

“A Religion of Faith or Works”

Romans 3:19-26

3/4/2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

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From the modest clay home of a Hindu family in India, a man walks out the door and into the crowded street to go to the weaving mill. He steps aside to allow a Brahman bull to pass. It might be a former relative of his – reincarnated.

As he walks to work, he wonders what the next life holds for him. Will he be good enough to be reborn into a higher cast in society? He wonders if his life will accumulate more good than bad karma. He doesn't know the answer but merely drudges off to work – amidst his own poverty, poor nutrition and despairing family situation.

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Among the over 260 million Buddhists in the world, picture a twenty-five year old woman living in Thailand. Life for her has been hard, ... raising nine children and trying to sell wicker furniture with her husband in the market.

The woman knows, from her religion, that life is hard and that most suffering is a result of wanting things too much. The secret to happiness, says her priest, is detachment, ... to escape your desires and wants. The way to be free of wants is to follow the eight-fold path. ❶ Right belief (and attitude); ❷ right spiritual goals; ❸ right speech; ❹ right conduct (defined by the Golden Rule); ❺ right work (where others are not oppressed); ❻ right effort (to achieve solitude); ❼ right thinking (so as to control one's mind); and ❽ right meditation (being open to enlightenment). And as the woman weaves the strands around the furniture she hopes to sell, she wonders if she will be “right” enough to someday achieve the kind of detachment from life that brings happiness and Nirvana.

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In Northern China, an elderly gentleman sits on a bench beside his home, speaking to his granddaughter. In the shade of the overhang of the thatched roof, he summarizes for her the wisdom of Confucius. He talks about the worth of all people. He says: “Ask not what you can get but ask what you can give.”

He says that human reason should guide all things, so one should reasonably follow the traditions of the culture (that respect parents, siblings, spouses, friends and politicians). But as he speaks, he also thinks of how uneven life is and how *few* people are truly governed by their reason and cultural traditions. As he talks, somewhere in his graying head are doubts about how well he, himself, has followed his own advice.

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In the large convention center of the city, the choir begins to softly sing the old hymn “Just as I am without one plea” as the evangelist closes off his sermon. The preacher lowers his tone and begins to question the ten thousand in his audience as to their own spiritual state. “If Jesus could go all the way to the cross and die for you,” he bellows, “why can't you merely walk down this aisle for Jesus? ... If you came in busses, the busses will wait!”

Scores from the audience get out of their seats, walking to the front, ... many with tears in their eyes. They feel, somewhere within them, that their walk to the front of the auditorium, before all these people, might be good enough, ... better than all their previous times of coming forward, ... good enough to secure their Christianity for good.

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Not four blocks away, near the urban renewal work, a black woman in her teens is kneeling in front of the altar of the church. As the choir moans “Lordie, Lordie” and chants phrase by phrase after the preacher man, ... he gives his folks one last chance to get religion and get free from the grip of the devil. And everyone in that singing swaying congregation is hoping that somehow they're going to stay in the spirit, ... and `get on down' to livin' in the Lord, ... and keep on keepin' on in this less than funky world.

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And you could talk about a middle-aged Christian going into the confession booth, ... hoping that the confession will bring her stability and long-range goodness. Or you could think about the three-piece-suited business man on his way to a

so-called “Christian Businessman’s” prayer breakfast. He hopes that his extra church attendance proves to be a good enough testimony for others in the community.

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There has been a myth, in most religions, that people should somehow arrive at a level of goodness that satisfies God. This myth has filtered down through every culture, in every nation and into our lives as well. And because of our human tendency to fall into the “am I good enough” trap, the book of **Romans** is one of the most significant books of the New Testament. It’s crucial to Christianity because it summarizes the beliefs of the early Christians and moves from storytelling about Jesus to summarizing what Jesus’ teachings imply for the ongoing church. It is, simply, theology.

Romans not only solved the problem of the converted Jewish legalists (who insisted that Gentile converts adopt the Jewish rituals), but it also summarized the nature of a person’s relationship with God. While it talks about the law and the purpose and value of the law, it teaches that we are justified (or set right with God) by faith – not by works or being good enough.

To highlight this basic Christian truth, I’d like for you to think about **Martin Luther** for a few minutes. His experiences caused millions to be reminded of something that had been overlooked in the Bible for a long time. And this Biblical principle is the bedrock and foundation of everything we do in our Protestant theology.

Martin Luther was a brilliant man who had been trained in the best universities and seminaries in 15th century Germany. Somewhere in his education process he choose to concentrate on religion – cloistering himself away as a monk and priest for some ten years in a monastery. He spent years of his life trying to benefit from the wisdom of previous thinkers in the damp and dim basements and library stacks. Martin was an extremely disciplined and pious man.

In this period of his life he witnessed the violent death of a close friend. He, himself, narrowly escaped being struck by a bolt of lightning. In those experiences he developed a reverence for God and a keen sense of the brevity of life.

As a priest, he had twenty-one saints for whom he would pray three times a day. Every day he would say a mass or liturgy of worship. He was said to even neglect his health in order to please God. Despite all this, he would lapse into tremendous feelings of guilt – feeling unworthy before God.

Now remember, this was a young priest who was conscientious, ... concerned with others around him and one who was obedient to the monastery in every way – yet he still felt guilty before God. Martin didn’t have to be reminded of Romans 3:23: “*all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*” The apostle Paul had pointed out, in chapter two, that God’s law functioned to do this very thing – to get people to realize that they are simply missing the goals of what people were originally meant to be.

One day Martin and one of his priest friends were talking about the phrase of the Apostle’s Creed that mentions the forgiveness of sins. Martin started to think about this Romans passage (on how our faith is a belief in Christ’s goodness). He started to think, as **Paul** had done centuries before, that in legal terms, although people often don’t measure up in terms of the law, Christ did. Something within Martin suddenly clicked.

He understood the lawyer Paul’s legal courtroom metaphor about Christ taking upon himself the penalty for people. Marty realized that no one could ever be good enough, in the ideal legal sense, ... so the free gift Jesus offered was God’s unconditional acceptance of people – just as they are. That all one has to do to have a relationship with God is discover that it already exists through the love of Christ. One’s obligations to follow Christ’s teachings are there but never as a condition to receive God’s love.

God loves us just the way we are and to express our thanks, we try our best to obey the example Jesus showed us, but nothing we (or anyone else can ever do) will cause God to stop loving us. God’s love is not dependent on our flimsy ability to be good enough. Rather, God’s love is to be had, simply because God gives it.

Jesus had the best metaphor when He said God is like a parent loving their child – a metaphor I personally prefer over Paul’s courtroom images of guilt and retribution shifted over to an innocent but

willing 3rd Party. But what Paul wrote got the point across to Martin Luther.

When Martin finished his doctorate at the university and became a professor, he would often give lectures on the topic of “Justification By Faith.” In the coming months, he started to see more of the church in his society. He saw how clergymen of his times were laying guilt trips on their parishioners. Parishioners didn’t know any better because the Bible was in Latin and only the clergy could translate.

What bothered Martin most of all was a new practice of selling indulgences – passes, if you will, to get into heaven. A church leader named Tetzel actually had permission from the Pope to sell tickets to heaven. These “indulgences” granted people (or even previously deceased relatives) shorter times in Purgatory – a place believed to house Christians who were supposedly in need of improvement before they could walk through the “pearly gates.”

This mentality existed before in the Old Testament times when people put all of their faith into their cult rituals. They figured that each week, they could fork over their money, let the priest slaughter an animal and their wrongs would be forgiven. Somewhat primitive, ... but there is that mentality today in the Church where people start to think that they are satisfying God by doing good deeds here and there in a particular religious or civic organization.

Amos had to correct this misunderstanding back in his time when he wrote this. *“God says, I hate your religious festivals, ... I can’t stand them. You bring Me burnt offerings and grain offerings. I will not accept them! So stop your noisy songs. I do not want to listen to your harps. Instead, ... let justice flow down like a stream and righteousness like a river that never goes dry.”*

Out of response to the actions of the church of his time, **Martin Luther** nailed his now famous 95 statements to a door. This was a list of disagreements he had with the Pope and the indulgence tickets. Not long after that he was excommunicated.

He stood before a council in Worms Germany, in front of Emperor Ferdinand and 54 church officials and he stuck to his guns. This impressive collection of scholars and leaders couldn’t argue, on scriptural grounds, against him. Their arguments couldn’t stand

against Paul’s verses 24 and 25 which say: “we are justified by God’s grace, as a free gift, through the redemption which is in Christ.” They were embarrassed to discover that this relationship with God is not to be received by faithful church attendance, nor by buying a five, ten or even a one-hundred dollar indulgence ticket.

Amos thought the people of God, before Jesus’ time, had to be reminded of this. **Jesus** had many harsh words on this issue for the fine upstanding religious leaders of His time. **Paul** realized that his contemporaries had to be reminded of this. **Martin Luther**, in the 15th century, thought that the leaders of the Church had to be reminded again.

Because this idea was so strongly resisted by the Church in Luther’s day, the Protestant Church was formed. Luther experienced this freedom to live as a totally accepted child of God and was ready to risk his entire career. He took the risk to remind people that God’s love is not dependent on how good we are – particularly according to so-called “representatives” of God in organized religion.

Realistically we remember precious little from sermons or other study Bible studies. I often wish I could simply remember everything I’ve read or have learned from others because so much seems to fade from memory. But whatever it would take, ... if somehow we could remember and never forget one thing (for the rest of our lives), in my judgment, it would be this.

God loves you as you are now, for what you’ve been and for what you will become. No matter what you do (or what anyone around you does), nothing will ever come between you and God’s love for you. Your faith in Christ is simply your knowing that God loves you. No matter how much other people have let you down, God will never do that to you because you simply can’t earn this friendship with God and you can never lose it – no matter what.

Another reason we don’t have to worry about being perfect, in order for God to love us, is that we already know the right things to do with our lives. When God made us, God built into the design of our models a nice feature – the presence of the Holy

Spirit. The writer, **Clarissa Pinkola Estés**, calls it “the One Who knows” within us.¹

This is that aspect, within us, that is within our deepest psyche, ... that place where our mind and soul mingle. It is where the ancient Being in us stands between the worlds of rationality, experience and the mythic. It is our innermost core of being that only can surface in the highest expressions of knowing: in poetry, in music, in dance or in storytelling.

We know deep within ourselves – in the river beneath the river of life – what is right and good. So we don’t have to worry about getting life “right.” In the deepest and the simplest sense, life is right and we need only to celebrate the relationship and the faith we have in our connectedness with God. The ethics, doing the right thing in any given moment, is just a matter of getting in step with the tempo and the rhythm of the music of God within us. It also doesn’t hurt to read the musical score for life found in the teachings of Jesus, witnessed in the gospels.

But remember God’s unconditional love for you. It is the only worthy foundation on which your self-worth stands. It is the basis of what you think of life and how you interpret the world around you. It is the structure defining all your relationships – giving you a firm sense of your self-worth and the worth of everyone whom God has made.

Remember God’s unconditional love for you when you have doubts about God and about yourself. Remember it when you feel guilt for not doing what you, in hindsight, know you should have done. Remember it when you face uncertainty in your paths ahead. Because “*If God knows every hair on our head and knows each sparrow in the world, how much more will God care for and watch over you.*”

This is the truth we know and it sets us free. God loves you and your life is lived forever in the shelter of The Most High.



¹ See the excellent book: Clarissa Pinkola Estés *Women Who Run With The Wolves, Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992) p.29-30.