

April 10, 2016  
The National Presbyterian Church  
**Belonging to Another**  
Romans 6:1-5, 20-23, 7:1-6

David A. Renwick

In the next couple of months in our Sunday sermons we're going to be looking primarily at the writing of the Apostle Paul (*one of the great leaders of the early Christian church*).

And we'll be looking in particular at a Letter he wrote the Christians in the city of Rome . . . focusing on 3 of the 16 chapters – chapters 6, 7 and 8

This letter to the Christians in Rome was written about 25 years after Jesus lived and died and has been one of the most influential writings in all of Christian – and indeed, western – history, in particular because of its influence on one of the great Protestant reformers in the early 1500's, Martin Luther.

At that time Luther was struggling with his faith and the issue that bothered him (tormented him) was the issue of *how to get right with God* in particular: how to get right with a God who was never fully happy with him never fully pleased with him; or loving him. Which was a view of God that he had because of his understanding of God's righteousness, or justice, holiness, Which, – as he saw it – left very little room for *full-blown, heart-felt* mercy:

So Luther writes: (Works 34:336-337)

'I greatly longed to understand Paul's letter to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression (in Romans Ch.1, v.17), which spoke of "the justice (or righteousness) of God," because I took it to mean "that justice" whereby God is righteous and acts justly in punishing the unrighteous . . .

I did not love this just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant. Night and day I pondered until . . . I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is "that kind of justice" whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, God justifies us by faith (by trust). When I realized this, I felt myself reborn as if I'd gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas, before, the idea of "the justice/righteousness of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet, in greater love. In fact, this message of Paul became to me a gateway into heaven.'

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As it has been for millions of other men and women not only since the time of Luther, but since the time of Christ himself. The simple message of Paul in the opening chapters of Romans

**1. At first, as Luther realized, this message is indeed scary:  
that we as human beings can do nothing to earn God's favor**

- Keeping all God's rules and regulations will never get us into God's good books, or into heaven

- The harder we try, the more we fail. It's like struggling in quick sand, the more we struggle, the more we sink. The moment we succeed the more we get proud – so in all our striving all we ever do is replace one set of sins with others!!

So, first (says Paul) we can do nothing to earn God's favor

## **2. And, then, second, (says Paul) we deserve God's judgment:**

*Luther was right to be worried:*

Our weakness, our ignorance, our willful ignoring of God – repeatedly, endlessly is fully worthy of God's judgment. We're to blame! It's our own fault!

We're not helpless victims but accountable persons made in God's image, who know what's right but (as the video of our lives will one day sadly show!) repeatedly choose not to do it! As the confession of sin would put it: we do 'what we ought not to do, and leave undone what ought to be done.'

## **3. And, then, third (and this is what changed Luther's life and view of God for good) – In the face of all this . . . there is stunning good news about eternal God's decision**

- not to evade the issue of justice / righteousness
- not to evade the punishment of our wrongdoing
- not to abandon his righteousness/holiness

*But to bear/carry all of his justice, ON HIMSELF! All of our judgment on Himself!! God's decision*

- to take our place in the court of his own Law
- to take all of our sins past, present and future,
- to lift them off us, to rip them from us . . .

. . . as if we'd never committed them in the first place, and to suffer his own judgment on them – instead of on us!

*In John Bunyan's classic, Pilgrim's Progress (written in 1678), there's a great picture of this:*

*Sin is represented like a back pack, that gets heavier and heavier. And that eventually will crush us unless someone else takes it off our back and carries it or bears it for us.*

## **So what Luther came to see from Paul & Romans**

was the Good News of the Gospel, the amazing news . . . that God has done this for us through Jesus his Son that in Jesus' death on the cross, God grabs our sin, says "Let me take that for you." God carries our sins in his own body and dies and in his death bears the full brunt of his own judgment instead of us! So we don't have to . . . ever.

And God does this willingly, lovingly, eternally – leaving us only with the need to respond to what God has done: to receive it, to believe it, to embrace it by faith . . .

## **4. Which is the fourth thing Paul teaches in Romans**

*(and that Luther came to see & understand), that our call is simply to believe this truth about what God has done for us!! To trust that this amazing Good News is actually true!!*

– Believing that God accepts us and brings us into his family and kingdom

- *not because* of what we have done/ or do but because of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ
- *not because* of our goodness or good works

- *not because* we have kept God's rules
- *not because* we are worthy . . . been good boys and girls . .
- but because every barrier between us and God all of God's judgment on our lives, has been dealt with by God himself . . . in the unimaginable love shown to us in Jesus' suffering and death

**Theologians call this “justification by faith”** and Paul speaks about this in the first 5 chapters of Romans . . .

**But by the time you get to Romans chapter 6, there is a problem!** A problem of ethics and behavior . . . And it's not small!!

It's a logical ramification and dilemma that Paul has to deal with, and that has to do with **the motivation** for living lives that are morally different . . .

Or, to put it in the form of a question, as Paul does,

- *If*, in fact – this Good News is True!!
- *if* the ultimate judge has already forgiven us – and always will;
- and, *if* there's no more fear of judgment ahead . .

THEN **Where's the moral power**

- to Change? Grow? become like Jesus, God?
- to become more loving, or kind, or just?
- to improve our character and our world?

Or, to put it crassly as some of the Roman Christians were probably doing:

***This good news is great! Why not keep sinning so God can keep forgiving? God loves forgiving. I love sinning. So let me help God do what God loves to do!***

**Do you get the picture? The dilemma?**

And even if we do not go that far, the question remains: Doesn't constant forgiveness at least weaken the need to try hard! Weaken the incentive – for radical moral change and action?

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**And Paul sees this dilemma** . . . So in Romans 6 through 8

he pulls out all the stops to show that there are many reasons why the gospel – why justification by faith – carries in it far more ethical power

than the negative power of fearing of the judgment of God: being motivated by the fear that if we don't get with the program, God will slam us.

**Now let me be clear . . .**

There's a certain sense in which the fear of God, *really still should* function as a motivating factor in the same way, at least, as Niagara Falls and snow on the Alps or Rockies should motivate us!

At Niagara you don't get too close to the edge! A little slip could be deadly. And in the mountain-snow, you better not yodel at the wrong moment and risk an avalanche!

*The beauty of snow and water do not negate the power of snow and water to overwhelm us if we're not careful . . .*

In the same way, the God of grace and mercy always remains the “powerful, sovereign, creator of the vast universe.”

**But, what Paul wants to say** here, though is this:

- that fear *should never be the* primary reason for “upping our game,” for changing our lives, for doing everything in our power to become like Jesus himself . . .
- that there are plenty other motives, positive motives.

**And in our Scripture reading Paul** begins to share this message *by providing three reasons, three ways of thinking that should be motivating and transformational for your life and mine*

**So, this is what he says . . .**

**I. First: When you put your trust in Christ**, when you were baptized,

Not only were your sins forgiven (great, good news!)

but you need to remember that

you became part of a new community!!

God took you from one country to another:

- from earth to heaven
- it’s as if you have already died
- as if you’re already there: a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven

And you need to live as if this is the truth: *as if* the life of heaven, the ways of heaven, the culture of heaven, the ethos of heaven, is the air that you breath and that you want to fall in love with, right now.

**So, for example, when I first came to this country**

I had to change my thinking and behavior pretty quickly

- Cars were driving on the wrong side of the road – and I had a choice to make . . .  
I could resent it, resist it, and be run over and crushed by it **or** I could join the flow
- Or, to think of another area of life: if I wanted to be a part of the weekend conversation with friends I needed to change the games I watched – I grew up with rugby, and cricket, but here the games were *football, basketball, baseball: new games, with new rules* that I had no clue about before. So, I changed my behavior: I watched and learned!!

**So Paul says, God has not only forgiven us,**

But the death and resurrection of Jesus is *like a ship or a plane* that carries us to a new country – to heaven! To the Kingdom of God!

And we need to think of ourselves (“reckon ourselves” is the literal phrase used in Romans 6:11) as already belonging to this new country: not just to the Kingdom(s) of earth but to the Kingdom of heaven – and we need to live like it.

In Romans 6, Paul puts it like this (using *The Message* paraphrase by Eugene Peterson)

**So what do we do** (asks Paul)?

*Keep on sinning so God can keep on forgiving?*

**I should hope not!** If we’ve left the country where sin is sovereign, how can we still live in our old house there? Or didn’t you realize we packed up and left there for good? That is what happened in baptism (when you came to believe/ to be part of the church). When we went under the water, we left the old country of sin behind; when we came up out of the water, we entered into the new country of grace (DR- the Kingdom of Heaven) —a new life in a new land!

So – morally speaking, motivationally speaking, says Paul, we need to think of ourselves as living in a new country,

**II. But more than that**, we also need to keep in mind that with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus

**we need to see our lives as having a new conclusion, a new climax** – given to us by God as a free gift. Life restored to the image of Jesus. This is what God wants and promises – our lives becoming like his – as a gift . . .

In the Scripture, this *gift of new life* is called ‘eternal life’

But this term can be very confusing.

- To most people it immediately means *living in heaven with God for ever*. And this is true and important. “Eternal” meaning length of time.
- But just as often it means, *living the quality of life that Jesus Christ lived*; “eternal” meaning quality – the life that has the quality of eternity about it; the life we were made for . . . becoming like Jesus himself – morally and spiritually; a total transformation of our lives that God promises to complete *when we meet God face-to-face*

So, back to Paul (“The Message) and Romans 6:

If you work hard for sin your whole life your pension (DR: *your conclusion, climax*) is death.

**But God’s gift** (DR: what God promises) is *real life*, eternal life, delivered by Jesus, our Master. A whole, healed, put-together life beginning *right now*, with more and more life – (DR: what we call ‘sanctification’) – on the way!

**So this future, this conclusion, this climax for our lives, this gift of God that will lead us to become, and act, like Jesus** is to be a powerful motivation for us, right here and NOW:

**In fact, when you think about it . . . every athlete is driven by this kind of motivation:**

What is it you want in the end?

What goal at the end makes the present struggle worth it?

A new personal best?

A new record of some kind?

A place on the Olympic team?

A medal on the rostrum?

A green jacket at the Masters golf event?

For an athlete, there’s always something in the future to strive for, even if it’s a dream. Even if it’s impossible, the goal, the climax, the conclusion, drives and changes and motivates the present.

But here’s the difference, says Paul:

becoming like Jesus, says Paul, **is no dream this is God’s assured gift:**

That one day, we’ll be restored to the image of Jesus; we’ll have his life, the life of eternity . . .

1. not only forgiveness
2. but a new country to belong to (and not only a new country)
3. But a new conclusion or climax for our lives:
  - Our lives restored to the life of Christ
  - A life that we must ‘put on,’ train for, and expect, as soon as possible

### **III. And then in the third place says Paul**

We need to remember that God has given us through the death and resurrection of Jesus, a new Contract, or Covenant, a new relationship in fact, a new marriage with God, with Jesus

...

So, back to Paul once again: (in Romans 7)

You shouldn't have any trouble understanding this, friends,  
– for you know all the ins and outs of the law  
– how it works and how its power touches only the living.  
For instance, a wife is legally tied to her husband while he lives,  
but if he dies, she's free.  
If she lives with another man while her husband is living,  
she's obviously an adulteress.  
But if he dies, she is quite free to marry another man in good conscience,  
with no one's disapproval.  
So, my friends, this is something like what has taken place with you.  
When Christ died he took that entire rule-dominated way of life  
(to which been married) down (into death) with him  
and left it in the tomb, leaving you free to "marry" a resurrection life  
that is, **[to marry or to belong Jesus, the one raised from the dead]**

IOW – **The old contract** from God says

*"when you break God's Law you die!!"*

**The new contract** from God says

- "I've paid all the bills, all the debts, all the justice – So now,
  - Would you like to marry me, belong to me, live with me forever?
  - Would you like to enter into a new relationship, a new covenant that changes everything?

### **From a business point of view we all know that the contracts we enter into (spoken or unspoken), inevitably change our behavior**

The contract has stipulations. It's the law!!

The contract spells it out – the new and expected behavior.

**But when** the contract or covenant is with someone you love, or with someone who loves you too – a spouse, or a parent, or a baby, or a child or a friend . . . **it's the relationship itself that is empowering, it's not just the rules, or laws, or small print that motivates us, and causes the change (though when the relationship degenerates, the rules begin growing!)**

- We change not because we have to, but because we want to
  - to bring joy to the one we love
  - **to please – the one to whom we are bound in love** in a new contract, a new covenant, a new marriage with God.
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**God's grace is amazing. God's justice is amazing. All intertwined together.**

God has born our judgment in the body of Christ, on the cross – all of it; for ever  
We are forgiven – eternally . . . Do you know this?? Believe it?

**And now our lives must change . .**

- **Not first** because of fear,
- **or** because of rules  
. . attempting to satisfy someone, a God, perhaps the God of Luther, who can never quite be satisfied.

***BUT because*** (1<sup>st</sup>) We are citizens of a new country: K of H – with a new ethos

***And because*** (2<sup>nd</sup>) We've been given a new conclusion, climax, a new dream to pursue with our lives: Being remade in the image of Jesus. But it's no dream: it's God's assured gift, and we need to begin training today!

***And, then*** (3<sup>rd</sup>) ***because*** we've been given a new contract, a new covenant – marriage itself, with God!! We've been given the promise of God, the assurance that Jesus longs to be our spouse for ever!! We belong to him, and he to us.

As you let every other relationship change you, so let this amazing relationship with God the Judge-filled-with-mercy, who bears his own judgment on us, for us, change you too!!

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4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016  
[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800