming from their wickedness, nevertheless they attempt to spread it more fully. They invade the field of education; they dominate the media; they seek legal status for their wickedness and defy all attempts at control. As you can well recognize, this is what is going on today.

Thus the Apostle Paul traces the deepening darkness of his own day. And yet it is {true of} ours as well. Though this is an honest record, it is also clear that God does not turn his back on man. This account is not a record of what God despises, and thus turns aside with contempt. Man is never treated here as an object of contempt, or as a worm. Rather, God's concern underscores this whole passage. He is at work to try to bring men to their senses, to wake up a civilization as to what is going on in its midst, and to show it how desperately it is in need of deliverance -- which can only come as a gift of righteousness from God's hands.

You may ask, "Why does God give a civilization over to this kind of thing?"

He does it because it is only when darkness prevails, and despair and violence are widespread, that men are ready to welcome the light. Remember Isaiah's prediction? "They that dwell in darkness, upon them

has the light shined. They that live in the land of deep darkness, unto them a great light has shined," {cf, Isa 9:2}. In the first century, the world was sunk in the darkness of despair. Idolatry had penetrated the whole world; men had turned from the true God, whom they could have known. Hopelessness and rank despair lay like a heavy blanket upon the earth.

In that hour, in the darkness of the night, over the skies of Bethlehem, the angels broke through and a great light shone about. A multitude of heavenly hosts were heard praising God and saying to a group of lonely shepherds, "Fear not; for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord," {cf, Luke 2:10-11 KJV}. The hope of the world has always been that the Savior would be born again in a human heart, as he once was born in a stable in Bethlehem. From that hope all light streams. The angels' message is the coming of the Lord Jesus, the availability of the gift of righteousness from God. It is against the growing darkness of our own time that the light of this Christmas story goes out again this year.

Everywhere we need to make this message as clear as we possibly can -- by our testimony, by the way we live, by the joy and peace of our heart. God has found a way to break through human weakness, arrogance, despair, and sinfulness to give us peace, joy, and gladness once again. Just as Jesus was born in Bethlehem so long ago, so he can be born in your heart now. This is the good news of the gospel. In this decaying world in which we live we can see again the glory of this truth as it delivers people from their sins. "Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins," {Matt 1:21 KJV}.

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, we see how accurately these words have described our own times, our own civilization, our own country. As we see the marks of godlessness on every side, in agreement with the description in Romans, we know three things. First, we know you have not forsaken this world. Second, we know that the message of truth and light is still as available as ever. And third, we know that love is behind it all. Your love reaches out to broken, fragmented, hurting man, and longs to set us free from the results of our own sin. Father, we thank you for this. We pray that many today may find this new life in Jesus Christ our Lord. In his name we ask it, Amen.

Title: The Deepening Darkness
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 1:24-32
Message No: 3
Catalog No: 3503
Date: December 21, 1975

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SINFUL MORALITY

by Ray C. Stedman

Chapter 2 of Romans is part of Paul's penetrating analysis of the first-century civilization, beginning with its rejection of the God who had revealed himself in nature and in man's conscience. Rejecting the true God, men turned to false gods and widespread destruction of the home occurred because of sexual immorality and perversion. A spirit of violence and cruelty was rising and a total disregard of human rights was spreading throughout the first-century world. And yet, to our astonishment, we see how accurately the apostle has analyzed the civilization of twentieth century civilization as well. All that is recorded in the first chapter of Romans took place last night in San Francisco and Los Angeles, up and down the West coast, and throughout this nation, and the world in which we live.

Yet there are many people who would say they do not belong in this picture. I am sure there were thousands in Paul's day, and I know there "That isn't talking about us. We're not like that. It may describe them, but it does not describe us."

Whenever you read this first chapter of Romans you find that division immediately evident -- them and us. They are the wicked, the obviously gross, wicked people; we are not. Many people would say, "We're law-abiding, home-loving, clean-living, decent people." Many of these people have been church members most of their lives. Others perhaps do not go to church at all, but nevertheless pride themselves on their moral standards, their ethical values, and their clean, law-abiding lives. They say the world may be in its present condition because of the wickedness of gangsters, radicals, revolutionaries, prostitutes, pimps, and perverts of our day; but they themselves are the salt of the earth. It is on these people that the apostle turns his spotlight in

We will see his argument developed in three separate steps. The first is

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the

same things. {Rom 2:1 NIV}

Here Paul talks about those who pass judgment on others. If there are any here this morning who do not belong in that category, we will excuse you. You are free to go, because I want to talk to those who have, at one time or another, passed judgment on someone else. The apostle makes

First, he says that these people know the difference between right and wrong; otherwise they would not presume to be judging. They have a clear understanding of a standard. They know that one thing is wrong and another thing is right. They are clearly aware, therefore, that there are things that are wrong, and which merit the judgment and wrath of God primarily God's removal of the restraints upon human wickedness, allowing evil to become widespread and publicly evident. That is the aware that there are things that bring forth the wrath of God, things that cause society to degenerate.

Paul's second point about these people who have a clear view of what is wrong in society is devastating. He says they are guilty because they are doing the same things themselves. The judges are as guilty as the ones they have in the dock.

As a practiced, self-righteous hypocrite, I always have a feeling of surprise at that statement. I feel that whenever moral people, those who pride themselves on a degree of righteousness and a standard of ethics, read a statement like this, they are taken by surprise. "What do you mean? How could this be?"

This reminds me of our Lord's account of his return, when all the nations are to be judged before him {cf, Matt 25:31-46}. He will separate them into two bands, the sheep and the goats. The test of judgment is made on the basis of how people treat others. He will say to the sheep, "When I was thirsty, you gave me to drink, when I was hungry you fed me, when I was naked you clothed me, when I was in prison you visited me." To the goats he will say, "When I was thirsty you did not give me to drink, when I was hungry you did not feed me, when I was naked you did not clothe me, and when I was sick or in prison you did not visit me." Both groups are taken by surprise and say, "When did this happen? When did we see you thirsty or hungry or naked? We don't remember that!" This feeling of surprise is highly indicative of how little we understand ourselves and why we need a passage such as this. We are all guilty.

I am going to use myself as an example, simply because I feel I am such an excellent example of what the rest of you are like. As I have been thinking this through, I see three ways by which I try to elude the fact that I am guilty of the things that I accuse others of doing:

First, I am congenitally blind toward many of my own faults. I just am not aware of them. I do not see that I am doing the same things that others are doing, and yet other people can see that I am. I don't see it, and neither do you see it in yourself. We all have these blind spots. One of the greatest lies of our age is the idea that we can know ourselves. We often argue, "Don't you think I know myself?" The answer is, "No, you do not know yourself. You are blind to much of your life." There can be areas that are very hurtful and sinful that you are not aware of.

I stayed with a pastor and his delightful family not long ago. They had three children, two boys and a girl. The oldest boy was about sixteen, and, like all sixteen-year-olds, he was very concerned about the undisciplined life of his twelve-year-old brother. One day, his mother said, he came in all upset at something his brother had done. He said, "Who does he think he is? Why, he acts as though he's as good as the rest of us!" What a typical example of the attitude we all have, only he was honest enough to say it.

I caught myself the other day saying to someone, " Relax! Take it easy! " It was only afterward that I heard my own voice and realized that I was not relaxed, and I was not taking it easy myself.

Have you ever lectured your children on the sin of procrastination? Then did you barely get your income tax report in on time, or not get it in at all?

How blind we are! We are congenitally blind toward many of our own faults. We just do not see them. In that way we can indeed be guilty, as the verse says, of doing the very things we accuse others of doing.

A second way we try to elude the fact that we are guilty of the very things we accuse others of doing is by conveniently forgetting what we have done that is wrong. We may have been aware of our sin at the time, but somehow we just assume that God is going to forget it. We do not have to acknowledge it in any way -- he will just forget it. As the sin fades from our memory, we think it fades from his, as well.

For example, let's consider our thought life. Much of this passage must be understood in the light of our Lord's revelation in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says that God, who looks at the heart, sees what is going on in the inner attitude and judges on that basis; he doesn't judge as men judge, according to what is observable from the outward life. In the Sermon on the Mount we learn that if we hold a feeling of animosity and hatred against someone, if we are bitter and resentful and filled with malice toward an individual, then we are guilty of murder, just as though we had taken a knife and plunged it into that person's breast, or shot them with a gun. If we find ourselves lustfully longing to possess the body of another, if we play with this idea over and over in our mind, and treat ourselves to a fantasy of sex, we have committed fornication or adultery. If we find ourselves filled with pride, yet we put on the appearance of being humble and considerate of others, we are guilty of the worst of sins. Pride of heart destroys humanity.

We think these things will go unnoticed, but God sees them in our heart. He sees all the actions that we conveniently have forgotten. He sees it when we cut people down, or speak with spite and sharpness, and deliberately try to hurt them. He sees it when we are unfair in our business tactics, when we are arrogant toward someone we think is on a lower social level than ourselves. He sees it when we are stubborn and uncooperative in trying to work out a tense situation. All these things God takes note of. We, who condemn these things in others, find ourselves guilty of the same things. Isn't it remarkable that when others mistreat us we always think it is most serious and requires immediate correction. But when we mistreat others, we say to them. "You're making so much out of a little thing! Why it's so trivial and insignificant."

The third way we try to elude the fact that we are guilty of the very things we accuse others of doing is by cleverly renaming things. Other

people lie and cheat; we simply stretch the truth a little. Others betray; we simply are protecting our rights. Others steal; we borrow. Others have prejudices; we have convictions. Others murder and kill; we exploit and ruin. Others rape; we pollute. We cry, "Those people ought to be stoned!" Jesus says, "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone," {cf, John 8:7}. Yes, we are all guilty of the same things we accuse others of doing.

asks two questions; here is the first:

Now we know that God's judgment against those that do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? {Rom 2:2-3 NIV}

What a ridiculous ground of hope! How tenuous to hope that God, who sees all men openly and intimately, who sees not only what is on the outside but also what is on the inside, will pronounce judgment on these other people, but not on you.

People will say, "How can a just and loving God permit the injustice and vileness that takes place in this world? How can he allow a tyrant like Hitler or Stalin to arise and murder millions of innocent people? How can he allow these godless regimes to come into power and crush people, usurp their rights, put thousands in prison, and spread destruction and sorrow across the land? Why does he allow these things to go on year after year? Why doesn't God judge these men?"

The question we ought to ask is, "Why didn't he judge me yesterday, when I said that sharp, caustic word that plunged like an arrow into a loved one's heart and hurt him badly? Why didn't he judge me? Why didn't he shrivel my hand when I took a pencil and cheated on my income tax? Why didn't he strike me dumb when I was gossiping on the phone this morning, sharing a tidbit that made someone look bad in someone else's eyes? Why didn't God judge that?" The God of truth and justice sees the one as well as the other. Paul asks, "Do you think that you will escape the judgment of God?"

Then Paul asked the second question, the other horn of the dilemma:

Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, even realizing that God's kindness should lead you to repentance? {Rom 2:4 NIV}

Paul's question is, "Why are you acting the way you are?"

Why do you judge others so critically and so constantly, yet never seem to judge yourself? Surely it can't be that you think you are going to escape! If you know that God judges according to truth, you must be included in that judgment as well. If it is not that you think you'll escape his judgment, then it must be that you are treating with disdain the opportunities God gives you to repent. Why are you allowed to live?

Why are you permitted to experience life, to find a new year lying ahead of you, with all its chances to correct these wrong attitudes and conditions? God's goodness, tolerance, and patience are exhibited in his giving you a chance to change, a chance to acknowledge your sins and to be forgiven.

We have to see all our life in this respect. A faithful God, judging the inner part of life, does give us these opportunities. He knows we are blind. He knows that we often struggle at recognizing what is wrong in our life, and so he gives us these opportunities to repent and change. These moments of truth are very important.

and describes what lies ahead for those who refuse to face the actual condition of their lives:

But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God "will give to each person according to what he has done." To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor, and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, and then the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism. {Rom 2:5-11 NIV}

I am amazed to see in my own heart how many times I expect God to show favoritism. Even as a Christian, I expect him to overlook areas of my life without any acknowledgment on my part that they are there. I expect him to forget them without revealing to me what their true nature is. Yet the Scriptures tell us that God is constantly bringing to our attention times when we see ourselves clearly. What valuable times they are!

Paul says that when we refuse to judge these areas we are storing up wrath for ourselves. The word is "treasures." We are laying up treasures, but the treasure is wrath. This is the same word that Jesus employed when he said, "Lay up treasures for yourselves in heaven," {Matt 6:20 KJV}. We are constantly making deposits in a bank account which we must collect one of these days. In his wrath, God allows us to deteriorate as human beings. We become less than what we want to be. I book, Mere Christianity, he says,

People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain in which God says, "If you keep a lot of rules, I'll reward you; and if you don't, I'll do the other thing." I do not think that's 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 a little different than what 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 into 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 and hatred with God and with its fellow creatures and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heavenly, i.e., it 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.

In very eloquent terms, that is saying the same thing Paul brings out here. God is a righteous God. He judges men and he assesses wrath against those who do wrong. No matter what the outward life may be like, he sees the inward heart and judges on that basis. There is a righteous judgment awaiting. It comes, in part, all through life, because we experience the wrath of God even now. But a day is coming when it all will be manifested, one way or the other.

The question Paul brings out here is this: What do you really want out of life? What are you seeking?

If you are "by persistence in doing good seeking glory and honor and immortality," i.e., if you want God's life, you want to be his kind of a person, you want to honor him and be of value to him -- if that is what you really want above everything else, then you will find it. God will give you eternal life.

In the context of the whole Scripture, this means you will find your way to Jesus Christ, for he is life eternal. You will find him as your Redeemer and Lord and Savior. You will grow increasingly like him, as you judge these evil areas of life, and honestly confess them, not assuming that God will pass over them. But what do you really want?

If what you really want is not God, truth, life, glory, and immortality -- if you really want pleasure and fame and wealth and power and prominence, if you want to be the center of things and have everybody thinking of you and looking at you and serving you -- then, according to this passage, "there will be trouble and stress for every human being who does evil, first for the Jew, and then for the Gentile." God plays no favorites. Church member or pagan, civilized or savage, white, brown, red, black or yellow, it makes no difference before God.

Now if all this sounds very harsh, if it sounds unloving, it is because you have not read the passage in its context. For this is not inconsistent with the picture of a loving God, who loves humanity and wants to restore it. It is a picture of a loving God who loves us so much that he tells us the truth, and that is true love. He will not allow us to deceive ourselves, to be tricked and trapped by falling into self-deceit. He tells us the truth. There is no way out, except one, and that is what he wants us to see. God's love is helping us to see that there is only one way to deal with sin -- admit it is there, and recognize that God has already dealt with it in Christ. On that basis, God offers us full and free forgiveness. There is no other way.

Any person who thinks he will escape by taking another route, or listening to some of the other voices that try to trap us into ways of rationalizing these feelings, and accepting them on other terms rather than dealing with them as ugly sins before God, will discover ultimately

that he has stored up a treasure house of wrath. That is why God tells us the truth now. God, in great love and at tremendous cost, has provided a way out. It is that we surrender self. We give up self-seeking and living for ourselves, and begin to live for the God who made us. By the power of the Lord who forgives us and restores us and says the principle of giving up self runs all through life, from top to bottom:

Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life, and you will save it. Submit to the death of your ambitions and your favorite wishes every day, and the death of your whole body in the end, submit with every fiber of your being, and you will find eternal life. Keep back nothing. Nothing that you have not given away will ever be really yours. Nothing in you that has not died will ever be raised from the dead. Look out for yourself and you will find, in the long run, only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ, and you will find Him, and with Him, everything else thrown in.

This is the gospel. This is what this tremendous passage is aiming at, that we might realize there is no hope, none whatsoever, except in a day-by-day yielding to the plan and the program of God, as we find it in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Perhaps there are some here this morning who have seen themselves in a new light. Perhaps you have seen that you need to stop justifying and excusing yourself, and are in need of forgiveness from God just as much as though you had been a red-handed murderer. We all are.

Perhaps there are many Christians here who have realized that when we protect and allow areas of our life to be given over to this kind of judgmental condemning and criticizing of other people, we are blocking the flow of the life of God to our lives, keeping back the joy and peace that he would have us enjoy. These areas need to be judged in the Christian life as well as in the unredeemed life.

Above all else, this process is designed to make us take seriously God's way of escape. There is a way of escape: Admit your sins freely, and receive the forgiveness of God -- on the basis of the work of Jesus Christ in his death on the cross and his resurrection life available to us.

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, we thank you that you do tell us the truth. You are the God of truth. You do not deceive us, you do not delude us; you tell us the blunt, stark, naked truth, that we might know exactly what we are, and what we can do about it. Save us, Lord, from the folly of trying any other method. Save us from the folly of trying to protect and rationalize and justify these areas of evil in our lives. Grant to us, Lord, the grace to confess and be forgiven. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Sinful Morality
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 2:1-11
Message No: 4
Catalog No: 3504
Date: January 4, 1976

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ACCORDING TO LIGHT

by Ray C. Stedman

and preach the gospel, for, above all else, it is exactly what Rome needs to hear. "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile," {Rom 1:16 NIV}. Paul took pride in the gospel, and rightfully so. The gospel is what men and women everywhere desperately need. In the gospel, God has found a way to condemn our sin and to destroy it without destroying us. No man can do that. When we want to correct evildoers, we have to punish them by imprisoning them. Sometimes, to protect society, we have to take their lives.

But God does not do that. Jesus, the center and heart of the gospel, changes people. He has found a way to change our most fundamental urges from self-centeredness and selfishness, to loving concern for others, so that the very basis of our urges has been altered. In the gospel God has made divine power available to us. God has promised to us and provided for us an ultimate destiny that is mind-blowing, beyond all our wildest dreams. And yet it is amazing that when people hear this good news, they often resist it and stubbornly hold out against accepting it.

Of course, the reason for this struggle is that the gospel can never be accepted until you admit your need. Men will never accept this message until they come to a place of hopelessness and helplessness. But that is the problem; we do not like to admit we need any help. We want everybody

to think we are able to handle what is coming our way. We struggle against this humiliation (as we see it) of stooping to receive from God something that we cannot earn or gain for ourselves.

In Romans, Paul describes the four types of men who resist and refuse the gospel. Two of these types we have already looked at. There is the obviously wicked person who, in essence, simply defies God. He is righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things, but also approve of those who practice them," {Rom 1:32 NIV}. This type includes the whole world of people who flaunt morality, defy the words of God, and who encourage people to get involved more deeply in things that are hurtful and destructive.

the gospel, the self-righteous moralist, who is outwardly decent, good-living, and clean-cut. Inwardly, however, he is filled with resentments, jealousies, murder, hatred, and envy; and his attitudes are as wrong as the actions of those who are outwardly evil. The problem is that such men delude themselves by thinking that everything is going to be all right with them. Because they have maintained a certain respectable facade, they think that God is going to overlook the inner sins of their life and that there is going to be no judgment for them because everything appears to be fine.

Now we come to the last two types of people who resist the truth:

One of these is the unenlightened pagan. Here we are dealing with the question of what to do about the people who have not heard the gospel. What about those who live where the Bible is unknown, or those who are in a different religion where there is no reference to the facts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ? In this passage Paul says that their problem is that they defile their consciences.

The other and last type is that of the religious devotee who seeks deliverance from the judgment of God by religious practices, rituals, performances, and knowledge of the truth.

These two types of people are introduced by a statement of the universal

All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. {Rom 2:12-13 NIV}

Now this is probably the strongest statement from the hand of Paul and it answers the question non-Christians ask Christians more often than any other, "What about the people who have never heard of Jesus Christ?" Usually they are thinking of savages in jungles. They seldom think of the savages in the concrete jungles of our cities, but both are in the same condition, as we will see. Paul's answer to this question 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 do know. They will be judged by their own standards.

So far in Romans, Paul has made three great statements about the basis

of the judgment:

according to truth, i.e., it is realistic. He only deals with that which is actually there. God does not falsely accuse anyone, but he judges according to truth.

works. Now that is interesting, because that shows God is patient. God, who does see what is going on in our inner lives and who judges wholly on that basis, nevertheless waits patiently until our inner attitude begins to work itself out in some deed, speech, or attitude that we manifest openly. Therefore, God allows men to be their own judge, to see for themselves that what is coming out is a revelation of what is inside.

is according to light. That is, God is not going to summon all mankind and tell them they are going to be judged on the basis of the Ten Commandments.

(By the way, I was taken to task because I speak only about what God says to men. One woman got very disturbed because she wanted to be included in this; so I want to make it clear that when I say men I am using it in the long-standing generic sense in which men stands for mankind. That has always been a grammatical feature of the English language, and, before that, of the Greek and Hebrew languages. All languages have this grammatical device and it is simply ridiculous to say that this is a sexist term, when used in that generic sense.)

But man, in this generic sense, is certainly going to be judged according to light. That means that God will say to that individual. "What did you think was right and wrong?" When the individual answers, God's question then is, "Did you do the right, and not the wrong?" By that standard, of course, everyone fails. Paul makes clear that this is true. He says, "All who sin apart from the Law will also perish apart from the Law." The fact that such men never heard the Ten Commandments, or anything else that is in the Bible, does not mean that they are going to be acceptable in God's sight. They will perish, not because they did not hear, but, because what they did know was right, they did not do.

Now Paul goes on to take up the case of the unenlightened pagan in

(Indeed, when the Gentiles, who did not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares. {Rom 2:14-16 NIV}

in parentheses because this all comes within the context of Paul's argument that there is a day coming when God is going to judge the secrets of men everywhere and all that is hidden will be revealed. In Luke 12:3 Jesus himself spoke of that: "What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear behind closed doors will be proclaimed from the housetops," {Luke 12:3 NIV}. Now there were some in Paul's day who said that because the Jews

possessed the Law and knew God's truth, they would not be condemned in that judgment. But Paul is saying, "Look, if your knowledge of truth is what saves you, then everybody will be saved, even the savages and the pagans, for they show that they have a law, too. They know a great deal about the Law; it is written on their hearts, and their consciences act as judges within them, just as they do within those of us in the more civilized world." On that basis, you see, everyone would be saved. But God does not judge that way.

Now here we have a revelation of what goes on in the primitive world. Men and women who have never heard anything about the Bible, Jesus Christ, Moses, the Ten Commandments, or any standard that we are familiar with, nevertheless are subject to judgment because they have truth written in their hearts. They do know what is right and wrong. They show it in their own lives.

I have just finished reading an amazing book called Peace Child, which has been made into a movie. It is a wonderful and remarkable story, taking place in the last couple of decades in the island of New Guinea. Some missionaries went there and found a tribe of people who were so degraded, so sunken in immorality, that they actually idolized treachery. They admired the man who could win someone's love, friendship, and trust, and then betray and murder him. Such a man was held up as an admirable person to follow. When the missionaries first came among these people, they despaired of ever reaching them, for there seemed to be no ground of appeal to a people that had so reversed the moral standards of life. However, as they lived among them and got better acquainted with their culture, they discovered that this moral reversal was universal, except at one point. There was one situation in which they recognized that men and women were bound to a moral standard, and that was in the case of an exchange of a peace child. If a tribe gave a baby or a child from their tribe to another, then that other tribe would be bound to keep its agreements and to honor its treaty with the first tribe. If they did not, they would lose face and be regarded as a despicable people. It was at this point the missionaries were able to introduce the gospel, for they pointed out that God had given up a peace child in Jesus Christ. Thus these people were bound to honor God. It is a remarkable story, but it shows clearly how God had prepared the way for the gospel by building into this culture a concept that would be ready and waiting when the gospel came. Now these people were living according to the rule of conscience; and the conscience, as Paul points out here, never brings a settled peace. These tribes are a continual testimony to that fact.

People say, "Let your conscience be your guide." That is a recipe for unhappiness. If that is all you have, it is a certain way of plunging into a life that alternates between fear and momentary peace.

In the latest issue of Christianity Today there is a very interesting article by Rachel Saint, widow of one of the five men who were cruelly murdered by the Auca Indians on the banks of a river in Ecuador twenty years ago. In this article she describes the way the Aucas lived before the gospel came and the tremendous work going on in that tribe since then. She writes,

The Aucas have been thoroughly acquainted with demons and devil worship for many generations. The result of this is a religion of terror. The witch doctor is the central authority,

and he controls the tribe. Any death is supposed to be caused by the witch doctor. Then that death has to be avenged and the feuding starts. They are afraid that they might be speared at night in their own houses. Everyone is a potential enemy. If a father loses a son, he feels he must kill his daughter. If the group loses a marriageable girl, a grandmother is killed. Why should a worthless old woman live if a marriageable girl has died? This kind of thinking permeates their culture.

Now this sort of thinking goes on not only in the jungles of South America and other places, but also in the concrete jungles of San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and everywhere else. A reign of terror always ensues when people are governed only by the law of conscience. Yet, even under their own law, they perish, just as much as those who are judged by God's Law.

Now Paul goes on to take up the case of the religious devotee of his day, the Jew. Today we need only substitute the title "church member" to bring it up to date -- because we American church members are in the same condition as the Jew was in the culture of Paul's day. We have a great body of truth that we delight in, and we feel proud of our knowledge and our understanding of it. But unfortunately, we oftentimes hope and think that knowledge, in itself, is what is going to deliver us in the sight of God.

Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth -- you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." {Rom 2:17-24 NIV}

Paul lists here the five great advantages which the Jews of his day had and on which they relied for their position before God:

First, they relied on possessing the Law. There are many people in the churches of America today who rely upon the fact that the Bible is available to them. We have the Bible in twenty-five different versions and many take great pride in owning a specific version. "I am a King James Christian! If it was good enough for the Apostle Paul, it's good enough for me!" Or "We're liberated! We have the American Standard Version!" You hear people bragging about this! Well, that is exactly what the Jew was doing in Paul's day.

Second, they bragged about their relationship to God. The Jew made it

clear that he had a special inside track with the Almighty. You hear people talking like that today. "God, Billy Graham, and I were just talking the other day..." We make it clear that we have a special standing with the "Good Lord," as he is usually called, and in some way we brag about our relationship to God.

Third, the Jews were people who knew the will of God. They had the Scriptures, they had the Ten Commandments, and the knowledge of what God wanted. There are many today who boast about their knowledge of the Word of God and who rest upon that fact.

Fourth, these Jews approved of what was superior, i.e., they rejected certain attitudes and actions in life and chose only that which was regarded as morally superior. Many, many church members do this. They take pride in the fact that they do not do certain things. I am amazed at how many people think that God is going to be impressed by the things they do not do. "We don't dance, we don't drink, we don't go to the movies, we don't go to theaters, we don't play cards, we don't drink coffee," and on and on.

Finally, the Jews were instructed in the Law. There were many who could quote great passages of Scripture and they took pride in that. Now, there is nothing wrong with any of these advantages except that the Jews and many of us today depend on them for righteousness. We feel we have a special standing with God because of them; and that is what is wrong.

Paul goes on to list four privileges which the Jews felt were theirs because they had these advantages:

First, they felt they were a guide to the blind. Today we have those who are always ready to correct anybody around them, to impart truth to those unfortunate people who have not learned anything yet.

Second, the Jews felt they were a light to those in the dark. Every now and then we run into people who are quite ready to dazzle us with their knowledge of the Scriptures. They know all about the antichrist, they know when Christ is coming again, they know all the elective decrees of God, they are thoroughly acquainted with the superlapsarian position of the people before the Fall, etc., and they take great pride in this knowledge.

Third, the Jews felt they were instructors of the foolish. A lady came up to me after a service on Sunday and told me a long, painful story of how she had injured her wrist in an auto accident. The emergency doctor who took care of her happened to let slip a couple of curse words while working on her. She lectured him at great length about how she was a Christian, how she wouldn't listen to this kind of language, and how terrible it was that he took the name of God in vain. This attitude is typical of many who feel they are instructors of the foolish, because they have a knowledge of the Scriptures.

The fourth privilege which the Jews possessed was that they were teachers of children. I am amazed at how many want to teach Sunday school classes for the wrong reason. Now there is a right reason, but many want to teach because they feel they are imparting truth to people who need it, and they take great ego satisfaction in doing it.

Paul's judgment of such people is, "You are guilty yourself." This attitude of the Jew is the same one Paul condemned earlier in the moral Gentile. "You are outwardly righteous and correct, but inwardly you are

doing the wrong thing." They were envious, proud, covetous, lustful, bitter, dangerous people. Religious zealots are dangerous people. The Jews were notorious in the Roman empire for being over-sharp in business deals. That is why Paul says, "You who preach against stealing, do you steal?" They were not above a little hanky-panky with slave girls they had to deal with. Paul says, "You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?" They were ready to profit from trade with pagan temples. He says, "You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?" They bragged about the Law, but Paul says, "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." That was the ultimate judgment upon the Jews. To them, blasphemy was the worst of sins. Yet Paul says, "Though you claim to have so much, and to be so knowledgeable, yet what you have done is to blaspheme God. People have been turned away from God because of you."

I do not think I have to detail how true that is of American Christianity as a whole. And not only in this country, but around the world, Christians have caused people to turn from God because of our attitudes and the way we approach people. I have often thought it is amazing how the people who keep close records on how many they win to Christ never keep any records on how many they drive away. And the name of God is blasphemed because of that.

Now Paul seizes upon and singles out the supreme symbol of Jewish

Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. {Rom 2:25-27 NIV}

The Jews, of course, prided themselves (and still do today) on the rite of circumcision, the symbol that they were God's people. You only need to substitute baptism, confirmation, or church membership to apply that to the twentieth century, to Protestant or Catholic American. So many Americans 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. Paul says that is useless and worthless, if something has not happened in the heart.

A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God. {Rom 2:28-29 NIV}

That last phrase is a play on words. The word "praise" is taken from the word "Judah," from which we get the word "Jew." Paul says the Jew is not

praised by men but by God; but he also makes clear what constitutes a true Jew in God's sight.

Now this is one of the most hotly debated questions in the state of Israel today. The Israelis are constantly trying to decide what is the basis of Jewry. What makes a Jew? Is it religion? Is it observing the Old Testament Law, keeping a kosher kitchen? Many Jews are atheists, having no use for the Old Testament, and yet they claim to be Jews because their ancestry is Jewish; their mothers and fathers, as far back as they know, were Jews. Is that the basis on which to claim Jewishness? There are black Jews who are petitioning to belong to Israel. But other Jews say you have to be white to be a Jew. What makes a Jew?

God says that nothing outward makes you a Jew. One becomes a Jew when his heart is changed. As with Abraham and Jacob, you become a Jew when you believe in Yeshua Hamashiach, Jesus the Messiah. The Jews for Jesus group is telling people this today. What makes you a Jew is not the culture from which you came, the ritual through which you have gone, the circumstances of your life, or your background, ancestry, or history, but the fact that you have come to know the Lord Jesus Christ. That is what makes you a Jew.

Paul wrote in Galatians 3:29:

If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. {Gal 3:29 NIV}

man without Christ is hopelessly lost. Though he defies God, deludes himself, defiles his conscience, or denies what he himself teaches, he is absolutely, hopelessly lost until he comes to know the Lord Jesus and lives on the basis of that relationship. That is what makes a Christian.

It is not a question of whether you are baptized, galvanized, sanforized, or pasteurized. The question is: "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, cannot earn it, but receive it by his love and grace?"

We will see what additional problems this raises with the Jews in the next section of the book of Romans.

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that if anyone here today is resting upon empty ceremonies, fancy moral standing, or decent or good living for their righteousness that they will see the hopelessness of such justification before you, the God of reality, the God of truth. We pray that they will receive the gift that you so freely offer in Jesus Christ our Lord. He alone can change us. He alone can set us free. He alone can instruct us, guide us, and make us into the men and women you want us to be. He accepts us on that basis, and for that we give grateful thanks. In his name, Amen.

Title: According to Light
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 2:12-29
Message No: 5
Catalog No: 3505
Date: January 11, 1976

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TOTAL WIPEOUT

by Ray C. Stedman

It has been interesting to note, as we have gone through this letter to the Romans, how logically and powerfully the Apostle Paul develops his subject. He evidently possessed a very vivid imagination and used it skillfully and with great power to illustrate and illuminate what he wanted to say. I never fail to be delighted at how the mind of the Apostle Paul works as he sets this truth out for us.

parts. The first eight verses are an imaginary dialogue that the apostle description of the condition of mankind before God.

The first part, the dialogue with the Jews, grows out of the close of Romans 2, in which the apostle answers the question that is still being hotly debated in the State of Israel today: What constitutes a true Jew?

The State of Israel has never been able to settle that question. Is it religion? Is a Jew someone who believes the Torah, the Law and the Prophets? Is it someone who is culturally a Jew, who keeps a kosher kitchen and observes all the dietary restrictions, who lives as a Jew and observes the traditions of Judaism? Many claim that this is the answer. Others say, "No, you can be an atheist and ignore all the ritual and ceremony of Judaism, but if you were born of Jewish ancestry you are a Jew." Still others think it is the facial features that make a Jew: the hooked nose, brown eyes, olive skin. But there are millions of Jews without these physical characteristics. So the argument rages.

Paul answers that question in Chapter 2. He says a man is not a Jew who is one outwardly. In God's sight, a Jew is one who has faith, who has the presence of the Spirit of God in his heart, who inwardly has faith in Jesus the Messiah. That is what constitutes a Jew and nothing else; all these other distinctions are laid aside. It is not the knowledge or possession of the Law that makes a man a Jew; it is not the rite of circumcision; it is not the claim to a special relationship with God. The only thing that makes a man a Jew is faith in the Messiah.

At this point the vivid imagination of Paul comes into play. He imagines a Jewish objector standing up and arguing with him at this point. Perhaps this actually happened many times in the course of Paul's travels throughout the Roman Empire. He had stated these things in many synagogues and surely at one time or another some knowledgeable Jewish rabbi would stand up and argue with him. That is what he is sharing with us now. In some ways this is a rather difficult passage. I invite you to pay close attention to it as we look through and see what these arguments are. Paul imagines three arguments from this Jewish objector.

In our own culture, you can place any religionist in place of the Jewish objector -- a Mormon, a Christian Scientist, a Hindu, a Buddhist, a Mohammedan, a Baptist, a Presbyterian, a Catholic. Anyone who counts on religion will offer the same kind of argument.

Paul imagines a Jew standing up at this point and saying, "Now, hold it! Wait a minute! These things you say don't count are the very things God himself has given to us." Circumcision came from God; God asked it of the Jews. And the Law was given by God to the Jews. It was God who called them his chosen people.

The argument is, "Paul, you're setting aside what God has established. If these things don't count, what advantage is there in being a Jew?" That question, and Paul's answer, are phrased in the first two verses of

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God. {Rom 3:1-2 NIV}

When Paul says "first," he does not mean first in a long list of advantages, though he did see many advantages in being a Jew. What Paul means by "first" is supremely, chiefly. The great glory in being a Jew in Paul's day was that the Jews had the Law. They possessed the written Word of God. That advantage is claimed today by many non-Jews, Catholics and Protestants who are proud of their knowledge of the Bible. Paul says that is a tremendous advantage. Already he has shown that everyone is under law. Even the savages in the jungle, 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. The conscience lays hold of that law written in the heart to tell people whether they are doing right or wrong. So light is given to everyone. As John puts it in his Gospel, "There is a light that lights everyone coming into the world," {cf, John 1:9 NIV}. Nobody lives in darkness.

But even though everyone has that light, the Jews had an additional

degree of light. They were given the written Word on stone, so that it was permanently preserved. Thus they had a knowledge of the mind and will and character of God that other people did not possess. They had a greater opportunity to know and obey God than anyone else in that day. Therefore they had a tremendous advantage. Implied in this is the fact that, though the Jew had this tremendous advantage, he failed to make use of it, and therefore it did him no good at all. He was no better off than if he had never known the Law at all because he did not put it to its intended use.

This parallels the situation in our day. We have billions of people who have been raised in Sunday school and church, who know the Scripture, and have even read the Bible from cover to cover. We live in a land where Bibles are available by the dozens and we can take our choice of versions. The mind of God is available, and yet millions of people are no better off than if they had never heard of the Bible. They are as lost as if they were savages in the jungles of Africa because the light they have is not put to use.

Just imagine, for instance, an island in darkness, populated with people. There is only one way to escape the island, a narrow bridge over a deep chasm, but the darkness is so great that only a few find their way over that bridge. Everybody on that island has been provided with a little penlight that enables them to dimly illuminate a small space around them, barely enough to avoid the more obvious obstacles in their path. But a certain group of people is given a powerful searchlight that can shine thousands of yards into the darkness. It is given to them not only so that they can find the bridge, but also so they can show others the way out. Yet these people, who have so much more light than the others, spend their time utilizing this powerful searchlight to look for needles in a haystack. They turn that searchlight on a mound of hay and search for needles. That, in essence, was what the Jews were doing.

The rabbis were arguing constantly over infinitesimal theological differences. Jesus called this "straining at a gnat, but swallowing a camel," {cf, Matt 23:24}. They argued over how many steps constituted a violation of the Sabbath and whether spitting on a rock is permissible on the Sabbath, or whether spitting on mud is a violation. One would be right, and the other wrong. This is what they used the Law for. Though the Jews had a tremendous advantage in having the Law, Paul says, they failed to use it properly.

The imaginary rabbi comes back with a second objection and Paul responds

What if some did not have faith? Would their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written:

The Jewish rabbi says, "Paul, are you suggesting that if some of the Jews did not believe (He is ready to admit that as a possibility) that God could forget his promises to all the Jews? Are you saying that just because some of us didn't measure up to what God required in the Law, everyone in Israel has lost the promise that God gave them? You seem to suggest that God is not interested in the very rituals which he himself instituted. Are you saying that circumcision and all these things mean nothing to God? Are you saying that God is upset by the disbelief of

just a few Jews and so he has canceled all Israel's prerogatives?"

Paul's answer uses the strongest words in the Greek language to say a thing is false. "By no means! Not at all!" (Literally, "May it never be!" Or, as it is translated in some versions, "God forbid!") That would suggest that God is the failure. It would suggest that God gave a promise and then did not keep his words, just because a few people failed to measure up. So God would be at fault. Our human hearts always tend to blame God for what goes wrong in our life, for our inability to fulfill what God demands. Paul says, "Never let that be! Let God be true, and every man liar." God is going to keep his word no matter how many fail.

Paul then quotes David's fifty-first psalm, that wonderful psalm written after the twin sins of murder and adultery, in which he was caught red-handed. When David repented, he wrote this beautiful psalm, in which he confesses his sins to God,

{cf, Psa 51:4b}

For a year and a half, David tried to hide his sins and refused to admit them to God or anyone else. He went on acting as though he were righteous and let people think that he was still the godly king of Israel. He let that hypocrisy go on for eighteen months; then God sent Nathan the prophet, who speared him with his long, bony finger, and exposed; he admitted them and confessed to God. He said, "It isn't you who are to blame, God; I did it." Paul says, "Let God be true and every man a liar."

Even if all the Jews fail in their belief, God will still fulfill his promise. How can God do this? God has said that some will believe. If everybody fails to believe, how can he keep his word? Paul says, "That's your problem; it's not God's problem." When certain of the Pharisees boasted to Jesus that they were "children of Abraham," Jesus said, "Don't you understand that God can raise up from these stones children unto Abraham?" {cf, Matt 3:9, Luke 3:8}. If men fail, God has unlimited resources to fulfill his promise. So there is no objection at that point. God will still judge the Jews, and all religionists, despite the failure of some.

But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?" {Rom 3:5-6 NIV}

As Paul says, this is a common human argument. You still hear it today. People say, "If what we're doing makes God look good because it gives him a chance to show his love and forgiveness, how can he condemn us? We've made him look good. We've given him a chance to reveal himself, and that's what he wants. So he can't condemn us for our sins. In fact (as Paul will go on to show the logical conclusion), let's sin the more

and make him look all the better!" People today say, "If God is glorified by human sin and failure, as the Scriptures say, then let's sin all the more."

Paul's answer is, "Let's carry that out to its logical conclusion. If everyone lived on that basis, then nobody could be judged and God would be removed as judge of all the world." It would demean God. God would be no better than the worst of men. God himself could not act as a judge if he actually arranged things so that sin would glorify God. If God cannot judge, he is demeaned; if he does not judge, the entire world is locked into perpetual evil. There would be no way of arresting the awful flow of human evil in this world. Therefore, this is a ridiculous argument.

The fact is, sin never glorifies God. Sin always has evil results; it does not produce good. As the Scriptures say, "He that sows to the flesh reaps corruption; he that sows to the Spirit reaps life everlasting," {cf, Gal 6:8}. This is an ordained law of God which no one can break.

Paul strengthens this argument with a personal illustration in

Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" Why not say -- as we are being slanderously reported and as some claim that we say -- "Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is deserved. {Rom 3:7-8 NIV}

The text adds the words, "Someone might argue," and that does not belong here. If your text does not add this, it is more accurate.

Paul is saying that he includes himself in the circle of condemnation. He says, "If my falsehood... " If you look back in Romans you can see O man, who judges another, you are without excuse." Then in

I love this because it means that Paul does not consider himself, even as a believer, beyond the judgment of God; he is just as capable of falsehood as anyone else. When that happens, that area of his life is subject to the condemnation of God, the same as anyone else. Paul does not hold himself up as better than anyone else.

Paul says, "Let's go on to say the logical thing: Let's do evil that good may come." What a ridiculous argument, he concludes. Why, that removes all differences between good and evil. This is what people are saying today. "There's no such thing as good or evil. Whatever you like is good; whatever you don't like, that's evil. It's only in your mind that there's any difference between good and evil." You see how up-to-date this argument is? Paul says it is ridiculous. The logical conclusion to that thinking is moral chaos and anarchy. Nobody could judge anything. We simply would plunge into a tremendous abyss of immorality in which anybody could do anything, and nobody would dare to raise a hand in opposition. This would produce moral anarchy. So, Paul says, the condemnation of this kind of reasoning is well-deserved.

answers it.

What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. {Rom 3:9 NIV}

I think it would be a little better to change this phrase from, "Are we any better?" to "Do we have any standing at all?" For that is what Paul is really saying. He has looked over all of mankind, and says, "Is there any ground by which a man or woman can please God apart from faith in Christ? Is there any way you can try to be good and make it?" His answer: None at all. No one can make it on those terms.

He has already demonstrated the universal condition of both Jews and Gentiles. He showed that the blatantly wicked people end up defying God, therefore they cannot make it. The morally self-righteous people, who pride themselves on their good conduct and clean living, simply delude themselves, so they cannot make it. The unenlightened pagans in all the jungles of the world, the concrete jungles as well as the green tropical jungles, defile their own consciences; they do not make it because they do not live up to their own standards. The religious zealots deny in deeds what they teach in words, and so they cannot make it. They are all wiped out.

Now comes the final touch. Paul gathers up what the Scriptures say on this subject. I like that. We are living in a day when what men say is really considered the final word. The Scriptures are considered, but are not really taken as authoritative. But the apostles never treated Scripture that way. They listened to what men said, but when it came to the final authority, they said, "What Scripture says, that's it!"

We need to return to that in our preaching. Every preacher ought to close his message by saying, in effect, what Walter Cronkite says at the end of every broadcast: "That's the way it is, this Sunday, January 18, 1976."

Paul gathers up a compilation of Scriptures from the Psalms and Proverbs and Isaiah to show that what he has described, God has already said. The Scriptures he uses divide into three very clear groups. First, there is the character of man, as God sees it; the conduct of man, in both speech and action; and the cause of all this.

3:10b NIV}

Isn't that an amazing statement? Just think of all the nice people that you know. They may not be Christians, but they are nice people -- good neighbors, kind and gracious people who speak lovingly. God, looking at them, says, "There's not one among them that is righteous, not even one." I think the total depravity of the human heart is revealed by the fact that when we read this kind of statement, "There is no one righteous, not even one," we mentally add, "except me." Right?

Think of all the people today who are searching to understand the mystery of life. All over the world, in temples, schools, universities, in the jungles, before idols, people are searching to find the answer to the mystery of man: Why are we like we are? And in all that vast array of searchers, God says there is not one who understands, not one.

What a claim this is! Here are all these religious people going to temples, going through various procedures, observing rituals, flocking to churches, filling up worship areas all over the world. What are they looking for? We would say they are looking for God, but God does not say so. He says there is no one searching for God. They are looking for a god, not the God. They are not looking for the God of truth and justice, who is behind all things.

worthless.
NIV}

That could hardly be made any clearer. There is no one who does good, not even one. Do you struggle with this? Then imagine that someone has invented a camera that records thoughts. Imagine that at a Sunday morning service, where all you fine-looking, moral, clean-living, decent people come, we would let you pass through a security section like they do at the airport and all your thoughts would be recorded. During the service, the camera is scanning, picking up your thoughts --

- * What you thought when you sat down,
- * What you thought when the person next to you sat down,
- * What you were thinking when we sang the hymn, and
- * What you were thinking when I led in prayer.

Then we announce that the next Sunday, instead of the regular service, we would hold a screening of the film from that camera. I wonder how many would show up?

But this is the stark revelation from Scripture of what God sees when he looks at the human race. There is no one who does good, not even one. Then he details why.

First, their speech:

bitterness." {Rom 3:13-14 NIV}

This covers the whole realm of the speech. It begins deep down in the throat, it comes then to the tongue, then the lips, and then the whole mouth. It moves from the inward to the outward. What do you find? Deep down, Paul says, God sees an open grave with a stinking, rotten corpse

and a horrible stench coming up from it that reveals itself, ultimately, in vulgarity.

Do you ever wonder why children love toilet talk? Kids especially like to talk toilet talk. Why?

Why do adults like words with double meanings? You hear them on television all the time.

What is down in the heart comes out in the speech -- not only vulgarity, but hypocrisy. "Their tongues practice deceit."

Those little white lies, the way we erect facades, the way we claim to feel one way when we actually feel another; we think all this deceit is harmless and unnoticed. But God sees it.

"The poison of vipers is on their lips." This is a picture of the tongue used to slander, to plant poison in another person's heart -- the put-down, the sharp, caustic words, the sarcasm that cuts someone off and depersonalizes another being. We are all guilty. This is what is inside, and this is what God sees with the realism of his eye.

"Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." If you do not believe that, just step out on the street and hit the first fellow that comes by right on the mouth and see what comes out -- cursing and bitterness! Cursing is blaming God; that is profanity. Bitterness is reproaching God because of the way he has run your life. This is what we hear all the time, even from Christians. We hear complaints about your circumstances, where God has placed you, and what he is doing with your life -- cursing and bitterness.

Look now at the deeds that follow.

{Rom 3:15-16 NIV}

Wherever man goes, ruin follows. Do we need any documentation of that today? Why do cities always develop ghettos and slums? Why do our beautiful mountains and streams become polluted? It is because of the heart of man.

3:16b-17 NIV}

I have often thought this would be an appropriate slogan for the United Nations! "The way of peace they do not know." An intense and cruel war is being fought in Lebanon today and the United Nations is helpless to stop it because "the way of peace they do not know." The cause of this follows, in just one sentence:

3:18 NIV}

"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness ... of men..." When men reject God, they lose everything. All these things follow because "there is no fear of God before their eyes."

In the last two verses we have a clear vision of why God gave the Law. Since the Jews were so convinced that their possession of the Law gave them special privileges in God's sight, Paul now turns to that subject.

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law [That was a fantastic statement to make] ; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. {Rom 3:19-20 NIV}

When you read this terrible description of the human race as God sees it, it is almost impossible for us to believe that God is not going to say, "Enough! Wipe them out!" If all he sees is wretchedness, misery, evil, deceit, hypocrisy, vulgarity, profanity, slander, and all these evil things that are in every heart -- every one without exception -- our natural instinct is to say, "Then God doesn't want us." But the amazing thing is that across this kind of verse he writes, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son," {John 3:16a KJV}. God did not send the Law to destroy us (and this is very important); he sent the Law to keep us from false hope.

The worst thing that can happen is to be going down a road to an important destination and think you are on the right track and spend all the time necessary to get there only to discover that the road peters out into nothingness. You find you have been on the wrong track and it is too late to go back. That was what was happening. So God, in his loving kindness, has given us the Law to keep us from taking a false path. Though the Law condemns us, it is that very condemnation that makes us willing to listen, so that we find the right path.

Paul says the Law does three things to us:

First, it stops our mouth. We have nothing to say. You can always tell someone is close to becoming a Christian when they shut up and stop arguing back. Self-righteous people are always saying, "But -- but this -- but I -- yes, but I do this -- and I do that." They are always arguing. But when they see the true meaning of the Law, their mouth is shut. When you read a statement like this, there is really nothing left to say, is there?

I had a friend who told me she was given a traffic ticket one day. She was guilty of doing what she was charged with, but she felt there was some justification for it, so she thought she would go to court and argue it before the judge. She imagined in her mind how she would come in and the judge would ask her if she was guilty. She would say, "Yes, but I want to explain why." She would proceed to convince the judge and all the court that what she did could hardly be avoided and that she was justified in doing it. Her argument was ready. "But," she said, "when I

came into that court and stood up there all alone, and the judge was there on the bench, dressed in his robe, and he looked over his glasses at me and said, 'Guilty or not guilty?' all my arguments faded. I just said, 'Guilty.'" Her mouth was stopped.

That is the first thing the Law does: it shuts you up, and you do not argue with God anymore.

Second, Paul says, "The whole world is held accountable to God." That makes us realize there is no easy way, no way by which death suddenly is going to dissolve all things into everlasting darkness, forever forgotten. The whole world has to stand before God. Hebrews puts it so starkly, "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment," {Heb 9:27 KJV}.

Finally, the Law reveals very clearly what sin is. What does the Law want of us? Jesus said that all the Law is summed up in one word: Love. All the Law asks us to do is to act in love. All these things the Law states are simply loving ways of acting. When we face ourselves before the Law, we have to confess that many, many times we fail in love. We do not love. That is what the Law wants us to see, because, then, when all else fails, we are ready to listen to what follows.

from God has been provided. That is what Paul wants us to hear. When we take that one way, we find we have learned to love -- not by the Law, but by the provision of the Son of God.

Prayer

Father, we thank you for loving us enough to tell us the truth. Thank you for loving us enough to shut up all other ways -- to block them out and tell us they are wrong and they do not lead anywhere -- so that we give up trying to make ourselves good enough to belong to you. Help us to take the only way that has ever been provided, a righteousness that is given to us, which we never earned, and cannot earn, but which is ours because we believe the Lord Jesus. We thank you for that. How rich we are because of it. May anyone here without this now turn and open his life to you, knowing that this is the only way out of the judgment of God. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Total Wipeout
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 3:1-20
Message No: 6
Catalog No: 3506
Date: January 18, 1976

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BUT NOW

by Ray C. Stedman

The title of our study this morning is taken from the opening words of sigh of relief in those two words. After God's appraisal of man's efforts to achieve some standing before him, given to us in the verses previous to this, now come God's words of relief, God's total answer to man's total failure. Paul has concluded his description of what humanity is like as God sees it, with his ability to see everything about us. Nothing is hidden from his eyes, not our thoughts, our hearts, our intents, or our motives. We saw last week that there is clearly no one us that:

That is God's appraisal. "But now," Paul says...

But now a righteousness from God, apart from the law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. {Rom 3:21 NIV}

This is God's great "nevertheless" in the face of man's failure. In the subsequent paragraphs, the Apostle Paul develops this in his usual reasoned and logical style. For a little guide to this section, here is the way it breaks down:

obtained.

Let us look together now at this great statement beginning with

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. {Rom 3:21 NIV}

This is what Paul elsewhere calls "the glorious gospel of the blessed which consists of a gift that God gives us -- the righteousness of God himself. We have already seen that this word, righteousness , is highly misunderstood in our day. Often it is associated with behavior. If people are behaving in a right way, we say that they are behaving righteously. But in the book of Romans, righteousness does not directly touch on behavior. It is not what you do ; it is what you are! That is even more important, because your behavior stems from what you are. The gift Paul is talking about, the gift from God, is that of a righteous standing.

But the real meaning underlying this word, as understood by us today, is found in the word worth . People everywhere are looking for a sense of worth . In fact, psychologists tell us that this sense of worth is the most essential element in human activity, and that without it you cannot function as a human being. Therefore, whether we know it or not, or describe it in these terms, we are all looking for a sense of worth. But the gospel announces that it is given to us. What other people work all their lives to achieve is handed to us right at the beginning, when we believe in Jesus Christ. According to the gospel, we cannot earn it, but it is given to us. Now that is the good news, and what a wonderful statement that is.

The other day, in reading an article on some of the movements of our day, I came across these words by Dr. Lewis Smede, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. This is what he said.

Anyone who can see the needs of people today must recognize that the malaise of our time is an epidemic of self-doubt and self-depreciation. Those whose job it is to heal people's spiritual problems know that the overwhelming majority of people who seek help, are people who are sick from abhorring themselves. A prevailing sense of being without worth is the pervasive sickness of our age.

That comes from a man who spends a great deal of time trying to help people with emotional problems and personality difficulties in their lives. He says the basic need is a sense of worth. There are millions of people today who are openly acknowledging that they need help, and who come looking for help. There are others who never ask, but behind their smiling facades and confident airs, there are insecure hearts and a consciousness of deep self-doubt. This is the basic problem of mankind.

This gospel, therefore, is dealing with something tremendously significant. It does not have to do only with what happens when you die. I think this is one of the reasons why hundreds of churches today are half-empty; so many people do not know that self-worth is what the gospel is all about. Young people today are looking for a ground of worth. They want to be loved. We just read this prayer request of a boy who desperately needs to know that his dad loves him, and I sensed a murmur of concern throughout the congregation as we identified with that feeling of needing to be loved.

Well, far, far deeper than the need to feel that some human being loves us is our need to know that God loves us, and that we are acceptable in

his sight, that we have standing and value and worth to him. Something about us, that bit of eternity planted in our hearts by God himself, bears witness to us that this is the ultimate issue. Somehow life can never be satisfying if that question is not settled. Therefore this good news comes with tremendous relevance today. What God is offering is a gift of righteousness -- his own perfect righteousness, that cannot be improved upon, a perfect value. By faith in Jesus Christ, he gives us a sense of worth and acceptance, and there could be no better news to mankind.

Paul adds two things to this, so as to make it clear to us:

First, this righteousness is apart from the Law. That is to say, it is not something that you earn; it is a gift. You cannot earn it by doing your best to be pleasing to God, and anybody 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 that you know of cannot make it, because God knows her heart. Nevertheless, God has found a way to give us that gift, and therefore it is apart from the Law; it is not something we can earn.

Second, Paul says, it is witnessed by the Law and the Prophets. This is not something entirely new in history, something that only Jesus Christ brought to light. He did make it known, so that we understand it far more clearly because of his coming, but it is found in the Old Testament as well as in the New. The saints who lived before the cross knew and experienced the wonder of this gift just as much as we do today, although they came to it by a different process.

The Law bore testimony to this righteous gift of God providing a series of sacrifices. The Jews knew, somehow, that they did not measure up to God's standards, so the Law itself provided a system of offerings and sacrifices that could be brought and offered on the altar. This system pictured the death of Jesus; the whole sacrificial system of the Old Testament is a witness to mankind that One is coming who will be "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world," {John 1:29b}. They bear witness to this righteous gift.

The prophets also -- these well-known names of the Old Testament: Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others -- not only talked about this gift, but experienced it themselves. In one of the Psalms that we will read in the next chapter, David is quoted as saying, "Blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven, to whom the Lord will not impute iniquity, whose sins are covered," {cf, Psa 32:1}. David understood that God had found a way to give the gift of worth to a man, even before the cross occurred in history. This is not new, Paul says; nevertheless, it is clearly explained and made fully available to us in the cross of Jesus.

In the next division Paul tells us how to obtain this gift. Perhaps you are looking for this sense of worth, this sense of value, of being loved and wanted by God. How do you get it? Here is Paul's answer.

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. {Rom 3:22-24 NIV}

There is one way -- expressed here in four different aspects, but only one way -- through faith in Jesus Christ:

Notice first how Paul's answer centers immediately on the person of the Savior, not only on his work or his teaching, but on his person. It is by faith in Christ himself that you come into this standing. He is the Savior; it is not what he taught, not even what he gives; but it is he who saves us. Therefore the gift involves a relationship to a living person.

That is why in John's gospel he does not say, "Believe in what Jesus did" but rather, "As many as received him, to them he gave power to become the sons of God," {cf, John 1:12}. That means there must come a time when you open your life to Christ, when you ask him to be what he offers to be -- your Lord. Later in this epistle Paul will say, "If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved [another term of this gift of righteousness]. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved," {Rom 10:9-10}. Jesus himself said, in the book of Revelation, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door [the door of your will, of your heart] I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me," {cf, Rev 3:20}. There is no other way. No way can be found in all the religions of earth that can bring men into a sense of value and standing in God's sight, and of worth and love before him, except this way by faith in Jesus Christ.

Second, Paul stresses the fact here that it is all who believe who are saved; it is not automatically and universally applied. People are teaching today that the death of Christ was so effective that whether people hear about it or not, they are already saved. They do not even need to know about it, for they are saved by the death of Jesus. But Paul is careful to make clear that this is not true. You are saved when you personally believe. Faith, therefore, is the hand that takes this gift that God offers. What good is a gift if you do not take it? Gifts can be offered, but they cannot be used until they are taken. When that occurs, then the gift becomes effective in the life of the one who takes it.

The third element that describes how we obtain this gift is in the phrase, "justified freely by his grace." Do you see what that says? It is God who does this. If you try to say, therefore, that there is anything man must do to be justified, you will destroy the gift, because it is all of God. We are justified, declared righteous, declared of worth in God's sight, by his grace. If you add baptism to that, or church membership, or anything else, then you destroy the grace of God. It is freely and completely and wholly God who saves us. We do not contribute a thing. Have you ever sung the hymn, "Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to Thy cross I cling"? That is one beautiful way of expressing this truth.

The last word in this section is this: It is "through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." That is, Christ is the one who accomplished something that does the work of redemption. Here we are brought face-to-face with the cross, with the death of Jesus, and the apostle is underlining this fact. Many churches are given over to following the teachings of Jesus, but hardly ever refer to his cross. If you find a

so-called Christianity that does not emphasize the cross, you are listening to "another gospel" which is not the true gospel. The real gospel is based only upon the redemption which Jesus accomplished in his cross.

Paul now gives a brief explanation of how and why this redemption works. verses that follow.

God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished -- he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies the man who has faith in Jesus. {Rom 3:25-26 NIV}

I want you to give very careful attention to these words. This is the heart of the gospel, and the ground of assurance. Many people, even though they become Christians, struggle with assurance. They do not rest upon the fact that these words are true, so they are filled often with a struggle of doubts and uncertainty. They have a sneaking suspicion, deep inside, that perhaps, despite all these wonderful words, God is still not quite satisfied; if something should happen to them, they might be lost. I want you to pay very careful attention to Paul's argument here, because this is the answer to that struggle.

First, he says that God has accomplished a propitiatory sacrifice. God presented Jesus as a "sacrifice of atonement" (that is the phrase here) through faith in his blood. His words, "sacrifice of atonement" are really translating a single word in Greek (hilasterion , for you Greek students), which is translated "expiation" in some versions, and "propitiation" in others. I know that those words are theological terms, and may not make much sense to you. But I want you to understand their meaning, because this is the heart of the gospel.

Expiation is that which satisfies justice; propitiation is that which awakens love. Both of these terms are involved in the death of Jesus, but expiation does not go quite as far as propitiation. Propitiation carries us clear through to the awakening of God's love toward us. That is why I think "propitiatory sacrifice" is a better translation than the word "expiation."

Let me illustrate the difference. In these days we often read of industrial accidents. Let us say that someone has been injured in the course of his work, and has been partially paralyzed. The company is at fault, having neglected to provide safety equipment, thus creating the conditions that put this man in danger. So the company is held accountable for the man's injury and subsequent paralysis. Therefore the court awards this man a tremendous sum of money, to be paid by the company. When the money is paid, the company has expiated its wrongdoings; it has satisfied the demands of justice. It no longer has any responsibility toward this man; it has paid its costly debt. That is what expiation means.

But that does, not say anything about how the man feels toward the company. He may yet be filled with resentment, bitterness, even hatred. He may spend the rest of his life abhorring the name of that company,

even though it has given him all the money he could possibly use. The debt has been expiated, but it has not been propitiated.

What Paul is saying here is that human sin has injured God, just as that man was injured by the negligence of the company. Our sin has hurt and injured God, and justice demands that we be punished for that sin in some way. In the death of Jesus that punishment was accomplished, so that God's justice was satisfied. If you read this as expiation, that is all the cross means. In a way, it means that it paid God off, so that he no longer holds us to blame. But that is not all that Paul is saying here. The word means also that God's love has been awakened toward us, and he reaches out to love us, and grants us the feeling of worth and acceptance and value in his sight. That is what propitiation means, that is what the death of Jesus does. It did satisfy God's justice, but it went further; it awakened his love, and now he is ready to pour out love upon us.

Paul shows us why this had to happen, beginning in the middle of

He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his
forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand
unpunished -- {Rom 3:25b NIV}

What is he talking about? He is referring to all the centuries when God apparently had done nothing about the wrongdoings of men. We find people questioning this yet today. They say, "Where is the God of justice? How is it that a just God lets these tyrants rise up and murder millions of people? How can he let people live in poverty and squalor and filth? He never seems to do anything about oppressors! Where is the justice of God?" Those questions have been raised for centuries; in fact, we even find them in the Psalms.

We have to face the fact that the last time in history that mankind got a clear idea of God's holy justice was the time of the flood. In response to the wickedness of men toward other men, God wiped out the whole human race, except for eight people. The flood was a testimony to God's sense of justice, but there has never been a manifestation of it to that degree since that time. So the question arises in human hearts, "Doesn't God really care? It doesn't matter whether you do wrong or not, God will let you get away with it. God won't do anything to you." David writes, "Why do the wicked flourish, and the righteous suffer? Where is the God of justice?" Now, God has been patiently restraining his hand, in order that the human race may continue to exist, but people do not see that. Therefore the justice of God seems to be compromised by his self-restraint.

But the cross settles that. The cross says that God remains just. All the stored-up punishment amply deserved by the human race, is now poured out without restraint upon the head of Jesus on the cross. God did not spare his Son one iota of the wrath that man deserves. Just because Jesus was his beloved Son, he did not lessen the punishment a single degree. All of it was poured out on him. That explains the cry of abandonment that comes from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" {Matt 27:46, Mark 15:34}. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus faced the possibility of being shut away from all love, all beauty, all truth, all warmth, all acceptance, the possibility of being

forever denied all that makes life beautiful. There he faced the eternity of emptiness in the judgment of God, and this is what he experienced on the cross; all of it was poured out on him.

Paul's argument is that he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time -- so as to be just, and yet be free to extend love to us who deserve only his justice. That is the glory of the good news of the gospel. God's love has been freed to act toward us, and his justice satisfied, so that it is no longer compromised by the fact that he forgives sinners.

In the closing paragraph, Paul gives us the results of this forgiveness.

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles, too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through the same faith. Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law. {Rom 3:27-31 NIV}

Paul raises and answers three simple questions to show us the natural results of this tremendous acceptance that God gives us in Jesus Christ:

First, who can boast? No one, absolutely no one. How can you boast when everyone receives the gift of grace without any merit on his part? This means that any ground for self-righteousness is done away with, and this is why the ugliest sin among Christians is self-righteousness. When we begin to look down on people who are involved in homosexuality, or outright wickedness, or greed, or gambling, or whatever -- when we begin to think that we are better than they are -- then we have denied what God has done for us. All boasting is excluded. There are no grounds for anybody to say, "Well, at least I didn't do this, or this, or this." The only ground of acceptance is the gift of grace.

Then, no one is excluded from grace, Jew or Gentile. No special privilege or favor counts in God's sight. He has no most-favored-nation; they are all alike before him. 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 he is equally the God of the Gentiles and the God of the Jews, because both must come on exactly the same ground. This is the wonderful thing about the gospel. All mankind is leveled; no one can stand on any other basis than the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf.

Paul's third question is, "Does this cancel out the Law or set it aside? Do we no longer need the Law?" His answer is, "No, it fulfills the Law." The righteousness which the Law demands is the very righteousness that is given to us in Christ. So if we have it as a gift, we no longer need to fear the Law, because the demands of the Law are met. But it is not something we can take any credit for; indeed, whenever we act in unrighteousness after this, the Law comes in again to do its work of showing us what is wrong. That is all the Law is good for. It shows us what is wrong, and immediately, all the hurt and injury accomplished by

our sin is relieved again by the grace of God, the forgiveness of God.

Receiving God's forgiveness is not something we do only once; it is something we do again and again. It is the basis on which we live, constantly taking fresh forgiveness from the hand of God. John's letter puts it this way:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

That is God's gift, and we need all the time to take it afresh from the hand of God. When we find ourselves slipping into self-righteousness, when we find ourselves looking down our noses, when we find ourselves filled with pride and acting in arrogance, being critical and calloused and caustic and sarcastic toward one another, or feeling bitter and resentful -- and all these things are yet possible to us -- our relationship to a holy God is not affected, if we acknowledge that we sinned. We can come back, and God's love is still there. He still accepts us and highly values us. We are his dearly loved children, and he will never change.

That is what God's gift of righteousness means to us. It is wonderful good news indeed, that we never need fear. The God of ultimate holiness, the God who lives in holy light, whom we cannot begin to approach, has accepted us in the Beloved, and we stand on the same ground of worth that he himself has. We can remind ourselves, as I seek to do every day, of three things:

- * I am made in God's image -- therefore I am able to act beyond the capacity of any animal on earth. I am not an animal; I am a man made in God's image.
- * Second, I am possessed of God's Spirit -- that means I am forgiven, I am freed, and I am filled.
- * Third, I am part of God's plan -- I am part of the working out of his purposes in the world today, and God will make everything I do fit into his plan.

Therefore I can go on with purpose, and with confidence, and with love; without guilt, nor any sense of inadequacy or fear. I have perfect freedom to concern myself with the problems around me, and not be all wrapped up with the ones inside. Those are all taken care of, and that is truly wonderful.

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, these words are so remarkable, we can hardly believe them. In fact, our hearts still struggle with them at times. We just cannot believe that this can be accomplished. But this is the clear declaration of your Word. And we know that millions before us have believed these words and found them to be true, and have gone shouting off to face death itself with a confidence that they had nothing to fear before your throne. We thank you for that. We pray that we may live on this basis, and thus find the ground of forgiving each other, and being tenderhearted and loving toward one another,

knowing that we already have that gift ourselves, in Jesus Christ our Lord. If anyone here has never yet come to that, Lord, we pray that even now he or she might open his heart to you, and say, "You are my Lord, and I invite you to reign in my heart, and deliver me from my guilt." We thank you that this will be accomplished as your Word has declared, in the name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

Title: But Now
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 3:21-31
Message No: 7
Catalog No: 3507
Date: January 25, 1976

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THE FATHER OF FAITH

by Ray C. Stedman

Today we are studying Romans, Chapter 4. Do you remember how this letter from the Apostle Paul began? After a brief introduction, Paul declares, in striking terms, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile," {Rom 1:16 NIV}. In those words you have the theme to the book of Romans. It is the "glorious gospel of the blessed God" possesses something that men desperately need and search for everywhere.

Yesterday morning in Cincinnati, I spoke to a beautiful young woman who had been divorced a few weeks before. Her husband had deserted her and had run off with another woman. This young woman was a Christian, but she was very much afraid even to contemplate what was ahead for her. She confessed that she was upset and nervous, uncertain of what to do, afraid of the future. As I talked with her I could see that what was troubling her was a lack of any sense of self-worth or respect for herself as a person. Therefore she lacked confidence in herself and

feared what would happen to her.

Today you can buy books by the score on the subject of the need for self-worth. It is called self-image, or a sense of significance to your life, or loving and being loved, or accepting and being acceptable: These things are what is meant by the word righteousness in Scripture. Righteousness lies at the heart of the gospel. Paul says in Romans 1:17 {NIV}, "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed." Paul is talking about that gift of self-worth, that gift of significance, which you can have in the gospel, not only at the beginning of your Christian life, but every day thereafter. It is the ground upon which you face life and the place from which you operate -- it is a gift of the grace of God.

One of the clearest examples of this in Scripture is Abraham, and, in this fantastic gift of righteousness, this gift of worth and standing and acceptance and significance before God. Abraham is one of the great names of all history. There are very few names that are known and honored throughout the world in the entire record of human history, but the name Abraham is. He is known, revered, and honored by three faiths. Jews, Muslims, and Christians all honor the name of Abraham. Here is a man who, by any reckoning at all, stands head and shoulders above most of the human race. Paul uses Abraham as an example especially for the Jewish readers of this letter.

morning. In these twelve verses Paul discusses three important questions about Abraham:

- 1 How was Abraham made righteous?
- 2 When was Abraham made righteous?
- 3 And why was Abraham made righteous?

That is the outline of our study this morning. Let's take this first one, as Paul introduces it in Verses 1-3:

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter [that is, in regard to being acceptable before God] ? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about -- but not before God. What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." {Rom 4:1-3 NIV}

Paul says that Abraham our forefather discovered two ways to gain a sense of worth: One, Paul suggests, is by works. Abraham was a man of good works. In Genesis, the very first account of Abraham, when he was living in the city of Ur of the Chaldea in the Mesopotamian Valley, describes him as a religious man. Abraham was an idolator and worshipped the moon goddess. But he was not deliberately seeking to evade God. He worshipped the moon goddess in ignorance. It was in the midst of that condition that God appeared to him and spoke to him. Abraham believed God, responded to his call, and set out on a march without a map. He trusted God to lead him to a land he had never seen before, to take care of his family, and to lead them into a place that would fulfill the promises of God. So Abraham appears in the Scripture as a man of great works.

Paul says, "If in fact Abraham was justified [i.e., made righteous] by

works, he had something to boast about." Abraham thus discovered early in his life one way of gaining a sense of significance, importance, or self-respect -- performance. If you can give a good performance in any endeavor you will be highly thought of, you will gain a sense of being appreciated, you will have a feeling of self-respect, and you will be able to function on that basis.

Paul admits that if Abraham was righteous because of works, he had something to boast about. Works always give you something to boast about. You can look at the record, you can show people what you have done and why you ought to be appreciated. You may not boast openly, but we all have very subtle ways and clever tricks of getting it out into the open so people can see what we have done. You can drop a hint of something you have done, hoping that people will ask some more about it. Somehow you manage things so that people will know you are a person of significance. That is the way the world is today, and the way it was in Abraham's day.

That may work before men, but not before God. God is never impressed by that kind of performance. In fact, God, who sees the heart, is not looking at outward performance; he knows what is going on. He knows the selfishness, the greed, the grasping, the self-centeredness, the ruthlessness with which we cut people out and harm those we profess to love. He sees all the maneuvering and manipulating, the clever arranging that goes on in our lives and in our hearts. Therefore, to his purposes, that beautiful performance is utterly invalid, worthless, to God. That is why the sense of righteousness that results from our performance before men never lasts. It is but a temporary shot in the arm that we need to repeat again and again, almost as though we were addicted to it. But it will always let us down in the hour of crisis. It is only the righteousness that comes from God that is lasting and will work -- not only in time, but for all eternity. That is what Abraham discovered. He discovered that righteousness which comes from performance is worthless.

How did he discover this? Paul says, "What does the Scripture say?" Paul refers to the fifteenth chapter of Genesis, where God appeared before Abraham. He took him out one night and showed him the stars in the heavens. "Abraham, look up!" Abraham looked up into the stillness of that oriental night, with the stars blazing in all their glory. God said to him, "If you can number those stars, you can number your descendants. Their number will be far more than all the stars of heaven." And, Paul says, "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" -- self-worth, standing before God, acceptance, a sense of love and value in the sight of God.

It says that "Abraham believed God," but we have to be careful. These Old Testament accounts are highly condensed versions. They do not give us the details. We have to fill them in from elsewhere in Scripture, and oftentimes we need to use a bit of sanctified imagination, guided by what the passage gives us. From other passages we know that God did not just say, "Abraham, see the stars? So shall your seed be." But we learn that God explained to Abraham what he meant by "seed."

In the letter to the Galatians, Paul tells us that God made it clear to Abraham that when God said, "so shall your seed be" {cf, Gal 3:16}, he was talking about Jesus Christ, who would be the seed of Abraham. God evidently explained to Abraham that there was One coming who would fulfill all the promises that Abraham would have a heavenly seed as well as the earthly seed of his physical descendants. With regard to his spiritual descendants God said his seed would be Jesus. It is through

Jesus that all Abraham's seed would be fulfilled.

That is why, on one occasion, when Jesus was talking to the Pharisees, they said to him, "Abraham is our father." Jesus said to them. "If Abraham were your father, you would believe me, because Abraham saw my day and was glad," {cf, John 8:56}. So God evidently explained to Abraham, and Abraham understood by faith that the seed of righteousness, Jesus the Lord, was coming and that he would die on the cross to remove the penalty and guilt of man's misbehavior and to settle the question of the justice of God. He would rise again from the dead as a living Lord to give his life to men and women everywhere, thus fulfilling the promise to Abraham. Abraham believed God. He believed God's promise about the seed, and so he was justified, made righteous, given the gift of a sense of worth.

Interestingly enough, when James quotes this passage from credited to him as righteousness," then he adds, "and he was called God's friend," {Jas 2:23 NIV}. That is acceptance, isn't it? Abraham became God's friend -- not because he behaved so well, or because he was a godly man and obeyed God -- he became the friend of God because he believed God's promise about the seed. Abraham is a beautiful example of what Paul is talking about here in Romans.

Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited [or reckoned] as righteousness. {Rom 4:4-5 NIV}

Here is an illustration taken from common life, and it is very up to date. Tomorrow I must sit down and fill out my income tax. There is a very tantalizing regulation in the income tax law that awakens my cupidity every year. The rule says that if you have money given to you as a gift, it is not taxable. I keep looking for ways that will make it appear to the IRS that all the money I receive from my various functions as a pastor is really a gift. But the IRS will never buy it. They insist that if you work, what you are given is not a gift, but wages, and must be reported.

This is exactly the argument Paul uses. If you work for something, then what you get is never a gift, it is what you have earned. You have it as a result of your labor; it is an obligation that must be paid. Therefore you yourself can take the credit for having earned it. But then Paul work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness." He is reckoned righteous -- not because he earned it, but as a gift. Who is Paul talking about? From the context it is clearly Abraham. This could read:

However, to this man Abraham, who does not work, but trusts God who justifies the wicked, the ungodly, his faith is credited to him as righteousness -- worth, acceptance, standing, and love from God. {Rom 4:5 RCS Paraphrase}

This is an amazing declaration of the gospel. It is startling to think that Abraham was a wicked man, but he was. Anybody who tries to earn acceptance, to earn God's love, to earn a place of respect and standing before God by trying hard to do things for him, is a wicked person. That is what the Scriptures say. We are trying to gain something by our own merit that can never be gained that way. Therefore it is the height of wickedness.

Many, many Christians fall back into this trap. Having once accepted the Christ and believed on him for their eternal destiny, they spend the rest of their lives trying to gain a sense of God's approval and love by hard, exhausting, committed, dedicated labor. And you can never win God's love that way. You never know when you have done enough. You cannot earn the gift of love, but it is yours if you take it by faith in Christ, fresh every morning.

Paul now brings in another illustration from the Old Testament to confirm this. He says David expressed the same idea when he spoke of the blessedness of the man to whom God credited righteousness apart from works. Paul says David is another man who gained this wonderful basis of operation -- not by his performance, but by his faith. In

against him." {Rom 4:7-8 NIV}

Those of you who heard Stuart Briscoe Wednesday night heard a marvelous exposition of similar words in the fifty-first Psalm. During a Monday morning breakfast, he gave a beautiful exposition of the thirty-second Psalm which Paul quotes here. The remarkable thing is that David found this gift of self-worth before God when he was tortured by a guilty conscience. His hands were red with the blood of the murder of Uriah the Hittite, and he was troubled with a wrong spirit that had plunged him into deep evil as the king of Israel.

Paul points out that Abraham failed to find righteousness by being devout and moral; he found it when he believed in Jesus, the seed. He was called the friend of God, not because he was such an obedient servant, but because he believed in what God said. And the bloody-handed, lustful king, David, failed to find righteousness by being the king of Israel. In the midst of his evil he found it in Christ when he believed God; he believed that God did not require the sacrifice of animals, but a broken spirit that trusted in what God had to say about the great sacrifice that was yet to come. And David is called a man after God's heart.

Now, would you like to be a friend of God, a man or a woman after God's own heart: This is what Paul is telling us. There is a way -- not by your performance, but by your trust in Jesus' life and death and work and what it means for you every day.

The apostle moves on to take up the question of when this happens. He

Is this blessedness only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? We have been saying that Abraham's faith was

credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received circumcision as a sign and seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. {Rom 4:9-11a NIV}

I find a lot of people today who are very embarrassed by God's emphasis upon circumcision. Because of their upbringing, these people feel that sex is dirty, and that our sexual organs are never to be discussed or mentioned. They think that our bodies end at the waist. That, of course, represents a very twisted view of human sexuality. God frequently discusses circumcision. He chose it as the symbol of this marvelous truth that we are talking about this morning, and he gave it to the Jews for a specific purpose. God is not in the least embarrassed by that fact, and I don't think we should be either. Those who fail to think through this whole matter of circumcision miss some very powerful insights into human life.

Paul makes two points here:

First of all, Abraham was circumcised fourteen years after he was pronounced righteous by faith, fourteen years after he was called the friend of God. Therefore the ritual of circumcision cannot have any saving value whatsoever. Abraham was already God's friend fourteen years before he was circumcised. You can see how effectively that wipes out all the arguments of the Jews, from Paul's day on, who claim that it is the ritual that makes you acceptable. This, of course, cancels out the modern equivalent of circumcision -- baptism. People are justified -- made righteous, accepted in God's sight -- not by being baptized, but by faith in the Lord Jesus, in his work and in his death.

I will never forget the young man who came into my study one day, Bible in hand, and announced that he had been reading the Bible. He didn't know a lot about it, but he said, "Would you circumcise me?" I blinked three or four times, then said, "Why?" He said, "I've been reading in this Bible that if you want to know God you have to be circumcised. I want to know God, so I want to be circumcised." I had the joy of telling him what circumcision meant, that it was simply a sign of something that was already true by faith. That boy became a Christian and is still in our congregation and growing in the Lord.

The second point that Paul makes here is that not only is ritual valueless in saving anyone, but that the real purpose of circumcision was two-fold: It is a sign and a seal.

Now let us not be prudish at this point. I do not want to offend anyone by what I say, but I just want to point out that God thinks this is highly important. God says that he chose the place on a man's body where this sign, this rite of circumcision, would be placed. God chose to put it on the male organ, and I think it is obvious why. God wants us to remember what this ritual stands for. The most important thing you can remember in your life is where you find love and self-acceptance and standing and significance before man and God. So God placed it -- out of all the parts of the body he could have chosen -- on this organ, because a man, by nature, has to handle it several times a day. It is a sign, therefore, that would be impossible to overlook.

Furthermore, Paul says, it is not only a sign, but a seal. A seal is a

guarantee of permanency. Once again, the rite of circumcision, which removes the foreskin of the male organ, is an unchangeable act. Once it is done, it cannot be undone. Therefore it is a guarantee of the continuity of this great truth. It is God's expressive way of saying with visible force, "This is the ground of your life, the secret of your functioning as a human being, this great truth of acceptance before me. And it will never change."

righteous. Beyond the personal salvation of Abraham himself, God had another reason.

So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.
{Rom 4:11b-12 NIV}

The words "so then" really should be, "it was to make him" a father. Paul is not talking about circumcision; he is talking about what circumcision stands for: The gift of being made acceptable before God, being loved by God, a gift of worth from God. That was given to Abraham, not only for his own personal purposes, but to make him a father of many more yet to come. Remember the stars in the heavens? That promise is yet to be fulfilled.

We here today are not, for the most part, physical descendants of Abraham. I happen to be. I learned several years ago from the genealogist of the Stedman tribe that the Stedmans go back to Abraham, through Ishmael. That makes me a physical descendant -- but I am not boasting of that. However, we are spiritual sons and daughters of Abraham when we, too, have received worth and self-respect by believing, as Abraham did, that God meant what he said. And he gives us this gift in Jesus Christ, quite apart from any merit on our part. This is what fatherhood means.

Jesus illustrated this when he said to the Pharisees of his day, "You are of your father the devil," {cf, John 8:44}. Now Jesus did not mean that in some way the devil had been involved in their conception. What he means is they were following the philosophy of the devil. They were agreeing with and controlled by the philosophy of the devil, so they were sons and daughters of the devil. The devil was their father.

Likewise, we think and act like Abraham when we trust that the basis of our acceptance by God is what Jesus is and has done for us -- not anything that we are doing. In this way Abraham is our father and we are his spiritual descendants. Paul says this is true for those who are uncircumcised, and yet who keep on believing in Jesus; and it is true of those who are circumcised, the Jews, who also walk in the footsteps of the faith of Abraham. So Jews are not saved by being circumcised; they are saved by trust in God.

This is the great secret of life.

What a change this makes in your motivation if you know that you do not have to earn God's love, God's favor, God's forgiveness. It is already

yours.

You do not have to earn it, it is yours every day. There is nothing I know that will set you free more than that.

You do not need to take your sense of worth from other people. You do not need to maneuver and manipulate and cleverly show yourself as a person of some significance. You are set free from that. You already have the only standing that ever counts -- your standing before God.

So you can relax and give people love without demanding anything back. That is what Christianity is all about.

That is a great gift, a fantastic gift.

Let us thank God for this.

Prayer

Father, we ask that you will forgive us for any lingering desire in our heart to try to earn a standing before you, for any hungering after the righteousness that comes from men -- a gift of self-worth and self-image extracted from others through manipulating and maneuvering and clever posturing. Forgive us that, and help us accept this marvelous gift of acceptance before you, this gift of worth given fresh every day. Help us to live and operate on that basis as Abraham did, and as Moses did, and as the other mighty men and women of God did in the past. We know that these words are true. This is the way you operate, and we can find the effect of them in our lives today. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: The Father of Faith
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 4:1-12
Message No: 8
Catalog No: 3508
Date: April 4, 1976

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THE FAITH OF OUR FATHER

by Ray C. Stedman

This morning we are going to talk about faith -- a simple thing, but hard for many to comprehend. Many people are confused on the subject of faith.

Some think that faith is nothing but a mental assent to a truth -- that if you believe a thing is true, then you are exercising faith. But faith is more than simply believing something is true.

Some people believe that faith is a feeling, a feeling of confidence. If you happen to have confidence, you have much faith; if you do not have confidence, then you have little or no faith. Your faith depends upon how much feeling you can generate. But that is not true faith, and that kind of definition of faith deceives many people.

There are some who think that faith actually is a type of self-deception. Somebody has said that faith is a way of believing what you know is not true. There are people who actually try to believe something that they know is not true. They talk themselves into believing it and call that faith.

If you really want to know what faith is, you have to see it in action. That is why the Apostle Paul, in Romans 4, brings in Abraham, the man of faith. He is by no means the only man who has faith, but he is pre-eminently qualified as a man of faith. Looking at Abraham you can learn what faith is.

Abraham -- that gift of self-worth, that essential element which every one of us desperately needs in order to function as a human being. We found that it comes as a gift from God when you believe. That is what the word "righteousness" really means. Abraham obtained righteousness by faith. Today we are going to look at the faith of Abraham.

There are four things that the Apostle Paul points out about Abraham's faith:

- 1 First, we will look at the opposite of faith -- what faith is not. Sometimes the best way to learn what a thing is, is by learning what it is not.
- 2 Second, we will look at the effects of faith -- what faith does, what it accomplishes.
- 3 Then we will look at what faith actually is -- the nature of faith.
- 4 Last, we will consider the beneficiaries of faith, or whom faith helps.

It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has not value and the promise is

worthless, because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. {Rom 4:13-15 NIV}

Here Paul tells us that faith is not trying to obey and fulfill some kind of law. It is not doing your best to try to live up to a standard that you think you ought to live up to. That is the law, and no matter what the law is or where it came from, trying your best to live up to it is not faith. In that case, Paul points out, you are not living by faith, you are living by works. Faith is not expecting God to accept and love you simply because you have tried your best to obey some standard. In fact, if you live on those terms, you will find that you cannot receive what God wants to give you. Abraham is proof that this method will never bring you the gift of righteousness. If you think that God is going to accept, love, and forgive you because you have tried hard to do what you think is right, you are on the wrong track. It will never work, and Paul tells you why.

First, notice that Abraham received the gift, the promise of righteousness, long before the Law ever was given. "It was not through the law," Paul says, "that Abraham and his offspring received the promise." In fact, if you look at Galatians 3:23-29, you find that Abraham received the gift of righteousness 430 years before the Law was given. So righteousness could not come by law, that is clear.

Second, the Law renders the promise worthless. "For if those who live by the law are heirs [of the promise], faith has no value and the promise is worthless." Now let me help you to understand that. If there is anyone here who is quite athletic, I would like you to do something to demonstrate this for us. I want you to stand here before the pulpit and jump up and touch the ceiling. If you do that, I promise I will give you a thousand dollars. I might have to borrow it, but I will give it to you. Are there any volunteers? I'll even let you stand on the platform. No volunteers? Why? Because, you say to me, "Look, your promise is worthless! You are asking something that no one can do. No one can jump up and touch the ceiling by their natural strength. Your promise is worthless." Even though I sincerely mean it, it has no value to you because you cannot do it. This is what the Scriptures tell us.

What does the Law require of man? Basically, it requires something that he cannot do. It asks us to love. That is all that the Law asks. It asks that we love God with all our heart and strength and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves. That is all the Ten Commandments ask, that you act in love all the time, without fail. Very simple, isn't it? Jesus said that love is the fulfilling of the Law. When you love people, you are doing what the Law asks of you. Don't say that by not being angry with them or not hurting them you are loving them. Love is a positive thing. Love is reaching out, and the Law requires that you reach out in love.

Now, if you cannot do that, the promise that comes with the Law is useless. The promise is: "Do this and live." If you obey the Law, God will accept you as righteous -- worth, value, and approval will be given to you because you earned them by doing what the Law demanded. But if you can't, then the promise is worthless. And we can't. We can't love everybody, and we don't. We can't love God like we ought. It is not only that we won't, but we can't. Therefore the Law is worthless in obtaining the promise.

But Paul does not stop there. He says there is another reason why you

will never be able to gain righteousness by trying to meet the requirements of the Law. The Law brings wrath. It actually subjects you to punishment if you don't make it. And this is what we find. The Law brings wrath. Wrath is defined in the very first chapter of Romans. It is God's removal of all divine protection -- you can do what you want. Wrath is the removal of restraints from human beings. Three times in up... God gave them over..." {cf, Rom 1:24, 1:26, 1:28}. That is wrath. That is God saying you can have your own way.

of just two kinds of people: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God is saying, "Thy will be done." That is wrath.

When God removes the restraints, we begin to fall apart. Therefore wrath always results in the disintegration of the human personality. Emptiness, meaninglessness, loneliness, and worthlessness possess us because we feel abandoned and lost. We do not know where to turn, and despair and depression press down on us heavily. That is always the case when wrath comes in. The Law brings wrath.

Paul amplifies this by saying, "Where there is no law, there is no transgression." He is explaining why the Law brings wrath. Where there is no law, people do not deliberately disobey God; they disobey in ignorance.

There are a lot of people today who fall into this category. I find many young people who are living in immorality, living together without marriage, in all innocence of any transgression. I actually believe that many of them have no idea that there is anything damaging or destructive or wrong about this. Some of them are so ignorant of reality that they actually think that it is not hurting them or anyone else. This attitude is widespread in our day. What these people lack is light. They have not yet learned that what they are doing will cause them to fall apart. They don't see that it is destroying them in many subtle and effective ways and that ultimately it will lead them into death and hell.

What Paul means when he says, "Where there is no law, there is no transgression," is that death and hell are taking their toll on men whether they know it or not.

reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not yet transgressed (according to Adam's transgression). By that he means that they were acting in ignorance, and yet they were falling apart. When the Law comes in, it makes you aware of what is wrong. In one sense, that only makes it worse, because then you deliberately begin to disobey what God says. But the Law also brings hope, because when things get bad enough, you are ready to turn to the way that can deliver -- faith in the work of Jesus Christ. That is why the Law will never bring us righteousness. Faith is not works.

Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring -- not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: "I have made you a father of many nations." {Rom 4:16-17a NIV}

Here is faith in action. If law cannot achieve righteousness, what does faith do?

First, the promise comes by it. You actually obtain what you are desiring, this sense of being approved and loved and wanted and accepted before God himself. You are a part of his family and you are forgiven of all the past. All that is achieved by faith, not by seeking to earn it. The promise comes by faith. What works could not do, faith does. That is a fantastic promise.

this personal self-worth before God, which Abraham achieved, but it also makes you the heir of all the world. In First Corinthians 3:23, the Apostle Paul says, "All things are yours... and you are Christ's; and you will be indwelt, as Abraham was, with the Holy Spirit of God. Galatians 3 makes clear that Abraham received that promise by faith, and we receive it the same way Abraham did. So faith obtains the promise.

The second thing that faith does is to introduce the principle of grace. Law and grace are opposed to one another in certain ways. They do not cancel each other out, they simply do two different things. We need both; we need law and we need grace. Do not ever say, "I am under grace, therefore I have no need for law." The Bible never takes that position. It is Law that helps you come to grace, and without it you never would come. But law and grace do not have the same functions. It is grace that lays hold of the promise.

Now what is grace? There are many ways to define it. I love the one that says it is enrichment that you don't deserve: God's Riches At Christ's Expense. It is all the richness of life -- love, joy, peace, and the fulfillment of the heart's longing -- all that enriches your life and that you do not deserve. It is given to you, therefore it is a gift. There is an old hymn that puts it well:

"Do this and live!" the Law demands,
But gives me neither feet nor hands.
A better word is "Grace doth bring."
It bids me fly, but gives me wings.

The Law condemns; grace enables. When grace comes in, it guarantees the promise. If you and I had to earn the standing that we have before God -- not only at the beginning of our Christian life but every day through it -- we would certainly fail somewhere along the line. If it depended upon us, somewhere we would blow it and lose the whole thing. But if it comes by grace, if it is purely a gift and it does not depend upon us at all but upon God alone, then it is guaranteed to us -- because he is not going to fail. That is why Paul says, "Therefore the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring -- not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham." There are offspring of Abraham to whom this guarantee is made. We will see more of that in just a moment.

ready now to consider what faith actually is.

He [braham] is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed -- the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead -- since he was about a hundred years old -- and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God," {Rom 4:17b-20a NIV}

Paul gives us three things that tell us what faith is:

- 1 First, he says the key is the object of faith. Don't miss that.
- 2 Next, he shows us the obstacles to faith.
- 3 And then he tells us the objectives of faith -- where faith will bring us.

Abraham, Paul says, believed God. God is the object. The quality of your faith depends upon the object in which that faith has placed its trust. The amount of faith you have has nothing to do with it. That is why Jesus told us that even if we have a little tiny faith, like a grain of mustard seed, it will work. The object of your faith is the important thing.

You may leave this service this morning and go out to the parking lot with the utmost faith that when you get into your car and drive down the driveway and into the street your car is going to work just as it was working when you parked it there this morning. But maybe, while we were sitting here this morning, someone took off the hubcaps and removed the lug bolts from the front wheels of your car, and then put the hubcaps back on so you cannot see any difference. That may have happened. And though you have the utmost confidence that your car is going to work properly, when you get onto the street and turn the corner, sooner or later the front wheels are going to fall off. You might end up dead -- killed by faith! On the other hand, some of you who have been worried a bit by what I have just said may go out to your car after this service and take off the hubcaps and examine the lug bolts to make sure they are there. And even then, not too confidently, you may start your car and drive it rather timidly down the driveway, still thinking that something might go wrong and it may fall apart. But if no one has tampered with it, you are perfectly safe -- even though you have little faith -- because the object of your faith is strong. That is why you should not talk about your faith ; talk instead about the God in whom your faith is fixed!

That is what Abraham looked at. It is not a question of how little or how big your faith is; it is a question of how big your God is! What kind of a God is he?

There are two things about this God that helped Abraham tremendously:

- * First, he is the God who gives life to the dead -- the God who makes dead things live, who takes things that once were alive, vibrant, and full of life, but have died and become hopeless, and brings them to life again; and
- * Second, he is the God who "calls things that are not, as though they were." He calls into existence the things that do not exist. He is a creative God.

In the book of Genesis, it is recorded that God said, "Let there be..." and there was. Over and over, for a week, God said, "Let there be..." and there was. Until, after six days, he rested. That is the kind of God that Abraham had: The God who gave life to the dead and who called into existence things that did not exist. It was that God in whom he fixed his faith.

Now let us look at the obstacles to faith. Whenever you have faith or are called to exercise faith, there are obstacles. Abraham teaches us this. There are horrendous obstacles, and Abraham faced two of them. First, there were hopeless circumstances. "Against all hope, Abraham in waver [or stagger] through unbelief regarding the promise of God..." That is, the promise itself was the second obstacle to faith because it had such staggering possibilities. It was too good to be true! It was beyond belief that God would make him heir of all the world and give him a standing before God that he didn't deserve. It was too good to be true, so it was an obstacle to faith. Isn't that interesting? There are two obstacles to faith: hopeless circumstances and staggering possibilities. Let us see what Abraham did with them.

What were the hopeless circumstances Abraham faced? Paul tells us there were two: Abraham's body and Sarah's womb. Abraham's body was a hundred years old and was sexually dead. The promise of God hung on the fact that there must be a child born to Abraham and Sarah. Through that child would come all the descendants from the nations of the world that would be blessed by Abraham. And, more important yet, through that child would come the Seed, which was Jesus Christ, whom Abraham saw and rejoiced in, and who would make possible the gift of righteousness. Everything hung on the birth of a baby.

Abraham looked at the circumstances and saw his hundred-year-old body and the barrenness of Sarah's womb. She was ninety years old and had never had a baby. They had been trying for years and years, and no baby had come. These were the hopeless circumstances.

Now, here is the beauty of Abraham's faith. Paul says that he faced the facts. I love that. In this translation it says that "without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact..."

Many of us think that faith is evading the facts -- escapism, some kind of dreamy idealism that never looks at facts, a kind of unrealistic adventuring in which you hope everything is going to work out. It is never that!

Abraham looked at the facts. He faced them head-on. He considered his dead body and the barrenness of Sarah's womb. He sat and thought about it, and he saw how hopeless the situation was. There was no chance at all! His body was a hundred years old and Sarah's womb was ninety years old and had never borne children. She was far past the age of childbearing. It was hopeless.

There was no hope, yet Abraham believed in hope. How? Because when he looked at his dead body he remembered that he had a God who raises the dead. And when he thought about Sarah's barren womb, he remembered that he had a God who calls into existence the things that do not exist. That would take care of everything, wouldn't it? And so, against all hope, he believed in hope, because of the God in whom his faith was fixed.

Then he did one other thing. It is not mentioned here, but this has

always intrigued me. He told Sarah what God said. I have often wished I could go back in history and observe certain times, and this is one of them. I would have loved to have been a bug on the tent wall when Abraham came in to tell Sarah this news! Can you just imagine it? He came in and she said, "Well, dear, your eggs are ready. What have you been doing?" He said, "Oh, I've been having devotions, and what a wonderful time I had! God told me something." She said, "Well, what was it?" Abraham said, "Well, I don't really know how to put this." "What do you mean?" Sarah asked. "Well," he said, "you'd better sit down. God told me something very startling that is going to happen to us." "That's interesting!" she said. "What is it?" Then, like a man, he just blurted it out. "You're going to have a baby!" And Sarah said, "What?" Abraham said, "That's what God said. You're going to have a baby." "What, me?" "Yes, you!" "Why, how can it be? Abraham, did you stop at the wine shop on your way home this morning?" And Sarah laughed. It says so in Genesis. Sarah laughed, "Ha! God said that I'm going to have a baby?" {cf, Gen 18:12}.

But then Sarah did something else. God had said something to Abraham that applied to Sarah and Abraham must have told her. And I am convinced that Sarah must have made a little plaque and put it over the kitchen sink and meditated on what God said. He said: "Is there anything too hard for God?" {cf, Gen 18:14}. When God says that he will do something, is there anything too hard for God? And you know, when Sarah began to feel pregnant, her faith laid hold of that promise again. And when the baby came, Sarah was a woman of faith, because she had been thinking of the God for whom nothing is too hard.

There is the faith of Abraham. How did he deal with these staggering possibilities? It is unbelievable that all nations should be blessed through them. He would be heir of the world, he would be called the friend of God. Could it be? But Abraham remembered that he had a God who gives life to the dead and a God who calls into existence things that do not exist. And so he believed.

... but [he] was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God," {Rom 4:20b NIV}

His faith was made strong. Faith grows. Jesus said it would. If you have faith like a tiny little grain of mustard seed, but the object of your faith is trustworthy and has promised to do something, then exercise your faith and it will grow. Obey. Abraham did; and as he believed and obeyed, he was strengthened in his faith and he gave glory to God. Faith never glorifies man; it glorifies God. It is God who acts, not we. What is accomplished is not something we do on behalf of God; it is God who does it by us and through us, on his own behalf. God, therefore, is thanked; and God is glorified. So faith grows, and faith glorifies.

... fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. That is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." {Rom 4:21-22 NIV}

Faith grounds us on the truth, as it did Abraham. He was fully persuaded. This is the faith that was credited to him as righteousness. Faith grasps the promise. Faith lays hold of what God has offered. As Abraham's faith grew, he grasped the promise and found himself loved and accepted by God, a friend of God.

The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness -- for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. {Rom 4:23-25 NIV}

Isn't that interesting? This happened two thousand years before Paul, but Paul says God did not write those words for Abraham alone. For whom were they written then? For us, today. We look at the faith of Abraham and say, "That was extraordinary faith." Paul says it wasn't; it was ordinary faith. Anyone can exercise such faith if they want to.

You can have righteousness too. You can be a friend of God, accepted before him, with worth and value in his sight -- not just once as you begin your Christian life, but every day, taking it fresh from his hand. You are forgiven of your sins, restored, every day afresh and anew -- a thousand times a day if you need it. All that Abraham had -- the promises of the world, the indwelling of the Spirit -- all are ours as well.

This verse says the gift of righteousness is for those "who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead." He is still the God of resurrection, the God who can raise from the dead. "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification." So we live by his death and by his life. Now if we believe in the God who raised Jesus from the dead and we are ready to live on the basis of his death and his life for us, we, like Abraham, are heirs of all the world. All these things are yours, Paul says. The indwelling of the Spirit is granted to us moment by moment, and day by day, all our life long. And we, like Abraham, are the friends of God.

If you have a God who can raise things from the dead and who can call into existence the things that do not exist, you are going to be a very exciting person to live with. You will never know when a thing that is dead and dull and lifeless may be touched by the grace of God and brought to life again. When something that you cannot possibly hope for -- something which does not now exist, but which will be called into existence by the God who calls into existence the things that do not exist -- when such a thing is promised by a God like this, life is an adventure.

That is faith, when all things are yours.

Do you have that kind of God?

You can settle that now in your own heart as we bow in prayer.
Prayer

Father, how we thank you for this example of Abraham. What a tremendous example of faith he is. How richly he has endued us! By the example of faith, he has taught us how to trust against the circumstances that surround us, when we have a promise to oppose against it, the promise and a God who says he will do something and who cannot fail. May our eyes therefore be fixed upon that God. May we take from his hand this morning the gift of righteousness which we need daily. Lord, may we grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ our Lord. We pray in his name, Amen.

Title: The Faith of our Father
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 4:13-25
Message No: 9
Catalog No: 3509
Date: April 11, 1976

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REJOICING IN HOPE

by Ray C. Stedman

Paul's letter to the Romans is a description of the power of God let loose among the ruin of men. It is about the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ. God has found a way, through the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, to justify the ungodly. Now, that includes us all, because we are all ungodly. Romans teaches us that as God sees and understands our hearts, he understands all that is there. As a result, no one is able to stand upon his own righteousness in the presence of God. As Paul has told us, "There is none righteous, no, not one," {Rom 3:10b KJV}. There is no sweet little old lady, or strong virile man, or

boy, or girl, who has lived a clean, moral life and who is able to stand in the presence of the demands of the Law and the love of God.

Therefore, we are ungodly to start with.

If you understand that you are ungodly to start with, then you can be justified -- because we have a God who has found a way to justify the ungodly. As we have seen, to be justified means to be given the gift of righteousness, the gift of loving acceptance before God. That is where our lives start. If we are ungodly, we qualify. As long as we remain self-righteous, we don't have a chance. I hope we are facing facts as they really are in our lives.

having been justified by faith. We can see this from the opening word of the chapter: "Therefore ..." Obviously, as a result of what he already has said, Paul is coming to certain conclusions:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into his grace in which we stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. {Rom 5:1-2 NIV}

That little word "rejoice" is the key to this whole fifth chapter. You will find it again in the very next verse. In these first two verses Paul says there are three results when we have really believed in Jesus Christ for our justification, and we rejoice in these results. In sufferings, ..." Have you gotten that far yet? That is a higher stage of the apostle, with his very logical mind, says, "Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God ..." This is the third level of Christian growth.

There is the outline of the whole chapter: learning to rejoice at these various stages.

As a Christian, if you really understand your theology, you will be rejoicing, even in the midst of suffering. As I look around at Christians, sometimes I wonder if they ever will grasp this idea. Some of them look like they have been marinated in embalming fluid. They never seem to rejoice. But Christian teaching and doctrine is designed to produce a spirit that can't help but rejoice. It is not something artificial -- screwing on a smile and pretending that you are happy when you are not. When you really understand Christianity, it will produce a rejoicing spirit. (If you're a glum-bum, just study the fifth chapter of Romans and it will turn you into a glad-lad!)

In subsequent studies, we will look at this three-fold division of

- 1 First, we learn to rejoice in our spiritual position;
- 2 Then, to rejoice in our present troubles; and
- 3 Finally, we come to the place where we rejoice in God himself, our powerful Friend.

This morning we will look at these first two verses only.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we

have gained access by faith into this grace in which we stand.
And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. {Rom 5:1-2
NIV}

When you find a word in Scripture that is repeated three or four times, it is reasonable to conclude that it represents what the passage is all about. The first thing that you learn as a Christian is that you are justified by faith. To help us understand what that actually means, the apostle brought in the example of Abraham. Way back before the Law was given, before the ritual of circumcision, or before anything that we usually associate with religion came into operation, Abraham was justified by faith. Those two terms, "justified" and "faith," are explained to us and demonstrated for us in the person of Abraham. "He was justified" means that he was declared to be the friend of God. He was acceptable to God, he was loved by God. He was God's friend. What we need to understand is that Abraham didn't earn that. He was given that right at the beginning of his relationship with God, when he believed God. And that is what faith means. When Abraham believed that God could and would do what he had promised, Abraham was declared the friend of God and he entered into that close relationship with God that characterized his life. Now that is what it means to be justified by faith, to be given as a gift, this closeness, this nearness, this dearness to God. You receive this with no merit on your part, but by faith alone -- by believing the promise of God, according to the work of his Son. That is justification.

Then, Paul says, there are three ways by which you can test whether you really do believe that and have been justified by faith:

Since we have been justified by faith, the first result is that we have peace with God. As you think about your life and your relationship with God, if you really have believed that God justifies the ungodly, you will have peace with God. You are a Christian. That means you are in the family, you belong to the family of God. The war is over. All the conflict between you; and God is ended; you are at peace with him.

ended in Europe, but that was a long way from the South Pacific. Though we were glad that the fighting in Europe had ended, we still had a war to fight. Out in the South Pacific there were many bloody battles yet to come. But I will never forget the day it was announced that peace with Japan had been signed in Tokyo Bay. All over the world, World the people simply poured out into the streets. All over the city, lights that hadn't burned in years went on. There was dancing and shouting and music and laughter, with thousands of people jamming the beaches and streets of the city, rejoicing because they were at peace.

That is something of what happens in the heart when we understand that we have been justified by faith. The war is over, we are at peace with God. All conflict has ceased. I think there are at least four things that are true immediately when you are at peace with God:

The first one is, you lose your fear of God. I think there is something in all of us that instinctively fears God. I remember how awesome the person of God seemed to me as a boy. My guilty conscience troubled me when I thought of God. I thought God as a heavenly policeman, always watching me, a stern and forbidding judge, ready to correct me and straighten me out. I will never forget the joy that came into my heart when I realized at God was no longer my judge -- he was my Father. When

you have been justified by faith, you no longer fear God as a Judge because, according to this book and the promises of Scripture, it is no longer necessary that God function as a judge in relationship to you. He is now a loving, tenderhearted, compassionate father. Now, as a father, he disciplines. That is what love does. But God is no longer a judge. That beautiful picture our Lord gave us in the story of the prodigal son -- is the picture of God as we learn to see him. Having been justified by faith, we immediately lose our fear of God.

Second, we lose our fear of death. If we have been justified by faith, we no longer are afraid to die. As a boy, I lived for a while in the Red River Valley of North Dakota in a little Scottish settlement named after Ayr, Scotland: Ayr, North Dakota. It was a Presbyterian settlement and held to the old custom of ringing the bell of the church when someone died. I can remember yet, lying in my bed, listening to the tolling of the bell, knowing that someone had died, and feeling the cold clutch of fear on my own heart as I faced the possibility of my own death. Someday I would die. It could even happen while I was a boy. I knew it could, because a friend of mine had died. I knew it could happen to me, and I felt the fear of death.

Last week Hal Lindsey shared with us that certain psychologists and psychiatrists are now admitting that the basic fear behind all other human fears is the fear of death. The conflict with which we constantly live is this shadow of the end that hangs over us all, this awareness that someday this life is going to come to a close for us. Hebrews 2:15 speaks of that. It says, Jesus came "... that he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage," {cf, Heb 2:14b-15 KJV}. So when you come to understand that you've been justified, you've been given a righteous acceptance by a loving father, you immediately lose that fear of death. You are not afraid of what lies beyond. You know it is not judgment, but glory.

Third, when you have peace with God, you have the answer to the attacks of doubt and fear that the devil is able to bring into your life. I think this is one of the things that troubles many young Christians. They start out their Christian life with a sense of rejoicing and an experience of peace. But after a while, there will come a time when all that they have been believing and resting on and rejoicing in seems to turn dull and cold and unbelievable. They don't know what has happened. They think they have just been kidding themselves about Christianity, and now they have awakened to the cold reality of life. They do not understand that the Scriptures tell us that this is the power of the devil. Through his angels, he has access to us through our thoughts. He can insert these troubling doubts and fears into our minds without our being aware of it -- even against our will, at times.

I know there are some who think that after you've been a Christian awhile you should reach a point when you never again have any doubts. But you never do. I know some people think that pastors never have any doubts about their salvation or their relationship with God. I can tell you, that's not true.

When I first came here to Palo Alto, there was a dear old Presbyterian pastor associated with the work of this church when we met in the Community Center. Some of you here will remember him. His name was dear, alert, godly man, who was a tremendous help to me as a young man. He called me, asking me to come see him. I found him in deep distress over his personal salvation. He told me, "I just feel like God is angry

with me. If I were summoned into his presence now, there is nothing I could offer to him." I had to help that dear, godly old man, and remind him again that he had been justified by faith in the work of Christ. I reminded him that his salvation had nothing to do with what he was like, but with Jesus, and what he had done. This is how you can deal with these doubts and fears if you have believed you have been justified by faith.

If you do not have that sense of peace, the way to get it back is not by working on your feelings but by reviewing your justification. Go over the facts again, remind yourself of what God has declared, and what kind of a God he is -- Abraham's God, who can raise the dead to life and call into existence things that do not exist. He is able to perform what he has promised. Then your faith is restored and you can handle these doubts and fears.

Fourth, if you have peace with God, you have an answer to the accusation of your own conscience when you sin. I know that many young Christians, in that glory and first flush of love in their relationship with the Lord, really think that they are not going to sin again. Sin seems to them an impossible thing. Their hearts are so caught up with the love that God has shown to them that they cannot imagine themselves going back and doing some of the things they once did. But sooner or later they will be back doing some of those things. Old habits will reassert themselves, old ways of thinking will return. Perhaps they will not go back to all that they did formerly, but they will go back to some. They will sin again. Or it may be that after years of Christian life and service, they will fall into some terrible thing they thought they never would or could do again.

What do you say to your accusing conscience that says to you then, "Are you a Christian? Could you possibly be a Christian and act like this?" That is where justification by faith comes in. You remind yourself at that time: "My standing and my acceptance by God does not depend upon me. Even my sin doesn't cancel it out. The whole essence of this truth is that God has found a way to put aside my sin, by faith in the work of his beloved Son on my behalf." That is why you read, at the close of raised to life for our justification," {Rom 4:25 NIV}.

These are the ways you can test whether you really have believed it:

- * Do you have peace with God?
- * Are you freed from the fear of God and the fear of death? And
- * Do you have an answer to the doubts and fears and attacks that come from the enemy, those "fiery darts of the wicked one" {cf, Eph 6:16 KJV} that Paul speaks of in Ephesians 6?
- * Do you have an answer to the accusations of your own guilty conscience when you fall, or sin?

Here is where the answer lies: You have been justified by faith.

Notice that Paul is careful to remind us again that our justification is through the Lord Jesus Christ. It is never through ourselves. We have no merit before God ourselves. We never deserve this, we never earn this, and no matter how long we have served God as a Christian, and have lived a clean and moral life, we can only stand on the ground of the work of the Lord Jesus on our behalf. That is why Paul insists on saying this again and again. He knows our prideful flesh. He knows that after we have cleaned up some of the bad areas of our life we will begin to take credit for it and think that we have deserved something from God. So he faithfully reminds us that we are not deserving in this matter at all.

The first mark of our justification by faith, then, is that we have peace with God.

The second mark is found in verse 2:

... through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand. {Rom 5:2a NIV}

We have access to continued grace, to enable us to stand in the midst of pressures and problems and trials and difficulties. This is a constant supply, because we have instant access to God himself, the God of all grace. That is the second way you know you are justified by faith -- you see that you have this instant access to the grace of God -- to the throne of grace, as the writer of Hebrews puts it.

There is a beautiful picture in the book of Esther that illustrates this. Remember Esther, that lovely Jewish maiden, a captive in the land of Persia? The king, seeking a bride, found her and made her his queen. After Esther ascended to the throne as queen, a plot was hatched against the Jews. The king, unwittingly, signed a decree that meant death for all Jews in the land of Persia. Esther's godly uncle, Mordecai, said it would be necessary for her to go to the king and tell him what he had unwittingly done. Esther knew that was a dangerous thing, because it was the law of the Medes and Persians that no one could come before the king without first being summoned by him. It meant death for anyone to dare come before the king in that manner. There were no exceptions -- even for a queen -- for this was the law of the Medes and the Persians and could not be changed. Unless the king extended his golden scepter to that person, he must die. Yet Esther knew that she had to dare to take her life in her hands and go before the king.

The story tells us that she fasted for three days and three nights before she went. I am sure that was to prepare her heart and her courage. It doesn't say what else she did during that time, when she was getting ready to come before the king. With a wife, four daughters, and a mother-in-law in my home, I've observed women getting themselves ready for some years now. I'm sure that what Esther was doing was fixing her hair. It probably took three days and three nights to get ready! Then we are told that she dressed herself in robes of beauty and glory. When she was all ready, she stepped into the audience hall of the king, appearing all alone before him. The king was so smitten with her beauty that his heart went out to her. He stretched forth his scepter and accepted her. She had access to the king.

This is a picture of what Paul is telling us. Who would dare stand before the God of all the earth, the God of majesty and power and greatness and glory, unless he has been given access to the King. The wonder of this promise is that, by being justified by faith, we have been given access into his presence. Esther received from the king's hand all that she needed to handle this problem which was a threat to her life. That is what this portrays for us. Dressed in robes of beauty and glory that do not belong to us -- for they are the garments of Jesus -- we have access to the King, to receive from him all that we need to handle any threat that has come into our lives. We have continual acceptance before him.

One phenomenon of our day that has always astonished me is the persistent popularity of the program "Hogan's Heroes." My daughter is a fan of "Hogan's Heroes," and every night I can hear the story of these and how they always confound the German commandant by the schemes they come up with. To the continual dismay of Colonel Klink, they keep coming up with all kinds of unique weapons and various other things. They have an unseen, undiscovered link with Allied Headquarters, and the Underground supplies them with things they could never get otherwise. I am sure the popularity of that program is due to the fact that we all love to think that there are hidden resources supplying the underdogs and keeping them going in the face of all kinds of difficulties. Surely that is exactly what Paul is talking about here.

We do not get our strength from our circumstances; we get it from our continual access to the power and presence of God in our lives in the midst of danger or difficulty, trouble or pressure. Hebrews 10:19, 22 puts it this way:

Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, ... let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, {Heb 10:19, 10:22a NIV}

That means we have a supply, a resource, given to us in the hour of need or danger.

Now look at the third thing that comes as a result of being justified by faith:

And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. {Rom 5:2b NIV}

That means that as we look at life ahead, even though life comes to an end (and it will) that is not the end of the story. There is a confident anticipation that something is beyond. We rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

Hope is not a word that means a mere possibility, a good chance. Hope, as it is used in the Scriptures in this way, is speaking of a ringing certainty, based upon the words of Jesus himself. "Because I live, you shall live also" {cf, John 14:19}. "If I go to my Father, I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am, you may be also," {cf, John 14:3}. That is the certain hope of everyone who has been justified by faith. If you really have been justified by faith, you know that you have the promise of God that he will do this, and that he is able to do what he has promised.

That promise is given to us regardless of what our conditions here on earth may be. It may be tough here. For some people it is very tough. There are some Christians today who have nothing of the freedom and the joy of relationships that you and I experience together. They are under persecution, they are in danger, they wake up every morning with the dreary expectation that they are going to have to live under the watchful eye of some hostile person. Life may be cold and hard, it may

be filled with pain and sorrow, but the minimum promise to all who are justified by faith is that there is a glory beyond death that is absolutely certain.

I have a friend who lives in the Midwest. He told me one day of an experience he had. He lives in the country, and one stormy morning, in the dead of winter, he looked out his window and saw the mailman drive up and leave something in his mailbox. Wanting to see what it was, he dressed warmly and went out into the bitter cold, with the snow swirling about him, and walked about a quarter of a mile down the lane to where the mailboxes were located. He opened the mailbox and, to his disappointment, all that was there was a seed catalog. But he opened it up and began to thumb through it. You know, there is nothing like a seed catalog to capture the beauty and brilliance of the flowers and vegetables. As he stood there in the snow, suddenly he felt as though spring had come. He could taste the crunch of a cucumber and smell the fragrance of those 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.

I think that is something of the experience that we get at times when we read the Scriptures. Here, in the midst of "the winter of our discontent," something of the glory that is waiting beyond, the hope of the glory of God, breaks through.

I will never forget reading, as a young Christian, the words of Samuel Rutherford, that dear old seventeenth century Scottish Covenanter. At a time when the English Church was persecuting the believers in Scotland, he was a dear and godly man who had come to know and love the Lord Jesus and to understand these great truths in the Scriptures about the inner strengthening that can come through faith. As he was lying on his deathbed, he received a summons from the king of England to come to London and appear on trial for his life. He knew he was dying. Samuel Rutherford sent back by the messenger of the king this word: "Go and tell your master I have a summons from a Higher Court; and ere this message reaches him, I'll be where few kings and great folks ever come." That was the spirit of the man. He wrote many letters that reflect the glory of his faith and expectations. Anne Cousin has gathered them up for us. Some of them are arranged as hymns. One, which was D. L. Moody's favorite hymn, and mine also, is one we have sung many times.

The sands of time are sinking,
The dawn of heaven breaks,
The summer morn I've sighed for,
The fair sweet morn awakes.
Dark, dark hath been the midnight,
But dayspring is at hand,
And glory, glory dwelleth
In Emmanuel's land.
O! Christ He is the Fountain,
The deep, sweet well of love!
The streams on earth I've tasted,
More deep I'll drink above;
There to an ocean fullness
His mercy doth expand,
And glory, glory dwelleth
In Emmanuel's land.
With mercy and with judgment,

My web of time He wove,
And eye the dews of sorrow,
Were lustered by His love.
I'll bless the hand that guided,
I'll bless the heart that planned,
When throned where glory dwelleth,
In Emmanuel's land.
The bride eyes not her garment,
But her dear Bridegroom's face:
I will not gaze at glory,
But on my King of grace;
Not at the crown he giveth,
But on His pierced hand;
The Lamb is all the glory
Of Emmanuel's land.

That is the first stage of the Christian life -- just the beginning. That is what you get, without fail, when you believe that you are justified by faith; but it is just the start. Then we go on to handle life and its suffering, and, finally, we end up rejoicing in God. But everyone who has put faith in what Jesus Christ has done on his behalf -- not in what he himself has done -- has come to a place of complete assurance, continual acceptance, and confident anticipation. When you have those, you know you have been justified by faith.

Prayer

We thank you, Father, for these riches that are given to us so freely in Jesus. We don't deserve them -- we never can, and never will, Lord, but we have them because we have believed your great and mighty promise. How we thank you for it. What courage and strength this imparts to our feeble and faltering hearts, as we face the problems of our life with these great certainties underlying us. We have peace with God, we have been reconciled. We have acceptance in your presence and continual access to your help. We have been propitiated, and we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. How we thank you for that anticipation. We pray that we will be able to walk in these terms and rest upon them all through this day and through this week, and in every relationship that confronts us. In the name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

Title: Rejoicing in Hope
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 5:1-2
Message No: 10
Catalog No: 3510
Date: April 25, 1976

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REJOICING IN SUFFERING

by Ray C. Stedman

When I was in Virginia this past week I met a number of wonderful Christians -- some of whom I had met before, others who were new to me. But one thing that impressed me was the number of people who were going through very severe trials and suffering.

I met a man who was in bed with his wife one morning a year or so ago, when their teenage son suddenly appeared in the doorway with a gun in his hand. Without a word, he suddenly shot them both. When the mother tried to crawl away, the boy shot her a second time. They both managed to escape and called the police, who came and took their son to a mental hospital. This man and his wife managed to survive that terrible time, but I heard him speak to a group of men about it, and he said that God had gotten his attention through that ordeal. He began to learn things that he had never learned before.

I met another man whose son is so mentally disturbed that he has to be kept in a very expensive hospital for treatment which costs \$50,000 a year. I met others who were battling with cancer. I was simply amazed at the number of people struggling with severe problems.

I share this with you to let you know that our brothers on the East coast have as much trouble as we do. So if some of you are going through difficulty or danger, you are not alone. Suffering is something that all Christians are called to experience in one way or another. And yet I suppose there is no question that is more difficult for us to handle than this one. "Why do Christians suffer?"

The theme for this study from the fifth chapter of Romans is how to the results that come in a Christian's life when he truly and genuinely believes that God has given him the gift of righteousness in Jesus Christ our Lord. If you have been justified by faith, then certain results will be obtained. As we have already seen, these results come in various stages, or levels of maturity.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have

peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. {Rom 5:1-2 NIV}

The rejoicing comes immediately. We rejoice because we are going to be with the Lord. We have a hope for the future, a hope beyond death. That is the initial and introductory phase of Christian growth. But Paul goes on. Not only is this so, but there is something more, and this is the

Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. {Rom 5:3-5 NIV}

It is clear from this that Christians are expected to experience suffering. We don't like that fact, but, nevertheless, it is a fact. In Apostle Paul puts it very plainly, "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake," {Phil 1:29 RSV}. So those who think that becoming a Christian will remove them from suffering have been seriously misled and self-deceived, for the Scriptures themselves teach that we are to expect suffering.

The Greek word for suffering, basically, is translated as "tribulation, something that causes distress." It can range from minor annoyances that we go through every day, to major disasters that come sweeping down out of the blue and leave us stricken and smitten. These are the sufferings that we might go through, the tribulations.

rejoice: "Not only so, but we rejoice in our sufferings." Here is where many people balk. They say, "I can't buy that! Do you mean to say that God is telling me that when I am hurting and in pain, going through mental and physical torment, I am expected to be glad and happy and rejoice in that? What kind of a nut is this Paul, anyway? It's not human, not natural!"

There are many who feel this way. I think we all easily reflect the attitude of the lady whose pastor went to see her when she was going through trouble. She kept complaining and grouching and griping about it. He stopped her and said, "I don't think you should talk that way. Christians are not to do that." She was very upset. "Why, I don't understand, pastor. I think that when God sends us tribulation, he expects us to tribulate a little bit!"

Most of us would feel the same way. We feel like tribulating, and we do. But it is instructive to note that not only does Paul tell us to rejoice, but this is the unanimous testimony of every writer of the New Testament. We are told by all to rejoice in our suffering. First Peter 4:12 says, "Think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is coming upon you to test you, as though some strange thing happened to you." It is not strange, it is normal. James 1:2 says, "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you fall into various tribulation." There is that word again: joy, rejoicing. Even the Lord Jesus told us, in the Sermon

on the Mount, "Blessed are you when men persecute you for righteousness' sake, and say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. [What does he say?] Rejoice, and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven. For so persecuted they the prophets before you," {cf, Matt 5:11-12 KJV}. Paul's call to rejoice in suffering is found everywhere in Scripture.

Let us take a closer look at what this really means. There are certain things it does not mean, though many people think it does:

First, it is clear from Scripture that rejoicing in suffering is not simply stoicism. It is not simply a 'grin and bear it' attitude, or 'tough it out' and see how much you can take, or 'just hang in there until it's over' and 'don't let anything get you down,' or 'keep a stiff upper lip.' Many people feel that if they do that, they are fulfilling the Word and "rejoicing in suffering." But that is not it. There are non-Christians who can do that. Many people pride themselves on how much they can take. Sometimes people who are not Christians will put us to shame by the things that they can take without complaining. Rejoicing in suffering is not merely being stoical.

What else is it not? We are not merely expected to enjoy the pain. There are some people who think "rejoicing in suffering" means that you are to enjoy your pain and hurt, that somehow Christians ought to be glad when terrible tragedy occurs and their hearts are hurting. That is not what Paul is saying. But there are people who feel that way -- they are called masochists -- they like to torture themselves. You have met people like that, who aren't happy unless they're miserable. If you take their misery away from them, they are really wretched, because it is their misery that gives them a sense of contentment. That is a twisted, distorted view of life. That is not what Paul is saying.

Nor is he saying that we merely are to pretend that we are happy. Some think this passage is saying that when you are out in public, you should put on an artificial smile and act happy, when inside your heart is hurting like crazy. Now that is not it. Christianity is never phony. Phonyness of any kind is a false Christianity. Neither the apostles nor the Scriptures ever ask us to be unreal and phony. This Scripture clearly tells us to have a genuine sense of rejoicing.

You may not be able to rejoice right at the moment of trial. present is pleasant. But afterwards it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it," {cf, Heb 12:11}. Right at the moment of hurt, you are not going to feel like rejoicing, but it should soon follow that you rejoice in your suffering. And that is what Paul plainly says: "We also rejoice in suffering."

I heard a man some years ago put this very clearly. Some of you may remember this man. He was going through great physical trouble, and one of his legs was amputated. That did not arrest the course of his disease, and he ultimately died because of it. Just a few days before his death I visited him in the hospital and he said something to me that I never forgot because it so perfectly expresses what Christian rejoicing in suffering means. He said, "I never would have chosen one of the trials that I've gone through, but I wouldn't have missed any of them for the world!" Now that is saying it. There is an awareness that this suffering has done something of supreme value; therefore, you wouldn't have missed it. But you wouldn't have chosen it, either! That is rejoicing in suffering.

How do you get to the place where you can rejoice in suffering? That is what this passage brings before us, and that is what we need to know. The apostle's answer is, "We rejoice in suffering because we know..." We rejoice because we know something. It isn't just because it's such a great feeling to be hurt, it is because we know something about it. It is something our faith enables us to know, a kind of inside information that others do not share. Worldlings lack it totally. Something that we know will cause us to rejoice in our suffering.

What do we know? Paul says, "Knowing that suffering produces..." Suffering does something, accomplishes something. It is productive. It is of value. We know it works, and that is what makes us rejoice.

Watch a woman in labor; watch the expression on her face. If you have any empathy in you, you can't help but feel deeply hurt with her because she is going through such pain. And yet, there usually is joy in the midst of it because she knows that childbirth produces children. It is the child that makes it all worthwhile. There are probably women here this morning who will gladly go through childbirth again because they want a child. Suffering produces something worthwhile.

Then what does suffering produce? The apostle says there are four things that suffering produces:

First, suffering produces perseverance. In some versions the word may be patience. The Greek word literally means "to abide under, to stay under the pressure." Pressure is something we want to get out from under, but suffering teaches us to stay under, to stick in there and hang with it. These are some of the expressions that we use today, and I think they are very valuable. Perseverance is the opposite of panic, of bailing out. The best translation I can think of is the English word "steadiness." Suffering produces steadiness.

When I was a boy in Montana, I used to help a man break horses, working in a corral with 3-year-old horses that had never had saddles on their backs. I was always interested in watching the horses when they first felt a saddle thrown on their back. That must be a frightening experience to an animal. They don't know what in the world is happening to them. Some horses will react with anger, rearing back and trying to get away -- even striking out with their forefeet at their trainer. Their nostrils flare, their eyeballs roll, and they panic! Others will just stand there trembling, shaking like a leaf. They won't move, they're so afraid. They don't know what's happening to them.

I think Christians respond that way, too. Do you remember when you first became a Christian and went through a trial? How easily you panicked and cried out to the Lord, "What's gone wrong?" You were in a panic over what was happening, fearful that it would wreck everything and destroy your hopes and dreams. You were just like the disciples in the boat on the Sea of Galilee when the storm was raging. They panicked. They came to the Lord and shook him and said, "Wake up! Don't you know we're about to perish?" {cf, Matt 8:25, Mark 4:30, Luke 8:24}. And the Lord did as he does with some of us. He stood up and said, "Don't panic." Then he said to the storm, "Peace, be still," {Mark 4:39}. And quiet came.

That is what suffering does. It steadies you. You go through a time like that and you're all panicky; then the Lord stills the storm and you think, "Thank God that's all over. I'll never have to go through that again! I've learned my lesson!" And two weeks later, there is another storm. But this time you've been through it once, so you steady up a

bit. You don't get quite so panicky.

You learn something -- you learn about yourself, first. You learn that you're not as strong as you thought you were. You learn that you don't have the 'stick with it' that you thought you had. You wanted to bail out much sooner than you thought you would.

Then you learn something about the Lord -- you learn how gracious he is. You learn that he can handle events in ways that you couldn't dream of or anticipate. You see him work things out in ways that you could never have guessed. So the third and fourth times a trial comes up, you are steadier. You don't panic, you don't bail out. You stay under and let it work itself out. That is what Paul is saying here. Suffering produces steadiness. If you didn't suffer you would never have that quality.

Second, not only does suffering produce steadiness, but steadiness, Paul says, produces character. The Greek word for character carries with it the idea of being put to the test and approved. It is the idea of being shown to be reliable. Steadiness produces reliability. You finally learn that you are not going to be destroyed, that things will work out. Steady up, and people start counting on you. They see strength in you, and you become a more reliable person.

We have all seen the tire advertisements on television. A car is equipped with four tires and is put through horrendous tests -- driven through desert sands, bogs, swamps, and marshes, driven over rough, hard, cobblestone roads, over roads with holes and chuck-holes, over boards studded with nails. The tire is twisted and pulled and stretched in every direction, and you are amazed at what that tire can take! After the test is over, they hold the tire up and it looks like it's never been out of its wrapping! Then the ad comes: "Buy Sock'em Tires! They're tested, proven!" Now that is what this word character means. God is building you up so he can hold you up and say, "He's approved, he's tested." God is in the process of making veterans. I have always like that word. A veteran has been through something and has been tested and proven. Let me read to you from the Living Bible a passage I have always loved, Second 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

Now, that's a veteran speaking. He's been through some tough things, but he knows that God can take him through them, and he will. He isn't saying, "It's all over." No, he is saying, "There's more coming, but God will take us through." That's a veteran.

Years ago I stayed in a home and asked a 9-year-old boy there, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Usually you get the standard answers, but I was amazed at his. I'll never forget it. He said, "I want to be a returned missionary." He didn't want to be just a missionary, but a

returned one -- one that's been through it and it's all behind him. Here Paul tells us that God is in the process of building returned missionaries.

Third, we find that reliability produces something. Suffering produces steadiness, steadiness produces reliability, and reliability produces "rejoicing in hope," the hope of sharing the glory of God, a hope for the future beyond death. But here is hope that we will share the glory of God, which is God's character, right now. We have the hope that God is producing the image of Christ in us right now. That's a great thing! And this hope is a certainty, not just a possibility.

We are being changed. We see ourselves changing. We are becoming more like Jesus. We can see that we are more thoughtful, more compassionate, more loving. We are being mellowed. We are becoming like Christ -- stronger, wiser, purer, more patient. To our amazement, a certainty grows in our hearts that God is doing his work just as he promised. He is transforming us into the image of his Son.

That brings us to the fourth step that Paul mentions here, and that is that hope does not disappoint us. (Although I am disappointed in that translation.) I like the King James translation better. It says, "hope does not make us ashamed." That is a figure of speech called litotes, which is the use of a negative to express a positive idea. Paul does this in Romans 1:16 when he says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ because it is the power of God..." What does he mean? He means he is proud; he is confident and bold. I think that is the term that we ought to use here. Hope makes us confident. Hope, or certainty, produces confidence and boldness.

The man I mentioned earlier, who had gone through the terrible trauma of having been shot by his son, stood up last week before a group of men and told them how God used that situation to get his attention. He began to study and to grow. As he spoke, it was evident that a man who previously had been ashamed to speak of Christ was now confident and bold. What the Lord had shown him, and how the Lord supported and sustained him through this terrible tragic time means so much to this man that he didn't care what anybody thought about it. He shared openly what God had brought him through. We lose our fear of ridicule and shame and we speak up and share out of the reality of our experience of what God has brought us through.

Paul goes on to explain why our hope does not disappoint us. He says it is "because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." Now, to my mind, this is one of the most important verses in the book of Romans. It is a very significant verse because it is adding a thought that we have not had in this book up to now. It is the explanation, above all else, of how to rejoice in suffering. You can see how important this is, because it is the first mention in the book of Romans of the Holy Spirit. This is also the very first time in this book that the love of God is brought in. Up to now, Paul has not said anything about the love of God, but now it is "the love of God that is shed abroad in our hearts, by the Holy Spirit, who is given to us."

We need to be very careful to see how Paul presents this concept here because the love of God is the subject he develops in Verses 6-10. That connection is important because these verses have been extracted from their context and used for evangelistic preaching so many times that we have forgotten what they originally meant.

... God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given to us.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! {Rom 5:5b-11 NIV}

The argument here is extremely important. It will explain to us how to rejoice in suffering. I know some Christians who are suffering, but are not being made steady and reliable and confident. Instead, they are being made bitter and resentful and angry, even to the point of denying their faith. Suffering, you see, does not produce these qualities automatically. You can go through suffering as a Christian and be filled with anger and rage and resentment against God. What makes the difference?

As Paul explains here, the difference is in seeing your suffering as evidence of God's love, and not his wrath. Then you will experience that love in the midst of the suffering. The Holy Spirit will shed abroad in your heart an experience of the love of God so rich and radiant and glorious that you will not be able to help but rejoice in your suffering. But, if you see your suffering as evidence of God's wrath, you will be rendered frustrated and angry and resentful and miserable. That is why Paul brings in this description of God's love for us.

I am sure that anyone who has gone through any degree of suffering knows that in the moment of pain and hurt it is easy to feel that God does not love you. It is easy to feel rejected, unloved. We are so used to thinking that love is something that blesses us and warms us and takes care of us that it is almost impossible for us to think we are being loved when we are hurting. It is hard for us to believe that the one who is doing the hurting is doing it out of genuine love for us. We feel broken, we feel worthless, we feel forgotten. That is why we need to

Paul says there is a place where every Christian knows that God loves him, even though he himself is worthless and useless and forgotten. What is that place? It is the cross. In the cross of Jesus Christ you always see two things: First, you see yourself. You see, as Paul puts it here, that you are helpless. If there were any other way to get to God, then there never would have been a cross. But the cross is God's testimony that there is no other way. That is why it says, "At the right time, in due time, Christ died." At that time in history God amply demonstrated to all the world that man could not save himself.

The great Hebrew prophets had spoken, and that didn't help. Greek philosophers had taught, and that didn't help. The Romans had come in with their military might, and law and order was imposed over the course

of the whole world of that day, and that didn't help. At the right time, Christ died on the cross so that men could see how helpless and powerless they were to save themselves.

As we look at the cross we see how ungodly we are. We are not like God, we don't act like God. We have the capacity to do so, but we don't. We even want to at times, but we don't. Therefore, we see in the cross how unlike God we are. We see that we are sinners. We are involved in things that are hurtful. We are destroying ourselves and others. We find ourselves lawless and selfish at times, and we know it was man's sin -- our sin, yours and mine -- that nailed Jesus to that cross. It was not his own sin, but yours and mine. There we learn that we are enemies of God, enemies sabotaging God's plan to help us, wrecking everything he tries to do to reach us. For years we fight back and resist God's efforts to love us and to draw us to himself.

We are the enemies of God. And yet we know, if we are Christians at all, that in that place where man's inadequacy is so fully demonstrated, we also have the clearest testimony that God loves us. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son," {John 3:16 KJV}. Jesus came to break through all our despair and weakness and shame and sorrow and sin, all man's ruin and disaster. He came to demonstrate a God who loved mankind and would not let it perish.

Now we come to the force of Paul's argument. If you clearly knew God's love when you became a Christian -- when you were enemies and helpless and powerless -- how much more can you count on the fact that God loves you now that you are his child? Even though you are suffering, even though you don't feel loved right now, even though it seems as though God is against you, how much more you can count on the fact that God loves you.

Paul is arguing from the greater to the lesser. If God could love you when it was so evident to you that you didn't deserve it, how much more must you reckon upon his love now that you know that you are dear to him and loved by him. Therefore, this suffering is not coming into your life because God is angry with you; it is coming because God loves you. It comes from the heart of a Father who is putting you through some development that you desperately need to grow into the kind of a person you desperately want to be. And he loves you enough that he will not let you off, but will take you through it. Therefore it is not his anger you are experiencing, but his love.

disciplined by the fathers of our flesh, and we know they love us, why can't we believe that God loves us when he puts us through times of testing and pressure and suffering. When you see that truth, then you can rejoice, because you know that suffering will produce the things that make you what you want to be. There is a hymn that I think expresses this idea beautifully. It goes like this:

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed, 'ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.
His love has no limit, His grace has no measure;
His power no boundary known unto men.
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again.

Prayer

Our Father, it is encouraging to us to realize that you are a God of utter realism, that you know thoroughly and completely the raw hurt, the agony, the pain, the bleeding that we can go through. You don't try to dress it up and make it look any different. But nevertheless, Father, we thank you that you assure us and reassure us that we are being loved all through this time, that we are being tested and developed and made into something we need and want very badly, and that you know what you are doing. You are faithful and do not allow us to be tempted above that which we are able to bear. You are even showing us how much we are able to bear, when we think we can't bear very much. Thank you, Lord, for that. Thank you that through the pressure and testing you give a deep sense of joy. And as we understand that this is coming from your loving hand, you, by the Holy Spirit, will release in our hearts your love to us, to steady us and enfold us and keep us strong and rejoicing. We thank you for this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Rejoicing in Suffering
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 5:3-10
Message No: 11
Catalog No: 3511
Date: May 16, 1976

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REJOICING IN GOD

by Ray C. Stedman

true Christian is that he always rejoices. Three times in this chapter we are given reasons for rejoicing, as believers:

First, we rejoice in our spiritual position. Having been justified by faith, "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God," {Rom 5:1b-2 NIV}. That is our spiritual position. The moment we believe in the Lord Jesus, we can rejoice in the hope of sharing the glory of God.

Then we are to rejoice in our growing conformity to the character of Christ. This is produced by suffering. Suffering helps us to become like Jesus now. And as we suffer, knowing we are undergirded, protected, and covered over by the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, we learn to rejoice in our sufferings.

Verse 11:

Not only is this so [Paul has said that twice in this chapter] , but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation. {Rom 5:11 NIV}

In my book *Authentic Christianity*, I call this "an unquenchable optimism." Christians always have grounds for rejoicing. No matter what happens, you have a ground for rejoicing. The three kinds of rejoicing not necessarily chronological levels, but they are levels of understanding truth and responding to it that reflect a continually growing and deepening maturity.

The third level is rejoicing "in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation." Notice again that Paul, as he so frequently does, reminds us that everything that comes to us comes through our Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is the way to God. He himself said so: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man [-- no man --] comes to the Father but by me," {cf, John 14:6 KJV}. Therefore, when you see the greatness of Christ, you have seen the greatness of God. It is he who reveals the Father. Remember how John begins his gospel?

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. {John 1:1, 1:14 KJV}

That is the way we see God. When we see the greatness of Jesus, we see the greatness of God. When we see and know the love of Jesus, we know the heart of God. Therefore, we are to rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

How do you do that? How do you see the greatness of Christ? Paul says it is by understanding the reconciliation. If you want to know how great a person is, you look at the record of his achievements. What has he done? record of the greatness of Christ, his achievement of what Paul calls the reconciliation.

This passage, admittedly, is one of the most theologically important chapters in all of the Bible. It is a very complicated statement, in some ways, and I am going to ask you to follow it very carefully, for it is tremendously important. In this passage is the clearest statement in the Bible on what is called "original sin," that is, the blight that has been passed on to our whole race as the result of the sin of our father Adam. Also, here is the complete answer to those who doubt the historicity of Adam and Eve. There are some who claim that the first chapters of Genesis are merely legend, or myth, that Adam and Eve were not real people. But this chapter shows that that belief is false. For, all through the passage, Adam, as an individual, is contrasted and compared with the person of the Lord Jesus. This section also lays the

I have found that, if you get involved in the details of the passage, and it would be easy to do so, it would be possible to preach a month of Sundays on this one section alone. People invariably get lost in the argument and lose the main point the apostle wants to make, which is: The greatness and the glory of the Lord Jesus -- the reason why we can rejoice in God through him. So, instead of dwelling on the argument in detail, I want to summarize it for you.

There are four movements in this section:

- 1 First, in Verses 12-14, Paul begins with us in Adam, where we start as a human race -- in Adam.
brought to if we are in Christ, as contrasted with what we were in Adam.
master logician, the Apostle Paul.
- 4 The chapter closes with a brief explanation of the relationship of

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned -- {Rom 5:12 NIV}

My version has a dash here, which means it is an incomplete sentence. I am going to read that verse again to you, because I don't agree with this translation. Notice that Paul starts out by saying "Therefore, just as..." When you get a "just as," you grammarians know that you have got to have an "even so" a little later. Paul is making a comparison here. The Greek text actually has an "even so," but for some reason, the New International Version doesn't translate it, so we'll correct it. (This is the Stedmaniac version, with which you are all familiar.)

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, so also [or, even so] through one man death came to all men, because all sinned. {Rom 5:12 RCS Version}

This is Paul's argument. He starts with two undeniable, indisputable facts: the universality of sin and the universality of death. We can't deny these. Everywhere we look there is evidence upon evidence that what he says is true, that we are victims of the twin evils of sin and death.

There are some who may not accept the idea of sin. There are people today who do not like this word. You can call it anything you like, but the fact remains that there is clear evidence wherever you look in the human race that something has gone wrong with our humanity. You can call it karma, destiny, fate, evolutionary darkness, or whatever -- but it is said, "Whatever else may be said of man, this one thing is clear: He is not what he is capable of being." I think any line of evidence will substantiate that. Some kind of a twist has come in, something that we cannot explain -- a taint, a moral poison that makes us act in irrational ways -- so that even when we know that something is wrong or hurtful, we want to do it.

I don't have to go any further than my own heart to find evidence of that. There are things that I know would destroy me and my family, and yet at times I catch myself wanting badly to do them. And so do you, so don't look so pious! That is what is called "original sin." And it is not only evident in adults. The striking and remarkable thing is that it is found in babies. Sin is there at the beginning of their life, they are born with it as conclusive proof of what Paul is saying here. It is something that has gripped the race.

My two-year-old grandson comes over to our house frequently and tears up the place. It takes us two days to get it back in shape after a visit from him. His mother was telling us the other day that if she says to him, "Now, eat your food," that's the one thing he doesn't want to do. So she has learned how to make him eat his food: She says, "Now, don't eat your carrots." And he gobbles them up. Anything that is prohibited, that's what he wants to do. Nobody had to teach him that. We've never sent him to school to learn how to disobey. He's only two years old, but he knows how to resist instruction and command; he wants to do what he ought not to do.

I think this universal tendency to evil has been stated most clearly by a totally secular agency. The clearest 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, 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.

This is a clear statement on the universality of sin and of the fact, as Paul says here, that by one man, sin entered the world. And along with sin came death. Everyone acknowledges the universal presence of death in our society. Even babies are starting to die. We look at a newborn child and say, "Here is someone who is starting to live." But it is equally true to say of that child, "Here is someone who is starting to die," because death is at work in that child from the moment of birth. We are born to die. This is the story of our race. We don't need to argue it; it is evident on every side. Later on in this passage Paul says, "Death reigned." Still later on, he says, "Sin reigns." So in these two forces that have been introduced into humanity, we have a pair of royal tyrants who rule over men. King Sin and his evil and cruel queen, Death, who hold in their remorseless hands every human being, without exception.

How did sin and death get control of our race? The apostle answers: through one man. That is the key to this whole section. Again and again Paul rings the changes on that phrase: through one man, by one man. Paul is contrasting two men, actually, Adam and Jesus. But, in either case, what comes to us, comes from one man, either Adam or Jesus.

It was through Adam that sin and death gripped our race. We sin because we are sons and daughters of Adam, and we die because we are sons and daughters of Adam. We don't die for our own sins. Normally, we would die for our own sins, but, as Paul goes on to argue, there are even some -- babies, for instance -- who haven't sinned at all, and yet they still die. Therefore, Paul traces the reign of sin and death back to Adam.

For before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account where there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come. {Rom 5:13-14 NIV}

Paul's argument is simply this: Death is the punishment for breaking a command. In the Garden of Eden, God said to Adam, "Do not eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of evil. In the day that you eat thereof, you shall surely die," {cf, Gen 2:17}. Adam broke that specific, clear-cut command; he ate of the fruit. That was not merely a little incident, a peccadillo, Adam actually was choosing to be an independent creature and denying his dependence upon the God who made him. It was an act of rebellion; it was an act of idolatry. He was enthroning himself as a god, in the place of God. Those were the implications of his action. Adam broke the command and, as a result, death and sin passed upon all his descendants. Paul is saying that death is the result of breaking a command -- and you need a law in order to be able to break a command.

How many of you have driven down your street for years and never had to stop at a certain intersection because there was nothing that required it. Then one day a stop sign is erected. Now the law has come in. From that time on, to fail to stop at that intersection is to break a command. If you fail to stop, you are subject to a penalty, even though you have been driving through that intersection without stopping for years without any penalty. But now the law has come in, and thus you break a command if you fail to stop.

In order to have death, Paul says, there had to be a command to break. But people were dying long before the Law was ever given. People died from the time of Adam to Moses, even people who never had a command to break. How could that be, if death is the result of breaking a command? Paul's conclusion is: The whole race actually sinned when Adam sinned. We broke the command in Adam.

At this point, many people say, "Well, that isn't fair! God is punishing us for Adam's sin, and that's not fair!" People who argue that way simply are revealing how little they understand the facts about the nature of our humanity. People who talk that way think of themselves as individuals quite separate from other people when, as a matter of fact, we are tied in together, all a part of one great bundle of life. We share life together. We recognize this fact when we speak of the brotherhood of man, and when we say, "No man is an island." But, at other times, we choose to think that we have a right to stand alone, as though no one else exists. Whether you understand it or not, this passage reveals the fact that when Adam sinned, he plunged the whole race into disaster. We are all born with sin at work in us and, as a result, death is taking its toll. So we sinned in Adam.

The most important phrase in this paragraph is the last one: Adam "was a pattern of the one to come." Through the rest of this passage, the apostle is going to show us how Adam is a kind of picture of Christ; and yet there is a great contrast between the two, as well. So the verses that follow draw both a comparison and a contrast between Adam and Jesus. Let's take these verses one at a time and restate the argument so that we don't get lost in this passage, then we'll move on to the conclusion that the apostle makes.

But the gift is not like the trespass. {Rom 5:15a NIV}

The gift, what every human being is always looking for, is the gift of righteousness, a sense of worth, a sense of significance to life. That is what righteousness means. And it comes as a gift from the Lord Jesus. The trespass is Adam's disobedient act in the Garden of Eden. The gift, Paul says, is not like the trespass.

For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, Adam, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! {Rom 5:15b NIV}

Paul is saying this: Adam brought a single experience of death to all people. We only die once, don't we? Adam brought that death to us. But Christ brought a repeated and ever-growing experience of life to all that are in him. That is the contrast. We can take life from Jesus a thousand times a day. We can take the gift of worth over and over again. Whenever our spirit feels put down, or crushed, or insignificant, or inadequate, or insecure, we can be renewed, we can take again the gift

of life and righteousness from him. So Christ Jesus is greater than Adam; for though the trespass of Adam brought death once, the sacrifice and the death of Jesus brings life a thousand times.

Again, the gift of God is not like the result of one man's sin. The judgment followed one sin, and brought condemnation. But the gift followed many trespasses, and brought justification. {Rom 5:16 NIV}

Adam's single trespass brought in judgment, i.e., death. Adam trespassed once and brought death to all that were in him. Christ died once and, despite thousands of trespasses, brought justification to all that are in him. That is the contrast. Adam trespassed once and brought death to all. Jesus died once and brought life -- despite thousands of trespasses.

What Paul is saying here is amplified before this in the repeated forgiveness of sin. One trespass brought death; the death of Jesus brought forgiveness for thousands of trespasses. All your life, as many times as you sin, you cannot out-sin the grace of God. No matter how many trespasses are involved in your record, there is freedom in Christ and forgiveness for all of them.

For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ? {Rom 5:17 NIV}

His argument: Adam's transgression permitted sin to reign over the whole race. This is talking about more than just the funeral at the end of your life. True, that funeral happens because of Adam's trespass, but there is more to it than that. Not only does death come to us at the end of our life because of Adam, but it reigns throughout our life because of Adam. Paul is talking about forms of death other than the mere cessation of life.

What is life? Life is love, joy, and excitement. It is vitality, enrichment, power; it is fulfillment in every direction, in every possibility of your being. That is life. Death is the absence of life. Death is emptiness, loneliness, misery, depression, boredom and restlessness. How much of your life is made up of death? A lot of it, right? Some people never seem to have anything but death in their lives. Death reigns because of Adam's transgression.

Paul is saying that Christ's death provides such abundant grace and loving acceptance, which are available again and again and again, that all who are in him can reign in life -- now. You can have life in the midst of all the pressures and circumstances and suffering and troubles. Your spirit can be alive and joyful -- experiencing fulfillment and

delight. Life in the midst of death! We reign in life now. Love, joy, peace, glory, and gladness fill our hearts even in the midst of all the heartaches and pressures of life.

Paul is drawing this parallel so that we might see how much more we have in Jesus than we ever had in Adam. What we lost in Adam, we regain in Jesus, plus so much more. Just as a climber on a mountaintop can dislodge a pebble which rolls on and accumulates others until it begins to launch an avalanche that will move the whole side of a mountain, so Adam's sin in the Garden of Eden dislodged a pebble that has built into an avalanche of sin and death that has swept through our entire race. But, Paul tells us, Jesus has launched another avalanche of grace, and in him there is ample counteraction against all that Adam has brought.

Consequently, just as the result of the one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.
{Rom 5:18 NIV}

Paul is saying that death, i.e., judgment or condemnation, comes to us not because of our own sins, but because of Adam's. It is a gift from Adam. What a terrible gift it is, isn't it? And thus the acceptance and worth that we need to have, the love that we human beings desperately crave and must have in order to function, is also a gift, a gift from the Lord Jesus Christ. We can have all that we want, anytime we need it.

For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. {Rom 5:19 NIV}

There are some people who claim that we are righteous because God declares us righteous. But here it is stated very plainly that we are made righteous in Jesus Christ. Paul is saying that since we are born in Adam, sin and guilt are not an option with us -- we have no way of choosing. We will sin because that is part of our nature. And so, when we are in Christ, having worth and love is not something that we have to choose to earn -- it is a gift from the Lord Jesus.

Law in this matter.

The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. {Rom 5:20-21 NIV}

Someone might raise the question, "Why then did the Ten Commandments have to be given?" Paul's answer is, "The Ten Commandments never were given to make men do right." That is what we think they were given for, but they were not. They were given to show men how wrong they already are. The commandments actually were given to make men sin more, to increase the trespass. Isn't that strange?

As in the example of my grandson, the Law makes you want to do wrong even more. It increases the trespass.

But a strange thing happens at that point. Paul tells us that the worse we get -- the more we fling ourselves into rebellion and sin and evil that we know to be wrong -- the closer we are to being broken, to coming to the end of ourselves and discovering how foolish and hurtful this whole thing is, and the closer we are to discovering the grace of restoration, cleansing, and forgiveness in Jesus Christ.

Last night I listened to a tape by Charles Colson, who was called 'the hatchet man of the Nixon Administration.' He was put in the federal penitentiary because of his involvement in some of the things associated with Watergate. On the tape he told of his experience in prison. In that dark and lonely place, crammed in with forty other men, he found a brother in Christ. The two of them met together and began to pray for others in that prison. They didn't know what God could do -- they almost despaired that anything could happen -- but as they began to pray, God began to work. They found that the Spirit of God swept through that prison in a remarkable way, and men were broken. Hardened, violent, brutal men, who had spent their lives in resistance to right and truth and good, and had given themselves over completely to hardness and cynicism and brutality, began to break and to find forgiveness.

Do you know that there is a spiritual awakening going on in our prisons today? I read last week that last year alone, in the Los Angeles County jails 256 prisoners received the Lord. Prisoners are open to Christ because they have allowed the law to drive them into trespass to such a degree that they are ready to hear the gospel. Sometimes this happens without outward rebellion. Sometimes we become frustrated and hard and cynical. When that happens we learn that the grace of God will abound more and more, for the increase of sin only increases the grace of our Lord Jesus.

The point of all this is that the one who breaks through is Jesus. Adam ruins us all. Only Christ can set us free. Sin and death will never loose their filthy hold on us except at the command of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the one to whom we look is the Lord Jesus, the one who broke the terrible death grip on us and set us free -- Jesus, the head of a new race, the beginning of a new humanity. Jesus is Lord. As we see him thus, we discover what the Scriptures say, that the blessed Lord, who broke through death and sin, has come to live within us, to give himself to us, and to infuse us with his strength and purity, his wisdom and power. All that he is is available to us. Thus we rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, who has made for us the reconciliation. When you understand that, you will sing, along with Christina Rossetti, these words:

None other Lamb, None other Name,
None other Hope in heaven or earth or sea,
None other Hiding Place from guilt and shame,

None beside Thee.

My faith burns low, my hope burns low;
Only my heart's desire cries out in me,
By the deep thunder of its want and woe,
Cries out to Thee.

Lord, Thou art life, though I be dead;
Love's Fire Thou art, however cold I be;
Nor heaven have I, nor place to lay my head,
Nor home, but Thee.

Prayer

By your Spirit, Father, we rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ.
We rejoice in who he is, and what he has come to do in our
wretched, miserable lives. We rejoice because he has broken
the shackles of evil and death and sin that held us, and he
has set our spirit free and has given us the opportunity to
draw from him the grace and mercy we need every day.

Title: Rejoicing in God
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 5:11-21
Message No: 12
Catalog No: 3512
Date: May 23, 1976

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CAN WE GO ON SINNING?

by Ray C. Stedman

Let me ask you a question. Now that you are a Christian -- now that you understand that the grace of God forgives your sins, past, present, and future, that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on your behalf settles the debt for sin, no matter when sins occur -- do you then have the privilege to go on sinning, living as you were, knowing that the grace of God will cover those sins?

That is a very relevant question, because a lot of people today are asking it, and a lot of people are saying that we can go on sinning:

who claims that he has the right to go on living in a blatantly sinful way because, he says, his sins are forgiven.

Last week I heard of a man in this congregation who admitted that he was a homosexual and was living as one. He claimed that he did not need to make any change in his life because, as a Christian, his sins are forgiven.

I just quote these to show you that this is not an out-of-date question, but one we all wrestle with and one that we must confront. The Apostle Paul faces this question in the sixth chapter of Romans.

us the tremendous change that was introduced by Jesus Christ when he died on the cross and rose again from the dead -- the breakthrough in history that came when the second Adam came in to undo, by means of his death and resurrection, what the first Adam did to us the Garden of Eden. That great contrast runs all through the second part of

deal with two very practical questions:

the sins of believers?" This whole chapter is devoted to answering that question.

about the Ten Commandments and their demands upon us?"

carry on with the description of the tremendous results that came in Jesus Christ, as opposed to Adam. Perhaps this outline will help us a bit as we deal with these passages.

seen, the Apostle Paul always states the truth first, in a kind of nutshell summary, a very pithy statement of what he wants to say -- then he logically takes his argument step by step and explains and expounds it until it is perfectly clear. That is what he does here. The whole truth that answers the question, "Can we go on sinning?" is dealt with

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? {Rom 6:1-2 NIV}

That is the whole argument, right there. Paul is dealing with the answer to that question, and he will deal with it very logically in the steps that follow. But for now he puts it in this one brief statement: "We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?"

I want you to notice three things about this brief statement:

First, notice that the question is logical. "Shall we go on sinning in

order that grace may increase?" That is a very good question to ask. If your teaching or preaching of the gospel does not arouse this question in somebody's mind, there is likely something wrong with your teaching, for it is the kind of question that ought to be asked at this point. There is something about the grace of God and the glory of the good news that immediately raises this issue. If sin is so completely taken care of by the forgiveness of Christ, then we don't really need to worry about sins, do we? They are not going to separate us from Christ, so why not keep on doing them? It is a perfectly logical question. It was raised everywhere Paul went, and it is a question that ought to be faced.

But, second, notice that even our very nature would have us raise this question. It is not only logical, but it is also natural. That is because sin, basically, is fun, isn't it? Oh, come on -- you can admit it. Sin is fun. We like to do it. Otherwise we wouldn't keep on doing it, we would not get involved in it. We know sins are bad for us. Our mind tells us, our logic tells us, our experience tells us they are bad for us. But, nevertheless, we like to do them. Otherwise we would not. Therefore, any kind of a suggestion that tells us we can escape the penalty for our sin and still enjoy the action arouses a considerable degree of interest in us. It does in me, anyway. So it is quite natural that this question would come up.

We must clearly understand that the Apostle Paul is talking about a lifestyle of sin, not just a single act or two of failure. He is talking about Christians who go on absolutely unchanged in their lifestyle from what they were before they were Christians. The word for "go on sinning" is in the present continuous tense. It means the action keeps on. This chapter deals with the effects of a single act of sin in a believer's life and what happens when we fail even once. We will come to that in due course. But here Paul is talking about a habitual practice, or something that frequently occurs in a believer's experience, something that was there before he became a Christian. Can we go on living this way?

Finally, notice that this question is put in such a way as to sound rightly motivated and even pious. "Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase?" This suggests that our motivation for sinning is not just our own satisfaction -- we are doing it for the glory of God, so that grace may increase. God loves to show his grace. Therefore, if we go on sinning, he will have all the more opportunity. What a chance for God to show his grace! It is clear that this question is not asked by a complete pagan or by a worldling, but by someone who seems intent on the glory of God. Having said that, we come now to the answer, the positive answer of Paul.

What shall we say then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! {Rom 6:1-2a NIV}

Paul immediately reacts with a very positive statement, bluntly put: "By no means!" Or, as it is literally in the Greek, "May it never be!" Absolutely not! It is interesting to me to see how the other versions translate this phrase. The King James Version sounds horrified: "God forbid!" Phillips seems to catch this same note of horror: "What a ghastly thought!" The New English Bible puts it very simply, "No, no."

So here is a no-no in the Christian experience. Can we sin? No-no. I gather from all this that the Apostle Paul simply does not agree with this philosophy that you can go on sinning and be forgiven. Why? In his inescapable logic, Paul answers in just four little words: We died to sin.

We died to sin. How can we live in it any longer? {Rom 6:2b
NIV}

Here is the whole truth that Paul wants to confront us with in answer to this question. The rest of the chapter is but an exposition of what he means by that. We are going to take that exposition step by step because there is tremendous understanding involved in it. But Paul is not going to make any advance on his original statement. When we get to the end of the chapter, he has simply made clear what he means by, "We died to sin." There is the whole argument, and if we understand what he means, we will see why he asks this question, "How can we go on living in it any longer?"

Now let's look at this phrase.

First, it does not mean that sin is dead in me. It doesn't mean that, as a Christian, I have reached the place where I cannot sin, although many people take it to mean that.

Some years ago I was working in the city of Pasadena and I went to get a haircut. I soon found that the barber was a Christian. As we began to discuss some things, he started to tell me about his Christianity. He told me that seventeen years before, he had been 'sanctified,' as he put it, and he was no longer able to sin. For seventeen years he had lived without sin. He made it very clear that he had no sin at all. So I began to discuss this with him, and I brought in certain other passages, and we got into kind of an argument. The longer we went, the hotter he got -- all the while he was cutting my hair. He worked himself up into a lather, just as angry as he could be. I finally said to him, "Look, if you can get so upset, so angry, when you have no sin in you, what would you be like if you were a sinner like the rest of us?" It was two weeks before I dared to appear in public after that haircut!

This passage doesn't mean that sin is dead in us; nor does it mean, as some have taken it, that we should die to sin. There are movements and churches based upon this idea. They say that Paul is teaching us that we ought to die to sin. You can attend meetings, conferences, and camp meetings where you will be exhorted to die to sin. We are told that this is the way by which we come to a victorious life. We are told we ought to begin to crucify ourselves, and die to sin. Now I submit to you that Paul is not saying that we ought to do this; he is telling us it has been done. We died to sin.

Third, neither does Paul mean by this that we are dying to sin. There are some people who take it that way. They say this means that the Christian is gradually changing and growing, and the more he does so, the more he is dying to sin, and there will come a time when he will sort of outgrow all his evil. It doesn't mean that at all. Once again, we must face clearly the flat statement the apostle makes. He puts it in the Greek aorist tense, which means this is once for all: We died to

sin.

contrast with what we were in Adam, and what we are now, as Christians, in Christ. "If in Adam," he says, "we will sin." There is no way we can escape it because Adam has passed on the taint of sin and death as his heritage. And therefore, in Adam we will sin. We all do. But then he says, "If we are in Christ (and the implication is clear that we are),

...so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. {Rom 5:21 NIV}

Now whatever else those words mean, it is clear that what happens in Christ is canceling out what happened in Adam. If death and sin come to us from Adam, then life and deliverance come from Christ. You can see already one reason why the apostle would add, "If this is true, how can we go on sinning?" We need to clearly understand his line of argument in received the gift of God -- which is Jesus himself -- and the gift of righteousness which he brings, then you are no longer in Adam but in Christ.

I have to admit that I quarrel with a very commonly taught doctrine among evangelicals that there are two natures in the believer. I don't believe that. There are two natures, but only one of them is yours! There are two forces at work within us, and we feel the conflict that they arouse -- but only one of them belongs to us. We once were in Adam, but now we are no longer in Adam but are in Christ.

And yet, having said that, we have to face the fact that Christians, who are no longer in Adam but are now in Christ, do sin, and they do die. transgression. How can we be free from Adam and still suffer the results of Adam's transgression? That, I think, brings us to what we clearly need to understand -- the nature of our humanity. More than anything else that I have found in Scripture, I have been helped by what Scripture reveals about who we are as human beings. When we see that, I think we'll understand what Paul is saying.

The first thing the Scriptures tell us about ourselves is that the most important part of us is our spirit. We are spirit; we have bodies and souls, but we are spirit. That may sound a bit spooky to you. The reason we struggle with this is because we can see our bodies, and feel our souls. We have been brainwashed by the world, which says only those things that can be seen and felt are real -- and who can see or feel a spirit? So we have a struggle at this point. But the Scriptures clearly tell us that basically, down deep, the very nature of our being is spirit, and God is Spirit. You can't see it, nor can you feel it, but that is who you are.

The Scriptures explain and help us to understand the nature of that spirit by a beautiful little symbol. Since we can't see our spirit, we have to view it through a symbol, a visual aid. The most common visual aid in Scripture to describe our human spirit is to call it a vessel. You can think of your spirit as a little cup inside of you, made to hold something.

The Scriptures tell us that, in the beginning, this cup was made to hold

none other than God himself. All the greatness and glory of God could be poured into that tiny human cup. That is what Adam was, as he came fresh from the hand of God. But in the fall, that cup was emptied, and filled again with a kind of poison. This satanic twist began to poison all our humanity.

I realize I'm speaking in symbols, but this is what we must do in order to understand the nature of spirit. We find in our experience that when the poison that Adam brought in fills our spirit, it spreads into the soul. Now the soul is the realm of soul experience: It is the functioning of the mind (the reason), the will (the power to choose), and emotion (the power to feel). Scripture tells us that this poison has touched us in all those areas, so that we don't think rightly, we don't feel rightly, we don't choose rightly. That is why things go wrong wherever human beings are involved.

You can see this even in a little tiny baby. A baby grows and begins to develop, and sin shows up in his reactions, in his attitudes, in his soul feel will be expressed finally in the body's action. That is the way we are made. What the body does is always the reflection of what the spirit and soul are doing. That is, if we have fear (one of the forms of evil and death within us) it will express itself in several ways. Shyness or timidity may be one way; anxiety and worry, another; bluster and boasting, still another way. All these reflect the fear inside.

If we feel angry and hostile, it comes out in sharp words, or even violent actions. We poke someone in the jaw, or we yell at the top of our voice, or storm out of the house and slam a door. All this is revealing what is inside, what is filling the cup of the spirit. If it is self-love that is there, as it certainly is, it comes out in terms of greed and possessiveness and selfishness, or in terms of sexual promiscuity, satisfying self despite the exploitation of another person. Or it may be ambition, power -- hunger, whatever. All of this comes out from within. Remember, this is saying nothing more than what Jesus

"What comes out of a man is what makes him 'unclean.' For from within, out of men's hearts [that is the word for spirit], come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, [Ho, you say, you haven't got me yet! Well, hang on!] greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and make a man 'unclean.'" {Mark 7:21-23 NIV}

Paul is saying the same thing that Jesus said. It all depends, you see, on what is filling the cup of the spirit. If it is Adam's life, then that is what is going to come out. There is nothing we can do to stop it. All we can do is to try to pretend that it is something else. We are all adept at giving the things we do different names than we do when we see others doing the same things.

But what happens when that spirit fully and truly turns to Christ, when it receives the gift of God's grace, the gift of worth? Then, according spirit is emptied of its satanic content -- sin -- and it is filled again with the Holy Spirit, who releases to it the life of Jesus. That is what the Holy Spirit has come to do. Our human spirit, our essential nature, is no longer in Adam, in any sense at all. It is now in Christ.

We are tied to Christ.

Now that is the teaching of Scripture from beginning to end, from Genesis to Revelation.

But, you see, the problem comes by the fact that our souls and bodies, which have been functioning for years under the control of sin in the cup of our spirit, are still going on in the same old way, functioning according to those patterns built up under the control of sin. Our habits, thoughts, and actions, already are established along wrong lines. That is where the evil and sin in a believer's life is coming from.

It is a struggle to re-educate the soul and the body, and we experience many failures until we allow the Holy Spirit to bring it under the control of the new life in Jesus Christ in the cup of our spirit. But it will happen, and it must happen, Paul argues. If Christ is in the cup of the spirit, then just as we could not evade sin because we were in Adam, so in Christ we cannot evade righteousness. Isn't that clear?

The life of Jesus is more powerful, more persistent, more insistent than the life of Adam ever was. That is the meaning of all the "much mores" in this section {i.e., in Rom 5:9-10, 5:15, 5:17}. If we had to sin in Adam, then for the very same reason, we have to begin to practice righteousness in Christ. It is not something we can help; it just will happen. That is why Paul asked the question, "Having died to sin, how can we live any longer in it? Why, it's impossible. It's not a question of should we; it's a question of can we?" His answer is, "No, it can never be."

In our neighborhood, right next door to us, is a home that was built a number of years ago and has been inhabited now by several different families. The first was a rather difficult family, the kind of people who would never keep a yard or house in order. Soon after they moved in, the brand new home began to show the effects of their style of life. The yard was littered with trash and garbage, the lawn was dead for lack of care. When it was replanted, it died out again. To enter their house was to enter a shambles. It never was clean or in order, never. These neighbors moved out, and new neighbors moved in. It wasn't very long until it became evident that a different kind of people lived there. They cleaned up the house and painted it. The yard was cleaned up, the lawn was dug up and replanted, and it has been cared for adequately ever since. Things are completely different -- what happened? It is impossible that there would not be a change, because there was a change in those who dwelt therein. This is what Paul is telling us here. There has to be a change!

Now someone asks, "What if a Christian does go on sinning, living in sin, claiming forgiveness, but goes on without any change in his life whatever?" What about that? There are people who are doing that. The answer, in light of this Scripture is very simple: These people simply are revealing that they never truly have been justified by faith; they are not Christians. Let's put it as bluntly as the apostle himself put it. They are deceiving themselves and deceiving others. Though they may do so with good intent, and with utter sincerity as far as they know -- nevertheless the case is clear.

It is impossible for your lifestyle to continue unchanged when you become a Christian. It is simply impossible, because a change has occurred deep in the human spirit. And those who protest, and say they

can go on living this way, are simply revealing that there has been no change in their spirit, there has been no break with Adam. They are still in the same condition. The Apostle Paul makes that very plain in a couple of places, and I want to share them with you so that we may clearly understand what he is saying:

The first is in Ephesians 5:5:

For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person -- such a man is an idolator -- has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. [He is not a Christian yet. He is claiming to be, but he is not. And lest we be fooled by his claims, the apostle goes on to say,] Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. {Eph 5:5 NIV}

In very much the same terms, Paul puts it again in First Corinthians 6:9:

Don't you know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived [there it is again] : Neither the sexually immoral nor idolators nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. [They were; they are no longer. Some of them are still struggling, and some of them do occasionally fail and go back to some of these things. But there's a vast difference. They no longer are that way -- there has been a break, a change in their lifestyle.] But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God [and therefore there cannot be the same

I think that is clear and fully answers the question, doesn't it?

Paul is saying that there is great hope for those who are caught up in any of these things. There is a way of deliverance. It is not a way that involves going on with the same style of life. Jesus Christ came to free us from sin, and not to allow us to continue in it.

The question we must face about ourselves is, "Have you really begun to hate sin deep inside of you -- your own sin, the things you do wrong and, for the moment, choose to do? Have you begun to hate it? Do you want to be free from it, want to be delivered, want the power of it broken in your life?" You can only want that because there has come into your heart a new Spirit, there has come into the cup of your spirit the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. And from that vantage point, he is beginning to assert the control of his purity throughout your whole life. You can't settle for sin any longer.

but here he makes it unquestionably clear. Can we go on sinning? May it never be!

Prayer

We thank you, Father, for the honesty of your Word. How clearly it deals with us, always tenderly, always in love, but very plainly, never deceiving us or handing us a line, softening things that we need to face, but truly telling us where we are. We thank you for the grace of our Lord Jesus, who has the power to break the grip of death upon our lives. Thank you that it begins in our spirit, and grows to control our souls, and ultimately will redeem our bodies in resurrection. For this we give grateful thanks, in Jesus our Lord, Amen.

Title: Can we Go on Sinning?
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 6:1-2
Message No: 13
Catalog No: 3513
Date: May 30, 1976

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THE TRUE BAPTISM OF THE SPIRIT

by Ray C. Stedman

The book of Romans is a tremendous revelation of what happens in the believer's life when he comes to Christ.

apostle is dealing with the question of whether the believer can go on living in sin after he has come to Christ. Can he go on in a lifestyle that is basically wrong and sinful? Can he live as an alcoholic, or a swindler, or an adulterer, or a homosexual, or a slanderer? Is it possible to maintain such a lifestyle and be a Christian?

The apostle's answer -- as we have already seen in the first two verses -- is, "By no means!" {Rom 6:2a NIV}. It is impossible, Paul says, because, as he puts it in these four little words, "We died to sin," {Rom 6:2b NIV}. Paul's conclusion is: "How can we go on living in it any longer?" {Rom 6:2c NIV}.

to unfold this conclusion so that we might understand in detail what that change means in our lives.

When you become a Christian, when you really, truly receive Jesus Christ as Lord, something happens that makes it impossible to go on living a lifestyle of evil. We died to sin -- and this is what we are examining in this message. The apostle uses two marvelous visual aids that God likes to employ to help us to understand truth. One of them is baptism, and the other -- which may be more difficult for you to see -- is grafting, as a plant or a branch is grafted into a tree. Let's see what the apostle says about baptism in Verses 3-4.

Beginning at Verse 1:

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. {Rom 6:1-4 NIV}

It is always interesting to me that when some people hear the word baptism they immediately smell water.

When I was a boy in Montana, I had a horse that could smell water from farther away than any animal I ever saw. You could be riding across the dry, parched plains, when suddenly he would prick up his ears, lift up his head, and quicken his pace, and you knew that he smelled water somewhere and he was heading for it.

There are people who are like that. Whenever they read these passages, and see the word baptism, they smell water. You can just see them prick up their ears, lift up their heads, and head for it. But there is no water here. This is a dry passage.

This passage is dealing, of course, with the question of how we died to sin, how we became separated from being in Adam, how we became joined in Christ. No water can do that. That requires something far more potent than water. It is, therefore, a description for us of what is called "the baptism of the Holy Spirit" elsewhere in the Scriptures.

John the Baptist, who made his reputation because he baptized in water, said, "I indeed baptize you with water, but there comes One after me, greater than I, who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit," {cf, John 1:33}. That is what Paul is talking about here -- the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which places us into Christ.

Paul says exactly the same thing in First Corinthians 12:13: "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body -- whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free -- and we were all given the one Spirit to drink," believers were baptized into one body. We were placed into Christ. You are not a Christian if that isn't true of you. Therefore, people today who say you need to experience the baptism of the Holy Spirit after you become a believer do not understand the Scriptures. There is no way to become a believer without being baptized with the Holy Spirit.

The baptism of the Spirit happened first, historically, on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon 120 people who were gathered in the temple courts, fusing them into one body, joining them to the head, which is Jesus, and thus formed the church, one body in Christ, all members one of the other and members of the Lord Jesus himself. That is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. It is not something that is felt; it is not something you can know through your senses when it takes place; it is something the Spirit does to our human spirit. Yet this baptism is very essential to becoming a Christian. It is part of the process by which we share the life of Jesus Christ.

Notice some things that Paul says about the baptism of the Spirit in this passage:

First, he says that we are expected to know about it. "Don't you know that we were all baptized into Christ, into his death?" Paul asks. He expects these Roman Christians, who had never met him or been taught personally by him, to know this fact. It is something new Christians ought to know.

Now, how would they know it? Here is where water baptism comes in. Water baptism teaches us, by symbol, the meaning of this baptism of the Spirit. The one is the shadow, or figure, of the other. The people Paul was writing to had been baptized in water after their conversion and regeneration, and Paul supposes that their water baptism had helped them to understand the reality of what the Spirit had already done to them.

Some time ago, Ron Ritchie told me of an experience that he had on Easter Sunday during a baptism service in the ocean near his house. I tell you, you really have to love Christ to be baptized in the frigid waters of the Pacific! A woman came up to him and asked him to baptize her nine-year-old daughter. Ron was reluctant to do so without finding out whether the girl really understood what was happening, so he began to question her and to teach her about the reality behind the water baptism. He was gesturing as he talked to her, and noticed that, as he was using his hand, the shadow of it fell on the sand. So he said to the little girl, "Do you see the shadow of my hand on the sand? Now, that is just the shadow; the hand is the real thing. And when you came to Jesus, when you believed in Jesus, that was the real baptism. You were joined to him, and what happened to him happened to you. Jesus was alive; then he died, was buried, and then he arose from the dead. And that is what happened to you when you believed in him." He pointed to the shadow on the sand and said, "When you go down in the water and are raised up again, that is a picture of what has already happened." The girl immediately caught on and said, "Yes, that is what I want to do because Jesus has come into my life." So water baptism is a picture, a symbol worked out for us, to teach us what has happened to us when we believed in the Lord Jesus.

Notice also that the apostle says, "This is how we died to sin." The great statement of this passage is that when we became Christians, we

died to sin. Paul is still discussing the question, "Can a believer go on sinning?" "No," answers Paul, "because he died to sin." How did we die to sin? This is how, Paul explains: The Spirit took us and identified us with all that Jesus did. Now, I don't understand that. That means that somehow this is a timeless event. The Spirit of God is able to ignore the two thousand years since the crucifixion and resurrection and somehow identify us, who live in this twentieth century -- as he has all believers of past centuries -- with that moment when Jesus died, was buried, and rose again from the dead. We participate in those events. That is clear.

I don't think we need to struggle with this, because something similar this is what happened to us in Adam. By being born into this human race, we became part of what Adam did. Way back at the dawn of history, Adam sinned, and we sinned in Adam. I don't fully know how that is true, but I certainly believe it. Every evidence of history demonstrates it to be true. Men sin from the moment they are born. Babies sin. Babies are filled with sinful attitudes and sinful reactions, as we have already shown. If nothing enters their life to help them control these things, they grow up to become criminals and rapists and murderers, because sin is there from the beginning.

Therefore this is not theological fiction; it is fact. Adam sinned, and we sin. Adam died, and men ever since have died. Every funeral throughout the ages has testified to the reality of that fact. The apostle is saying that what was true in Adam has now been ended and now we are in Christ, by faith in Jesus Christ.

Once Adam's actions affected us; but now what Christ did becomes our actions as well. Christ died, and we died; Christ was buried, and we were buried with him; Christ rose again, and we rose with him. So what is true of Jesus is true of us.

Here Paul is dealing with what is probably the most remarkable and certainly the most magnificent truth recorded in the pages of Scripture. It is the central truth God wants us to learn. We died with Christ, were buried, and rose again with him. That union with Christ is the truth from which everything else in Scripture flows. If we understand and accept this as fact, which it is, then everything will be different in our lives. That is why the apostle labors so to help us understand this.

Notice one other thing about this paragraph -- the purpose for which all this happened. Paul says, "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." Remember, Paul is answering the question "Can a believer go on sinning?" His answer is, "Absolutely not." We cannot because we have died, have been buried, and have risen again with Jesus, and therefore we, too, may live a new life. If you are a Christian, there will be a noticeable change of behavior because of a radical change of government. If you do go on living as you were before, then your profession of Christianity is false. There must be a change, and there will be, if there has been a change in the heart.

revelation of what has happened to us. Paul now uses the figure of grafting.

Verse 5:

If we have been united with him in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. {Rom 6:5 NIV}

In other words, you can't pick and choose. You can't die with Christ and not be risen with him. If you died with him, you must be risen with him as well. Paul uses a word from botany here. The word united means "to graft a branch into another." Some of you have fruit trees and you have done grafting. You have taken a branch from a nectarine tree and grafted it into a peach tree. The branch is tied together in such a way that the life from the trunk of the tree flows into the branch and they grow together until finally you can't tell the difference between the graft and the natural branch. The life is fully shared. This is the figure Paul is using here to describe our tie with the Lord Jesus. His life becomes our life. We are no longer in Adam, in any sense. The tie is totally broken. We are now in Christ, and he is our life from now on.

This is one of the most important concepts to understand. In order that we might understand it, Paul now gives us both sides to this parallel -- Christ; Verses 8-10 explain what it means to be risen with him. We want to look at these verses very carefully because it is so important for us to know the meaning of the death and burial of the Lord Jesus and our death and burial with him.

Verses 6 and 7:

For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin -- because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. {Rom 6:6-7 NIV}

Paul is tracing this parallel. Jesus was crucified, and we were crucified too. Our old self, the old man, the man who was in Adam, the tie with Adam, has been broken by death. All that we were as a natural-born human being ended when we believed in Jesus.

Paul is referring to the essential you, the spirit within you. We need very much to understand biblical psychology. Biblical psychology tells us that basically we are spirits dwelling in human bodies. Your body is not you. Even your soul, which is produced by the union of the body and the spirit, is not wholly you. You are your spirit.

Next, Paul explains that Jesus was crucified in order that the sin which was in his body on the cross should come to an end, that his body be rendered powerless with respect to sin. You say, "Now, wait a minute. There's something wrong here. There was no sin in Jesus." That is true. Scripture is very careful to help us see that in Jesus there was no sin. He did not sin; there was no sin in him until the cross. But this tells us an amazing thing about our Lord when he was on the cross. There, Paul believer, is located in the body. Therefore, it was described in Jesus in terms of the body. His body became possessed and controlled by sin. That is why his body died. His body was rendered powerless with regard to sin. That is why he was buried.

Why do we bury a corpse? We bury it because it is useless, inert, inactive. There is nothing it can do any longer, and so we bury it.

That is why Jesus was buried -- to prove that the sin in his body was ended. The body was useless, unresponsive. Paul says that is what happens to us. When our spirit has died in Christ, then the body of sin will be rendered powerless.

What does Paul mean by this term "body of sin"? He means the physical body that is dominated and controlled by sin. In Adam, sin filled the whole of man -- our spirit, our soul, and our body. Therefore, we had to sin. That is why, before you became a Christian, even when you tried to be good, you couldn't. Something always went wrong and you ended by fouling up in some way. You were a slave to sin, and no matter how much you wanted to be different, you couldn't be. But now that bond has been broken. In Christ your spirit is freed. It has been united with Jesus; it has risen with him, and it is free from sin. This explains that rather interesting passage in First John 3:9, which says, "No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he who sins has not seen God, nor does he know Him." John is talking about your spirit, the essential you. In that sense, it is proper to say of believers, "We cannot sin."

power trying to dominate and control our bodies and our souls. It is the presence of the spirit in the body that produces the soul, just as electricity in a light bulb produces light. The soul is our conscious experience and is produced moment by moment as we live, as light is coming from a light bulb moment by moment. Paul makes it clear that our spirits were freed from sin. They do not sin, and cannot sin, because they are linked with Christ, so that we may be able to control the sin which is in the body.

From here on, we do not have to sin. If we do, it is because we allow it to happen. But we are no longer slaves to sin. Throughout the rest of this account Paul deals with this theme. The body is the means by which we are tempted to sin. There is nothing inherently sinful about our bodies -- they are perfectly all right -- but somehow an alien power remains in them, and that is where we are tempted all our life long.

I think I can illustrate this for you. When you sit at the table to eat, you are satisfying a very normal appetite that God gave to your body. It needs food; it needs replenishment of energy. There is nothing wrong with eating. But when we get to the table and find plenty of food on it, each one of us has something within us that makes us eat too much. We eat more than we should. We say that we have a weight problem. What we really have is a sin problem. There is this sin within us that wants to take a natural function of the body and push it beyond what it ought to -- and thus it becomes sin. That is why, when we sit at the table, many of us are going to sin by becoming gluttons and gourmands. (Do you know what a gourmand is? He is someone who eats greedily, who delights in luxurious food, someone who lives for the taste of food.) We are all tempted this way because sin, as a principle, is still in control of the functions of the body. But our spirit opposes it, and we don't have to give in. That is the point.

The body requires rest from time to time. The body of Jesus grew weary and needed rest. But somehow there is in us a principle that wants to overindulge, and we become lazy, slothful, apathetic. We want other people to work and to serve us while we rest. This is so natural that it is even hard to know when we go over the line.

The mind, that amazing instrument of the body, functions in such a way as to reason and to logically deduce and to produce an amazing variety of inventions and technological advances. Yet the mind, with its ability to think and reason, can easily move beyond what it should into evil thoughts and prideful reactions and attitudes of jealousy and lust. We sin with our minds.

Consider the tongue, that member of the body that is so little, James says, yet can be "set on fire by hell," {Jas 3:6 NIV}. With our tongues, designed to be that by which we bless God, we curse him instead. The tongue is like the rudder of a ship, that turns the whole life in the wrong direction because of the words that we speak.

Consider the glands and hormones. Physiologists tell us that they are linked somehow with our actions. Just as the brain is linked with the mind, so the glands are linked with emotions. They are responsible for the way we feel, often. They pour out hormones into the bloodstream and affect the body. Some hormones make us over-react. Instead of normal fears that are designed to protect us from evil, we become paranoid, worried, filled with anxiety; we become lustful and indulge in wrongful attitudes. We become angry, so that we hate and feel jealousy. We indulge in what the Bible calls "inordinate affections," {Col 3:5 KJV}. Even our loves become twisted. That is sin in the body -- no longer in the spirit, but in the body. I don't have to describe this in terms of our sexual appetites. These are normal, legitimate, valid appetites, made by God to be satisfied; but something within us wants to satisfy them too soon, or with the wrong person, or sometimes in the wrong way.

That is where evil comes from -- the body, not the spirit. I hope this is clear, because it is a very important picture, one that will govern the rest of the book of Romans, as well as all the New Testament. The regenerated spirit cannot sin. It is born of God and it cannot sin. It has been set free of sin in order that we may begin to exercise control over the body of sin, so that it may be rendered inactive and we no longer need to be slaves to sin.

Not only have we been set free to choose not to sin, but a new power to

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. {Rom 6:8-10 NIV}

Once we have reckoned ourselves dead to sin with Christ, there is nothing left but to go on to life. Jesus does not go back into sin; he does not go back into death. Sin and death are over, as far as we are concerned, because that is what is true of Jesus. He lives now, and he lives under the will and by the power of God. Therefore, Paul says, the same thing is true in our lives. Not only do we need to recognize that we died to sin with Christ, but also that his life is in us now. His power is available to us. When we decide not to sin, we have the power to carry it out, because Christ is living in us.

Therefore, it all comes down to two simple steps that are described in

asked to do anything; this is the first exhortation in all of Romans. Up to now, everything Paul has written has been about what God has done for

In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. {Rom 6:11 NIV}

When you feel temptation in your body or your mind, then there are two things you are to do:

- * First, remember that you don't have to obey sin. You just don't have to. You are free to refuse it. You are free to say, "No, you don't have the right to use that part of my body for a sinful purpose." And,
- * Second, remember his power is in you to enable you to offer that same part of your body to God, to be used for his purposes.

Now, that may mean a struggle, because the strength of sin is very strong. When we start to turn away from evil in our bodies, the habits of our lives are so deeply engrained that oftentimes it is very difficult, and we struggle. But we have the power not to sin because we have God himself within us -- the living God.

I have mentioned before a group of ex-homosexuals who live in San Rafael and who have a great ministry with those who are involved in homosexuality. This week I received another one of their papers and I was struck by this paragraph. The writer is describing how tough it is to turn from these evil practices and be different once you have been deeply involved in them. He says:

This very weekend one of our brothers said to me, "How can I last through even one more year of this?" I said in response, "How can I last one more week?" But I will last, and so will he. For we have each other, and the sharing and fellowship and caring are God's ingredients to healing -- long-lasting healing -- that will impart strength beyond endurance, as God does it in His time and in His way.

struggle; it is not always easy, but we have the strength to do it and we have the right to do it. We have the freedom not to sin and the desire not to sin. That is what God has brought to us in Christ. Now you will see how the rest of this fits in. Paul is describing the two steps that we are to repeat over and over again, in dealing with evil in our lives.

Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, {Rom 6:12-13a NIV}

Step number one is to reckon yourself dead to sin.

Step number two is found in Verse 13b: Offer yourself to God.

... but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have returned from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him [your tongue, your mind, your stomach, your hands, your feet, your sex organs -- offer them to God] as instruments of righteousness. {Rom 6:13b NIV}

That is the way to win over temptation. Then Paul closes with this greatest verses in all Scripture:

For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. {Rom 6:14 NIV}

Why does Paul bring in the Law? He brings in the Law because he is dealing with one of the most basic problems of the Christian struggle, the thing that oftentimes depresses and discourages us more than anything else -- the sense of condemnation we feel when we sin. You see, the Law produces condemnation. The Law says that unless you live up to this standard, God will not have anything to do with you. We have been so engrained with this that when we sin, even as believers, we think God is angry and upset with us and he doesn't care about us. We think that way about ourselves, and we become discouraged and defeated and depressed. We want to give up. "What's the use," we say.

But Paul says that is not true. You are not under Law. God does not feel that way about you. You are under grace, and God understands your struggle. He is not upset by it; he is not angry with you. He understands your failure. He knows that there will be a struggle and there will be failures. He also knows that he has made full provision for you to recover immediately, to pick yourself up, and go right on climbing up the mountain.

Therefore you don't need to be discouraged, and you won't be.

Sin will not be your master because you are not under law and condemnation, but under grace. And even though you struggle, if, every time you fail, you come back to God and ask his forgiveness, and take it from him, and remember how he loves you, and that he is not angry or upset with you, and go on from there, you will win.

I will never forget how, as a young man in the service during World War II, this verse leaped out of the pages at me. I remember how the Spirit made it come alive, and I saw the great promise that all the things I was struggling with as a young man would ultimately be mastered -- not because I was so smart, but because God was teaching me and leading me into victory. I remember walking the floor, my heart just boiling over with praise and thanksgiving to God. I walked in a cloud of glory, rejoicing in this great promise: "Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law, but under grace."

Looking back across these more than thirty years since that night, I can see that God has broken the grip of the things that mastered me then. Other problems have come in, with which I still struggle. But the promise remains: "Sin shall not have dominion over you. You are not under law, but under grace."

Prayer

How grateful we are, Father, for this word of assurance that though we are left to struggle with evil that is resident in our body, it has not touched our spirit, and it cannot do so. There is a part of us, the very essence of us, which does not sin, and which remains in control despite temporary failures that we experience in body and soul. Lord, we thank you for this assurance that the struggle is to an end, that we will be victorious, that those of us who are in Christ will not need to be depressed and discouraged and need not fail, for there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord. Sin shall not have dominion over us, for we are not under law, but under grace. Thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: The True Baptism of the Spirit
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 6:3-14
Message No: 14
Catalog No: 3514
Date: June 20, 1976

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WHOSE SLAVE ARE YOU?

by Ray C. Stedman

I invite you now to turn to the book of Romans, where we are going to

In this chapter we are dealing with a very practical problem, one that every Christian must wrestle with. The problem is stated by the apostle very plainly in the first verse of this chapter: "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?"

This whole sixth chapter deals with what happens when a believer sins. We do not like to think that believers do sin; but, unfortunately, we ask this question. Now that you have become a Christian and Christ has entered your life -- you have been joined to him by faith in his work, by the power of the Holy Spirit, and by baptism into his death and being made a part of his resurrection -- the question arises: Can you go on living as you once did? Can you continue on in a lifestyle of sin, just as though nothing had really happened to you except that you will go to heaven when you die?

Paul's answer is: "Absolutely not!" You cannot do that; if you do, it is proof that you never really participated in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In other words, you are really not a Christian. Anyone who goes on in an unchanged life after having professed that they have come to Christ is simply giving testimony to everyone that he really has not been changed in his heart at all. He belongs to that crowd of people of whom our Lord Jesus himself said, "Many shall come to me in that day and say, 'Lord, Lord, did we not do many mighty works in your name and cast out devils?' And I shall say, 'Depart from me, I never knew you,'" {cf, Matt 7:22-23}.

The apostle is dealing with a very important subject here, one that we call "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace." In verse 15, he raises the question again, but in a slightly different way:

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? {Rom 6:15a NIV}

You can see that is a slightly different question than you have in "Can you abide in sin, living in a lifestyle of sin?" Paul's answer is: "Absolutely not! You cannot do it. If there has really been a change in your life, if Christ has entered your heart, there is no way that you can go on absolutely unchanged, justifying the same style of life that you have always had." But now the question is not "can we" but "shall we." Paul is raising the question of whether a Christian ought to choose to sin occasionally because he enjoys the momentary pleasure that sin gives.

That is the situation that every one of us faces from time to time. Sin is fun, isn't it? Sometimes we run up against some especially delicious temptations. At times, we all are confronted with the feeling "Why not give in? After all, I'm not going to hell because of this. My salvation rests on Christ and not on me. And actually, God is not going to reject me because of this, for the Law does not condemn me any longer. I am not under Law. It is love that will discipline me; Law will not condemn me. I can be forgiven; I can be restored -- so why not sin?" I have heard a lot of Christians talk that way, and I have felt the full force of this

confrontation in my own experience. Why not give in and enjoy a sin -- we are not under law, but under grace. Do you see the thrust of the apostle's question? It is a very real, very practical one.

In the verses that follow, Paul answers that question. He asks, "Shall we sin?" His answer is: "No. By no means!" If you, as a Christian, go on and sin deliberately, even if it is only occasionally, you must face what sin will do to you. You must face the full results of what will happen when you and I, as believers, choose to do what we know to be wrong, even though we have been set free in Christ and need not do these things.

Paul's answer is three-fold:

- Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! {Rom 6:15 NIV}
- 1 First, sin makes you a slave (Verses 16-19).
 - 2 Second, sin will make you ashamed (Verses 20-21).
 - 3 Finally, sin will spread death throughout your whole existence

tells us that sin will make slaves out of us:

Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey -- whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were committed. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness. I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to every-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness and holiness. {Rom 6:16-19 NIV}

Paul says he has gone into the common experiences of the world of his day to give us a picture of what humanity is like. He uses the phrase "slaves" to describe us. In other words, he is dealing here with a very profound psychological fact: human beings are made to be mastered. Somebody has to master us.

Some years ago in Los Angeles I saw a man walking down the street with a sign on his shoulders. The front of it said, "I'M A SLAVE FOR CHRIST." On the back of it, as he passed, you read, "WHOSE SLAVE ARE YOU?" It is a good question because all of us are slaves to one or the other of these two masters -- sin or righteousness. We have no other choices. By the very nature of our humanity, we are made to serve and to be controlled by forces beyond our power.

A couple of weeks ago, I watched the Republican Convention and was struck by the fact that as these people gathered in Kansas City to make a choice, they were aware that they had to decide between two men, Ronald Reagan or President Ford. The whole convention was gathered together for that one purpose -- to make a decision, to make a choice. Everybody there felt that he was free to make the choice he wanted to make, according to what he saw was important or what commitments he had

made previously.

And yet, as I watched that convention, I was struck by the narrowness of the choice they had. There were only two men to choose from. There could have been -- and probably were -- many there who gladly would have chosen someone other than those two men, but they had no opportunity to do so. There may have been some there who would have chosen me, strange as that may seem. I don't know that there were, but they had no opportunity to do so. You can see what a fantastic loss the Republican Party has suffered because of that. We think we are creatures of sovereign choice, but we are not. Our choices are very narrow, very limited.

The great question is: Who controls the choices that we have to make? Who controls that narrow band? What forces are at work to limit us to such a narrow range throughout our lives? The answer is: It is always something beyond us that controls these choices. God is at work; Satan is at work. We are given very limited ability to choose.

Paul then speaks of these two kinds of slavery. He says that we Christians have been set free from the slavery to sin. Once we had to sin. Before we came to Christ, there was no choice; no matter whether we chose what we thought was good or chose what we thought was wrong, we ended up making a choice that led to evil. There was no other way out. Even the right things we tried to do were tainted with evil, with selfishness. We have seen experiences that confirm this in our own hearts.

Well then, what happens when we sin as believers? Now we are free, and yet we go back and choose to do something that is wrong. We are confronted with this temptation to give way for the moment and indulge ourselves in some sin we want to do. Most of us try to kid ourselves into believing it is not very serious. "It won't hurt us anyway," we reason, so we make the choice.

Paul says, "Let's look at what happens. First of all, don't you know that you have set in operation a basic principle of life?" The principle is this: If you yield yourself to sin, you become the slave of sin. Jesus stated this in John 8:34: "Verily, verily, I say unto you [that is a little formula that means he is stating basic, fundamental, absolutely foundational truth], he that commits sin is the slave of sin," {cf, John 8:34 KJV}

Now, what does this mean in practice? A slave, of course, is someone who is not in ultimate control of his own actions, someone who is at the disposal of another person, someone who has to do what that other person says. When we choose to tell a lie, we give one of the clearest evidences of the operation of this principle in our lives. Have you ever noticed what happens when you tell a lie?

A man said to me the other day, "I told what I thought was a little white lie. I thought that would handle the matter. But, you know, I found out that I had to tell 42 other lies -- I counted them -- before I finally woke up to what I was doing and admitted the whole thing and got out from under." You can't tell one lie. You see, you are not in control of the events. You choose to tell one lie, and before you know it, you have to tell another.

The same thing is true with anger. Have you noticed that? You decide you are going to put a little sharpness in your voice when you answer

someone. You want to cut him down just a little bit. You don't want it to go too far -- after all, you do like him -- you just want to hurt him a little bit. So you do. What happens? He answers back in kind. So you cut a little deeper, and before you know it, you are embroiled in an argument and a battle that you did not want. It happened because you were a slave to sin. Sin pushed you further than you wanted to go. There was no way you could escape.

Secondly, sin not only takes you further than you desire to go, but it also infects others with the same attitude. Did you ever notice that? You wake up in the morning feeling surly and grouchy, and you snap at somebody. Then the other person snaps back, and soon the whole household is reflecting your attitude. You choose to do something a little shady in your business, and soon others begin to do the same thing. So sin begins to spread, like an infection. If you think the Legionnaires' Disease was a killer, you should watch what happens when sin begins to operate. Years ago I heard a little rhyme that said:

I said a very naughty word only the other day.
It was a truly naughty word I had not meant to say.
But then, it was not really lost, when from my lips it flew;
My little brother picked it up, and now he says it, too.

That is the way sin begins to spread. And part of the slavery is that when you yield yourself to something, and do it two or three times before you wake up to what is going on -- it is getting out of control and going beyond what you wanted -- it becomes difficult to begin to change.

Something resists every opportunity you take to try to change. It is hard to go back. A habit has begun that is hard to change. Just as an illustration, somebody said to me the other day, "It's easy to quit smoking; I've done it dozens of times!" What a testimony that is to the power these things have to grip us and to control us. Paul is right, for we become the slaves of that which we obey.

When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit [or what fruit] did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? {Rom 6:20-21 NIV}

Each of us can look back in our lives at something we are ashamed of. It leaves a stain in our minds when we think about it. Shame is the awareness of unworthy actions and irreparable damage that we do to others and our painful feeling about it. We have all experienced shame at times. Sin -- no matter what it is or how small it seems -- always leads to shame. The memories of the past are stained and blotted by this sense of shame that we experience. We all know what it is like -- those shameful deeds that we would like to forget, but can't; hurtful words that we wish we had never said; strained relationships that go on for years, so that whenever we meet certain people we feel uncomfortable in

their presence.

This is the inevitable fruit of sin, something that Paul reminds us of many times. In Galatians 6:7-8 he says, "Do not be deceived [don't kid yourself]; God is not mocked," {Gal 6:7a RSV}. "For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption;" {Gal 6:8a RSV}. You can't drop the seed of evil into your heart without reaping from it the harvest, the fruit of corruption; "but he who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life," {Gal 6:8b RSV}. That is exactly what

The third reason why we should not give way to sin is found in

Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. {Rom 6:21-23 NIV}

Life and death -- the two results. What is death? When Paul talks about death here, he is not talking about a funeral which comes at the end of your life (though that certainly is what death is). He is talking about something that you experience right now while you are alive. Death is both physical and moral; the one is a picture of the other. Physical death always involves darkness, the end of light and life. It involves limitation, for a corpse is helpless -- what can it do for itself? And it involves, ultimately, corruption -- the corpse begins to stink and smell, it becomes foul and decayed, rotteness sets in.

That is what happens when we sin as believers. These same elements of death are present. There is, first of all, darkness. I can look back in my own life and see how, as a young Christian, there were times when I struggled and struggled to understand passages of Scripture. I couldn't seem to grasp them; they were closed to me. Others understood them and seemed to be rejoicing in them, but I couldn't -- until God, in his mercy, began to deal with me about things that I was doing that I knew were wrong. Finally, God led me to the place where I would be free. I would repent and turn from these things and come into the freedom that God had given me in Christ. Then I would discover that the Scriptures began to open up, and light came into my darkness.

I meet Christians all the time who do not seem to understand many of the truths of the Word of God. I don't know if this is always the explanation, but in many cases it is -- because they are deliberately allowing things in their lives that they know are wrong. They don't realize that these things spread death. Darkness sets in, and they cannot see the light. Paul reminds us in Second Corinthians, "The god of this world has blinded the minds of them that believe not, so that they cannot see the light of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ," {cf,

Not only does darkness set in when we sin, but there are limitations, too. Remember the account in the Old Testament about Moses in the wilderness. He became angry one day when the people tested him and frustrated him. God told him to speak to the rock and it would give water. Instead, in his anger, Moses struck the rock with the rod, {cf, Num 20:8-11}. That was just a little thing, a momentary blowup. For a few seconds, he lost his temper. But God said, "Moses, because you have

done this, you will not be able to enter the Promised Land. When the people enter the land, you must stay behind because you have done this thing," {cf, Num 20:12}.

I am not suggesting that there are things that we do that forever limit the opportunities God gives us. But I know that as long as we cling to things that we know are wrong, justifying them in our lives and refusing to enter into the freedom that God gives us, there is a loss of opportunity. That is why many Christians never seem to have occasion to discover the adventure of serving God. They sit with folded arms, watching other people having fun and excitement, while nothing opens for them. Oftentimes it is because of this very thing -- the choices of sin that we make.

Death means a lessening of our experience of freedom and delight in the things of God and an increase in boredom and banality. Sometimes our lives become utterly nauseating to us. Have you ever felt that way? Sometimes your whole Christian experience almost stinks in your own nostrils. That is a sign of the death that sin brings with it.

Now, throughout this account, Paul stresses over and over again the words "set free." "You have been set free," he says. "You no longer are the slaves of sin. When you came to the Lord Jesus, a change occurred; you have been freed. You are no longer a slave to evil, but a slave to righteousness." Paul says, "Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness and holiness."

Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, all this business of being limited, of experiencing death and shame, is totally unnecessary to a believer. That is the tragedy of sin in a believer's life. We don't have to experience death in our lives; we only have it because we choose to. Therefore, any experience of these things in our lives is something that has come because we have chosen to let it, although we were free to choose otherwise.

A member of our family is currently learning to ride a bicycle. I won't say who it is, but she is learning how to balance herself on the wheels and pedal down the street. And she is doing very well at it. But so far, the only way she has ever found to stop is by running into something. I am constantly picking her up out of bushes and off the sidewalk because the only way she has been able to stop is by running into something. The other day I was helping her, and said, "You don't have to run into things to stop; there is another way to do it. A provision has been made so that you can stop this bicycle without having to run into things." I showed her that all she had to do was to reverse the pedals and the coaster brake would bring her to a stop. I had shown her this before, so when I said that to her, she looked at me and said, "Well, I am sure relieved to know that there's another way to stop." I realized that she didn't need me to tell her that. What she did need was to actually do it when it was time to stop. What good does it do to have a bicycle that has a provision for stopping if you never use it? You might just as well not have it.

The question the apostle raises in this passage is: "What good is it to be set free from sin by Jesus Christ and have every opportunity and every possibility of walking in holiness (wholeness, a whole person, one who has got it all together) and in righteousness (a sense of worth, a sense of security, and assurance that you are loved by God and are valuable to him), if, at the moment of choice, we ignore these things

and go right on as though we were slaves to sin?"

As I travel across America, I am often struck by the fact that the various cities into which I come are always cities filled with churches. In almost every corner you can find a church. And those churches are often filled with Christians. It seems as if this country has a fantastic opportunity to see a new quality of life demonstrated -- a quality of life so uniquely different from how the world lives that we ought to have people stopping us on the street to ask, "What goes with you? How come you have such peace in your eyes? How come you have such love in your heart? Why are you so different?" Instead, with our cities filled with churches and our churches filled with people, all the world sees is the same old, tired reactions that they themselves are so familiar with and so tired of.

to be a king, free to have a sense of worth, free to be secure in your own personhood, knowing who you are before God. He set you free to be a whole person, so that you are not torn by a dozen different conflicting interests, but, with a single eye, you can live to the glory of God, free from the control or the blame or the censure or the praise of men. You are free at last to respond to the greatest calling that a man can have -- the call to know God, this amazing Being.

That is what this closing verse means. "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life." Jesus described eternal life in John 17:3: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent," {John 17:3 NIV}. Here we are, called to this kind of living, called to this quality of existence, and yet, because of the foolishness of our hearts and the weakness of our spirits, we choose to give way to these momentary indulgences that lock us into slavery and shame and death.

May God help us to set sin aside and to live as the free men and women God has made us to be. As Paul said in Galatians 5:1: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of bondage," {cf, Gal 5:1 NIV}

You have been freed from the slave market; now walk as new men. This is Paul's exhortation to us.

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that there may be among us today, young and old alike, men and women who will dare to respond to the challenge of your Word, to be what we are capable of being in Christ, who will dare to say, "Yes, by the grace of God, I want to enter into this freedom," who will dare to live according to this and turn away from the subtle, silken claims of evil in our lives, and say "Yes!" to you. We pray that we might manifest this wholeness, this beauty, this reality, this liberty of the children of God. Lord, help us here at Peninsula Bible Church, and those at other churches across this land, to begin to respond to this truth. We pray that this nation, under God, may have a new birth of freedom and that men may come to see the unique quality that Jesus Christ brings into a life. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Whose Slave are You?
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 6:15-23
Message No: 15
Catalog No: 3515
Date: September 5, 1976

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FREE TO WIN OR LOSE

by Ray C. Stedman

This is an election year, and we are hearing plenty about it. On television and radio and in newspapers we are confronted with the question, "What is wrong with this country?" Both of the major candidates are telling us what they think is wrong; and if you listen to them, you hear that the problem is always the other party. But, in our hearts, we know that both parties are wrong, because the problem really isn't in our politics -- it's in us. In those immortal words of Pogo, "We have met the enemy, and he is us."

The book of Romans agrees with this, for the Scriptures are always telling us that the problem with man is man himself. Until we deal successfully with that problem, there is little hope in any political change. All we do is rearrange the pattern of the problem when we elect another party's candidate; we really haven't changed the problem itself.

Romans tells us that God's solution to the problem of man is to begin a whole new race. He doesn't start with halfway measures; he doesn't patch up the old; he doesn't try to improve what's there until it gets good enough to live with. He cuts us right off at the root and begins a new race. But the wonder and the glory of it is that he starts the new race within the shell of the old. Outwardly, we remain unchanged. Our bodies are still subject to decrepitude and decay and death. Yet, within, a new man has begun if we have exercised faith in Jesus Christ. God's solution is to end the curse of Adam and to release within us the power of a new life, the life of Jesus himself.

Paul brilliantly describes this solution in these opening chapters of picture of what happens when we put our faith in our Lord and what he has done. We enter into an identification with his death and his resurrection, and the death of Jesus cuts us off from the old Adam that we all began life with. The resurrection of Jesus, Paul says, introduces us to a whole new power -- the life of Jesus available to us.

creates. Basically, it is the question, "Can we still sin as believers?" As you remember, his answer is, "Yes," and "No." No, we cannot go on in the same lifestyle which we had before we came to Christ. There must be a change. The radical transformation within us is going to result in some change in our attitude and outlook and value system, and, therefore, it will result in a change of lifestyle. Anyone who remains basically unchanged is fooling himself about being a Christian, because he is not a Christian unless there has been this inner change.

But, yes, we can still sin as believers. This is what Paul tells us in cannot escape the enslavement that sin will bring, and it carries us further than we want to go. It will involve us deeper than we would like; it will spread darkness and corruption throughout our lives; it will lead us to do things of which we will be terribly ashamed. Though we can choose to sin, we will not escape the effects of sin in our experience.

another question before he goes on to develop more fully this wonderful, help us, as believers, to handle the problem of sin in our lives?" Again, the answer is both, "Yes," and "No." Yes, the Law does help us -- but only up to a point. It will help us to define the problem. But no, the Law is no help at all when it comes to delivering us. It can't help us -- in fact, it will only make things worse.

he shows the necessity of being freed from the Law in order to handle the problem of sin in the life of the believer. We can't handle our problem with the Law hanging over our shoulder; we must be freed from that. I think you can see already that this is a very pertinent problem in our day. Every Christian believer rejoices in what he reads in the Scriptures about our identification with Christ and about these tremendous terms -- being freed from sin, dead to sin, and alive unto God, alive to righteousness, wholeness, power. Yet our experience tells us that we do not often achieve this. We are aware that we all have a problem with sin in our lives. We still like it, and we still do it. We experience what Paul says we will experience (enslavement, death, darkness, unhappiness, and shame) as a result of our sin. This is true in all Christendom today. Churches everywhere are filled with Christians who are struggling with this.

What's wrong? Basically, it is the same problem that Paul describes in want regulations and detailed instructions to follow so we can be freed from our problems. Yet, when we try, even with the best of intentions, it still doesn't work. That is what Paul is dealing with in this chapter.

Do you not know, brothers -- for I am speaking to men who know the law -- that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies,

she is released from the law of marriage. So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from that law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man. {Rom 7:1-3 NIV}

This is a simple illustration taken right out of life. This situation occurred again and again in Paul's day, and it occurs again and again in our day. It is an illustration intended to clarify this whole problem of our relationship to the Law. And yet, I don't think there is any passage in Romans that has become the source of more confusion than these opening verses -- not because the illustration is confusing, but because the commentators are. They twist the illustration. There is a unique phenomenon here that only those acquainted with theological journals and commentaries of our day would see. For some strange reason, this illustration, which is simple and clear, is often twisted by many commentators who insist on applying this as though the first husband is the Law.

In the illustration the woman clearly is a picture of the believer -- you and me. This woman had a husband, her first husband. According to the commentators, that first husband was the Law of Moses. But when you start with that understanding of this illustration, you are bound to end up with hopeless confusion.

In fact, many of the commentators go astray even before this. They fail to note to whom this whole passage is addressed, although Paul carefully underlines it for us. Notice the first verse again: "Do you not know, brothers -- for I am speaking to men who know the law -- " In other words, if you are going to understand this paragraph, you must know something about the Law -- you must know its functions, its purpose, and its effects. If you don't know or understand the Law, you are going to end up confused with this paragraph. As Paul says, "I realize that the ones to whom I am writing here are men who understand the Law."

Now, before we plunge into this, my question is: Do you understand the Law? Just as I thought -- not one of you here is a lawyer. As Paul points out here, we have to understand the Law. Let's stop a moment and see just how much we understand about the Law:

First, do you know that the Law Paul mentions here is a reference to a standard of conduct, or behavior, which is expected of men. There are other uses of the word law . Sometimes it is used in reference to a principle that governs our lives, such as the law of gravity. But here Paul is talking about a standard of conduct that we are expected to live up to.

The most obvious and perfect expression of that standard of behavior is the Ten Commandments. Everyone has heard of the Ten Commandments -- right? The Ten Commandments tell us: "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourselves a graven image... You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain... Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Honor your father and mother... You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet..." (Exodus 20:3-17). That is a standard of conduct, isn't it? That, of course, is the Law that Paul talks about here -- the Law that was given to Israel.

sense, the Law is present among men everywhere. Have you ever listened to people talking about their experiences and relationships with other people? Listen for a while, and you will hear a phrase like this: "I don't think that is fair." What do these people mean? What is it that determines whether a thing is fair or not? It is obviously some unspoken standard of conduct or behavior that both the speaker and the listener have in mind which is universally understood without speaking.

Some might put it this way: "I think this is the right thing to do." There, again, is an unspoken standard of behavior. Somebody says, "I'm going to get even!" How do you know when you are "even"? There is an Law really is everywhere; it is embedded in the hearts of men. There is an undescribed, unspoken standard of conduct to which we all refer. Every man everywhere thinks in these terms, no matter what his background may be. Now, that is the Law. It is the unspoken agreement that we all understand and which we must measure up to. Do you know that this is what Paul calls "the Law"?

Let's see what more you know about the Law. Did you know that the purpose of the Law is to condemn failure? The Law never pats you on the back when you do right. It takes for granted that you ought to do right anyway, and it never says thank you for doing right. But if you do wrong, the Law condemns you. In one way or another, it points out and punishes wrongdoing. It does this in the laws of our land, in traffic laws, and even in our so-called "moral" laws. Evil and wrongdoing always take their toll. Therefore, the nature of law is that it condemns failure. Did you know that?

Now, do you know that the effect of the Law is to discourage people? If law condemns -- and no one likes to feel put down and condemned -- then the effect of the Law, invariably, is to discourage, to produce a sense of defeat, and, ultimately, a sense of despair. That is what the Law does. That is why, in our land and in all the nations of the earth, law is producing a sense of despair. That is a major problem that people wrestle with today.

No one likes to feel despairing, and so we react in various ways. Do you know that there are certain invariable signs that you can detect in people who are still under the Law? Paul is writing this to those believers in Christ who were still under the Law. In their minds, at least, they thought they had to live under the Law, and there are certain signs of people who live like that.

One of the first signs is that they are always proud of their record. You say, "Wait a minute! I thought you said that the Law's effect was to make you discouraged and defeated. Someone who is proud of his record is not discouraged or defeated." Well, that is a diversion. The Law is making them discouraged and they don't like it. In certain areas of their lives they see defeat, and so they attempt to get people's attention off this area of failure and onto areas where they feel they have succeeded. That is why they are always pointing out the areas of their success and boasting about how well they are doing. They want to keep us from looking at that other area where they are failing. The Law produces failure. Therefore, one of the first marks of a person who is living under the Law is that he is always pointing out how well he is doing. Isn't that strange? Did you know that? I speak to those who know the Law, and you ought to know this.

Another mark of people who are living under the Law is that they are

always critical of others. This is another diversionary tactic. Why are people critical of others? Well, if you succeed in getting your friends' eyes fastened on other people, they won't look at you. And you feel justified because the faults you point out in other people aren't the same faults you feel guilty of. You know, God plays some amazing tricks with us. He so blinds our eyes, or allows Satan to do so, that invariably the things we criticize others for are the very things that we ourselves are guilty of. And we don't know it! You see, the Law is producing this sense of failure and defeat, and we are constantly adjusting to it and compensating for it by criticizing others.

Another mark of those under the Law is that they are always reluctant to admit any error or fault in their own lives. It is hard to get them to admit it. I have just finished reading *Born Again*, Chuck Colson's book about his terrible experiences during Watergate. I was interested in his characterization of former President Richard Nixon. This was one of Nixon's problems -- he could never admit he was wrong in anything. In fact, Colson said that even when Nixon obviously had a cold -- nose running, face red, sneezing, all the symptoms of a cold -- he would never admit it. That is the mentality of those who are under the Law. They feel very heavily the standard of conduct they are expected to have, so they pretend they are living up to it, even though they don't. They hate to admit defeat because that means they must change.

Another symptom of those under the Law is that they invariably are subject to times of inner boredom and depression, and oftentimes experience outward symptoms of depression and discouragement and defeat. They go through times of utter, sheer boredom. That is the sign of someone under the Law. The Law is doing its work condemning, and that sense of condemnation produces depression of spirit. Did you know this? You see, you can't understand this passage unless you know what the Law does. That is why I keep asking "Do you know it?" If you know this, you can see that this is a major problem in the church today. This is what has gone wrong with so much of the church in America today.

Now, therefore, we must understand Paul's application of this illustration. Let's get it now in Verses 4-6:

So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. For when we were controlled by our sinful nature [i.e., the flesh], the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code. {Rom 7:4-6 NIV}

Here is the way out, the way to be free from the Law! But I doubt if you understood it. Let's work through this passage so we can see it.

Let's go back to the illustration: The woman is you and me.

She has two husbands, one following the other.

Now, the point of this little story is not that the woman has two

husbands. Although that is important, it is not the major point. What Paul is getting at here is what the death of the first husband does to the woman's relationship to the Law -- not what it does directly to the woman herself, but what it does to her tie to the Law.

For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage [or, the law of her husband] . {Rom 7:2 NIV}

Do you notice three factors here? First, there is the law; second, there is a woman; and third, there is the husband. None of those are the same thing, are they? Therefore, the husband cannot be the Law. Many commentators say this woman (us) is married to the Law, and they have missed the point of this illustration. It is not that. It is the Law that binds the woman and her husband together. The Law is outside, saying "You two must stay together because you are married." The Law is not the husband, that is to clear.

If the first husband dies, Paul says, the woman is released from the Law. Not only is she released from her husband, but she also is released from the Law. If her husband dies, the Law can say nothing to her as to where she can go and what she can do and who she can be with. She is released from the Law. The death of the husband makes the woman dead to law.

Now, who is this first husband? According to the context, it is very clear. We have been looking at it all along. The first husband is Adam, this old life into which we were born. We were linked to it, married to it, and couldn't get away from it. Like a woman married to an old, cruel, mean husband, there is not much she can do about it. While she is married she is tied to that husband.

So then, if she marries another man while her husband is still alive, she is called an adulteress. But if her husband dies, she is released from the law and is not an adulteress, even though she marries another man. {Rom 7:3 NIV}

Now, that is plain, isn't it? The woman cannot have two husbands at once. She cannot have a second husband while she is married to the first. She is stuck with number one and she has to share his lifestyle. As we have already seen, that lifestyle is one of bondage and corruption and shame and death. That is why we who were born into Adam have to share the lifestyle of fallen Adam. It fits perfectly, doesn't it?

Now, if this woman, while she is married to her first husband, tries to live with another -- for this lifestyle is sickening to her -- she will be called an adulteress. Who calls her that? The Law does. The Law says, "You are a hypocrite." That, you see, is the spiritual counterpart of the physical term "adulteress." The Law condemns her, it points out her

failure, it calls her an adulteress. It is only when the first husband dies that she is free from that condemnation of the Law and thus can marry again. When she does, the Law is absolutely silent; it has nothing to say to her at all.

Now look at verse 4:

So, my brothers, you also died to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God. {Rom 7:4 NIV}

What a fantastic verse! Here is the great, marvelous declaration of the gospel of our Lord Jesus. Notice how Paul draws the parallel: "So ... you also." We fit right into this. The key word here is "you died to the law through the body of Christ," and the body of Christ refers to the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross. He died in a body. He came to take a body, that he might die.

Paul is referring to what the Scriptures say in many places -- that on the cross the Lord Jesus was made sin for us. He took our place, as sinful humanity, on the cross. I don't know how, but he did. In other words: He became that first husband. Do you see that? It is very important. On the cross, he became that first husband, that Adamic nature to which we were married. And when he became that, he died. And when he died, we were freed from the Law.

The Law has nothing to say to us anymore. We are free to be married to another. Who is this? It is Christ risen. Our first husband is Christ crucified; our second husband is Christ risen from the dead. We now share his name, we share his power, we share his experiences, we share his position, his glory, his hope, his dreams -- all that he is, we now share. We are married to Christ, risen from the dead. The Law, therefore, has nothing to say to us. Isn't that clear?

Verses 5 and 6:

For when we were controlled by our sinful nature, the sinful passions aroused by the law were at work in our bodies, so that we bore fruit for death. But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code. {Rom 7:5-6 NIV}

You see, while we were married to sin, the old Adamic principle, we often tried to act as though we were married to someone else, didn't we? We tried to act righteous and loving and kind. Many of us did. We really tried to behave ourselves, but we found we couldn't. The Law refused to go along with us. The Law judged us. It said. "You are really not that way, you are just acting like that. You are pretending." The Law called us hypocrites, and it was right. That is what we were. We were religious hypocrites, many of us, attempting to give the impression that we were

OK, and right, and loving, and moral, and kind, and good, when we weren't at all. Inside, all our attitudes were selfish and self-centered and loveless; but we were pretending. And the Law saw through it and named us what we were: hypocrites.

But, according to this, we died to the Law through the death of our first husband. When Jesus was crucified, that first husband died. And now we are free from the condemnation of the Law. We are married to another, Christ risen from the dead. So now, when we seek to be righteous and to do righteous things and to be loving and kind, we are no longer hypocrites. This is the point Paul wants to make. We are doing what we really are. We are tied to Jesus. His life is ours and we are acting according to our true nature.

We are married to a new husband. And because we share his life and power, we are not only able to be what he is, but we are also free from any condemnation or failure in our struggle along the way. We don't always act right, but the Law doesn't condemn us. The Law's purpose was to condemn, and we can't be condemned anymore because we are not hypocrites. We are doing what we were designed to do. We have a new identity. No longer bound to our failures, we can admit them and forget them. We don't have to have them clinging to us; we no longer have to believe that God is unhappy with us because we don't always live exactly right. He has made provision for this. It is not a fraud when we go back to God again and again and accept from his hand his forgiveness.

Therefore, it is not law that straightens us out, it is love. We no longer need the Law to straighten us out, but we have love to do so. We are free to fail and still be loved. And we are also free to win in the new power given to us.

The question Paul asks is, "Is the Law worthless, then, and contemptible?"

His answer, of course, is, "No!"

Some Christians talk that way about the Law, but Paul never does. There is a place for it, and it is valuable in a certain way, but it can do nothing to deliver us from evil. Only our relationship to love can do that.

Father, our hearts are singing,

Free from the law,
Jesus hath bled,
Cursed by the law
Grace hath redeemed us

Prayer

We thank you for this Father, and we pray that we may understand more and more fully that we are not under condemnation. Even though we struggle and don't always catch on to these truths very quickly, and don't always act on the principles revealed to us, nevertheless, you don't reject us, you don't cast us aside. You are not angry with us, but you lovingly forgive us, and help us, and restore us, and lead us on. That is what will make us free more and more. Thank you

for it, Father, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Free to Win or Loose
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 7:1-6
Message No: 16
Catalog No: 3516
Date: September 12, 1976

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THE CONTINUING STRUGGLE

by Ray C. Stedman

As we have been reading through this great letter from Paul to the Romans, we have seen the gospel of Jesus Christ which is able to set men free. This is the central declaration of the gospel: Christ has come, he has died, he has risen again, and he has come into our hearts by means of the Holy Spirit in order that we who believe in him might be free.

That is what the gospel is all about -- freedom! Freedom from self-centeredness, freedom from hostility and bitterness, freedom from anxiety and all kinds of fears, freedom from bondage to evil habits of any type -- this is the freedom Christ has come to give us. He has come to release us, to free us to be the men and women that God has designed us to be, living in the midst of (as Paul describes it) "a generation of crooks and perverts," yet being lights shining in the darkness of our day. As we have seen all the way through this book, and especially in Christ. Yet there are at least two ways we can miss this, even though we are Christians.

you can give yourself over to the bondage and slavery of sin. You can continue to give way to sin. You may think it is not worth your while to fight or you may enjoy the pleasure that sin gives you, so you keep on doing the things that are wrong. This is what theologians call antinomianism, which means, simply, "against the law." Antinomianism

reflects an attitude that unfortunately is common among us -- the idea that God, in his grace, will forgive us, so why not indulge in sin? I will go ahead and sin because I know God will forgive.

The Scripture says that if you do live on that basis, sin will enslave you, it will shame you, it will limit you, it will defile you, it will spread corruption and death in your experience. And though you may be a Christian, you will have a very unhappy, miserable Christian life because you cannot give way to sin without being enslaved by it.

The second way we can miss God's freedom for us is exactly the opposite. We attempt to handle this problem of sin by trying our best to do what God wants. By discipline and dedication of heart and the exercise of determined willpower we seek to do our best to do what God asks, to live according to the Law, and to fulfill the requirements that the Law demands.

Now, this takes many forms. Sometimes it comes as a challenge to take certain steps by which we can overcome certain problems. It all sounds very good, because it is an appeal to do that which is right, but it is what the Scriptures call legalism -- the exact opposite of antinomianism. It is a whole-hearted attempt to do what God wants. And the end result of attempting to live on that basis is that we become defensive, self-righteous, critical of others, proud of our own record. But also, we become unaccountably bored, dull, discouraged, depressed, and even frequently despairing. That, basically, is the story of

this. Legalism is not the answer, either, and there is no need for it. "dominion over you, for you are not under law, but under grace." In the woman with two husbands -- the woman representing us, and the two husbands representing our being tied to sin in Adam (our first husband), then freed by the death of Jesus on our behalf. Not only are we freed from sin, as Paul points out, but we are freed from the Law as well. The Law condemns us, but we are no longer under Law if we are resting in Christ. Therefore, the Law does not serve any useful purpose in delivering us from sin.

That raises the question: "What, then, is the purpose of the Law in a Christian's life? Is the Law really contemptible and worthless? Ought we just to dispense with it? There are many Christians around us who say, "I'm a Christian, saved by grace. The Law has no meaning to me at all. The Law was given to Moses for the Israelites but it doesn't apply to a Christian. Let's dispense with it."

Now, Paul never speaks this way, and neither does Jesus. In fact, Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount that if anyone disparages the Law, changes it, or waters it down in any degree whatsoever, he is under the curse of God. The Law abides forever.

Therefore, we must clearly understand what Paul is teaching here about the function and purpose of the Law. We must know (1) that the Law cannot deliver us from sin. It simply cannot do so. But (2) it can always do one thing well -- even with Christians -- it can expose sin in us and drive us back to Christ. That is what the Law is for, and that is

This section falls into two parts:

kills the believer. That is the term he uses: the Law kills us.
how the Law exposes sin and kills us -- but this time it is not explained, it is experienced.

In the first section Paul tells us how it works; in the second section he tells us how it feels. This is a feeling generation, and, therefore, this is a passage that ought to strike a very responsive chord in your heart, for Paul describes how it feels to be under the Law as a Christian. He describes what it does to you and just exactly how it feels.

in relationship to the Law:

What shall we say, then? Is the law sin? Far from it! Indeed I would not have known what it was to covet if the law had not said, "Do not covet." But sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead. Once I was alive apart from law; but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death. For sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death. {Rom 7:7-11 NIV}

This is Paul's experience. It is clear that he is describing something that he himself went through. But, also, Paul employs the past tense throughout this passage, which suggests that he is describing his experience before he became a Christian. This probably happened not long before he became a Christian, but Paul is describing something that is common to the experience of many of us today. No doubt many of us have had exactly the same experience that the Apostle Paul describes.

Paul, as we know, was raised in a godly home. He was raised a Jew in the city of Tarsus. He was brought up to be a typical Jewish son, and he was taught the Law from birth. So when he says he lived "apart from the Law" he doesn't mean that he didn't know what it was. He simply means that there came a time when the Law came home to him. "The commandment came," he says.

We have all had that experience. We have read Scripture that was just words to us -- beautiful words, perhaps, but we didn't understand them. Then, years after, an experience that we go through makes those words come alive. This is what Paul is talking about here. He knew the Law from birth, but he did not know it in the sense of understanding what it was saying until he went through a certain experience. Here he describes that experience, one that he had before he became a Christian.

In this home in which he was raised, Paul, like many of us today, was protected and sheltered and kept from exposure to serious temptations. He was raised in the Jewish culture, where everyone around him was sheltered also. Therefore, he grew up relatively untroubled with problems of sin.

Now, there are many people like that in this congregation. You have grown up in a home where you have been protected and sheltered, and you have run with a crowd of friends who, likewise, have been kept from exposure to various things. You haven't fallen into evil.

Many young people, like Saul of Tarsus, think they have handled the

problem. What about keeping the Law? It's not hard! Hardly any temptations come under these circumstances. These people think they have no struggles along this line. They have the world by the tail -- they can handle it. As Paul describes it, they are alive apart from the Law. But then comes a time when they are exposed. They are thrust out into a different lifestyle, a different crowd of people. They move out on their own and suddenly they find themselves removed from the shelter and protection and love and cultural defenses that have been theirs from childhood on. Perhaps the new crowd -- as a way of life -- does things that these sheltered young people have been taught are wrong.

Now, for the first time, they feel the force of the prohibition of the Law. The Law says, "Thou shalt not covet, commit adultery, murder, steal ..." -- whatever it may be. And yet the crowd around them says, "Let's do it -- it's fun!" For the first time, they begin to feel the prohibition of the Law. Then a strange phenomenon happens. Something about that situation arouses within them a strong desire to do the things that are prohibited. Maybe they are able to resist them for awhile, but, nevertheless, they find themselves pressured, pushed by something within them that wants very badly to do these things.

Now, that is what Paul discovered. It was the tenth commandment, "Thou shalt not covet" {Exod 20:17a KJV}, that got to him. He thought he had been keeping all the Law because he had not done some of the external things prohibited in the other commandments. But this one commandment talks about how you feel inside, your desires, your imagination, your ambitions. It says, "Thou shalt not desire what another has." Paul found himself awakened to this commandment and discovered that he was coveting, no matter where he turned. When the Law came, he found himself aroused by it and brought under its power. It precipitated an orgy of desire. Many of us have felt this same way.

I have seen this happen. When young people, raised in sheltered homes, move out on their own -- perhaps when they go to college, or get a job, or move to another city -- they find that suddenly all the control they had seemed to be exercising over evil vanishes. They give way and are plunged into an orgy of evil, in one form or another.

I was in the Colorado Rockies this past week. A man met me to take me into the mountains for a conference. When I came out to the curb, he was waiting in his new, powerful, shiny Lincoln Continental. I got into the car and expected him to turn on the ignition. But to my amazement, he started driving without turning on the engine -- or at least that's how it seemed to me. I suddenly realized that the engine had been running all the time. It was so quiet that I hadn't heard it. As we moved up into the Rockies, the power of that engine became manifest. We traveled up the steep grades in those great mountains without difficulty because of the power released by the touch on the accelerator.

Now, that is something like what Paul is describing here. Sin lies silent within us. We do not even know it is there. We think we have got hold of life in such a way that we can handle it without difficulty. We are self-confident because we have never really been exposed to the situation that puts pressure upon us -- we never have to make a decision against the pressure on the basis of the commandment of the Law "Thou shalt not..." "

But when that happens, we suddenly discover all kinds of desires are awakened within us. We find ourselves filled with attitudes that almost shock us -- unloving, bitter, resentful thoughts, murderous attitudes --

we would like to get hold of somebody and kill him, if we could. Lustful feelings that we never dreamed were there surface and we find that we would love to indulge in them if only we had the opportunity. We find ourselves awakened to these desires. As the great engine surges into life at the touch of the accelerator, so this powerful, idling beast within us called sin springs into life as the Law comes home to us. We discover something that we never knew was there before.

Now, is this the Law's fault? No, Paul says, it is not the Law's fault.

So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy,
righteous and good.

Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means!
But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it produced
death in me through what was good, so that through the
commandment sin might become utterly sinful [exceedingly
sinful] . {Rom 7:12-13 NIV}

That is what the Law is for. It is to expose the fact that this evil force is in every one of us, waiting only for the right circumstance in order to spring into being, overpower our will, and carry us into things we never dreamed we would do. Many of us experience this. According to this passage, the great power of sin is that it deceives us. We think we have got life under control -- and we are fooled. All sin is waiting for is the right occasion when, like a powerful, idling engine, it roars into life and takes over at the touch of the accelerator and we find ourselves helplessly under its control.

The Law is designed to expose that sin, and to make us feel this way so that we begin to understand what this evil force is that we have inherited by our birth into this fallen human race. The Law shows sin to be what it is, something exceedingly powerful and dangerous, something that has greater strength than our willpower and causes us to do things that we are resolved not to do.

time in terms of how we feel when it happens. There is only one major difference between this section and the previous one. In this section, Paul switches to the present tense. That is significant because it means that he is now describing his experience at the time he wrote this letter to the Romans. This, then, is a description of the Law as it touches the Christian's life. It does exactly the same thing as it did before we became a Christian, only now we have it from the point of view of the Christian, the believer who is deceived by the sin that is still resident within. Verses 14 and 15:

We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual
[carnal, fleshly. Paul gives us now an excellent definition of
carnality] , sold as a slave to sin. I do not know what I am
doing. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I
do. {Rom 7:14-15 NIV}

Some have been convinced, from this verse alone, that Paul was a golfer. If you have ever tried golf, you know that this is the very thing that happens. What you want to do, you do not do. What you do not want to do, that is the very thing you do. Of course, Paul has a much greater problem than playing golf.

Paul says. "It deals with my spirit. It gets right at the very heart of my being." Fundamentally, as we have seen, human beings are spirits. The Law is spiritual, and it touches us in that area. "But I am carnal," Paul says. "I can't respond to it. I am sold as a slave to sin."

be to God that, though you used to be slaves to in, you whole-heartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were committed. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness," {cf, Rom 6:17-18 NIV}. If he could write that to the Romans, surely it was true of him as well. And yet, how could a man write that he had become in Christ a slave to righteousness, and just a few paragraphs later write, "I am carnal, sold under sin, a slave to sin"?

Many have said that Paul is all confused here. Of course, he is not confused at all. He is simply describing what happens when a Christian tries to live under the Law. When a Christian, by his dedication and willpower and determination, tries to do what is right in order to please God, he is living under the Law. And Paul is telling us what to expect when we live like that -- for we all try to live that way from time to time. Sin, you see, deceives us. It deceived Paul as an apostle, and he needed this treatment of the Law. It deceives us, and we need it, too.

Now Paul tells us what happens. There are two problems, basically, which he gives us in Verse 15: "I do not know what I am doing. For what I want -- there are things I would love to do, but I cannot do them. The second problem is: "... but what I hate I do."

In the verses that follow, Paul takes the second problem first, and shows us what happens in our experience. Verses 16 and 17:

And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. {Rom 7:16-17 NIV}

That is a very important statement. Paul makes it twice in this paragraph, and it is the explanation of and the answer to how we can be

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature [or my flesh] . For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do -- this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. {Rom 7:18-20 NIV}

Let's examine this very carefully. Paul says that as a Christian, redeemed by the grace of God, there is now something within him that wants to do good, that agrees with the Law, that says that the Law is right. There is something within that says what the Law tells me to do is right, and I want to do it. But also, he says, there is something else in me that rises up and says "No!" Even though I determine not to do what is bad, I suddenly find myself in such circumstances that my determination melts away, my resolve is gone, and I end up doing what I had sworn I would not do. Have you ever felt that way?

So, what has gone wrong? Paul's explanation is, "It is no longer I who do it; it is sin living in me." Isn't that strange? There is a division within our humanity indicated here. There is the "I" that wants to do what God wants, and there is the sin which dwells in "me," which is different than the "I." We must understand what this is.

Human beings are complicated creatures. They are not simple organisms. We have within us a spirit, a soul, and a body. These are distinct, one from the other. What Paul is suggesting here is that the redeemed spirit never wants to do what God has prohibited. It agrees with the Law that it is good. And yet there is an alien power, a force that he calls sin, a great beast that is lying still within us until touched by the commandment of the Law. Then it springs to life, and we do what we do not want to do.

Notice that Jesus himself agrees with this. On one occasion he said, "If your right hand offends you, cut it off," {cf, Matt 5:30}. He did not mean that you should actually chop off your right hand, because that would be a violation of other texts that indicate that God made the body and made it right and it is morally neutral. What he means is that we should take drastic action because we are up against a serious problem. He indicates that there is a "me" within us that runs our members, that gives orders to our hands and our feet and our eyes and our tongue and our brain and our sexual organs, and controls them. That "me" is giving an order to do something wrong, but there is another "I" in us who is offended by this. That "I" does not like it, does not want it. And so, Jesus' words are, "Cut it off." In a moment we are going to see how that happens, what it is that cuts it off and thus enables us to handle the problem. That is the way man is made. Our will power is never enough; sin will win, and we will do the evil that we swore not to do.

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 [another principle] at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law [or principle] of my mind [my agreement with the law of God] and making me a prisoner of the law [principle] of sin at work within my members. {Rom 7:21-23 NIV}

Here is the same problem exactly. You want to do right and determine to do right, knowing what it is and swearing to do it, only to find that under certain circumstances all that determination melts away and you do not do what is right. You do exactly what you did not want to do. So you come away angry with yourself. "What's the matter with me? Why can't I do what is right? Why do I give way when I get into this situation? Why

am I so weak?" This is right where we live, isn't it? This is what we all struggle with. The cry of the heart at that moment is

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? {Rom 7:24 NIV}

What is this? Well, right here you arrive at where the Lord Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," {Matt 5:3}. Blessed is the man who comes to the end of himself. Blessed is the man who has arrived at spiritual bankruptcy. Because this is the point -- the only point -- where God's help is given.

This is what we need to learn. If we think that we have got something in ourselves that we can work out our problems with, if we think that our wills are strong enough, our desires motivated enough, that we can control evil in our lives by simply determining to do so, then we have not come to the end of ourselves yet. And the Spirit of God simply folds his arms to wait and lets us go ahead and try it on that basis. And we fail, and fail miserably -- until, at last, out of our failures, we cry, "O wretched man that I am!" Sin has deceived us, and the Law, as our friend, has come in and exposed sin for what it is. When we see how wretched it makes us, then we are ready for the answer, which comes

Thanks be to God -- through Jesus Christ our Lord! {Rom 7:25a NIV}

Who will deliver me from this body of death? The Lord Jesus has already done it. We are to respond to the feelings of wretchedness and discouragement and failure, to which the Law has brought us because of sin in us, by reminding ourselves immediately of the facts that are true of us in Jesus Christ. Our feelings must be answered by facts.

We are no longer under the Law. That is the fact. We have arrived at a different situation; we are married to Christ, Christ risen from the dead. That means we must no longer think, "I am a poor, struggling, bewildered disciple, left alone to wrestle against these powerful urges." We must now begin to think, "No, I am a free son of God, living a normal human life. I am dead to sin, and dead to the Law, because I am married to Christ. His power is mine, right at this moment. And though I may not feel a thing, I have the power to say, "No!" and walk away and be free, in Jesus Christ."

Some of you know that my wife and I were in Virginia Beach, Virginia, and made a recording for a television broadcast. With us on that program was a pastor from Canada who had been raised in Russia. He had a burden on his heart to get the Word of God into Russia and was part of an organization (among several that exist today) to get Bibles into Russia. He told us about his first experience of crossing the Russian border with a load of Bibles in the trunk of the car. He wasn't going to try to smuggle them in; he just was counting on God to get them through somehow.

He and a friend loaded the boxes of Bibles into the car, and as they drove up to the border, all his resolve and courage began to drain away. Within a mile or so of the border, his friend said, "How do you feel?" He said, "I feel scared." So they stopped alongside the road and there they simply told the Lord how they felt. "Lord, we are scared. We didn't get into this situation because we want to be here. It isn't we who want to get this Word into Russia; it is you. This is your project, and this is your situation. We are willing to take whatever risks you ask, but you have got to see it through. We are scared and we don't know what to do. We don't have any wisdom, we don't know how to handle this situation when we get to the border, but we expect you to do something." He said that as they prayed that way, totally bankrupt, wanting to do good, unable to do it, but committing the matter to the Lord Jesus, they felt the inward sense of the Spirit of God witnessing to them that God would act. They didn't know how or what he would do, but they felt a sense of peace.

They drove on to the border, and when the guard asked for their papers, they gave them to him. He examined them, then said, "What do you have in the trunk?" They said, "Some boxes." He said, "Let me see them. " So they opened up the trunk, and here were the boxes of Bibles. They expected surely that his next question would be, "What's in them?" But he didn't ask it. He simply said, "Okay," shut the door, gave them their papers, and on they went. Now, that is what this passage is describing for us. This is the way we are to live, the way we are to face every challenge, large or small.

something a Christian goes through once, then he gets out of it and Nothing could be further from the truth! Even as mighty a man as Paul went through it again and again. This is a description of what every believer will go through again and again in his experience because sin has the power to deceive us and to cause us to trust in ourselves, even when we are not aware we are doing it. The Law is what will expose that evil force and drive us to this place of wretchedness that we might then, in poverty of spirit, cry out, "Lord Jesus, it is your problem; you take it." And he will do so.

be to God -- through Jesus Christ our Lord!" The next sentence belongs the way of deliverance for Christians. We do need the Law. We need it every time sin deceives us. But the Law will not deliver us from sin; Law will only bring us, again and again, to the mighty deliverer.
Prayer

Thank you, our Father, for the simple and clear teaching of this passage. Help us to understand that we are freed from the Law once it has done its work of bringing us to the knowledge of sin. We cannot control ourselves by that means or deliver ourselves from evil, but we can rest upon the mighty deliverer who will set us free. We thank you in Jesus' name, Amen.

Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 7:7-25
Message No: 17
Catalog No: 3517
Date: September 19, 1976

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NO CONDEMNATION

by Ray C. Stedman

The eighth chapter of Romans is the favorite chapter of many of you, I know -- and not without reason. This is one of the most significant chapters of the Scriptures. Somebody has likened this to "the brightest jewel in the casket of gems in the Word of God." I like to think of it as a great mountain, like Mt. Shasta, rising above all the surrounding hills and capturing the attention of all. Yet, the interesting thing about this is that it is not until you get to the middle of the chapter words of this chapter he is simply gathering it up, bringing it to focus.

But first I want to point out that you have to ignore the division between Chapters 7 and 8. I believe that the text of the Scriptures is inspired by God -- "breathed out" by him -- but I believe that the chapter divisions were put in by the devil! Many times they come right at a place where they actually obscure truth. Sometimes these divisions break the continuity of a thought and take it out of the context. Then we may miss something tremendously important. That is certainly true you read them that way, it will help explain the struggle and darkness

As you remember, Paul is in a very intense struggle because, as a believer, he is trying to keep the Law. Anybody who gets involved in a discipline of the spirit and dedication of the heart to obey God, but is trying to do it through his own efforts, willpower, and determination, will have the same problem. The problem is really legalism. Here you see the tremendous harm that legalism causes throughout the existence of the church. There are thousands and millions of Christians who are struggling like this today because of the power of the Law in their lives. Paul tells us about the struggle: "The things that I would not do, that I do; and the things that I would do, I do not do," {cf, Rom 7:14-20 NIV}. We have all felt this way and can identify with his

struggle.

But Paul does not leave it there. It is a struggle that does not have to go on. That is the point. How does he resolve this struggle? He immediately answers with this one, great, flashing word of relief in

Thanks be to God -- through Jesus Christ our Lord! {Rom 7:25a NIV}

says, "Thanks be to God -- through Jesus Christ our Lord!"

So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God's law, but in my sinful nature a slave to the law of sin. [That summarizes don't stop there, for there should not be even a period Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. to open with the word "but." It is a contrast that shows the no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,"] {Rom 7:25b-8:2 NIV}

The only reason this verse does not open with "but" is because some clown put a big "8" there, and that has thrown off all the translators. Now, what is Paul saying in this passage when it all is taken together like that? First, it is evident that there is a struggle in the Christian life. There is a struggle between what he calls "the sinful nature" and the Spirit.

(I am not sure I like that term "sinful nature" too well -- the word is "flesh," and, as the word is used in the Scriptures, it not only means the body, but it means the sin that finds its seat in those bodies.) You see, it is by the body that we are linked with our father, Adam. Genetically, all that we have in our bodies is traceable back through the stream of human history to Adam. God made a body for Adam that is like ours -- with two eyes, two ears, a nose, etc., and we have these characteristics because Adam had them. But we also have inherited from Adam this principle of sin that is in us. Now, it is hard to define this principle of sin. In some way, it describes the access that the devil has to our humanity. It is the means by which Satan is able to implant in our minds "the fiery darts of the wicked one" {Eph 6:16 KJV}, as Paul calls them in Ephesians. This refers to those obscene and lustful thoughts, and selfish attitudes, and hostile, bitter feelings that we have toward others -- thoughts that come suddenly, unbidden, into our minds when we least expect them. They come from this root of sin that is in our bodies.

the flesh:

For the sinful nature [or the flesh] desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful

nature [the flesh] . They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want. {Gal 5:17 NIV}

That really is a verse of hope. Paul says the Spirit struggles against the flesh, so that you cannot do the things that you would. That is what myself in my mind am a slave to God's law." That is, as he said earlier, "I want to do good. I believe in it. I delight in God's law in my inner being. I am changed; I agree that the law is good. But I find I can't do it."

In his mind he is awakened to the value and the righteousness of God's law, and this has come about by means of the Spirit. How else can you ever come to the place of agreeing that God is good and holy, his Word is right and the Law is good, except it be by the Spirit of God in you? It is only when a man is filled with the Holy Spirit that he is able to talk like that. Therefore, it is the Holy Spirit, within Paul's human spirit, agreeing with God's law. But set against that is this sin that is in his flesh that takes hold of him and makes him a slave to the law of sin, even though he does not want to be.

How does he break this hold? He breaks it, as he says, by calling upon a new view of himself that is true because he is in Jesus Christ. That is

But there is a struggle, and some of us have been very much aware of it. If you ever have watched an alcoholic, or perhaps have struggled with alcoholism yourself, you know that this is an intense struggle. An alcoholic can come to the place where he can see everything evil happening to him because of alcohol. He wants to quit; he determines to quit. He knows he is going to lose his wife, his children, his reputation, and everything if he doesn't quit. I have seen these people resolve never to drink again. Yet, in a moment of temptation, the very overpowered by sin. They give in, and then they hate themselves for it.

Those who struggle with homosexuality feel the same way. Habits of reaction have settled in and they find it very difficult to say, "No," even though they want to. Born again, they want to be delivered -- but it is hard.

And it is not only these things that grip us like this. A hot temper or a habit of overeating can do the same thing. How many of you resolve not to eat as much? Perhaps right now you are saying, "When I go home, I am going to take just a very light meal." And someone will spread out a beautiful roast, and apple pie, and, before you know it, your resolve is gone -- and so is the food.

This is a problem of the will, isn't it? We are weak, and we know it. This is what Paul is describing here. This is the struggle of the Christian life. It comes again and again, but it does not have to continue. That is what this passage is about. It is a struggle that we find ourselves in, and sometimes we aren't even aware of it at first. But the struggle does not have to go on.

Some Christians resent the fact that the struggle is there at all. They have gotten a false idea of Christianity. They think Christianity means that God takes this struggle away and removes the temptation so they never have to struggle again. Unfortunately, that is not true; and many people have been hurt, and have become angry with God, because he doesn't do that. I have seen young Christians become very upset at times

because they thought they were free and then they found that they weren't.

The text goes on to tell us that this can cease only when we reckon on who we really are in Christ. Basically, what we need is a new self-image. That is what will deliver us, for that is what is true of us. And when we see who we really are, we can say "No" to the flesh and make it stick; then we can say "Yes" to the Spirit and discover a whole new walk of life.

The second major thing the apostle is saying is that not only is there a struggle, but, and this is very important, the struggle is without condemnation. Though I struggle at times, Paul says, there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. The reason there is no condemnation is given in just one little phrase: "in Christ." That goes right back to our justification by faith. We came out of Adam, we are in Christ, and God will never condemn those who are in Christ. He never will.

Now, we have to understand what "no condemnation" means. What is Paul talking about? Certainly, the most basic element in it is that there is no rejection by God. God does not turn us aside, he does not kick 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, never leave us. No matter what we do, he will never leave us. And God will never cut us out of his family or treat us as anything less than sons and daughters.

One of the most beautiful stories of the Scriptures is that of the prodigal son. The prodigal son left home, got into deep difficulty, wasted his life in riotous living, and ended up in the pigpen. I was listening to Dr. Vernon McGee the other morning on the radio and, in his colorful way, he asked, "Do you know the difference between the son in that pigpen and the pig? The difference is that no pig has ever said to himself, 'I will arise and go to my father.'" He is right; only sons say that. That is why there will be no condemnation, no rejection, by God. He will always treat you as his child, and not as his enemy.

The second thing "no condemnation" means is that God is not angry with you when this struggle comes into your life. You want to be good, or you want to stop doing bad, but, when the moment of temptation comes, you find yourself overpowered and weak, and you give way. Then you hate yourself. You go away frustrated, feeling, as Paul described, "Oh, what's the matter with me? Why can't I do this thing? Why can't I act like I want to?" And though you may condemn yourself, God does not. He is not angry with you about that. He knows, as the Scriptures show us, that you are a child in his family, learning to walk.

The beautiful figure is that of a tender, loving father, watching his little boy begin to take his first steps. No father ever gets angry with his little son because he doesn't get right up and start running around the first time he tries to walk. If the child falls and stumbles and falters, the father helps him; he doesn't spank him. He lifts him up, encourages him, and shows him how to do it right. And if the child has a problem with his feet, maybe one foot is twisted or deformed, the father finds a way to relieve that condition and help him to learn to walk. That is what God does. He is not angry when we are struggling. He knows it takes awhile -- quite awhile, at times. And even the best of saints will, at times, fall. This was true of Paul, it was true of the apostles, and it was true of all the prophets of the Old Testament. Sin

is deceitful and it will trip us at times. But God is not angry with us.

The third thing "no condemnation" means is that there is no punishment. God will never take us to the woodshed because of our struggles. He isn't angry and he isn't going to punish us. We may punish ourselves, we may be frustrated, we may cry out, "Oh wretched man that I am!" But God doesn't say that -- he doesn't punish us.

Now, let me caution you. When we deliberately decide to sin, and like it, then he will punish us. This is the discipline of a father described ourselves back into sin once we have been set free from it, then, as a loving disciplinarian, God will sometimes correct us, and punish us, and even scourge us, until we begin to see what has happened. He does this out of love, just as an earthly father would.

But that is a different condition than the one we are facing here. Here Paul is addressing the times when we want to do good, and we are trying to do good. But we are weak, and, in a moment of temptation, we fail. And we fail again and again. But there is no condemnation to those that are in Christ Jesus. Even when we are being punished as disobedient sons, we still are not condemned. That remains true no matter what happens to us. Why are we not condemned? The answer that Paul gives in

... because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. {Rom 8:2 NIV}

Paul was not left with a continuing, constant struggle; God came in and did something about it. God reminded him of what he knew to be true, and he began to believe it. Paul brings out three reasons why there is no condemnation.

good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good," {Rom 7:18a NIV}. His heart is right. Then again, in {Rom 7:18 NIV}. Paul really wants to do right, his heart is right; therefore there is no condemnation.

Second, and obviously connected with this, Paul explains that sin has deceived us and overpowered us. It is too much for us. We can't handle this wild beast raging within us when it is awakened by the demands and prohibitions of the Law. And God doesn't condemn us for that, he knows that it is more than we can handle.

Third, and this is the most important, God has already made provision for our failure in Christ, and our very struggle is driving us to Christ. When you have come to the place of saying, "Oh wretched man that I am!" the only thing left, if you want any escape at all, is to ask, "Why am I thinking of myself in this way?" and to realize, "God says I am different." Reckoning on that difference that has come to you in Christ, you can rise up to act differently as well. That is the way out. God knows that even your failures are driving you to that moment; and, as a loving Father, he is patiently waiting for it to come.

The third major thing that Paul says is that a provision has been made for victory. The law of the Spirit of life, which is in Christ Jesus, will set you free from the law of sin and death, which is in your members. That is why Paul cries, "Thanks be to God -- through our Lord

Jesus Christ!" {Rom 7:25a NIV}. This law of the Spirit of life is your faith in what God has already said he has done for you in Christ. He has cut you off, made you a different creature, brought you into Christ, and married you to him -- you are not any longer the same man.

When we are failing, and angry with ourselves, our natural way of thinking about ourselves is something like this: "I'm a mess, a hopeless, helpless mess! Why can't I do what I want to do? Why can't I stop this thing that is hurting me so, and hurting others, too?" You are all wrapped up in your own feelings and you think you deserve to be whipped and punished and cast into hell.

At that point God says to you, "What is wrong is your view of yourself. That is not what you are; that is only a temporary delusion to which you are giving yourself over. The truth is, you have been cut free. You are married to Christ. Your human spirit has been indwelt by the Holy Spirit and it cannot sin. It has not sinned and does not sin. Now, you yourself, as a person, have been deceived by the sin in your flesh, and it has taken over and has gotten you into this difficulty. But that is not who you are. Don't believe that about yourself anymore. There is a fresh provision of the forgiveness of God and the righteousness of Christ waiting for you. You are in Christ -- this is who you are. Take his forgiveness, believe it, thank God for it, and go on, and know that your struggle has ended." That is why Paul says in Galatians 5:17, "They [the Spirit and the flesh] are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want," {Gal 5:17b NIV}.

Of course this does not mean that God has ended the reign of the flesh in our lives. It is still there. The law of sin and death, like the law of gravity, goes on working all the time. But the moment you believe what Jesus Christ says is true about you, and you believe what he has done for you, a new law comes in. This new law is stronger than the law of sin and death; it even uses that law to accomplish its end.

When I was a boy, I discovered that there was a law at work in my members that was affecting my eyesight. It was what I later learned to call the law of myopia, which is nearsightedness. It was in my members, right in my eyes, so that I could not see what other people could see. Finally, I went to a doctor about it, and he told me that I had a law in my members that was constantly working and it affected my eyesight so that I could not see what others saw.

Then I discovered a new law, the law of contact lenses -- two little pieces of plastic which I could put in my eyes every morning and they would keep working all day long. All I had to do was put them in. They did not eliminate the law of myopia -- they actually used it. But the result was that I saw perfectly, with 20/20 vision. Now, if I got cocky and decided I didn't need those contact lenses anymore ("I can handle this situation without them!") and took them out -- immediately the law of myopia would take over and I would have the same old problem again. But if I put the lenses in, the law of contact lenses would cancel out -- overcome -- the law of myopia, and I could see perfectly.

That is what Paul is telling us here. God has given us a new image of ourselves. We are not what we feel we are. As a result of that, we can be set free anytime we employ that law, anytime that we, by faith, reckon that what God says is true and we begin to see ourselves that way.

The fourth major point that Paul makes in this brief paragraph is given

in Verses 3 and 4. It is a review of the basis for victory:

For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by our sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man [flesh] to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the sinful man [the flesh] , in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to our sinful nature but according to the Spirit. {Rom 8:3-4 NIV}

This is a beautiful description of the good news in Jesus Christ. There is nothing new here; we have had it all before. Paul says the Law is powerless to produce righteousness. It cannot do it. It cannot make us good -- no way. It can demand and demand and demand, but it cannot enable and it never will.

This, by the way, is why nagging somebody never helps. Did you know that? Nagging is a form of law, and God will not let the Law nag us because it doesn't help. It only makes it worse. If you try to nag your husband or wife or child, you will find that the same thing happens there. Nagging only makes them worse. Why? The reason, Paul says, is because the Law only stirs up the power of sin. It releases this force, this beast within us, this powerful engine that takes over and carries us where we don't want to go. That is why nagging, or any form of the Law, will never work. It is not because there is anything wrong with what is being said -- it is because of the weakness of the flesh that it The Law keeps sin going, it stirs it up.

To break through this vicious circle, Paul says, God sent forth his own son. There is a beautiful tenderness about this. He sent "his own Son." He did not send an angel, he did not send a man -- he sent his own Son as a man, in the likeness of sinful flesh. Notice that. He did not send him just in the likeness of flesh, but in the likeness of sinful flesh. Jesus had a real body, a body like yours and mine. Since sin has been done in the body, it has to be judged and broken in the body. Therefore, Jesus had a body. But it was not just a body of sinful flesh, it was the likeness of sinful flesh. It was like our sinful bodies, in that it was subject to infirmities (Jesus was weak and tired and hungry and weary), but there was no sin in him. Paul preserves that very carefully here.

In that body of flesh, without sin, he became sin. As we read here, he was offered as an offering for sin. And in the mystery of the cross, which we can never, never understand, no matter how long we live, somehow the Lord Jesus, at the hour of darkness, gathered up all the sins of the world, all the terrible, evil, foul, awful injustice, crime, and misery that we have seen throughout history, from every person, gathered it into himself, and brought it to an end by dying. The good news is that somehow, by faith in him, we get involved in that death. We

For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin -- {Rom 6:6 NIV}

(Christ-made-sin) was the first husband to whom we were married: And he died. The first husband died, and therefore we were free to be married to the second husband, who is Christ-risen-from-the-dead. Thus he has tied us to himself as a risen, ascended Lord, and that is who we are from now on.

This is not just for a few Christians who have gone beyond all the rest and have some special experience; all Christians are this way. If you are a Christian at all, this is who you are. It is always who you are. To let yourself believe anything else is to delude yourself. To believe your feelings about yourself at any moment of evil or sin is to fool yourself. This is who you are. By the gift of God, without earning it, or without ever deserving it, you are righteous in his sight; just like Jesus, you are righteous with the righteousness of God. The very righteousness which the Law demands is fulfilled in us the minute we believe what God has done about our evil and trust him for it. That righteousness is ours continually, as a gift.

The last thing the apostle says is that this becomes real to us when we choose to live according to the Spirit -- not according to our sinful nature. When we believe what God says about us and see ourselves in a new way, then we will change the way we act. This is always God's way of deliverance. We think that we have to change the way we act in order to be different; God says, "No, I have made you different, and when you believe it, you will automatically change the way you act." Do you see the difference?

Remember that story that Hal Lindsey shared with us on Easter Sunday? It was a beautiful story about a girl who was the daughter of one of the royal families of Europe. She had a big, bulbous nose that destroyed her beauty in the eyes of others -- and especially in her own eyes. She grew up with this terrible image of herself as an ugly person. So her family hired a plastic surgeon to change the contour of her nose. He did his work, and there came the moment when they took the bandages off and the girl could see what happened.

When the doctor removed the bandages, he saw that the operation had been a total success. All the ugly contours were gone. Her nose was different. When the incisions healed and the redness disappeared, she would be a beautiful girl. He held a mirror up for the girl to see. But, so deeply embedded was this girl's ugly image of herself that when she saw herself in the mirror, she couldn't see any change. She broke into tears and cried out, "Oh, I knew it wouldn't work!" The doctor labored with that girl for six months before she would finally accept the fact that she was indeed different. But the moment she accepted the fact that she really was different, her whole behavior began to change.

We act from what we know we are. If the evil in us deceives us into thinking that we are not what God says we are, then we are going to keep on acting that way. That is why the way to break the power of the most vicious and evil habit is to see yourself as God sees you. Then you begin to act that way. You can't help it. As this verse makes clear, you are one with Jesus and you share his life, and he himself, with the beauty of his character, is one with you. He is married to you and you to him and there is no distinction. If you can see this when you have temporarily believed something false about yourself and are struggling, then you will be free.

Many of us can testify to the fact that this works. God sets us free in

this way. This is what Paul has been saying all along. Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under the Law, with its nagging demand that you be different before you can be accepted, but you are under grace, with its affirmation that God has already made you different -- now believe it!

Prayer

Our Father, I am sure there are many here today who have been struggling against very powerful forces in their lives, many who have been wanting to be free from destructive things -- an evil temper; a critical, judgmental spirit; a hostile, defensive attitude; selfishness; lust; sexual desires that are hurtful and wrong. Lord, thank you that you have found a different way out. Thank you that the way out is not by forcing ourselves to be different, but by seeing that we already are different. We have been cleansed and purified and made whole in Jesus Christ our Lord. He is our life, and we belong to him and always will. What a difference that is! Help us to believe it and to act that way. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: No Condemnation
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 7:25 - 8:4
Message No: 18
Catalog No: 3518
Date: September 26, 1976

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WHY NOT LIVE?

by Ray C. Stedman

to the key word in this epistle -- the word "righteousness." Basically,

this is something that we all are looking for -- whether we know it or not -- for righteousness is really self-worth. It is knowing yourself to be of value, to be approved, to be desired; it is a feeling of self-respect, self-esteem.

Psychologists call this by various terms. It is the basis for confidence, courage in facing life, or a sense of security about yourself. We know from what psychologists tell us, and from experience, that this is an absolute essential to human life. Jesus said the same thing. When Martha had lost her confidence, her perspective, her focus on life, he said to her, "One thing is needful," {Luke 10:42 KJV}. This is what he was referring to, this sense of being needed and wanted, of having security, self-respect, a basis for self-worth.

Now, the gift of righteousness is exactly that -- a gift from God. Romans teaches that the theme of the good news is that righteousness, this essential quality of human living, comes only as a gift of God. There is no other way to get it. You can try to get self-worth from what other people think of you; but, as the Bible clearly helps us to see, and, as life will teach us, if we live long enough, that never really works. This way of finding self-worth is inadequate, a shot-in-the-arm that needs to be repeated again and again. It is very unrealistic, and it lets you down just when you need it the most. So, we are talking here about the gift of righteousness, which comes by faith in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, as applied to you personally, as a helpless human being in Adam, and, therefore, mastered by sin.

The gift of righteousness is used in two ways in the epistle to the Romans, and at this point we have to make the distinction between them very clear. We have already seen righteousness is a gift that is instantly imparted to our human spirits when we believe in Jesus; and, from that vantage point within us, it is continually available to us. We can turn to it any time we feel pressure or insecurity or need. It is available continuously by faith. That is what the Bible calls "justification by faith." It is our new identity which we have because we are in Christ -- we are no longer in Adam.

But now a new form of righteousness comes before us. It is what we might call "righteousness displayed." It is righteousness in the spirit that has worked its way out to visibility. That is, it is actually seen in our actions and deeds and words and thoughts. We are acting like Christ. As well as being like him in the spirit, we now begin to act like him.

For what the law was powerless to do [i.e., produce righteousness] in that it was weakened by our sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order [and here is the point] that the righteous requirements of the law [the right behavior which the Law insisted on] might be fully met in us, who do not live according to our sinful nature, but according to the Spirit.
{Rom 8:3-4 NIV}

That is what the Bible calls "sanctification," i.e., righteousness manifest. That is our new behavior. And it is ours, the apostle says, when we do not live according to our sinful nature, but according to the

Spirit.

morning, follow immediately and expound and explain those two possibilities for the Christian. Just being a Christian does not mean that automatically you begin to look and act and talk and think and react like Jesus Christ. You do not become Christ-like when you become a Christian. Your human spirit is, for it is linked with him, but you may not act that way for quite some time. It depends on whether you are walking (behaving) according to the flesh or according to the Spirit. Those two things are made crystal clear in the passage before us.

I am reading, as you know, from the New International Version of the Bible. Up to this point, it has been an excellent version; but now, for some reason, it confuses this issue a bit, and I will have to make some changes as we go along. This has to be done for every version in places. The Revised Standard and American Standard and King James versions are better translations of this passage than the New International.

possibilities in our Christian life: Are we going to live according to alternatives for us so that we can identify them and recognize them in our lives:

Those who live according to their sinful nature [i.e., according to the flesh] have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. {Rom 8:5 NIV}

There is the difference. There are two possibilities before us, as Christians, that will determine whether or not we manifest the righteousness which the Law demands, depending on whether we walk according to the Spirit or according to the flesh. Notice that the difference is what you set your mind on, i.e., what you are thinking about all through the day, what is important to you, how you view life, what you think is important about the things that are happening to you from day to day. Is it the viewpoint of the flesh, which governs the thinking of the world? Or is it the viewpoint of the Spirit -- God's viewpoint -- on life? That is the determining factor -- what you do with your thinking. Where you set your mind is going to make the difference.

Now, what is the mind set of the person who lives according to the flesh, or, as this version puts it, those who have "their minds set on what that [sinful] nature desires"? You only have to look around to see what that is. You only have to listen to the television or radio, or read the newspapers, or observe people -- even yourself -- and you will see what this is. It is the natural viewpoint of life.

What do people want in life? Basically, they want to make money, because money provides comfort and conveniences and pleasures that we would like to have. People want to have fun. The world is committed almost entirely to that. In every way we are being approached to buy this or buy that in order that we might enjoy ourselves. People want pleasure. That is what life seems to be all about -- the pursuit of pleasure. We want money, we want pleasure, and we want fame. People are always manipulating people and circumstances to acquire some degree of fame, to be seen and known. There is a passion in the human heart to be known. People will give

their right arm to gain influence and standing and prestige and following. Finally, I think that people desire to fulfill themselves. They want to manifest every capability that is within them. They want, somehow, to feel fulfilled. That is what the world lives for, isn't it? And it wants it all now, not later. That is the natural point of view.

You say, "Well, what's wrong with that?" There really is nothing wrong with that -- unless that is all you want. If that is all you want, then it is very, very wrong. This is what the Scriptures help us to see -- that there is another point of view, which is life viewed according to the Spirit.

"Ah," you say, "I know what that means!" That means you have to forget about making money and having fun and fulfilling yourself. All you do is go around memorizing Scripture and thinking about God all day long. Whenever anyone asks you to do something, you're too busy thinking about God and too involved in spiritual things to get your hands dirty. So you become a religious recluse. You go around reciting Scripture verses and telling people what is wrong with their lives -- and that is being spiritual!"

Unfortunately, a lot of people think that is what we are talking about when we say that we are to have our minds set on the things of the Spirit. But, of course, if you see people like that (or if you are somebody like that), you soon discover that kind of life does not produce the results this passage tells us should be there. That is really nothing but another form of being run by the flesh -- it's a religious form of it, but it is actually the same thing.

What does it mean, then, to have your mind set on the Spirit? It means that, in the midst of making money and having fun and gaining fame and fulfilling yourself, you are primarily concerned with showing love, helping others, speaking truth, and, above all, loving God and seeking his glory. The only trouble with the world is that it is content with just making money, having fun, and fulfilling itself -- that is all it wants. The end is man. But the mind set on the Spirit desires that God be glorified in all these things, which are proper and right. When your mind is set on the Spirit you look at the events of life from God's point of view, not from the world's. Your value system is changed and it touches everything you do. You no longer see that the important thing must be to make a lot of money. The important thing is that, in seeking to fulfill your needs, God be glorified. That is what makes the difference. That is the mind set on the Spirit. It does not remove you from life -- it puts you right back into it. But it does it with a different point of view.

The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace, {Rom 8:6 NIV}

I am going to change this a bit to make it a little more accurate according to the original text:

The thinking of the flesh is death, but the thinking of the

What happens when you, as a Christian, let yourself live just like the world does and never bring the perspective of God into what you do? Then you are living according to the flesh. And the thinking of the flesh is death, while that of the Spirit is life and peace. In other words, this describes the results that come right now in our experience. Death is not something waiting for you at the end of your life; it is something that you experience right now, whenever you live according to the flesh.

What is death? If you study through the Scriptures you will find that death, in this present experience, always comes down to four basic things: fear, guilt, hostility, and emptiness. Those are the forms of death, and they come when you have your mind set on those things -- and only those things -- that the flesh desires: making money, having fun, fulfilling yourself, and gaining fame. If that is all you want out of life, then you will also have with it fear, guilt, hostility, emptiness, in all their various forms:

- * Fear can appear as worry, anxiety, dread, or timidity.
- * Guilt can show up in your life as shame, self-hatred, self-righteousness, or perfectionism.
- * Hostility will manifest itself as hate, resentment, bitterness, revenge, or cruelty.
- * Emptiness can show up as loneliness, depression, discouragement, despair, meaninglessness.

These are all symptoms of death.

As if that were not enough, these symptoms of death not only have this immediate effect upon our feelings, but they actually go on to settle into the body and affect our physical functioning. As many of us, perhaps, have already found from our various experiences of death, we can develop nervous twitches, tics, rashes, eczema, ulcers, stuttering, heart attacks, cancer, and many other diseases. This, literally, is death. We are producing death in our experience if, as Christians, we continue to live and think and act like the world lives and thinks and acts. If, on Monday morning, we go right back to living just like everyone else does, and reacting like everyone else does, living for the very reasons they live for, death will be produced in our lives. You can see this in the world around. All around us we see testimony to the fact that fear, guilt, hostility, loneliness, and emptiness are the results of thinking like the world thinks.

What, then, is living with the mind set on the Spirit? It is facing all these things -- seeking to make money, having fun, fulfilling yourself, even seeking a degree of fame -- but nevertheless realizing that God is at work in this. He supplies the power to do these things. Expect him to be at work and to be glorified in all these things. What will be the result of this kind of living? According to this, it produces life and peace, two marvelous qualities.

What is life? Once again, if I may summarize all that the Scriptures say on this, life includes four basic things that are opposite qualities to death:

- * If death is fear, then life is trust, hope, and confidence.
- * If death is guilt, then life is a feeling of acceptance, security, and assurance.
- * If death is hostility, then life is love, friendliness, kindness,

and reaching out to others.

- * If death is emptiness, then life is a sense of well-being, fulfillment, excitement, vitality, and fullness of life.

With life comes peace, which, of course, is an inner calm, a quiet spirit, a remarkable sense of being able to cope and to handle life. That is what comes when the mind is set on the Spirit.

But the apostle does not stop with that; he gives us the reasons why produces death:

... because the sinful mind [or the thinking of the flesh] is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. {Rom 8:7 NIV}

That is what is wrong. The mind set on the flesh brings death because it is hostile to God and it can't obey the law of God. It opposes it, in other words. Anybody who thinks that life consists only of making money, pleasing himself, having fun, and gaining a degree of notoriety is hostile to God. That thinking is against God. As James 4:6 says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble," {Jas 4:6 NIV}. It scares me to think that whenever I am trying to live for myself, for my own advancement, that God is lined up against me, he resists that kind of thinking. That is why James 3:16 can say that "where jealousy and selfish ambition is, every evil work is present," {cf, Jas 3:16 KJV}. God resists the proud, and gives grace to the humble.

Although it is not stated here, the implication is clear. The mind that is set on the Spirit pleases God. That is what God wants; and God gives grace to that, he advances it and helps it. He works on behalf of one whose outlook on life is not that of proud confidence in self, but is one of humble trust in the living God who is ready to work with him and through him to do whatever needs to be done. That is the difference.

brings in because he wants to show us the difference between a Christian who lives "according to the flesh" and a non-Christian, who is "in the flesh". These terms are entirely different and need to be carefully recognized as such.

Those controlled by their sinful nature [literally, it is those who are in the flesh, who live in the flesh] cannot please God.

You, however, are controlled not by your sinful nature [i.e., you are not in the flesh] but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. {Rom 8:8-9 NIV}

That is as plain as you can make it. Nothing could be plainer than that. If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. You see, you cannot tell if a person is a Christian by what he does at any given moment. He may do exactly the same thing as a

non-Christian, and he may be very cruel, vindictive, natural, lustful, and sinful in every way when he does it. At that moment, you cannot tell any difference between the Christian and the non-Christian. But there is a difference, Paul says. One has the Spirit of Christ in him, the Holy Spirit, and eventually that will make a fantastic difference in his behavior. The other does not, and he will continue in sin and even get worse and worse.

In fact, the apostle suggests by this that the actions of a non-Christian may actually be much better than those of a Christian. There are non-Christians who are kinder, more thoughtful, and more gracious than Christians. People say, "Look at them! If their lives are so nice and pleasant, surely they must be Christians." But it is not necessarily so. He that does not have the Spirit of Christ is none of his. The difference will show up in the ultimate tests of life. When the crunch comes, one will collapse and fall and the other will rise and, eventually, conquer. A Christian can live "according to the flesh" even though he is not "in the flesh." Those distinctions have to be made very clearly.

what he is aiming at:

But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. {Rom 8:10-11 NIV}

That is a great statement. Notice, first of all, the helpful teaching about the Spirit here. The term "Spirit" is used. He is called the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. Then it is made clear that the Spirit actually is the means by which Jesus Christ himself is in us. All this refers to the work of the Holy Spirit. These terms all refer to the same thing. By means of the Spirit, Christ is in you. And if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin. You may not realize that, but it is true.

The problem is, our bodies are yet unredeemed. As a consequence, they are the seat of the sin that troubles us so. And the sin that is in us -- still there in our bodies -- affects the body. That is why the body lusts, the body loves comfort, and the body seeks after pleasure; that is why our minds and attitudes react with hate and bitterness and resentment and hostility. Sin finds its seat in the body. That is why our bodies keep growing old. They are dying, dead, because of sin.

I have been watching some of you through the years. Although I haven't noticed much change in myself, I have noticed that you seem to be deteriorating. You are growing older and getting weaker. Your hair is turning gray, you groan and creak where once you leaped and ran. And if you don't believe that people get older, I invite you to come up here and take a look at what I'm looking at. Our bodies are dead because of sin.

For one who is not a Christian, that is the whole story. The body is dead, and so is the spirit. It is falling apart, and will continue to do

so. But that is not the final answer for the Christian. The spirit in the Christian is alive because of the gift of righteousness. Christ has come in and we are linked with him. Paul puts it so beautifully in Second Corinthians 4:16: "Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet is the joy of being a Christian. Though the body, with the sin that is within it, is giving us trouble and difficulty, tempting us, confounding us at times, nevertheless, the spirit is alive because of righteousness. Sin has its seat in the actual physical body, and it rises up (as Paul Law, it can rise up and attack us, overwhelm us, and conquer us. But we have an answer. It is put very beautifully in First John 4:4: "The one 4:4 NIV}. In other words, the Spirit of God within us is stronger than the sin that is in our bodies. Therefore we have strength to control the of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you."

Unfortunately, many of the commentators say that this verse refers to the promise of the resurrection at the end of life, when God is going to make our bodies alive. But that is not what Paul is saying. He is talking about the Spirit in us, giving life to our mortal bodies. Now, a mortal body is not yet dead. A mortal body is one that is subject to death. It is dying, but it is not yet dead. Therefore, this is not talking about the resurrection. Later on Paul will come to that, but in this chapter he is talking about what the Spirit does in us now. He says that though sin in our mortal bodies is going to tempt us severely, and at times rise up with great power (we have all felt the power of temptation in our lives, this urgent, almost irresistible desire to do something that we know is wrong), we must never forget that because our human spirit has been made alive in Jesus Christ, and the Spirit of God himself dwells in us, we have the strength to say, "No!" to that expression of evil.

We cannot reverse the processes of death -- no one can. Our bodies are going to die. But we can refuse to let the members of our bodies become the instruments of sin. We do not have to give in; we can refuse, by the power of the Spirit within, to let our members be used for that purpose. We don't have to let our eyes look at wrong things. We can say, "No." We don't have to let our tongues say evil, hurtful, sarcastic, and vicious things; we don't have to let them lie. We can say, "No," to that. We don't have to let our ears hear things that are hurtful. We don't have to let our minds give way to thinking about things in a wrong and vicious fashion. We don't have to! We don't have to let our hands be used for wrong purposes. We don't have to let our legs and feet lead us into places where we ought not to be. We don't have to let our sexual organs be used for wrong purposes. We don't have to let the members of our bodies be used wrongly. That is what Paul said back in

Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have returned from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. {Rom 6:12-13 NIV}

That is as plain as can be. We don't have to sin. By resurrection power, by the power of the one who raised Jesus from the dead and who lives in

us, we can say, "No!" to these temptations and desires for evil that are Paul says: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God -- which is your spiritual worship," {Rom 12:1 NIV}. And we can do that.

only one obligation:

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation -- but it is not to our sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die [literally, you are about to die; death becomes your experience in your present existence] ; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live. {Rom 8:12-13 NIV}

You will live, with all that that means in terms of security and trust and fulfillment and vitality and joy and peace. Notice that Paul stresses that this must be done by the Spirit, that is, simply by believing what the Spirit of God has said. That is the way you act by the Spirit -- by faith. When you believe that God has said that these sins in your body do not need to be there -- that they can be controlled, they have been crucified with Christ, they are worthless, they cannot help you, nothing worthwhile can come from them -- then you can say, "No," to sin and you can live by the Spirit. Then you can make money, have fun, gain fame, and fulfill yourself. And through it all, God will be glorified. You will manifest, in you present experience, joy and love and peace and the grace of Jesus Christ. The very righteousness which the Law demands is fulfilled in those who walk, not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. That is beautiful, isn't it?

showing a soldier in conflict with a tank. I remember the picture vividly because it was in color and it showed a tremendously huge army tank bearing down on the tiny figure of the soldier, about to crush him. How frightened he was, as this massive tank was about to overwhelm him. The picture was designed to show the odds involved when a foot soldier with a rifle faced a tank. Then it showed what happened to that soldier's odds when the bazooka (a rocket launcher) was invented. It showed him standing with a bazooka in his hands. It was the same soldier, but he had a different weapon. The next picture showed the tank, shrunken in size, with the soldier at least equal in size, if not a little larger.

This is what Paul is saying to us. Without the power of God released in our lives, we are like an infantry soldier in the presence of a tank. We cannot do a thing. It is too much for us. But, by trust in the power of the living God at work in us, we can rise up in the face of temptation, and, armed with the bazooka of the Spirit, we can say, "No!" and make it stick. We can turn and begin to live as God intended us to live.

The question this raises, then, is this: Why not live?

Why spend most of your Christian life weak, and pitiful, and constantly experiencing guilt and fear and loneliness and depressions and discouragement? Why not live?

Jesus said, "I am come that they might have life and that they might have it more abundantly," {cf, John 10:10 KJV}

Paul is simply describing how we might, indeed, live!

Title: Why not Live?
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 8:5-13
Message No: 19
Catalog No: 3519
Date: October 10, 1976

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THE SONS OF GOD AMONG MEN

by Ray C. Stedman

The song Thank You, Lord , by Dan Burgess, says:

It goes against the grain
To put my human nature down
And let the Spirit take control.

That is a very honest reflection of the struggle that we all feel when we are under severe temptation.

We want to do what is right, but we also want to do what is wrong; so the battle is on! The way that you win at times like that is to remember is to remind us of who we really are before him. We have learned that we are no longer in Adam if we believe in Jesus Christ; we are in Christ, we are tied to him, we belong to him.

are also in the Spirit. That helps us to understand something that is confusing to many people today. The Spirit and the Lord Jesus belong together; it is the work of the Spirit to make Jesus real. So, to be in Christ means to be in the Spirit. Romans 8:5-13 tells us that if we are

in the Spirit, we have the possibility of walking according to the Spirit, and thus we have power to overcome the sin that is within. Now, that is a very important matter, and one that we ought to understand clearly. Because we do not always feel that we have power to overcome sin, we need to recognize that certain facts are true, whether we feel it or not. The fact is that, because we are in Christ, and in the Spirit, we have the power to walk according to the Spirit -- if we choose to. As Paul says in Galatians 5:25, "If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit," {Gal 5:25 KJV}. That is the way to victory.

What we really are saying is that behavior depends on seeing and recognizing who you are and the basic facts about your identity. Psychologists tell us this. They say that only when you have a clear idea of who you really are can you then act that way. But you can't turn the two around. You can't act like something you would like to be, and thus gradually become that kind of person. That is what confuses so many people today. Millions of people today are operating on the basis that they will become the kind of person they would like to be if they act that way. But that is wrong. The Word of God tells us the truth -- the way to become different is to become changed at the very basis of your being by faith in Christ, so that you are something different. And if you believe what you are, you will begin to act that way. What a difference that makes!

of what being in Christ and in the Spirit actually means. The apostle has been leading us step by step to understand more fully our new identity in Jesus Christ. The more we understand that identity, and the more we believe it to be true, under all circumstances, the more quickly we will begin to act that way.

letter. He says,

Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit who makes you sons. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." {Rom 8:14-15 NIV}

For the first time in this letter Paul uses the phrase "the sons of God." Now, I want to make something clear. This is a generic term that includes both sexes. There is no necessity now of referring to a female person as something different than the male. All believers in Christ who really trust him and have received the gift of righteousness by faith are sons of God -- regardless of whether they are male or female. There is no need for any differentiation of the sexes here. That is why the Scriptures speak of us -- all of us -- freely as the "sons of the living God," {Hos 1:10, Rom 9:26}. You see, this speaks of something that is true of our spirit, and our spirit is sexless. Spirit is not identifiable by male or female, so what is true of the human spirit is quite apart from what is true of the body.

It is important in understanding this to recognize right off that not of God by faith in Jesus Christ. That is what makes you a son of God, nothing else. It is true that we are all creatures of God by natural birth. When Paul was preaching in Athens, that great intellectual center, he mentioned to the Athenians that even their own poets

recognized that men came from God. We are the offspring of God, and in him "we live and move and have our being" {Acts 17:28}, he said. That is true of all human beings everywhere in the world at all times. We are creatures of God. We are the offspring of God.

But Paul is careful to use quite a different word in Romans. Here the word is "sons of God." We are in the family of God, and this is a very distinctive term. I want to underscore how important this is for us to understand, because it is something that God intends for us to return to when we are in trouble. If you are having difficulty handling your behavior -- whether you are not doing what you want to do, or doing what you don't want to do -- the way to handle it is to remind yourself of what God has made you to be. This terminology is tremendously helpful.

In other words, in the struggle that you have with sin within you, you are not a slave, helplessly struggling against a cruel and powerful master; you are a son, a son of the living God, with power to overcome the evil -- even though it is a struggle to do so. And though you may be temporarily overcome, you are never ultimately defeated. It cannot be, because you are already constituted children of God. That is why Paul you are not under law but under grace," {Rom 6:14 KJV}. And in this gracious relationship, we are made and constituted sons of the living God. No matter what happens to us, that is what we are. Nothing can change that. That is the place from which we start.

It is important also for us to see how we become sons of God. Paul says, "You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear." When the Spirit of God came into your heart, he did not make you a slave to fear. Remember how Paul puts that again in Second Timothy 1:7: "You have not received a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a Spirit. What did the Spirit do? Paul says, "You received the Spirit who makes you sons," or, literally, "the Spirit of adoption, who adopted you as sons." How did you become a son of God? Well, the Spirit of God found you, and found me, and he adopted us into God's family.

I was with a family the other night where there were two adopted children and two natural-born children. I watched all evening long to see if I could tell which were the adopted ones and which were the natural ones. I finally had to ask the parents because I couldn't tell any difference -- even with their looks. Two were adopted into the family and two were natural-born children, but they were all treated so beautifully and so naturally that I couldn't tell the difference.

Some of you may be saying at this point, "Look, you are confusing me. What do you mean when you say we are adopted into the family of God? I have been taught from the Scriptures that I was born into the family of God. I have been born again." That is the term that is being bandied about these days. Even politicians are boasting, "I've been born again!" Thank God, some of them are. "But," you say, "some passages talk about the new birth, about being born into the family of God. I thought we were born, not adopted. What do you mean by adopted?"

I am glad you asked that question. You see, the truth is that both of these are true. You are both adopted and born into the family of God. As Jesus said on another occasion, "With man that is impossible, but with God, all things are possible," {Matt 19:26}. You can't be both adopted and born into a human family, but you can in God's family. God uses both of these terms because he wants to highlight two different aspects of our belonging to the family of God. You are said to be adopted because God wants you to remember always that you are not naturally part of the

family of God. We have been seeing all along in this letter that we are born into Adam's family, and we are all children of Adam by natural birth. We belong to the human family, and we inherit Adam's nature. All his defects, all his problems, all the evil that came into his life by his acts of disobedience -- all these were passed along to us by natural birth. So by nature we are not part of God's family. This is just like some of you, who were born into one family, and, then, by a legal process, were taken out of that family and were adopted into another family. From then on you became part of the family that adopted you.

This is what has happened to us. God has taken us out of our natural state in Adam, and, by the process of the Spirit, has made us legally sons of God, and we are part of his family. But he reminds us that we are in his family by adoption so that we might never take it for granted, or forget that if we were left in our natural state we would not have a part in the family of God. It is only by the grace of God that we come into his family.

But it is also true that we are born into God's family. Once we have been adopted, it is also true that, because God is God, he not only makes us legally his sons but he makes us actually partake of the divine nature and we are born into his family. We actually share the nature of God! It is an amazing statement! This tie with Jesus is so real that we are seen to be actually one with him, and we share the divine nature. Peter puts it this way: "We have been made partakers of the divine family as if we had originally been born into it, and we are born into it by the grace of God.

So both of these statements are true. There is nothing more wonderful to remind yourself of, morning by morning, and day by day, than this great fact: If you are a Christian, you are a son of the living God, adopted and born into his family. Because you are his son, God loves you, God protects you, God provides for you, God plans for you, God hears you, God claims you and openly acknowledges you, God chastens and corrects you, and God honors you. All of that is true because you are his son.

We know how we treat our natural children. There is a difference between them and the neighbors' children. Our children are considerably superior, of course. We may love the neighbors' children, they may be delightful children. We have some wonderful children in our neighborhood whom we love and admire, but they are not our children. We have a special relationship with our children. We care for them, we hurt for them, we love and protect them, we plan for them, we watch out for them. We are specially tied with them. That is what this is saying to us. God has a special relationship to us. We are the sons of God turned loose among the sons of men.

It would be helpful, I know, if God would put a little mark on us that would indicate that we are his sons. If we had a little red star on our foreheads, then we could tell all the other sons of God. Or perhaps if we had a special glow. (Sometimes that does show, anyway.) But there is no special mark. Outwardly, there is no distinction; but inwardly, there is a tremendous distinction, and that is what we need to understand. We can't tell by looking at anyone whether he is a son of God or not, though often there is an underlying sense that reveals itself and identifies brothers and sisters in Christ. But there is a vast difference within, and because of that difference, there is a special relationship that God has with us.

Now, the great question in all this is: "If this all depends on my being

a son of God, how can I be sure that I am a son?" Paul has been leading up to this question all through this letter. If the thing that is going to make the essential difference in your life (not only now, in the way you behave, but for eternity, in the destiny you are headed for) is whether or not you are a son of God, then the greatest question in life is, "Am I or am I not a son of God?"

You can't ask for a more important question than that to settle. Your whole behavior, your happiness as an individual, your ultimate destiny, your whole relationship to the greatness and the glory of God, is all dependent on that question: Are you or are you not a son of God? That is why the Apostle Paul in this passage gives us three very practical tests -- three levels of assurance -- by which we can know whether we are sons or not.

First, Paul says, if you are led by the Spirit of God, you are a son of God. Now, to be led by the Spirit means that you are under the control of a being other than yourself. This, therefore, is a level of proof which arises from our circumstances, from our experiences, from the events and reactions that happen to us, over which we have no deliberate control. Paul is saying that we can learn the answer to this question by observation. This is proof addressed to the mind. You can reason it; you can observe it. You can look around in your life and see if you are being led by the Spirit of God. If there is proof that you are, then you are a son of God.

What are some of these signs? There are certain things that the Scriptures tell us the Spirit of God is going to do when he comes into a life. If he has done them, and you can see that he has, you have immediate assurance that you are a son of God. "Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God." So let's look at the signs of being led by the Spirit.

I think the most evident sign, at least one of the most important to me and obviously something that doesn't come from man, is that when I read the Scriptures I am taught by the Spirit. He opens our minds to an understanding of the Word of God. He is called the Spirit of truth. Therefore, when he comes into our lives, the first thing he will do is to make the Bible a living Word to us. We see it as truth -- we know it as truth. Our eyes are opened to understand that here at last is reality. This is the work of the Spirit of God.

Have you ever been reading a passage of Scripture when suddenly something just leaped out at you? The passage takes on a new and fresh and glowing meaning. If that has happened, you are being led by the Spirit of God. He is doing his work of opening the truth to your minds "If by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live," {Rom 8:13 NIV}. He is talking about our understanding of what the Spirit of God has already done with the flesh within us, how it was crucified with Christ, and how, therefore, we can be freed from it. We can rise up and refuse to obey that flesh because its connection with us has been broken. If you understand that, you are being led by the Spirit of God, and, therefore, you are a son of God.

Some years ago when I was in a city some distance from here, I was rather discouraged, and I opened the Scriptures and read one of Paul's letters. I was so impressed with a statement that he made about Christians. He said, "Remember that you are chosen of God, and precious this applied to me. I was chosen of God, and precious in his sight! That kind of an experience is something done by the Spirit of God within us,

teaching us the truth.

The Spirit also arouses us to pray. Have you ever felt that you just had to pray, that you just had to get away somewhere and have a few moments of quiet? You may not have prayed for several days, but suddenly you can't stand it any longer. You have got to find some time when you can open up and talk to your Father. Now, that is being led of the Spirit of God. It is he who arouses in us the desire to pray. And those who have had these experiences can know by them that they are children of God.

Another thing the Spirit does is awaken a love for the brethren. When you meet somebody and learn they are a Christian do you ever feel a special bond with them right off? Have you ever longed to be with Christians? Sometimes do you get tired of even the closest of friends who are not Christians and long to be with those who are? Do you long to be with brothers and sisters in the family? That is what makes the Body Life service here on Sunday night such a beautiful time, and what brings people in week after week, year after year. The Spirit awakens within us a love for the brethren. John says in his first letter that if you have a love for the brethren it is a sign that you are in Christ {cf,

Another sign is that the Spirit makes the world empty, and makes God real. The Spirit directs us and checks us at times. Do you ever feel this? These are signs that we are being led by the Spirit of God.

Of course, ultimately, the Spirit produces the fruit of the Spirit in us {cf, Gal 5:22-23}. If we have evidence at all that we are truly loving -- especially when it is hard to be loving -- if we feel love and joy and peace and gentleness and compassion and goodness and faith, then we know these have all been awakened by the Spirit of God. "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God," {Rom 8:14 KJV}. That is one test by which we can know if we are sons of God.

There is another level of assurance of our sonship mentioned in the closing part of Verse 15: "And by him we cry, ' Abba , Father.'" Abba is the Aramaic word for father. Of course, the Greek word is translated "father" here, also. So, by means of the Spirit, we are given an emotional response to God in which we are aware of his fatherhood, and our soul cries out within us, "Abba, Father." Abba is a baby's word.

I remember years ago hearing this story about Dr. Alan McRae, a great Bible student and Hebrew scholar. Some time after the McRae's baby boy was born, Dr. McRae had to go away for three or four weeks. When he came back, this wife was showing him how the baby had learned to say a few words. When Dr. McRae, this eminent Hebrew scholar, came in, his little son stretched out his arms and said, "Ab-Abba, abba!" Dr. McRae said, "Look, he's speaking Aramaic already!" The closest and most intimate relationship you can have is the awareness that you belong to a father, with a father's arms around you, a father's heart concerned for you, a father's wisdom planning for you, and a father's love protecting and guarding you. If you have ever sensed the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of Jesus, it is because the Spirit of God has awakened your heart to sense that you belong to the family of God.

I have seen this happen with people in a congregation like this. I have seen tears come to their eyes when something from the Scriptures reminds them of their relationship to God the Father. It can happen when you are driving your car, or sitting with your family, or going through a time of sorrow. Suddenly and unexpectedly, that wonderful sense that you belong to the Father comes, and you cherish that relationship, and your

soul cries, "Abba, my Father!" This, by the way, is the word Jesus himself used in the agony of Gethsemane. As he knelt to pray in his hour of anguish, he cried out, "Oh Abba -- my Father!" {Mark 14:36 NIV}. Even in his anguish he was aware of that relationship.

Spirit is in us:

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. {Rom 8:16 NIV}

This is the deepest level of assurance. Beyond the emotions, beyond the feelings, is a deep conviction that is born of the Spirit of God himself, an underlying awareness that we cannot deny that we are part of God's family. We are the children of God. I think this is the basic revelation to which our emotions respond with the cry, "Abba, Father." That is our love to him, but this is his love to us. It is what Paul shed abroad in our hearts by the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit which is given unto us," {cf, Rom 5:5 KJV}.

As I look back on my own life, I can understand how this is true. I think I became a Christian when I was about eleven years old, in a Methodist brush arbor meeting. I responded to the invitation, and, with others, came and knelt down in front and received the Lord. I had a wonderful time of fellowship with the Lord that summer and the next winter, and there were occasions when I just would be overwhelmed with the sense of the nearness and dearness of God. I used to sing hymns until tears would come to my eyes as the meaning of those old words reflected on the relationship that I had with God. Then I used to preach to the cows when I would bring them home. Those cows were a very good audience too; by the way; they never went to sleep on me.

But that fall we moved from this town where I had Christian fellowship to a town in Montana that didn't even have a church. Gradually, because of that lack of fellowship, I drifted away from that relationship with God, drifted into all kinds of ugly and shameful things -- habits of thought and activity that I am ashamed of. I even developed some liberal attitudes toward the Scriptures. I didn't believe in the inspiration of the Bible. I argued against it, and during high school and college I was known as a skeptic.

But all through those seven years there was a relationship with God I could not deny. Somehow I knew, deep down inside, that I still belonged to him; and there were things I could not do, even though I was tempted. I could not do them because I felt that I had a tie with God. This is that witness of the Spirit. Calvin called it "the testimonial of the Spirit," which we cannot deny and which is especially discernible in times of gross sin and despair. First John 3:20 says, "If our heart knows all things. There is a witness born of the Spirit which you can't shake, which is there along with the ultimate testimony that we belong with the children of God.

Now, this is where to begin when you get into trouble. Go back to this relationship. Remind yourself of who you are. You can see it in your experience as you look around. You are led by the Spirit of God. You can feel it in your heart. There are times when your emotions are stirred by the Spirit, and you can sense at the level of your spirit that you

belong to God.

deeper relationship. I am not going to take time on this verse because it introduces the next section in the passage, but I just want to read

Now if we are children, then we are heirs -- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. {Rom 8:17 NIV}

These words introduce the very climax of this epistle. We learn of the glory that is awaiting us and its tie with the sufferings that we go through now. I just bring this in here to show how the apostle has led us along:

- * We started in Adam;
- * We are now, by faith, in Christ;
- * If we are in Christ, we are in the Spirit;
- * If we are in the Spirit, we can walk according to the Spirit;
- * If we are in the Spirit, we are therefore led by the Spirit; and
- * If we are led by the Spirit, we are the sons of God; and
- * If we are the sons of God, we are heirs of God.

All that God owns is to be committed to us.

That is a staggering, mind-blowing thing, but that is what the apostle writes, and it runs all the way through the Scriptures. There is a thread that runs all the way from Genesis right through Revelation. In subtle and sometimes open ways it is constantly hinting that something fantastic is coming. What God has in mind for this beguiled and driven race of men who are now redeemed by faith in Christ is beyond description! That is what Paul is going to bring before us now, as we consider the heritage that is waiting for us in Jesus Christ.

But all this is for us to remember when we get into trouble. This is not just hope for the future; it is deliverance for the present. If we remember who we are, by an absolute psychological certainty, we will start acting like who we are. When we do, we will find that there is power available to say "No" to the flesh, to say "Yes" to the Spirit, and to walk in a way that glorifies God.

Prayer

Our Father, we ask you to help us to understand these things. We thank you for the work of the Spirit. We are not often conscious of his working, except as these things are pointed out to us in the Scriptures and we see them and recognize them to be true. But we thank you, Lord, for the working of the Spirit of God. O mighty Spirit! What a wonderful thing it is that you have called us to be children of the living God. Help us never to forget it, and to walk worthy of such a calling. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: The Sons of God among Men
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 8:14-17
Message No: 20
Catalog No: 3520
Date: October 24, 1976

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THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY

by Ray C. Stedman

First John 3:2 says, "Beloved, now are we the sons of God; but it does He deals with two themes: the sufferings of believers, and the glorification of believers.

First John 3:2 has always been a comfort to me, as a pastor, because it reminds me that, though we are all sons of God, sometimes we don't appear to be his sons. Sometimes when I am beset by saints who come to me and criticize various things that are going on, I have a difficult time relating to them. Then I have to remind myself, "Well, they are still children of God, even though it does not yet appear what they shall be." As I see the increasing decrepitude in people's deteriorating physical bodies as they grow older, I have to say again, "It does not yet appear what we shall be." Things are moving toward a great day, but it is not here yet; and until that day, we have to put up with the difficulties and the hardships and the sufferings that our current situations bring us to.

These are the themes that Paul links together in this great section of

Now if we are children, then we are heirs -- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. {Rom 8:17 NIV}

This verse links together two things that we probably would not put together: sufferings and glory -- hurts and hallelujahs. They belong together, and you find them together in almost every passage of Scripture that deals with the suffering of the Christian. In fact, the Apostle Paul links them directly together in Second Corinthians 4:17:

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an
NIV}

So, our sufferings as believers -- physical, emotional, whatever they may be -- are directly linked with the glory that is coming. The important thing we need to see is that both the sufferings and the glory are privileges that are given to us.

It is easy for Christians reading these passages to get the idea that we earn our glory by the sufferings that we go through -- those who go through the greatest suffering will earn the greatest degree of glory. But it is wrong to see it that way. We never earn glory. As this passage makes clear, glory is given to us as part of our inheritance in Christ. And suffering, also, is our inheritance in Christ. Suffering is a privilege committed to us. Paul says this again very plainly in Philippians 1:29:

For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him [or, for his name's sake], {Phil 1:29 NIV}

In the early part of Acts, it is recorded that the early Christians actually did this. They rejoiced in their sufferings. They rejoiced because they were counted worthy to suffer for the sake of the Lord. And though they were beaten and mistreated, they went away rejoicing because God had counted them worthy to bear suffering for his name's sake. I think this is the transforming view that makes it possible for us to endure suffering and, more than that, to actually rise above it with triumphant rejoicing. We can do this when we see that our sufferings are privileges committed to us. Our Lord Jesus said this himself in Matthew 5:11-12. He said, "Blessed are you when men persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely for his name's sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets who were before you," {cf, Matt 5:11-12 KJV}.

Nothing will help us more in enduring suffering than a clear view of the glory that is linked to it. That is the theme of this section in Romans

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. {Rom 8:18 NIV}

The theme of that verse and the next nine verses is that incomparable

glory lies ahead -- glory beyond description, greater than anything you can compare it with on earth. A magnificent and fantastic prospect awaits us. All through the Scriptures there has been a thread of hope, a rumor of hope that runs all through the Old Testament, through the prophetic writings, and into the New Testament. This rumor speaks of a day that is coming when all the hurt and heartache and injustice and weakness and suffering of our present experience will be explained and justified and will result in a time of incredible blessing upon the earth. The whisper of this in the Old Testament increases in intensity as it approaches the New Testament, where you come to proclamations like this that speak of the incomparable glory that lies ahead.

Now, we tend to make careful note of our suffering. Just the other day, I received a mimeographed letter from a man who had written out in extreme detail (even though rather humorously) a report of his recent operation. He said he had had to listen to all the reports of other people's operations for years, and now it was his turn! We make detailed reports of what we go through in our sufferings. But here the apostle says, "Don't even mention them! They are not worthy to be mentioned in comparison with the glory that is to follow."

Now, that statement would be just so much hot air if it didn't come from a man like Paul. Here is a man who suffered intensely. No one in this room has gone through even a fraction of the suffering that Paul endured. He was beaten, he was stoned with rocks, he was chained, he was imprisoned, he was shipwrecked, starved, often hungry and naked and cold. He himself tells us this. And yet it is this apostle who takes pen in hand and says, "Our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that shall be revealed in us." The glory that is coming is incomparable in intensity.

Our sufferings hurt us, I know. I am not trying to make light of them or diminish the terrible physical and emotional pain that suffering can bring. It can be awful, almost unendurable. Its intensity can increase to such a degree that we actually scream with terror and pain. We think we can no longer endure. But the apostle is saying that the intensity of the suffering we experience is not even a drop in the bucket compared with the intensity of glory that is coming. Now, you can see that Paul is straining the language in trying to describe this fantastic thing that is about to happen, which he calls the revelation of the glory that is coming.

This glory is not only incomparable in its intensity, but it is also incomparable in its locality. It is not going to be revealed to us, but in us. The word, literally, means "into us." This glory is not going to be a spectator sport, where we will sit up in some cosmic grandstand and watch an amusing or beautiful performance in which we actually have no part. We are to be on the stage. We are going to be involved in it. It is a glory that will be "revealed into us," and we are part of it. I say this more accurately than anyone else. I would like to share with you a paragraph or two from his message, The Weight of Glory :

We are to shine as the sun. We are to be given the morning star. I think I begin to see what it means. In one way, of course, God has given us the morning star already. You can go and enjoy the gift on many fine mornings, if you get up early enough. "What more," you may ask, "do we want?" Ah, but we want so much more. Something the books on aesthetics take

little notice of. But the poets and mythologies know all about it. We do not want merely to see beauty, though God knows even that is bounty enough -- we want something else which can hardly be put into words -- to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it. That is why the poets tell us such lovely falsehoods. They talk as if the west wind could really sweep into a human soul. But it can't. They tell us that beauty, born a murmuring sound, will pass into a human face. But it won't -- or not yet, at least.

[Lewis sums it up in a previous sentence in this way]

The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last.

That is what Paul says is about to happen. This is the incredible glory that God has prepared for those who love him, that he has given to us -- not because we have been faithful, not because we earn it, but because we are heirs of God, and co-heirs with Christ. And also we are called and entrusted with the privilege of suffering for humanity. All Christians suffer. There are no exceptions. If you are a true and genuine believer in Jesus Christ, you will suffer. But we are not only given the privilege of suffering with him now, but also of sharing in his glory that is yet to come. We can endure the suffering, and even triumph in it, because we see the glory that is to follow.

In the paragraph that follows, the apostle shows us two proofs that confirm this hope of glory. The first one is that nature itself testifies to this, the second is our own experience. Paul says the whole created universe bears witness to this day that is coming.

The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. {Rom 8:19 NIV}

The word in the original language which is translated "eager expectation" is an interesting word. It is a word that pictures a man standing and waiting for something to happen, craning his head forward. That is why I think Phillips translates this correctly when he says, "The whole creation is standing on tiptoe, eagerly awaiting the revelation of the sons of God." The word means "to crane the neck, to look on with a visible sense of anticipation that something is about to happen." That is what Paul says the world is doing. It is eagerly awaiting this remarkable event toward which the world is hastening, and has been hastening, since the beginning of time.

Paul goes on to explain why he makes such a statement in

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. {Rom 8:20-21 NIV}

Paul is saying that creation not only is waiting for something, but that it is doing so because it is linked with man. Creation fell with man, the apostle declares. Not only did our whole race fall into the bondage of sin and death, as the earlier chapters of Romans explain, but the entire physical universe fell as well. It was man's sin that put thorns on roses. It was man's sin that made the animals hate and fear each other and brought predators and carnivores into being. With the fall of man came the spreading fear, hostility, and hatred in the animal world, and the whole of nature testifies to this fact. It is, as Paul describes it here, subjected to frustration.

Recently we have been hearing a lot about how plants are sensitive to people, how they even understand something of what we say, and how our attitudes are conveyed to them. Can you imagine how frustrated a plant can get when it wants to produce and grow, and yet it is always treated with a circumstance or attitude that frustrates it. Some of us have to live with these frustrated plants in our homes. Think of the beauty of nature -- and yet every area is spoiled by thorns and thistles, and various things that mark this decay. Futility prevails in the natural world.

This phrase "the bondage to decay" is a very accurate description of what scientists call the second law of thermodynamics. This is the law of infinite increase of entropy. Everything is decaying; everything, with no exception, is running down. Though for a while something may seem to grow, eventually it dies. Even human life dies, and so does all that is with it. All of this is because of the fall of man.

I just spent a few days in the beautiful High Sierra, where the great Sequoia trees grow. As I walked about, I was sad to see how the crush of man has spoiled what is left of the beauty of creation. In the area where I was, there was once a great forest -- the world's greatest forest of sequoia trees, those great redwoods. But man came in, and in less than a decade there is nothing but blackened stumps and rotting logs where once there were thousands of trees. Ironically enough, though it was all done in the name of profit, nobody made a dime on the whole operation. At least half of the lumber that was cut was never removed and was left to rot. This is how man despoils creation wherever he goes. He pollutes the air and ruins the environment. This is all a part of the bondage to decay that we see all around us.

But the apostle argues that, if that is true, it is also true that when man is delivered from this decay, nature will be delivered as well. Therefore, when the hour strikes when the sons of God are going to be revealed -- when it shall appear what we are, as John would say, when what we have become in our spirits, sons of the living God, shall become visibly evident to all -- in that hour, nature will be freed from its bondage. It will burst into a bloom and fecundity that no one can possibly imagine now. The desert will blossom like the rose, the prophet says, and the lions will lie down with the lambs. None shall hurt and destroy in all of God's holy mountain. Rivers will run free and clear

and sweet again.

All that God intended in nature will come into visible manifestation in that day. Nature will be delivered into "the freedom and the glory of the children of God." That is a literal rendering of what Paul says here, and it means that glory has a great deal of freedom about it. It is a stepping into an experience of liberty such as we have never dreamed, such as has never come into our imaginations at any time. It is incomparable glory.

Now, in anticipation of that day, the apostle says, nature groans, but

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. {Rom 8:22 NIV}

As Paul has said earlier, nature groans in the hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage of decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. Somebody has pointed out that all the sounds of nature are in the minor key. Listen to the sighing of the wind. Listen to the roaring of the tide. Listen to the roar of the cataract. Even most of the sounds of birds are in the minor key. All nature is singing, but it is singing a song of bondage. Yet it sings in hope, looking forward to that day, Paul says, when it shall step into the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

Not only does nature testify to this bondage, bearing witness to the hope that is waiting, but, Paul says, we ourselves have this testimony. Our present experience confirms that this glory is coming. Paul sets

Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. {Rom 8:23-25 NIV}

In some ways, I think that is the most remarkable statement in this remarkable paragraph. Paul says here that though we ourselves are redeemed in spirit, our bodies are not yet redeemed; we, too, are groaning. All through this paragraph there is a constant contrast between the groan and the glory; yet there is a link between the two. Nature groans; we groan. And yet the groan is producing the glory. I remind you again of what Paul said in Second Corinthians 4:17:

For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an 4:17 RSV}

Have you ever thought of afflictions in that way? Our afflictions are working for us. Every time we groan, it is a reminder to us of the promise of glory. I do not think anything will transform our sufferings more than remembering that.

My daughter, Laurie, has reached the stage where she delights in mimicking me, repeating back to me the things that I say in the way that I say them. I must admit it is a great help. It's just like holding up a mirror before me. I have been so struck by the fact that in the tone of voice she employs in mimicking me there is often a groan. I am groaning all the time. I groaned this morning when I got up. So did you, probably.

Our lives consist of groans. We groan because of the ravages that sin makes in our lives, and in the lives of those we love. We groan because we see possibilities that are not being captured and employed. We groan because we see gifted people who are wasting their lives, and we would love to see something else happening. It is recorded that, as he drew near the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus groaned in his spirit because he was so burdened by the ravages that sin had made in a believing family. He groaned, even though he knew that he would soon raise Lazarus from the dead. So we groan in our spirits -- we groan in disappointment, in bereavement, in sorrow. We groan physically in our pain and our limitation. Life consists of a great deal of groaning.

But the apostle immediately adds that this is a groaning which is in hope. As nature groans in hope, so we believers groan -- but we groan in hope too. For in this hope we were saved, in the anticipation that God has a plan for our bodies as well. Among the Greeks, it was taught that the body was evil, and that the best thing was to get out of it, to get away from it, to escape into whatever glory awaited the human spirit, for the body was a prison, holding us in.

I am afraid that this pagan concept is more prevalent among Christians than we like to think. I find a lot of Christians who have an ejection-seat mentality. As soon as they get into difficulty, they want to pull the ejection chord and zip off into glory. They want to get away from it all. We are all tempted to feel that way, but that is not the Christian point of view.

The Christian viewpoint is that, though the body is in pain and suffering and is limited now, this is an important aspect of our lives. It is something that is part of the whole program and plan of God, part of the privilege committed to us as Christians. We suffer with Christ. As he suffered, so do we, that we might also be glorified, as he is. Therefore, what is happening to us now is something that we never need to see as meaningless. It holds great meaning. That is why I think that boredom is the most non-Christian attitude that we can have. Boredom is an attitude of enduring, waiting for something better to come, but seeing nothing meaningful in what you are going through at the time. I don't think the Scriptures ever support that idea of Christians.

We are saved in hope, Paul says, and by that hope we live. It is true that hope, by its very nature, is something yet in the future -- "But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently." But what makes it possible to wait is that we already have the firstfruits of the Spirit. We know that the Spirit of God is able to give joy in the midst of heartache. He is able to make us feel at peace even when there is turmoil all around. This happens to even the weakest

and newest among us. This is what Paul calls the firstfruits of the Spirit -- the power of God to make a heart calm and restful and peaceful in the midst of turbulent, trying, and difficult circumstances. Because we have these firstfruits we can wait patiently for the hour when, at last, even our bodies will be set free, and we shall step into an incomparable glory, such as we have never imagined or seen before. No one, in all the wildest dreams of science fiction, has ever imagined or conceived of something so vast and so magnificent as the glory God has waiting for us.

There is more involved in this program of patient waiting, as the

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know how we ought to pray, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. {Rom 8:26-27 NIV}

Now the Spirit is groaning. There are three groans in this passage. Nature is groaning, we are groaning, and now the Spirit is groaning with words which cannot be uttered. This passage helps us in our understanding of prayer. The apostle says that we do not know what to pray for as we ought. We lack wisdom. I want to point out immediately that this is not an encouragement to cease praying. Some people think this means that if we don't know how to pray as we ought, and if the Spirit is going to pray for us anyway, then we don't need to pray. But that would contradict many other passages of Scripture, especially James 4:2, which says. "You have not because you ask not," {Jas 4:2b NIV}. God does want us to pray, and we are constantly encouraged to pray. Jesus taught on prayer. In Philippians 4:6, Paul tells us that we are never to be troubled or anxious, but in everything, with prayer and supplication, we are to let our requests be made known to God.

There are many times when we do know what to pray for. But there will come times when we won't know what to pray for. My wife and I had a time like that last night. We knew something was wrong, but we didn't know how to analyze it, or how to explain it, or how to ask God to do something about it. We were without wisdom. It is at that time, the apostle tells us, that the Spirit of God within us voices, without words, his request to the Father.

I have always been amazed at people who emphasize the gift of tongues and take this verse as proof that the Spirit prays in tongues through us. This verse could not mean that. Paul tells us that this praying of the Spirit is done with groans which words cannot express. Now, tongues are words, words of other languages. If this referred to the gift of tongues, it would merely be putting into other languages the feelings of our heart. But this passage has nothing to do with that. This describes the groans of the Spirit within, so deep and so impossible to verbalize that we cannot say anything at all. We just feel deeply. The apostle says that when that happens, it is the Spirit of God who is praying. The Spirit is putting our prayer into a form which God the Father, who searches the heart, understands. The Spirit is asking for something concerning the situation that we are trying to pray about. Now, what is the Spirit asking for?

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.
{Rom 8:28 NIV}

Never separate this verse from the previous two verses. The apostle is saying that what the Spirit prays for is what happens. The Spirit prays according to the mind of God, and the Father answers by bringing into our lives the experiences that we need. He sends into the life of those for whom we are concerned the experiences that they need, no matter what they may be.

Now, that means that even the trials and tragedies that happen to us are an answer from the Father to the praying of the Spirit, doesn't it? You may leave this service this morning and become involved in an automobile accident on the way home. Someone may steal your purse. You may get home to find your house is on fire. There are a thousand and one possibilities. What we need to understand is that these things do not happen by accident. They happen because the Spirit which is in you prayed and asked that the Father allow them to happen -- because you or someone close to you needs it. These are the results of the praying of the Spirit.

The joys, the unexpected blessings, and the unusual things that happen to you are also the result of the Spirit's praying. The Spirit is praying that these things will happen, he is voicing the deep concern of God himself for your needs and mine. Out of this grows the assurance that no matter what happens, it will work together for good. This verse does not tell us that everything that happens to us is good. It does say that whether the situation is bad or good, it will work together for good for you if you are one who is loved and called by God. What a difference that makes as we wait for the coming of the glory! God is working out his purposes within us.

Paul is telling us here that we can wait with patience because nature testifies his glorious coming, and our own experience confirms it as well. We are being prepared for something -- we can't really tell what it is, specifically, but we are getting ready for something. And one of these days, at the end of our lives, if not before, we will step out of time into an incredible experience of glory, something that begs description -- a glory that Christ himself shares, and that we all shall share with him.

This is what God is preparing us for. No wonder the apostle then closes this passage with one of the greatest paeans of praise in the Scriptures. As we face the sufferings we are going through now, what a blessing, and what a help it is to remember the glory that has been granted to us. We have been counted worthy to suffer for his name, that we may also share in the glory that is to come.
Prayer

We thank you, our Father, for these mighty promises. How

magnificent they are, how rich they are! We thank you for them. We know that one day these words, which are essentially forms and empty sounds to us, will be filled with a content that is beyond description. You will astonish our minds and our hearts by what you have prepared. We pray that we may understand this, and thus be able to endure patiently and with thanksgiving what we are going through now, knowing that it is the very suffering that is working and producing the glory. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: The Agony and the Ecstasy
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 8:18-28
Message No: 21
Catalog No: 3521
Date: October 31, 1976

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IF GOD BE FOR US

by Ray C. Stedman

title of The Agony and the Ecstasy , none of us knew that this very week a family among us would be passing through an experience of deep and heart-felt agony, and that mingled with that agony would be the joy and ecstasy of a new life. Little did we know that a baby girl would be born to a couple from this church on the same day that they suffered the death of their son. But life is like that -- a strange intermixture of good and bad, of heartache and joy, that we oftentimes find very hard to understand. But the glory of Christianity is that, whether our hearts are aching or rejoicing, there is no incident or circumstance -- no matter how trivial -- that is without purpose or meaning. God has declared that "all things work together for good to those who love him, who are the called according to his purpose," {cf, Rom 8:28}.

That great statement of the apostle in this eighth chapter introduces to

us the climax of this letter to the Romans. It is capsulized in Verse 28, which I just quoted. We are called "according to his purpose." God has a purpose. There is purpose in life. What seems to be a meaningless jumble of events in history is not meaningless at all; there is a purpose to every event. Everything is moving to accomplish a desired end, and that end is the subject of this whole letter to the Romans. That is what it is all about: How God works through human history to accomplish his one great and enduring purpose.

in effect, is to have many sons, all of whom will love him with all their hearts. That is what God is after. That takes us back to what Jesus said: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your soul and all your strength. This is the first and greatest commandment," {cf, Matt 22:37-38 NIV}. To accomplish that, God called the world into being, set up the whole universe, peopled the earth with a race of men, permitted them to fall, sent into this sin-ridden earth his own beloved Son, accomplished the cross and the resurrection, and now, as Paul so clearly says, "works all things together for good to those who love him, who are the called according to that great purpose," {cf, Rom 8:28}.

In this we have a tremendous statement of what life is all about. We see that God's purpose is to have a race of people, his own children, who will love him. Love is the end and aim of life. To accomplish this, Paul summarizes the process that God follows. Paul looks back through this letter to the Romans and sums up in five brief steps the process that

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. {Rom 8:29-30 NIV}

These are the five steps that God takes, stretching from eternity to eternity -- far greater than any of our individual lives would suggest. Nevertheless, this is what brings us to faith. I want to make clear that in this passage the Apostle Paul is not touching the question of why some people believe and some do not. That is the problem of election, to reason and think can comprehend about that subject is clearly stated in the ninth chapter. But that is not what Paul is talking about here. He is not facing the mystery of election. He is simply describing what is back of those who believe, what has already happened when, as Christians, we look back to see how God brought us to this place. There are five steps:

The first step is that God foreknew us.

A lot of people talk about how God foreknew what we were going to do, he foreknew that we would believe in Christ. There is a certain line of teaching that says God looked down the corridor of time and saw that we would believe in Christ, and therefore he chose us to be part of God's elect because of what we were going to do. Now, this verse, as I have already suggested, is not dealing with that question. This verse says "those whom he foreknew," not "that which he foreknew." It is concerned, therefore, with the question of existence. It is telling us that from among the tremendous number of human beings that have been spawned onto

this earth since the creation of man, God foreknew that you and I would be there -- as well as all the believers who have preceded us or who will follow us in the course of history.

Now, when you consider the fact that at every birth the chances that you and I should be the one that should emerge from that union are somewhere in the range of one to one or two hundred million, this is a remarkable statement. Because of the abundance of sperm to one ovum, doctors tell us that the possibility that any one particular person could be foretold and foreknown is fantastic -- the odds are one to two hundred million for every single birth. So, when you consider that, out of all those possibilities, God has seen that we would be the ones who would come -- and not only us, but all believers of all time, in all ages -- you begin to get some staggering understanding of the mind and the wisdom of God. It is simply mind-blowing to think that God would have the ability to do this.

We are impressed by great computers that amass huge numbers of facts and put together amounts of information that none of us as individuals could ever handle. But these computers are nothing! They are children's toys, compared with the greatness of the mind of God, who saw all the fantastic possibilities and yet knew that we would be there. Not only that, but he knew it long before the world was ever called into being! That is the amazing statement of the Scriptures. Before the foundation of the earth, God foreknew that we would be here. Now, I cannot go any further than that. That baffles me, and bewilders me, but, nevertheless, it is fact. This is where Paul begins.

Then, Paul says, the next step is that God predestined .

"Ah," you say, "I know what that means! That means God looked over the whole group and said, 'Now these will go to hell, and those will go to heaven.'" Predestination has absolutely nothing to do with going to hell. In the Word of God, predestination is never related to that in any way whatsoever. To think of predestination in those terms is completely unbiblical. Predestination has to do only with believers. It simply tells us that God has selected before hand the goal toward which he is going to move every one of us who believes in Christ. That goal is conformity to the character of Christ. Everything that happens to us focuses on that one supreme purpose.

If we understand that, it will help to explain some of the conundrums of our lives. We think that God's primary objective is our happiness, but the Scriptures never say that. God is interested in our happiness, and eventually our happiness is involved in all that God does, but that is not his primary concern. His primary concern is for our character. God knows we can never develop the character he wants without times of difficulty and trial and suffering. That is why suffering is an inevitable part of the picture. It helps us to remember that God's primary objective is not that we be happy all the time. He is not that kind of a father. Rather, his primary objective is that we be holy, which means "whole," "complete," all that we were intended to be, functioning as God intended us to function, like Jesus.

We have all noticed that God is forming a lot of characters. In fact, he is going to end up with a whole heaven full of them. But one distinctive thing about those characters is that they are all like Jesus. They all have different personalities, but they all have the same, basic, fundamental character: loving, gracious, gentle, wholesome, helpful, compassionate -- all the things that marked that magnificent life of

Jesus interpreted in a thousand and one different ways in our human lives. That is the wonder and the glory of God. That is what he has predestined: {that} there shall be many brethren, and {that} Jesus should be the firstborn among many just like him.

The third step is that God called us.

Those whom God foreknew he also predestined; and those he predestined, he also called. This is where we get into the act. Up to this point, the passage has been concerned with God's mind and purpose, but now we suddenly become involved in the picture. Those whom God has foreknown and predestined, he now calls.

I could not begin to describe to you the mystery and wonder that is involved in this. This means that the Holy Spirit somehow begins 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 does not make any difference. God begins to work and he draws us to himself.

Jesus said, "All that my Father has given me shall come unto me. Not one shall be lost," {cf, John 6:65}. This is what he means. The Holy Spirit begins to draw us and woo us and open our minds and create interest in our hearts. We think we are getting religious, but we are only responding to the drawing of the Spirit of God. We are not aware of this -- we think it is our choice. In a sense, we do have to make a choice, free will and God's sovereign choice. Nevertheless, we are being drawn in ways we do not understand.

The Apostle Paul was converted in the brilliant light on the Damascus road when he saw the glory of the Lord shining about him greater than the sun. He heard a voice that said to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Is it not hard for you to kick against the goads?" {Acts 26:14b NIV}. By that last phrase the Lord Jesus indicated that he understood that Paul was fighting, struggling, kicking, trying to hold on to his independence -- but he was being dragged relentlessly to a fate he could not escape. That is what happens to all of us. We do not understand it, but it is true.

Dr. Harry Ironside used to tell about a man who gave his testimony, telling how God had sought him and found him, how God had loved him and called him and saved him, delivered him, cleansed him, and healed him -- a tremendous testimony to the glory of God. After the meeting, one rather legalistic brother took him aside and said, "You know, I appreciate all that you said about what God did for you, but you didn't mention anything about your part in it. Salvation is really part us and part God, and you should have mentioned something about your part." "Oh," the man said, "I apologize. I'm sorry; I really should have mentioned that. My part was running away, and his part was running after me until he found me."

That is what Paul is saying here. God called us. Those whom he predestined, he also called.

Fourth, those God called, he justified .

All along in this letter we have been looking at what justification means. It is God's gift of worth. Those who are justified are valuable in his sight. They are forgiven, cleansed, and given the position before him of being loved, accepted, wanted, and endeared. This is

justification -- being given the gift of worth without any cause on your part at all. By the cross, God was freed to give the gift of righteousness. Had he given it apart from the cross, he could have been properly accused of condoning sin -- but the cross freed him. It established his righteous justice on other grounds, so that he is now free to give to us the gift of worth without any merit on our part.

Then, finally, those God justified, he also glorified .

Paul writes as though this had already happened. It has already begun, it is true. Glorification is what Paul calls "the revelation of the sons of God," {cf, Rom 8:19}. It is the exciting day which the whole creation is anticipating, when God is suddenly going to pull back the curtains on what he has been doing with the human race. Suddenly, the sons of God will stand out in glory.

But in a sense, as we have said, this has already begun. It is what we call, in theological terms, sanctification . Sanctification is the process by which the inner worth which God imparts to our human spirit by faith in Christ begins to work itself out into our conduct. We actually begin to change. We begin to be like what we actually are. Therefore, our attitudes change, and our actions change, and our habits begin to change, and we stop certain things and begin others. Our whole demeanor is different; we become much more gracious, happy, wholesome persons. That is called sanctification, and that is the process of glorification; it has already started.

We all know how this works. We all are aware of how wonderful it is when someone we know to be nothing but a ding-a-ling begins to change. How much easier that person is to live with! We see that the glorification has already begun.

That is the process that Paul says is inevitable. God has started it, that is what he is doing, and that is what he is going to complete at the day of the revelation of the sons of God. So Paul writes here as though it were already done: "Those whom God justified, he also glorified."

There are none lost in the process. Those whom he foreknew, before the foundation of the world, he also predestined to conform to the likeness of his Son; the same number of people he called; and the ones he called, he also justified; the very ones he justified, he also glorified. No one is lost in the process, 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 does -- no matter what it takes.

At this point Paul asks the final question:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? {Rom 8:31a NIV}

What can you say? All you can say is "Thank you. How great thou art!" The response of the heart is, "Father, I love you." And that is what God is after. He is after the love of men -- the uncoerced, unforced love of men, despite their pressures, their problems, their heartaches, whatever

they go through. Therefore, the rest of this letter is a beautiful description of how to love God.

The nature of love to God is outlined for us in three questions which the apostle asks in this last section.

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for all of us -- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? {Rom 8:31b-32 NIV}

If you have understood all that God has done for you, your first response of love is to say to yourself, "If God is for me, who can be against me?" You love God when you work out and reflect on the implications of his saving commitment to you. The moment you think this through, and say to yourself, "If God has done this, and God is for me, then this and this and this must be true," and you rejoice in that truth, you are loving God. You are responding as he intended you to respond to his love for you.

Now, what is the effect of this realization? It is clear from this passage that it is the removal of fear. If God is for us, who can be against us? All fear of successful opposition is removed. It is not that there is no opposition. The devil is still there, the Democrats are still there, the Communists are still there -- there is still going to be opposition. But Paul is saying, "If God is for us, what difference does it make?" If God is for us, who can be against us? (And I don't mean "us" as Republicans, either!)

A few weeks ago at our elders' meeting, Barney Brogan was telling us about his grandson. His daughter has moved to Missouri with the boys. As some of you know, their father is Chicano, and the children look like their dad. Their 13-year-old ran into a tremendous nest of White Supremacy at school. Because of the prejudice against blacks and Chicanos, that little innocent lad began to suffer very unjust torment and persecution. He didn't understand it; he came home weeping, beaten up because of his looks. His mother didn't know what to do, and so she wrote and asked us to pray for this situation, and we did.

A week or so later a letter came back and described how one night the biggest kid in school appeared at their door and said that he was a Christian, that he knew they were Christians, and that he had come to tell them that he had gone to every kid in school who had beat up on the boy and told them that if they ever did anything like that again, they would answer to him. I don't know what that boy's name was, but let's call him Mike. I can imagine this little boy going back to school, walking in the shadow of Mike, with all his tormentors looking at him. He probably would be saying to himself, "If Mike is for me, who can be against me?" That is what God is saying here. That is what David said in the twenty-seventh Psalm:

That is what we ought to be saying when trouble strikes, when difficulty comes, and when opposition appears. We ought to think it through, and say, "This is the way we love God. And if God be for me, who can be against me?"

Not only does our belief in God's love for us remove our fear of want:

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all -- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? {Rom 8:32 NIV}

He who has already given us the best, the greatest, the dearest, the most precious thing he has, and who did so while we were sinners -- while we were enemies, while we were helpless -- will he not also give us some of these trivial, piddling little things that we need?

If someone thinks enough of you to give you a costly, brilliant, beautiful, flawless diamond, do you think he will object when you ask him for the box that goes with it? If a mother will give up a baby, do you think she will object if they ask to take his clothes too? And if God has given us his own Son already, do you really think God is going to withhold anything else that we need? Paul's argument is unanswerable: Of course he won't. We can say with David in the twenty-third Psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want," {Psa 23:1}. The first sign that we love God, then, is that fear is removed. We begin to face our lack, face our enemies, and say, "If God be for us, who can be against us?"

The second question Paul asks of those who know God's love for them is

Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died -- more than that, who was raised to life -- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. {Rom 8:33-34 NIV}

This is a reminder of the work that God has done. We love God when we trust in the full effect of his work on our behalf. Paul is looking back over the letter, and sees two great works that God has done:

The first is justification. "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?" Who can? It is God who justifies. Justification means that nothing and no one anywhere can accuse us successfully before God. Now, the devil is the accuser of the brethren. He will try to accuse us constantly. This verse tells us that we must not listen to his voice. We must not listen to these thoughts that condemn us, that put us down, that make us feel that there is no hope for us. These thoughts will come -- they cannot be stopped -- but we do not have to listen to them. We know God is not listening to these accusations. Who can condemn us when God justifies us? Therefore we refuse to be condemned.

We don't do this by ignoring our sin or trying to cover it over, or pretending that it isn't there; we do it by admitting that we fully deserve to be condemned, but that God, through Christ, has already borne our guilt. That is the only way out. That is why Christians should not hesitate to admit their failure and their sin. You will never be justified until you admit it. But when you admit it, then you also can face the full glory of the fact that God justifies the ungodly, and therefore there is no condemnation.

Then Paul raises the question, "Who is he that condemns? Who is going to do this? The only one who has the right is Jesus -- and Jesus died for us. And more than that, he was raised to life for us, he is now at the right hand of God in power for us, and he is also interceding for us. So there is no chance that he is going to condemn us. This is a reference to the power that we have to take hold afresh of the life of Jesus. Not only is our guilt set aside, but we have power imparted to us -- his life in us, his risen life made available to us now.

So we can rise up and say "No!" to the temptations that surround us and the habits that drag us down; we can be a victor over them. That is not a mere dogma; we are in touch with a living person. That is the glory of Christianity. The unique distinction of Christians is that we have Jesus.

I know that every cult, every new faith, every false faith around, old and new, offers some kind of an experience, perhaps a mystic experience, or some sense of peace or freedom. That is what they are all based on. We must not discount these, for they can do some of these things. But the difference is that they do not have a grounding in history. There is no assurance that these experiences are reality. But we Christians have a grounding in the history of Jesus. He came, he died, he rose again. These are unmistakable facts. Therefore, when we come to Jesus, we come to someone we know exists. We know he is there. Therefore, the experience that we go through is real.

states it like this:

The teaching of the New Testament is that now, at this very moment, there is a Man in heaven appearing in the presence of God for us. He is as certainly a man as was Adam or Moses or Paul; he is a man glorified, but his glorification did not de-humanize him. Today he is a real man, of the race of mankind, bearing our lineaments and dimensions, a visible and audible man, whom any other man would recognize instantly as one of us. But more than this, he is the heir of all things, Lord of all lords, head of the church, firstborn of the new creation. He is the way to God, the life of the believer, the hope of Israel, and the high priest of every true worshiper. He holds the keys of death and hell, and stands as advocate and surety for everyone who believes on him in truth. Salvation comes not by accepting the finished work, or deciding for Christ; it comes by believing on the Lord Jesus Christ, the whole, living, victorious Lord who, as God and man, fought our fight and won it, accepted our debt as his own and paid it, took our sins and died under them, and rose again to set us free. This is the true Christ; nothing less will do.

Our whole relationship rests upon that magnificent person.

That brings us to the third and last question: How do you love God? Well, you love him by reminding yourself of the implications of his continual, unchanging commitment to you. You love him by remembering and trusting the full effect of his work for you. And finally, you love God

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? {Rom 8:35a NIV}

Who or what is going to do it? Is there any force, anywhere, that can come between you and Jesus?

Here the apostle is facing the question that many people ask. Is there any way to lose your salvation? Who can remove us from Christ, once we fully come to him? Paul's answer is, "Let's take a look at the possibilities."

First, can all the troubles and dangers of life separate us from his

Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: slaughtered." {Rom 8:35b-36 NIV}

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. {Rom 8:37 NIV}

Trouble is catastrophe and disasters, such as we have just had this week. Will hardship do it? That means the tight, narrow places we have to go through sometimes. Will persecution do it? That is hurt deliberately inflicted on us because we are Christians. Will famine, lack of food and money do it? Will nakedness, or lack of clothes? Will danger, or threat to our lives? Will the sword (war, riot, uprising) do it? "No," Paul says, "In these we are superconquerors." Why? Because rather than dividing us from Christ, they draw us closer to him. They make us cling harder. They scare us and make us run to him. When we are independent and think we can make it on our own, these things strike, and we start whimpering and running for home, and we cling all the closer. We can never be defeated then, so we are more than conquerors.

What about supernatural forces? What about people and power and demons

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 [literally, anything even in a different creation] , will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. {Rom 8:38-39 NIV}

There is nothing left out of that list, is there? Everything is there -- demons and dark powers, black magic and angels, truth and error, death and life -- whether in this creation or any other creation. Paul takes everything in and says that nothing, no being or force, is capable of separating us from the love of Jesus Christ our Lord. So we love God when we say, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" We love God because of what he himself has done on our behalf, and the nature of that commitment is that he loves us. Nothing can separate us from that.

This is the highest point of the letter. Obviously, Paul cannot go beyond this, and neither can we. What can you say? What can you do but love when you are confronted by a God like that?

I want to close by reading a modern version of this verse put in the terms of a specific individual, Ruth Harms Calkin, who wrote:

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.

Can you add anything to that?

Title: If God be For Us
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Explained
Scripture: Romans 8:29-39
Message No: 22
Catalog No: 3522
Date: November 7, 1976

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HAS GOD FAILED?

by Ray C. Stedman

There is a verse in the book of Jeremiah that comes to mind as we begin to study the ninth chapter of Romans. On one occasion, when Jeremiah was very troubled about some things that were happening to him, he came to God and told him how he felt. Instead of being comforted, as he thought he would be, the Lord said to him, "If you have fainted when you run with footmen, how will you contend with horses?" {cf, Jer 12:5}.

the ninth chapter? For, in this chapter, the apostle brings before us some of the toughest questions ever faced by man as he contemplates the actions and workings of God. All the bitter and denunciatory accusations that man brings against God are faced squarely in this chapter.

Perhaps it will be helpful to remind you of the divisions in this letter to the Romans:

1 Chapters 1 through 8 constitute the first major division of the letter and deal with Paul's explanation of the gospel of the grace of God, the full plan of redemption, as God has worked it out. It is a marvelously brilliant explanation -- the best, the most accurate, the most theologically complete detailed explanation that we have in all of the Scriptures.
that we will be commenting on in just a moment.

In Chapters 9, 10, and 11, the apostle seems to start all over again. He has been talking about the grace of God and the gospel of God, and he goes back over it again -- but this time his purpose is not to explain the gospel, but to exhibit it. These chapters are an exhibition of the grace of God.

Many of you have been to Fisherman's Wharf, and perhaps you have gone into the Wax Museum and viewed the exhibitions of scenes from various historic moments and the wax figures of various renowned characters in our national and world history. I don't know whether that kind of thing appeals to you, but I like it. It helps me to grasp more clearly what those historical incidents were actually like.

This is what you have in these three chapters of Romans. It is a demonstration -- in terms of people -- of how God works in human history, how he redeems and saves.

helpless to save himself. There is not a thing we can do to save ourselves. We have power to choose, we are expected to choose, and we are free to choose, but, nevertheless, as Paul has made clear, God is

behind it all. We don't understand that, and so Paul turns the spotlight on Israel to demonstrate just how God works. We will learn many important things from this section of the epistle to the Romans.

This is a sad and rather sobering story about Israel. Here is a nation that counted itself as having an inside track with God, and saw itself as the people of God, the chosen nation close to God, with various advantages which no other nation had. The Israelites regarded themselves, therefore, as having a specially privileged position with God. And yet Paul begins this section with a clear acknowledgment that this nation is far, far away from God. Despite all the possibilities that they enjoyed, nevertheless, they are a long, long way away.

Now, Paul does not come on in anger at that fact, nor does he come on with accusations. He begins, as we will see in his opening words, with a description of the personal anguish that this causes him. Listen to these words:

I speak the truth in Christ -- I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit -- I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel. {Rom 9:1-4a NIV}

I am sure that to the Jews of his own day the apostle sounded like an enemy. As he preached and taught the riches that are in Christ Jesus and centered and focused everything on the Person of Messiah, the Person of Christ, he became, in the eyes of the Jews of his day, their enemy. This has remained true of the nation of Israel. They see him in that way. Had a Jew read the letter to the Romans, he would have regarded it as a gigantic put-down to the whole nation. Paul's ministry everywhere stirred up the antagonism of the Jews. He made them angry and upset, even violent in their rage against him.

And yet, he is not their enemy, as he himself makes clear here. He is their loving, hurting friend. It breaks his heart that he has to tell them these things. The hurt is real.

Paul tells us that these are not crocodile tears that he is shedding. This is no phony protest on his part, like some people who say, "I'm only telling you this because I love you," and then proceed to cut us to pieces.

"No," Paul says, "my conscience supports me in this, and the Holy Spirit himself confirms that my anguish is genuine and real. It is deep and lasting." He describes it as "great sorrow and unceasing anguish."

I am sure there must be many here this morning who have grieved over a wayward loved one, and I join you in that. If you are grieving over someone you love who is trending away from Christ and the things of God, you know how that anguish is always there beneath the surface of your heart. You may be enjoying yourself outwardly, and you may be at peace in many ways, but it is there, like a deep knot. The moment your thoughts go back to it you feel it -- that unceasing anguish of heart. I don't think there is anything that can be more devastating and more

deeply felt than the love and concern of someone who sees another drifting into hurt, destruction, danger, despair, and perhaps even death, and is helpless to do anything about it.

That was the apostle's position. That anguish was so deep that he declares that if it were possible (fortunately, it isn't, but if it were possible), he would be willing to take their place in hell, if only they could find Christ! That kind of commitment is rare in humanity.

In Exodus 32, there is an account of Moses, who said something very similar. He came down from the mountain and found the people dancing around the golden calf, conducting themselves in riotous ways, and he intervened before God on their behalf. "Lord, if it be possible, blot this sin from their lives," he said, "but if not, blot me out of your book," {cf, Exod 32:32}.

That reaches me. I confess that I have loved ones for whom I would be willing, gladly, to die that they might be in glory. I would be glad to give up the rest of my earthly life. But I can't think of anyone for whom I would be willing to give up my hope for eternity. And yet that is what the apostle's heart is feeling. He knows it isn't possible, but he says, "If I could, I would."

And so we begin this chapter with the recognition of the depth of the anguish of Paul's heart. What a lesson this is on how to approach someone you want to help, someone who isn't very eager to receive what you have to say. You never come on -- Paul never does -- with accusations, or with bitter words, or denunciations, or even with the issues that separate you. Paul first identifies with their deep hurt; he feels with them.

I have told you before about the man who said to a friend, "I hear you dismissed your pastor. What was wrong?" The friend said, "Well, he kept telling us we were going to hell." The man said, "What does the new pastor say?" The friend said, "The new pastor keeps saying we're going to hell too." "So what's the difference?" "Well," the friend said, "the difference is that when the first one said it, he sounded like he was glad of it, but when the new man says it, he sounds like it is breaking his heart." That is what Paul is saying here. It is breaking his heart as he has to tell us these things.

Now, part of the reason for this anguish is made clear in what Paul says next. Paul recognizes the tremendous possibilities that the Jews had and which they seemed to have failed to take advantage of, Verses 4-5:

Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship, and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen. {Rom 9:4b-5 NIV}

Last week I was reminded of a young man with whom I shared a ministry a number of years ago in Southern California. I was in Southern California this past week, and someone reminded me of the wonderful time we had when this young man came in and ministered with us. He had a brilliant mind, a powerful personality, keen insights into the Scriptures, great

effectiveness in what he said, and he was a convincing speaker. This past week I learned that he is now a broken man, having drifted from the faith -- an alcoholic, dying. What sorrow that brought to my heart, as I thought of the great possibilities he had that are now being wasted.

This is the way the apostle feels about the nation of Israel. Look at these advantages -- there are eight of them listed:

First, they were chosen as the people of God. There is no doubt about that. God makes it very clear that he separated this nation -- the descendants of Abraham, the twelve sons of Jacob and the tribes that came from them -- as his people. He called them that: "Behold, Israel is my son," {cf, Exod 4:22 KJV}. He dealt with them as the specially chosen people of God. Gentiles have not always understood that, and many times I think we resent it. Somebody has said, "How odd of God to choose the Jews." But God really did choose them. Their position was different than any other nation of their day, and Paul acknowledges it.

Second, to the Jews was given the glory, Paul says. By that he means the Shekinah, the bright cloud that followed Israel through the wilderness and later came into the holy of holies in the tabernacle and marked the presence of God himself among his people. Centuries later, when the temple was built by King Solomon, the cloud of glory came and filled the holy of holies, and the people knew that God had recognized his ties with this remarkable people and was living among them in a very real sense. They had the glory.

The Jews also had the covenants, Paul points out, these remarkable agreements that God made with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, with Moses and David, in which God committed himself to do things for that nation, and he has never gone back on those covenants. God took the initiative to make these covenants with this strange and wonderful people.

Fourth, Paul says, the Jews had the Law. This was their dearest and greatest treasure, and it still is. A few weeks ago I finished reading the book *In the Beginning* by the contemporary Jewish writer, Chaim Potok, in which he describes how the Jews loved the Torah, the scrolls of the Law. They have a service set aside in which the men of the congregation take the scrolls of the Law and dance with them. Potok records how one of the young lads says to himself, "I wonder if the Goyim (Gentiles) ever feel this way about the Word of God?" Yes, the Law was their greatest treasure. God gave it to Moses -- not to Charlton Heston!

Also, Paul argues, the Jews had the temple worship. Not only did they have the Law, but God had carefully and meticulously described how the people should conduct themselves. He told them the kind of offerings to bring, the ritual to carry out, and he designed beautiful ways of reminding them of the truth that he had taught them through these rituals and services. The Jews had the temple itself, one of the most beautiful buildings ever built by men. It was the glory of Israel, and it was still there in our Lord's day, and even while Paul was writing this letter.

Sixth, the Jews had the promises. Those are still to be found in the pages of the Old Testament -- promises of a time when the Jews would lead the nations of the world. There would be universal reign, a world King, and Jerusalem would be the center of the earth. Government would flow from the city of Jerusalem throughout the whole earth. Those promises are still there, and God means to fulfill them.

Seventh, Paul says, the Jews had the patriarchs, those tremendous men whose names are household words all over the world -- Abraham and Moses and David. We think we are blessed having leaders like Washington and Jefferson and Lincoln, but even they are not as widely known as these great names from Israel.

Finally, the supreme blessing was that Jesus himself, the Messiah, came from Israel. From the Jews is traced the human ancestry of Christ. Notice that Paul does not say that Christ belonged to Israel -- he came from them. He belongs to the world because, as the apostle adds, "He is God over all, to be praised forever!" This is one of the most clear and definite statements of the deity of Jesus that comes from the apostle's pen. I know there are manuscripts suggesting that this is to be translated as a closing doxology that says "God be blessed and praised forever." But the best manuscripts do not put it that way at all. The most ancient manuscripts agree that this is what the apostle wrote: "Christ is God over all, blessed and praised forever!"

And yet, with all these fantastic advantages, with the remarkable achievements and possibilities of this nation, the Jews of Paul's day were violently anti-Christian. They could not stand the idea that Jesus was their Messiah. Paul could see evidence, even at this date, of the approaching crisis between the Jews and the Romans that would result in the destruction of the city of Jerusalem and judgment upon this nation. They would be scattered throughout all the nations of the world for centuries. Paul saw that coming.

moving to bring about that final confrontation when the Roman armies would surround the city and eventually break through the walls, destroy the temple, level it to the ground, and take the Jews captive and send them out into all the nations of the world, fulfilling the word of Jesus that this would occur. And yet, despite these fantastic advantages, remarkable and unique in all the nations of the world, Israel had proved to be faithless. That is what breaks the apostle's heart.

Now Paul raises a question, and here he gets into the heart of this chapter: Did this also mean that God was faithless? Has God failed? Did Israel's failure come about because God is not able to save those whom he wants to save? Is that the problem?

A lot of people think that is the problem. They wonder if God is really able to save someone whom he calls. So this is a problem that is relevant in our day.

Paul answers by launching upon a great statement that sets forth the faithfulness of God -- but in terms that we struggle with. I want to warn you before we get started that you are going to have a difficult time with the ninth chapter of Romans. Way back in the prophet Isaiah's day, God had said to Isaiah, "My ways are not your ways, and my thoughts are not your thoughts. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts higher than your thoughts," {cf, Isa 55:8-9}. Whatever else those words might mean, they certainly imply that there are times when God is going to act in ways that we don't understand, ways that seem absolutely contrary to the way he should act.

I think this is one of the major problems that we face in dealing with God. There have been times when I have been bewildered and baffled by God's behavior. I have seen solutions to problems of deep importance, I

could see how to work them out -- but God seemed totally unable to catch on. Even when I have told him how to solve them, rather than take the simple steps that would have worked out the solutions (as I saw them), he persisted in going into deeply involved relationships and circumstances that seemed to have no bearing at all in the working out of this problem. I am confronted, finally, with the truth of Isaiah's words. God is beyond me. Now, that is the attitude we must keep in mind as we go through this chapter.

Paul begins to introduce this to us by showing us some of the principles by which God works in carrying out his great work. There are three principles that we want to take this morning. The first one is that we must understand that great opportunities and special privileges that God may grant to nations or to individuals, such as those he has just listed for Israel, do not necessarily imply that God intended in any way to save those people.

Here is how Paul establishes his argument:

First, he says, salvation is never based on natural advantages,

It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. {Rom 9:6-7a NIV}

Now, two of the patriarchs are mentioned, Jacob and Abraham. Israel, of course, is another name for Jacob. God named him Israel after Jacob wrestled with the angel, for Israel means, "A prince with God." God made Jacob, the usurper, into a prince. But those who are his descendants are not necessarily involved in all those promises. Even those who are physical descendants of Abraham, the greatest of the patriarchs, are not all included in the salvation promise of God.

Therefore, we can draw the conclusion that salvation is never based on natural advantages. It is not inherited.

Your family may have been Christians, but that doesn't make you a Christian. You may have had great opportunities for Bible study and Bible knowledge, and maybe you have taken advantage of them -- but that doesn't necessarily make you a Christian. These special privileges that come to us by natural means are never the basis for God's redemption. That is the first thing we have to understand.

But, in contrast to that, the second thing is that God's salvation is always based on a divine promise. Now look at what Paul says,

On the contrary, "Through Isaac shall your offspring come." In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I [God] will return, and Sarah shall have a son." {Rom 9:7b-9 NIV}

This takes us back to the eighteenth chapter of Genesis, where God said to Abraham and Sarah, "I will come back, and Sarah, whose womb has been barren all her life -- who has never had a child, who is now ninety years of age and, from a natural point of view, couldn't possibly have a child -- is going to have a baby," {cf, Gen 18:10}. It was a biological miracle, and that was God's promise. It involved his own supernatural activity. His promise is based on what he does, not upon what men do.

As we well know, Abraham had another son, Ishmael, the oldest boy. He was thirteen years older than Isaac, the firstborn of Abraham. By rights, he should have inherited the promises that God made to Abraham, but he didn't. Instead, Isaac inherited those promises. Ishmael stands as a symbol of the futility of expecting God to honor our ideas of how he is to act.

Remember how Ishmael was born? Sarah said to Abraham one day, "Do you expect God to do everything? He has promised you a son, but you are getting old. Time's wasting. Surely, God doesn't expect you to leave it all up to him!" {cf, Gen 16:1-2}. So she suggested that he take her Egyptian servant. He did, and she conceived and bore a son whose name was Ishmael. Ishmael was brought before God by Abraham, who said, "God, here is my son. Will you fulfill your promises to him?" {cf, Gen 17:18}. God said, "No, I won't. That is not the one. He must come by divine promise," {cf, Gen 17:19-21}.

I think this is a very important principle in Scripture. I find a lot of people who get an idea of what they think God ought to do. They ask him to do it, and, because they have asked him to do it -- in line with what they think are the promises about prayer -- they think God has to do it. They misread all the promises about prayer and think that if they get an idea of what they want, God has to do it. But what this teaches us very plainly is that God is committed to do only what he has promised to do. If you want God to act on your behalf, find a promise that he has given.

Some of you this week saw the film on Aimee Semple McPherson, that rather remarkable woman evangelist of the early part of this century who was the first of the well-known faith healers of this country. She and others who have followed her since have taught people that God has promised that he would heal all physical ailments. They tell people to claim healing from God. They say that if we would just claim what God has promised, God will do it.

You know, I've been studying the Scriptures for thirty years or more, and I can't find that promise! It just is not there! God has never, anywhere, promised to heal all physical illnesses. I would invite you to share it with me if you know where it is. He does heal, and often he will respond to the requests of his children -- but he has never promised that he will. Therefore, we are wrong when we try to claim from God something that he never promised to do. That is why anything expected from God must rest upon a promise that he has already given. Otherwise it is merely his grace that supplies an answer to our requests. That is the second principle here.

Now we come to the, third, which is even more difficult to handle,

Not only that, but Rebecca's children had one and the same father, our ancestor Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or

had done anything good or bad -- in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls -- she was told, "The older will serve the younger." {Rom 9:10-12 NIV}

Do you remember who Rebecca was? She was Isaac's wife. He found her through his servant, who had been sent to find God's choice for Isaac. Now, that is a remarkable statement, and Paul confirms it with a quotation from Malachi 1:2-3:

Just as it is written, "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." {Rom 9:13 NIV}

Many have struggled over those words. But all the apostle is saying is that it is clear from this story that:

- * First, ancestry does not make any difference (these boys had the same father), and,
- * Second, what they will do in their lives -- including the choices they will make -- ultimately will not make any difference.

Before they were able to make choices -- either good or bad -- God had said to their mother, "The elder shall serve the younger." By that he implied, not only that there would be a difference in the nations that followed (the descendants of these two men) and that one would be in the place of honor and other wouldn't, but, also, that the personal destinies of these two men were involved as well. I think that is clear from the record of history. Jacob forevermore stands for all the things in men that God honors and wants them to have. Jacob was a scheming, rather weak character -- not very lovable. Esau, on the other hand, was a rugged individualist -- much more admirable when he was growing up than his brother Jacob. But through the course of their lives, Jacob was the one who was brought to faith, and Esau was not. God uses this as a symbol of how he works.

I remember hearing of a man who said to a noted Bible teacher, "I'm having trouble with this verse, 'Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated.' How could God ever say 'Esau have I hated'?" The Bible teacher said, "I have trouble with that verse, too, but my problem is not quite the same. I have no trouble in understanding the words 'Esau have I hated.' What bothers me is how God could ever say 'Jacob have I loved!'" Read the life of Jacob and you will see why.

Now, I do admit that we must not read this word "hated" as though God actually disliked Esau and would have nothing to do with him and treated him with contempt. That is what we often mean when we say we hate someone. Jesus used this word when he said, "Except a man hate his father and mother and brother and sister and wife and children and houses and land, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple," {cf, Luke 14:26}. Clearly he is not saying that we have to treat our mothers and fathers and wives and children and our own lives with contempt and disrespect. He clearly means that he is to have pre-eminence. Hatred, in that sense, means to love less. We are to love these less than we love him.

God didn't hate Esau, in the sense we usually employ that word. In fact, he blessed him. He made of him a great nation. He gave him promises which he fulfilled to the letter. God did not hate Esau in that usual sense. What these verses imply is that God set his heart on Jacob, to bring him to redemption, and all Jacob's followers would reflect the possibilities of that. As Paul has argued already, they were not all necessarily saved by that, by any means, but Jacob would forever stand for what God wants men to be, and Esau would forever stand as a symbol of what he does not like.

Do you know the final confrontation of Jacob and Esau that is recorded in the Scriptures? It was when Jesus stood before Herod the king. Herod was an Idumean, an Edomite, a descendant of Esau. Jesus was, through David, a descendant of Jacob. There, standing face-to-face, were Jacob and Esau! Herod has nothing but contempt for the King of the Jews, and Jesus will not open his mouth in the presence of Herod. This is God's strange and mysterious way of dealing with humanity. Now, I don't understand it, but I have to submit to the fact that God is greater than I. His ways are not my ways, and his thoughts are not my thoughts.

What Paul is teaching us here is that God has a sovereign, elective principle that he carries out on his terms. Here are those terms:

Salvation is never based on natural advantages. Never. What you are by nature does not enter into the picture of whether you are going to be redeemed or not.

Second, salvation is always based on a promise that God gives. This is why we are exhorted in the Scriptures to believe the promises of God. It includes, in some mysterious way, our necessity to be confronted with those promises, and to give a willing and voluntary submission to them. I do not understand that, but Paul brings this up a little later in this chapter when he discusses the harmony, as far as we can understand it, between the free will of men and the sovereign elective choice of God.

The third principle is that salvation never takes any notice of whether we are good or bad. Never! That is what was established here. These children were neither good nor bad, yet God chose Jacob and passed over Esau.

Now, I want to close at this point, because it is too much to take along with the next section. But I want to ask you this question: "How do you react to what we have covered so far? Is there something in you that wants to cry out to God and say, 'God, that's unfair! That isn't right!'"

When I preached this message at the 8:30 service this morning, a man walked out the door cursing God because he treated men this way. Do you feel something like that? Then relax, because you are normal. There is something in us called the flesh that reacts to this; it doesn't like it. Paul is going to pick that up later in this chapter and we are going to face it squarely and find out what we can about this sense of unfairness that we have toward God in this regard. But, in the meantime, let us reverently accept the fact that God is greater than we are. He knows more than we, he knows what he is doing, and everything he does will always be consistent with his character. God is love. Whether we can understand it or not, that is where it is going to come out.

Prayer

Our Father, once again we have to admit we don't understand very much. We are finite creatures, and how much we feel it at this moment! We certainly are not gods, and we don't understand how you act. But we believe you are faithful to us, and that you tell us the truth, and that it does us good to seek to understand. We will seek to do that, Lord, but keep us from being rebellious, from charging you with injustice. Help us to be open and teachable in spirit, that we might recognize the marvelous grace that has reached out to us and found us. Help us to understand what you are doing with the rest of the world as well. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Has God Failed?
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Exhibited
Scripture: Romans 9:1-13
Message No: 23
Catalog No: 3523
Date: November 21, 1976

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LET GOD BE GOD

by Ray C. Stedman

There was a time when almost everybody on earth believed that the earth was flat. At that time, this was a very comfortable theory to live with. It was safe, easy to understand -- it was comfortable. Now, believing this did not make it true, but it was easier to handle and it made life more predictable. In reading accounts of the time, we learn that people got rather upset when some evidence that this was not true was presented. As more and more scientists began to say that the earth was really round and not flat, contrary to the way it looked to their eyes, and that it was spinning on its axis and floating in a great sea of space, people got very upset.

Religious people, especially, were upset, for they believed with all their heart that the Bible taught that the earth was flat. They would quote certain passages that seemed to indicate this. So there was a great deal of controversy over the issue. It was a long time before people began to realize that the new evidence really made God appear more wonderful and more powerful than he ever had before. They began to discover, too, that there were certain verses and passages which they had overlooked before that supported this new evidence. They could see how the old viewpoint could be fitted within the context of this new truth that was appearing.

You know, I think that is our problem when it comes to a passage like is flat, that he is rather safe and easy to understand and that he fits very comfortably into the pattern that we have made for him. He is predictable, and we find ourselves very secure with these little the kind of passage that is designed to break through and kick the sides out of those kinds of boxes. I hope that is what has been happening to some of the boxes that you have tried to fit God into. God is greater than any human box we can design.

We have already learned that it is very easy for us to misread God's actions. We look at history, we look at what is happening in contemporary events, we look at what the Bible itself records about God's actions, and it is easy for us to misread those and to think that God is intending to do something that he really is not. That is what we he gives us rich privileges. And when he gives us special blessings, we tend to jump to the conclusion that God has chosen us, that he likes us, that we have an inside track with God, for he likes us better than he does other people.

That was the problem the Jews had in Paul's day -- and they still have it today, in many ways. They felt the same way we do. I think we in Christendom (although not necessarily the Church) tend to do the same thing when we point the finger at our Jewish friends and accuse them of being proud and conceited about their position before God. Paul has already told us that God has a different reason for setting people up and giving them special privileges, and in the opening verses of They are the reasons God himself gives for his actions. These are the principles upon which he acts.

natural privileges: inheritance, ancestry, education, opportunity. All these natural privileges, though they may be granted to an individual and may give him great access to knowledge about God, do not guarantee that a person is chosen of God.

The second principle is that with those whom God chooses, God always precedes that choice in history with a divine promise of his activity on their behalf. God himself promises to act. He never bases salvation upon what human beings are going to do, except as they respond to what God does. We have to understand that. Redemption always has at the heart of it a promise that God has given and that we are to respond to. Paul makes that clear.

Third, Paul points out that God's choice is never based on the behavior of individuals, whether good or bad. Now, that is the tough one. That is what we have a hard time believing. But Paul proves it in the case of Jacob and Esau, in which a choice was made before the boys were born, before they had opportunity to do anything, either good or bad. God made a choice. Therefore, salvation or redemption never is based on human

works. We have seen that all the way through Romans, but here it is put in a very positive form.

Well then, what is the basis on which God chooses? If it is not works, if it is not the natural advantages which he himself gives, then what is it? Paul's answer, which we take up now in the second half of God has a right to choose. That is the final resolution of that problem.

What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! For he says to Moses,
have compassion."

It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."
Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. {Rom 9:14-18 NIV}

Now, I do not know how you react to that. I do not know what you feel about what it says -- but it is clear what it says, isn't it? It does not say that salvation is based on human effort or human choice -- it is God who chooses. I think that is very clear. You may not like what it says, but that is what it says. The ultimate reason for God's choice of anyone is that God chose him. He chooses whom he wants.

I think this is the truth about God which men dislike the most. We are having to face the fact that God is a sovereign being. He is not responsible to, or answerable to, anyone. He is totally, absolutely sovereign. We don't like that, because to us sovereignty is always connected with tyranny. To trust anyone with that kind of power is to put ourselves into the hands of someone who might destroy us, and we instinctively fight that.

We fight it in our national life, we fight it in our family life, we fight it in our individual relationships. We do not trust anyone with absolute power over us. The very Constitution of the United States is based on that presumption. No one can be trusted with absolute power. We have checks and balances built into our government. We divide it into three divisions and put one against the other, so that they all watch each other. We do not believe that even the best of us can be trusted with absolute power.

It is no wonder, therefore, that when we come to the Scriptures and confront the fact that God has absolute power, we become uneasy and troubled by this. But you see, if God had to give an answer to anyone, that being or person to whom God had to account would really be God. The very idea of God is that he is sovereign. He does what he pleases. He does what he wants to do. What we must do is get rid of the idea that his sovereignty is going to be destructive to us. It isn't at all. As we will see before this is over, his sovereignty is our only hope!

Paul says that God declares his own sovereignty. God says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion," {Exod 33:19 NIV}. Now, Moses was a great example of God's choice of someone to bless. Who was Moses that God should choose

him? Moses was nobody in himself. He was a murderer; on one occasion, in a fit of temper, he killed a man. Then, instead of turning himself in for justice, he hid the body in the sand. He was a criminal, a murderer, a fugitive from justice. For forty years he had been living in the desert, a nobody. No one had heard of him. But God picked him up and made him a messenger of God and gave him a name that became known throughout history. He set him in authority over the greatest king the world had ever known at that time and used him in a most remarkable way. Why? God chose to do so. That was his elected choice. He had the right to do that.

On the other hand, God demonstrated his sovereignty with Pharaoh as well. He took a man who was no better than Moses (in fact, Scripture tells us God often puts in power the basest of men) and put him on a throne and gave him authority and power over all the nation of Egypt. Then, when Moses confronted him, God allowed Pharaoh to continue to resist God's will. God could have stopped him, but he didn't. He allowed him to do what all men do by nature -- resist God. So Pharaoh held out against God in order, as this verse says, that God might demonstrate his power and attract the attention of men everywhere to his greatness.

That bothers us, too. We think anybody who boasts about his greatness, who tries constantly to get people to think about how great he is, is a braggart, he is conceited. We don't like such people -- largely because we are jealous of them! We want to be the one standing up there getting people to admire our greatness.

But you see, God is the one who must do this. In our constant tendency to think of God as nothing but an enlarged man, we attribute to God our own motives. When man does this, he is destructive. He must necessarily put others down in order to elevate himself. But what God does is necessary to the welfare and benefit of his creatures. The more his creatures understand the goodness and greatness and glory of God, the richer their lives will be, and the more they will enjoy life. Jesus said, "This is eternal life, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent," {John 17:3 KJV}. So when God is inviting men, and seeking to find ways to have men think about his greatness, it is not because God's ego needs to be massaged -- it is because God's creatures require that for their very welfare. Therefore God finds ways to do it, and he uses men even to resist his will in order that there might be an occasion to display his greatness and power. Paul's conclusion, therefore, is that God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden.

Immediately somebody objects. We all feel this objection, I am sure. We

One of you will say to me, "Then why does God still blame us?
For who can resist his will?" {Rom 9:19 NIV}

In that brief statement is hidden all the accusations and all the bitter charges that men bring against God: "God is the one responsible for all our human evil. It isn't us; it is God, ultimately, who is to blame!" This accusation appears in many different forms in human history.

What does man do with this essential truth about God's nature, his sovereignty? He uses it to blame God for all human evil. Verses 20-29

give us Paul's answer to this, and we will look at that in due time. But, right now, I want to spend a moment with this charge that men bring against God. What it is really saying is,

"All right, Paul. You say that God uses men for whatever he wants to use them for. Men cannot resist him. Pharaoh could not resist God's use of him. God used him to oppose what he sent Moses to do in Egypt. Pharaoh was merely an instrument in God's hands. So God uses men to do evil, then he turns around and blames them for the evil and punishes them for doing what he made them do! That's not just, that's not fair! God himself must agree that it is not fair to make somebody do something, and then punish them for doing it. The very sense of justice, which God himself gave us, is offended by that!"

That sounds logical, doesn't it? The logic of it sounds unanswerable. Many people argue this way. With calm reason and devastating logic they point out that Scripture teaches that God can use men however he wants, for good or for evil; therefore he has no right to condemn them or to punish them because they do evil.

How do you answer logic like that?

Let's see what Paul does. Paul has four things to say in reply, and let's examine them carefully:

The first one is found in Verse 20. Basically what he says here is, "All right, you man, whoever you are, you are going to charge God with injustice. You say he is not fair because he does this! Let's examine your credentials."

Who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'"
{Rom 9:20 NIV}

"Let's take a look at this," Paul says. "Let's compare and consider the difference between man and God. Here is man, finite (that means his knowledge is limited, his understanding is limited). He is not only finite, but he is frail. He has very limited strength. He only lasts a little while -- a breath of air and he is gone. He is very weak, unable to do much. The record shows us through the whole course of man's history that not only is man finite and frail, but, despite all the logic that he seeks to employ, time and time again man demonstrates that he is foolish. With all his logic he makes atrocious blunders. He ends up doing things that are extremely hurtful when he thinks he is doing the right thing. With all this array of logic and of reason and ability to think, he ends up making the most foolish mistakes. Now, that kind of man is daring to stand up against the God who is infinite in knowledge, infinite in power and majesty, mighty, wise, knowing all things from beginning to end -- not only all the things that are, but all the things that could be as well. This puny pipsqueak of a man is daring to stand up and challenge the justice of a God like that!"

What Paul is saying is that even our logic is wrong, because there are mysteries we do not reckon on, objectives that we cannot discern, there is resistance that we know nothing about. So who are you, man, to stand and question the rightness of God? That is a good argument, isn't it? Are we equipped to challenge God in this way?

I think the most helpful book in the Bible on this score is the book of Job. Job was not a cavalier; he was not a skeptic, an atheist arguing against God. He was a devout man who loved God deeply. Yet he was a deeply puzzled and bewildered man who could not understand what God was doing with him. You know the story. Job was afflicted with a series of terrible boils and physical afflictions, his family and all his wealth disappeared in a series of terrible catastrophes that came like a trip-hammer, one after the other.

To top it all, he was afflicted by three torturers, who called themselves his friends, who came to argue with him in his pain and despair with the presupposition that all suffering must be caused by sin. Therefore Job's suffering meant that he somehow was a deep-dyed sinner, and all his pain was coming because he refused to let people know the terrible evil that he must have done. They hounded poor Job and examined every crack and cranny of this argument and searched it to its depths. Finally, in despair, Job cries out. He doesn't blame God though. That is the glory of this book. He never once blames God. He just says, "Lord, I don't understand it! Oh, if I could just come and stand before you and plead my case, I could show you how unfair it seems to me!"

Job, you wanted a chance to argue. You wanted to ask me some questions -- here I am. But before you ask me a few, I have some to ask you, to see if you are qualified to ask them of me. Here are my questions: Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? Where were you when the morning stars sang together, and I flung the heavens into space? Were you there? Where were you when all these things began to be worked out? Can you enter into the secrets of the sea? Do you understand how the rain works, and how the lightning appears? Do you understand these things, Job? Why, these are simple to me. How are you doing on them?"

Job has to hang his head.

God goes on: "Look at the stars, Job. Can you order their courses? Can you make the Pleiades shine forth in the springtime? Can you make Orion stride across the winter sky, always on time? Can you handle the universe, Job?"

And Job says, "No, I'm sorry; I don't qualify." God says, "All right, let me ask you some more questions."

Then, in a tremendous section that is really the key to the book of Job, God uses the figures of Behemoth and Leviathan, two strange and formidable creatures, to examine Job's qualifications to handle satanic power. "Can you handle Satan? Do you know how to handle this fantastic dragon who can wreck a third of the universe with his tail? Are you able to take him on?"

Finally Job ends up on his face in the dust before God and says, "Lord God, I didn't know what I was getting into! I just meant to say a few things to you, but you are not in my league at all! I repent in sackcloth and ashes; I put my hand on my mouth. I have nothing to say to a God like you."

That is Paul's argument here: "Who are you, O man, to reply against God? You don't understand even a tiny fraction of the things to be known, so how can you argue with a God like that?"

Paul's second argument follows. Even among men, isn't there a form of sovereignty that we exercise and don't we have the right to do so?

Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? {Rom 9:21 NIV}

Nobody questions that, do they? Doesn't a potter have the right to take the lump of clay that he is working with and divide it in half and make of one half a beautiful vase for the living room and out of the other make a slop jar? Why yes, he has that right. Nobody tells the potter what he can do with his clay. Men exercise sovereignty like that and nobody questions it at all.

Well, at this point many people say, "But we're not clay! It's all right to do that with unfeeling clay, but human beings are not clay. We're people. We have feelings, sensitivities, and wills. Your analogy doesn't hold!" Well, you can extend the analogy to things that have feelings. What about the ways we treat plants and animals? Doesn't a gardener have the right to move plants around wherever he'd like? Just last week I tore out some plants and threw them away -- good, healthy plants. Did I have the right to do that? Do my neighbors have the right to swear out a warrant for my arrest because I didn't ask permission of the plants first? No. Does a farmer have the right to send cattle to slaughter, to pick out certain ones that he thinks are nice and fat and slaughter them, while he keeps others awhile longer? Do we ever challenge that? No.

Men have that kind of authority -- a kind of delegated sovereignty that they exercise. When flies come into your kitchen, do you housewives have the right to swat them, or must you put up with their nuisance endlessly? You folks who ate turkey for Thanksgiving, do you blame the poultryman because he planned to raise turkeys for that very purpose? Ought we to go over and picket his turkey farm because he did this? No, of course not. Men exercise this kind of sovereignty. And if men exercise this delegated sovereignty, can we deny it to the one being who, in all the created universe, has the right, above all else? That is Paul's argument. It is hard to answer that, isn't it?

"But," somebody says, "it still doesn't solve this problem of justice. It seems unfair." Paul's third argument says, "Then let us consider two

What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath -- prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory -- even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? As he says in Hosea:

people;
is not my loved one,"
and,
was said to them,
[Those are the Gentiles -- us.]

Isaiah cries out concerning Israel:
like the sand by the sea,
with speed and finality." {Rom 9:22-28 NIV}

What Paul is saying in all this is that God may have purposes and objectives that we do not see. And doesn't he have the right to do it? And what if one of those objectives is not only to display his power and his wrath by allowing and permitting man to oppose him and to resist him, but also to display his amazing patience and longsuffering this way? Did you ever think about that? Did you ever think of how, for centuries and centuries, God has put up with the snarling, nasty, blasphemous, accusing remarks of men, and has done nothing to them? He has listened to all the cheap, shoddy, vulgar things that men say about him, and allowed them to treat him with hostility and anger and never does a thing but patiently endure it and put up with it. Paul says, "What if God does all that. What if it takes that kind of a display of the wrath of God and the patience of God to bring those of us whom he chooses to himself?" Something has to appear to us that makes us understand God. We are not being forced to come to him, we are drawn to him. Therefore we have to respond, and something must make us respond. Is it not the wrath of God and the patience of God that draws us on?

All this, then, is necessary to bring some of us to glory. In other words, for some to be saved, some must be lost. Now, I admit that is an inscrutable mystery. I don't understand it. But I don't have to understand it! That's the whole thing. I can't understand it at this point. There are factors in it which God cannot reveal. He will some day, but he doesn't now -- not because he does not want to, but because I can't handle it. And neither can you. We have to accept it, nevertheless. Paul suggests here that without the display of wrath on God's part, no Gentiles ever would have been saved -- only the elect of Israel, and only a remnant of them. But, as it is, the Gentiles, those of us who never had the advantages that Israel had, are included, as Hosea and Isaiah both predicted.

Now the final and clinching argument, the fourth one, is found in Verse 29:

It is just as Isaiah said previously:
9:29 NIV}

This past June we drove past the sites of Sodom and Gomorrah. I don't think there is a more desolate place on the face of the earth -- just dreary, dry desert, with a briny sea in which nothing will live, and around which nothing will grow. It is the most terrible place of desolation on the face of the earth! What Paul argues here is that if God had not chosen to draw us to himself by an elective decree -- something that makes men wake up and stop resisting him and start

listening to him -- none of us would ever be saved.

You see, we start thinking on this from the wrong premise. We start by thinking that everybody is in neutral, and unless they have an opportunity to be saved, they just remain in neutral until it is too late for them to have a chance. But that isn't it at all! The truth is, we were born lost. We are already lost. We were lost in Adam. Adam lost the race, not us. But we are victims of it. There isn't a chance that any of us will do anything but resist God. Paul has said in none that seeks after God, not one!" {cf, Rom 3:10-11}. So you see, God is not shutting us away and not giving us a chance. It is his grace that reaches out to us, and without it, nobody would ever be saved at all. The whole race would be lost. God's justice could allow the race to be lost; God's mercy reaches out to save many among us. And that is his sovereign choice! That is where we must leave it.

The passage closes with a very remarkable paragraph. People ask at this point, "How can we tell whether people are chosen or not? If you can't tell by the advantages they have, how can you tell?" Here is the answer

What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the "stumbling stone." As it is written:
stumble
shame." {Rom 9:30-33 NIV}

God says there is a way you can tell whether you are being drawn by the Spirit unto salvation or whether you are being permitted by God to remain where you already were, lost and condemned: The way you can tell is by what you do with Jesus. God has planted a stone in the midst of society. Now, when you walk down a path and come to a big flat rock in the middle of the path, there are two things you can do. You can stumble over it, or you can stand on it, one or the other. That is what God says Jesus is.

The Jews, who determined to work out their salvation on the basis of their own behavior, their own good works before God, stumbled over the stone. That is why the Jews rejected Jesus, and why they reject him to this day. They don't want to admit that they need a Savior, that they are not able to save themselves. No man is. But for those who see that they need a Savior, they have already been drawn by the Spirit of God, and awakened by his grace, and made to understand what is going on in their lives. Therefore, their very desire to be saved, the very expression of their need for a Savior causes them to accept Jesus. They stand upon that stone. Anyone who comes on that basis will never be put to shame.

Now that, God says, is the testing point. The crisis of humanity is Jesus. You can be very religious, you can spend hours and days or an entire lifetime of following religious pursuits and apparently honoring God. But the test will always come: What will you do with Jesus? God put him in the midst of human society to reveal those whom he has called, and those whom he has not.

Jesus taught this very plainly: "No man can come to me except my Father draw him," {cf, John 6:44}; and "all that my Father has given me shall come to me. Him that comes to me I will never, never cast out," {cf, John 6:37 KJV}.

So what is left for us? To respond to Jesus, that is all. And to thank God that in doing so, we are not only doing what our own hearts and consciences urge us to do, but we are responding in obedience to the drawing of the elective Spirit of God, who, in mercy, has chosen to bring us out of a lost humanity.

Prayer

Our Father, how this passage puts us in our place! How it makes us realize afresh how desperately dependent we are upon your saving grace. We did not save ourselves -- we could not. We did not even initiate the desire to be saved -- that comes from you. But we thank you that you have not left us, as you could have, in utter justice, to destroy ourselves and end, at last, in separation from all your goodness and grace. But you have called us and redeemed us and brought us to yourself, at infinite cost to yourself, and thus, Lord, we give ourselves afresh to you this morning, that you may use our lives for whatever way you please, and that we may be the willing servants of a loving God. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Title: Let God be God
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Exhibited
Scripture: Romans 9:14-33
Message No: 24
Catalog No: 3524
Date: November 28, 1976

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HOW TO BE SAVED

by Ray C. Stedman

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. {Rom 10:1 NIV}

I do not think there is any word in the Christian vocabulary that makes people feel more uncomfortable than the word "saved." People cringe when they hear it. Perhaps it conjures up visions of hot-eyed, zealous buttonholers -- usually with bad breath -- who walk up and grab you and say, "Brother, are you saved?" Or perhaps it raises visions of a tiny band of Christians at a street meeting in front of some saloon singing, "Give the winds a mighty voice, Jesus saves! Jesus saves!" Whatever the reason, I do know that people become bothered at this word.

I will never forget the startled look on the face of a man who came up to me in a movie theater. The seat beside me was vacant, and he said, "Is this seat saved?" I said, "No, but I am." He found a seat across the aisle. Somehow this word threatens all our religious complacency and angers the self-confident and the self-righteous alike.

And yet, when you turn to the Scriptures you find that this is an absolutely unavoidable word. Christians have to talk about men and women being saved because the fact is that men and women are lost. There is no escaping the fact that the Bible clearly teaches that the human race into which we are born is already a lost race. This is why the good news of John 3:16 is that "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish -- not perish -- but have everlasting life," {cf, John 3:16 KJV}.

We can never deal realistically with life until we face up to this fundamental fact: People are not waiting until they die to be lost -- they are already lost. It is the grace of God that reaches down and calls us out of that lostness and gives us an opportunity to come to Christ and be saved. Therefore "saved" is a perfectly legitimate word to use. It makes us uncomfortable only when we refuse to face the fact that men and women are lost. They are born into a perishing race in which their humanity is being put to improper uses and is gradually deteriorating and falling apart, and they are facing an eternity of separation from God. These are the facts as the Scriptures put it.

is our model for understanding how God works. Paul is answering the question of why some who have little knowledge are saved while many who have much knowledge are not saved. Part of his answer was given in the ninth chapter, in which he explained that behind this strange mystery is the elective, sovereign choice of God. God chooses to call men to him -- but not all men. Paul has dealt at length with that subject in the ninth chapter. But now he turns to the other side. Now we are confronted with the fact of human responsibility. It is true that God draws men to him: it is also true that no one will come unless they respond to the appeal of God.

Now, to us, this is an apparent contradiction. That is why we call it a paradox, a seeming contradiction. We cannot resolve it because at this

greatly with that. We do not understand even a fraction of how God works, therefore human knowledge is too limited to resolve this apparent conflict. But both sides are true. God calls men by an elective decree that is irresistible, and yet they must respond by a choice of their will, which they are free to make or not, as it pleases them. Let's see how Paul introduces this other side of the picture and brings before us Israel's responsibility.

Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they disregarded the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. {Rom 10:1-3 NIV}

Probably the most outstanding thing about this paragraph is that despite Paul's profound conviction that God saves whomever he will by an irresistible, elective choice, nevertheless this does not stop Paul from praying and yearning over his kinsmen according to the flesh, the nation Israel. You see, prayer is not inconsistent with God's call. It is never right for us to say, "If God calls, there is nothing we can do about it. We might as well sit down, fold our hands, and do nothing." That response fails to see that the way God calls is through the preaching of the Word and the praying of Christians, the yearning of their hearts over those who are not yet saved. Therefore, that is part of God's program, and Paul exemplifies this beautifully for us here. We need to see the importance that prayer has in reaching people. Paul prayed for men. He writes in First Timothy 2:1-3, 8:

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone -- for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and

I want men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer, without

some very helpful things in this regard. Speaking of prayer, he says,

When we are praying about the result, say, of a battle or a medical consultation, the thought will often cross our minds that, if we only knew it, the event is already decided one way or the other. I believe this to be no good reason for ceasing our prayers. The event certainly has been decided. In a sense, it was decided before all the worlds. But one of the things taken into account in deciding it, and therefore one of the things that really causes it to happen, may be this very prayer that we are now offering. [He then adds:] Thus, shocking as it may sound, I conclude that we can at noon become part causes of an event occurring at ten o'clock.

That is, even our prayers after an event affect the event. Now that is strange to us, but I think it is true. We are up against a great mystery

There is no question whether an event has happened because of your prayer. When the event you prayed for occurs, your prayer has always contributed to it. When the opposite event occurs, your prayer has never been ignored; it has been considered and refused for your ultimate good and the good of the whole universe.

Those are deep matters, but perhaps that will help us. At least it is clear that Paul does not hesitate to pray, even though he knows God chooses whom he will.

The second emphasis in this paragraph is the zeal that Paul notes about Israel. "I bear testimony that Israel is zealous for God." And indeed they are. Perhaps the most noteworthy difference between an orthodox Jew and the average Gentile is right there. Jews take God seriously. Any of you who have seen Fiddler On The Roof or have read any of the writings of Chaim Potok, or other contemporary Jewish authors, know how true this is. The Jewish way of life is built around God. God is the most important element in all their thinking. They sacrifice anything and everything to the centrality of God in their national and community life.

This is in stark contrast to the average Gentile. Gentiles have religious feelings -- all men do. Gentiles think of God, but God is out of the periphery of Gentile life. I think we all demonstrate this. We are more casual about God. He isn't the center of life, as he is in Jewish thought and action. Paul takes note of this fact. It was true then; it is true today.

A Gallup poll taken recently discovered that 43% of Americans -- largely Gentiles -- said that their religious feelings really were of very little significance in their lives. And yet the thing that amazed Paul, and amazes us today, is that the casual Gentile, who is not necessarily looking for God, nevertheless finds him. At our Thanksgiving service we had two testimonies by people of Gentile background who found God suddenly intruding into their lives when they didn't expect him. They found peace and rest and joy even when they weren't looking for it. And yet the Jew, with all his zeal, with his consummate desire to discover and to know God, fails to find peace and forgiveness and is not reborn into joy and love.

Paul tells us why this is so. The reason is that the Jews sought to establish their own righteousness, and therefore they missed the gift of God, which is the righteousness of Christ, obtained without works. This is the reason why anyone, Jew or Gentile, who seeks to try to establish his own righteousness, is going to be in the same boat. This was the problem with the Jews. They were constantly trying their best to obey the Law of Moses. They were failing to do so, of course, but they were not willing to admit that they failed. Thus they kept hoping and seeking and believing that God was going to accept them, even though they did

not obey the Law.

Now, there are many people like that today, both Jew and Gentile. In fact, to show you how true it is that Jews still think this way, I would like to quote a paragraph from a letter that a boy from this congregation with a Jewish background received recently from a rabbi, who wrote because he was troubled about the boy's faith in Christ:

The basic question about religion is how to elevate man, and bring him into closer relationship with God. [That is the rabbi's view of the purpose of religion. It is to elevate man, not to change him.] We believe that God revealed to us in the Torah [the Law of Moses] how he wants us to live, so that we can be in harmony with his divine purpose. Our role and religious purpose is to obey God's laws -- to love him and to obey him. We exercise our free will to proper intention and, through having done the good deeds [notice that, through having done the good deeds] , are elevated so that it becomes progressively easier and more natural to continue to do good and to resist evil.

That is the Jewish view of how to be right before God -- simply keep trying until it becomes easier and easier, and finally you stand righteous before God. Paul says that is the problem. Anyone who seeks to come before God on that basis is doomed to failure. They cannot obey the Law. Paul goes on to show us why they can't and to reveal to us that the issue is always Jesus.

Listen to his words:

Christ is the end of the law so that there may be
righteousness for everyone who believes. {Rom 10:4 NIV}

If your version, as mine, says "the law," I suggest you take a pencil and cross out the word "the." It is not "the law," as though it affected only the Mosaic Law, it is "law." Christ is the end of law -- any kind of law -- so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes. Of course this doesn't mean that Christ does away with law. He does away with law as far as bringing you to God is concerned; he makes a total end of it. And, as we have seen in this letter, the reason is clear. What was the purpose of law? Why, to make us aware of the fact that there is something wrong with us. If you don't have a standard to try to live up to, you have no idea that there is anything wrong with you. You think everything you do is natural, and therefore right. You hear this argument all the time today. Anything that is natural is right. That is because more and more today the Law is being set aside.

Now, the Law was given to make us realize that there are things that are wrong, that are destroying us. All the injury and death and darkness that come into our lives come because of the things that we are doing, the attitudes we have. We are producing the problem. We think it comes from everyone else, but law helps us to see that we are what is wrong.

But once it has shown us that, what good is it? It can do no more.

At that point, unless we come to Christ, there is no way out. The Law cannot cure our evil; it can only show it to us. At that point, the Law becomes our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, as Paul puts it in Galatians 3:24. That is the end of the Law, that is its purpose. It has been fulfilled when it does that work and brings you to Jesus Christ. He can change you. He can give you new life. He can wipe out the old pattern of failures and all the hurt and agony and anguish that you have been going through and give you a wholly new heart. Therefore Christ is the end of law, that there may be righteousness to everyone who believes in him.

Now, Paul, in his logical way, is very careful to show us how this

Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: "The man who does these things [the righteousness that is by the law] will live by them." {Rom 10:5 NIV}

Moses said that in Leviticus: "Here is the Law, the Ten Commandments. Anybody who does these things will live," {cf, Lev 18:5}. That is, God will bless him, fulfill his humanity, make him to enjoy all that God had for man in the beginning. It will all come if a man will simply obey these ten rules.

You know, when you read the Ten Commandments, they always seem so reasonable, they seem like such an easy thing to obey. This is the way people have always reacted to them. You say to yourself, "Why, this is not difficult. I can do that easily. All I have to do is just decide to do it, that's all!" But when you actually start to do it, you soon discover that there is a rebelliousness inside that sooner or later stops you from doing what you want to do. We have seen this all through Romans.

Therefore, the Law reveals the evil that is in your life. Moses said the Law was given to make people try to live this way. He said that he who did these things would live. Now Paul goes on to quote Moses again. He doesn't say that Moses said the next part, but he did. He sets the

But the righteousness that is by faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down), or "'Who will descend into the deep?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). [The comments in parenthesis are Paul's.] But what does it say?
heart";
that is the word of faith that we are proclaiming. {Rom 10:6-8 NIV}

It may startle you to realize that Paul is saying here that Moses taught salvation by grace through faith just as much as Paul did. Moses knew that the Law would not work. Why, even as Moses was bringing it down from the mountaintop, the people at the bottom of the mountain had

broken all ten of the commandments before they were given to them.

Moses knew that the people could not keep them, and therefore Moses also taught that God had provided another way by which people could be delivered when they failed to keep the Law. He saw clearly that God would lay the foundation for salvation in the incarnation and the resurrection of Jesus. That is why Paul quotes these words from Deuteronomy. Moses saw the coming of Christ down from heaven; he saw the resurrection, the raising of Jesus from the dead. Paul clearly indicates that all along God had this basis in mind for how people were to come to Christ.

Therefore, when the angels sang the song to the shepherds in the darkness of the night on the plains of Bethlehem, and the glory of the Lord broke out upon those humble shepherds out there in the fields and the angel said to them, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all men; for unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is Christ the Lord" {cf, Luke 2:10-11}, this was the historic fulfillment of the basis on which God had been saving people for centuries before this. Now it is being worked out in history -- but God had been saving people who saw beyond the Law to the work of Christ long before that.

And when the angels, in the brightness of the Easter sunrise, said to the woman at the tomb of Jesus, "Go and tell his disciples that he is risen, as he said" {cf, Matt 28:6-7}, that was the culmination of God's program to work out human redemption quite apart from any effort on man's part. Jesus had done it all. That is why Paul points out here that Moses understood that the way to lay hold of and personally appropriate the value of these incredible events was by believing the divine announcement with the whole man, with your whole being. That is why he adds,

But what does it say?
heart";
that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: {Rom 10:8 NIV}

The mouth is the outward man, the intellectual understanding of what has happened, expressed in words; the heart is the inner man, the will, the spirit deep within us understanding the basis on which God saves. And

That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved. {Rom 10:10-11 NIV}

Now I don't think it could be put any clearer than that. That is the clearest statement in the Word of God on how to be saved. It is very simple, isn't it? Paul makes it very simple. He says that it begins with the confession of the mouth that "Jesus is Lord."

Now, don't twist those words to mean that you have to stand up in public somewhere and announce that you believe Jesus is Lord before you are saved. Paul does not mean it that way, although it does not exclude that. He means that the mouth is the symbol of the conscious acknowledgment to ourselves of what we believe. It means that we have come to the place where we recognize that Jesus has the right to lordship in our lives. Up to this point we have been lord of our lives. Up to this point we have run our own affairs. We have decided we have the right to make our own decisions according to what we want. But there comes a time, as God's Spirit works in us, and we see the reality of life as God has made it to be, that we realize Jesus is Lord:

- * He is Lord of our past, to forgive us our sins;
- * He is Lord of our present, to dwell within us and to guide and direct and control every area of our life;
- * He is Lord of our future, to lead us into glory at last.
- * He is Lord of life, Lord of death, he is Lord over all things.

As Jesus himself said after his resurrection, "All power is given unto me, in heaven and on earth" {Matt 28:18 KJV} -- all power! He is in control of history. He is running all human events. He stands at the end of every path on which men go, and he is the ultimate one we all must reckon with. That is why Peter says in Acts 4:12:

"Salvation is found in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." {Acts 4:12 NIV}

You cannot read the book of Acts without recognizing that the basic creed of the early Christians was: "Jesus is Lord."

These are days when you hear a lot about mantras, words that you are supposed to repeat when you meditate. I suggest you adopt this as a mantra: Jesus is Lord. Say it again and again, wherever you are, to remind yourself of this great truth. When Peter stood up to speak on the day of Pentecost, this was his theme, "Jesus is Lord." And all the thousands of Jews listening to him could not deny what he pointed out -- that Jesus had lived a unique life, had been witnessed to by the prophets before him, had been raised from the dead in a most astonishing way, had died a most remarkable death, then had poured out supernatural signs from heaven, evidences they could not deny, and they had to recognize the fact above all facts, that Jesus was Lord -- whether they liked it or not. Therefore, the great question of all time is "What are you going to do with Jesus?"

Paul tells us here that Jesus is Lord, and if you have come to the place where you believe in your heart that he is risen and available, and you are ready to say to yourself, "Jesus is my Lord," then God acts. At that moment God does something. No man can do it, but God can. He begins to bring about all that is wrapped up in this word "saved." Your sins will be forgiven; God imparts to you a standing of righteous worth in his sight; he loves you; he gives you the Holy Spirit to live within you; he makes you a son in his family; he gives you an inheritance for eternity; you are joined to the body of Christ as members of the family of God; you are given Jesus himself to live within you, to be your power over evil -- over the world, the flesh, and the devil -- and you will live a life entirely different than you lived before. That is what happens when

you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead.

I think it is very helpful to see that nowhere in all the Scriptures are men ever asked to believe in Jesus as Savior. They are asked to believe in him as Lord. When you believe in him as Lord, he becomes your Savior. But you don't accept Christ as a Savior -- you accept him as Lord, as the one who is in charge of all things, including you. When you come to that point, when you respond with the whole man, then God says the work of redemption is done. The miracle occurs.

"Well," someone says, "what if I'm not elect? What if all the time I've been wanting God and seeking God, and then it turns out I'm not chosen?" Anyone who talks that way -- and people do talk that way -- are indicating they have never understood what Paul is saying here. You see, if you believe in Christ, you have given proof that you are elect. As Jesus himself put it, "No man can come to me except my Father draw him," {John 6:44}. You can't believe in God until God has called you and drawn you. The very desire to believe is part of that drawing, therefore we needn't struggle over this apparent conflict.

What Scripture everywhere confronts us with is the necessity for every individual to settle the question, "Is Jesus Lord of your life? Is he your Lord? Have you enthroned him and acknowledged him where God has placed him, as king over all the earth, the Lord of glory, the one who is in charge of all things?" When you do, that is the moment when redemption begins to occur. Now, see how Paul confirms this in the

As the Scripture says, "He who believes in him will not be put to shame." [Here Paul quotes Isaiah. It is not on the basis of works, but on the basis of belief -- he who accepts what Christ does, who believes on him, will not be put to shame.] For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile -- the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." [That is the word of Joel the prophet.] {Rom 10:11-13 NIV}

These verses indicate that this is not something new with Paul, but it is something all the Scriptures have taught, both Old and New Testaments alike -- that faith is the way by which we lay hold of what God has to give us. It is never gained by earning it, or by trying to be good, or by the good outweighing the bad, but simply by acknowledging that Jesus Christ has done it all on our behalf.

Probably some of you here this morning have been coming to this church for weeks, and even years, and yet you have never come to the place where you have acknowledged Jesus as your Lord. You have been religious, but you are not saved, you have not been redeemed and changed. I am asking any who have never settled this, to say to the Lord, "Jesus, you are Lord, I accept you and receive you as my Lord because I believe you rose from the dead and you are available to me right now." That is the basis on which God says he will act.

"If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." That is the

way it happens. At this time of the year I always think of that beautiful little carol, O Little Town of Bethlehem . I love the third verse:

How silently, how silently,
The wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still,
The dear Christ enters in.

Some of you can be born again this morning, as we bow together in prayer, if you silently say these words:

"Jesus is Lord -- my Lord."

Ask him to enter your life as Lord, and at that moment, God says, his gift is given. John 1:12 tells us:

He came to his own home, and his own people received him not.
But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; {John 1:11-12 RSV}

So if this morning you asked him to come into your heart, and you received him as Lord, and you mean to allow him to be the controlling center of your life from here on, I can tell you on the authority of the Word of God, that you have been saved. God has begun already the new life that will change you from the inside out, and you will never again be the same person.

Prayer

Our Father, we give grateful thanks for these clear words from Paul. We know how he himself struggled and sought to establish his own righteousness, and tried hard, Lord, to be acceptable before you in his own strength, and he, too, failed, until there came that wonderful day on the Damascus road when he met Jesus and he was changed into a new creature in Christ. Lord, we thank you that simple but marvelous miracle has been occurring again and again throughout the centuries since. We pray that this morning there were some who opened their hearts to Jesus, made him Lord in their life, acknowledged his lordship, realized that he was the one who had died for them and had given himself on their behalf, and made possible the blessings of the glory of God in their life. Now we pray that we may serve you together. Through this joyful Christmas season may we remember that the purpose of his coming to the manger in Bethlehem and to the cross of Calvary is that we may

be saved, and that no one should perish but should live eternally with you. We thank you in Jesus' name. Amen.

Title: How to be Saved
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Exhibited
Scripture: Romans 10:1-13
Message No: 25
Catalog No: 3525
Date: December 5, 1976

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HAVE THEY NOT HEARD?

by Ray C. Stedman

frequently asked questions we hear, especially from non-Christians. That question is, "What happens to all the people who never hear about Jesus?" That question is phrased in a variety of forms, but basically it is the expressed concern of many -- especially when they hear Christians talking about the uniqueness of Jesus. When we say, as Paul so strongly says in this passage, that Jesus is Lord and it is only through him that men come to God, immediately it raises the question, "Well, what about those who never hear of Jesus?" We are going to come to the answer to

any individual person to be salvaged from the wreck of humanity, he must call upon the name of the Lord. Notice how Paul quotes the prophet Joel

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,
{Joel 2:32a NIV}

Well, how do you do that? How do you call on the name of the Lord?

I'm glad you asked that question. It gives me another opportunity to preach a message on it.

essential to salvation -- calling on the name of the Lord.

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in?
And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" {Rom 10:14-15 NIV}

Now, there are five steps involved in calling on the name of the Lord.

Paul begins with that final step, the call itself. He traces it back for us so we can see what is involved in bringing people to the place where they cry out to God in a sense of need and desperation and are saved, born again, changed, regenerated, made alive in Jesus Christ. Paul begins by stressing the fact that each person individually must call on God. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." The important thing, therefore, is to bring people to that place.

As we have already seen, in the first part of this chapter, this is not just a routine matter. It involves the whole being. The heart must be involved, that is, the inner consciousness, the deep conviction of the will. Then the mouth must acknowledge it. There must be a willingness to consciously confess that Jesus is Lord, and this must be done before God and others as well, to evidence a deep-settled conviction that Jesus is Lord. This means, of course, that God does not hand out salvation like some free coupon that comes in the mail; it is yours whether you like it or not. There has to be this individual, personal conviction. It is not enough to come and sit under the hearing of the gospel. Some people think that if they go to church regularly and hear the gospel they will be saved. No, there has to be a time when you personally call on the name of the Lord. I want to stress that, as the Apostle Paul does here.

But behind the call is belief. Paul says, "How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in?" So there has to be belief. That means the mind has to be engaged -- the intellect is called into play. I think this is important because so many times today we think it is enough to get the emotions stirred up. I have been in many evangelistic services where people were stirred emotionally but they did not understand anything about what God had done. They had nothing to believe in; they were just stirred up to want something.

Years ago there was a great evangelist named Gypsy Smith. He was born a gypsy in England and came to Christ as a boy. Gypsy Smith used to preach saying that Gypsy Smith came to Moody Church on one occasion and held meetings and told about his conversion and about his gypsy life. The people would sit, entranced with these wonderful stories he told. At the end of the meeting he would give an altar call, and people would surge they were coming for. Did they want to be gypsies, or what? They had really been given nothing in which to believe. I so well recall saying to us in class, "Men, remember, you have never preached the gospel until you have given people something to believe, something God has done that their minds can grasp, something they can use as a basis

for understanding what God has offered to them -- their salvation."

Behind the belief, Paul says, is a message -- something heard. "How can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?" Something has to be preached. Some message must come. Again, this is a very important aspect of Christian faith. These days we are hearing much of the 'isms' and 'asms' and spasms that are coming into being, new cults that are springing up on every side, dominating the religious field. Often they make their appeal to some mystical feeling or philosophy, some idea that men have of what could work. But it is not grounded in any historic entity.

Now, the glory of Christianity is that it has a message that is grounded in history. It is objective truth, not just something that happens inside of you. It is not some feeling that you are following that you hope will work out; it is the story of historic events. One of these events is the coming of Jesus as a baby in the manger of Bethlehem, the coming of the wise men from the east and the uproar and unrest that it caused in the kingdom of Judea, beginning with Herod the king himself. That is all part of history. Then there was the resurrection and the events that followed in the church. These are all historic events -- objective truth. The great thing of the Christian faith is not that we are presenting some philosophy, but a faith that is grounded in events that cannot be explained away. That is our message.

Behind the message, of course, is the messenger. "How can they hear without someone preaching to them?" There has to be a messenger speaking forth this message. This is why I believe God has always used some object or person to convey truth and that this method will never be superseded. All the marvelous machinery and inventions that we have today -- the media of communication -- are only ways of conveying the preaching of the Word of God. You can preach today on television, on radio, on cassette tapes, and on video tapes. You can have the message flung up to satellites and back to the four corners of the earth. But in every event, someone has to deliver the message. God has chosen preaching as his means of conveying this great truth in every generation. That is why I don't believe that the distribution of the Scriptures alone will ever be sufficient to win men.

Now, I do not demean that ministry, because it is a very important one. The translating of the Word of God and the spreading of the Scriptures all over the earth are important. But they are only supplementary. That, alone, will never reach and change nations as does the gospel when proclaimed by a human messenger. God has sent men out everywhere, therefore, to preach this word and to proclaim the truth.

And behind the messenger, as Paul brings out, is the sender. "How can they preach unless they are sent?" I don't think there need be any doubt as to who does the sending. Jesus himself said, "Pray the Lord of the harvest, that he may send forth laborers," {cf, Mark 9:38, Luke 10:2}. It is God who sends men. The great initiative in the process of redeeming men and women, healing them and restoring them, healing the fragmentation of their lives, is the great heart of God that sends men out. He calls out men and women and sends them into the far reaches of the earth.

I think that Paul has brought all this before us in order that we might understand what a wonderful and beautiful thing this is that God has done. That is why Paul quotes Isaiah here: "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" {cf, Isa 52:7}. What a welcome and

beautiful thing it is to think of God sending out men and women all over the earth with this message. What a marvelous thing it is when this message takes root in the human heart! We never forget the ones who bring it to us. I am sure that many of you can think of people who came to you with the message of Christ, and they are dear to you because of that. "How beautiful are the feet" ... feet are not usually the most beautiful part of the body, but even they become beautiful when the message is conveyed and God delivers and frees and heals us and makes us whole.

I have often thought it is like turning on a light switch. You flick the switch on the wall and the lights go on. It seems like such a simple thing. Yet behind it is a very complicated process. There are the transmission towers, the substations, the dam that was built to hold back the water, the poles on which the wires are strung -- a tremendous complexity lies behind the simple act of turning on a light switch. Every time you do it, power surges forth -- and it comes only because that complicated process has been gone through.

Every time an individual comes to the place where in quietness he calls out to the Lord, a tremendous process is behind it. There is the darkness and anguish of the mystery of the cross, the birth at Bethlehem, the wonder and miracle of the resurrection, the sending forth of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost -- all this is the process behind a single individual when he calls on the name of the Lord. God is behind it, he has started it. The apostle wants us to understand this activity of the sovereign character of God.

But what if all this is provided, but still men do not respond? That is the problem Paul is facing here, with regard to Israel,

But not all the Israelites responded to the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. {Rom 10:16-17 NIV}

Paul is telling us here that a strange reaction occurs when people hear this message. It is what we might call the puzzle of unbelief. Isn't it strange how some people seem to be so suspicious, so self-dependent, that even when good news comes, they don't want to receive it? This is the reaction that preachers and other who tell the good news run into all the time.

I have a young friend living in Fresno who told me the story of his conversion. As a young man he became a Christian. He was a man of considerable wealth, and he tried to reach his friends for Christ after he himself became a Christian. He told them, with tremendous enthusiasm, what had happened to him, how the Lord had changed his whole life and saved his marriage. But he found that his words fell largely on deaf ears. They were not interested. His wealthy friends patted him on the back and went on their way. Finally he decided on a rather strange and remarkable demonstration -- both for his sake and the sake of his friends. He sat down and wrote out a check for a million dollars (and he was good for it too!). Then he took his check around to his friends and said, "I have always highly regarded you as a friend. I have always

wanted to do something for you. Would you receive this check as a gift from me?" People would look at the check and, when they saw the amount of it, they would hand it back and say, "I can't take that from you." He tried to give that check out to a dozen or more of his friends and no one would take it, although it was a valid offer. Finally he faced the fact that there is something deeply embedded in human nature that doesn't want to hear good news, doesn't want to be helped too much, doesn't want to be the recipient of great riches without having some part in it.

This is what is universally discovered by those who bring the good news of the gospel. Even the prophet Isaiah discovered this when he came to the people of Israel at a time in their history when they were surrounded by enemies. They were about to be overrun by the nations around them, they had turned to the idols of the nations about them, degrading practices had come into the national life, and peace and joy had fled from the land. Isaiah the prophet, in the dark days, 725 years before Christ was born, came and preached to this people good news about one who was coming. And on the basis of this person's life and death, God would work on their behalf. He had to confess, as Paul brings out here, that they would not believe his message. The great and luminous 53rd chapter of Isaiah begins with those words:

been revealed?
at him,
him.
grief;
not.
way;
all. {cf, Isa 53:1-6 RSV}

Yet the nation of Israel said "No!" to that tremendous revelation of Isaiah the prophet -- at least, most of the Israelites did. Now Paul comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ."

This, by the way, is a more accurate translation than the Authorized Version, which says, "and hearing comes by the word of God." It is really "the word of Christ."

Paul says that faith is aroused by hearing. If you hear a message, then you either have to believe it or disbelieve it. Your faith is aroused by the message. But if it is to be saving faith, he says, it must be a word about Christ. Once again, Paul sets Jesus right at the center of the universe. He is the very issue of life. Even back in ancient Israel, when they heard the news about Jesus, it precipitated the puzzle of unbelief. People refused it, and that word "refused" brings the whole project of God's enterprise to reach men to a point of failure.

Last week I shared with you some paragraphs from a letter written by a rabbi to a boy of Jewish background who is now in this congregation. The rabbi was greatly concerned because the boy had become a Christian, and in his letter he explained to him what he saw as the difference between what the Jews believe about the messiah and what Christians believe. Perhaps you would be interested in his words:

The Messiah question is central to Christianity. This is the hub around which their whole theology rotates. To make this your major concern is to play their game. We [Jews] have a belief in a messiah, but this is not too rigidly defined, nor of central concern. According to our belief, the messiah is a man, descended from the house of David, since God had promised not to replace the line of David with another, who will defeat the enemies of the Jews, restore the people to the land of Israel, rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, and reign there and introduce an era of peace. The advent of the messiah has to do with God's plan for actualizing his plans in the world.

That is the usual Jewish position regarding the Messiah. He was a man, not a divine Being; he was to come into history only to deliver the Jews from their oppressors, in fulfillment of the promises to Israel of leadership among the nations. But they ignore the passages such as The rabbi goes on,

The situation is quite different for the Christian. He believes that nothing that man does can help. Man necessarily exists in a state of sin. Ethical living, obedience to God, goodness, all are of no avail. The only way that a man can get out of a state of damnation is to believe that Jesus is his Savior or Messiah (quite a different meaning for the word). Thus the whole purpose of religion is for man to be in Jesus, i.e., to accept this belief in Jesus as his Savior.

Now, that betrays a considerable degree of understanding of the Christian position and of the gospel. To show how thoroughly he understands it, he goes on,

The Law is not only ineffective, but unnecessary, because once one has accepted Jesus, one of the byproducts is that he is essentially good and needs no direction from the Law. From this point of view, one of the most basic and almost exclusive concerns of religion is the Messiah. Don't be shifted to that question without realizing the difference in import and meaning that places messiah, as used by a Jew, and Messiah, as used by a Christian, worlds apart.

This is the position that Jews still take today regarding Christ. Paul says that is the issue. Well, someone says to me, "The trouble is that the Jews never really heard the gospel. Maybe the problem is that it never reached them!" This brings up the question about what to do about

But I ask, did they not hear? [His answer,] Of course they

did:
{Rom 10:18 NIV}

If you have read the 19th Psalm recently, you know that this is the great Psalm that details nature's witness to God. It begins with the words,

handiwork.
world. {Psa 19:1-4a RSV}

There has been a universal proclamation of the gospel through nature. Now, this is not a lot of light about God, but it is light. In the first

... what may be known about God is plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities -- his eternal power and divine nature -- have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. {Rom 1:19-20 NIV}

The answer to the question "What about those who have never heard about God?" is: "There aren't any people who have never heard about God." Everywhere men and women know something about God. He is revealed in nature. There is a universal proclamation that has gone out. And if it is observed, if it is noticed and followed, more light will be given.

... without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. {Heb 11:6 NIV}

First, there must be belief, or faith. Then you must believe that God is, and, then, that he rewards men who diligently seek him. So all men everywhere are responsible to seek the God who is revealed in nature. Now, they may have no more light than that. But, if they, are obedient to it, that is enough to bring them through gradually dawning light to the knowledge of Christ. God will see to it that they have further light. And Israel had that proclamation. No matter how low they sank in their understanding, no matter how dark it became in the land, they at least had that universal proclamation of truth that would have brought them back to truth and to God.

But that isn't all. There is another stage of the revelation of God. God, in his grace often gives more light even when people refuse the light of nature. No one deserves more light, but God gives it nevertheless. I think the United States of America, above all nations, ought to be grateful for the grace of God that has poured light out upon us when we did not deserve it anymore than anyone else. God has given us

much light. But we must remember that more light does not necessarily mean more belief.

To turn up the light brighter does not mean that people are going to believe more than when it was dim. Unbelief can reject bright light as well as dim light, so more light does not necessarily mean more belief. That is why this nation, with this great and shining light pouring so brilliantly upon it, is still a nation filled with unbelievers. God

Again I ask, did Israel not understand? First, Moses says,
not a nation;
has no understanding."

Then Isaiah boldly says,
ask for me." {Rom 10:19-20 NIV}

God sent the prophets to Israel. He sent Moses and Samuel, Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah and Jeremiah, and all the other prophets in the Old Testament. Through many years and centuries he sent them to this people -- and he did it in order to arouse them to jealousy through the fact that although they often rejected the prophets, the nations around would believe. This would be true more fully in the day when the Gentile nations would suddenly turn to God in large numbers while the Jews remained obdurate in their unbelief. This, of course, is exactly what has happened in history. Paul singles out the specific principle here that God uses to arouse belief, even when people tend to reject truth -- jealousy.

I was watching my grandson play with his cousins the other day. He was playing with a certain toy, then he got tired of it and threw it away. One of his cousins picked it up and started playing with it, and immediately the little boy ran over and grabbed the toy away. "No, that's mine!" he said. He wanted to play with it only because he was made jealous by someone else having it.

You see, God understands this principle in fallen human nature. He even uses it at times to make people wake up. This is why God pours out blessings upon an individual or a family, with one member of the family receiving spiritual insight. He does it in order to make the others jealous so they will listen to him. This is why God will pour out blessings upon one nation in order to make other nations jealous. "What is the secret of your blessing?" they will ask. Thus they might hear the witness about God.

If you understand some of these things, you will be able to read your newspapers differently than you ordinarily do. What is God doing in the human events of our day? We see them as simply a conflict of warring factions of humanity. But God is using these events to arouse people to jealousy. Paul gives two instances of this:

First, he points out that Moses said that God would use a people far less intelligent than the Jews. One of the striking things about Jewish history is the brilliance of the Jews. It would be impossible to list the many Jewish leaders in the fields of science, philosophy, literature, art, and music in our day. They dominate the field. Over 12 per cent of the Nobel Prize winners have been Jewish. And yet, these

brilliant people, with their tremendous minds, are often confronted with people, savages in the jungles, untaught, dark and clouded in their thinking, who find God and become Christians and are delivered and given blessings, hope, peace, and even prosperity. God is doing this only to arouse his people and awaken them.

Then Isaiah came along. Not only will God use those who are less intelligent, he says, but God will use people who are less motivated: "I was found by those who did not seek me: I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me." Another characteristic of the Jew has been his zeal for God. Paul has talked about that already. Jews seem to be haunted by God, driven by a fanatical loyalty to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And yet, despite all that, careless Gentiles, who are not even thinking about God very often, through Christ, learn to revel in the grace and love and blessing of the living God. This is to arouse the Jews to jealousy. God uses this principle with Gentiles too. That is why people watch Christians. There is blessing there that the Gentiles can't understand. God is trying to use it to awaken them to listen, that they might be saved, to turn and settle the issue at the feet of Jesus.

There is a final stage of divine pursuit that is described in

But concerning Israel he says, "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people." {Rom 10:21 NIV}

What a beautiful picture of the character of God. Here is his patience -- all day long! That day has stretched now for almost four thousand years of human history. Four thousand years ago, Abraham set out. Four thousand years later, God is still holding out his hands to this stubborn people, wanting to draw them to himself. He is not only patient, but loving. He held out his hands. This is the stance of God toward those who resist his will -- with wide open arms, all day long he is waiting to draw them back.

Remember how Jesus put it to the Pharisees of his day? "You will not come unto me that you may have life," {cf, John 5:40 KJV}. And looking over the city of Jerusalem, he wept as he saw the stubbornness of this people. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem! How often would I have gathered you under my wings, as a hen gathers her chickens, but you would not," {cf, Matt 23:37, Luke 13:34}. With those sorrowful words, he comments on the stubbornness and the pride of people who will not admit their need. This is being repeated again and again throughout the world today. God longs to draw men to himself. He must somehow arouse faith in the individual. In order to do so, he sent messengers with a tremendous message, and still there is resistance to the will and purpose of God.

So the chapter closes with this picture of God standing with his arms open, longing to draw men to himself, admitting that the problem is a disobedient and obstinate people.

I think the most amazing thing from this account is to realize that in order to perish, i.e., in order to go to hell, you must resist the pleas of a loving God. God never damns anyone to hell without a chance. Don't ever let anybody tell you the Bible teaches that. It does not teach any such thing. It teaches us that no one, no one, will end up separated

from God who has not personally resisted the claim and appeal of a loving God who sought to reach him.

The historic fulfillment of God's longing to draw men to himself began at Bethlehem, in the very event that we celebrate this Christmas season. If there are any here who have never settled this with God, I urge you, in the name of the Lord, not to resist his plea any longer, but to open your heart to him that you might be healed by the word of Jesus.

Prayer

Father, we scarcely know which is the greater wonder, that men should resist such a beautiful appeal on your behalf, or that you should so patiently and lovingly wait for them to turn. But we thank you for it. We thank you that you have drawn us to yourself, and that you have given us grace upon grace, that we might be drawn to you, and filled our inner life made whole, and our spirit redeemed, through Jesus Christ our Lord. We give thanks for him and for his coming, and for his presence in our lives and hearts today. In his name we pray, Amen.

Title: Have They not Heard
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Exhibited
Scripture: Romans 10:14-21
Message No: 26
Catalog No: 3526
Date: December 12, 1976

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THERE'S HOPE AHEAD

by Ray C. Stedman

The eleventh chapter of Romans deals very strongly with Israel -- its hope, its promises, and its relationship to the church.

I think everyone here knows that Hanukkah and Christmas are celebrated at the same time of the year. They have something in common, in that Hanukkah is a celebration of the cleansing of the temple for the ultimate coming of the Messiah, whom the Jews expected would come to the nation of Israel, while Christmas celebrates the actual coming of that Messiah to a sinful, weary, and waiting world. I think these two ceremonies, very diverse in nature, nevertheless symbolize the close relationships that the nation of Israel has with the church of the living God.

We must never forget those relationships, and I think this chapter, perhaps more than any other passage of Scripture, will help us in understanding that.

Unfortunately, the church and Israel are often like two relatives who can't get along with each other. Through the centuries, disagreement and outright persecution and unhappy situations have prevailed. But chapter eleven of Romans gives us some very helpful insights into how to live with our Jewish friends and neighbors.

Twice in this passage the Apostle Paul asks the question "Did God reject his people?" That is, is God through with Israel because of their rejection of the person of Jesus and the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ? Because they turned a deaf ear to that, has God wiped them out? Has he said they no longer have any place in his scheme of things?

Twice Paul raises that question here, and twice he answers it: "By no means!" That is, God is not through with the Jews. Anyone who teaches that the church has now inherited all the promises of Israel had better take a second look at the Scriptures, especially the eleventh chapter of Romans. It is amazing how many people take all the blessings and glories that were promised to Israel in the Old Testament and apply them to the church, but take all the cursings and all the punishments and apply those to Israel. That does not treat the Scriptures fairly. So let's take a look at Paul's answer to the question "Does God reject his people?"

I ask then, Did God reject his people? By no means! I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew.
{Rom 11:1-2a NIV}

Those among the Jews whom God foreknew, he did not reject. Paul is the great example of that. Here we have clear evidence that God has never set aside the Jews, in respect to individual salvation. Through all the Christian centuries Jews have been coming to Christ, coming back to God, coming into the fulfillment of the promises of Abraham by faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul is an excellent example of this. Notice how he refers to himself as one of those foreknown, i.e., one of the elect, one whom God had set aside to be his. In the letter to the Galatians the apostle reminds us that this was done from his mother's womb, so that all through those

years of resistance and pharisaical anger at the claims of Jesus, when Paul was persecuting the church and "breathing out threatenings and slaughter" {Acts 9:1 KJV}, Paul was, nevertheless, one of the elect. Though he was struggling, he was one whom God inexorably was drawing to himself -- and Paul never forgot that. In every one of his letters he marvels at the grace of God that took him, a blasphemer and persecutor of the church, and drew him to himself, changed his heart, and made him into a new creature in Christ. He is but one example of the many millions of Jews through the centuries who have believed in Christ.

But even that does not exhaust the position of Israel in God's program. Not only do some Jews become Christian, but there are many who remain Jews who, nevertheless, are born again, saved individuals. Paul cites an example from the prophet Elijah:

Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah -- how he appealed to God against Israel: "Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me." And what was God's answer to him? "I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal." So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. {Rom 11:2b-6 NIV}

There was a time in the life of the prophet Elijah when he thought he was the only one left. It was after that tremendous encounter with the from heaven and wiped out all the sacrifices. Queen Jezebel mounted a persecution against all the prophets of God, including Elijah, and brought Elijah to the place where he felt that he was the only one left.

Have you ever felt like that? "O Lord, they have all left you. I'm the 19:10-14}. Have you ever felt that way? That was how Elijah felt. But God said, "Elijah, your computer is broken. You only see one left; I see seven thousand who have not yet bowed the knee to Baal. I have kept them from it. I have reserved to myself seven thousand who have not bowed the

Elijah, like many of us, made a lot of mistakes. First, he forgot about man's limited knowledge about any subject. We don't see very clearly; we don't understand all the issues. I do not think there is anything that we know everything about. Therefore our knowledge as to what is happening is always to be taken with a grain of salt. It is never as bad as it looks, no matter how bad it may get in these coming years -- and it may get bad. But it will never be as bad as it looks, because our knowledge does not encompass all the ones who remain faithful.

Second, Elijah forgot about God's unlimited power. The situation is never as bad as it looks because God is never as weak as he seems. Sometimes we think that God must have lost the battle, that the powers of darkness are so strong and violent and so in command that God has given up. But when we think that way, we have forgotten what the Scriptures tell us again and again -- that it is the very opposition of the enemy that God is using to bring about his purposes. Never forget that. God cannot lose because he uses the very opposition against him to win. Elijah had no reason to despair.

Third, Elijah forgot about life's unmixable principles. If salvation is by grace, then it can't be by works. And if it is by works, then it can't be grace. Grace, you see, is God at work. Works is man at work. The processes of salvation are much less complex than they appear. We think we have to earn our way to heaven. I find this revealed in the thinking of many Christians.

A man said to me the other day, "Why should this happen to me? What have I done that I should have to go through this kind of a trial?" I realized that I had said the same thing not long before. That kind of thinking reveals that I really thought that I had put God in my debt, that I had somehow earned something, and deserved something better from him. Now, that is works, and Paul reminds us here that you cannot mix works and grace.

If God is going to call you and save you and deliver you, then it is not going to depend on your works. As James points out, your works will be there if your faith is real, because it is faith that produces works. But the works aren't the saving factor. That is what Elijah forgot.

So there were thousands in Paul's day, and there are thousands of Jews today, who perhaps have never really heard about Jesus. I think there are many Jews today who are earnest, devout, humble souls, trusting in the Old Testament record, who have never really heard anything about Jesus that would make them feel that he really is their Messiah. And yet they have believed what is revealed in the Old Testament about the Messiah. There are probably hundreds of thousands of Jews today who are still faithful believers in the only bit of Christ that they know -- that which is revealed in the Old Testament.

At any rate, Paul has made it clear that God is not rejecting individuals out of Israel. And yet the majority are turning away

What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain,
but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written:
And David says,
for them.
see,
11:7-10 NIV}

Now, those are horrible words, but they represent the reaction that God has determined should accompany unbelief. When you hear truth, it is always very important that you do something about it. If you know something is true, then you had better act on it. If you don't, you lose your capacity to recognize truth. Gradually the dry rot that is described here, that is so visibly evident among many in Israel today, will set in. Paul calls it a blindness. Their eyes are blinded, so that even when the truth is there they cannot see it. Their ears are deaf. Even when loving appeals and warnings are set before them, they don't hear them. Their table, their food, becomes a snare and a trap, leading into slavery.

The food of Israel referred to here is the Law, the Scriptures. Jews highly value the Law. Now, they don't know a lot about it. Many Jews today are hardly acquainted with anything in the Old Testament. The rabbis have given themselves to the study of it, and yet all that

intensive study only seems to make them sink deeper and deeper into the trap of legalistic slavery. They are bound by rituals and spend their days constantly working out interpretative details.

Not long ago I was reading about Dr. Joseph Goebbels, the propaganda minister among the Nazis, who, on one occasion, asked a Jewish rabbi to teach him how the Jews approached the Scriptures. "I understand that you Jews have a peculiar way of reasoning when you come to the Talmud and the Torah (the Old Testament), and I want you to teach it to me." The rabbi said, "I'm sorry, but you're too old for that." "What do you mean?" he asked. "Well," the rabbi told him, "we have three questions we ask a boy before he enters into the study of the Talmud. If he can answer them, we let him into the study. If he can't, he has no chance." Goebbels said, "Ask them of me. What's the first question?"

The rabbi said, "The first question is this: Two men fall down a chimney; one comes out clean and the other is dirty, which one washes?" Dr. Goebbels said, "Oh, that's easy. The dirty one washes, of course." The rabbi said, "Wrong. It is the clean one that washes." "How do you reason that?" The rabbi said, "When they fall down the chimney, they look at each other, and the dirty one sees the clean one, so he thinks he is clean, too; but the clean one sees the dirty one and thinks he is dirty, so he washes." "All right," Goebbels said, "there is a strange logic about that. But give me the second question."

"The second question is this: Two men fall down a chimney. One comes out dirty, and the other clean. Which one washes?" Goebbels said, "That's the same question." "No it isn't, it's an entirely different question." "Well," Goebbels said, "I think I can answer that. It is the clean one that washes." The rabbi said, "Wrong. They look at each other. The dirty one looks at the clean one and says, 'Isn't it wonderful that two men can fall down a chimney and come out clean?' But the clean one looks at the dirty one and says, 'Look how dirty we've gotten.' And the dirty man holds up his hands and sees that they are dirty. So he washes."

Goebbels says, "What's the third question?" "Two men fall down a chimney..." Goebbels says, "That's the same one!" "No it isn't," the rabbi says, "it's an entirely different problem! What's the answer?" Goebbels said, "I don't know." The rabbi said, "Neither of them wash because it is a ridiculous story to begin with! How could two men fall down a chimney and one come out dirty and the other clean? So unless a boy can answer those questions, we never admit him to the Talmud."

It is this kind of strange, penetrating, and yet difficult reasoning that accounts for much of Jewish unbelief. I have here a paper printed and distributed by Jewish rabbis in which the differences between Christianity and Judaism are described. One rabbi writes about Paul:

Paul claimed that obedience to the Torah (the Law) could not guarantee salvation; rather, salvation was obtainable only through acceptance of and faith in Christ Jesus. To believe that a person could atone for his own sinful condition through any efforts on his own, as, for example, by obeying the laws of the Torah, was accordingly a delusion. But Paul eagerly announced that what man could not himself accomplish, namely salvation, could still be accomplished for him. Only God, however, was powerful enough to atone for man's sinfulness, and Paul held that the death of Christ Jesus was that act of

divine atonement.

Then he adds,

We Jews have rejected this Gentile Christian view. Judaism, as shaped by our rabbis in Palestine, conceived of the body as a gift of God, and to this day we regard the body as holy and wholesome, not as a prison from which to escape. Any inclination by man to commit a wrongdoing, we hold, resides not in his body but in his heart or mind. And this inclination can be overcome by a change of heart or mind. Thus man, by himself, does indeed possess the power to atone for his own misdeeds, and we Jews have, in our Torah, the guidance directing our hearts and minds to righteous living.

On that basis, the Jews say, they can win their way to acceptance before God without dealing with the sin problem and without ever taking into consideration the full teaching of the Scriptures. Paul says, therefore, that many have been rejected because of that.

Again I ask, "Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?"
Not at all! {Rom 11:11a NIV}

This question deals with the national promises of Israel. Individually, in any age, Jews can come to Christ, and have. But what about the national promises God gave to Israel? Has the nation lost those? By no means! Paul gives us five arguments to prove that Israel must someday become a godly nation once again, and become the leading nation of earth:

The first argument is that the salvation of the Gentiles was intended to

Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious. {Rom 11:11b NIV}

If you have read the book of Acts, you know that everywhere Paul went he began his ministry with the Jews. It was only when the Jews would refuse to hear that he would turn to the Gentiles. So, in all these cities, the Gentiles were blessed and enriched by his ministry only because the Jews had refused it. Gentiles were allowed to believe and to become different people in order to make the Jews jealous.

Do you know what that tells me? That tells me that we Christians ought to be so alive, so vital in our Christianity, so excited and full of joy and love toward one another that every Jew we contact will say to

himself, "How come they have it and we don't? How come they have a light on their faces and joy and love in their hearts?" We have to hang our heads in shame and admit that through the centuries there has been very little in the church to attract the jealousy of Israel. It has been the other way around. But Paul says this was God's intention, that the Gentiles should become so alive as to awaken the Jews.

Paul's second argument is that Israel must ultimately return to God because worldwide blessing will come only when that happens

But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!

I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be, but life from the dead? {Rom 11:12-15 NIV}

When I was at the Congress for World Evangelization at Lausanne, Switzerland, a couple of years ago, I was moved to see that every nation on earth was represented at that congress. The gospel had in some way penetrated every nation on the face of the earth. To some degree, at least, the riches of the gospel had come to every single nation. Now, those riches really speak not of material prosperity, but of freedom, the human spirit made free. It is a fact today -- you can take your globe and check it -- that everywhere the gospel is freely proclaimed, you have a free people. But where it is resisted or rejected or ignored, you have people drifting into violence, anarchy, exploitation, and tyranny. This is because human freedom comes by means of the gospel. We in the Gentile world ought to give thanks to God for the riches that have come our way because of the blindness of Israel.

But Paul's argument is this: If that kind of riches has come because of the Jews' rejection, what will it be like in the day when Israel comes again into its proper position? According to the prophets, that is the time when the earth shall blossom like the rose, when there shall be no more war, "nothing to hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain" {cf, Isa 11:9}, when the earth shall move into a golden era. Israel is the key. That is why every Christian should keep his eye on that remarkable people and see what is happening to them.

If the part of the dough offered as first fruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; If the root is holy, so are the branches. {Rom 11:16 NIV}

Now, it would take a good Jew to really understand this. Paul is referring to the offerings and sacrifices in the tabernacle. For the offering of the firstfruits, a pile of dough was made up, and someone

would take a handful of it and present it to God. Paul's argument is that if that first handful was acceptable and holy before God, the rest of the dough would be too. Now, the firstfruit here is Abraham, the father of the Israel nation. Abraham was accepted before God; therefore his descendants will be too. They are not cut off from God or from his relationship with them; they are claimed by God.

Paul's fourth argument has to do with the olive tree

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. {Rom 11:17-21 NIV}

Once again Abraham is symbolized by the olive tree. The New Testament tells us that when a Gentile becomes a Christian, he, in a sense, becomes a son of Abraham. He becomes an Israelite. But when a Jew becomes a Christian, he doesn't have to become a Gentile. You see, the natural fruit of the olive tree is the Jews. It is we who are grafted in.

the only normal human being in the world." What do you think of that? He goes on, "Everyone else is, from one point of view, a special case dealt with under emergency conditions." That's how we got in. God sort of opened the back door and let us in as an emergency case. But the ones who really belong are the Jews. It is healthy for Gentile Christians to remember that. The Jews are not hanging around waiting for us to be nice to them. It is they who have been nice to us. We ought to remember that and respond with gratitude and humility to what God has done in placing us in this olive tree.

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree? {Rom 11:22-24 NIV}

The olive tree is the position of the faith of Abraham, the position of receiving blessing from the God of the earth through sheer grace, without any merit on our own part. According to Paul here, we who were like a wild olive tree, with hard, shriveled up, bitter fruit, were

taken and grafted into this rich olive tree. But what happens is contrary to what happens in nature.

If you take a nectarine branch and graft it into a peach tree, what does the branch grow from then on -- peaches or nectarines? It still grows nectarines. The fruit is determined by the branch, not by the tree. The peach tree will grow nectarines on a nectarine branch, and plums on a plum branch, and so on. That is what happens according to nature. Following Paul's analogy here, if we, a wild olive branch, were grafted into a rich cultivated olive tree, the fruit that would continue to grow would be the wild olives, bitter and shriveled, that which we already were producing. But God does a miracle with us. He changes us so that the fruit that comes forth is the fruit of the Spirit, and we begin to produce the rich, wonderful, fat fruit of the good olive tree in our lives. Again, Paul argues, if God can do that with bitter fruit such as we Gentile believers are, how much more will he produce richness with the true branches?

Then Paul speaks of the kindness and the severity of God. I want to close on that note, because it recognizes what determines how God appears to you. If you come to God needy and repentant and acknowledging that you need help, you will always find him to be a loving, gracious, open-armed, open-hearted Sovereign, ready to help you, ready to forgive you, ready to give you all that you need. But if you come to God complaining, excusing yourself, justifying what you've been doing and trying to make it look good in his sight, you will always find that God is as hard as iron, and as merciless as fire, as stern as a judge. God will always turn that face toward those who come in self-pride and justification in their own strength.

This is the secret of the mystery of Israel and its blindness today. As long as the Jews come to God in that manner, they will always find a hard, iron-willed, stern God. But when they come in repentance, and, as Zechariah the prophet describes, when Jesus appears and they look at him whom they had pierced and they ask him "Where did you get these wounds in your hands?" he will say, "These are those which I received in the house of my friends," {cf, Zech 13:6}. Then they will mourn for him as one mourns for any only child, and the mourning of Israel that day will be like the mourning for King Joash in the battle of Jezreal. The whole nation will mourn. Then God will take that nation, and they will replenish the earth.

This is what Paul looks forward to.

Now, as we come to the close of a year, and look on to the beginning of a new one, I think this is a reminder to our own hearts of the faithfulness of God. His promises will not fail. God's purposes will never be shortchanged. God is going to accomplish all that he says he will do. Though it may be a long way around, and though it may lead through many trials and temptations and hurts and heartaches, what God has said he will do, he will carry through.

On that basis we can enter this new year with a deep awareness of the faithfulness of our God.

Prayer

Thank you, Holy Father, for you faithfulness. Thank you that

you are the God of glory and the God of mercy, and also the God of justice and the God of truth. We do stand amazed at both the kindness and the severity of God. Lord, teach us that you are not someone we can manipulate and wind around our finger, someone to do things for us and run errands for us. Help us bow before you in humble adoration at the grace that reaches out to us when we are ready to admit our need and come before you trembling and contrite. Thank you, Lord, that you love us and have drawn us to yourself. We pray for our Jewish friends, and ask that they, too, may have their eyes opened to see this beloved One who has come in their midst to be their Redeemer, who has power to set them free and to bring them into beauty and truth and fulfillment such as men have never dreamed of before. Help us to be faithful and loving to them. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: There's Hope Ahead
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Exhibited
Scripture: Romans 11:1-24
Message No: 27
Catalog No: 3527
Date: December 26, 1976

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OUR GREAT AND GLORIOUS GOD

by Ray C. Stedman

In the eleventh chapter of Romans the Apostle Paul is tracing for us a very strange connection between a largely Gentile church and the nation of Israel. Through the centuries many have wondered about the tie between these two remarkable peoples -- the church of God, which is made up now largely of Gentile believers, although there are Jews among us -- and the Jewish nation, that strange nation which now occupies a prominent place on the stage of the world.

As you know, there is no nation today quite like Israel. It attracts worldwide attention when anything happens to it -- attention that is way out of proportion to its size and its power. Let something occur in Jerusalem, or anywhere in Israel, and it is blazoned across headlines around the world. The eyes of the world are on this strange nation of the Jews. And Jews, as a people, constitute a strange, unusual power bloc in any country in which they are found today. Someone has suggested that it might be well for the United States to guarantee the permanent possession of Jerusalem to the Jews if they will agree to give New York and Miami back to us. Surely there is no nation quite like the nation of the Jews.

and twice he asks the question, "Has God forgotten his people?" Will God forget this people because of their rejection of Messiah? Has he turned his back on them? Twice he answers the question, "No, never. God has not forgotten his people."

In the first part of this chapter Paul gives us five reasons why it is evident that God has not forgotten his people the Jews.

- 1 The first one (and one of the reasons why God has turned to the Gentiles and is saving men and women from among the Gentiles) is that he desires to arouse Israel to jealousy. God is reaching Gentiles because, ultimately, he wants to reach Jews.
- 2 Second, Paul says the promises of worldwide blessing that fill so many prophetic passages of the Old Testament hinge upon the restoration of Israel to God. Worldwide blessing can never come until Israel is back in right relationship with its God.
- 3 Third, he says that if the first Jews (the patriarchs, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob) could be made holy by God, then God is able to make Jews holy after thousands of years have passed. Therefore there is hope for Israel.
- 4 In Paul's fourth argument he uses the figure of an olive tree. The natural branches of the tree are broken off and unnatural branches are grafted on. He points out that even the Gentiles, when they do become believers, become spiritual Israelites. When a Jew becomes a Christian, he doesn't change his spiritual heritage at all; he fulfills it. Jews who become Christians today are "completed Jews," but Gentiles who become Christians become spiritual Jews.
- 5 Therefore, Paul argues, not only is that true, but, fifth, if God could do that to the unnatural branches, if he could take a twisted, deformed Gentile and make him into a son of the living God, how much more can he do this with the natural branches, the Jews.

prophesies the restoration that is coming to Israel. Up to now he has been arguing this from reason, but now he prophesies what this

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: Jacob.

As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. {Rom 11:25-29 NIV}

Perhaps the striking thing about this passage is that Paul calls the Jews' present resistance to the gospel a mystery. Now he doesn't mean that it is obscure and difficult to understand. The word "mystery" does not mean that in Scripture. What it means is that it is something supernatural. It is not caused by natural causes. It cannot be observed by the normal observation of human beings.

I do not know if you have had any occasion to try to witness to a Jew. If you have, perhaps you have run up against what seemed to be a rock wall of indifference and objection and resistance to what you were trying to say. If so, you may well have been experiencing what Paul is talking about here, a strange hardening toward the gospel on the part of the Jews.

When Paul calls this a mystery he means that it is a supernatural phenomenon that has to be revealed to us. You can't explain it by the normal reasons for resistance to the gospel. It is not because the Jews are inferior in intelligence -- they are among the most intelligent of people. Scores of the greatest intellectual leaders of our time have been Jewish in background. So it is not because they are dumb; they are not dumb. And it is not because they don't want God; they are among the most religious of all people. In fact, they have been called the most religious people of all time. They want God. Ordinarily you would think they would be open to hearing the good news of how God, in grace, is ready to reach men and change them and indwell them and enrich their lives. And yet those who go among the Jews often find this strange resistance, this anger that is awakened because of the preaching of the gospel. Paul will say more about that later.

First he points out that it has been prophesied that an awakening will come. There will be an awakening. But Paul says three things about this hardness that we must take careful note of: First, it is a hardening "in part." That is, not all Jews are afflicted this way. We are not told here how big a part of Israel is going to be hardened -- whether 10 per cent or 90 per cent. All we are told is that there are going to be some Jews who simply will not hear, who will not receive the gospel. Whether you are talking to one who is hardened or one who is not is very difficult to determine. It may mean, as it does oftentimes, that the person needs to be witnessed to and loved and reached over a period of time. No one can say that any given person belongs to that hardening. But we can say that there will be, as has been evident in history, a strange, remarkable resistance to the gospel. I have been to Israel five times, and I am always amazed at how resistant the Jews there seem to be to the claims of the Lord Jesus.

Not only does Paul say that this hardening is in part, but it is also limited {in} time. It is not going to go on forever. A hardening of the heart has happened "until the full number of the Gentiles come in." So this is not something that they are bound to experience forever. It isn't something that can be explained by natural causes, and it is not going to last forever.

What does "the full number of the Gentiles" mean? I really do not like that translation. The word the apostle uses is "the fullness of the Gentiles." We have to ask ourselves, "What does that mean?"

Some, obviously, have interpreted that to mean that a certain number of Gentiles are going to be converted. God has a certain number in mind and

he is going to let the gospel go out to all the world until that number of Gentiles has been converted, and then he will release Israel from its blindness, its hardness. But I don't think this refers to a certain number.

Actually, this is the second time in this chapter where the word "fullness" is used. It is used not only of the Gentiles, as here, but also of the Jews. There is a fullness of Israel mentioned here. In riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring?" There is the same word, *pleroma*, which means "that which fills." Notice that it is set in direct contrast to the words "their loss" or "their fall." That refers to the time when Israel was driven out of Jerusalem by the armies of the earth.

This does not mean there is a diminished number of Jews. The Jews have increased in number throughout all these centuries of dispersion, so it is not a lower number of Jews that is in view. This is not talking about quantity at all. Paul is talking, rather, about diminished spiritual riches. The Jews have lost the quality and richness of their relationship with God. Though they have the outward trappings of faith and the very books of the Law, still they have lost that richness of relationship that sets the heart aglow and the face radiant with the light and love and beauty and grace and character of God. This is the loss; therefore the "fullness" means "these riches restored."

So, when Paul uses this phrase "the fullness of the Gentiles," he is talking about a Gentile church which is going to become so rich and full in its spiritual riches that it will awaken again the envy of Israel. That is what God has said in this chapter. He turns to the Gentiles in order that he may arouse the Jews to envy. Anyone who reads church history knows that there hasn't been a great deal in Gentile churches that would awaken the Jews to envy! They see among Gentile Christians, for the most part, enemies. Oftentimes the Jews have been oppressed and persecuted and terribly treated -- all in the name of Jesus Christ -- by those who profess to be Christians. But if this interpretation is right, and I think it is, it means a very hopeful thing for us. It means that a day is coming when the Gentile churches are going to be enriched with such spiritual blessing that the Jews will say, "We should have that! That's the way we should be!" And the Jews will be open, as never before, to the gospel of the grace of God.

I think we are seeing a taste of this now. This is one reason why Jews, in greater number than ever before since the time of the dispersion, have been open to the gospel and turning to Christ. This is an amazing and encouraging thing. This is what the apostle says must take place.

Paul then says the prophets have told us this is going to happen: "The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob." That is a promise in the Old Testament prophets. Furthermore, quoting from Jeremiah, he says, "And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins," {cf, Jer 31:33-34}. The deliverer is coming and forgiveness is going to be granted to Israel. That is clearly stated in the gospel.

And so the apostle closes with two important things we ought to remember about the Jews. I don't know if you have Jewish friends and neighbors or not. I have had, and have enjoyed contact with them. But whoever is in touch with Jews today ought to remember these two things from on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on

account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable." God's gifts and his call cannot be taken back.

Now, the Jews may treat you as an enemy. That is due to this strange and supernatural hardening in part that has happened to Israel. This has been the experience of many who have gone as missionaries to the Jews. They have been treated as though they were attacking the Jews instead of trying to minister to them and help them. They have aroused the enmity and anger of the Jews.

Our friends the "Jews for Jesus" have told us how they have gone into Jewish communities to share and talk about their experience as Jews who have found the glory and the grace of God in Jesus Christ. They have been met with violence and attack upon their persons and enmity against them.

I read last week that two thousand Jewish orthodox rabbis held a conference in New York City to determine what to do about the ravages that were being made in the Jewish community by the "Jews for Jesus" movement. The rabbis estimated there must be five thousand "Jews for Jesus" in New York City. The "Jews for Jesus" people say there are only thirty members there -- including secretaries. This is the fearsome front that any missionary movement among the Jews seems to create. It causes consternation among Jewish ranks and very grave resentment.

So remember, you may be treated as an enemy. But remember also that the Jews are loved by an unchanging God. God loves every Jew, without exception. No matter how stubborn or resistant they may be, he has set his love upon them. And the nations of the world had better not forget it. God still has chosen the Jews.

Now the apostle moves on to see God's principle of salvation for all men

Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too, as a result of God's mercy to you, have become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy. For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all. {Romn 11:30-32 NIV}

That is an amazing statement! In this you see something of how the mind of God works and some of the strange wheels-within-wheels {cf, Ezek 1:16, 10:6-10} with which he moves in current history to bring about his purposes. Paul says that God used the Jews' disobedience, their rejection of their own Messiah, in order to give opportunity to rebellious Gentiles to receive mercy and grace from his hand. In this very letter Paul recounted for us how the gospel went out to the Gentiles only because it had been rejected by the Jews. Paul said that in all the cities he came to, he started first in the synagogues. And he would have stayed there, had the Jews accepted the message. But when they rejected the message, he turned to the Gentiles. And it was only by the Jews' disobedience that the gospel went out to the Gentiles.

That, by the way, answers the question with which this whole section Since he obviously has been trying to reach the Jews and has sent his own Son as their Messiah and they rejected him, does that mean that God

has failed? The answer is now clear: No, God has not failed. He used that as a means to reach the Gentile world, which he had intended to reach all along. That was his way of bringing it about.

Then, Paul adds, after having shown mercy to the Gentiles, God now uses the very mercies he has shown to the Gentiles to make the Jews mad and rebellious in order that they, too, can receive mercy. What Paul is saying here is that, unless you realize how rebellious your heart is, there is no chance for you to receive mercy. And so God works in human history to make us aware of our basic, inherent rebellion against him. Paul concludes that everyone is a rebel, and God desires that everyone admit it, so they can receive mercy.

What is the thing that keeps any individual or nation from receiving mercy from God? It is always a self-righteous, self-confident attitude. "I don't need help. I can handle it myself. I am able to handle all the problems of life on my own. I don't need God." Any individual or nation with that attitude has cut himself off from receiving the mercy of God, for without mercy there is no way we can ever fulfill our humanity. So God, as Paul puts it here, has "bound all men over to [the knowledge of their] disobedience so that he may have mercy upon them all."

We have had an outstanding illustration of this in the fact that in the last few years two prominent national figures have remained etched in the public mind as an aftermath of Watergate: Richard Nixon and Charles Colson.

Charles Colson came to the place where he saw his own rebellion and disobedience to God. He finally came to a place where he was driven to his knees, where he saw that without recognizing it or knowing it, he had been involved in evil things. He began to recognize the extent of it and the control it had in his life. At last he was driven to the place where he openly committed himself to the mercy of God. God changed him. In his book *Born Again* he tells how God changed him, healed him, delivered him from prison, and sent him out again to have a new life. He is traveling across the country now, telling his story, involved deeply in a great and helpful ministry to prisoners. He is alive and enjoying life to the full.

Richard Nixon, on the other hand, has isolated himself in a self-imposed exile in which he refuses to admit he has ever done anything wrong. Tormented with the past, he has become a national pariah, and his life is limited and narrow, crabbed, because he does not yet know of the mercy of God that is available to one who admits disobedience.

That is the way God works in history. He is constantly moving in many ways in our individual lives to bring us to an awareness of our self-righteousness and dependence on ourselves. Paul says the Jewish nation has not availed themselves of the righteousness of God. Because they are so determined to establish their own righteousness, they cannot accept the righteousness that comes by faith. That is their problem.

Now all this awakens in the apostle's heart an outburst of praise and adoration for the wisdom and the greatness of God. He closes this section with these words (Verses 33-36):

knowledge of God!
his paths beyond tracing out!

things.
{Rom 11:33-36 NIV}

This reminder of the strange ways God works awakens within the apostle a tremendous outburst for God's inscrutable wisdom and his ways with men. As you look at these verses, you can see certain things that have amazed the apostle:

There are the deep riches, as Paul calls them, the deep riches of God's wisdom and of his ways. They are beyond human exploration. There is no way we can finally fathom God.

I received this week in the mail a pamphlet written by a group that is trying to analyze and understand intellectually all the doctrines of the Scriptures. They struggle, obviously, to put God in a box where they can get hold of him and analyze him. But if they succeed in that, they have only reduced God to the size of a man. God is greater than man. He is beyond us. We must always remember that. Our minds cannot grasp the greatness of God! We can understand what he tells us about himself, but even beyond that, there is much more that we cannot know. There are depths of riches. That is why we are always being surprised by God if we trust him. He is always enriching us in ways that we don't anticipate.

Then Paul speaks of God's "unsearchable judgments." We are going through one of these unsearchable judgments right now. People cannot understand this strange drought that has gripped the whole country. Meteorologists are baffled. They say, "Why does this high pressure system sit off the coast up here, and not down by Baja, where it belongs?" They are hard pressed to find somebody to blame for it and they have no control over it. They keep telling us of storms that are coming that never show up. Why? Because God's ways are unsearchable, and his ways, who can trace out? He is beyond accountability. No man can call God to account and say, "You have no right to do that!" We do it all the time, but we have no right to do it. For God is beyond us; he knows so much more than we do.

If you have any trouble with this, just read the book of Job and see the amazing list of questions that God asked and that Job could not answer. God says, "Look, this is just A-B-C stuff. If you can't answer these, then you have no right to quiz me on what I am doing! If you don't understand this simply kindergarten level of knowledge, how am I ever going to explain to you the vast, involved, and complex things that I am doing?"

Paul then is impressed by the untraceable ways of God, the paths of God that are beyond understanding. We can't put it all together. We can believe it, but we can't explain it.

For instance, it is clear from Scripture that nothing God ever planned interferes with human responsibility. Nothing God has ever said will happen in any way infringes on our free will or choice. We are free to make choices. We know it. We feel ourselves free to decide to do this or that, to do good or bad. Nothing God ever plans interferes with that freedom of human choice. And yet the amazing thing is that nothing humans ever do can frustrate God's sovereign plan. Isn't that amazing? How can you explain that? No matter what we do, whether we choose this or that with the freedom of choice we have, ultimately it all works out to accomplish what God has determined shall be done. That is the kind of

God we have.

Paul is not only impressed with God's inscrutable wisdom and ways, but he contrasts it with the impotence of man. He asks three very searching questions. If you have trouble with this, try to answer his questions:

His first one is, "Who has known the mind of the Lord?" What he is asking is, "Who has ever anticipated what God is going to do?" Have you? Have you ever been able to figure out how God is going to handle the situations you get into? Oh, we all try, but it never turns out quite the way we think it will, does it? There is a little twist to it that we never could have guessed.

You see this in the case of Jesus. Remember how the Pharisees asked him, "Should we pay taxes to Caesar?" They thought they had him. If he said "No," the Romans would be mad at him; if he said "Yes," then the Jews would be mad at him. Do you remember how he handled it? He called for a coin and said, "Whose picture is on this coin? They said, "Caesar's." He said, "All right. What Caesar has put his image on, you give to Caesar (i.e., pay your taxes); but what God has put his image on, you give that to him," {cf, Matt 22:16-22, Mark 12:13-18, Luke 20:19-26}. God had put his image on man, and that is what they owed to God -- themselves. The Pharisees couldn't handle that kind of an answer. It wiped them out.

Remember the woman caught in adultery? Her stern and self-righteous accusers were ready to put her to death. Then Jesus came. He didn't do a thing at first; he just sat and wrote on the ground. He looked up, finally, and said, "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone," {cf, John 8:7}. They stood there, puzzled and transfixed, then every one of them began to think of other places they ought to be. Soon they were all gone, and no one was left except the woman and Jesus. How could you ever have anticipated that he was going to handle it that way? How unsearchable are his judgments! Who has anticipated what God is going to do? No one.

Second question: "Or who has been his adviser?" or "Who has ever suggested something that God has never thought of?" Have you ever tried that? I have. I have sometimes looked at a situation and saw the way to work it all out and suggested to God how he could do it. I thought I had been very helpful to him. But in the final outworking of the matter, it turned out that he knew things that I didn't know and he was working at things that I never saw and couldn't have seen. God's final outworking of it was right, and mine would have been wrong. So the question remains, "Who has ever suggested something to God that he has never thought of?"

Paul's last question is, "Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?" That is, "Who has ever given God something that he didn't already have?" Who has put God in his debt? "Why," Paul says, "everything we are and have comes from him. He gives to us; we don't give to him." There is nothing we could give to God that he doesn't already own or have in abundance, or could make, if he had to. There is nothing.

And so he concludes with this great outburst: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."

God is the originator of all things; all things come from him. He is the sustainer of all things; they all depend on him. As very power that makes it possible to argue at all!" He is the end

purpose. All things will find their culmination in God. He is the reason why all things exist. Therefore, "to him be the glory forever! Amen."

Then there occurs what must be the most terrible, tragic separation that has ever been made in the Bible. The chapter division here cuts off Paul's conclusion from all the tremendous arguments which have led up to it. For Paul goes right on to say, "Therefore... "

Therefore [because God is like this and you are like that] , I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God -- which is your spiritual worship. {Rom 12:1 NIV}

I don't like that translation of "spiritual worship," either. Literally, it is "logical service." You see, it is only reasonable for man to be available to God. It is even your logical reason for existence. "Therefore," he says, "bring your bodies." If you are Christians, your spirits have already surrendered to God. But you are trying to live split lives, schizophrenic lives, if your body does not follow what your spirit has already done. Now put your body where your mouth is, and follow through with what your spirit has said to God. Be his available instrument.

At this point, traditionally I should give an altar call, in which you all would bring your bodies forward. But I am not going to do that because what Paul is describing here is not an act of the moment -- it is a commitment for the rest of your life. You are going to make your body available to God for as long as you live. Paul does not talk about your soul or your spirit because you never can do anything without your body in this life.

So put your body on the line. Bring it, a living sacrifice, and the God of greatness and of glory, of infinite riches and wisdom and power, will fill that body with his own amazing life, and you will never find life to be the same again.

What an adventure of faith that will launch you on!
Prayer

We thank you, our amazing Father, for this look at something of the wonder of your Being. How far beyond our stumbling words your greatness is! How mighty and vast you are, Lord, how powerful among the nations of earth. How terrible that we should ever feel afraid, with a God like you. How stupid, Lord, that we should ever think that we can outwit you, or cheat you, or rob you, or get away with something in your presence. How foolish, Lord, that we should ever forget that you love us and have declared that love in unmistakable ways, and that your love can only enrich us and bless us, ultimately. Therefore, Lord, lead us to the place where, in our inner spirit, in the innermost chambers of our wills, we submit ourselves to you, gladly and cheerfully and thankfully. We are thankful that we have the inestimable privilege of

being children of the living God today. We ask you to lead us and send us out into the world around us this week with that truth governing all that we say and do. We pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Our Great and Glorious God
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Exhibited
Scripture: Romans 11:25 - 12:1
Message No: 28
Catalog No: 3528
Date: February 27, 1977

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LIVING DAY BY DAY

by Ray C. Stedman

I believe it ought to be against the law to read or quote the first two have been cut off from the ones in the preceding chapter. The two verses your body to God and give it to him to use. But all the great reasons

knowledge of God!
things.

Therefore, ... {Rom 11:33-12:1a NIV}

Because he is like this -- rich and wise and great and glorious, a God of love and mercy, and you are like this -- ignorant of the future, forgetful of the past, unable to control the present --

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer yourselves as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God -- which is your spiritual worship. [Literally, "which is your logical service, that which makes sense."] Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is -- his good, pleasing and perfect will. {Rom 12:1-3 NIV}

These are familiar words. I know you have read them many times. I like the way the Jerusalem Bible translates the first sentence:

Think of God's mercies, my brothers, and worship him, I beg you, in a way that is worthy -- by offering him your living bodies. {Rom 12:1 Jerusalem Bible}

That is what we sing in that great hymn, When I Survey The Wondrous Cross : It closes,

Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

That is what Paul is urging us to do here. He says God is interested in you bringing your body and making it available to him. When he says to "present your bodies," he uses what the Greeks call the aorist tense. That means it is something you do once for all; it is not something you do over and over again. You do it once, and then you set the rest of your life on that basis. So there comes a time when God wants you to bring your bodies to him.

It amazes me that God would ever want our bodies. Why does he want my body? I can hardly stand it myself, at times! But God says, "Bring your body." Perhaps the most amazing thing is that Paul has been talking about the body all the way through this section of Romans. In fact, he tells us the body is the seat of what he calls "the flesh," that antagonistic nature within us that does not like what God likes and does not want to do what God wants. We all have it, and somehow it is located in or connected with the body. Our body is the source of temptation. It is what grows weak and wobbly. That God would want this is amazing! And yet he does.

Some of us, I know, feel like saying, "Lord, surely you don't want this. It has a bad heart, Lord. It has a dirty mind. You don't want this body. I have trouble with this body. It is always tripping me up. My spirit is great, and I worship you with my soul -- but the body, Lord, that's what gets me down!" But the Lord says, "Bring your body. Let me tell you something about it. I know all about it. I know more about it than you do. I know all the things you tell me about it plus some things you haven't learned yet. Let me tell you something. By means of the blood of Jesus, and by the work of the Holy Spirit, I have made it (what does

Paul say?) holy and pleasing to God."

That is the beautiful appeal of this verse. It is not telling us we have to get all cleaned up and get our lives straightened out in every way and become perfect before we can offer ourselves to God. Paul's word is, "I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer yourselves as living sacrifices. Bring your bodies (that is what it says in the Greek word -- your bodies , not yourselves) as a living sacrifice unto God." Bring it, with all its problems, with all the difficulty you have with it, with all the temptations and all -- bring it just the way it is! I don't know how that affects you, but that encourages me greatly. All the other religions that I know of in the world tell us that somehow we have to straighten out our lives first, and then offer them to God. God never talks that way. He says, "You come to me just the way you are. I am the answer to your problems; therefore, you must start with me. You can't handle those problems yourself. Don't start with thinking you have to get them straightened out. Come to me, because I have the answers for your problems."

Furthermore, Paul tells us, this is the only thing that makes sense. "This is your logical worship." This is the way you worship God. I hear a lot of people talking about worship these days. When you come to a church, you come to worship corporately, together. But worship doesn't start or end in church. You are worshipping or you are not worshipping all week long, depending on what you do with your body. Is it his? Is it his to use right where you are -- at your work, in your home, with your family? Worship is allowing God to use your body and to be the dynamic that works through that body in every situation. God says that is your logical worship. That is the only thing that makes sense.

God says if you use the body that you have, you will misuse it, abuse it. You will use it for things the body was never intended to be used for. Or you will use it in such a way that it will be destroyed or hurt. We know this is true. But if you give your body to God, he says he will use it rightly. You will either ruin it, if you use it yourself, or you will spend so much time preserving it, painting it, pouring lotions on it, exposing it to the sun, and all the other things we do, that you will never get around to using it for what God has intended it. "So bring it to me," God says, "and I will use it wherever you go, and I will use it in such a way as to bring peace and to give joy and to heal hurt and show love and healing and grace wherever you are. I will bless the world through your body."

Therefore, the only logical, sensible thing to do with your body is to bring it to the Lord and say, "Lord, here it is, just as it is, without any attempt to improve it or make it better. Take me, Lord, and begin to use me."

Well, that sounds like a great deal, doesn't it?

You say, "Okay, Lord, but how do I do this? How does it work?"

The Lord says, "Well, you bring your body, and then there are two things I want you to do after that. Once you bring your body to me, I will take it. But then there are two things that you need to keep doing. First, 'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world.' Second, 'But be transformed by the renewing of you mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is -- his good, pleasing and perfect will.'"

These two commands are both in the present tense.

That means they are things that you keep on doing. You bring your body once -- you give it to God and you base the rest of your life on that commitment -- then you go out and do these two things every day:

First, "Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world." Literally, this means "the schemes of this world," the schemes that men come up with, by which they regulate and run their lives. The word of the Lord is, "Stop being conformed to that." "Oh," you say, "I know what that means. I know exactly what you are talking about. That means you should not smoke or drink or play cards or, if you are really, really spiritual, you sell your television set and never drink coffee or tea again." You say that is being spiritual and not being conformed to the world.

There are a lot of Christians who have thought that. I grew up thinking that if you stopped all these things that the world does you were being spiritual. And there was always a particular list of forbidden activities. A lot of other things the world did were not on the list, but the things mentioned above were always on it. And if you stopped doing those things you were not being conformed to the world. I had to learn, through rather painful experience, that has nothing do with spirituality at all. Those things are neither good nor bad in themselves.

I know people who have given up all of them, and yet they are still saturated by the spirit of the age. That is what this word really means. It doesn't mean "be not conformed to this world," it means "be not conformed to the pattern of this age, the spirit of the age, the philosophy of thought and of life that surrounds us on every side." God says, "Don't give way to the schemes of men, the schemes by which they live their lives."

The spirit of the age, you see, is always the same. It never changes from generation to generation. The basis of it is clearly the advancement of self. Everybody in the world lives to advance himself. Just listen, and you will see how true that is. You hear them talk about it. "What do I get out of this? What is in it for me?" That is the spirit of the age. "What's my angle; how can I work this for my benefit? Unless there is something in it for me, I'm not interested!" That is the spirit of the age.

What the Word is saying to us is "Don't be stuck in that kind of thinking, because that is what is wrecking life among men. That is what brings the heartache and ruin and disaster into our lives. Don't live on that basis anymore. Don't get sucked into that kind of thinking; it's wrong! It is an approach to life that is twisted and distorted, and it won't work. Don't be trapped by it."

What is the spirit of this age? We all know what it is. It is my personal happiness. If the advancement of self is the basis for all life, then the goal of all life is my happiness. You hear that on every side. Unfortunately, it has infiltrated the church as well. Christians talk this way just as much as anybody else. They say, "The reason why I am working and living is so I can have my needs met, my desires fulfilled." I hear people talking about church this way. "Why do you go to church?" they are asked. "Because it meets my needs." Or you will hear them say, "I'm thinking of leaving this church and going to another one." If you ask them why, they'll say, "Because this one doesn't meet

my needs." As though the only reason for ever going to church is to have your needs met! That is the thinking of the world; that is the spirit of the age. And to be conformed to that way of thinking is to be conformed to the world, regardless of whether you drink or smoke or chew or play cards.

Then there are the methods of the world. You only have to look around to see what those are. They are rivalry and competition, getting ahead of the other guy, getting there first, grabbing what's mine before someone else gets it, hanging onto everything I've got no matter what it costs in terms of hurt or pain to someone else. That is the method of this age, isn't it? That is very clear.

The apostle is saying, "Be not conformed to this world. Do not conform any longer. Don't let the world around you pressure you into thinking that way any longer." No doubt every one of us realizes how much pressure we are subjected to. The pressure to conform pervades all of society. Even in the church itself people talk this way, think this way, live this way. All around us is a whole climate of life that is saying, "Conform!" It is pressuring us, squeezing us, insisting we conform, making it costly to us if we don't.

I heard this week of an incident in the life of Jerome Hines, the Metropolitan Opera singer. Many of you know the story of his life -- how, as a boy growing up in California, he became convinced that he had a good voice. Someone urged him to train it, and so he did. He became possessed of a desire to become a star in the Metropolitan Opera Company. That was what he lived for. He built his life around that, gave up all other activities, all other pursuits, all other pleasures, to give himself to the necessary work of training to become an opera star. He learned the arts of intonation, of musical projection. He learned several languages so he could sing operatic roles. He gave himself to that tremendous desire within him to be a star in the Metropolitan Opera. It finally came true. He became a star. And he said it was empty, hollow. One day he heard a man singing. The voice was as good as his, and the man could have done what he did. He heard Beverly Shea singing, "I'd Rather Have Jesus." The words he sang were,

I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold,
I'd rather be His than have riches untold,
I'd rather have Jesus than houses or land,
I'd rather be led by His nail-pierced hands
Than to be the king of a vast domain,
And be held in sin's dread sway.
I'd rather have Jesus than anything
This world affords today.

That song got to Jerome Hines. He began to think about it, and, out of that incident, he became a Christian. But he didn't quit the opera. A lot of people thought he should have. They thought the opera was "worldly"! No, opera is not worldly -- except to those who think like worldlings and live like wordlings in the opera. Jerome Hines stayed in opera, but everything was different. He was not longer singing for the advancement of Jerome Hines, he was singing for the glory of God. He dedicated his art, his work, his all to that purpose. That is right. God doesn't take us out of the world; he wants us to live in it, but to

change our thinking. Jerome did.

A few years ago Hines had an opportunity to sing the role that he had always wanted to sing. He trained for it, with months and months of hard work, and he was given the role. He was contracted to sing that role in the opera for ten years. When he went to the opera to practice he found some people performing a rather lewd dance. He asked, "What is this?" He was told, "This is the choreography that introduces the opera." He said, "There's nothing in the opera like this!" "No," they said, "we're changing it a bit, modernizing it, bringing it up to date." Jerome Hines said, "I won't sing if you are going to have this kind of a dance in it." He was told he had better go talk to Mr. Bing.

Jerome Hines went to Rudolph Bing, the Metropolitan Opera general manager, and said to him, "Sir, if you have that dance in the opera then I am not going to sing in it." Bing told him, "If you don't sing, you will be ostracized and blacklisted in opera because you are under contract to sing." Hines said, "Sir, I can't sing in that opera. I am not going to let my name be used to entice people to come in to see filth like this. You can break me, sir, and the union can break me. I've worked hard for months to train for this role, but I will not sing in your opera if that dance is in it." Bing said, "Jerome, you don't have to sing. If you really feel that way, you don't have to sing; we'll get someone else. But we can't change the contract."

So Jerome Hines had to give up that role. It cost him, over the period of ten years, something like a hundred thousand dollars. How many of you are willing to give your body to God in such a way that you would be willing to give up a hundred thousand dollars rather than do something with your body that would be offensive to your Lord?

That is what Paul is talking about by not being conformed to this world -- not going along with its pattern of thinking, not being willing to go in for all that it goes in for in its pursuit of pleasure and happiness. "That's tough," you say. You bet it's tough! If you do that day after day it gets very hard, because you are under constant pressure -- and it gets to you after a while. "Everybody is thinking this way, everybody wants to do that, nobody understands you -- so why don't you give in?"

There is only one answer to that question. In order to stand up against that kind of pressure you need what Paul talks about next: "but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." There is no way that you can keep from being conformed to the world unless you are being transformed by the renewing of your mind. Something has to happen to your thinking. You can't go on thinking the way the world around you thinks and still not give in and be conformed to what it does. What we need is a change of thinking. That comes day by day by being renewed again and again and again. You need a mind that will see through all these silly schemes of the world. There is that kind of a mind. In the Scriptures it is called "the mind of Christ." The mind of Christ is the way of looking at life as Jesus does, seeing life as he sees it. It is seeing what is really there and not what seems to be there, seeing what really is important, not what looks to be important. You can't have that mind unless you are having your mind renewed every day.

The mind of Christ, of course, looks at the world and does not say that the basis of life is the advancement of self. When it looks at the world it says that the basis for living, the reason for life, is to serve God and to advance his will. Not your will, but his will be done; not the building of your kingdom and your empire, but the advancement of his

kingdom. This is the basis for life. This is really what human beings are here for. And to maintain that kind of thinking in the midst of the world takes a renewed mind.

I was talking with a young businessman this past week. He told me that he sat down a few months ago and made a list of all the reasons why he is working at his company -- the advantages it gave him, the salary, the prestige and status, the opportunity to rub shoulders with men in his profession who could help him, the opportunity to be involved in work in which he found intense pleasure and delight. Then, when he finished the list, he looked at it and said to himself, "That's just the human list -- the things that just anybody would put down. I'm a Christian. I ought to have other reasons than these for being here." So he took another piece of paper and sat down and began to list all the reasons why God wanted him there. He began to see things that he hadn't seen before. He saw that God had him there because the fellow at the desk next to his needed help. He had an opportunity to bring a witness to that whole organization that wouldn't be there otherwise. He had occasions to help people with their problems and give them Christian insights to help solve their personal and emotional problems. He began to list all the reasons why God had him there. When he finished, he began to realize that these were the reasons why he was in that job. How much money he made and his advancement were really very trivial; the enduring thing, the thing that would last forever, was not what he got out of it, but what God got out of it.

That is what this passage is talking about -- renewing your mind so that you see life the way God sees it. The mind of Christ sees that the goal of living is not to please yourself but to please God. And the way you please God is to depend on him, to expect him to work through you, where you are; to expect that he has the power and the wisdom and the strength to somehow, in the situation in which you find yourself, do things in ways that you can't anticipate or even dream of. God is pleased when people venture out in faith.

This past January, at the men's conference, I shared with the men a paper that I had found describing the two kinds of theology there are in Christian life today. It was put in terms of the Old West. One was called "Settler Theology, " and the other, "Pioneer Theology." This paper had some very interesting ways of expressing these differences. In Settler Theology the church is the courthouse in a little town; it is in charge of everything. In Pioneer Theology the church is a covered wagon, out on the trail, never stopping, moving on and on, involved in battles and bearing the scars of many fights, getting stuck in the mud and getting pulled out again. That is the church, a covered wagon.

In Settler Theology, God is the mayor. He lives up on the top floor of the courthouse and keeps an eagle eye on everything going on in town. In Pioneer Theology God is the trail boss, rough and rugged and tough and hard-hitting; he won't let anybody stop -- he keeps them going down the trail. He gets down, shoulder to the wheel, when they get stuck in the mud.

In Settler Theology, Jesus is the sheriff. He wears a white hat and goes around and plugs all the bad boys that come into town. He is always determining who goes to jail and who doesn't. In Pioneer Theology Jesus is the scout, out ahead of the party, telling where the wagon is to go next, exposed to all the dangers of the trail. He is the pioneer par-excellence, everyone looks to him as the model of what a pioneer ought to be.

In Settler Theology, the Holy Spirit is the saloon girl. She keeps everybody comforted and happy. In Pioneer Theology, the Holy Spirit is the buffalo hunter, out providing the meat for the wagon train, feeding them daily. He amuses himself by going up to the courthouse window every Sunday, when all the settlers are having an ice cream party, and firing off a tremendous blast from his shotgun that scares the living daylights out of all the people inside.

In Settler Theology, the preacher is the banker. He keeps all the resources in town under control. Everything has to go through him. In Pioneer Theology, the preacher is the cook. He just dishes out the food that the buffalo hunter provides. He's no better than any of the other pioneers, he just keeps them fed.

This paper is a tremendous gathering-up of New Testament Christianity. Christians are not sent into the world to build their own little nests, to feather them up and keep them nice and comfortable, and to try to get by without being polluted by the things around them. That is what we often think, and that is what we often hear, but that is not what it is all about. We are sent into the world like sheep in the midst of wolves, Jesus said. We are exposed to danger and pressure and trouble and battle all the time. The only thing that will keep us from succumbing to all this subversive propaganda to which we are constantly exposed is that we constantly have our minds renewed by the Word of God.

How do you get your mind renewed?

Well, it happens at church, to name one place. This is why we have the exposition of the Scriptures on Sunday morning when we come together and hear once again what the truth is -- not what everyone around is telling us is true. That philosophy is wrecking everybody else's lives, but here you learn what the truth is, what really helps and heals and works.

Your mind is renewed in your personal Bible study, when you sit down with the Word of God. When you are confused and don't know where you are, you renew your mind by reading through a passage and thinking it through and letting the Word speak to your heart. Then you go back to your routine and determine that your life will be in line with the Word of God.

The rest of the book of Romans is designed to tell you how to have your mind renewed so you won't be conformed to the spirit of the age. This is where we learn that the methods of the Christian are not rivalry and competition, but obedience to the Word of God and a heart that expects God to operate. Then life becomes exciting. God wants your life at work and at home to be exciting, with this constant battle around you, so that you might understand how to live and overcome and conquer in the name of Jesus.

I don't know what you are going to be doing this week, but I know that living a Christian life isn't something that is done only in church. It is done wherever you are. It starts with a change in your thinking. You don't let yourself think like other people around you think. That can only come as you are exposed to the truth as it is in Jesus.

Now, what are you going to do with your life? Are you going to wrap it up in a napkin of affluence and bury it in forty years of self-indulgence? Well, that would be the dullest experience you could have. When you get before the throne of God, all you will find out is

that you have wasted all those years. Oh, you will be there, if you know the Lord, but you will find you have wasted your life, and it will be worth nothing before his throne. And you will have lived the dullest kind of existence.

But if you are willing to bring your body to God and say, "Lord, here it is. I have trouble with it, and I'm sure you will too, but here it is. You wanted it. I give it to you for the rest of my life, to be your instrument for whatever you want." God says, "All right, I'll take it." If you then, on that basis, begin to recognize the systematic brainwashing of the world and refuse it, and constantly renew your thinking in the truth as it is found in Jesus and the Word of God, then I will tell you something: You are going to have an exciting life, beyond what you ever dreamed. It will never be dull. It will be awfully hard sometimes, but never dull, never boring.

What are you going to do with your life?

I had a friend many years ago who was walking through the Union Station in Chicago. It was a busy, crowded station. He had been thinking of what he might do with his life. It suddenly dawned on him, as he was walking across that crowded station, that the only logical thing he could do with his life, since it belonged to God and had been redeemed by the Lord, was to give it to him and ask him to use it. Right in the midst of the crowd he stopped and drew a little mark with his toe. Then he stood on it. He said,

"Lord, here I am. I am yours. The rest of my life, whatever you want me to do, if you will show me and convince me that is what you want, I will do it. The attitudes you want me to have, that is what I will have. As I study and read your Word, I will try to carry out what you tell me to do, and think the way you tell me to think. Here I am, Lord; you do with my life as you want."

Now, that was a commitment service held in Union Station in Chicago that nobody knew about but this man and God. But God picked that man up and began to use him in remarkable ways. He has traveled the world and has touched hundreds of lives because God used him that way.

If you want to stand where you are now and draw a little mark on the floor with your toe, that's fine. Give yourself to God, if that is what you want. He doesn't make anybody do this.

That is why Paul puts it in these terms: "I beseech you, brothers, I beg you. It is the logical outcome of your life, the only thing that makes sense." But will you give yourself to him, so you can never forget that you did it right here and right now? Every time you come back to this spot you will think about it. "This is where I gave myself to God. This is where I said he had a right to use me. He can use my body and all that I am for the rest of my life."

Some of you have already done this, and I am not asking you to do it again, unless you feel that you need to renew that. But for those of you who have never given yourself to God, this is the place. I beg you, brothers, to present your bodies as living sacrifices unto him. Be not

conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, and you will prove that God's will is not only good, but it is acceptable and perfect, as well.

Prayer

Our Father, you know what each heart here is saying and thinking before you. As you read our hearts now, Father, as you hear a cry that says,

"That's what I want to do with my life. I want to be your man. I want to join the pioneers. I don't want to settle down and be a religious settler trying to enjoy the same comfort and self-indulgence and ease that the world around me is enjoying, but covered over with a religious glaze. I want to be a man or woman out on the firing line, out in the frontier, living life as you want it to be lived, challenging the forces around and resisting the brainwashing of the world. Lord, I give myself to you for that reason. Take me and use me just as you please."

Lord, wherever you hear that cry, we pray that you will help that person to understand that this is exactly what you are doing, that you mean this, that you will take them and use their lives for your glory. May this moment never be forgotten. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Living Day by Day
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Experienced
Scripture: Romans 12:1-3
Message No: 29
Catalog No: 3529
Date: March 6, 1977

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WHO AM I, LORD?

by Ray C. Stedman

Last week we saw that the only logical and sensible thing that a Christian can do with his body is to turn it over to the Lord, present it to him, and ask him to use it in everything he does. We have quoted these words from Scripture many times: "Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus," {Col 3:17b RSV}. That means by his strength and by his power. That is what Paul is exhorting us to in Romans 12:1-2. "Present your bodies a living sacrifice" {Rom 12:1b RSV}, not just to come to church in, but to do everything in terms of that power and strength which God supplies to you.

There are two things that are necessary to make that happen:

- 1 One is to "stop being conformed to the world," {cf, Rom 12:2a}. Stop acting like everyone else around you. As we saw last week, that does not mean making up a list of ten no-no's to quit doing. This is not a negative thing so much as it is a positive one. It is not that you stop doing a few things that other people are doing that are regarded as "wrong," it is more that you start doing some things that they don't do at all -- like loving your enemy, and forgiving when you have been injured, and returning good for evil, and showing kindness to those who are ungrateful and selfish. These are the things we are called to do. This is not being conformed to the world.
- 2 The only way you can do this is to take the second step, to "be transformed by having your mind renewed," {cf, Rom 12:2b}.

is talking about what it means specifically to have your thinking changed.

The place to start is with yourself. That is always where God starts. He never wants to change others until he has changed you. Jesus said, "First remove the beam that is in your own eye, then you will see clearly how to help your brother remove the little sliver that is in his eye," {cf, Matt 7:3-5, Luke 6:41-42}. The order of this is so important! Start with yourself first.

thinking of ourselves: First, what to think about who we are; and then what to think about the gifts God has given us.

For by the grace given to me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. {Rom 12:3 NIV}

Paul is saying, first, to think about yourself.

Many people get the idea that the Christian life consists of never thinking about yourself. Because we know that ultimately we are to reach out to others, we think that there is never any place for thinking about ourselves. That is wrong. It is true that some Christians have abused this to such a degree that all they think about is themselves. I know Christians like this who are forever going around taking their spiritual temperature, feeling their spiritual pulse, and worrying about their spiritual condition.

The Scriptures tell you to examine yourself to see whether you are in the faith or not, "to see whether Christ be in you," as Paul writes to of nothing but yourself, but it is quite right to take time, occasionally, to evaluate yourself and where you are in your Christian life and experience. The apostle says so. In fact, he exhorts us with his apostolic authority to do so. "For by the grace given to me," i.e., the gift of apostleship, on the basis of that office he exhorts every one of us to take time to think through where we are and what is going on in our lives. Every one of you is to think about yourself.

Now, Paul stresses that you have to do this in a way that avoids overrating yourself. "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought." I am sure he puts this first because this is such a natural tendency with us. But feelings can change and fluctuate a thousand times a minute. They are dependent upon so many factors over which we have no control, such as whether our glands are working properly, or whether the sun is shining, or whether we ate too much at a previous meal, or whether we got enough sleep the night before -- all these factors affect our feelings. Therefore the most foolish thing in the world is to judge yourself on the basis of how you feel at any given moment.

Now, feelings are important, and I don't mean to rule them out entirely. Sometimes people get the idea that feelings are all wrong. No, feelings aren't wrong; they are just not what you base your evaluation of yourself on. This is what the Scriptures tell us in many places.

Well then, on what basis should you evaluate yourself? The answer, of course, is how God sees you. That is reality -- what God says you are. That is the realistic way to think about yourself. It is a two-fold evaluation, as the apostle makes clear in this verse:

- 1 First of all, he says, "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but think of yourself with sober judgment." So, first, think soberly about yourself. What does that mean? What will sober you? Well, surely that refers to the teaching of the Scriptures on the Fall. We are all fallen creatures. We all have within us this Adamic nature which is not to be trusted at all. And as long as we are in the flesh, in the body, we are going to have this nature. Therefore, the first thing to remember about yourself is that there is something you have to watch. There will be something within you that you can't quite trust. There will be thoughts and attitudes and temptations in your life which are distorted and wrong. And they will always be there. Therefore, first of all, think soberly about yourself.
- 2 But then, second, think with "the measure of faith that God has given you." That is, look back over all God has told you about what has happened since you have come to Christ. The degree to which you accept what God has said about you will give you confidence and courage and ability to function as a human being any day, or at any given task. You have that courage and ability according to how much you believe what God has said.

And what has God said about you? Look back over all the tremendous truth given in the first eight chapters of Romans: We are no longer in Adam, in our spirit, but are now tied to Christ. He lives with us, his power is available to us. The Holy Spirit has come to enable us to say, "No," to all the evil forces and temptations that we come up against, so that sin shall not have dominion over us, for we are not under the Law but under grace. That is the way to think about yourself. Remember that you are always going to have to be on guard because of the evil of the flesh within you, but you can always win because of the grace of God and the righteousness of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit which you have.

When I get up in the morning I try to remind myself of three things:

- * First, I am made in the image of God. I am not an animal and I don't have to behave like an animal, because I have an ability within me, given by God himself, to react and relate to God. Therefore I can behave as a man and not as a beast.
- * Second, I am filled with the Spirit of God. The most amazing thing has happened! Though I didn't deserve it in the least degree, I have the power of God at work within me. I have become, in some sense, the bearer of God, and God himself is willing to be at work in me in terms of the little problems and the little pressures that I am going to go through this day.
- * And third, I remind myself that I am part of the plan of God, that God is working out all things to a great and final purpose in the earth and I am part of it. What I do today has purpose and significance and meaning. It is not just a meaningless thing that I am going to go through. Even the smallest incident, the most apparently insignificant word or relationship, is involved in that great plan. Therefore it has meaning and purpose.

I don't know what that does for you, but it gives me confidence without conceit. You see, I have a sense of being able to cope, of being able to handle life. And yet I know that I don't deserve this gift of worth and grace, and yet I have it. Therefore I can't be conceited about it, but I can be confident in it. I don't know anything else that can set you on your feet like that. If you succumb to the thinking of the world around you, you will end up either as bigheaded and as boastful and as loudmouthed as Mohammed Ali, or you will end up certain that you can't do anything and as unwilling to attempt anything, as meek and fearful and timid as a mouse. But God has provided a way that we can face life daily with confidence, and yet without a vestige of conceit, because we know that it doesn't come from us.

Now Paul moves to our life in the church and he takes up the subject of the gifts that God has given. Not only are you who you are because of the work of Christ, but you have what you have because of his work too.

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. {Rom 12:4-5 NIV}

That is a beautiful picture of the church. I don't know what you think about the church. Most of us have grown up with various backgrounds and experiences in churches, and I am sure all of us have a mental picture

of what the church ought to be. But here is where we need our thinking changed. We need to be renewed in our mind. God has told us that his church is like a human body. If you want a good course in ecclesiology, just stand in front of your mirror some morning without your clothes on and examine your body. That is what the church is like.

The first thing that will impress you is that there is only one body there, not two. There is only one church in all the world. All Christians belong to it, and it doesn't make any difference whether they have a denominational label or not. If they have been born of the Spirit of God, they are members of that church, and there is only one church. Therefore, wherever the members meet one another, they already belong to each other. Whether you have your name on a church roll somewhere is of no significance whatsoever. There is only one church, one body, yet there are many members.

The second thing that will strike you as you look at your own body is that it has members. It isn't just a trunk, but it has arms and legs and feet and toes and fingers and eyes and ears and a number of other interesting protuberances. And they are all for a purpose. They are part of a body, they belong to the body. And so the church of Christ has many members, and they are different. That is what I like about the church -- the diversity of it. And yet that is so contrary to the spirit of the age. In this age in which we live, the spirit of the world around us is one of uniformity. Everybody is pressured to look and act and talk and think alike. You join a club and you have to dress like they dress, drive the same general class of car, etc. You join another club and you have to change your way of speaking. This is the Christian life. I don't know why it is that we have this mentality that we have to Xerox everything. Even in the church, people want to turn out Christians like so many sausages -- all alike. No matter where you cut them they are still bologna.

But that is not God's idea of the church. His idea is to have diversity within the church. There are many members, and they are not to be alike. That is the joy of it. They don't come from the same class or the same race or the same color, and they don't even have the same gifts. They have many gifts. A true church is one where people are beginning to recognize that diversity more and more and rejoice in it. They let people be different and don't try to grind them all out alike.

I have been with Christian groups in which you could discern who the members were by the fact that they all carried the same Bible under their arms -- the same version and even the same color. Sometimes they even would have identical notebooks.

That isn't the way God runs his church. Each member is to be different, with a blessed diversity. And yet, Paul says, though these members do not all have the same function, each one belongs to all the others. That is unique. No other organization in the world can say that about itself. In all other organizations the members are individually there for what each can get out of it. But in the church of Jesus Christ, we belong to one another. We share with one another. Paul says we are to have the same care, one for another. Isn't this remarkable! How terrible it would be if all Christians were exactly the same.

Years ago, Ron Ritchie was our high school pastor and was teaching First painted a football like one huge eye, a human eye, with a big, round pupil. He wrapped it in a blanket and put it under his arm and showed it to the kids. "What do you think of my baby?" he asked. They would look

at it and say, "Oh, gross!" Here was this eye staring out at them. He asked them, "What if your girlfriend was just an eye? If you took her out on a date there would be this great big eye sitting across from you in the booth. What a date that would be!" He drove home this point very forcibly: We are not just one member; we are many. We are to have the same care one for another. Even though we are different, we are to love each other because we belong to each other. We share the same life together.

That is why you are to get along with other Christians -- not because you like them, necessarily, or that they are very nice, but just because you belong to each other. They are your brothers and sisters. And when they hurt, you will hurt, whether you know it or not. And when they are honored, you will be honored, whether you know it or not.

A number of years ago I fell and injured my wrist rather severely. It swelled up and got very painful. And the rest of my body felt so bad about it that it sat up all night to keep it company. That is what the body of Christ is to do when one member is hurt. We are tied to one another, and when one hurts, all hurt.

Not only is that true, but Paul goes on to point out that we have gifts

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. {Rom 12:6-8 NIV}

That is only a partial list of gifts. There are many others that are list of gifts that are available to us. But the point the apostle makes is this: God has given gifts. Paul calls them "graces," and we have different gifts, according to the specific gift of grace that is given to us. I like that term for gifts because it indicates something about them. Graces are graceful. Something graceful is a delight to watch in action. This is true about a spiritual gift. It is an ability God has given you because he wants you function along this line. It enables you to do this thing so naturally and smoothly and beautifully that others will take note of it, and ask you to do it, and enjoy watching you do it. And you will enjoy it, too.

A spiritual gift is a fulfilling thing when you are using it. You enjoy doing it, and that is why it is called a "grace" that is given to you. It is not a hard, painful thing to do; it is something you delight in doing. And you can improve in it as you do it. Therefore it is one of the things that will make life interesting and fulfilling for you. Imagine how hurt you parents would be if you gave gifts to your children, wrapped them all up in beautiful packages and put them under the Christmas tree, and then handed them out to your children and the child just took it and laid it aside. What if he said, "Thank you," and never bothered to open it, never made any effort to find out what was in it.

Can you imagine how the Lord must feel when he has given gifts to us

that he intends us to use and we never take the trouble to find out what they are, and never put them to work, and excuse ourselves by saying that we can't do anything. But the Word of God tells us there is not a single Christian who is left out in this matter of the distribution of gifts. It is clear from this account that the gifts Paul lists here are intended to be used. That is what Paul stresses here.

the gift you ought to covet earnestly to be manifest in your midst, because basically it is the gift of expounding Scripture, making Scripture come alive. It comes from a root word in Greek that means "to cause to shine," and it refers to the ability to take the Word of God and make it shine. Everybody sees what to do, and where to go, and how to act, and function. Peter says, "We have a more sure word of prophecy Calvin describes prophecy as "the peculiar gift of explaining revelation." Paul says if you have the gift -- and it is not just for people who go to seminary; there may be many in a congregation who will have the gift of prophesying -- then use it. But use it according to the proportion of your faith. That is, stay with what you know. Don't try to get into areas that you don't yet understand. That will come later as you grow in the use of your gift. Start where you do understand Scripture, make it clear to people, explain it. That is the gift of prophesying.

There are some who have the gift of serving . This is a very beautiful and common gift. Many people have it. I think it is the same gift which 12:28 KJV}. It is the word from which we get our word deacon. It is to deaconize, i.e., to serve as an usher, to do banking on behalf of the church, or caring for widows, serving on committees -- whatever. But it is the ability to so help people with such a cheerful spirit that they are blessed by it. You know people like that. You are thinking of some right now who have the gift of helps. You just love to have them around because they are so eager to serve and they do it so willingly and cheerfully that everybody is helped and blessed by it. What a tremendous gift that is! The church runs by those who have this gift. Many of you have it, so put it to work. "If [a person's gift] is serving, let him serve."

"If [his gift] is teaching , let him teach." Teaching is the ability to impart knowledge and information, to instruct the mind. You see, prophesying goes much deeper. It instructs the heart and moves the will. But teaching instructs the mind, and is the basis for much else that comes in the Scriptures, in terms of gifts. Therefore the gift of teaching is a great gift, and widely established in the body. I suspect that at least 30 per cent or more of any Christian group would have the gift of teaching. If you have it, don't wait for somebody to ask you to teach. The church didn't give you these gifts. The pastor didn't give you these gifts. God gave them to you -- you put them to work. Don't wait for somebody to come around and invite you to exercise your gift. That may happen, and be glad if it does, but you still have the responsibility to use the gift God has given you, whether anybody asks you to or not. You find the occasion. Find somebody who doesn't know as much as you know and teach them, if you have the gift of teaching.

Then there is the gift of encouragement . That was the gift that Barnabas had. He was called "the son of encouragement," which is what Barnabas means. His name was Joseph, but no one called him Joe; they called him Barney. In the stories of Barnabas in the Scriptures he is always found with his arm around somebody's shoulder, encouraging him, comforting him, urging him on. This is a marvelous gift in the church. If you have the gift of encouragement, start anywhere and use it. God

gave it to you, therefore use that gift.

Then there is the gift of giving, contributing . Did you know that is a gift? That means God will give you something to give, and then he will give you a desire to give it. If you have that gift, use it! The more you use it, the more you will have to give. It is part of the way you function in the body of Christ, and many can use that gift. Paul says, "Let him give generously." That is not quite an accurate translation. What Paul is really saying is, "Let him give with simplicity." It means without ostentation, without calling people's attention to it.

I heard of a man who stood up in a meeting and said, "I want to give \$100 anonymously." You can't give that way if you have the gift of giving; you give with simplicity, without making a big deal out of it.

Just give the gift as unto God and delight in the opportunity to be used by the hand of God.

Then the gift of leadership is mentioned. That specifically is a word that means "leading meetings." It comes from a root which means "to stand up before others." If you have that gift, there are all kinds of meetings waiting to be led. But when you use it, Paul says, do it with diligence. That is, don't wing it. Do it thoughtfully, think it through in advance. Make yourself ready for it, and use the meeting to its fullest purpose. The gift of leadership is a great gift.

Then, finally, Paul mentions the gift of showing mercy . I just delight in some of the people of this church who have the gift of showing mercy. I watch them in the congregation at times.

- * There is a young girl who comes and brings retarded children, sits with them in her lap, and interprets the service to them.
- * There is another young girl who brings a dear old lady who is partially crippled and nearly blind. She brings her almost every Sunday and ministers to her.

Mercy, you see, is helping those who are undeserving or neglected by others. The gift of showing mercy is a marvelous gift within the church, and many have it. If you have it, don't wait for somebody to show you what to do -- start doing it.

Sometimes great and marvelous organizations have grown up out of a single person beginning to exercise his gift. This ministry for retarded children, called Green Pastures, has grown up out the exercise of the gift of mercy by a single individual. There is another ministry that is just starting to take off that is reaching out to the vast crowd of homosexuals in this area. It was organized by someone who had a vision, a gift of showing mercy. They had an understanding of the homosexual's need and a desire to help. These people are starting out alone, but others will join them -- so organizations come into being by individuals exercising their gift. That is the way the church functions.

There are many other gifts that are not mentioned here, as I said, but no matter where you find a list of gifts, there are always two says,

Each one should use whatever spiritual gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one

speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God

first four gifts listed have to do with speaking; there are three have to do with serving. There are two basic functions, then, of every believer in the body of Christ. Either you speak, or you serve -- one or the other. And everybody is to be involved.
the local church:

It is urgently needful that the Christian people of our charge should come to understand that they are not a company of invalids, to be wheeled about, or fed by hand, cosseted, nursed, and comforted, the minister being the Head Physician and Nurse; but a garrison in an enemy's country, every soul of which should have some post of duty, at which he should be prepared to make any sacrifice rather than quitting.

Now that, I think, is a biblical picture of the church, a church functioning as God intended it to function.

Now we close with this question: Who are you, anyway?

Every morning you ought to ask yourself that. Who am I? And your answer should come from the Scriptures. I am a son of God among the sons of men. I am equipped with the power of God to labor today. At the very work that is give to me today God will be with me, doing it through me. I am gifted with special abilities to help people in various areas, and I don't have to wait until Sunday to start to utilize these gifts. I can do it at my work, I can do it anywhere. I can exercise the gift that God has given me to do. As soon as I begin to find out what it is, by taking note of my desires and by asking others what they see in me and by trying out various things. I am going to set myself to the lifelong task of keeping that gift busy.

That is why Paul had to write to Timothy to say, "Stir up the gift that 1:6}. Timothy was letting it slide. But we are expected to stir it up.

At our last elder's meeting, all the elders of the church sat down and started writing all the names of people in this congregation who, to our knowledge, had no ministry and perhaps no awareness of their spiritual gift. You know, within a space of five minutes or less, we had a hundred or more names of men and women here. We will devote ourselves over the next year to contacting these people and helping them to discover their gifts and employ them as God intends them to. They can choose the place where they employ their gifts. It can be here, at work, at home, wherever they like.

We just want to help you find your gift. I hope you present your bodies afresh today, so you can find that gift and put it to work and be busy doing what God has sent you here to do.

Perhaps you want to renew again your request to God to lead you in the search of your spiritual gift and to lead you to put it to work, with a view toward the day when you stand before him and he says to you, "What

did you do with the gift that I gave you?"
Prayer

Our Father, we pray that you will indeed enable us to understand these great themes and discover the excitement and the joy and fulfillment that come to our lives when we begin to move according to the program that you have for us, and not our own self-centered desires. Lord, help us to discover who we are before you, and then to fulfill that, that we may bless your own heart, and fulfill our own lives. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Who am I, Lord?
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Experienced
Scripture: Romans 12:3-8
Message No: 30
Catalog No: 3530
Date: March 13, 1977

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HOW TO HUG

by Ray C. Stedman

I want to comment briefly on the title of this message, How To Hug . This was suggested to me by a story I once heard about a man who was walking down the street. He passed a used book store, and in the window he saw a book with this title, How To Hug . He was taken by the title and, being of a somewhat romantic nature, went in to buy the book. To his chagrin, he discovered that it was the third volume of an encyclopedia and covered the subjects "How" to "Hug."

I have often thought, as I think of that story, that the church is like

that. Everyone knows that the church is a place where love ought to be manifested, and many people have come to church hoping to find a demonstration of love, only to discover an encyclopedia on theology. But I am grateful that God is changing that today. Thank God that hugs are returning to the churches. Here we often greet each other with a hug, and I think that is great. In the early church the Christians actually greeted one another with a holy kiss. You don't see that too often these days, but perhaps it is coming back. At least we have begun to hug one another. Once in a while you see somebody greet someone with a kiss -- I don't know if it is holy or not -- but we have at least begun to hug. That is great, because that is what the church is to be like.

If you have read through this passage, Romans 12:9-21, you can see that the theme is clearly given in the very first sentence: "Love must be sincere." Our English word "sincere" comes from the Latin *sincerus*, which means "without wax." It stems from a practice of the early Roman merchants who set their earthen and porcelain jars out for sale. If a crack appeared in one, they would fill it with wax the same color as the jar, so a buyer would not be aware that it was cracked. But astute buyers learned to hold these jars out in the sun, and if the jar was cracked, the wax would melt and the crack would be revealed. So the honest merchants would test their wares this way and mark them *sincerus* -- without wax. The word literally reflects what the Greek says here, "Let love be without hypocrisy." The Revised Standard Version translates it, "Let love be genuine." Phillips says, "Let us have no imitation Christian love."

All this indicates clearly that the primary character of the early Christian community was that it was a place where love was demonstrated -- so much so that people began to imitate it. You can see this emphasis in the New Testament. Every writer in the New Testament stresses the need for love. In First Timothy 1:5, Paul writes to his young son in the faith and says, "The end of our endeavor is love." That is where it all comes out. "The end of our endeavor is love, out of a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith." Peter says (1 Peter 4:8), "Above all else put on love." Paul reminds us here and in other places that this love must be a genuine love, not phony, not hypocritical.

In those early days of the church it was easy to imitate love if you didn't really have it because it was so widely valued and so visibly manifested. So people fell into the habit, as they do today, of pretending they loved, using loving terms and gestures, but really not feeling it in their hearts. This, of course, is hypocrisy, and this is what this passage warns against. Don't let your love be hypocritical, don't put it on. We are living in an age in which this is the very spirit of the times -- to project an image, to pretend you are something that you are not. All the world holds that up before us, through the media of television and radio and all the rest. We actually are encouraged to be something we are not.

No one seems to see how phony this is. But in the church it is intolerable. That we should be in any sense phony in our love is a violation of all that the Lord came to do. Sham love, of course, comes from the flesh. It comes from that pretender that is down inside all of us that wants to be thought well of even though we really are not worthy of it. And so we easily succumb to this desire.

But true love, as we have been seeing, comes from the Holy Spirit. In Romans 5, Paul says, "The love of God is shed abroad in your heart by the Holy Spirit which is given unto you," {cf, Rom 5:5 KJV}. True love

is manifested by learning from the Word of God how you should behave in a certain situation, and then, depending on the Spirit of God to give you the strength to do it, moving out and doing that very thing. That is the way you love -- by acting in obedience to what the Word tells you by the power of the Holy Spirit within you.

13 set forth love as it is manifested in the family of God, the church, out in the world. This outline will be our guideline as we look at this passage together. Let's take each of these two sections separately and see what is covered by each of them.

First, love in the church is described in Verses 9-13:

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. {Rom 12:9-13 NIV}

This describes love among Christians. Notice that it consists of six things which the apostle brings out very clearly. In order to understand them, let's look at them one by one.

First, true love rejects sin but not the person. That is what Paul means when he says, "Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." He is talking about people. That is, hate what is evil in people, but don't reject the person because of the evil. The person is good. God loves him. He or she is made in the image of God. Therefore, true love learns to hate evil but not to reject the good. I grant you that this is difficult to do. But notice that hypocritical love, love that pretends to be Christian, does the opposite.

Hypocritical love rejects the person because he doesn't behave according to an acceptable standard. You find many churches that do this. In fact, this is one of the things in the church that has turned off more people than anything else. People come and hear the great words of the New Testament about love and peace and joy, and expect to find them exhibited, but instead they find all the world's attitudes -- rejection and prejudice and even contempt and disdain for people. The church cuts them off and sets them aside, not wanting to have anything to do with them because they don't meet a certain standard of performance. That is what this word warns us against. It is hypocrisy to reject persons because you don't like their behavior.

But you can go to the other extreme in this, too. It is also hypocritical to condone sin because you accept the person. Christians often realize that it is wrong to cut people off and have nothing to do with them because they are not behaving rightly. But some Christians accept these people and say nothing about their evil or sin, and even defend it on occasion. We are seeing something of this today in the matters of homosexuality and alcoholism. People want to defend these sins, as though they were right, simply because they want to accept the person. "Hate what is evil [loathe it]" -- but "cling to what is good."

Second, notice that true love remembers that relationship is the ground of concern, and not friendship. That is why Paul says, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love." This doesn't refer to just anyone that is in need or in trouble; it specifies your brother or sister. The basis of concern for one another is not that we know each other well or enjoy one another, it is that we are related to one another -- even though we may never have met before. If we are Christians, we know that we already have a tie that ought to evoke concern and care for one another. They are our brother, our sister. It is because we are related that we treat our brothers and sisters warmly and with acceptance and forgiveness.

Third, Paul says that true love regards others as more deserving than yourself. "Honor one another above yourselves." I like Phillips' translation here. He says, "Be willing to let other men have the credit." That is a practical application of this. Years ago I ran across a sign that has helped me many times when I have done something, that I wanted to be credited with and yet people had credited others with it. I would be on the verge of pointing out that the credit belonged to me, but I would be stopped by the remembrance of this little sign: "There is no limit to the good that a man can do, if he doesn't care who gets the credit." If you really don't care who gets the credit, then you can just enjoy yourself and do all kinds of good deeds. Just be glad that it is done, and don't worry about who gets the credit. Again, our flesh doesn't like that. It is very eager to be acknowledged and promoted and recognized. But the Word tells us that real love will not act that way.

Fourth, real love retains enthusiasm despite setbacks. "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord." I think that one of the most noticeable marks of a Christian walking in the Spirit is that he retains enthusiasm, always rejoicing, rejoicing in hope. He never lets his spiritual zeal flag or sag, but maintains it. After all, the one thing that the Lord cannot put up with, as he tells us in the letters to the churches in Revelation, is lukewarmness {cf, Rev 3:16}. It is nauseating. He will spew you out of his mouth if you are indifferent, neither hot nor cold, just going along with the crowd. Jesus says that lukewarmness is very distressing to him.

I have always enjoyed the Old Testament story of David and Goliath. Remember how all Israel was sunk in despair because of their fear of this giant? The whole army of Israel was helpless because of the taunts of this man. But little David is fearless. He is only a stripling, but he is not afraid. He looks at Goliath, in all his impressive height and great strength, and says, "Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, who dares defy the armies of the living God? Who does he think he is?" {cf, response? David tells us. He says, "The battle is not ours but the

This is what Paul is saying here. The answer to keeping your spiritual fervor is that you are serving the Lord. It is not your battle; it is his. It is not your resources that are required to work it out; it is his. After all, why should you be afraid or distressed or want to give up? It doesn't depend on you. You are serving the Lord! That is why it is important that Paul adds the phrase "serving the Lord" here -- to help us remember that the only thing that will keep our enthusiasm high is an awareness that we are serving the Lord.

I have always appreciated Paul Winslow, who is on our pastoral staff, because he always is excited about things. Even when they go badly he looks at it as a chance to do something a different way. I like that. And this is what the apostle is telling us here.

Fifth, true love rejoices in hope. "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." The way to rejoice in hope is explained by the two other things mentioned here. You can rejoice in hope because you are patient in affliction, and you are patient in affliction because you have been faithful in prayer. That is what makes you patient. So, when trials come, the thing to do is to begin with prayer. As Paul tells us in Philippians, "In everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, make your requests known unto God," {cf, Phil 4:6 KJV}. Take them to him. If you are faithful in prayer, you will be able to be patient in affliction. You won't be dropping out, or copping out, or quitting, but you will be staying in there, waiting until God works it out, not getting impatient and angry and resentful, but quietly waiting for God to accomplish what he had in mind in this whole trial. That, of course, will make you rejoice in hope -- because you will discover that God has a thousand and one different ways of working things out, ways that you can never imagine. That makes you begin to rejoice. You rejoice because God knows what he is doing and he is able to work it out.

Then, six, true love responds to needs. "Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality." In these days when we have so much social help available -- unemployment insurance, Social Security, welfare, Medicare, etc. -- we tend to forget that there are still human needs and that we have a responsibility to meet them. I think we need to be reminded at times that people are still hurting and that it is a direct responsibility of Christians to care for one another's needs.

I can suggest two ways that you can help to meet this responsibility:

One is through the Need Sheet. Did you know that every week a sheet that lists the needs of people is published and handed out at the door at the Body Life service? It is also available at the table in the back of the auditorium after the morning service. Every week this list is fresh. Items are never carried over from week to week. Every week it lists needs that you can meet. Here is one:

"Help needed! Someone to fix my dryer, or at least tell me what is wrong with it." There is a name and a phone number to call. Here is something for some of you electricians to do in response to a need.

Here is another:

"High school girl needed to spend a few hours on Saturday with a high school girl who is in the educable mentally handicapped class in high school." Here is a ministry for a high school girl.

There are other needs every week, so I suggest that you pick up a Need Sheet and help out.

Another way of helping is through our Need Fund. We have a fund that is set aside for the pastors to dispense to people who are in need. Every

week people are without food, without money for rent and other things, and their needs are met through this fund. You may not know about direct needs, but you can give to that fund and we will try to help others through it.

But first of all we are to do what Paul says here. "Practice hospitality." Hospitality -- to have your home open for a bed or a meal that somebody needs -- is a manifestation of love.

This is the way that you manifest love in the church. There are six ways to do it. Let me review them quickly for you:

- 1 True love rejects sin but not persons;
- 2 It remembers relationship is the ground of concern;
- 3 It regards others as more deserving than themselves;
- 4 It retains enthusiasm despite setbacks;
- 5 It rejoices in hope by being patient in affliction and faithful in prayer; and
- 6 It responds to needs in direct and personal ways, and especially by practicing hospitality.

Now Paul moves on to describe love exhibited to a non-Christian world. Tomorrow morning you will all be back in your shops and offices and schools and places of business, and Christian love is to be manifested there as well as it is here. So Paul gives some very practical help on this. Again, he gives us six ways to do this, Verses 14-21:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Don't be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Don't be conceited.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the sight of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge, I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. {Rom 12:14-21 NIV}

First, love speaks well of its persecutors. That is a tough one, isn't it? "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." That is getting right down to where the rubber meets the road, isn't it? That means you don't go around badmouthing people who are not nice to you. You don't run them down or speak harshly about them to others, but you speak well of them. You find something that you can approve, and you say so to others. That is a tough one. I confess that that is not my natural reaction. When somebody persecutes me, I persecute back! At least I want to. But this is what the Word tells us we don't need to do and we should not do. I think this applies to such practical areas as traffic problems. Have you ever been persecuted in traffic? It happens all the time. Somebody cuts you off, and you want to roll down the window and shout, "Melonhead!" But according to this, you are not supposed to. Now, this doesn't tell you what to call them, but it tells you to bless them, anyway.

Second, true love adjusts to other people's moods. "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn." When somebody in your office is feeling low and gloomy, don't come in and sit down and whistle away. When they obviously don't respond, don't say, "What's the matter with you? How come you're so down all the time? Why don't you be cheerful like me?" There is nothing worse than a cheerful person when something has gone wrong for you. No, Paul says, adjust yourself. Mourn with those who mourn, and rejoice with those who rejoice. I think he puts rejoicing first because that is so hard to do sometimes -- especially if it awakens our envy or self-pity. If there is something someone else has achieved that we think we ought to have, it is hard to go up to that person and say, "I'm so glad for you." But that is what love does, and it is possible to do it -- for those who walk in the Spirit.

Third, true love does not show partiality to persons. Paul says very precisely, "Live in harmony with one another. Don't be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Don't be conceited." That is amplified in these words, "Don't seek high-up people, but associate with ordinary people."

When Jesus came to Jerusalem he stayed with Mary and Martha and Lazarus out in the little suburban town of Bethany instead of at the Intercontinental Hotel in Jerusalem.

Many of us have been rejoicing over the way President Carter is seeking to manifest this kind of a spirit in his high office. He is spending the night with the ordinary people in little towns in New England and various other places. The whole nation is caught up with the beauty of that kind of approach -- we love it.

This is what the apostle enjoins Christians to do. And he suggests that the real reasons for respecting persons and for name-dropping and that kind of thing is really personal conceit. "Don't be conceited," he says. "Don't think highly of yourself." That is what makes you always want to be associated with the high-ups. But if you have an honest view of yourself, you know that you are no better than anybody else and therefore you will be willing just to enjoy the ordinary people. And you will find a rich, rich manifestation of love and humanity among them.

not to give back evil for evil, but to plan to do right, out in the open, before all. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the sight of everybody." I think that Paul is telling us not to take silent revenge for imagined or real insults and not to resort to subterfuges to get even.

I remember hearing of some officers during the Korean War who rented a house for themselves and hired a Korean houseboy to work for them. He was a cheerful, happy soul, and they were young and had a lot of fun playing tricks on him. They would nail his shoes to the floor, and they would put water up over the door so that when he pushed it open the bucket would fall on him. They played all kinds of tricks, but he always took them in such a beautiful, good humor that they finally became ashamed for themselves. They called him in one day and said, "We've been doing all these mean thing to you and you have taken it so beautifully. We just want to apologize to you and tell you that we are never going to do those things again." He said, "You mean no more nail shoes to floor?" They said, "No more." He said, "You mean no more water on door?" They said, "No more." "Okay then," he said, "no more spit in soup!"

So you see, it is possible to take silent revenge. But the Word of God warns us against doing it. Don't be sneaky and underhanded about your actions, it says, but "be careful to do what is right in the sight of everybody."

Fifth, true love seeks to live at peace with everyone. "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." There are people who just will not allow you to be at peace with them, but don't let it start with you. Remember the old song, It Takes Two To Tango ? I think that last word ought to be "tangle." It takes two to tangle. If you refuse to tangle, at least the conflict does not depend on you and is not traceable to your actions and your attitudes. That is what love really does.

Then, finally, love does not try to get even. Listen to these words again. "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, 'It is mine to avenge, I will repay,' says the Lord." Revenge is one of the most natural of human responses to hurt or injury or bad attitudes. We always feel that, if we treat others according to the way they have treated us, we are only giving them justice. We can justify this so easily. "I'm only teaching them a lesson. I'm only showing them how I feel. I'm only giving back what they've given me." But any time you argue that way you have forgotten the many times you have injured others without getting caught yourself. But God hasn't forgotten. This always puts us in the place of those Pharisees who, when the woman was taken in adultery, were ready to cast stones and stone her to death. Jesus came by and said to them, "He that is without sin among you, let him cast the first stone," {cf, John 8:7}. That stopped them all dead in their tracks, because there wasn't a one of them who wasn't equally as guilty as she. They needed to be judged too. We must never carry out revenge, because we are not in the position of a judge. We, too, are guilty. We need to be judged. Therefore, Paul's admonition is, "Don't try to avenge yourself." You will only make a mess of it. The inevitable result of trying to get even with people is that you escalate the conflict. It is inescapable.

When I was in school in Montana, I used to watch the cows in the corral. They would be standing there peacefully, and then one cow would kick another cow. Of course, that cow had to kick back. Then the first cow kicked harder and missed the second cow and hit a third. That cow kicked back. I watched that happen many times. One single cow, starting to kick another, soon had the whole corral kicking and milling and mooing at one another, mad as could be. This happens in congregations, too.

Paul gives two reasons why you should not avenge yourself:

- 1 One is because God is already doing it. "Leave room for God's wrath." God knows you have been insulted or hurt or injured. He knows it and he is already doing something about it.
- 2 Second, God alone claims the right to vengeance because he alone can work it without injury to all concerned. He will do it in a way that will be redemptive. He won't injure the other person, but will bring him out of it.

We never give God a chance; we take the matter into our own hands. And Paul says that is wrong. It is wrong because we don't want that person to be redeemed; we want them to be hurt. We are like Jonah when Ninevah repented. When God spared it, Jonah got mad at God. "Why didn't you wipe them out like you said you would?" We get angry because God hasn't taken vengeance in the way that we would like. Paul reminds us that God is already avenging, so we should leave him room, and God claims the right

to vengeance because he alone can work it without injury to all concerned.

You say, "What do you expect me to do? Somebody hits me -- do you expect me just to sit there and do nothing? Oh, no. There is something you can do. Look what it is: "On the contrary: 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Two things will happen if you refuse to avenge yourself and let God do it:

First, you will be enabled to act positively instead of negatively. That will result in what Paul, quoting Proverbs {25:21-22}, calls "heaping burning coals on his head." This doesn't mean that you are going to get even by another process -- burning his head. No, this refers to the ancient way of lighting fires. They didn't have matches in those days, so if you wanted to light a fire in your home, you couldn't go and borrow a match. But you could go and borrow some coals from your neighbor. Of course, you took along an earthen jar that would not burn. Then you would ask your neighbor if you could borrow some coals to light your own fire. Now, if he was a good neighbor, he would fill the jar and you would carry the padded jar home on top of your head. This became a picture of an ample, generous response to a neighbor's need. Because of that, it became a metaphor for responding so generously to your neighbor that it made him ashamed of himself for his attitude toward you. That is what Paul is suggesting here.

The second result of leaving vengeance to God is that you win the battle. If there is a conflict going on, you will win it if you respond with doing good instead of evil.

I was reading one day a story about a boy who was in the army. He was a Christian and had formed the habit of praying beside his bed before he went to sleep. He kept up this practice in the army, but he became an object of mockery and ridicule to the entire barracks. One night he knelt to pray after a long, weary march. As he was praying, one of his tormentors took off his muddy boots and threw them at the boy, one at a time, hitting him on each side of his head. The Christian said nothing about it, and just took the boots and put them beside the bed and continued to pray. But the next morning, when the other man woke up, he found his boots sitting beside his bed, all shined and polished. It so broke his heart that he came to that boy and asked him for forgiveness. That led, after a time, to that man becoming a Christian.

This is what Paul means when he says you overcome evil with good. As Abraham Lincoln once said, "The best way to overcome an enemy is to make him your friend."

Three times in this passage the apostle has stressed the fact that you states it. So, throughout this passage it is underscored that the major way we express love in the world is by not reacting in vengeance when we are mistreated by the world.

Can you imagine what would happen on this Peninsula if the Christians would begin to act this way? How many times we turn people away from Christianity by assuming the same attitude the world around us has. Surely this is a practical way Paul has of reminding us that we are not to be conformed to this age. We are not to think like they do.

It is recorded of the Lord Jesus that when he was reviled, "he reviled not again, but committed himself to him who judges all things admonition, that we might behave as Jesus did in the midst of the world.

What a testimony of grace that would be!

Title: How to Hug
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Experienced
Scripture: Romans 12:9-21
Message No: 31
Catalog No: 3531
Date: March 20, 1977

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GOD'S STRANGE SERVANTS

by Ray C. Stedman

Our study in Romans has brought us to that famous passage in the government. It isn't very hard to think of President Jimmy Carter as a servant of God. His personal profession of a new birth has been well publicized. But I wonder if you have ever thought of Leonid Brezhnev as a servant of God? Or Idi Amin? Or even Adolph Hitler? And yet the amazing thing that this passage declares is that men like that are, in some sense, servants of God.

I think this shows how much we need to have our minds renewed, our thinking changed, as the twelfth chapter of this letter tells us, in order that we will not be conformed to the thinking of the age. I find that those who are not Christians have great difficulty in thinking of governmental leaders who are tyrannical, vicious, or cruel, as, in any sense, being servants of God. And yet, if we Christians are going to conform our thinking to reality, i.e., proof as God sees it, this is what we must begin to think. We need to have our minds renewed to what the Scriptures say, and to think along those lines about the life around us, in order that we might be able to present our bodies available to God to use in whatever situation we find ourselves.

The first thing the apostle tells us about our government is where it comes from: Where does it originate? The answer is given in the very first verse:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. {Rom 13:1 NIV}

When Paul refers to "governing authorities," he uses a phrase that can best be translated "the powers that be." He is not just talking about heads of state; he is talking about all levels of authority, all the way down to the local dog-catcher. These are the powers that be, those that exist. He tells us that the thing we must think about these governmental offices is that they are, in some way, brought into being by God himself.

I often hear people ask, "Which form of government is the best? Which is the one God wants us to have?" We Americans would love to think that democracy obviously is the most God-honored form of government. But I don't think you can establish that from the Scriptures. In fact, the Scriptures reflect various forms of government. So when you ask, "Which government is the best kind? Is it a monarchy? An oligarchy (i.e., ruled by a few)? Is it a republic? A democracy?" The answer of Scripture is not necessarily any of these. It is whatever God has brought into being. That is best for that particular place and time in history. God has brought it into being, considering the makeup of the people, the degree of truth and light which is disseminated among them, and the moral conditions that are prevailing. For that condition, for that time and place, God has brought into being a particular government.

Now, that government can change. God doesn't ordain any one form of government to be continued forever. If the people grow toward understanding of truth, and morality prevails in a community, the form of government may well take on a democratic pattern. Where truth disappears, government seems to become more autocratic. But, in any case, the point the apostle makes is that whatever form of government you find, God is behind it. Don't ever think of any state or any government as something that in itself is opposed to God, because it isn't. That includes communism as much as any other form of government. That is the clear statement of this passage. I think we have to begin to clear our thinking along that line.

This truth is not confined to the New Testament. You find it in the Old Testament as well. In the book of Daniel, Daniel stood before one of the greatest monarchs the world has ever seen, one of the most autocratic of kings, and said to him, "God changes times and seasons, God removes kings, and he sets up kings," {cf, Dan 2:21a RSV}. There it is made clear that God definitely has a hand in whatever is going on on the earth at any particular time. Sometimes we are tempted, or even taught, to think of God as being remote from our political affairs, that he is off in heaven somewhere turning a rather morbid eye on us human beings struggling along with our political problems down here. But Scripture never takes that pattern. He is not on some remote Mount Olympus; he is right among us, involved in the pattern of governments; and he raises up

kings and puts down others, raises up rulers and changes the form of

I think we Americans are slowly learning that not every body of people in the world can handle democracy. There was a time when, naively, we thought democracy was the best and only enlightened form of government, and all we had to do was go around the world and set up democracies and people would begin to function properly. Democracy would solve all their problems. Now, after many painful experiences, we know better than that. We know there are times and places where democracy just won't work. It can't work. People aren't ready for it. They can't handle that kind of liberty, that kind of responsibility. Therefore God doesn't give it to them. The government they have is better suited for their purposes than the one we have. We are slowly catching on to that.

When Paul wrote this letter to these Christians, they were living in the capital city of the empire, Rome itself. Rome by this time had already passed through several forms of government. It had been a monarchy, a republic, a principate, and now it was an empire. Nero had just begun his reign as the fifth emperor of Rome when Paul wrote this letter. What Paul is saying to these Christians is that whatever form of government may be in control, they are to remember that God is behind it.

Not only is God behind the forms of government we have, but he is also responsible for the incumbents, the ones occupying the offices at any particular time. That may be a startling thought for some of us, but that is what this verse says. Listen to the way the New English Bible translates the last half of Verse 1: "There is no authority but by act of God, and the existing authorities are instituted by him." Not only are the forms of government brought into being by God, but the very people who occupy the offices are put there by God.

So if you thank God for Jimmy Carter and say that God gave us a godly born-again President, remember that he also gave us Richard Nixon, Spiro Agnew, and all the others that we have had some trouble with. They came from God too. You see, God is neither a Republican nor a Democrat. He is not a socialist, or a Marxist, or even an American! The biblical picture is that God not only sends us good men sometimes, by his grace, to lead us and heal us, but also he sends us bad men at times, to punish us. And we deserve them. Therefore, when Hitlers, Stalins, and other ruthless individuals come to the throne of power, God has put them there because that is what that people needed at that particular time in history. This is the biblical position with regard to government, and it is rather startling. And yet, it is the clear statement of this passage.

You find this position supported by other passages of Scriptures. We read this morning the passage from First Peter which says we are to one who was seated on the throne. Christians are to be subject to the governing authorities, Peter tells us. In the book of Daniel we are taught the same thing. Nebuchadnezzar, that mighty monarch, had been brought low before God by God's dealings with him. In a great decree, which he had issued throughout his kingdom, he testified to that effect. He said God had taught him painful lessons "to the end that the living may know that the Most High rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whom he will, and sets over it the lowliest of men," {cf, Dan 4:17 RSV}. Isn't that remarkable? God sometimes deliberately picks a man that is not capable, the lowliest of men, and puts him into power. So the first thing we need to recognize is that, regardless of the form of government we may be up against, the hand of God is in it. And not only is this true of the form of government, but also of the very ones that occupy the positions of power. God has put them there.

The second thing we need to know about our relationship to our

Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. {Rom 13:2 NIV}

Clearly, if God is behind governments, then those who oppose the government and would overthrow it are really opposing God. I realize this has to be handled very carefully, because there are those who would use a statement like this to justify everything the government does -- no matter what it is. But we must recognize, first of all, that governments do have a God-given right to punish those who would overthrow them, to punish treason, to resist overthrow, to control riots, and to seek to preserve themselves in power by legitimate means. Governments do have that right. This the apostle makes very clear.

But, though Paul doesn't go into this side of it in this particular passage, we also must remember that Scriptures show us that such a right is always held under God. I thank God for the enlightened soul, a few decades ago, that set in line a motion that added to our pledge of allegiance the words "under God." That reflects biblical truth. This nation exists as a nation under God. What that is saying, of course, is that nations are to recognize that they have limited power. They are agents of God, but they are not God.

There are some things that nations have no right to do, or governments have no right to get into. The Bible is clear on what those kinds of things are. This is what Jesus clearly referred to in that famous incident when he was asked about paying taxes. He took a coin and held it up and said, "Whose image is on the coin?" They said, "Caesar's." He said, "All right, then give to Caesar the things that belong to Caesar; but give to God the things that belong to God," {cf, Matt 22:20, Mark 12:16-17, Luke 20:24-25}. By this he clearly indicated that there are limits to the power of government. Caesar has his image on certain things; therefore they belong to him -- and rightfully so, Jesus is saying. What Caesar put his image on belongs to Caesar. By implication he extends this to the world of things.

Governments have authority over what we do with our property and how we behave with one another, but our Lord clearly indicates they have no right to touch what God has put his image on, which is the spirit of man. In other words, Caesar has no right to command the worship of man or forbid his obedience to the Word of God. Rulers are under God; therefore they have no right to command men to do what God says ought not to be done, or to command men not to do what God says should be done. These are the limits of governmental powers. Governments are not to enslave men, because men belong to God. Governments are not to oppress men, because men bear the image of God. What bears God's image must be given on to God, and not to Caesar -- just as what bears Caesar's image must be given to Caesar, and not necessarily to God. And so I think that though this passage doesn't deal at length with this, it indicates clearly that believers have a right to resist oppression and religious persecution by nonviolent means, as they have opportunity, but they are not to resist the legitimate functions of government. We are to accept government as a gift of God.

The legitimate functions of government are further described for us in

For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. {Rom 13:3 NIV}

Do you hear what Paul is saying? If you are driving down the freeway and want to be free from having to look constantly in your rear view mirror, then keep the speed down! The officer will pull you aside and say, "Sir, you were driving so beautifully that I just want to commend you." Well, no, he won't do that. He may wish he had time to, but he will just pass by and wave at you.

For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of justice to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. {Rom 13:4 NIV}

This is a very helpful passage, and it says that there are two basic functions of government. Governments are to protect us from evil. That is, they are to preserve the security of people. They are to protect us from attack from without and from crime from within. And for that purpose, governments properly have armies and police systems and courts of justice to preserve us from evil in our midst.

This is why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. {Rom 13:6 NIV}

Notice that in these three verses Paul calls government agents "the deacons of God." They are the deacons of God. I don't suggest that the next time you pay your taxes you call the person who takes your money a deacon. But Scripture calls these governing agents deacons, for they are servants of God. The next time you are called up in traffic court, you must look at the judge as a deacon of God. He is a servant. The point these verses make here is that these things exist as an arm of God's work among men. It is really the way God is doing things. Therefore, God is behind them.

This not only involves punishment of crime and wrongdoing, but also the commending of good. Governments are to honor those who live as good citizens. They offer rewards of various sorts for those who have a record of keeping the law. Occasionally you hear of such commendations or rewards.

Even the courts are set up to recognize the right motives of people. Not

long ago I read about a man who was hauled into court because he had stolen a loaf of bread. When the judge investigated, he found out that the man had no job, his family was hungry, he had tried to get work but couldn't, tried to get funds for relief but couldn't, and so in order to feed his family he had stolen a loaf of bread. When the judge found out the circumstances, he said, "I'm sorry, but the law can make no exceptions. You stole, and therefore I have to punish you. I have to assess, therefore, a fine of ten dollars. But I want to pay the money myself." He reached into his pocket, pulled out a ten dollar bill, and handed it to the man. As soon as the man took the money, the judge said, "Now, I also want to remit the fine." That is, the man could keep the money. "Furthermore, I am going to instruct the bailiff to pass around a hat to everyone in this courtroom, and I am fining everybody in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a city where a man has to steal in order to have bread to eat." When the money was collected, he gave it to the defendant. That represents the good side of justice. A court that will, on occasion, recognize the right motives of people, even though there may be wrongdoing involved. That is a legitimate function of government. But the government also has the right to defend, to maintain an army and a police system and courts of law, and thus fulfill what the Constitution of the United States calls "to provide for the common defense, and insure domestic tranquility."

There is also the function mentioned in Verse 6: providing various services. Here the word that is used for "servants of God" is not the word deacon ; it is priest , ministering priests . The idea here is that the government is not only to provide for our defense and security, but also to provide certain common services that we all need and to function as priests among us, helping us in our needs. Out of this grows the function of government in providing mail service, utilities (water, sewage), schools, relief agencies, and many other functions of government. Now these are all proper functions of government agencies.

In order to make these services possible, governments, by God's grace, have two powers given to them. This the Scriptures clearly teach. One, they have the power of using force. That is what is meant by "he bears not the sword for nothing." The sword is the symbol of the right to use force, even to the taking of life.

I don't think there is any area today in which people are more confused and muddled in their thinking than in this area of the use of force by the government, even to the point of capital punishment. Right now the state of California is debating this once more. Amazingly enough, the people of the state have declared with a loud voice that they want capital punishment, even though some of our leaders do not. I respect the conscience of these leaders, but I think the Scriptures indicate that there is a place for capital punishment. What people need to understand is that when the state, acting in line with the judicial system, functioning as it was intended to function, finally passes sentence on an individual to yield his life for a certain crime, then that is really not a man taking a man's life. God is taking that life by means of the state. That is what we need to understand. God has the right to take human life. All through the Old Testament you find him doing that very thing. He has also the right to set up human channels for doing this. This is what is meant here. This means that governments have the basic right to maintain armies for their defense, and that people -- even Christians -- are to serve in them.

I know I am touching on matters that are hotly debated, and I haven't time to fully defend these statements at this point, although I am glad

to do so in private conversations or at other times. But governments have the right to maintain armies, police forces, to take life in capital punishment for certain crimes -- all with the recognition that these powers can be abused and have been abused. There is no question about it. Citizens have every right to protest these abuses and to seek to correct them. But it is folly to try to eliminate the rightful uses of authority because some of them are being abused. What we need to do is to correct the abuses and not eliminate the things Scripture ordains. I am not going into that any further, but much more can be said on this subject.

The second power this passage says governments rightfully have from God to enable them to perform their function of protecting, securing, and providing various common services, is the power to collect taxes. Now you may not like the amount of taxes that your government collects, but you can't object to the principle of taxation. Taxes are right, and governments have taxed their citizens from time immemorial, and will continue to do so. The apostle makes clear that the government has the right to collect taxes, and Christians should pay them.

Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. {Rom 13:5 NIV}

This has to do with our attitude about taxes and arrests and judicial systems, etc. We are not to obey the law just because we are afraid we are going to get caught. We are not to keep to the speed limit just because there is a police car in sight. We are not to pay our incomes taxes just because we know the government now has tremendous computers that can review any number of records and might catch us. That is a factor, and many more people are honest about their taxes because of it, but that ought not to be the Christian's reason for being honest in paying his taxes. The Christian's reason is that it is the right thing to do before God. Your conscience ought to be clear. You ought to pay the taxes because that is what God says to do, and not what man says.

I am sure you heard of the man who wrote to the IRS and said, "A few years ago I cheated on my income taxes. My conscience has been troubling me, and I haven't been able to sleep. So I enclose a check for fifty dollars. If I still can't sleep, I'll send you the rest." No, conscience demands that we keep the record clear for God's sake, and not for man's.

Give everyone what you owe him; if you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue [Revenue refers to those hidden taxes such as sales taxes, customs duties, etc.] ; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. {Rom 13:7 NIV}

Here the apostle is dealing with our actual response to what these demands of government are. We haven't the right to withhold taxes if the government doesn't use them quite the way we think they should.

Governments are made up of fallible men and women just like us, and we can't demand that the government always handle everything perfectly. Therefore what Paul wrote to these Romans, who had the same problems we have about taxes, was, "If you owe taxes, pay them." You know, I think the proof that God is behind all this is that this message comes the week before our income taxes are due and before property taxes are due. I didn't plan it that way, but that is the way it worked out. I don't get any refund on my income tax for preaching this kind of message either.

The point the apostle is making clearly is: Don't resent these powers of government. This is all set within the context of Paul's word in Chapter 12, "Be not conformed to this present age," {cf, Rom 12:2a}. Don't act like everybody else acts about taxes. The world grumbles and gripes and groans at paying taxes. You have a right, of course, as does everyone, to protest injustice and to correct abuse. There is no question about that. But don't forever be grumbling about the taxes that you have to pay.

I have had to learn some lessons on this myself. I remember the first time I had to pay an income tax, a few years ago. My income had been so low for a long time that I didn't have to pay any taxes. But gradually it caught up and I finally had to pay. I can remember how I resented it. I really did! In fact, when I sent my tax form in I addressed it to "The Infernal Revenue Service." They never answered, although they did accept the money. The next year, I had improved my attitude a bit. I addressed it to "The Eternal Revenue Service." But I have repented from all those sins, and I now hope to pay my taxes cheerfully. The largest amount I have had to pay is due this year, but I want to send it off with thanksgiving to God for the government that we have -- bad as it is in many ways.

I don't hold up any defense for the gross injustices that prevail in our American system. But the very fact that we can meet this morning and don't have to hide behind closed doors, the very fact that we have relative freedom from attack when we walk about is due to the existence of a government that God has brought into being. I want to make every effort I can, as a good citizen, to improve it and to see that it does things better. But I just thank God for the privilege of paying my taxes. This is what the apostle is after. He wants us to have a different attitude than the world around us about these matters. We are not to come on with gimlet-eyed fanaticism, attacking the government and seeking to overthrow it because it doesn't behave quite as we think it ought. But rather, we are to understand that God has brought it into being, and he will change it if the hearts of the people of the land warrant that.

Somebody has well said, "Every nation gets the government it deserves." And so as we pay our taxes, let us do so cheerfully. Remember that the apostle says not only that we are to pay our taxes, but if we owe respect, we are to give that; if honor, give that. Never forget that the worst of governments are, nevertheless, better than anarchy, and serve certain functions which God himself has ordained.

Therefore let us respond as Christians, with cheerfulness and gladness for what we can do under God, and let us do so in such an attitude that people will see that there is something different about us. Thus we commend ourselves to God and the people around.

Thus endeth the reading of the lesson: Pay your taxes.

Prayer

Our Father, we thank you for these practical words. How eminently practical they are in our lives, how deeply concerned you are even about such matters as this. Forgive us for ever thinking that you aren't concerned. Help us to be good citizens, Lord, but above all, to be faithful to our responsibility to show honor to those to whom honor is due, and respect to those who deserve it. Even though they may not personally be men and women deserving of our respect, the office they hold demands it. Thus we pray that we may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior. We ask in your name, Amen.

Title: God's Strange Servants
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Experienced
Scripture: Romans 13:1-7
Message No: 32
Catalog No: 3532
Date: April 3, 1977

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THE NIGHT IS NEARLY OVER

by Ray C. Stedman

I am sure that many of you feel like I do about Easter. I love Easter -- the triumphal notes of the music, the joy it expresses. I love the hope for which Easter stands, and even the time of year in which it comes, with the beauty of the springtime flowers around us. I always look forward to Easter. Even though I have sung the hymns nine times over this morning, I still love and enjoy them. But I never go through an Easter without feeling, at the end of each year, that something has been missing. Some great truth has remained unexpressed. Somehow or other we

focus on some of the great and well-known themes of Easter and miss this one which, in many ways, I think, is the greatest note of all in the Easter Message.

I rejoice with you in singing that Jesus is alive again. The very thought that he survived the grave, that he came back from death, is an encouraging thought, and we rightly celebrate that all through this Easter season. And I rejoice with you that we therefore have a hope beyond the grave, that when we come to the end of life and stand at the river of death, we can hear Jesus' words, "Because I live, you shall live also," {cf, John 14:19}. We can cry with the Apostle Paul, "O death, where is your sting? O grave, where is your victory?" {cf, I rejoice also that truth will surely live; that evil will not triumph ultimately, but God's goodness and truth shall reign throughout the earth. But it seems to me that the true glory of this Easter message, the greatest message that this day can have for us, is to remind us that in the risen Lord Jesus we have an endless supply of power to love. That is what Easter is all about -- the fact that we have an ability to love. Love is the greatest need of the world today. I don't think I have to argue that point with you.

When Paul wrote this letter to the Romans in the capital city of the Roman Empire, surely love was the thing that was most lacking in that empire. These people, under the subjugation of a military machine and a cruel, relentless emperor, needed desperately to learn how to love and how to display love amidst the pressure and oppression of that day. This was what was needed in the city of Corinth, with all its immoral sexual practices and its abandonment to pleasure, the city from which Paul wrote the letter to the Romans. In the midst of seeking after merriment and pleasure the Corinthians needed to learn the gift of love. Love is what is needed in Palo Alto, Menlo Park, Mountain View, Los Altos, and Sunnyvale, all up and down the Peninsula, across the Bay, across the country, and around the world. The greatest need of men anywhere today is to learn the secret of how to love. Love would make a difference.

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow man has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery," "Do not murder," "Do not steal," "Do not covet," and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.
{Rom 13:8-10 NIV}

Have you ever struggled to obey the Ten Commandments? Have you found it difficult to face up to obeying these demands that you shall not murder or lie or steal or commit adultery? Well, Paul says it is really easy. All you have to do is love. Act in love toward people and you won't hurt them. You can't. The solution to all the problems we struggle with is this one thing. Have you ever thought of what would happen in this world if people could be taught how to love -- and then they did it?

The first result that occurs to me is that all the impending divorces would be happily resolved. Couples ready to split up because love has left their marriage could go back together and learn how to work it out. It wouldn't automatically solve all their problems, but it would make

possible their solution. And think what would happen if all the divorces that this country is facing today would suddenly cease to be, and homes and families would be secure. What a tremendous thing that would be in this country!

If we could teach people how to love we wouldn't fight in wars. We wouldn't have to worry about disarmament. We could send the atom bombs and nuclear explosives and missiles off into space somewhere and let them join the rest of the space garbage. What a remarkable thing that would be! Think of how much energy and money is being expended in keeping up this endless array of armaments simply because we can't trust people to love each other. That is the whole problem.

If we could love each other, there wouldn't be any more crime. The streets of San Francisco would be safe to walk once more, and in all the great cities of our land you would feel safe and secure -- if people would learn to love. Of course, if there weren't any crime, you wouldn't need any prisons. All the money we spend on prisons and reformatories could be spent on something more useful. And you wouldn't need any courts of law, or police -- except to regulate traffic a little bit now and then. We need all these things because we are so deprived in this ability to love. And think what would happen to our tax burden if we could get rid of all wars and crimes and police and courts! It would be reduced to practically nothing! All the wealth that is poured into taxes today could be used to spread beauty and harmony and sufficiency of living to everybody on earth. Our biggest problem is our lack of love, our inability to love one another. Everything we know in life revolves around that problem.

This passage is telling us that the ability to love -- that and nothing less than that -- is the radical force that Jesus Christ has turned loose in this world by his resurrection. Therefore it has the power to radically change the world. Notice what Paul says about this to these Roman Christians.

He implies that this has to start with us. If we are Christians, if we know Jesus Christ, we have the power to love. There is no doubt about that. If you know him, then you have the power to love. You don't have to ask for it; you've got it. If you have Christ, you have the ability to act in love, even though you are tempted not to. That is the whole issue.

Therefore, Paul says, when you come up against people, when you rub shoulders with them, remember that your first obligation is to love them. Act in love. Show courtesy, kindness, patience, understanding, longsuffering -- whatever it takes, whatever the scene demands, you can show that. It is a debt you owe that person. That is the first thing Paul says: "Owe no man anything but to love one another." Paul says very plainly that we are to think of this as our obligation to everyone.

I wonder what kind of radical things would start happening among us if we were to start living on this basis. Every day, every person we would meet, we would say to ourselves first, "I need to show some love to this person. No matter what else happens, I have an obligation to pay him that debt."

I have owed money to people in my life, and I have noticed that whenever I meet people I owe money to, that is the first thing that comes into my mind. I remember the debt that I owe them, and I wonder if that is what they are thinking about too. This is what Paul says we are to do about

love. We are to remember that we have an obligation to every man -- to love him.

The second thing Paul says is that this obligation is to everyone. This is designed for your neighbor. Who is your neighbor? You think immediately of the people who live on each side of you. They are your neighbors. Why? Because they live next door to you. They are in contact with you. When you hear the word neighbor you think of them. But you can see that it really includes everyone. The people sitting next to you now are your neighbors. And so are the people you meet in business, and in your shopping. Wherever you are, the people you make contact with are living right beside you and are your neighbors for that moment. The word to us is that, since we have the ability to love, we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. The butcher, the baker, the cadillac maker -- it doesn't make any difference, they are your neighbors.

The third thing Paul says is that, when you love like this, you go beyond the Law. The Law says to you, "Don't injure your neighbor." You can do what you like with you own property, but it stops at your neighbor's line. You can't do what you like with his. If you do, you are answerable to the law. But you see, love goes a step beyond that. It doesn't stop with the negative, "Don't injure your neighbor"; it says, "Do good to your neighbor." Love him, reach out to him, minister to him, help him. It is simply impossible to help your neighbor and hurt him at the same time. It is impossible to reach out to your neighbor and, at the same time, injure him.

That is why, as Paul says, love will not sleep with your neighbor's wife or husband; love won't commit adultery. Love will not murder your neighbor, or poison his dog, or throw garbage over the fence into his back yard, or do anything harmful to him. Love will not steal from your neighbor, or even keep his lawn mower for more than a month. Love will not covet what is your neighbor's, it won't drool over his pool, or stew about his new Porsche. Love does not want what your neighbor has, but rejoices with him over what he has. That is love. Love, therefore, fulfills the Law. You don't have to worry about keeping the Ten Commandments; all you have to worry about is acting in love, paying the debt that you owe every man, every woman, every child, every person you meet. If you pay them the debt of love you will not injure them.

And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of your sinful nature. {Rom 13:11-14 NIV}

The thing that strikes me about this paragraph is the opening words. Love your neighbor, Paul says, pay the debt you owe him, understanding the time. That is, there is something about the age in which we live which, if you understand it, will compel you, motivate you, drive you to

love your neighbor. If you understand the times, you will be able to do this. There are three things Paul points out about the times.

First, he says it is time to get going: "The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here." It is time to wake up, time to get going, time to look around and see all the opportunities to love that abound around you.

I am amazed to see how many times in my own life I pass over the opportunity to love. I am always looking for opportunities with other people out there, further away. And yet I am surrounded in my own family with opportunities to show love, even when it is difficult. It is to love the unlovely that Christians are called. I am always amazed by how easily people can want to help somebody further away and yet ignore the present needs right around them.

A couple brought some clothes down to the church one day to take to the Rescue Mission. The lady was very concerned about the poor people's need for proper clothing. But I noticed that her husband had to hold his pants up with a nail. It struck me as very strange that people can get so concerned about helping others when there is such an obvious need right at hand. But that's the way we are, isn't it? Paul is telling us to wake up and to look around, because every day holds opportunities for us to pay this debt. If we wake up we can begin to see them.

Now, we don't have a lot of time to do this. The time is short. As Paul puts it, "our salvation is nearer than when we first believed." That is, the deliverance to which we are looking, when Christ returns again, is nearer than when we first believed. No one can argue with that. The Christian message has been going for 1900 years -- but how much nearer we have grown to the time when Christ is coming back! There is no doubt about that. "The night is nearly over," Paul says, "the day is almost here." On one occasion Jesus said, "I must work the works of my Father while it is day. The night is coming, when no man can work," {cf, John 9:4}. Jesus was aware of the urgency of the time, and the fact that he had to labor because the day was almost gone. On another occasion he said, "As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world," {John 9:5 KJV}. That is what created the day. When Jesus was present on earth, then it was daytime. But when he left us physically, when he was buried in the grave, the night came. That night has been running on now for 1900 years. As the Apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Colossians, "We Christians are to be like lights shining in the darkness of the night," {cf, Phil 2:15}. The night is all around us, but the day is about to come. The night is nearly over; the day is at hand.

You say, "Wait a minute. Paul wrote this letter 1900 years ago, and he said it was nearly over then. How can we say that it is nearly over now? How could it be nearly over then, when 1900 years have gone by?" When you look at it from that point of view, it is difficult to understand. But there is a sense here in which these words are always true of every one of us. I am sure this is the way the apostle meant them for himself. Regardless of whether or not this is the generation in which Jesus Christ returns to fulfill his promise, the truth is that the night is nearly over for every one of us.

I look out on this congregation and I see several gray heads. I have a few gray hairs myself. And, for us, the night is nearly over; the day is at hand. If we are ever going to love, it has to be now. We can't wait much longer. But how about you young people, fresh and strong and filled

with excitement and energy?

I often think of the words of George Bernard Shaw, "Youth is such a wonderful thing, it's a shame to waste it on the young."

But let me ask you young people, "How much time have you got left?" Who knows? We live on the edge of eternity. The night may be nearly over for any one of us, no matter whether we are old or young.

So the argument of the apostle is powerful. He is saying, "If you are going to love, now is the time to do it. Now! You can't wait for tomorrow. You can't plan on doing this after you graduate from school. Start now. Now you must begin to love one another. "The night is nearly over; the day is at hand."

The second thing we need to understand about time is that it is time to give up some things: "So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy." If you are going to live in love, then there are some things that are going to have to go. There are some things that are incompatible with love. You can't do these things and love at the same time. Facing that fact, there are some things that have to go, and Paul has three categories of them.

1 The first one is, "Don't live for endless pleasures. Give up orgies and drunkenness." That covers a whole spectrum of things and means, "Don't devote your life to endless good times, things that you plan over and over again for your own self-indulgence, an endless round of parties or plays or concerts, opera, or even watching television." You can't love and do that. You are wasting your life. You've got only so many precious moments to show this mighty power, this release, this radical power of love. If you spend your moments in endless self-indulgence, you will never be able to live in love.

1 Second, "Don't live for sex." Sex is a powerful force that is highly exploited today. We are constantly surrounded with silken and sensuous temptations to give ourselves to. A new love affair, a new romance, a new sexual liaison will satisfy us, please us, fulfill us. That is what we are after. And the world urges us on to try it. There is no harm in it, they tell us. Paul says there is. He says if you live for these things, you can't fulfill what God wants you to fulfill. You will miss the excitement and the radical glory of loving people. You can't love people and live for sex. Paul covers the whole range of immorality here -- fornication, adultery, homosexuality, pornography. You can't indulge in these things and love; you will hurt people. You will hurt yourself. You will destroy others and destroy yourself. This is so essential that in order to experience the glory of what God wants, you have to lay aside these cheapened, tawdry things. I like what

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 holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

This is what Paul calls us away from.

2 The third category is this: "Don't live for strife, causing dissension and jealousy." Again, it is amazing to me how many people get kicks out of being the cause of dissension. They can't seem to enjoy themselves unless they get people fighting and upset and angry -- either with them or with one another. It is amazing how many Christians do this. I remember a word of Jesus which has always helped me very much when I am tempted along these lines. He said, "He that is with me gathers; but he that is against me scatters," {cf, Matt 12:30, Luke 11:23}. There is a way to measure your life. What is your effect upon people? Do you harmonize them? Do you gather them together? Are they noticeably happier because you have come in? Or do strife, division, and separation immediately begin to break out because you are there? What is your life doing? That is the way you can tell whether you are with Jesus or against him. If you are with him, you gather people; if you are against him, you scatter them.

So Paul says it is not only time to get going, and time to give up, but it is time to put on, above all else: "Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to satisfy the desires of your sinful nature."

When I got up this morning I put on my clothes. And so did you, I notice. I put on my clothes with the intention that they would be part of me all this day, that they would go where I go and do what I do. They will cover me and make me presentable to others. That is the purpose of clothes.

In the same way, the apostle is saying to us, "Put on Jesus Christ when you get up in the morning. Make him a part of your life that day. Intend that he go with you everywhere you go, and that he act through you in everything you do. Call upon his resources. Live your life in Christ." That is the way to love.

Notice that Paul uses the full name of Christ, "the Lord Jesus Christ." I think he does this deliberately, because Lord stands for his power to rule, his authority, his power to change and alter events, and control history, "to open and no man shuts; to shut and no man opens," {cf, Rev 3:7}. When you put on Jesus Christ, you are putting on a power to operate and change events and effect people that you don't have without him.

When you put on Jesus , you are putting on the capacity to love. Read the Gospels and you will find that the striking thing about Jesus of Nazareth was his ability to love. He would put his hand on a loathsome leper to heal him, even though the law forbade that. He would reach out to a lost woman or a drunkard and speak a healing word in their lives. He treated the lowly the same as he did the higher-ups. He loved people. Everywhere people were struck with him. When you put on Jesus, that is what you are putting on -- the capacity to love.

When you put on Christ , you are putting on the power to deliver. Christ is the word for anointed ; it means Messiah . It refers to his work. Christ came to deliver us, to set us free. And when you put on Christ, you have an amazing power to free yourself and others from what they are going through.

So put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Remind yourself of his presence all through the day. Reckon on his power to supply love when you begin to

obey the command to love. When you start to pay the obligation, he will supply the power to do so. And, as Paul says, "Do not think about how to gratify the desires of your sinful nature." Stop doing that, planning for evil and self-indulgence. That always ends in strife and rivalry and jealousy and debauchery. But rather, learn to love by putting on the Lord Jesus Christ.

These words have forever been made famous by their connection with the conversion of Saint Augustine. Augustine was a young man in the fourth century who was what we would call a swinger. He lived a wild, carousing life, running around with evil companions, doing everything they were doing. He forbade himself nothing, went into anything and everything. And, as people still do today, he came to hate himself for it. One day he was with his friend in a garden, and he walked up and down, bemoaning his inability to change. "O, tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow! How can I free myself from these terrible urges within me that drive me to the things that hurt me!" And in his despair, as he walked in the garden, he suddenly heard what he thought was the voice of a child -- perhaps some children were playing in the garden next door -- and the voice said, "Take and read, take and read." He could not remember any children's games with words like that, but the words stuck. He went back to the table and found lying on it a copy of Paul's letter to the Romans. He flipped it open, and these were the words he read:

Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies, and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, ... {Rom 13:13-14a NIV}

Augustine said that at that moment he opened his life to Christ. He had known about him, but had never surrendered to him. But that moment he did, and he felt the healing touch from Christ cleansing his life. He was never the same man again. He went on to become one of the greatest Christians of all time -- Saint Augustine.

A couple of weeks ago Eldridge Cleaver was telling me about his days as a Black Panther. He said that while he was a Black Panther he was filled with a terrible, roiling feeling of hatred and violence against any law enforcement agency. He couldn't help himself. Every time he would get with them he would feel this terrible sense of anger and murder and rage within him. It made him the leader of the Black Panthers, the violent militants of the early '60s. But a year or so ago, in the south of France, in a balcony overlooking the Mediterranean Sea, he had a vision, an inner view, of the face of Jesus Christ, coming out of his boyhood to and over again. He said that ever since that time on the balcony, he had never had that feeling of hatred again. He has looked for it, and expected it, but instead there has been a feeling of love for everyone he meets.

Now, that is what Jesus Christ is capable of doing. He gives us all the power to love. If we but choose to exercise this power in the moment that needs it, we can release in this world this radical, radical force that has the power to change everything around us. It will change our homes, our lives, our communities, our nations, the world -- because a risen Lord is available to us, to live through us.

Let us be Christ's men from head to foot, and give no chance to the flesh to have its fling. {Rom 13:14

That is the way to live.
Prayer

Our Father, there may be some here this morning who have never surrendered themselves to this living, loving Lord. On this Easter morning we pray that this may be their spiritual birthday, that right now as we are praying, they will open their lives to you and say, "Lord Jesus, come in, be my Lord. Rule in my life, and give to me this amazing ability to love." We ask in his name, Amen.

Title: The Night is Nearly Over
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Experienced
Scripture: Romans 13:8-14
Message No: 33
Catalog No: 3533
Date: April 10, 1977

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ON TRYING TO CHANGE OTHERS

by Ray C. Stedman

We are back in the fourteenth chapter of Romans this morning, and we are going to be discussing the favorite indoor sport of Christians, that is,

trying to change each other. As this passage indicates, this has been a major problem in the church for centuries. All through the history of the church, the problem arises from the attitude that most of us share, I am sure, that God is clearly pleased with the way we live -- but there are those others around. They drink beer and play cards; they go to movies; they smoke cigars; they work on Sundays; they wear lipstick; they dance; they play musical instruments; they use zippers instead of buttons. There is an endless list of things that can be included, debatable matters that the church has never been able to settle because of a misunderstanding of the principles that are set forth here in this very passage.

We are dealing, of course, with the problem of Christian taboos, all the no-no's of the Christian life that we encounter from place to place, and from time to time. We are facing the question of how much fellowship you can have with somebody who lives in a different way than you do, who does things that you do not approve of as a Christian.

This is the problem of Christian ethics, the problem of so-called legalistic behavior, and this passage is a rather extensive one, which indicates the extent of the problem. The passage runs all the way

But we are not going to try to cover all that this morning. I want to look at just the introduction to it and to see the principle that will lead us to a solution of this problem. I think it is very important to note that this whole section dealing with this problem is part of an extended commentary of the Apostle Paul on the command of Jesus to love one another. This is part of how you love one another, and this has been the subject ever since the apostle turned to the practical part of this

- 1 First, love must be serving. That is its nature; love serves. That is why we are given spiritual gifts, so that we might serve one
- 1 Second, he tells us that love must be genuine. It cannot be phony or sham; it cannot be "put-on" love. It has to be real.

especially to the authorities, to the state, and the powers that be, because they are put there by God. And in the latter part of to everyone without exception. "Owe no man anything, but to love one another," {Rom 13:8a KJV}. That is a universal debt which we must continually be paying to everyone we meet.

of other people's views. It begins with our actions towards someone whom we regard as less enlightened than ourselves. Think about who that is for a moment and then listen to what Paul says to do about it

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. {Rom 14:1 NIV}

That is very plain, isn't it? Do not reject him; do not ignore him; do not treat him in a second-class way. Accept him, but not for the purpose of arguing with him. Do not accept him in order to debate with him, but "without passing judgment on disputable matters."

To "accept him," of course, means that regardless of where you may struggle with someone and about what you may struggle, you must realize that they are brothers and sisters in the family of God, if they are

Christians at all. You did not make them part of the family -- the Lord did. Therefore, you are to accept them because they are your brothers and sisters. And you are not to accept them with the idea of immediately straightening them out in the areas in which they are weak. I think that is a very necessary, practical admonition because many of us love to argue and sometimes the first thing we want to do is straighten somebody out.

I remember years ago when, after preaching from this platform on a Sunday night, a man came up to me and started talking in a rather roundabout way. He said, "Let me ask you something. Do you believe that two Christians who love the Lord and are led by the Holy Spirit will read a passage of Scripture and both come out believing the same thing?" I said, "Yes I think that sounds logical." "Well," he said, "can you explain why, when I read the passage you preached on tonight, I believe it teaches there will be no millennium, but when you read it, you believe there is going to be one. What do you think of that?"

Being young and aggressive I said, "Well, I think it means that I believe the Bible and you do not." That immediately precipitated an argument and, with several other people gathered around, we went at it hammer and tongs for an hour or so.

Afterwards, thinking it through, I realized how wrong I was. I had immediately started arguing. I had to write to that brother and tell him that I was sorry I had jumped on him like that. Of course, he had jumped on me, too, but that was his problem, not mine. I had to straighten out my problem, so I apologized to him and said, "I am sorry that I did not recognize the parts where we agree before we got on to those things over which we differ."

Paul wants us to understand that this is what we are to do. First of all, accept people, let them know that you see them as a brother or a sister. Establish the boundaries of your relationship by some gesture or word of acceptance so they do not feel that you are attacking them immediately.

The Greek here says not to accept them in order to argue about your differences, or, as the New English Bible puts it, "without attempting to settle doubtful points." First, let there be a basic recognition that you belong to one another.

Paul goes on to define more precisely the areas of debate that he has in

One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man,
whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. {Rom 14:2 NIV}

Did you hear that, you vegetarians? This is not dealing with nutrition, of course. This arises out of the background of the early church in which there was a real moral question about eating meat. Not only were there the Jewish restrictions against certain forms of meat -- Jews did not eat pork, and even beef and lamb had to be kosher -- but it had to be slain in a certain way. So a Jew, or even one raised as a Jew, after he became a Christian, always had great emotional difficulty in eating meat. I still wonder what the Apostle Paul's reaction was when, as a Christian, he was first handed a ham sandwich. I think he ate it, but I

do not know what his feeling about it was. He may have struggled at that point.

Then there was the problem in Rome and in other pagan Greek and Roman cities about the matter of eating meat that had been offered to idols. Some Christians said that if you did that it was tantamount to worshipping that idol. You were no different than the people who worshipped and believed in the idol, and therefore, it placed a stigma on your faith to eat meat that had been offered to idols.

Other Christians said, "Oh, no. How can that be? Meat is meat. The fact that someone else thinks of it as offered to idols does not mean that I have to." In these pagan cities the best meat was sold in the butcher shop next to the temple because that is where the sacrifices were sold to the populace, who bought it without any question. So there was a real problem in the church.

As in every area of this type, there were two viewpoints. There was a liberal, broad viewpoint that said it was perfectly all right to do this, and a stricter, narrower viewpoint that said it was wrong to do this. It really does not make any difference what you are arguing about if it is in this area that is debatable -- something about which the Scriptures themselves do not speak -- then you always get this two-fold division. You can put many of the modern problems that we have into this category. Should you drink wine and beer; should you go to the movies; should you dance; what about card-playing; what about work on Sunday? Some of the things I have already mentioned fall into this category.

Let us be very clear that there are areas that Scripture speaks about that are not debatable at all. It is always wrong to be drunk. It is always wrong to commit adultery or fornicate. These things are clearly wrong. In both the Old and New Testaments, God has spoken, he has judged, in these areas.

Christians are exhorted to rebuke and exhort and reprove one another, and, if necessary, even discipline one another according to patterns set out in the Scriptures. This is not judging each other in those areas. The Word of God has judged; it has already pronounced what is wrong.

But there are all those other areas that are left open, and the amazing thing to me, and the significant thing here, is that Scripture always leaves those open. Paul will not give a "yes" or "no" answer about some of these things because God does not do so. There is an area, in other words, where God wants to leave it up to the individual as to what he or she does. And, as we see later on, he expects it to be based upon a deep conviction of that individual. But it is up to them. This is the area Paul is talking about here.

It is also clear that he calls the "liberal party" strong in the faith, while the "narrow party" is regarded as being weak in the faith.

I point out that the translation that I am reading from, the New where it translates: "Accept him whose faith is weak, ..." It has nothing to do with the strength or weakness of the individual's faith. It is not talking about someone whose faith is weak. It is talking about someone who is weak in the faith. The problem is doctrinal here. The problem is that he does not understand truth. Remember, Jesus himself said, "If anyone continue in my word, he shall be my disciple indeed and he shall know the truth and the truth will set him free," {cf, John 8:31-32 KJV}.

Therefore, the mark of understanding truth is freedom; it is liberty. That is why Paul calls the person who understands truth clearly one who is strong in the faith, while those who do not understand it clearly are weak in the faith. They do not understand the delivering character of truth.

I think William Barclay in his commentary on Romans has handled this well. He says:

Such a man is weak in the faith for two reasons. (i) He has not yet discovered the meaning of Christian freedom; he is at heart still a legalist; he sees Christianity as a thing of rules and regulations. His whole aim is to govern his life by a series of laws and observances; he is indeed frightened of Christian freedom and Christian liberty. (ii) He has not yet liberated himself from a belief in the efficacy of works. In his heart he believes that he can gain God's favor by doing certain things and abstaining from doing others. Basically he is still trying to earn a right relationship with God, and has not yet accepted the way of grace. He is still thinking of what he can do for God more than of what God has done for him.

That is the problem here. It is the problem of a Christian who is not yet understanding fully the freedom that Christ has brought him, who struggles with these kinds of things, and who feels limited in his ability to indulge or to use some of these things -- while others feel free to do so. One is strong in the faith; the other is called weak in the faith. Every church has these groups. We have them right here. Paul puts his finger precisely on the natural attitudes which each group would have toward each other that must be avoided if we are going to accept one another as he says.

The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, ... {Rom 14:3a NIV}

That is the first thing. In other words, the strong must not reject the one who is still struggling, who is still weak. The word "look down" here is really a word that means "push him out." The strong must not push him out; they must not exclude him. That involves several things:

First, it means that he must not think about him in a disdainful or contemptuous way. He must not let himself look down on these people.

I think this is a tendency that some of us have who feel that we are free in certain of these areas. We tend to regard those who are not yet free as weaklings, which in some sense they are. But we are not to regard them as deliberately so, as if it is their own fault that they are that way. Thus we get offended when they do not behave as freely as we think they should. This is wrong. Paul says, "The strong must not reject the weak." You must not think wrongly about him. You must not say

wrong things about him. You must not ridicule him.

Someone has defined a legalist as someone who lives in mortal terror that someone, somewhere, is enjoying himself. But we must not think of legalists that way, because that is not the motivation that governs them and creates legalism in their attitude. There is another reason and, therefore, we must limit ourselves to that, and not think of them as motivated simply because they want to spoil it for everyone else.

We are not to exclude these people from our contacts with one another. We must not form little cliques within the church that shut out people from social fellowship with people who have different viewpoints. We must not think of our group as being set free while this group over here is very narrow and we have nothing to do with them.

This is wrong, and Paul clearly says so. In fact, he implies that if any of the so-called strong exclude weaker brothers, look down on them, treat them as though they are second-class Christians, they have simply proved that they are just as weak in the faith as the ones they have denied. Strength in the faith means more than understanding truth. It means living in a loving way with those who are weak: The truly strong in the faith will never put down those who are still struggling.

On the other hand, the apostle goes on:

... the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. {Rom 14:3b NIV}

Here is the other side of it. Those who struggle must not look down on those who have freedom in these areas. Those who think it is morally wrong for a Christian to drink wine or beer must not look down on those who feel free to do so. They must not judge them. The word "condemn" means to sit in judgment on them and it involves several things.

It involves, first, no criticizing of such people or censoring of them. We are not to go up to them and tell them, "I do not see how you can be a Christian and do things like that." That has nothing to do with being a Christian. Their Christianity is established on grounds other than those.

It means no categorizing of such people, no classifying them as carnal Christians or reproving or rebuking them. In these areas we have no rights to reprove or rebuke. The church has no authority in these areas. It means no legislating against them; no imposing of behavioral standards or codes without the agreement of all those who are affected by them. These are areas in which the Scriptures say we are to make up our own minds and we are to go along only with that with which we agree.

Now, there are sometimes good reasons for limitations. We will go into some of them as we get further into this section next week. But they must be reasons which the individual accepts and makes. They are not to be imposed upon him by others, that is the point. What has happened often in the church is that those who are weak in the faith, i.e., those who do not fully understand the freedom in Christ, are the majority party and they often make artificial standards for Christians and impose them on everybody who comes into the church, with the implication that

you really cannot be a Christian unless you do these things or do not do these things.

That has given rise to a tremendous distortion of Christianity in the eyes of the world. It has given rise to the idea that Christianity is a "do not do something" idea, a "don't" religion. This distorts the freedom that is the message of the gospel. It propagates the feeling that Christianity is a set of rules to be obeyed, and the freedom of the sons of God is denied. The world therefore, gets a totally false idea of what the church is all about.

This has happened widely in our day and for the most part, I think, the "narrow party" has triumphed in the evangelical churches. This is why many people will not touch the church with a 25-foot pole, even though they are fantastically interested in the gospel. They see the church as having imposed standards and rules of conduct that have nothing to do with the Scriptures. These are artificial regulations that only the church has brought about.

Now, as a fourth main point, we come to the reason that governs this central part of this section. The apostle sets forth three great facts, all supporting and explaining the great principle involved.

The first reason why you must not look down on the weak or judge or condemn the strong is because it is not your responsibility to change your brother in this area. He is not your servant. This is what Paul

Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. {Rom 14:4 NIV}

That is very plain, is it not? The reason we are not to judge each other is that we are not responsible for one another's conduct in this area. Such responsibility is not defined in the Scriptures. This is an open area that each one has to decide before God, and, therefore, we have no responsibility to change each other and no authority to do so.

He is not your servant, Paul says; the Lord chose him. The Lord, then, is the one responsible to change him. The Lord chose him without asking you or me. Half of you would not be here if I were choosing you! Oh, I do not know about that. I do not know you that well. But I did not choose you, therefore I do not have to change you, either. Nor do you have to change me. We are not responsible for each other in this area.

consideration is being changed. He is on his way to standing. He will stand, Paul says. "Stand," of course, means that he will be straightened out if he is doing wrong in this area. If it is really wrong, God will straighten him out and it is not up to you to do it. This is why I enjoy so much that little pin that Bill Gothard gives out with the letters is, "Please be patient, God is not finished with me yet."

We are all in the process of change. The Lord is doing it, and he will do it. He is changing us, and if we will just wait a little while we can see some of the changes. Now, if the problem is one of not understanding truth, the solution is teaching the truth more plainly. As people hear it and understand it, they will be freed from this. To try to force them

into some kind of compliance with something they yet do not understand is ridiculous and futile. Therefore, be patient. If they are being exposed to truth, they will change. Let the Lord change them; it is his responsibility. Not only will he do so, but he is perfectly able to do so. God is able to do it. I like Phillips' translation here. He says, "God is well able to transform men into servants who are satisfactory." That is exactly what Paul is relying on here.

Now, if the first point is that it is not your responsibility to change these people, the second one is that God is reading the heart and he

One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord, and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. {Rom 14:5-8 NIV}

That is a very impressive point. What Paul is saying is that God can read hearts and you cannot. These distinctions and differences of viewpoint arise out of honest conviction which God sees, even though you cannot. Therefore, the individual is not simply being difficult because he does not agree with you. He is acting on the basis of what he feels is right, so give him the benefit of the doubt on that.

Believe that he is as intent on being real before God and true to him as you are, and if he feels able to indulge in some of these things you think are not right, then at least see him as doing so because he really feels that God is not displeased with him on that basis. Or, if he does feel limited and he feels he should not do certain things, do not get upset with him because he has not moved into freedom yet. Remember that he really feels that God would be displeased if he did those things; it is an honest conviction. The apostle makes clear here that every man should have that kind of a conviction, if he acts this way. "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own heart," {cf, Rom 14:4b KJV}.

Do not just act from tradition, because you were brought up that way or because you just feel it is right. Find some reason in the Scripture for it. Seek justification out of the Word of God. You may change your mind as your understanding of truth develops, but at least let it be on the ground of a conviction of the heart and of the mind.

The next thing Paul says is that God sees both of these men and both of these viewpoints as honoring him. The one who thinks Sunday is a special day that ought to be kept different from all other days is doing so as unto the Lord, therefore honor that, respect that viewpoint. The one who says, "No. When we are in Christ, days do not mean anything. They are not set aside for any special purpose. Therefore, I feel every day is alike, and I want to honor the Lord on every day." Okay, do not feel upset at that. He is doing so out of a deep conviction of his heart.

The one who drinks beer gives thanks to God for the refreshment of it

and the taste of it, and it is perfectly proper that he does so. The one who says, "No. I cannot drink beer. I only drink coffee," gives thanks for the coffee. The coffee may do as much physical harm as the beer, but, in either case, it is not a moral question. It is a question of what the heart is doing in the eyes of God. Sometimes we are too harsh with one another in these areas.

I heard some time ago of a girl who was a converted nightclub singer, a fresh, new Christian, who was asked to sing at a church meeting. She wanted to do her very best for the Lord whom she had come to love, and so she dressed up the best way she knew how and she sang a song that she thought was expressive of her faith. She did it in the "torchy" style of the nightclub singer. Somebody came up to her afterwards and just ripped into her and said, "How can you sing a song like that and claim to be a Christian? God could never be happy with a Christian who dresses the way you do, and to sing in that kind of a nightclub style must be offensive to him." The poor girl was so taken back, she just stood there for a minute, and she broke into tears, and turned and ran.

Now, that was a wrong and hurtful thing to do to her. Granted, later on she might have changed her style, but God has the right to change her, not you. Her heart was right and God saw the heart and honored it. I think that was something he was pleased with, not displeased. We must remember that we are not to make distinctions where God would not.

The last thing Paul says in this area is that our relationship with one another is more important than our life style (Verses 7, 8): "For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." Basically, what Paul is saying there is simply that living is liberty and dying is limitation. In the context, this is surely what this means. He is not talking about funerals, and life and death in that sense. He is talking about those who feel free to enjoy liberty to the fullest. They are living, while others, because of deep convictions of their own, limit themselves, and to that degree they are dying, because death is limitation.

"But whether we live," Paul says, "or whether we die, that is not the important thing. The important thing is that we belong to the Lord. He understands." That, therefore, is what we ought to remember in our relationships with one another. We belong to the Lord. We are brothers and sisters. We are not servants of each other. We are servants of the Lord and he has the right to change us.

The third and final fact that supports this governing principle is that

For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written:

So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.
{Rom 14:9-12 NIV}

That is clearly stating the fact, again, that the Lord alone has the right to judge us in these areas and he has the ability to do so because

he has been involved in both death and life. He died, so he knows what ultimate and utter limitation is. He gave himself up to death and he deliberately restricted himself in many things so that he knows what that is like. And he lives, so he is free to do anything and everything that he desires, and he knows what that is like. Therefore, he alone has won the right to judge us. He understands us both.

So Paul says, "Stop trying to take his place. Stop trying to be Christ to the rest of the church or playing God to each other. You, the weak, why do you judge your brother? And you, the strong, why do you look down on your brother? It is wrong. You are trying to take Christ's place when you do that. But remember that all of us, men and women alike, all brothers and sisters together, must individually stand before God's judgment seat."

This is true in both a present and future sense. There is a sense in which we are before him all the time and we have to give an account to him and to him alone. But there is also coming a day that Paul mentions the things that we thought nobody ever saw will be brought out to the light. We must then give an account to the Lord.

That is where we stand. Again, Paul sums up everything in the first part: We are not servants of each other; we are brothers and sisters; we are all struggling; we are all in the process; we are all subject to change; we are all trying to understand truth more clearly as we go on and we are all being freed by it. But, in the process, the only one who has a right to do anything about it is the Lord. So stop judging each other in these areas. That is what Paul is saying.

There are other things we need to explore in this area, and later in the section which we will take up next week, Paul goes further into them to show us how we are to carry them out.

But here is the great principle: In these areas we are to quit judging one another; quit treating each other with disdain and contempt and ridicule and separating from one another. We are to love one another and show it by accepting one another.

Prayer

Thank you, our Father, for these searching words which make us all feel a bit guilty. We have all been guilty of this, whether strong or weak. We have judged our brother, and condemned him. Forgive us for that, Lord. Help us to see that we have been usurping your place, Lord Jesus, in doing so. Help us to stop that, and to begin to answer only for ourselves before your throne, and upholding and praying for our brother or sister if we feel they need it. Grant to us, Lord, that illuminating understanding of truth that sets us free. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

Scripture: Romans 14:1-12
Message No: 34
Catalog No: 3534
Date: May 29, 1977

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THE RIGHT TO YIELD

by Ray C. Stedman

question of different views on such matters as dietary restrictions (whether it is all right to eat meat at certain times or days, or whether we should be free from that); on ritual regulations (such as observance of Sunday or other special days, such as Lent); on ceremonies; and especially, personal preferences in the matter of drinking wine and beer and alcohol, smoking, movies, cosmetics, or whatever.

We are right in the middle of the apostle's treatment of these kinds of problems, and I remind you that this all comes in one great section, matters, showing how much they were a problem in the early church, as they are in churches today.

The section falls naturally into three divisions:

- 1 What you must not do about these things;
- 2 What you can do about them; and
- 3 What happens when you handle them in the right way.

Last week, we looked at what you must not do. We saw that the apostle tells us that we must not criticize or condemn each other in these matters. There is an area of freedom in anyone's life which only God has the right to correct. We must not judge each other in these matters; we must not try to regulate one another's conduct by legislation, by majority rule, or by artificial codes of behavior. These methods are wrong because, as Paul brought out, they are taking the place of Christ. He alone has the right to judge. He alone has the right to criticize or condemn in these areas. And he will do so. Therefore, when Christians take this on themselves, they are usurping the place of Christ. I think that argument was very clear.

This morning we want to look at what you can do about these matters; how

we are to behave toward one another in these areas.

Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. [That summarizes what we have covered so far: we are not to judge one another.] Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. {Rom 14:13 NIV}

I have always appreciated the fact that Scripture is never merely negative. It never says, "Do not do something," without suggesting a positive action to take its place. If all the apostle had to say was, "Stop judging," that would be like saying to someone, "Do not worry," which is a futile thing to say, unless you give them a basis on which they can stop worrying. If you try to stop worrying without any reason for doing so, you will find yourself worrying all the more; that is the nature of worry. Someone said,

The worry cow would have lived till now,
If only she'd saved her breath.
But she got so afraid she was going to worry,
That she worried half to death!

Scripture never says anything like that. It does not merely say, "Stop judging"; it says, "Stop judging, but, if you want to judge, fine! Start with yourself; judge yourself." Are you pushing liberty so hard, are you insisting on your rights in certain areas, and your freedom to indulge in something, that you are upsetting others and forcing them to act beyond their own conscience? That is what you ought to judge. What is the effect upon others of your attitudes about some of these things?

The apostle goes on to give us two reasons why we must not judge others, but must judge ourselves first in this area.

As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. {Rom 14:14 NIV}

Now, there is a fundamental, psychological insight into life that governs our behavior in these areas, or it ought to. It is one thing to be free yourself to partake of something that others are not free to indulge in. And, like the apostle, you may have arrived at that by some direct teaching of Scripture, even as Paul did in the case of the Lord Jesus himself.

Actually, it does not really say in the Greek text, as this version translates it, "As one who is in the Lord Jesus," that is, as one

speaking as a Christian. What Paul really says is, "As one who has been taught by the Lord Jesus, no food is unclean in itself." The Lord Jesus did say that. It was he who said, "No food is unclean." He does not mean that all foods are good for you; some foods are not; some things you can eat are highly poisonous. Jesus does not mean that everything is all right to take in; he means that there is no moral question about food. It is never wrong, morally, to eat what your body may enjoy. Jesus taught that himself, and Paul says, "That is enough for me. That sets me free."

But that is not the only problem involved. The conscience needs to be trained by this new insight into liberty. One person's conscience may move much slower than another's, therefore, we are to adjust to one another's needs along this line.

I liken this to crossing a swinging bridge over a mountain stream. There are people who can run across a bridge like that, even though it does not have any handrails. They are not alarmed by it, they can keep their balance well. They are not concerned about the swaying of the bridge, or the danger of falling into the torrent below. That is fine; some people can do that. But others cannot. You watch them go out on a bridge like that, and they are very uncertain. They shake and tremble; they inch along. They may even get down on their hands and knees and crawl across. But they will make it if you just give them time, if you let them set their own speed. After a few crossings, they begin to pick up courage, and eventually they are able to run right across.

It is like that with these moral questions. Some people just cannot see themselves moving in a certain area that they have been brought up to think is wrong; they have difficulty doing so. As in the case of the swinging bridge, it would be cruel for someone who had the freedom to cross boldly to take the arm of someone who was timid and drag them across, to force them to run across. They might even lose their balance and fall off the bridge and suffer injury.

If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. {Rom 14:15 NIV}

It is wrong to do that. It is not loving to force people to move at your pace. To refuse to indulge a freedom that you have for the sake of someone else, to adjust to their pace, is surely one of the clearest and truest exercises of Christian love. That is what the apostle urges us to do here.

The second thing Paul says in this regard is that the issue of freedom versus non-freedom does not really demand unyielding firmness. There are some issues that do demand that. There are certain doctrines in the Scriptures we are to stand fast on, and refuse to let anyone change us on. But not on one of these questions. We are not to take that kind of

Do not allow what you consider as good to be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and

drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by men. {Rom 14:16-18 NIV}

If you are going to create division by arguing so hard for your rights, or your freedom, or by flaunting your liberty in the face of those who do not agree with it, then you are distorting the gospel itself, Paul argues. He actually uses the word "blaspheme." You are causing that which is good, Paul says, the good news about Christ, to be blasphemed because you are making too much of an issue over a minor matter. You are insisting that your rights are so important that you have to divide the church over them, or separate from a brother or sister who does not believe as you do. That is saying to the watching world around that Christianity consists of whether you do, or do not do, a certain thing.

I heard of a church some time ago that got into an unholy argument over whether they ought to have a Christmas tree at their Christmas program. Some thought that a tree was fine; others thought it was a pagan practice, and they got so angry at each other that they actually got into fist fights over it. One group dragged the tree out, then the other group dragged it back in. They ended up suing each other in a court of law and, of course, the whole thing was spread in the newspapers for the entire community to read. What else could non-Christians conclude other than that the gospel consists of whether you have a Christmas tree or not? They made such an important issue over it, they were ready to physically attack one another.

Paul says that is utterly wrong. The main point of the Christian faith is not eating or drinking or Christmas trees. The main point is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. A non-Christian, looking at a Christian, ought to see these things, not wrangling and disputing and fighting and law courts, but righteousness.

You have seen that word, "righteousness" many times in Romans, and you know what it means. It means God's gift of a sense of worth about yourself. It means that, because of the death of Jesus on your behalf, you are loved by him; you are accepted by him; you are a valuable person in his sight. In fact, he cheerfully and delightedly calls you his beloved child. That is righteousness, and from it, when we understand that, comes a sense of dignity, a sense of self-respect. That is what the world ought to see. The world ought to see you confident as to who you are, with that kind of underlying assurance that is without conceit; that shows you have a basis of self-acceptance that the world knows nothing about.

The second thing the world ought to see is peace. That comes across visibly as a kind of calmness, an inner core of unflappability that is undisturbed by the minor irritations of the moment. It is that quiet and calm assurance that God is present in the situation; that he will work it out for his glory, and therefore, we need not get upset or angry, or vindictive toward someone.

It is hard for the world to get that impression of peace and calmness if they see two people screaming at one another over what they disagree on. That does not look very calm. The important thing, therefore, is that you manifest that gift of God, which is peace.

The third element is joy. These three always go together: righteousness,

peace, and joy; they are gifts of God. They do not come from you; they come from him. Joy is that delight in life that always finds life worthwhile, even though it may be filled with problems. Joy, in a Christian, does not come from circumstances.

I was down south a couple of weeks ago, and I met a lady who has been lying in her bed for 13 years. She has arthritis so bad that her joints are disconnected and she cannot even raise her hands. But the smile on her face, the joy that is evident in her, is an outstanding witness to the fact that joy of this kind is a gift of God. It comes out of relationship, not out of circumstance. She has a tremendous ministry to the community around her because of that.

Paul is saying that if that is what you have discovered, if that is the center of your focus and interest, then you can easily give up some momentary indulgence in a pleasure that you enjoy and are free to participate in, if it is going to bother someone, or upset someone, or make them move beyond their own conscience.

Sometimes, when you enter a main highway, you see a sign that says "YIELD." Now, I would not suggest that you steal one of those, but it would be good if you could make one and put it up in your dining room. That is a Christian philosophy -- to yield, to give way. Do not insist on your rights under these circumstances.

What should guide us in that? Paul takes it up more fully in the second

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace
and to mutual edification. {Rom 14:19 NIV}

There are the guidelines. Enjoy your liberties, indulge them wherever you desire, if you do so in such a way that you do not destroy peace, or mutual building up in truth, or arrest the learning process for someone else. Paul enlarges on these guidelines for us. Whenever you are doing something that threatens the peace of a community, or a church, or a group, or an individual, so that they cannot handle it, so that they become angry and upset, then back off. You who are strong, bear that burden. Do not insist on your rights.

Some Christians get so intent on having their rights that I have seen them indulge in the very presence of people they knew would be highly offended by what they did, simply because they wanted to show how free they were. Paul says that kind of thing is absolutely wrong. He goes on to say,

Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. {Rom
14:20a NIV}

Peace is the work of God. Nothing can produce lasting peace among people, especially those of different cultural backgrounds, except the work of God. It is the Spirit of God who produces peace. So, if for the sake of some right that you have, some liberty you feel, you destroy

that peace, you are destroying what God has brought about. Do not do that. It is not worth it.

The apostle's second guideline is that you stop exercising your liberty whenever it arrests someone else's learning process. All Christians ought to examine these issues more and more. They ought to investigate for new truth from the Word, in a sense, constantly keeping an open mind on these matters. And they will, if you do not push them too hard. But if someone flaunts his liberty in such a way as to anger people and upset them, it will often harden them in their resistance to change, so that they no longer want to examine the question. That, Paul says, must be the limit to those who indulge in their liberty. Do not push people that far, or press them that hard. Rather, we are to help them understand the reason for our liberty.

I think it is a healthy thing for a Christian who has liberty in some of these areas to indulge it on occasion. I do not think the cause of Christ is ever advanced by having every strong Christian in a congregation completely forsake their right to indulge in some of the things. What happens then is that the whole question is settled on the basis of the most narrow and most prejudiced person on the congregation. Soon, the gospel itself becomes identified with that kind of view. That is why the outside world often considers Christians to be narrow-minded people who have no concern except to prevent the enjoyment of the good gifts of life that God has given us.

It is a good thing for people to indulge their liberties. It makes those who are not free raise questions in their minds, especially when they see that that indulgence is linked with a clear manifestation of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. It makes you think, when you see a godly person whom you admire and respect feel perfectly free to indulge in something that you have never been able to indulge in, and yet you cannot deny that he is a godly person. I think that kind of thing is right, and Paul is suggesting this, as we will see in our next study.

But, Paul says, be careful, and judge how far you are going. If what you are doing upsets people and hardens them in their views so that they will no longer examine and investigate, then stop, you are going too far. That should be the limit. This is what the apostle means when he says,

All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else that will cause your brother to fall. {Rom 14:20b-21 NIV}

Now, be careful there. Paul does not say it is wrong to make him think; it is never wrong to indulge your liberty to such a degree that your brother has to ask questions about his viewpoint. That is all right. But it is wrong to persist in it to such a degree that you cause him to act beyond his convictions in order to feel acceptable.

So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God. {Rom 14:22a NIV}

Unfortunately, that is not a very good translation. It suggests that you are to keep quiet about your liberties, that you do not say anything to anybody, that you keep it between yourself and God. That really is not what Paul is saying. What he is saying is, "if you have faith, have it between yourself and God." That is, let God and God's Word be the basis for your faith, and nothing else. Be sure that what you are doing is not because of pride on your part, because you want to show off how free you are -- you are doing this because God has freed you by his Word. And, Paul says, if you do that,

Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself by what he approves. {Rom 14:22b NIV}

If you have really based it on that, then your action will be one in which your conscience is free. You will not feel guilty and troubled as to whether you are acting beyond what the Word of God really says. You will be happy, free, blessed.

But, if you do not, if you really have not settled this on the basis of Scripture, but are acting only because you want to indulge yourself; if you like this thing but you still feel a bit troubled by it; if you act then, you are going to be condemned by your conscience. And if you are condemned by your conscience, you will feel guilty. And if you act because you feel guilty, you are not acting out of faith, and, therefore, you are sinning. This is Paul's argument.

"Without faith," Hebrews says, "it is impossible to please God," {Heb 11:6a}. Faith means believing what God has said. Thus, you must base your actions in Christian liberty on what the Word of God declares -- not about any specific thing, but the great principle of freedom which is set forth. Now, if you understand that, fine, Paul says. But be sure that you yourself are acting not out of pride, not out of mere self-indulgence, but out of a deep conviction that rests upon the Word and revelation of God.

To sum up, what Paul has said to us is:

- 1 Do not deliberately stumble or shock your brother or sister. Do not deliberately do things that will offend them, or even make them feel uncomfortable. Think about them, not yourself.
- 1 Second: Give up your right when it threatens the peace or hinders the growth of another individual. Be alert to judge in that area.
- 1 And third: Never act from doubt. Act only from conviction, by the Word, and by the Spirit of God. If these problems are all settled on that basis, a congregation will be moving gradually toward the great liberty that we have as children of God.

What will happen in the eyes of the watching world? Christians will be seen to be free people, not controlled by scruples that limit them and narrow them in their enjoyment of God's great gifts. Yet, these things will not be of such importance that they are put at the heart and center of everything. The world will begin to see that the heart of the Gospel

is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, the gifts of God. Those gifts, then, are the basis for freedom in all these areas.

But you are just as free to say, "No," to the indulgence of a gift as you are to say, "Yes," to it. That is true freedom. You are not free if you think you have won your rights. That is not freedom. Freedom is the right to give up your rights, for good and proper cause. That is what the watching world will begin to see.

These are wise words. Properly followed, they will gradually work out the differences of viewpoints we may have. But if they are ignored, the church is bound to go along with one side or the other, and division, anger, and upset will follow, and the whole cause of Christ will be injured by that.

In our next study, we are going to see how Christ is our great example in this, and what will happen to us when we really begin to live on these terms.

Prayer

Thank you, our Father, for words that help us to understand these problems, and the way of working them out peacefully and cheerfully and joyfully, "preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Teach us Lord, to walk softly before you in this, with a concern for our brother and sister; to be patient and to learn to enjoy our liberties only as they do not injure or hurt another. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: The Right to Yield
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Experienced
Scripture: Romans 14:13-23
Message No: 35
Catalog No: 3535
Date: June 5, 1977

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OUR GREAT EXAMPLE

by Ray C. Stedman

We are in the fifteenth chapter of this epistle of Romans, and Paul is concluding his discussion of the different views on what is wrong and what is right for Christians.

- * Is it morally right for a Christian to drink wine, beer, or cocktails, or is that wrong?
- * Is it morally wrong for a Christian to keep special days, such as Lent, or is that right?
- * Is it morally wrong for a believer to smoke, or is that right?
- * Is it morally right to eat pork, or is that wrong?

These are but some of the questions that Christians have asked through the years. You could go on and on, for there is an extensive list along these lines.

I was just reading this morning that Dr. Carl McIntire, the flamboyant fundamentalist Presbyterian preacher, is now attacking Christians for going along with the change from Fahrenheit to Celsius, or centigrade. He says it is nothing but a sneaky Communist plot to take over the world by degrees!

So there are a lot of things you could get upset about and divide over. The apostle has been giving us some very helpful guidelines and I am not going to retrace these arguments for you as our messages are in print. There is really no need to retrace them, anyway, for in the opening two verses of Chapter 15, Paul summarizes them for us.

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. {Rom 15:1-2 NIV}

There are two thumbnail rules to follow when you have to make a quick decision as to whether you ought to insist on liberty in a certain area, or give way to someone else's qualms, or prejudices, or differences of viewpoint.

The first rule is: Choose to please your neighbor rather than yourself. Do not insist on your way of doing things; be quick to give in. After all, this is what love does. Love does not insist on its own; in your loving approach, love will adjust and adapt to others. I

We who have strong faith ought to shoulder the burden of the doubts and qualms of others, and not just to go our own sweet

The second rule, however, says to be careful that your giving in does not allow your neighbor to be confirmed in his weakness, that you do not

leave him without encouragement to grow, or to re-think his position. I think this is very important, and it reflects some of the things that Paul has said earlier in this account. We are to seek to build one another up. As I have pointed out before, in all these kinds of questions, if we do nothing but give way to people, and give in to their weaknesses, the church eventually ends up living at the level of the weakest conscience in its midst. This presents a twisted and distorted view of Christian liberty, and the world gets false ideas about what is important, and what Christianity is concerned about. So this helps to balance the situation. Please your neighbor, but for his own good, always leaving something there to challenge his thinking, or make him reach out a bit, and possibly change his viewpoint.

In Sacramento this past week, a man made an appointment to see me. He told me he was a teacher in a Christian school there and he had been asked by the board of the school to enforce a rule prohibiting students from wearing their hair long. It was a rule that he did not agree with, so he found himself in a serious dilemma. If he did not enforce the rule, the board had given him clear indication that he would lose his job. If he did enforce it, he would be upsetting the students and their parents, who felt that this was a matter that did not merit that kind of attention. Our culture has long since changed from regarding long hair as a symbol of rebellion, so this man found himself in between a rock and a hard place. His plea to me was, "What shall I do?"

My counsel, whether right or wrong, in line with what we had learned liberty to the degree that they would upset the peace. So I said to him, "For the sake of peace, go along with the school board and enforce the rule for this year. But make a strong plea to the board to re-think their position and to change their viewpoint. At the end of the year if they are unwilling to do that, perhaps you might well consider moving to a different place, or getting another position. That way you would not be upsetting things, and creating a division or a faction within the school."

Now, I think that illustrates what Paul is bringing before us here. These kinds of decisions are not easy to make. Oftentimes people can lose sight of the main objectives of being together as Christians, and they get so focused in on these issues that a church can split right down the center. Or else these issues will create such arguing, bickering, fighting and dissension within the group that everyone is made unhappy, and the whole atmosphere of the church is changed. Paul is saying to us that this is really not necessary as there are things that can be done to work these problems out. To encourage us in this, he gives us three factors that we can count on for help with these problems.

The first one is the encouragement of example that comes to us from the

For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written:
"The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scripture, we might have hope. {Rom 15:3-4 NIV}

Paul's first example for us is Jesus himself. He ran into this kind of

problem though he was perfect, though he never did anything that was wrong or out of line. Even though he never on any occasion conducted himself in a way that was in the slightest degree displeasing to God the Father, nevertheless, he ran into these kinds of antagonisms. As Paul says, Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures that predicted that those who did not like God's methods would take it out on him. "The insults of those who insult you," he says, "have fallen on me," {cf, Psa 69:9 NIV}. And so our Lord had to bear with all the unhappiness and sometimes the insults of those who could not be pleased even with what God himself was doing.

keeping the Sabbath properly? They were very upset because he did things they felt were wrong to do on the Sabbath. Now what did our Lord do? Did he give in to their desire? No, he did not. He ignored their protest and went ahead and did things that upset them even more, because if he had gone along with their desires, they would never have learned what God intended the Sabbath to be. So the Lord did not adjust to their antagonism.

But on another occasion the Lord was accused of not paying his taxes. When the disciples told him about this, he sent Peter down to the lake to catch a fish, and in the fish's mouth he would find a coin sufficient to pay the tax for both Peter and himself. Jesus said he did this in order not to offend them. That is, he adjusted to their complaint at that point.

If we think we have difficulty in applying these rules we must remember that the Lord himself had difficulty in this, and there is still a third occasion when he publicly acknowledged that there was no way to please everybody. Jesus said, "When John the Baptist came to you, he came neither eating nor drinking." That does not mean that John did not eat food; it means that he carefully observed certain dietary restrictions. He was probably a Nazirite and had taken a vow never to touch any kind of alcoholic beverage. So Jesus said, "When John came neither eating nor drinking, you said of him, 'He has a demon.' But when I came both eating and drinking, you called me a glutton and a drunkard. So how can I please you?" {cf, Matt 11:18-19, Luke 7:33-34}. Jesus simply recognized the impossibility, at times, of adjusting to everybody. Thus he went ahead and did what God had sent him to do and he let God take care of the difficulties.

I think this is what Paul has in mind here. He tells us that our Lord is the example, and there will be times when you cannot please anybody. There will be other times when you can, and, if you can, you should. But there will be still other times when if you did, you would hinder people in their spiritual growth, and then you should not seek to please them.

Not only do we have our Lord's life as our example, but the Old Testament also helps us here, especially in the matter of yielding up our rights. Remember when Abraham and Lot, his nephew, stood looking over the valley of the Jordan River? It was evident that they would have to divide the land among them, and Abraham, who was the older of the two, and the one who, by rights, ought to have had the first choice, gave that choice to Lot. Lot chose first, and he chose the lush, beautiful, green areas of the Jordan valley, leaving Abraham the barren hills. Now Abraham is an example of graciousness; he gave up his rights.

Remember when Moses, according to the record, gave up his place as a prince in the household of Pharaoh? As Hebrews tells us, he gave it up in order that he might "suffer reproach with the people of God for a

season," {cf, Heb 11:25-26}. This is a beautiful example.

Remember David and Jonathan who were such close friends? We see Jonathan so gracefully yielding his right to the throne to David, his friend, because he knew God had chosen him. And Jonathan also supported him against the wrath of his own father. What a beautiful picture this is. Jonathan is willing to give up in order that David might gain.

When you come to the New Testament there is that scene when John the Baptist says of Jesus, "He must increase; I must decrease," {cf, John 3:30}. And yet none of these men who gave up ever lost anything. Now that is the point the apostle is making. These men gained by this. God was glorified, and they themselves ultimately gained, because, in giving up, they achieved the objective that God was after. So Paul gives us this picture of willingness to give up, refusing to do so only when it is going to be hurtful to somebody, leaving them ignorant of the principles of Scripture, bound to some narrow, rigid point of view.

So we get help from the past. Not only that, Paul goes on to show us

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. {Rom 15:5-6 NIV}

There is no need to panic or to be afraid that we cannot work these problems out, Paul says. God can drastically change the situation. He is that kind of a God. The apostle suggests two things we can do when we get involved in a disagreement like this.

First, there ought to be prayer, prayer for unity. Paul prays himself that God may grant "a spirit of unity among yourselves." In Luke 11:13 {NIV}, Jesus said, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those that ask him!" Now Jesus does not mean that is the way to get the Spirit of God to come into your life. He is talking there about problems and difficulties in your life when you need a special ministry of the Holy Spirit. He says, "If you know how to give good gifts to your children, even though basically you have evil in your nature, how much more willing is the heavenly Father to give the Holy Spirit to you in times of problems and difficulties, to preserve the spirit of unity that you desperately need."

This very week I learned of a situation of two brothers in Christ who had a serious difference of viewpoint. Not only did it bring them to a deadlock where they were not able to resolve it (for both felt they were right, and neither was able or willing to give in), but it affected a whole program that God was putting together, one that depended upon their working together. It looked as though the whole thing would come to an ignoble end; nothing could be worked out. But when others heard about this, and the two men involved began to pray, asking God to intervene, then, at the final meeting that was scheduled to try and work this out, one of the men said, "There is no need for us to talk about this, because God has already been talking to me. He showed me that I had been stubborn and obstinate about this, and I'm sorry. Let's go on to other things now; let's get the program started." The whole

difficulty just faded away because God is able to change situations and bring about unity. So prayer for unity is one of the most important things we can do when there is this kind of disagreement among us.

The second thing the apostle says is to praise God for the relationship you already have, "so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." With one heart and mouth. Remember that you are brothers. Give God thanks together for what unites you, and minimize the things that divide you. Remember the important thing is that in the eyes of the watching world you manifest the unity of brotherhood that God has brought about. You did not make yourselves brothers and sisters: God did. Therefore he desires that to be visible to the world around. That is why, in Ephesians 4, we are admonished to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," {cf, Eph 4:3}. One of the present helps we have is to pray, to ask God for the spirit of unity, and then to praise him for the unity that already exists.

We have had encouragement from the past, and encouragement from the present, and now Paul tells us to be encouraged by what the future holds

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, so it is written:
Gentiles;
Psalm 18:49]
Again, it says,
32:43]
And again,
peoples." [cf, Psalm 117:1]
And again, Isaiah says,
nations;
{Rom 15:7-12 NIV}

Now what Paul is saying here is that God is already working out a great program that involves reconciling the Jews and the Gentiles. God has announced that he is going to do that, and he will bring it to pass. It has already started. It started when Christ accepted both Jews and Gentiles, regardless of the great differences between them.

I do not know if you have ever been involved in a church fight over an issue like drinking or smoking or movies or dances or whatever, but if you have, you know that tempers can get very hot. People can get very upset, and factions can form; divisions and feuds break out. And yet I have never heard of a church fight on those grounds that was any worse than the attitudes that Jews and Gentiles had toward one another in Paul's day. The Jews held the Gentiles in contempt; they called them dogs. They would have nothing to do with them. The Jews even regarded it as sinful to go into a Gentile's house and they would never dream of eating with a Gentile. They regarded them with utter contempt. In the book of Acts, Peter got into serious trouble with his Jewish friends because he went into the home of Cornelius the centurion, and ate with him. It was only because Peter was able to show that the Holy Spirit sent him there, and used him there, that he was able to justify his

conduct to his friends.

Of course, if the Jews felt that way about the Gentiles, the Gentiles paid it right back in kind. They hated the Jews. They called them all kinds of names; they looked down on them. This is where modern anti-Semitism was born. These were opposing factions who hated one another, and would have nothing to do with one another, Yet, Paul says, that kind of division God is healing by the work of Jesus. And how did Jesus do it? Paul's point is that Jesus began his work by becoming himself a minister of circumcision. The version I have says he "became a servant of the Jews." That is based on the idea that what Paul wrote was, "Christ became a minister of the circumcision," which is another name for the Jews. Actually what the text says is, "he became a minister of circumcision," which does not necessarily refer to the Jews as a people, but refers to their customs and rituals and ceremonies.

What the apostle is arguing is that the Lord healed this breach between the Jews and the Gentiles by his giving in and limiting his own liberty. He who designed the human body, he who made it perfect, exactly as it ought to be, he himself consented to the act of circumcision. His body was mutilated. That part of his body which was the mark of the flesh was to be cut off. Jesus consented to that and limited himself in that way. He became a circumcised Jew. He who declared in his ministry that all foods are clean, and thus gave clear evidence that he understood the liberty that God gives us in the matter of eating, never once ate anything but kosher food. He never had a ham sandwich. He never had bacon and eggs for breakfast. He limited himself to the Jewish diet, even though he declared that all foods were clean.

He who was without sin insisted on a sinner's baptism. He came to John, and John said, "Why are you coming to me? I need to be baptized by you. You do not need to be baptized." Jesus said, "Allow it to be so, for in this way it becomes us. It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness," {cf, Matt 3:15}. So he who had no reason to be baptized consented to be baptized. He who longed to heal the hurts of the world said that when he came, he limited himself to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Now, Paul's argument is that the results of that limitation were that Jesus broke the back of the argument and of the contempt between the Jew and the Gentile. He reached both Jews and Gentiles to the glory of God.

If you trace this through you can see that what Paul is saying is that in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God showed his faithfulness to the Jews in fulfilling the promises made to the patriarchs; and he showed his mercy to the Gentiles, saving them who were without any promises at all. Thus the two, Jew and Gentile, shall fully become one, just as the Scriptures predict here.

You have quotations from the Psalms (the Writings); from Deuteronomy (the Law); and from Isaiah (the Prophets). So you have the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings all agreeing that God can work out these kinds of problems. >From the past, from the present, and from the future there is encouragement to work them out. What Paul is really saying is, "You do not need to separate; you do not need to split; you do not need to fight; you do not need to sue one another; you do not need to quit. You can work the problems out, for there is help available from all these sources, and God is honored and glorified when you do so."

May the God of hope fill you with great joy and peace so you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. {Rom 15:13 NIV}

What a magnificent verse! Whenever I am asked to give an autograph, I almost always include this verse in it. It is such a beautiful expression. Look how much you have got going for you. All the great words of the Christian faith appear here: hope, twice (once it is called "overflowing hope"); and joy, great joy; and peace, calmness and confidence; and trust, belief in a living God; and finally, the power of the Holy Spirit, the invisible force that can open doors and no man shuts them, and can shut and no man opens -- the power of God released among us.

Now I think we Christians need to remember this. I am delighted that here at Peninsula Bible Church we have had very, very little of this kind of strife. I am just so grateful for it. I have been in places where the whole testimony of Christ in a community has been wrecked by the divisions and the attitudes that people have had toward one another in these areas; when we presume to write one another off because one has liberty we do not feel they should have; when we talk down to people and disparage those who do not have the faith and strength to act in liberty such as we do, we destroy the work of God.

What the apostle is urging us to do is to unite on the great positive words of our faith, and that we allow these qualities of hope, and joy, and peace, and trust, and power to be visible when others see us gathered together as Christians. When they hear us talking about each other we are to reflect these qualities, rather than the miniscule divisions and arguments that many of us have.

In some ways the letter to the Romans ends with that verse. Paul goes on, it is true, to give some personal words about his own ministry which we will be looking at together next Sunday, and in the sixteenth chapter there is a long list of his friends, and his greetings to them. But, in a sense, the whole argument of this epistle is drawn to a close with this tremendous benediction:

May the God of hope fill you with great joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. {Rom 15:13 NIV}

How I hope these will be the characteristics that we manifest to the world around.
Prayer

Our Father, we do thank you for the peace and joy and righteousness that are gifts to us from your Spirit at work in our hearts. Thank you for the liberty and freedom that you

give us in these areas. We pray that we who regard ourselves as strong, may be willing to bear the burdens of the weak, and not to offend them or to hurt them or to slash at them. May love be evident among us, Lord, but above all else, we pray that we may manifest a spirit of unity to the watching world that knows no way to get divergent factions together. We thank you for this miracle of unity among us, and ask that it be preserved in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

Title: Our Great Example
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Experienced
Scripture: Romans 15:1-13
Message No: 36
Catalog No: 3536
Date: June 19, 1977

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AN ADEQUATE MINISTRY

by Ray C. Stedman

We are drawing to a close in our study of this great epistle to the Romans, and this letter closes just as it began, with a personal word from the apostle about himself, and about the church in Rome. There are two themes in the closing section of Chapter 15 -- one is the church at Rome, and the other is the ministry of the Apostle Paul. I hope you will follow in your Bible, for this is a rather extended passage, and one that I am going to have to move rapidly through. The apostle says

I myself am convinced my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another. {Rom 15:14 NIV}

When I was in Sacramento last week, I was introduced to the congregation of the Arcade Baptist Church by the pastor, Dr. Lee Toms. He not only introduced me to the congregation, but he introduced the congregation to me. He said he wanted me to meet the finest congregation in the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii. But I demurred, saying that I knew of one congregation that was finer. We had a polite little exchange over that but, since I was the speaker, I had the last word.

Those who know anything about the ancient city of Rome know that it was built on seven hills. The largest of those hills was called the Palatine, and you can still visit the Palatine, down by the Roman Forum. I have always imagined, as I read this letter to the Romans, these early Christians gathering somewhere around the foot of the Palatine hill, studying this letter and other Scriptures as well. Since they were a church that understood and knew the Scriptures, I am sure they called themselves the Palatine Bible Church -- PBC!

Now, the Scriptures do not actually teach that. You only discover that kind of information as a result of what might be called "sanctified imagination." But there are many similarities, I think, between the church at Rome and Peninsula Bible Church. You remember that this letter began with the recognition of the apostle that the faith of these people was known around the world; and even in a much bigger world than Paul knew, this is true of this church here. God has given us a very deep responsibility, in that many people around the world know of this church and its faith.

In this chapter of Romans, Paul gives us a little further insight into this church, and tells us certain things that were true of it that, there are three things that he says about this church, three great qualities that they possessed.

First, he says, "I am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness." That is, their motives were right. They had come to the place where they were motivated by a sense of goodness, and I believe that this is also true here at PBC. Certainly, this church at Rome was a responsive church, a compassionate church. It reached out to people who were in need. It responded to those who had hurts and burdens and concerns. I think this is one of the qualities I have appreciated most about this congregation here. Whenever a need is shared, there is always a compassionate response. I feel it could be said of this church, as it was said of the church at Rome, that the congregation is "full of goodness."

The second thing that the apostle says is that they were complete in knowledge. Now that is rather remarkable. Here was a church to which Paul did not need to give any new theology. He acknowledges that they had it already. Though this is one of the most deeply penetrative theological treatises in the New Testament, Paul did not write it because these people did not already know the truth that he was giving them. If you think back through the letter, there were certain themes that the apostle emphasized:

One was justification by faith, i.e., the gift of worth in God's sight. This gift could not be earned: It was a gift because of the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf. It was not earned by trying to do good works before God -- this is impossible, and they understood that. They knew that though they did not deserve anything from God, nevertheless, they were his dearly loved children, and God accepted them fully. This, I

think, is one of the great truths that has always rung strong and clear throughout the Christian centuries. For it is the one truth, above almost anything else, that God wants us to know to start our Christian lives with. It is the basis for worth. If we know God loves us, then we know we can love our neighbor and we can accept others, because we ourselves have been accepted by God. There is a profound psychological reality here that these people understood.

And they understood the nature of the flesh, the need for sanctification, to use the theological term. They knew that even though they had been redeemed, they were still possessed of an old nature. The old Adam was still there, giving them trouble.

I still struggle with the old Adam, and so do you. I can see you doing it. Young Philip Melancthon, the colleague of Martin Luther, once wrote to Luther and said, "Old Adam is too strong for young Philip."

These people at Rome understood this truth and they knew that this would be the struggle of their Christian lives. Paul did not have to tell them that; they knew it before he wrote. But they knew also that God is working out a great plan, that he is creating a whole new humanity, and building a new creation. Right in the midst of the ruins of the old, he is producing a new man, and they were part of it.

They understood the great themes of glorification, and of the eternal ages to come. So Paul writes and says they were complete in knowledge, and I think in many ways we can say this about PBC. We are well taught, deeply understanding the great truths and the great themes of Scripture.

The third thing the apostle had to say about this church was that they Adams gets the title of his well known book, *Competent to Counsel* .) What the apostle said here was, "You are able to counsel one another." I think that is a remarkable thing.

This is the answer, by the way, to all the terrible pressure that is placed upon pastors, who are expected to solve all the problems of their congregations, and to counsel everyone first-hand. That was never God's intention. The plan of God is that the whole congregation be involved in the work of counseling. The whole congregation is to be aware of what is going on with neighbors and friends and brothers and sisters, and do something about meeting their problems. And the way this is done is by the imparting of the gifts of the Spirit.

I think this is something we can rejoice in here, that so many are ministering in this area, sharing the load of counseling -- and, by the way, there are many more who could be involved.

So the church at Rome had the right motives, they had complete knowledge, and they had the full range of gifts, so that they were able to do many things within their church community and in the city of Rome. But Paul also recognized that there were three things they lacked

I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. {Rom 15:15-16 NIV}

Now, you would think that a church that was theologically knowledgeable, able to instruct and counsel one another in the deep problems of life, and filled with a spirit of goodness and compassion, would hardly need anything more said to them. Yet it is to that kind of a church that Paul addressed his letter to the Romans. And he wrote, he says, because they needed three other things that he sets forth here.

First, they needed a bold reminder of the truth. "I have written you quite boldly on some points, to remind you of them again."

I saw a man the other day with a string around his finger. The string was to remind him of something. The fact that we so easily forget things is somehow built into our humanity and I think one of the greatest proofs of the fall of man is that we have such a hard time remembering what we want to remember, yet we so easily remember what we want to forget!

We even need to be reminded again and again of these great themes of the renewed by the Holy Spirit," {cf, Rom 12:2}. That is one reason to gather together every Sunday: We need to have our minds renewed. We need to be called back to a vision of reality.

Living out in the world, as many of you are, working every day among non-Christians, it is so easy to be sucked into the attitudes of the world around. It is so easy to get the idea that life is designed to be a pleasant picnic, that we can work toward the day when we can retire and enjoy ourselves. I find that attitude prevalent among people everywhere, but that is not what the Bible says.

The Bible says we are in the midst of a battle, a battle to the death, against a keen and crafty foe. He wants to discourage us and defeat us, and to make us feel angry and hostile. He knows how to do it, and he never lets up. This life is not designed to be a time of relaxing. There are times when we need recreation and vacations, when we can slow down a bit. But you never see the Apostle Paul talking about quitting the battle. You cannot quit, as long as life is there.

So Paul tells us that we need to be reminded, day by day and week by week, that we are in a battle and that we have a crafty foe. This life is not all there is, by any means. This is school time, a training ground, where we are to learn our lessons. This life is getting us ready for the real thing that is yet to come.

The second thing the apostle said the Christians at Rome needed was a priestly ministry. He told them, "You not only need to be reminded of the truth, but you need an example to follow. You need somebody you can see doing this kind of thing. That is what God has given me the privilege of doing. I have been called of God into this ministry, not only to be an example of leadership, but also to be like a priest working in the temple, to awaken among you a sense of worship, a sense of the greatness of God."

I think we need this frequently. I know I do. Ron Ritchie was saying to me before the service this morning that he feels sort of dead inside. I get that way, and so do you. Despite all the exciting things happening, despite all the tremendous encouragement on every side, there are times when we need to lift our eyes from our circumstances and stand before

the greatness of God and see who it is we have to deal with, who it is that is working through us. That is why Paul wrote the book of Romans. That is why we have in the eleventh chapter that passage dealing with

knowledge of God!
11:33 NIV}

The third thing they needed, Paul says, is that the Gentiles "might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit." Every congregation needs this. We need to labor, to pray, to work, to counsel, to evangelize. But all of the activity of the Christian life is of no avail if it is not sanctified by the Holy Spirit, if it does not have in it that touch of God, that unction from on high, that divine wind blowing upon the dead bones and making them come to life. I think Paul is reminding them here of the ministry of prayer, and the need to remember that God himself must touch something -- otherwise it is dead and useless. So Paul calls this church at Rome back to this tremendous reality. They had so much, but they needed this as well.

Today at Peninsula Bible Church we have so much, but we need the same thing; we need daily reminders of the truth. We need our minds renewed, or else we are going to slip right back into thinking like everybody else. We need a model, and there are models among us that we can follow, men and women who are exercising this kind of ministry. And we need the touch of God above all else, that sense that God himself must make it go.

Now that brings us to the theme that the apostle develops here on his own ministry. Here is a fantastic passage, where, for the first time in this letter, we get a close look at this mighty apostle himself.

Did you ever stop to ask yourself what influence the Apostle Paul has had in your own life? He lived two thousand years ago, and yet there is not a man or woman, boy or girl among us, who has not had their life drastically affected by this man. The whole course of history has been changed by the truths he taught. In fact, for the most part, history itself has been built around the letters and teachings and doctrine and ministry of the Apostle Paul. We would not even be here, for America as a nation would not exist if this man had never lived. Even today we feel the freshness of his spirit, the greatness of his mind, and the fullness of his heart. He touches us all.

Paul tells us three things about his own ministry in this last section: The principles that he worked under; the practice by which he carried them out; and finally, a word about the power that he relied upon

Therefore, I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done -- by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be

building on someone else's foundation. {Rom 15:17-20 NIV}

Concerning the principles of his ministry, Paul tells us five things:

First, everywhere he went he found himself rejoicing. He said, "I rejoice, I glory in Christ Jesus, in my service to God." Why? Because when this man came into a city, he usually found it in the grip of Roman authority, and ruled with an iron hand. He would find the people in widespread despair, empty and longing for something they could not find, and fallen into terribly degrading habits that were destroying homes and the very fabric of society itself. He would find them in the grip of superstitious fears. No church existed where he went, but after he had been there a while, and had begun to preach these tremendous themes, light began to spring up in the darkness. People were changed; they began to live for the first time. They discovered why they were made, and excitement appeared in their lives.

So Paul just spent his life rejoicing over what was happening. That is the kind of ministry he had, and he gives us the secret of it in Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done." That is the greatest secret God has to teach man -- that man was designed, not to do something to make God happy, but to let God work through the man. God would do the work -- that is what Paul said, "... Christ has accomplished through me."

Not a week goes by but half a dozen posters and pamphlets across my desk promoting the work of some man, telling me how much he has done for God. I get them all the time, and so do you, these boasting, promotional pieces trying to convince you they are God's gift to earth. I have learned to throw most of them into the waste basket unopened. In fact, I recognize them from their titles by now, and I just throw them away. You never hear that from Paul. You never hear him telling how much he has done for God. Everywhere it is how much God has done through him, and that is the secret of a truly effective life. It took the apostle ten years to learn that secret.

Like many young Christians, he started out with a great amount of zeal and desire to turn the world upside down, and he thought he had the equipment and the gifts to do it. It took God ten years to show him that his brilliant mind, his mighty gifts and great personality and influence and contacts were of no value in the service of God. All God wanted was the man himself; he would work through him. And when Paul learned that secret, he launched upon this great ministry that changed the history of the world.

A young man asked me this week, "Why did God punish King David for numbering Israel?" That is one of the puzzles of the Old Testament. Why did God severely punish the king and his people when he took a census of Israel? That does not sound like a very serious aim, does it? But that represented David's departure from the principle of dependence upon God to be his resource, and a shift to the world's resource of numbers. Nothing has contributed more to the weakness of the church than this dependence upon numbers, as though a great crowd of people can do something. When you meet a man or a woman who is willing to trust God to work through them, there is no limit to what God can do. This is the secret of Paul's ministry.

Then its manifestation, which is power (Verse 19): "by the power of

signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit." These signs and miracles were the signs of an apostle. Paul tells us in Second Corinthians that wherever he went he performed signs and wonders. People say today, "Well, why can't we do them?" The answer is because they were the mark of an apostle, and only apostles did these things. Today we do not need any more apostles; we have the original ones, and their writings are available to us. What we have is what Paul mentions, the power of the Spirit, and its impact on human lives. Remember he wrote to the Corinthians, who had the nerve to write him and say, "The next time you show up in Corinth, how about bringing a letter of recommendation from Peter and James and John?" Paul wrote back and said, "Do you mean that? Could you really mean that? Why, don't you understand that you are my letter of recommendation? Look at what's happened in your lives: You used to be drunkards and homosexuals and thieves and murders -- such were some of you! But what are you now? Look at the change! You are all life and ministry were constantly characterized by the display of the power of God to change lives.

Then look at how widespread his ministry was (verse 19): "So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ." You really have to have a map to see that. Jerusalem is way down on the eastern corner of the Mediterranean Sea, in Asia. Paul had traveled up and down that coast, on into what we call Turkey, in Asia Minor, up and across the Dardanelles, into Europe, then into Macedonia and Greece. He had gone, as he tells us here, into what we call Yugoslavia. Illyricum is Yugoslavia, now dominated by the Communists, but the Apostle Paul preached there, and the nature of his ministry was pioneering (Verse 20): "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known." He never wanted to build on another man's work.

Some weeks ago I shared with you a little booklet I ran across that described the difference between "Settler" theology and "Pioneering" theology -- a very interesting and humorous little booklet. This book says there are two kinds of Christians: Some want to be Settlers, to live around the courthouse and let the mayor run everything. They have lost all desire to reach out. But then there are the Pioneers, like Paul. They want to be getting into new areas that have never been touched adequately. I believe this is characteristic of the Spirit of God. He loves to thrust out into new areas.

Some of us are praying for a thrust into East Palo Alto, to touch folks who have never been touched much. We ask you to pray with us that we may reach into these areas, that something will develop that will have the touch of God upon it. And this is Paul's great hunger. (Did you ever notice that the word for news, as in good news, is made up of the first letters of north, east, west, and south?) We are to reach out with the good news, as Paul did.

Now for a paragraph on how he practiced this ministry

This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you. But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions, and since I have been longing for many years to see you, I plan to do so when I go to Spain. I hope to visit you while passing through and to have you aid me on my journey there, after I have enjoyed your company for a while. {Rom 15:22-24 NIV}

There is Paul's word about how practical his ministry was. It always involved three things.

First, it involved planning for the future. I am always running into Christians who think that God gives his orders directly to them while they are moving. They think of the Christian life as going on automatic pilot, where they just float around, waiting for orders as they go. They never think of planning or looking ahead. But Paul did not live like that.

For many years he had longed to go to Spain, and he planned to do so. But notice something about his planning.

- 1 First, it was flexible; he did not have a timetable. He went according to the way God opened the door, but he planned to go in a certain direction; he had it clearly in mind. He did not tell God how or when it had to be. Now that is Christian planning.
- 2 Second, he was persistent; he did not give up. He had set his heart on Rome and Spain, and that is where he was going. It did not matter how long it took, he just kept plodding steadily toward that goal. There is no record that Paul ever got to Spain, although there are some hints in Scripture that he undertook a fourth missionary journey after he wrote the letters to Timothy. Perhaps he did get to Spain. That was the direction he had set his heart on.
- 3 The third thing about Paul's planning was that it always involved a team. He never went alone, and he says to these Romans, "When I come to Rome, I expect you to help me to go on." Perhaps to supply some assistants, and some money, and to pray as he went, Paul never worked independently, as a prima donna; he always involved others.

The second factor about his planning is found in verse 25 and on:

Now, however, I am on my way to Jerusalem in the service of the saints there. For Macedonia and Achaia [Greece] were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to do it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings. So after I have completed this task and have made sure that they received this fruit, I will go to Spain and visit you on the way. I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ. {Rom 15:25-29 NIV}

Now, not only was Paul practical in that he planned, but also he fulfilled past commitments. Some Christians, I find, are always jumping into new things before finishing the old. But Paul did not do that. Many years before this, in the fifteenth chapter of Acts, which tells about the council of the church, Paul and Barnabas were sent to Antioch with a letter to the church, settling the question of circumcision for the Gentiles. In that letter, Paul was specifically asked that he be careful to remember the poor in Jerusalem. Now, many years later, he is fulfilling that requirement. He has taken up an offering every place he

has gone, and now he wants to deliver it personally to the famine-stricken saints in Jerusalem. And notice that it is not beneath the apostle to give material help. He is not going up there to preach to these people; he is going to help them with material things. Christianity involves that as well.

I read the other day that Charles Spurgeon, the great English preacher, was once invited by a wealthy man to come down and preach in a country church in order to help them raise funds to pay a debt. The man told Spurgeon he was free to use his country house, his town house, or his seaside home. Spurgeon wrote back and said, "Sell one of the places and pay the debt yourself." That is how practical he was.

Paul was willing to take up offerings and personally carry the money to those in need. But here he gives us the principle of sharing blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings." If somebody blesses you spiritually, and the only way you can thank him is with material things, then do it, Paul says. That is God's program, to give back in material things for the spiritual blessings you have received. Notice it says, "After I have completed this task..." He is not going to quit until he is through. He will wrap it up well and do it right. "When I have made sure that they have received this fruit, then I will go to Spain and visit you on the way."

The third aspect of the practical character of Paul's ministry is his trust in the power of God (Verse 29): "I know that when I come to you, I will come in the full measure of the blessing of Christ." He counted on God to come through.

That brings us to the last paragraph, where you have his touch on the

I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Pray that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea and that my service in Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints there. Then by God's will I can come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed. The God of peace be with you all. Amen. {Rom 15:30-33 NIV}

What was behind this mighty apostle's ministry? Why has it lasted for two thousand years? What was it that opened the doors and gave him access even into Caesar's household, and before the throne of the emperor himself? Paul would tell you it was because of the prayers of God's people for him. He was well aware of the ministry of prayer, and he urges them to pray.

You get a brief word on the nature of prayer. What is the basis of it? "I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit..." Prayer is born of the Spirit of God within us, awakening a desire to help, a sense of love and compassion. We pray to honor the Lord Jesus.

This is what will stir people to pray more than anything else -- not beating them with a whip. I learned that long ago. It is when people begin to see that the honor of Christ is involved, and the love of the Spirit is fulfilled when you pray, that they will really begin to pray.

That is what the apostle appeals to here.

"Join me in my struggle." Life is a struggle, as we have seen already, and Paul sees prayer as a way of fighting in that combat. It is a great weapon which can batter down doors and open others. It can remove obstacles, withstand tremendous pressure and forces, and uphold people and sustain them. So Paul seeks this kind of prayer.

I would say that if there is one thing we need more than anything else at PBC, it is this kind of prayer. This is a critical hour in our church's history. We are making changes in various directions within the staff. We have great opportunities before us. But what we need above all else is people who will pray that we can lay hold of the need of the hour.

Notice what Paul requested of them: "Pray for protection from the unbelievers, and for acceptance from the saints." The reason he asked that is that these are the two areas that Satan loves to attack. If he can lay a person low with physical illness, or spiritual attack, this is what he will do. Prayer is particularly powerful at this point. It can protect someone in danger. When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, as we learn from the book of Acts, there came a moment when he was set upon by a mob in the temple courts. They were out to kill him, right on the spot. They had rocks in their hands, and were going to stone him to death. But it just so happened that at the critical moment, the commander of the Roman legion on the other side of the wall, in the castle of Antonia, looked over into the temple court and saw what was going on. He came down with a band of soldiers and rescued the apostle in the nick of time. So that prayer was answered, and Paul was protected from the unbelievers.

Earlier in Acts, Luke tells us, when Paul came with his gift, there were many Christians there of Jewish background, who did not want to accept Paul. They regarded him as a renegade, a traitor to the Jewish cause. They were turning their backs to him. But James, in answer to prayer, interfered, and asked Paul to show that he was not an enemy of the Law, and to take on a certain commitment in order to demonstrate to the people that he was not against the Law. That turned the tide, and Paul's ministry was accepted.

Then, the results (Verse 32): "Then by God's will I can come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed." The book of Acts closes three years from this time, with the Apostle Paul finally in Rome, after being shipwrecked, and after arduous travels. Now he is on his way toward the capital city, and he is met by a delegation of Christians from the church of Rome. There in a place called the Three Taverns, they sat down and had joy and refreshment together. What an encouragement to the apostle's heart, that these Christians were able to come out and meet him. He was coming as a prisoner chained to a Roman guard, on trial for his life, and sentenced to appear before the emperor. But they encouraged his heart and refreshed his spirit.

That brings us to the final chapter in this letter to the Romans. friends, but there are some interesting things about it.

I hope that this review of Paul's ministry will remind us that we are in a battle and we cannot take time out. We have to maintain the task, and we have to be faithful to what God has called us to do. Above everything else, we must seek that mighty unction of the Holy Spirit on all that happens, that it may not be just a mechanical process, but the power of God released among us.

Prayer

Our Father, we thank you so much for the many things to rejoice over among us today -- the many changed lives; the many homes that have been made right and happy, where once they were sad and hostile; the many lives that have been filled with joy and peace and thanksgiving. But Lord, we pray that we may not forget that we are still in the battle, and we are still to be your instruments. Help us to partake of the apostle's spirit and press on, until you are ready to call us home. We thank you for the privilege of it, in the name of Jesus our Lord, Amen.

Title: An Adequate Ministry
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Experienced
Scripture: Romans 15:14-33
Message No: 37
Catalog No: 3537
Date: June 26, 1977

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ALL IN THE FAMILY

by Ray C. Stedman

We have finally reached the last chapter in our study in Romans. Some of you are old enough to remember when we started! I am not going to finish it today, however. The last paragraph is reserved for next Sunday and our Communion service.

Many people ignore this chapter, I think, because they see in it nothing but a list of names of people long since dead and gone. But in many ways this is one of the most exciting chapters in Romans, as I think you will

see.

There is something in all of us that wants to see our names preserved. Years ago I visited the Natural Bridge of Virginia. There were thousands of names and initials scratched on the rocks, but high up on the side of it, above almost every other name, was scratched "George Washington." Even the father of our country felt the urge to gain a kind of immortality by carving his name on the rock.

knew that they were going to be famous. I am sure that if they had known that mention in one of Paul's letters was to give them undying fame, there would have been a long line of people outside his door urging him to include them in the letter. But these names are mentioned only because they were personal friends of Paul's in Rome, to whom he was writing, or they were with him in the city of Corinth, from which he wrote.

In these first 24 verses there are 33 names mentioned. Nine of these people were with Paul -- eight men and one woman. There are 24 names mentioned in Rome -- 17 men and seven women. There are two households mentioned, and two unnamed women -- the mother of Rufus and the sister of Nereus -- as well as some unnamed brethren. So there is quite a list of people the apostle knew personally in Rome, though he himself had not yet visited that city -- these are people he had known somewhere else in the Roman Empire. We tend to think of those ancient days as a time of limited travel, and they were. It took weeks to reach cities that we now reach in less than an hour by plane. Nevertheless, these people got around, and here is a record of that fact.

This passage has three simple divisions:

- 1 First, Paul's greetings to the brothers and sisters at Rome (the first 16 verses),
- 2 Then a brief warning about phony Christians who were there in Rome, and
- 3 Then greetings from the brothers who were with Paul as he wrote.

The letter to the Romans was carried by a traveling businesswoman, Phoebe, and she is introduced to us in the opening verses of this chapter:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been a great help to many people, including me. {Rom 16:1-2 NIV}

The whole church can be grateful to this woman for her faithfulness. She bore and preserved this letter all along that hazardous journey from Corinth to Rome. She is called by the apostle "a servant of the church in Cenchreae." Cenchreae was the port of Corinth, located about nine miles east of the city. Evidently, a Christian church had grown up there, and Phoebe was a deacon in it. (That is really the term, not "deaconess," as the King James Version puts it. That is a sexist term. The word is the same for male or female.) That does not mean that she held some governmental office in that church; we sometimes read present-day meanings into these words. It means that she had assumed a

ministry on behalf of the church. She represented them in some labor, and whether it was material, physical, or spiritual, she was very faithful in it. So Paul commends her to these Christians in Rome, and asks them not only to receive her, but to help her. "She has been a help to many others," he says, "and to me."

number of women Paul mentions -- many more than in any other literature of that day. Women occupy a prominent place in these letters of the New Testament. Evidently, they handled very important tasks within the church, according to the gifts they had. There is strong suggestion here that Phoebe was a teacher or an evangelist -- a laborer for the gospel with Paul. We do not know much more about her, but her name has been preserved forever because of this mention.

Paul now turns to greet those he knew in Rome, and he begins with a very

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me. Not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles are grateful to them.

Greet also the church that meets at their house. {Rom 16:3-5 NIV}

We meet this couple in other letters of Paul. We see them first in by trade, who were driven out of Rome by the decree of the Emperor went to Corinth, took up their trade there, and met this strange young Jew, also a tentmaker, who had come from the north. Evidently, Saul of Tarsus moved in with them and soon led them to Christ. Theirs was probably the first home in Corinth that started a church. Luke tells us that after two years there, Paul left to go to the great city of Ephesus, and Priscilla and Aquila went with him. Again, they took up the trade of tentmaking and again opened up a church in their home.

They also ministered in the synagogue, for Luke tells us that one morning they heard a mighty and eloquent man named Apollos preaching, but it was evident to them that he did not understand the fullness of the gospel, for he preached only what John the Baptist taught, that "One was coming, who would do mighty things." After the service they invited him home to dinner (that is a wonderful thing to do for a preacher!) and instructed him more fully. Because of their ministry to him, Apollos went on to Corinth, where he had a mighty ministry in the Word of God. Incidentally, of the six times their names are mentioned, four times Priscilla's name is put first -- which indicates that she had the gift of teaching, rather than her husband. Now they are in Rome, having traveled from Corinth and Ephesus. Paul greets them, and reminds the church that they had risked their lives for him. That was probably in that uproar that broke out in the city of Ephesus, recorded in the latter part of Acts, when the whole city was upset, and a mob was intent on taking Paul's life. He reveals the fact that everywhere this couple went they had a church in their home.

In these early days, Christians did not meet in buildings like we have now. In fact, for 300 years there is no mention of church buildings {either in church history or} in Scripture. What a relief, not to be where they could for larger meetings. But here in Rome there were at least three, and probably many more, house churches where Christians

gathered and one of them was in the home of Priscilla and Aquila.

Greet my dear friend Epaphroditus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.

Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. {Rom 16:5-6 NIV}

Epaphroditus was never forgotten, for he was the first one to believe the gospel when Paul came to the province of Asia, of which Ephesus was the capital. You never forget that first one you lead to Christ. No matter how many others follow, you never forget the firstfruits. We do not know what Epaphroditus was doing in Rome, but he was cherished because he was the first to exercise faith in Asia. And associated with him is Mary, whom Paul calls "Mary the toiler." She is one of the group of unknown women in the Gospels who had the gift of helps. She could not teach or preach or evangelize, but she could work, and she did. Paul is very careful to remember these women and men who had the gift of helps.

Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was. Greet Ampliatus, whom I love in the Lord.

Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys.

Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ. {Rom 16:7-10a NIV}

Andronicus and Junias were relatives of Paul, and since he says they were "in Christ before me," this takes us back to the very first days of the church, back to the ministry of Stephen in Jerusalem. What it must have meant to the young Saul of Tarsus, who was breathing forth threatenings and slaughter against the Christians there, to learn that two of his own kinsmen had become Christians! Undoubtedly the prayers of Andronicus and Junias affected the apostle. It is hard to tell whether this is a husband and wife team, or two brothers. It all depends on the name "Junias." If it is "Junias" with an "s," as we have it here, it is a male; if it is "Junia," as the King James Version has it, it is female. But whoever they were, they were Jews, relatives of Paul, who had become Christians. There is a wistful note here as Paul remembers that they were in Christ before him, and no doubt they were praying for him. Somewhere along the line they shared a prison term with him. There is no better place to make friends than in jail. You have to get to know your fellow-inmates -- there is no escaping them! They became fast friends, as well as relatives, and Paul speaks highly of them. He says that even the twelve apostles in Jerusalem held them in high regard. What they were doing in Rome we do not know -- doubtless they were leaders in the church there.

Ampliatius in an interesting name. In the cemetery at Domitilla, found among the catacombs in Rome, there is a highly decorated tomb with the single name "Ampliatius," written on it. A single name like this implies that the man was a slave, but as the tomb is rather ornate, it indicates that he was a Christian, and highly respected by the leaders in Rome. We cannot be sure that he was the same person Paul mentions here, but he most likely is. Therefore this man, though a slave, had a great ministry among the brethren in Rome.

Urbanus and Stachys we know no more about than what Paul mentions here. Somewhere, Urbanus joined Paul's team, and also "his dear friend Stachys," and that is all we know. But I have always been fascinated by this man Apelles, whom Paul says has been "tested and approved in Christ." (I wish that is what I would merit on my tombstone. Would not that be a great inscription, "Tested and approved in Christ"?) This man will forever be known as one who endured a testing of his faith and who stood against the pressure. Thus he has been approved in Christ. His name means "called," and he certainly proved himself to be one whom God had called.

mentioned, involving Christians and, perhaps, non-Christians as well:

Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus.

Greet Herodion, my relative.

Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord.
{Rom 16:10b-11 NIV}

the background of Biblical stories, tells us that Aristobulus may have been the grandson of King Herod the Great, who lived in Rome. He was behind the scenes politically, but was the close friend of the Emperor Claudius. When Aristobulus died, his household, i.e., his servants and slaves, became the property of the emperor (and by this time Nero was on the throne, succeeding Claudius, who had been murdered), but his household was still known as the household of Aristobulus. It is this group, probably, that Paul is referring to. If so, it means that even in the royal household there were a number of Christian servants and slaves who exercised great influence on the leaders of Rome -- even the emperor himself. This is supported, I think, by the fact that Paul mentions his relative, Herodion, in connection with these servants. You can see from his name that this man had connections with the family of Herod. This is also a hint to us that Paul himself had some connection with the ruling family of the Jews. His relative, Herodion, had become a Christian, and was living there in Rome as part of the household of either Aristobulus or Narcissus.

The most famous Narcissus we know in Roman history was a former slave who became the personal secretary of the Emperor Claudius. He gained much wealth, because he was in charge of the correspondence of the emperor. (His palm had to be greased before a letter got through to the emperor.) When Claudius was murdered, Nero took over, and he also took over the household of Narcissus. Shortly after Nero came to the throne, he forced Narcissus to commit suicide, as he did many men. But it is very clear from this mention here that there were Christians among his household. "Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the

Lord." Already, in the heart of the Roman Empire, a Christian witness had been established, and Paul sends greetings to the slaves and servants in the house of Nero.

Next, we get another band of hard-working ladies, and also another

Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa [I have always enjoyed those names!] those women who work hard in the Lord.

Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord.

Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. {Rom 16:12-13 NIV}

These words of Paul open up hidden vistas that bring the whole flavor and color of this first-century Christian life home to us. Here were Tryphaena and Tryphosa. I can just imagine them knitting and darning and crocheting, these dear maiden sisters who worked very hard. We do not know what they did, but there is a delicate irony here. When Paul wrote this he probably smiled to himself, for their names mean "dainty" and "delicate" -- yet they were hard workers. Their names are suggestive that they were probably aristocrats, women who were born to a high class. And yet, they who did not have to work for a livelihood worked hard in the service of the Lord.

We know nothing about Paul's dear friend Persis, other than that she too had worked with him somewhere, perhaps traveling in his company of evangelists.

had been a mother to the apostle too. There seems to be little doubt that Rufus, along with his brother Alexander, mentioned in the Gospel of Mark, were the sons of Simon of Cyrene. In the Gospels we are told that as our Lord was making his way down the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, on his way to the cross, he was so weak from loss of blood that he tripped and fell. The Roman soldiers laid hold of a passing stranger whom they compelled to bear the cross to Calvary. That man was Simon of Cyrene, a Jew coming into the city for the Passover. His home was in North Africa, and he evidently had little or no interest in the things of Christ until he was forced to carry the cross of Jesus. Though we do not know the details, it is evident that this man became a Christian and there is a hint in the book of Acts that he was present on the day of Pentecost.

His two sons, Alexander and Rufus, became outstanding men in the Christian community. There is an Alexander who comes to the rescue of Paul in the city of Ephesus, at the time of the outcry there. There is a Rufus here in Rome, who is well known, and Paul sends his greetings to him, and reminds him also that Rufus' mother had been his mother too, at some time. This again takes us back to the earliest days of the gospel ministry when perhaps young Saul of Tarsus, coming to Jerusalem to sit at the feet of Gamaliel, the great Jewish teacher, had probably stayed in the home of Simon of Cyrene and his two sons, Alexander and Rufus. Later they became Christians, and Paul cherished them as friends he had known even before his own Christian days. We cannot be certain of all those details, but much is suggested by this.

Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brothers with them. {Rom 16:14 NIV}

Here is a kind of male commune, all with Greek names, suggesting that these were young businessmen who had come to Rome and formed a group. They had all become Christians and had another house church going in their bachelors' quarters there. Paul sends his greetings to them and all the brothers with them.

Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the saints with them.

Greet one another with a holy kiss.

All the churches of Christ send greetings. {Rom 16:15-16 NIV}

Philologus means "a lover of the word," and this was probably a nickname given to him, just as Barnabus was called "the son of consolation," even though that was not his name. Here was a man who loved the Word of God, and gathered with him these men and women -- Julia, Nereus and his sister.

may have been the housekeeper of a prominent Roman citizen named Flavius Clemens, later to become Consul of Rome, the highest political office in Domitian because he was a Christian. His wife, Domatilla, also a Christian, was banished by the emperor. Here is a hint that in the household of Flavius Clemens was a Christian slave, Nereus, who was undoubtedly a great influence in leading this prominent Roman citizen to Christ, and who would later give his life as a martyr for the cause of Christ.

We can see from these names that Roman society had already been infiltrated by the gospel before Paul ever arrived in the city. That is why, at the beginning of this letter, he says, their "faith is being reported all over the world," {Rom 1:8 NIV}. These prominent Christians had already penetrated society from top to bottom.

That is the way Christianity should work. I do not think it makes its best progress by massive campaigns. I think it makes its best progress when it infiltrates all levels of society and brings them all together in the church of Christ.

Now we have this warning paragraph. Paul is evidently thinking of his own trip to Jerusalem and the threat that awaits him from the Judaizers

I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way, contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such

people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people. Everyone has heard about your obedience, so I am full of joy over you; but I want you to be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil.

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.

The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you. {Rom 16:17-20 NIV}

There is a very helpful passage here on what to do about problems within the church. Here is a group of people who are professing Christians, but, who, to judge by the apostle's language, are not truly believers. The danger, as Paul outlines it, is that they create factions within a church -- that is, little dissident groups that gather about and emphasize one particular point of doctrine or teaching, to the exclusion of everything else. That is always a problem within the church when people think one particular thing is most important. We have people today who emphasize tongues, or prophecy, or some phase of teaching that they think is the mark of a true believer, to the exclusion of everything else. Paul warns about this.

The second thing they do is introduce practices or ceremonies that Paul calls "obstacles to faith," certain rituals or practices that these groups insist are the marks of true Christianity. They build a sense of superiority. They say, "If you have this mark, then you really are a Christian." Their motives, Paul says, are not to serve Christ, even though they say they do. These factions are really out to advance themselves, to get a following, to gain prestige. You can tell by the way they act that is what they want. Their methods are to come on with smooth and plausible talk. They always use scriptural language. They always appear to be the most dedicated and devoted of believers. Have you noticed how many of the cults today are trying to go back to the Scriptures, arguing from them a groundwork for their faith?

Another method is flattery. They make Christians feel important. They lift them up above the rest and give them a peculiar mark of distinction, and flatter their egos as being members of the true church. These factions always cause division. When some group like this appears, many of us tend to want to rush in and excommunicate them, read them out from the pulpit, or violently attack them. Paul does not say to do any of those things. His advice is to keep away from them. Ignore them. "You Christians in Rome have a reputation for obedience. You have a spirit of wanting to obey what the Lord says. Now here is your word from the Lord: Do not follow them; do not get involved with these separatist groups. When you obey this, God will work. The God of peace, who will preserve the peace of the church, will also crush Satan under your feet." Something will happen to open the eyes of people to the unscriptural position of these groups, and they will lose their following. The peace will be preserved without a lot of warfare and dissension.

Corinth:

Timothy, my fellow worker, sends his greetings to you, as do Lucius, Jason and Sosipater, my relatives.

I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord.

Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings.

Erastus, who is the city's director of public works, and our brother Quartus send you his greetings. {Rom 16:21-24 NIV}

That brings us to the final paragraph when, as was his custom, Paul takes his pen and writes the last words himself.

Up to this point he has been dictating this letter to a man who identifies himself in Verse 22: "I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord." Evidently, the apostle said something to him, such as, "Tertius, you've written this whole thing and you must have writer's cramps by now. Just write another line and send your own greetings." The name indicates that he, too, was a slave, because his name means "Third." In slave families they did not bother to think up names; they just numbered the children, First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth, etc. Here are Third and Fourth of a family of slaves. (His brother, Quartus, Fourth, is mentioned in Verse 23.) They are educated slaves who have become Christians. They can read and write, and are part of this group in Corinth.

You can picture them gathered in the home of Gaius, this gracious, genial, generous host of the city, mentioned in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Gaius opened his house to the entire Christian community, so here is Paul, sitting there with his friends. Tertius is writing down the letter, and the others are gathered around listening to Paul as he dictates, and profiting much from the writing of these great truths. With Paul, of course, is his dear son in the faith, Timothy, whom we know so well from the two letters addressed to him. Paul spoke of him always in the highest terms; his beloved son in the faith, who had stayed with him so long and remained faithful to the end. The very last letter Paul wrote from his prison cell in Rome was to Timothy.

Paul also mentions Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater, his relatives.

Here in Romans 16 are six members of Paul's family, kinsmen who are now Christians. Some were Christians before him, but some Paul influenced toward Christ. They come from various places. Lucius appears to be the one of the teachers in the city of Antioch. Jason was evidently Paul's host when the apostle went to the city of Thessalonica, in Macedonia. Paul stayed in Jason's home when a riot broke out in the city. Sosipater may be the man from Beroea, mentioned in Acts 20 as "Sopater." Paul met him in Macedonia and may have accompanied him to Jerusalem with the offering to the churches there.

The final name is Erastus, director of public works in the city of Corinth. You can see how the gospel penetrated all levels of society, with slaves, public officials, consuls, leaders of the empire, all sharing an equal ground of fellowship in the church of Jesus Christ. All class distinctions disappeared within the church and that is what happens whenever the church works.

I think the thing we need to remember from this list of names is that these Christians were noted for their steady, tested commitment, their faithfulness to the gospel.

I must say that I am troubled today when I see Christians succumbing so easily to the world's philosophy of life -- live for your own pleasure, try to retire as early as possible so you can do as little as you can. I think that is a deadly philosophy. The early Christians did not believe that.

Four things ring clearly throughout their lives:

- * One, they were not their own. "You are not your own; you are bought did not have a right to direct their lives any longer. God had sent them into the world, and God would take them through it.
- * Second, they believed that life is a battle, a battle to the death. It is not a picnic. They were engaged in warfare that never ended until they left this life, so they kept on fighting.
- * Third, they believed that there is need for rest and leisure at times, but only to restore them to go back into the battle. They never envisaged retiring and enjoying themselves for the remaining years of their lives. They only envisaged getting adequate rest in order to come back and fight through to the end.
- * Finally, they understood that the gifts of the Holy Spirit among them opened up a ministry for every single believer. No Christian was without a ministry. Some of these dear people had only the gift of helps (although I should not say "only" the gift of helps, for that is a great gift.) They could not teach or preach but they could help, and they did, right to the end.

I think this passage reminds us that God has called us all to a ministry, and we all have to give an account for what we have done with our gifts. We had better find out what they are and get to work, get involved in the battle, because God has not called us to a picnic ground. He has called us to a battleground.

Prayer

Our Father, we thank you for these names of men and women who long ago preceded us in the pilgrimage of life. And what a testimony they left us. Men and women who were tested, tried, and approved, who stayed steadfast in the long martyrdom of life itself. We pray that you will grant to us, Lord, similar faith that we too may share with you in a time of testing, a time of rebuke and pressure and persecution and trouble, and stand steadfast to the end, for your name's sake. Until you see fit to remove us, Lord, keep us at the work. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: All in the Family
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Experienced
Scripture: Romans 16:1-24
Message No: 38
Catalog No: 3538
Date: July 10, 1977

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THE GREAT MYSTERY

by Ray C. Stedman

We have seen that the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Romans from Corinth. And now we have come to the very last paragraph of the letter. Very likely at this point, Paul took the pen and wrote the closing paragraph in his own hand.

Paul tells us in Second Thessalonians that this was his custom one thing, but also to bear a personal greeting to those to whom he was writing. I think almost all scholars agree that the apostle probably suffered from a serious eye problem. The letter to the Galatians suggests that. So Paul wrote these marvelous words in large letters with

Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him -- to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen. {Rom 16:25-27 NIV}

Those remarkable words constitute a summary of the whole letter to the Romans -- a beautiful finale to this great epistle. I have chosen this as the central study around which we may gather as we come to the table of the Lord this morning.

You will notice that the goal the apostle has in view in writing this letter and summary is that we who read this letter may be established.

Have you ever had the desire to be established?

Many people think they are established when actually they are simply stuck in the mud. Most of us think that being established means that all progress ceases. We sit down, camp there, and that is it. In that sense, there are a lot of Christians who are established. But when Paul speaks

of our being established, he means putting us on solid, stable ground.

Have you ever erected a picnic table and tried to find a place where all four legs touched the ground at the same time? 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 in this word establish . God wants to bring you and me to a place where we are no longer rocking or shaky or unstable, but solid and secure. The idea is basically what all human beings look for -- an inner security from which you can handle all the problems of life. You become dependable, and have a true sense of worth, so that nothing gets to you, or shakes you up, or throws you off balance.

This is the goal of all Christian teaching in the New Testament (and especially the goal of the letter to the Romans) that we believers might be brought to that place of security where we are not shaken by things, so that we do not lose our tempers easily, or get frustrated, angry, resentful or hostile; where we do not scream at our children, or yell at our mates, or get upset at the neighbors.

Notice the resource that the apostle counts on to make that happen: "Now to him who is able to establish you..." It is God himself who is responsible for this. You and I are not given the final responsibility to bring this about. Isn't that encouraging? Now there are things he asks us to do: We are to understand what he is saying to us in this letter, and we are to willingly cooperate with it and give ourselves to it. But even if we do not, Paul is saying, we do not have the ultimate responsibility to bring this about. God will do it.

I am sure as the apostle wrote this he had in mind all the instances and circumstances from the past that are given to us in the Old Testament to encourage us.

- * God did this with Abraham, who was an idol worshiper. Abraham could not tell the truth about his wife. He was always lying about her because he thought that would save him from difficulty. He had various character faults but God stabilized him, established him, and brought him to a place where he became one of the great names of all time.

- * God did this with Moses and David and, of course, with Paul himself. Paul was a brilliant young Jew with an ambitious heart, a sharp mind and a strong sense of achievement, due to his notable gifts and his desire to become famous. Yet God broke him, softened him, changed him and put him through circumstances that Paul did not understand at the time. This finally established him, so that no matter what came, he remained strong, steady, trusting and certain. That is the great good news of this letter. "Now to him who is able to establish you..."

Paul goes on to give us three things that God will use during that process.

First he says, "Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel ..." Now, do not misunderstand that little phrase. Paul does not mean by this that he has a unique gospel. Unfortunately, some teachers have taken these words in that way, and have concluded that the Apostle Paul was giving a special revelation that no one else possessed -- one that Peter, James and John and other writers of Scripture did not know. That teaching has been widespread among certain men of our day, and people have followed that delusion. That is not what Paul means. He answered

that accusation in First Corinthians. He said, "Some of you are following me; some are following Apollos; some are following Cephas, and this is wrong. We are not different; we all have the same gospel. You 1:11 ff}. He rebuked them for tending to divide and to follow certain leaders and teachers.

What Paul means is that he was given a unique revelation of this gospel, of First Corinthians: "For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which at the Lord's supper. I was not even a Christian then. I have not talked with Peter or James or John about this, and none of the men who were present there told me what happened in that room. I know what happened because Jesus himself appeared to me and told me. And I told you only what I received from the Lord himself.'" The Lord taught Paul the same gospel that the other apostles believed and that is what Paul means when he says, "According to my gospel..." The practical impact of that upon us is this: That the test of all true Christian messages is that they be in line with the apostolic writings. The apostles are the ones who tell us the truth about the gospel. That is why we must always check what we hear today that claims to be Christian and see if it fits with what the apostles gave us. Paul says that is what God will use to establish you: "My gospel -- that which was given to me."

The second element is "the proclamation of Jesus Christ." Here Paul is unfolding to us the heart of his gospel. Paul was a mighty theologian. There has never been a greater theologian in the church. I sometimes go to seminaries, and I am tempted to say to the young men and women studying there, "Why waste your time with these fourth-rate theologians, when you could be spending your time with the first-rate theologians: Peter, James, John and Paul." Theology was not the heart of Paul's gospel. The heart of his gospel was 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.

Therefore, a gospel that leaves out Christ is a phony gospel.

Jesus himself said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except by me," {cf, John 14:6}. There Jesus declared the uniqueness of his position. In the whole realm of theology there is no one like Jesus Christ. In all the history of the religions of the world, there is no one that is equal to him, or that can be remotely compared to him. Therefore, any gospel that minimizes Christ, or puts him on the level of other names, is a perversion of the true gospel of Jesus Christ. Christ is the central figure of all history, of all time, of all faith.

There is a third element, the apostle says, which has been the theme throughout Romans, although it is not always called by the same terms. Paul says, "God will not only use my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, but what he will use to establish you is the explanation of 'the mystery.'"

... according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him -- {Rom 16:25b-26 NIV}

There is the mystery. Here is the ultimate test of any Christian message: Does it proclaim the mystery?

There are thousands of places in this land today where people are meeting, as we are, in Christian churches. They are singing the same hymns we sing, and reading the same Bible, and praising God in the same way. And yet, in thousands and thousands of those churches, there is nothing exciting happening, nothing that reaches out and touches the community. Do you know why? Because the mystery is not being proclaimed.

After the early service this morning someone told me of a town in California of about 8,000 people, where there are 22 churches. And according to this individual, almost all of these churches are lifeless. Nothing is happening because they do not understand the mystery. Here is the heart of the gospel, this amazing mystery. The question we need to ask about any church is, "Does it ask men and women to live on the basis of that fantastic secret, which was once hidden but is now fully revealed?"

What is this mystery? There are several references to it in the New Testament, sometimes referring to a part of it, sometimes referring to the whole. The only other reference to this mystery in the letter to the

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited [when Christians become conceited it is because they have forgotten the mystery] : Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: {Rom 11:25-26 NIV}

Now that is part of the mystery. Paul is referring to the fact that God intends to unite both Jews and Gentiles into one body. For this to happen, the Jews must be partially blinded for a while, in order to allow the Gentiles to see. That is what has been going on for 2,000 years of human history: a partial blindness in Israel.

We do not understand fully what is involved here, but it seems to be necessary in the program of God.

That aspect of the mystery is also referred to in Ephesians 3:2-6:

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 [The New Testament 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}

Now that is a very important part of the mystery. But these references to parts of the mystery are not to be regarded as distinct and separate mysteries. They are all one, as we will see. The heart of the mystery is given to us in the opening chapter of Colossians. Here is one of the clearest statements on it (Verses 24-27):

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. 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.

There is another reference to the wonder of this mystery in First Timothy 3:16. Paul describes it in terms of a hymn of the early church. He says,

Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great:
3:16 NIV}

Jesus himself is the mystery. By means of the virgin birth of Jesus, by means of his holy, sinless life, by means of his substitutionary death upon a violent and cruel cross, by means of his startling break-out from the prison of death, and by means of the gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, God has given Jesus -- all that he is and all that he has -- to you and to me. This enables us to do two things:

- * To deny our natural abilities and strengths, and
- * To rely wholly on Jesus' ability and strength --

and thus to live our lives today as though Jesus himself was living them.

That is the mystery. That is the radical, powerful secret of authentic Christianity: Christ in you, the hope of glory.

Do you know that mystery?

Do you know it, not only in your mind, but do you live it?

It is the knowledge of it and the living of it that turns Christianity into an exciting adventure. It may be demanding, it may even be scary,

but I can guarantee you one thing: It will never be boring, because the mystery is at work.

If you are filled with the secret, the indwelling Christ, it does not make any difference if you are a Jew or a Gentile. All the divisions of class and sex and national origin are eliminated by that secret. It does not make any difference whether you are rich or poor, slave or free, all are one in Christ Jesus by that mystery. And whenever a Christian lives on that basis, really trusting the fact that God is in him through Jesus Christ to be his wisdom, his power, his strength; when he attempts things only on the basis of expecting God to fulfill that promise, and moves out to do things by his grace, he finds himself "established."

If you want a place of security, it is not going to come by your reckoning on what you can do for God. That will never work. It is going to depend on how much you believe God is ready to do something through you. That is the radical promise.

Paul says two additional things about this:

First, though the results of this lifestyle were experienced by men and women of God in the Old Testament, no explanation was ever given of how this happened. When you read the Old Testament you find men and women puzzled as to how God was going to put together all its great promises and themes. There is the promise of the restoration of Israel. There is the promise of the forgiveness of an individual's sins. There is the mighty promise of the healing of the nations and the cessation of war. Then it began to unfold. Jesus came. He was the secret. He would be the one who would bring to pass all the tremendous promises and themes of the Old Testament. Therefore, the historic appearance of Jesus was required to put this victorious lifestyle in such vivid light that it could be preached and demonstrated to the nations of the world. That is what Paul means when he says that the mystery was "hidden for long ages past, but now revealed."

The second thing Paul says is that it was "made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God." There is a reference to the New Testament as we have it today. The apostles and prophets wrote the gospel down for us so that we might have a clear picture of who Jesus is, and what he can be in us. This is why we must study the New Testament, particularly, and the Old Testament as well, that we might understand how to live on this basis.

And so Paul closes with a great doxology,

-- to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ!
Amen. {Rom 16:27 NIV}

What a plan! What a program! What a change happens when people really capture this and begin to operate on it.

We are going to close the service with the Lord's Table which is itself a dramatic retelling of the mystery of the gospel:

* When we take the cup, we are being reminded that, by the death of Jesus, God cut off all the natural abilities and strengths that we have, and rendered them worthless. The New Testament teaches us

that the flesh cannot please God.

- * But when we take the bread, we are reminding ourselves that Jesus himself, the bread that came down from heaven, is available to us. His strength, his power, operating through the channel of our gifts, can accomplish what we could never do by ourselves. God at work within us; that is the mystery.

When we come to the Lord's Table we are reminding ourselves of this, and renewing our promise, our commitment to fulfill that mystery not only here at church, but in every situation throughout the week. Every moment of pressure and every demand upon us are simply opportunities to respond by realizing again the validity of the mystery.

Title: The Great Mystery
By: Ray C. Stedman
Series: From Guilt to Glory -- Experienced
Scripture: Romans 16:25-27
Message No: 39
Catalog No: 3539
Date: July 17, 1977

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