

Sermon for Sunday, September 20, 2009
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THE NEED FOR THE GOSPEL
Romans 1;16-23

In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin says he was a vegetarian for a while in his youth. Then one day he was on a boat. The wind died away. The idle sailors caught a number of cod. Soon the fish had been fried and the delicious smell, coupled with hunger, tempted Franklin. Franklin's principles and desires battled within. He then had a thought: the fisherman found smaller fish in the bellies of some of the cod. So, "If the fish eat one another, why can't I eat the fish?" He ate some and added: "The advantage to being reasonable is that one can find a reason for anything one wants to do." God gave us reason and we use it to rationalize everything. This is the human problem.

Franklin was a great scientist, inventor and patriot. Spiritually he was a deist, a practical atheist. He was a great man at a public level, but he did as he pleased.

Paul's concern from Romans 1:18-3:20 is the problem of human sin. This is stated in 1:1: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness." The Lord has a holy wrath toward all sin, but his first concern is godlessness – sins against God.

The sin of godlessness has three forms. First, some deny that God exists at all. Second, some admit that he exists, but refuse to worship or thank him. Third, some admit that God exists, but utterly pervert the truth about God.

1. The need for the gospel previewed (1:18-23)

Psalm 14:1 says, "The fool says in his heart "There is no God.'" Two points: First, in Scripture, the "fool" is not a person who lacks intelligence, it's a person who has no heart, understanding and moral fiber. Second, the psalm says fools deny God in differing way.

Some fools deny that God exists. Bertrand Russell was a great mathematician and philosopher in the 20th century, the father of my dissertation advisor and a pure atheist. His manifesto, "A Free Man's Worship", denies God's existence: ¹

"Brief and powerless is Man's life. On him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way. Man [is] condemned today to lose his dearest [friends]. Tomorrow he himself [must] pass through the gate of darkness. It remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day... [He alone sustains] the world that his own ideals have fashioned." ²Man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving. His origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms. No heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave. All the labors of the ages, all the human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and the debris of a universe in ruins. Only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's salvation be safely built."

¹ Bertrand Russell, *A Free Man's Worship, in Mysticism and Logic*, 1953, page 59

This is pure atheism. Yet notice the final thought: Unyielding despair is the firm foundation of 'the soul's salvation.' Russell still sought salvation, even if that is nothing more than maximum clarity and integrity for the decades of life.

Deism and practical atheism

Genuine, convinced atheists are still a small tribe. Far more common is the person who admits there probably is a God, but thinks it doesn't matter because God is far away, and takes no interest in the affairs of men.

Psalm 10 describes this fool: He does evil and says, "God will not seek it out... He has forgotten. He has hidden his face; he will never see it." They say in their hearts: God "will not call us to account" (10:1-13). "In all his thoughts there is no room for God..." (10:4).

So there is a fool who concedes that there probably is a God but his existence is immaterial. This man renounces God yet addresses him, saying, "You will not call us to account." He speaks to God in order to dismiss him. But the psalmist tells God the fool is wrong: "You do see... The Lord is king forever [and will] do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed" (10:14-18).

Paul was familiar with this form of atheism. Many of his fellow Jews prayed carefully, but acted as if there is no God (Luke 12). As a Roman citizen, he also knew the Epicureans. Some Epicureans were true atheists. But most believed some god created the world and then abandoned it and now cares nothing for human affairs. Further, since the soul is corporeal, body and soul will die at the same time. So live for the present, for tranquility and gentle pleasures.

Careless polytheism

Third, some believe God or gods exist, but they are careless about it. Paul says God's "eternal power and divine nature" are clearly visible in what he made (1:20). No one can see God's moral perfections by gazing at nature. There are hints, but not proofs of his love, justice, holiness, compassion, and grace. His moral goodness is clearly seen first in his covenants with Israel. And they are perfectly revealed in the life, teachings, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Still, Paul says that anyone who considers creation should be impressed by the power of its creator. We've talked about this before. The current estimate is that there are 2×10 to the 23rd stars. Thus, if we told every person who ever lived – about one hundred billion people - to name the stars for sixty hours a week, for sixty years and gave each person twelve seconds to name each star, every human who ever lived would need a thousand lifetimes to name all the stars.

But the fine structures of creation are even more amazing: the human body has between ten and eighty trillion cells, each with its purposes and structures, each with millions of atoms. How many? As many stars as there are, there are 40,000 times more atoms in one human body than there are stars in the universe.

Let's appoint every human to the task of counting these atoms: sixty hours a week for sixty years. Since it's easier to count an atom than to name stars (as everyone knows), we'll let everyone count ten atoms per second. Still, if one hundred billion humans tried to count all the atoms in one man, they would count about one-thirtieth of one-ten thousandth of that number.

The careless atheist doesn't want to think about these things. He can barely stand on the shore and consider the vastness of the ocean. Thus, "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... 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."

So the careless atheist exchanges the glory of the eternal God for lesser deities. Paul had the polytheism of the Roman Empire in mind. It was full of images of bulls and birds of prey, mighty warriors and fertile women. The goal of all was to gain the favor of the gods, to make them propitious, to give fertility to fields and animals, to protect the land from foes. Religion was transactional. Do for the gods, and they will do for you. Say the prayer, offer the sacrifice, and they will bless. Pagan gods had superior power and knowledge, but share our flaws: jealousy, lust, anger. There were numerous. In 73 A.D., the statues of 265 deities stood at Rome's major crossroads. The common man might pray to a dozen gods.³

I saw this first hand in India where they had statues of monkeys and elephants. Our mission team was assigned a servant who professed the Christian faith in order to get the job. But one day, a staffer saw him sitting by a road in the garb of a Hindu holy man and soothsayer. When confronted, he had no remorse, saying, "A man has to make a living."

Buddhism has a similar carelessness. Classic Buddhism is firmly atheistic. Monastic Buddhism has always been its backbone. While the monks seek enlightenment, they deny that Buddha, or anyone like him, is or can be divine. But in order to enlist popular support, Buddhists are perfectly happy to let the masses worship any great, enlightened person as a god⁴.

Most common folk believe there is a creator. He has some moral interest and gives us our sense of right and wrong. After that, people don't think too hard.⁵

2. The power of the gospel (1:16-17)

The gospel comes into this sad situation. Last week, we said Paul wrote this great letter in the context of his mission to preach Christ to the Gentiles, especially in places where his name had never been heard. He hoped to enlist the help of the Roman church to speed him on his way to Spain. To that end, he presents his gospel.

He begins with a surprising statement: "I am not ashamed of the gospel." We can reverse it and make it a positive: "I am proud of the gospel" – which Paul is. But he admits that one can be tempted to be ashamed of the gospel. The world is hostile and doubtful. Everything hinges on two miracles which skeptical people doubt: the Incarnation and the resurrection. Worse, we present a hero who was crucified. He came with words, not armies. And his church always seems weak, always seems to be a minority.

Nonetheless, Paul is eager to preach in Rome, in the world. Paul states his reason; the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: First for the Jew, then for the Gentile. The gospel is the true, supreme, effective power. It accomplishes his plan for the salvation of mankind.

Salvation has the highest sense. This is not the partial deliverance of generals or political leaders who rescue people from ordinary dangers. This is salvation in the day of the Lord. Salvation is from the wrath of God that punishes the godless and wicked who refused to repent. Salvation is to the restoration of the glory, honor and peace that God designed for us in the beginning. On that day, God will transform us and we will conformed to his glorious body. Our weary spirits and fallen minds will be changed.

When the Bible describes our salvation, it's usually future tense: We will be saved. But sometimes it's past tense: through Christ we have been saved. And sometimes it's present: We are saved. What the Lord has done, what he will do, shapes our present. We live by faith.

³ ISBE 4, 213- Jeffers, pages 103-5.

⁴ Rodney Stark, *One True God*, pages 46-51

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, chapters 3-4.

This is for all who believe, Jew or Greek. Some scholars think the universal offer of the gospel is the prime theme of Romans: God offers salvation to all who believe.

Certainly the gospel is offered to all. He promised it to the Jews, yet he calls "Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith" (1:2, 5). That's why Paul is obligated to preach "both to Greeks and barbarians" (1:14). And 1:16 says the gospel saves all who believe, first the Jew, then the Gentile. In Romans 10, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved". In Romans 11: "God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all" (11:32).⁶ Clearly the universal offer of the gospel is a major theme. In fact, the universal offer of the gospel is the result of the genuine main theme. The next verse states the content of Paul's message, his gospel: "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."

2. The content of the gospel (1:17)

This statement is rich, so we'll go slowly. First, a literal translation: "In [the gospel] a righteousness of God is revealed." That is, in the gospel, God's redemptive plan unfolds visibly in human history.

Through the Middle Ages (sometimes since then) the "righteousness of God" was taken to mean a righteousness that belongs to God. He showed it by acting rightly or righteously for his people. In His supremely righteous act, God saved His people through Christ, as He promised. It's true, the gospel does reveal God's righteous action. But Paul's emphasis lies elsewhere.

The righteousness Paul has in mind is a righteousness from God and given to men. That is, God is the source of a righteousness He bestows on us, so that we are righteous in His sight. This perfectly fits the context of our passage. The great concern of Romans 1-3 (1:18-3:20) is the problem of human sin, whether it's overt and crass, or subtle and civilized. At the end we're guilty of violating God's standards. Then we'll stand before the judge, without excuses.

The gospel, described in Romans 3:21-4:25, explains how God solved this problem – He covered our sin, forgave us, redeemed us, justified us, declared us right, so that we no longer stand guilty before Him. We have a new status and with that comes a new life – all described in Romans 5-8.

This agrees with summaries of Paul's gospel found elsewhere: "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith" (Philippians 3:9). Clearly, Paul teaches that believers have received a righteousness from God that is theirs.

Indeed, before he offers the gospel once more in Romans 10, Paul chides people who "Did not know the righteousness that comes from God." Instead they "sought to establish their own." For "Christ is the end [the goal, completion] of the law so that there may be a righteousness for everyone who believes."

The center

To explain the importance of this, a side trip: Christian thinkers tend to survey the centuries and see this shift in western thought from 1200 to 2000+.

For centuries, God was at the center.

⁶ Achtemeier, *Introducing the New Testament*, pages 307-9

Beginning in 18th century, with Enlightenment, reason and science became the center. In the last century, the self has become the center.⁷

The accusation would go: You Protestants have done the same. You have taken the righteous action of God and made it a point about the self – how you are right with God.

No, we still place God at the center. But He takes interest in our affairs. He acted righteously with us in mind and His acts mean something to us. His righteousness radiates outward. He declares us righteous in His sight and that has implications.

Someone recently described our competitive nature this way: We are not content to make a good paper clip; we want to make the best paper clip, the best coffee. Why? To justify ourselves, to prove our worth. But the gospel teaches us that God grants us worth freely, so we can give up that quest.

From our theme tonight, consider children who grow up under waves of parental condemnation: you're evil, a failure, worthless. As I said last week, that is a portion of my story. This week some of you shared your story with me. Some react as I did: You're wrong and I'll prove it. Others believe it and are crushed by it.

Others are wounded by rejection – by someone at work, by a friend, even by a spouse who suddenly declared, "I don't love you any more." Everyone wants to belong, to be loved, but someone says, "You don't belong here, we don't love you." The gospel answers all this.

Christ has triumphed over death and the powers of evil, that "we may not fear those things which our King has conquered." Therefore, believe no accusations, whatever the source. Turn to Christ, the supreme case of a good man wrongly accused. Understand that Jesus "experienced all our weaknesses so that he may comfort us in our miseries."⁸

To be clear then, the gospel affects our self-understanding in many ways, but it isn't about our self-understanding. It is **about** the acts of Christ which grant us his righteousness. This righteousness, says Paul, is by faith.

Righteousness by faith

This gospel righteousness, Paul says, is by faith from first to last. From the Old Testament to the New Testament, from the present to the future, however much we grow, the status we have before God is altogether by faith.

When he says righteousness is by faith, he means our faith is not a work that earns God's favor. Faith isn't something we do, it's a response to a person creating a vital relationship.

An analogy: Imagine that a child of ten is on the third story of a building and is trapped there by a fire. She can't get down the stairs and runs to a window as a way of escape. She looks down and sees her father. He calls to her to jump to him. Will she do it? It requires awareness of her need – why jump if it isn't necessary? And knowledge of her father. She must judge: "Is he strong enough to catch me?" But it isn't enough for him to be capable. She must hear his claim - "I'll catch you" - believe it, and act upon it. She must jump into his arms, believing he is capable and trusting him to do so. When he catches her, she is saved and continues to live from that day.

This is faith. It begins with an awareness of need and proceeds to trust in a person, whom we know is

⁷ D. Wells, *Courage to be Protestant*, pages 102-108

⁸ Calvin, *Institutes*, I, pages 517-518

capable to help us. Calvin said faith is "a kind of vessel... we come empty and with the mouth of the soul open, to seek Christ's grace."

This fulfills the Scripture: The righteous will live by faith

The person who is righteous by faith in Christ will live. This is a quotation from Habakkuk. The prophet had the survival of Israel in mind, but Paul applies it to everyone. Faith is the key to a relationship with God.

This week my daughter took the bullet train from Nanjing, China, to Shanghai and back again. It's a great train, covering one hundred seventy miles in less than two hours. But in the pursuit for speed, the doors aren't open long. Due to the crowd, they couldn't get off in time. They had to go another hour to get off, then catch a regular train back. That took three hours, but it was the right decision.

When we make a mistake, when we are not going where we intended, we should ask, "Where did I go wrong?" It's pointless to keep going down the same path. We must reverse ourselves, go back to the place where we were last on track. And the faster we turn around, the better.⁹

Romans 1 bids us to start afresh. No more foolishness. No atheism, no practical atheism, no fabrication of feeble gods. Come to the powerful God – for the first time. And come to Him the 1,000th time. Christian, live the gospel. You know you can't save yourself. Don't try. Don't try to justify yourself or prove your worth. Believe in the God of the gospel. The just will live - will flourish - by faith.

⁹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 1.5 (28-29).