

Lessons on Romans

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Dedication

To our friends from the Becoming Closer class, for their constant encouragement and support.

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The Righteous Shall Live by Faith - Romans 1:1-17

It is of some interest that the last time we did a series on Romans this section of Scripture was skipped entirely. It cannot be said, necessarily, that this was a mistake – but we can certainly take a look at it now.

Salutation

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called *as* an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about *the* obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name's sake, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called *as* saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

(Rom 1:1-7 NASB)

It was not until the early 20th century that scholars discovered that this sort of salutation was not unique to the Epistles. Its form is somewhat different from that which might be used today (think of a business memorandum for a parallel), but we can gain somewhat from disassembling its form.

From: Paul

Paul begins by telling us something about himself. He points out three things to us:

- ✚ He tells us that he is an apostle – the highest rank of those in the church.¹ It is an honor restricted to those who have seen the resurrected Christ in the flesh, though recently the title has been stretched beyond recognition.² Even beyond the experience the early church recognized none but Paul and the Twelve after the Resurrection.
- ✚ Such rank does not inflate his pride, however. He calls himself the bond-servant of Christ. The word is also correctly translated, “slave.” In this he carries forward the Christian conception of servant-leadership.
- ✚ He also tells us that he has been set apart for this task. What task? The Gospel itself – something which is not a creation of Paul, or the other Apostles, but something which God had prophesied long before.

Subject: Christ

Paul makes two important points about Christ, both of which are crucial to our understanding of the faith:

- ✚ Christ is a lineal descendant of David, King of Israel, founder of the dynasty that God said would last forever. This implies first that Christ is completely human; second, that he is of royal rank, entitled to reign; and third that he is the one who was indeed prophesied in the Old Testament.

¹ 1st Corinthians 2:28

² For an exposé of just how ludicrous this has become (in the name of feminism) see Touchstone magazine’s article on St. Junia at <http://touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=21-08-022-f>

- ✚ Christ is the Son of God. That means that he is fully divine, shown by the miracles he performed by the power of God. Only the fully divine would be rescued from death.

That last was done “according to the Spirit” – in which Paul here confirms the existence of the Trinity.

To: Romans

Why is Paul writing to the Romans? One very important reason is that Rome is the center of the Empire. “All roads lead to Rome.” But there are two other reasons:

- ✚ They are among the “beloved of God.” We sometimes forget that God’s love extends to all the church, not just those who are near, or who agree with us. A true Christian who happens to be a Catholic is also the beloved of God – and we should treat same accordingly.
- ✚ They are saints – holy ones. Consider that at the resurrection of the dead such people will be so awesome that if one were to present himself to us at this instant, we would instinctively fall down and worship (and be corrected, one assumes). We are surrounded by spiritually dangerous people in the church – wherever the church is.

Paul’s Heart

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, because your faith is being proclaimed throughout the whole world. For God, whom I serve in my spirit in the *preaching of the gospel* of His Son, is my witness *as to* how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you so that I may impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established; that is, that I may be encouraged together with you *while* among you, each of us by the other’s faith, both yours and mine. I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that often I have planned to come to you (and have been prevented so far) so that I may obtain some fruit among you also, even as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

(Rom 1:8-15 NASB)

Heart for the Romans

Paul shows us here just in what manner he has a heart for the Romans. See if this reflects your heart for those you love:

- ✚ He thanks God for them. Is your heart longing for your grandchild? Do you thank God for him or her? It is a natural reaction; if someone is a blessing to us or the cause we love, we thank God for that person.
- ✚ He prays – unceasingly – for them. If you love someone, you pray for them. Even if they are going astray.
- ✚ He wants to come to them. Does going to visit your grandkids please you? The same sort of reaction is shown here – with the caveat that God is willing to allow it.

Desires for the Romans

When my wife and I go visit the kids, she fills half a suitcase with suitable gifts. So what kind of gifts does Paul desire for the Romans?

- ✚ First, he wants to give them spiritual gifts – things like healing, for example. As far as we have record, this can only be done by an Apostle.

- ✦ Second, he wants them “established” – perhaps we might say, “solidly grounded.”
- ✦ Finally, that they might mutually encourage one another. The life of the evangelist can be lonely; it always helps to hear of the great things God has been doing in other parts of the church.

Goal: Fruit among you

The object of his approach – indeed, of his entire life’s work – is to produce fruit for the kingdom. That means new saints who have accepted Christ, and growth for those already in the church. To this end Paul mentions his track record in other locations – always encouraging – and tells them that it is not for lack of desire he’s been prevented from coming to Rome.

This might sound hypocritical from some; Paul rightly evinces no such hypocrisy. Rather, as is known, Paul is a man driven by a sense of obligation to the Lord who has forgiven him – an obligation which extends to all the human race. A man who is forgiven much, loves much – and Christ has commanded him to take that love to the world.

The Righteous Shall Live by Faith

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it *the* righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS *man* SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."
(Rom 1:16-17 NASB)

In the original

The passage is a quotation from Habakkuk 2:4. In the original passage (see verse 3) we find a prophecy of the coming Christ. The implication is clear: no longer would salvation come by going through the Jewish rituals and works, which were meant to be a picture of what was to come.³ The time would come when true reality sets in – and in that day the righteous man will live by faith.⁴ As Paul put it to the Galatians,

Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "THE RIGHTEOUS MAN SHALL LIVE BY FAITH."
(Gal 3:11 NASB)

This principle – justification by faith – is a commonplace of the Christian faith. Any study of James will contain the usual dilemma of faith versus works, resolved in “faith without works is dead.” But a new form of the debate has arisen lately, and as we shall see it has the power to lead many astray.

Works and faith

We must pose the question carefully, explaining as we go. “Is man morally perfectible?” Do not misunderstand; the question is not about *obtaining* moral perfection but *sustaining* moral perfection. Once a Christian is forgiven, and (legally speaking) morally perfect at that moment, can he by his own efforts alone remain that way?

³ An idea capable of great elaboration.

⁴ John 3:36

Phrased that way, it is clear that we are dealing with the Semi-Pelagian heresy (see the study on 2nd Peter). But that is not how the question is phrased these days; indeed, it is not phrased as a question at all. We have instead an assertion clouded in fuzzy language.

To the ancient Christian this question would boil down to whether or not a man could avoid sinning again. Paul answers that question at length here in Romans, and his answer is a definite “No.” But the question is not phrased that way. The usual approach is this:

- ✚ The speaker outlines some problem in which a person has “made a mistake.” Not sinned; sin is a church word and must be avoided in the seeker friendly church. “Made a mistake” could mean sin; it could be just a failure to read the manual for the lawn mower. By making it fuzzy we blur away the guilt that comes from sin, leaving only the consequences.
- ✚ The consequences must be repaired and the mistake prevented. Fortunately, we have pop psychology to help us here. The speaker then outlines some number of simple rules which obviously fix the problem. The listener usually nods positively at this step.
- ✚ Finally, the speaker adds some quotations from the Bible – usually from a paraphrase, several of which espouse this view – which seem to add God’s stamp of approval. The Bible is no longer source but “familiar quotations.”

One author called this “moralistic therapeutic deism.” If you object to this by saying that faith (and thus repentance) are called for, you will be told, “Faith without works is dead.” But that is not the argument. It may also be said that works without faith are dead; for example:

And without faith it is impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and *that* He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.
(Heb 11:6 NASB)

The Gospel is the power of God

The fact is that the power of God comes through the Gospel; as Paul tells us here the Gospel is the power of God. In this we see an answer to another heresy of modern times: the idea that “good people in other religions go to heaven too.” The idea is based on the premises above. If man is morally perfectible, then why shouldn’t a Moslem go to heaven – if he’s good enough? We don’t even have to know what “good enough” means; that’s Christ’s problem.

Not only is this false by direct statement of the Scriptures,⁵ but it negates the central fact of Christianity. For if man is morally perfectible by himself, of what use is the Cross? Does not this new doctrine tell us that the Cross must have been non-essential? The core of the faith now isn’t.

For reasons like this, the “emergent church” (as this movement is called) de-emphasizes Bible study. Obviously, if the Bible proclaims the existence of sin – that seeker-unfriendly word – then we need to keep the Bible on the bookshelves, and out of the hearts and minds of Christians.

⁵ John 14:6

Wrath Deserved -Romans 1:18-2:11

Paul begins his lessons to the Romans by stating three things:

- ✚ Why the wrath of God is deserved by man
- ✚ What God is doing about it – even today (eerily, his words ring of today).
- ✚ Ultimately, what God will do about it on the Day of Judgment.

Why God's wrath?

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, (Rom 1:18-22 NASB)

Counterargument: the love of God

It may seem strange to start with the counterargument, but this idea is so embedded in our society that it must be dealt with first. Put simply, the counterargument goes like this: “But God is a loving god – how could he do a thing like punish someone or send them to hell?” We answer that (as Aquinas would have said it):

- ✚ How do you know that God is a loving God? Is it not because both nature and revelation (Scripture) show him as such? If so, how is that you accept this revelation about him, but not the revelation of the God of Justice? Are you indeed so superior to God?
- ✚ Indeed, are you not picking and choosing among the things known about God to create a god of your own convenience and choosing? My wife likes to have me make love with her; she also likes to have me do the dishes. Somehow she does not see the logic in my picking what I want. Marriage, like the rest of life, is a package deal.
- ✚ For those to whom written revelation has made it, do you really have the choice? Can you decide which parts of Scripture are true and which are false – based on your personal desires? It's the word of God, not a candy store.

What is revealed about God?

So just what is it about God that has been revealed? The question takes much more time than we have to answer fully, but for our purposes we might point out the following:

- ✚ First, his existence – as shown in his divine power in creating the universe.⁶
- ✚ Second, his love as shown in his divine care for us, both in nature and at the Cross.
- ✚ Third, his justice – as shown in Scripture, and in history. What goes around, comes around; the universe is a moral place – just as its Creator intended.

⁶ The reader is referred to the five philosophical proofs of the existence of God as given by Aquinas – the unmoved mover, the uncaused cause, contingency and necessity, degrees of perfection and the argument from design – and the implications regarding his character thereof.

The accusation

Justice is applied to the guilty. What, then, does God say that we have done?

- ✚ We failed to glorify him. We have Obama worshipers, and no one thinks anything of it. But we do not glorify him.
- ✚ We have failed to give him thanks. The ultimate source of bread is not the bakery – but we act like it is.
- ✚ Most important of all, we think ourselves wise while being fools. Think of the condescension the world has for “ignorant fundamentalists.” Throughout much of the church today the concept of sin is considered obsolete – and we shall see its consequences.

So what will God do about it?

It’s easy to think that God does nothing about this, and therefore doesn’t really care. If the “something” we want him to do is fire and brimstone, you’re right; he usually doesn’t do that. So what does God do about this?

Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; *they are* gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

(Rom 1:24-32 NASB)

Sexual desires

It is interesting: the first thing God does about this is give mankind over to sexual desires. Does that ring an alarm bell today? Notice the sequence:

- ✚ First comes lesbianism. Those old enough will recall a time when lesbianism was considered “bold, artistic, fulfilling,” while male homosexuality was still considered a bit shady. (See the history of feminism for this; a major part of this spiritual foolishness.)
- ✚ Once that is well established, male homosexuality comes next. And coming up next, by the way: pedophilia. (We already have a state sponsored institution in California set up specifically to advocate this – an institution funded primarily by the pornography industry.)
- ✚ Following that? The penalties thereof (think AIDS). What’s really funny is to hear the “reasons” for the AIDS epidemic – which chastity could wipe out in a generation.

Why do we have an AIDS epidemic in the United States? Well, it’s certainly not our sexual behavior (pure righteousness, that – except for Republicans, of course.) Here’s why:

- ✚ Not enough money spent on health care, especially in the rural south. (More clinics would mean people would find out they’re infected sooner, and of course they’d use condoms after that.)

- ✚ Not enough money spent on research – which is caused by right wing Christian fundamentalists.
- ✚ And – my favorite – because of the guilt trip laid on innocent, sexually active AIDS victims by those same Christians.

So you can see, it's really nothing of God's doing. Right.

Gave them over to...

The next step is a long and familiar list of characteristics of our society. The reader is referred to the list given in our previous study on Romans.⁷ (For the classroom use, this list was reproduced).

Key points to observe

It's a long list – but each item rings true. But I would point out three key things for you to observe concerning this list:

- ✚ First, we deny God's decree. We contend that right and wrong aren't; that all things are relative; all "cultures are equally valid." In other words, God, you are mistaken.
- ✚ We "continue to do" these things. It starts with the fact that we have no shame about them (and that is true in our local church.) I remember well the reaction our former pastor got when he stated that "sex outside of marriage is wrong." The audience – and it was the older portion of the congregation – gasped. Ultimately, the conscience is seared. Once this is done, it's easy to proclaim wrong to be right.
- ✚ Finally, we end up by approving – indeed, applauding – those who do such things. Homosexuals are bold fighters against puritanical prudes, applauded by all.

No Favoritism

It is tempting – in the Biblical sense – for the Christian to say, "right on!" But Paul now brings out the problem with doing that.

Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same *yourself*, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. *There will be* tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.

(Rom 2:1-11 NASB)

You judge, you condemn yourself

The argument is pretty simple:

⁷ http://www.becomingcloser.org/Romans/wrath_of_god.htm

- ✚ You possess the truth, Christian. It is a higher standard than the revelation of nature. Should you not therefore be held to that higher standard?
- ✚ You pass judgment on others. That implies that you know the standard, and that you agree that it is right.
- ✚ God is just. Is it not justice that he therefore will apply the standard that you know, the higher standard, the one you agree is right – to you?
Most inconvenient, that. So we bring up our excuses – agreeing generally, but in my particular case...

Our excuses

This may not seem familiar at first, but think on it a bit...

- ✚ “My sins are respectable.” It’s not greed, it’s ambition. It’s not envy, it’s a desire for social justice. Everyone approves of these things; what’s the problem. (And if all the kids in your junior high class are wearing bones in their noses, running like lemmings over the cliff, then you...)
- ✚ “God will forgive me – it’s his hobby.” (Heine). In saying this, do you not insult the mercy of God?
- ✚ “Doesn’t my sin give God a chance to show his grace? Grace is a good thing, right?” So more sin is a good thing, right?

God’s wrath

The fact is unassailable: God will deal with mankind according to his righteous wrath. But we may observe three principles to this which may affect our search for a solution:

- ✚ First, in his mercy, he allows for a time of repentance.⁸ We should avail ourselves of that time.
- ✚ Judgment will be based on what you have done – both positive and negative.
- ✚ Hypocrites will be judged most severely.

Stopping at this point, things look bleak. But Paul is not finished yet. As we shall see, his writing will hit its high point in Christ – the solution to this problem.

⁸ There is wickedness in this world. Therefore God is either not powerful, not righteous – or not finished with us yet.

Solution to Sin - Romans 2:12 – 3:31

The reader will bear with us, please. This is a long section of Scripture, and can be taken in several lessons. But it seems good to bring Paul's argument about sin to its proper conclusion. Today we will see three things:

- ✚ The universal effects of sin, and the judgment to come.
- ✚ How this makes things better – and worse – for believers.
- ✚ God's solution to the divine dilemma.

Universal Judgment

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

(Rom 2:12-16 NASB)

The pygmy in Africa

There is an old debating question for Christians which runs something like this: suppose there is a pygmy in Africa. He's never heard of Christ, or the Jewish Law, but he's a good pygmy (by whatever standards they might have). He's nice to his mother, honors his father, treats his wife and kids well and is generally respected among the other pygmies. How, then, could God condemn our pygmy to hell?

Paul answers that thusly:

- ✚ If you sin outside the Law of Moses (or, by extension, the obedience required of a Christian), you are going to be judged by the law you knew. This would apply to the pygmy.
- ✚ If you are a Christian, you will be judged by the Scripture – because that what you knew (or at least should have known.)

So – the standard is still sinless perfection for all. It's just that God evaluates you on what you actually knew as right and wrong. Which, for instance, is why God judges teachers more severely.⁹ The problem is this: law or not, we are still all sinners, even based upon the little we knew. Who among us has not sinned?

Law unto themselves

It is seldom noticed, but the religious systems of this world are largely in agreement on what is right and what is wrong.¹⁰ Universally we find honor for parents, care for children, faithfulness to your wife (or wives), honesty in dealing with others, prohibition of theft and so on.

⁹ James 3:1

¹⁰ The point is amplified nicely by C. S. Lewis in his *Abolition of Man*.

This thus gives rise to the conviction shown here: we are all sinners. We have all violated *the law we know*. Good, bad or ugly, we are all sinners. It is the universal condition of mankind. This explains much about modern humanism. Our society now approaches this problem in various ways:

- ✦ Psychiatry tells us that guilt is an emotion, unfounded in fact. Guilt, itself, is the problem; psychiatry is the solution. (Science is our real god).
- ✦ We have our own form of legalism: “if it’s legal, it’s moral.” Useful for politicians and the self-excusing everywhere.
- ✦ A more amplified version is this: there is no absolute right and wrong, only what works for me.

But note that last one: OK, let me buy your argument for the moment. Are you telling me that you’ve never done anything that *you personally* consider wrong? Even if you’re the only one with your standards, have you always kept them? More to the point, have you ever condemned anyone else for doing what you yourself have done? Are you really such a hypocrite as to say “it’s morally right for me to steal from you, for example, but not for you to steal from me?”

Paul hints at the answer to the problem. Those who obey will be *declared* righteous. This tells us two things:

- ✦ Whatever God’s solution to this problem is, it involves us being obedient to the best moral law we know.
- ✦ God’s solution is not to pretend we are sinless – but by His own power to declare us righteous. We shall see how this works.

Day of Judgment

It’s a long topic, but may I point out from this passage what the ultimate result will be on the Day of Judgment?

- ✦ Judgment will be by God, through Christ. The righteous Judge will be Jesus himself.¹¹
- ✦ Everything will be made known. Closed doors, aren’t.
- ✦ “As my gospel declares.” This judgment is something revealed and yet to come. God is not finished with us yet.

Speaking to the believers

Perils of the believer

But if you bear the name "Jew" and rely upon the Law and boast in God, and know *His* will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For "THE NAME OF GOD IS BLASPHEMED AMONG THE GENTILES BECAUSE OF YOU," just as it is written. For indeed circumcision is of value if you

¹¹ Classical readers will recall the formula that all good things are “from God the Father, through Christ the Son, by the Holy Spirit.”

practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. So if the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? And he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter *of the Law* and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

(Rom 2:17-29 NASB)

Here's the warning: if you think you are so good and pious, then you need to examine yourself. If you do what you condemn in others, and do not confess and repent of it, then you are a hypocrite. Remember that Christ's wrath was concentrated on the hypocrites of his time.

Why? One reason is this: it produces blasphemy among those who don't believe. Your example as a Christian will be noticed, one way or another. If people see you as a hypocrite, that's not just your problem. You have caused them to blaspheme God; you have provoked them to a most serious sin. If someone leads your child astray, do you feel kindly toward them?

Look at it this way: suppose you say, "I am a baptized Christian." That's good – if you are also an obedient Christian, obeying from the heart, not just the rules. Otherwise, it's a formality with no real meaning – or power.

Advantages of being a Christian

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God. What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man *be found* a liar, as it is written, "THAT YOU MAY BE JUSTIFIED IN YOUR WORDS, AND PREVAIL WHEN YOU ARE JUDGED." But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.) May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world? But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner? And why not *say* (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), "Let us do evil that good may come"? Their condemnation is just.

(Rom 3:1-8 NASB)

We might update this to apply to Christians. Is there an advantage to being a Christian? Yes indeed. It's all the difference between having the repair manual and not having it. If you are willing to read the manual, fixing is a lot easier than if you have to blunder through it.

But we have the tendency to decide that being a Christian makes us *intrinsically* righteous. This quickly leads the world to see us as hypocrites, not repentant sinners. We need to note that this doesn't change the truth of the faith; truth exists, whether we exemplify it or not. In that sense our conduct doesn't matter – but it often matters very much to those who see us.

It can get worse. We can attempt to justify our sins by God's grace. You will see that this is a pretty far gone condition. For example:

- ✚ “My sins are useful to show that God is righteous.” Since you’ve done him such a favor by being a superb bad example, he’s unjust in judging you. (By which you just called him a liar, by the way.) You wouldn’t take that argument from your kids.
- ✚ “My falsehood only brings out God’s truth by comparison; I am increasing his glory.” Believe it or not, people have used that one.

The net net: all are sinners

What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, "THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE; THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD; ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE." "THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE, WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING," "THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS"; "WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS"; "THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD, DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS, AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN." "THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES." Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin.

(Rom 3:9-20 NASB)

So let me net it out for you:

- ✚ Christians are accountable for what they do.
- ✚ None of us is righteous of our own efforts or obedience.
- ✚ Rather, we all know, clearly, that we are sinners. Even after salvation.

Which, I submit, is a **really difficult problem**. For us, at least. So what is God going to do about it? (It has to be him; it sure isn’t going to be us.)

The righteousness of God

But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was to* demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, *I say*, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Or is God *the God* of Jews only? Is He not *the God* of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one. Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.

(Rom 3:21-31 NASB)

Righteousness made known – Good News!

God has indeed solved the problem – and this is good news. Which is the meaning of the word “gospel,” and now you can see why this phrase is used. It’s a problem we can’t solve, but God has solved it for us. Three preliminary points:

- ✚ It's a righteousness *from God*. Not ours, but from him. We have no bragging rights in this one.
- ✚ It's not something new. The Law foreshadowed it in teaching us about atonement for sin; the Prophets let us know that it was coming.
- ✚ It is open to all – for God is one.

Divine dilemma

Perhaps we might undertake a shallow bit of theology to make it clear. The sin of man has given God a divine dilemma, which springs from his very nature.

- ✚ God is righteousness itself. As Aquinas tells us, he is his attributes; he is righteousness, he is justice. Therefore, he cannot tolerate sin forever. Justice may be delayed, but the omnipotent cannot deny it.
- ✚ God is love; God is merciful. He therefore longs to forgive his errant children and bring them home to himself. He is omnipotent; therefore his children cannot be barred from him forever.

God's solution? The atonement. Note that Paul tells us he did this to demonstrate his righteousness, but does not mention his mercy. This is correct. If God was only merciful, he could simply declare us all forgiven. But he is righteous; sin demands payment, or atonement. As his justice is perfect, so must the atonement be – which is satisfied in Christ alone.

Sin comes before judgment. Judgment comes before mercy. We sinned; Christ paid the judgment; we receive the mercy from it.

Justification by faith

By the very nature of sin and judgment, we cannot claim this mercy by our obedience. Our obedience should be a result of this mercy, but it cannot be the cause, for obedience is righteousness, at least partially. Righteousness cannot give rise to mercy. So therefore we come to this mercy by faith. Since it is by faith, and not by religious observances, it is therefore open to all who will take up that faith.

For there is one God – and therefore there is one faith. God is One, and so is the bride of Christ, his church. As much as can be within man, it is the living representation of the mercy of God.

But wait – don't we still acknowledge the right and wrong of, well, right and wrong? Indeed we do. The faith requires that we admit we *need* the atonement; we can't do it ourselves. But to say that is to say that we are sinners. To say that we are sinners is to say that sin exists. If sin exists, it must be defined by a law – Mosaic or otherwise. So it is that by accepting the mercy of God, given at the Cross, we confirm his judgment: we are sinners. Saved by grace.

When I do my lessons I usually close the door. Sometimes this is to keep out the interruptions. Sometimes this is to hide the tears that come when I think of what a sinner I am, and how God is merciful.

Dazzling Leap - Romans 4

Paul's thesis now takes a slight detour to deal with certain questions and objections which would logically arise at this point. Anticipating Aquinas on this point, Paul knew that an argument was not complete without answers to objections. We shall state those objections, and Paul's answer – and then proceed to examine the implications thereof.

Objections

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing on the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: "BLESSED ARE THOSE WHOSE LAWLESS DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGIVEN, AND WHOSE SINS HAVE BEEN COVERED. "BLESSED IS THE MAN WHOSE SIN THE LORD WILL NOT TAKE INTO ACCOUNT."

(Rom 4:1-8 NASB)

Objections

We might see in this three objections to Paul's argument concerning the nature of human sin and God's response to it. We may phrase those objections as follows:

- ✚ "This is all just theory. You need to show me by historical evidence that such a thing is plausible at least and ultimately required. Give me an example."
- ✚ "All this talk puts me down. I'm not a axe-murderer; but I might as well be by your argument. Surely good – OK, great – people are exempt from this. If this is true, why do I feel OK about myself?"
- ✚ "You have obviously missed one central point: God works by Law. The Old Testament is full of rules and regulations. How can you reconcile that with your theory?"

Paul's answer comes in two parts: Abraham and David.

Abraham

We must remember how Abraham would have been viewed by the legalist Jews of the day. He is the patriarch, the man with whom God started his system. To one who reasons through these things, he would be seen as one greater than Moses, and thus greater than the Law (being the ancestor of Moses). From our point of view he is the man with whom God arranged the promises of Christ, and therefore a man worthy of high praise, at least, in our view.

Paul brings our attention, therefore, to what Abraham *discovered*. The point is experimental. God did not simply write it down for him; Abraham discovered the character of God through a lifetime of interaction. Now, it cannot be said that Abraham kept the Law, for the Law was several hundred years in the future from him. But through his experience, Abraham learned to trust God – and for this he was "credited" with being righteous.¹²

¹² Genesis 15:6

You can see the point. Promises are made to Abraham concerning his descendants; his descendants in that sense inherit those promises. Those promises come by faith, not keeping the Law. Historical example, and logical point.

David

In David we find no man of great logic and reason as much as we find an artist – a poet, to be specific. If Abraham is left-brain, David is right brain. Paul quotes him here (Psalm 32) showing us the blessing of God – by God’s action, not our own. A blessing is not something earned, but given as favor by God. And what is that blessing?

- ✚ That our sins are forgiven – which sets our relationship to God in order.
- ✚ That they are “covered” – meaning that God will not bring them up again at some convenient time. God, if you will, can’t find them anymore.
- ✚ That our sins will never be counted against us. Our sins are fact; their impact depends upon God. If he forgives, they cease to count against us – and this is a great blessing.

The point is poetic. If the burden of sin is unbearable gloom,¹³ then forgiveness, covering and remission are indeed the blessings of God.

One cannot help but note that God is making this argument both to the Romans and to us

Questions

Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, "FAITH WAS CREDITED TO ABRAHAM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS." How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised. For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified; for the Law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, there also is no violation. For this reason *it is* by faith, in order that *it may be* in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, (as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the presence of Him whom he believed, *even* God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist.

(Rom 4:9-17 NASB)

The biker problem

We come now to the “biker problem.” Consider it this way: it’s one thing to tell a pious, hard-working, upright Christian that faith is so pre-eminent. It is, from that point of view, a solution to many difficulties – for example, the call to perfection. But let us consider that icon of badness, the biker. How can we say that faith avails for such a person as that?

¹³ Psalm 51 is the classic expression of this

- ✚ There is the obvious: the promise comes by faith. The biker may be greatly inferior in being nice to his mother, but that doesn't necessarily imply he can't have faith. So, purely logically, this shouldn't be a problem. But it is.
- ✚ Paul draws this conclusion by inference from circumcision. Righteous people are (physically or symbolically) "circumcised." That's the Old Testament dividing line between the good guys and the bad guys. If God had given Abraham the promise *after* circumcision, we might conclude that only the good guys can have the promise. But God didn't.
- ✚ He also argues from first principles. God is one. His family is therefore one. God is father to us all; indeed Abraham is called a father to many nations, not just the Jews. The question is not, "who is righteous?" but "who is family?"¹⁴

Promise vis-à-vis Law

Sometimes the idea that there are rules and regulations, and that life is about following them, is so ingrained in us that we fail to see the limits of the rules. Look at it this way, perhaps:

- ✚ The Law – the Old Testament version of rules and regulations – looks backward. It asks, "What have you done?" and provides penalties for it. In the law itself there is no hope, for hope concerns the future. The Law of God brings the Wrath of God.
- ✚ But even in our legal system there is the slight hope of pardon. The Promise of God looks forward, as do all promises. Therefore, there is hope. If you have faith, He will deliver.

So why circumcision?

Which brings us to another logical objection: if this is so, then why do we have Law at all? Why do we teach the Christian that he must ceremonially be cleansed (baptism) and then stay clean?

- ✚ The ceremonial part is well described here as a "seal of righteousness." If you will, it makes your attributed righteousness official. It's the purple ink, raised letter seal on the death certificate of sin.
- ✚ Staying clean? Any parent knows the answer to that. It's a fact that obedience in children pleases their parents; obedience in the Christian pleases God. And disobedience provokes not God's wrath but his discipline.

Hope

In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE." Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. Therefore IT WAS ALSO CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. Now not for his sake only was it written that it was credited to him, but for our sake also, to whom it will be credited, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, *He* who was delivered over because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification.

(Rom 4:18-25 NASB)

¹⁴ Those who know about the author might ask about Joe Gresko and Ben Machinist.

Against all odds

Hope is not the same thing as probability. Probability guesses what is likely to happen; hope believes – even knows – what is going to happen. The facts do not matter to hope.

- ✦ Abraham, when he was told he'd have his own biological son, was pushing a hundred. Remember, no Viagra. He just laughed at the idea; God was serious, though.
- ✦ OK, maybe Abraham can do the job – but his wife? Sarah was pushing ninety. There's a reason Medicare doesn't cover pregnancy.
- ✦ Perhaps more telling, Abraham proposed that his son by Hagar, Ishmael, should be his heir. God said no. In short, Abraham made a reasonable suggestion – and God countered with an unreasonable promise.

Against all odds? You bet.

What kind of faith?

What kind of faith would do a thing like that? I give you three characteristics:

- ✦ Abraham was “fully persuaded that God had the power.” Such faith begins with the knowledge of God – and that knowledge includes knowing his power. We shy away from that; gentle Jesus is more approachable than the creator of all things. But they are one in the same.
- ✦ Abraham did not develop this faith by himself; rather, we are told that he was strengthened in it. If you need help in this, ask the one who gives faith.
- ✦ This is not “faith in faith” – that is, if you just have enough faith it will come true. It is faith in the promise of God.

“Credited”

Abraham didn't earn this treatment; God “credited” it to him. God is the Father of Abraham as well as our heavenly father; what he did for Abraham he will do for us. He will credit us with righteousness – if we believe.

Believe what? Paul tells us simply: the death and resurrection of Christ. There is a reason that the attacks against Christianity center on this.

And the hope? The hope is none other than the return of Christ and the resurrection of the dead – including us. The facts are there to support it. You know God's power; you know of the resurrection of Christ; you know that you are part of God's family. This hope is a leap of faith, to be sure – a dazzling leap of faith. It is also a sure one.

Peace and Joy - Romans 5:1-11

Paul now gives us a rather lyric interlude – if you know how to read it properly. It introduces us to the concept that the Christian life is not peaches and cream, but much more vigorous.

We Have Peace

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God.

(Rom 5:1-2 NASB)

The “Let us” controversy

Those reading this passage in the NIV will note the footnotes, starting with “we have peace.” There is a considerable controversy about this reading.

- ✚ The difference between the two readings is precisely one bar over the letter “o”. It is not surprising, therefore, that alternate texts have different readings. The Textus Receptus, used for the King James, translates it as “we have peace.” The Douay Rheims, the Bible in Basic English and ancient writers (e.g., Chrysostom) read it as “let us have peace.” Commentators disagree.
- ✚ Those advocating the more common interpretation argue that the other version cannot be reconciled with good doctrine, and therefore must be a mistake. This might be related to a Catholic/Protestant point of division, whether or not it is possible to lose one’s salvation, or perhaps the role of works in salvation.

It is possible, in my view, to do that reconciliation.

Peace

If this is the correct reading, then it is clear that peace with God is a choice we make. It is entirely possible to be saved by grace and still be angry with God. We may stand on the solid rock and complain that our troubles are great and that God is not doing what we want. Or we can ask just what peace with God really means. Does it mean that He gives us all we want, or that the conflict that exists between mankind and God is over for us?

An illustration might make this clearer. After the American Civil War, southern citizens were required to take a loyalty oath before being allowed to vote. Many southerners were reluctant to do so. The choice of many was influenced by Robert E. Lee, who counseled them to accept the oath. His argument was simple: the war is over, we lost, and now we must get our state back on track. Loyalty to the Union was a requirement to do that, otherwise the war started all over again. Peace must not only be won, but accepted.

If we have peace with God, though, does this not also imply peace with his children? Could the South have reconciled with the Union government, but not with its citizens? It would have negated the meaning of peace. Similarly, peace with God, accepted, implies peace with his children.

Hope

Let's be simple about this. Everyone dies. No one wants to. Each of us wants to live a little longer; death always comes too soon.¹⁵ We long for life.

As Christians, that is what is promised for us – life, eternal life. The hope that Paul refers to here is the hope of the resurrection. If there is peace with God, the author of life, then there is hope of life. It is the deepest yearning of the human soul, placed there by a God who knew what it should mean to us.

More than that, there is the hope of glory. We are not being raised simply to a dreary existence, but to the glory of God. This lesson does not have space to expound upon it, but it is sufficient to say that the life to come is vastly superior to that which we have now – if for no other reason than the joy it will have. God himself will wipe away every tear.

Tribulation

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

(Rom 5:3-5 NASB)

Why would I rejoice?

Ok, so we're supposed to rejoice – in our sufferings. Why would I want to do a thing like that?

- ✚ It means you're on the team.¹⁶ Suffering and tribulation are the consequences of becoming a Christian. In a sense, you made it!
- ✚ It's how you mature in Christ. Even Christ himself was made perfect through suffering.¹⁷ If our Lord found it necessary to suffer to become perfectly fitted for the role he had to play, does it not follow that his followers will suffer likewise?¹⁸
- ✚ It also produces results in our character that can be obtained no other way.

Results

Specifically, it produces these kinds of results:

- ✚ It produces perseverance. One writer put it this way: "The word rendered "patience," means rather patient endurance, constancy. It is active rather than passive in meaning. Then the endurance which is developed under tribulation helps to form a tried, tested character"
- ✚ It produces character. The NASB translates this as "proven character," it can be rendered as trustworthiness as well. It is that sense of one who is consistently loyal to the Lord no matter the circumstances.
- ✚ Which, tried and true, produces hope.

Is hope valid?

So, then, how do I know that the hope I have is indeed correct?

¹⁵ I understand those who see death as a release from pain – but wouldn't you rather live without the pain?

¹⁶ John 16:33

¹⁷ Hebrews 2:10

¹⁸ Matthew 10:24-25

- ✦ We have the testimony of the prophets. So much of what they have predicted came about in Christ that we can trust the rest.
- ✦ We have the evidence of history – no one else rose from the dead.
- ✦ Most of all, we have the Holy Spirit. When you find the Spirit moving within you, remember that this is a guarantee of the hope of the resurrection – as well as guidance for the present.

Reconciliation

For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.

(Rom 5:6-11 NASB)

Who would you die for?

It's an interesting question. Deep down inside you, is there really someone who is so dear to you that you'd shove them away from the oncoming train and take the hit yourself?

- ✦ The Scripture commands such love in only one instance: the husband for his wife. And the command is phrased in the idea that you are to love your wife as Christ loved the church.¹⁹
- ✦ For most of us, we have a rather indefinite list of "good guys" for whom we would die, if the choice came to that. Your children? Your grandchildren?
- ✦ But Christ died for the ungodly – not the good guys but the bad guys.

How much more

The point is rather hyperbolic. If God loved you so much that He sent Christ to die for you, is it at all possible he will then make your new life one of dreary misery, with no hope? It makes no sense; it is contrary to the character of God. His own consistency says that if he loves you enough to go to the Cross, then his love is sufficient to make your life a cause for rejoicing.

That's one reason we have praise in our worship. You can look at worship as being nothing more than a rock concert with the preacher as the star. If you take it as the church has traditionally, it is much, much more. In the structure of worship you find the life of the Christian. Do you give at church? Then give during the week. Do you pray at church? Then pray during the week. Do you read the Scriptures at church? Then read the Scriptures during the week.

And if you have cause to rejoice during the week for what God has done for you, should you not then praise him for it? If this is so during the week, how much more should it be true in worship – and vice versa.

¹⁹ Ephesians 5:25

Praise simply reflects the truth about God – He is love, and his love is so great that he went to the Cross. Beyond that, his love is our constant source of joy in life. We praise God because he, and he alone ultimately, is praiseworthy.

That is the God who is the source of our lives in Christ. What then is suffering, compared to the blessing?

Christ and Adam - Romans 5:12-21

Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, Luther, Arminius, Irenaeus, Anselm, Wesley – these are some of the great names in church history. They are also men who do not agree on a very fundamental doctrine: original sin. We shall not settle the debate in this lesson, but we hope to make matters a little clearer – and along the way point out the important things upon which all agree.

Original Sin, etc.

Concepts:

Let's do a little dictionary defining:

- ✚ Original sin – the doctrine that humanity, individually and collectively, is by nature sinful as a result of the sin of Adam.
- ✚ Concupiscence – the doctrine that the method of transmitting original sin is by sexual lust in procreation.
- ✚ Total depravity – the concept that original sin makes man absolutely helpless to correct the problem.
- ✚ Predestination – the concept that (largely due to total depravity) man cannot determine his own destiny, but is predestined to heaven or hell as God (alone) decides.

You now have a scorecard.

Big Guns

Something as important as this would, one might think, be the subject of majority agreement. It is not. A little history of the big guns in Christian thinking:

- ✚ Augustine – developed the idea of original sin as a response to the Pelagians. The Pelagians held to the idea that man is morally perfectible (in short, Paul got it wrong); in response, Augustine expounded the first clear statement of original sin. From this, Augustine concluded that infant baptism was necessary – otherwise dead babies go to hell. This later became a point of argument. Irenaeus used the concept against the Gnostics as well, but in the context of the fallen nature of the world. He also decided that concupiscence was the mechanism by which original sin is transmitted. This, ultimately, was said to imply the immaculate conception. (Gets complicated, doesn't it?)
- ✚ Aquinas – rejected the doctrine of concupiscence. This eventually blossomed into full debate as to whether or not sex is inherently sinful. Aquinas himself barely touched on the subject – but the rest of the church picked it up for him.
- ✚ Luther – picked up Augustine's idea of concupiscence. This was enormously influential in determining Protestant ideas and attitudes toward sex (and the inferiority of women).
- ✚ Calvin – extended Luther's concept to the point that mankind was so consumed with original sin as to have "total depravity" – and therefore was unable to do anything about it. Even the act of faith had to come from God; therefore you are predestined to heaven or hell by Almighty God.

Christian Churches (Restoration Movement)

And what of our little denomination? Stone and Campbell rejected original sin; contending that we each die for our own sin. (This is why there is no infant baptism in our church). Many such churches now accept original sin in some form or another.

- ✚ One particular change arising recently comes from the “Emergent Church” movement. Theologically a bit fuzzy, it contends that (like the Semi-Pelagians of old) man is morally perfectible in this life – at least, after baptism. Man does not need the aid of God beyond baptism (though he may seek it), but by virtuous acts can rise to moral perfectibility. Regular listeners will recognize the characteristic ideas that people have problems, not sins, which can be solved by a set of easy rules to follow.

Where on earth did all this come from???? From three little verses.

What Paul really said

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

(Rom 5:12-14 NASB)

The nature of sin

We need to start simply in this. What is the nature of sin? In the original, it means “to miss the mark.”

Which implies that there exists a mark to miss – a commandment, a sense of right and wrong. But Paul has already shown us there are two kinds of “marks:”

- ✚ There is the explicit standard – a commandment from God, to violate which is known sin.
- ✚ There is the implicit standard, inferred from nature. This applies to those who don’t have the explicit kind. As we have seen, all mankind has this.

Obviously, **the** original explicit sin was Adam’s – as before that there was no commandment. (Hence the name, “original sin.”) That doesn’t mean that there was no implicit sin before Adam; the Scripture is almost silent on that point. But as Paul points out here, if there is no commandment, then God doesn’t take sin into account. We might see this as no additional consequence. We still do much the same; we are much lighter in judgment on those who are ignorant than those who are not.

The nature of death

One source of conflict about this in the modern world is the idea, popular in the early 1900’s, that before Adam there was no death. The fossil record seems to indicate to the contrary (to put it mildly). How can we understand this?

- ✚ First, remember that Christ is the source of life. When he proclaims that he is “the life”²⁰ the word used for life means biological, not spiritual, life. So if you are to live, God must continue to sustain it.
- ✚ But sin separates man from God.
- ✚ Ultimately, therefore, sin means death because it separates you from “the life.” Whether that sin is against the explicit or implicit law would make no difference.

²⁰ John 14:6

Adam as pattern

Adam, as we have said, committed the first explicit sin. That kind of sin is always taken into account by God.

Paul therefore tells us that Adam is a type of Christ. The word “type” means something like a model, a figure or even a statue. Suppose you took your grandchild to Washington, DC, and your grandchild pointed to a statue and asked, “who’s that?” You might reply, “That’s George Washington.” You don’t mean that the statue is literally George; rather, it’s a picture of George in three dimensions. Paul’s language means the same here.

He is going to compare Christ and Adam in the next section. But here we see an example of imputation: because of Adam, God imputes sin to us. Because of Christ, he imputes righteousness. How this works is explained next.

Compare and Contrast

But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. The gift is not like *that which came* through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment *arose* from one *transgression* resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift *arose* from many transgressions resulting in justification. For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous. The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

(Rom 5:15-21 NASB)

Do you know why there are no one-armed Bible teachers? Because we have to be able to say, “On the other hand...” Paul does that here: he performs a logical analysis known generally as “comparison and contrast.” Two options or ideas are compared, usually point by point, to show the differences. We can do that more graphically than Paul. Consider the ubiquitous T-chart:

Broccoli	Chocolate Ice Cream
Green	Brown
Can be eaten by tortoises	Usually rejected by tortoises
Can be used as a highway flare	Doesn't burn, even with gasoline on it
Highly tasteless and woody	Delicious

Well, you get the idea (I hope). Paul does the same thing here, comparing and contrasting Christ and Adam, the trespass and the gift:

Trespass	Gift
One man's sin	One man's sacrifice
Many died as a result	Many live as a result
Chronologically, followed one sin	Chronologically, followed many sins
Result: condemnation	Result: justification
Cause: disobedience	Cause: obedience
Sin increases	Grace increases more
Sin reigns	Grace reigns

The point, then, is startling: everything that could go wrong did when Adam sinned – but how much greater is the grace of God through Jesus Christ. Just how much greater, we will expound next lesson.

Wages of Sin - Romans 6

We now encounter a chapter which has caused some trouble to Christians over the years. This is largely because Paul is trying to draw a picture for the Romans – a word picture, an analogy of sorts. Like other analogies, it's possible to draw conclusions that aren't really implied. We shall see if we can sort it out.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? Or do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into His death? Therefore we have been buried with Him through baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

(Rom 6:1-4 NASB)

Ideas

Antinomianism

The heart of antinomianism is the idea that the Christian is freed from the Law – or any kind of moral law. This ideal runs through church history, and its nature has provoked a great deal of argument. At this time, however, the issue was rather clear. The antinomians argued as follows:

- ✚ I sin – which is then covered by grace. Therefore, the more I sin, the more God's grace increases.
- ✚ More grace is a good thing.
- ✚ Therefore, we should sin more.

This was sometimes restricted to sins of the flesh and the world, as these are temporal sins as opposed to pride, a spiritual sin. Paul dismisses the argument in "By no means!" It's clear to him that to state this argument is to prove its fallacy.²¹ The appeal, however, is not gone. Throughout Christian history this idea has arisen many times, usually in a more complicated formulation. Watch for it.

Identification

We must take a detour to understand Paul's argument. Let's take this in three steps:

- ✚ Symbolic communication. When human beings want to say things of ultimate importance, they turn to symbols. A wedding ring is not just so much jewelry; a flag is not just so much colored cloth. There is a difference between what a thing is, and what it is made of. Hence symbols have meaning.
- ✚ One use of symbols comes with acting them out. For example, when her father gives the bride away, it symbolizes the transfer of the woman from her father's authority to her husband's. We call this a ritual. It is the human way of acting out the profound.²² Communion is a ritual; baptism is a ritual.
- ✚ Rituals often use the principle of identification. By doing something symbolically, I proclaim myself to be "like" someone else, or part of some organization. (Initiation rituals are often based on this.) Paul, in this passage, tells us that baptism is just such an identification ritual.

²¹ Physics students will remember the inevitable phrase, "It is intuitively obvious to the casual observer that..."

²² It should be noted that our church is very proud of the fact that they have no rituals. One wonders if this is one of the reasons the more mature Christians tend to long for something more in worship than just a rock concert.

Symbolism

So Paul gives us the symbolism used for baptism: it is first a symbol of death, by identification with the death and burial of Christ. In so doing, we say that we are like him in “dying” – and therefore benefit from the effects of death.

We also say we will rise as he rose. Baptism proclaims, symbolically, the resurrection of the dead, and our participation in it.

This, folks, is serious stuff.

Death and Sin

Paul now takes the symbolism and applies it to our lives. The argument is by analogy, but nonetheless an answer to antinomianism.

Christ died to sin

For if we have become united with *Him* in the likeness of His death, certainly we shall also be *in the likeness* of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old self was crucified with *Him*, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

[\(Rom 6:5-11 NASB\)](#)

Have you ever heard someone say that the only response to temptation is to give in to it? If that’s your guiding light, I have news for you: sin owns you. Sin is what is guiding your life. You may think you’re “doing your own thing,” but you are actually being controlled by something outside you. Don’t think so? Temptation comes, and whose direction do you follow? Temptation comes from outside – so it’s not your own direction.

Paul tells us here that this is not so for the Christian. By this principle of identification, we proclaim that we have died with Christ – so we are no longer slaves to the body. It’s dead, so to speak. We have identified with his atonement, and therefore are no longer under sin’s dominion.

Christ was also raised – and as we identify with his death, we identify with his resurrection. We are saying that not only are we free from sin, but the result will be resurrection and eternal life. Your entire life is a walking symbol of either death in sin or life in Christ – and we should know just what we are symbolizing.

Instruments of righteousness

Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin *as* instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members *as* instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

[\(Rom 6:11-14 NASB\)](#)

OK, so just what are we to do about this? Remember that when you are baptized, you are a new man in Christ. So you have taken on a new Lord (you do remember taking him as “Lord and Savior?”) If Christ is your Lord, then sin is not – and therefore you should not let sin rule over you.

Want a test of that? Just what is your body doing? Paul doesn’t mention “parts of your body” idly. The most prominent example is in sex. It has been many years since I have heard a sermon that even faintly mentions sexual fidelity in marriage, but the principle is eternal. It’s a test point.

The issue is one of lordship. Just who’s in charge? It isn’t you; it’s either sin or Christ. Be sure you know which.

Slavery

Someone might object, “I am the captain of my fate and the master of my soul.”²³ But are you really? Can you really determine your fate? Can you really tell God where your soul belongs? It is a grand point of hubris to think so. It is the point of saying to God that I’m in charge of me – and that I can make my own results. It’s not that way in physics; you have no choice but to play by God’s rules. It’s not that way in life either.

In fact, you have no solo choice. To reject God is to select sin. If you think not, look again at *Invictus* and see if you can read it with humility. You are, in fact, going to be serving a master (as they would have seen it in Paul’s time.) It may be something – gold, sex, pride – or it may be Somebody, but serve you will.

How do I know? Because whatever you obey – whatever controls you – is that which you serve – by definition. That you have no choice in. You just get to choose which lord you take. Choose wisely.

Human Terms

I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in *further* lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. Therefore what benefit were you then deriving from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the outcome of those things is death. But now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Rom 6:19-23 NASB)

The limits of analogy

Paul is aware that there are limits to analogy, and that it’s possible to press this argument too far. So he lets us know that he’s put this in human terms so that we can understand it clearly. It is not wise, however, to press the matter beyond our own understanding.

²³ *Invictus*, William Ernest Henley.

Curiously, however, the more mature the Christian is, the more the analogy comes home. It's a matter of spiritual growth. The beginner can't see sin as master, and must be convinced by the analogy to slavery. The mature Christian is quite well aware of the slavery of sin.

There is a side effect of this principle in worship. It's the beginner who is instructed in liturgical worship; the mature saint is blessed in it. Spiritual things grow sharper in focus as you mature. If I might offer an example, consider the hymn *Amazing Grace*. When you first become a Christian you see little more than the title in it; but read it over some time. It is full of sound doctrine that touches the emotional heart of the beginner – and the mind of the mature. Think not? Consider the word, “wretch.” To the beginner it seems like poetic exaggeration; the mature Christian understands just what a wretch really is. It's the difference between the beginner saying, “I'm not a Hitler” and the mature Christian knowing just what a sinner he is. If the artist gets the hymn right, the impact grows with the Christian. So too with liturgy.

Comparison and Contrast

Bring the matter down to daily living, Paul tells us. Look at the results. What do you think of the man you were before you became a Christian? (Remember, he is talking to a church largely made up of adult converts.) Are you really proud of what you used to do? No, you'd really rather not talk about it, right? But afterwards you see the fruit of the Spirit in your life. OK, which lifestyle leads to death, and which to life?

Wages of sin

Paul has been telling us how things work in this universe. You're a sinner, no choice. You get to pick your lord – sin, or Christ. He ends with another fact of the universe: for sin, you get the wages of sin – death. For repentance, you get the gift of God. One you earn, one you don't. That's how the universe is. Your work – or God's grace. You choose. No other options are available.

Life and Death - Romans 7:1-8:17

Paul now enters on a very personal exploration of sin, death and the law. Notice how often “I” or “we” appears in this section of Scripture.

Dead to the Law

Or do you not know, brethren (for I am speaking to those who know the law), that the law has jurisdiction over a person as long as he lives? For the married woman is bound by law to her husband while he is living; but if her husband dies, she is released from the law concerning the husband. So then, if while her husband is living she is joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress; but if her husband dies, she is free from the law, so that she is not an adulteress though she is joined to another man. Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God. For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were *aroused* by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death. But now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.
(Rom 7:1-6 NASB)

Alive to the Law

Why do we have criminal law in this country? Is it not so that we control the behavior of people who should know better anyway? Just like small children, who need an enforced set of rules, would-be criminals have the law.

Law, by its very existence, implies the existence of sin in the objects of the law. We have laws against burglary because there are burglars. When we catch and convict them, we send them to prison – to force them to obey rules. Free men have choices; prisoners don’t. That’s the nature of law.

Law also requires atonement; for example, swindlers are usually required to pay back that which they have swindled – and more. Just like the Old Testament Law, modern law exacts a price.

This thus implies that if you are under a law – or need to be – then you are one who must be controlled by it. So how do you get out from under the law?

Death by identification

One good way to get out of our prisons – is to die there. Whether by execution or natural causes, prison and law lose their authority when a man dies. Similarly, as we saw in our last lesson, we have an opportunity to “die” – by identification. The method is simple:

- ✚ Christ’s death pays the atonement price of God’s Law.
- ✚ We accept that death (identification) when we claim him as Lord.
- ✚ Thus, the Law’s demands upon us are satisfied – and we are released from the prison of Law.

Results

So what effect does this have on the Christian?

- ✚ There is not really a change in character, at least immediately. The change is in the direction.
- ✚ There is a great victory in the Christian’s life when he accepts the Lord, a victory won at the Cross. But that doesn’t mean the war is over.

- ✦ The key to maintaining that victory is this: you go from an external control (rules and regulations) to an internal, Spirit led life. The law is a schoolmaster; but you've now graduated.

Sin Within

What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "YOU SHALL NOT COVET." But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin *is* dead. I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. Therefore did that which is good become *a cause of* death for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, so that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful. For we know that the Law is spiritual, but I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin. For what I am doing, I do not understand; for I am not practicing what I *would* like to *do*, but I am doing the very thing I hate. But if I do the very thing I do not want *to do*, I agree with the Law, *confessing* that the Law is good. So now, no longer am I the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good *is* not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me. I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?

(Rom 7:7-24 NASB)

Three states of man

It's easier if you look at it this way: there are three possible states for man:

- ✦ Man without the Law is spiritually dead – and doesn't know it. You can guess where that leads.
- ✦ Man with the Law is also spiritually dead, but knows it. This life comes with the continual problems of temptation, and eventually leads to judgment.
- ✦ Then there is the man who is spiritually dead to the Law because he's alive in Christ. Curing the first brings a knowledge of sin; curing the second a knowledge of life.

Sin living in me

Note the pronoun: me. This is Paul at his most personal.

We now must consider the phenomenon of "forbidden fruit." Man is a rebellious creature – a sinner by nature. If you make something illegal, you increase the temptation to do it. Why is this so?

Because sin is in control of your life. Paul expresses this in a number of ways:

- ✦ One is bad habits. I've never met a chocolate chip cookie I didn't like. Have you ever noticed how these habits always seem to get their way?
- ✦ A second is that "evil is always right there with me." People picture this as Satan on one shoulder. We just don't seem to be able to get away from whatever sin besets us.
- ✦ Possibly most important: we ask ourselves, "Why do I keep doing this?" It's the sin living in you.

Sin and the law

So here we have it: when I sin, I recognize it. I thereby condemn myself and confirm that God's law is right. Think about that; our guilt is God's proof of righteousness.

I want to do what's right – honest! I make New Year's resolutions, promises to myself and others, write myself reminders – and it seems just like “autopilot on” when the same sins keep coming up. Again, this shows the righteousness of God lit by the sinfulness of man.

Most important: all the laws in the world won't help me being a prisoner of sin; in fact, they just make it worse. Buying another diet book doesn't make you skinny.

So – what can we do about it?

Spirit Led Life

No condemnation

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin. Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God *did*: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and *as an offering* for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

(Rom 7:25-8:4 NASB)

You can see what is done here:

- ✚ You exchanged life under the Law, with all its problems with sin, for life in the Spirit.
- ✚ You did this because of the sacrifice of Christ at the Cross. Without it, this goes nowhere.

Does this mean that sin is no longer sinful? No indeed; the existence of the Atonement means that it is needed. The Cross condemns sin by its very existence. So sin is still with us, and still condemned.

Live according to the spirit

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

(Rom 8:5-8 NASB)

The contrast is unmistakable. The sinful nature leads to natural desires – and giving in to them. The Spirit filled life desires what the Spirit desires.

Now, before you get too far with this, note that Paul is talking to *Christians* – not seekers. This is a choice the Christian has to make. Note carefully:

- ✚ It's a choice of how you live, not just what you think.
- ✚ The sinful nature cannot be successful in God's law – it's going to result in eternal death.

- ✦ The Spirit filled nature brings life and peace – a good test for those who are wondering just where they fit in this.

The results of this choice are shown, ultimately, at the Resurrection.

Obligation

However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you. So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh-- for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him* so that we may also be glorified with *Him*.

(Rom 8:9-17 NASB)

There is something profound in this section. This entire lesson comes down to whether or not you are in the family of God. If you are, there is a "family obligation" to do things the way the family does – that is to say, God's way. That obligation is to "put to death the misdeeds of the body" – that is, the sinful nature. In short, we have work to do. With God's help the sinful nature can be overcome. For some this is a short process; for others, a long one. But it is the normal result of leading a Spirit filled life.

So it is no surprise, therefore, to learn that one way we know that we are indeed the children of God – and therefore to be resurrected on the last day – is because the Spirit is our "seal" or deposit, guaranteeing that we are indeed God's children.

Indeed, Paul goes so far as to tell us that we are not just adopted sons but co-heirs with Jesus. So it is not just resurrection we will share, but the glory of God – IF. If we share in His sufferings too. Of that, more next week.

Christ and Creation - Romans 8:18-27

Maurus Rabanus, a ninth century Christian writer, pointed out an interesting reaction in Christ's parable of the sheep and the goats; specifically:

"Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You *something* to drink? 'And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? 'When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?' (Mat 25:37-39 NASB)

It appears at first as if the righteous *don't believe* what their Lord is telling them! As these are the righteous, this cannot be distrust of our Lord's words. So what is it? Rabanus gives us two reasons they would react this way:

- ✚ First, these are the righteous after the resurrection. They are in such a glorified state, so exalted that they are stunned.
- ✚ Second, in that state they realize just how small their righteous acts are compared to the glory they have been given.

Do you see it? Their righteous acts were so small, their suffering so little, that the connection seems to them to be easily overlooked; it is as nothing.

Paul makes much the same point.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now. And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for *our* adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he *already* sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it. In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for *us* with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to *the will of God*. (Rom 8:18-27 NASB)

Christ and Creation

If we are to understand this passage, we must first condition our minds with some facts about Christ and creation.

- ✚ Christ is the *author* of creation. He is not just its agent of creation, but the author. That is to say, he designed it as well as implemented it. (Civil engineer vs. bulldozer operator – by way of comparison.)
- ✚ Christ is the *sustainer* of creation. He did not just wind up the universe and set it spinning – he actively sustains it.
- ✚ He is, in a sense we shall see, the first born of creation. This includes the thought that he is the first to be raised from the dead to life in the new creation. Lazarus was raised to die again; Christ lives forever.

First Fruits

In some sense we share that property of being “first born” – to the extent that we are an imitation of Christ, disciples. Paul puts it here that we *have* the firstfruits of the Spirit. A little refresher course on firstfruits:

- ✚ Firstfruits were just that: the first things you harvested every year. At the point where you were the most tired of last year’s apples you gave the first of this year’s crop to God. It is a sacrifice; it is also an act of faith.
- ✚ If the firstfruits are holy, the rest of the crop is holy.²⁴ By giving the firstfruits, you secure the blessing of God on the whole crop.

Now we can see the sequence as it applies to us: Christ is the firstfruits of the new creation.²⁵ But we are also told that we are a kind of firstfruits:

Do not be deceived, my beloved brethren. Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow. In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth, so that we would be a kind of first fruits among His creatures.

(Jas 1:16-18 NASB)

It is not our doing – but he gave us that privilege.

The nature of power

Of course, all this leads up to a discussion of the events of the end times; in particular, the resurrection of the dead and the new heaven and earth. Such events are beyond our normal experience, and we might well wonder whether or not the descriptions in the Bible should be interpreted not literally but as some sort of parable that proclaims, “the good guys always win.”

This comes from the concept that either God does not have the power to cause this to happen, or the will. As to the will, it is his clearly expressed intent, no matter how you interpret the Scriptures. But for power, we need a little background.

Students of physics will recall the difference between “kinetic” and “potential.” Kinetic means that we see it in motion; Wile E. Coyote falling to the bottom of the cliff is kinetic. But if he’s tied a rope to a rock on the cliff above, that rock’s power is potential – until Wile E. pulls on the rope and sends it screaming down on his own head. But Chuck Jones – the cartoonist – has a greater set of options. All those physically impossible happenings in a Roadrunner cartoon are possible to him; he is the creator of Wile E.’s world. Similarly, we see only the kinetic but not the potential of the universe; resurrection and regeneration are beyond us. But not beyond the creator who devised the universe in which we live. We, like Wile E., are “in the box.” God is not.

End Times

The order of events – indeed, some of the events themselves – are in debate. We shall confine ourselves today to three concepts of first importance.

²⁴ See Romans 11:16

²⁵ See 1st Corinthians 15:23

Resurrection

It is very clear that the dead will rise – and beyond that there is debate. First, there is the question of how many resurrections are there? The answer is at least two – Christ’s and ours. Hal Lindsay sees six; any other number is your choice.

The debate comes from this: the dead rise – to what purpose? Some hold to one resurrection with the judgment. Others see a resurrection to life, not facing a judgment, with a separate resurrection (at varying times) for those not in Christ. Still others see separate resurrections for those in the Old Testament period. Who can say? But one thing we do know:

But someone will say, "How are the dead raised? And with what kind of body do they come?" You fool! That which you sow does not come to life unless it dies; and that which you sow, you do not sow the body which is to be, but a bare grain, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body just as He wished, and to each of the seeds a body of its own. All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one *flesh* of men, and another flesh of beasts, and another flesh of birds, and another of fish. There are also heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one, and the *glory* of the earthly is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown a perishable *body*, it is raised an imperishable *body*; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual *body*. So also it is written, "The first MAN, Adam, BECAME A LIVING SOUL." The last Adam *became* a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual. The first man is from the earth, earthy; the second man is from heaven. As is the earthy, so also are those who are earthy; and as is the heavenly, so also are those who are heavenly. Just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we will also bear the image of the heavenly.

(1Co 15:35-49 NASB)

Which introduces us to the concept of *glory*.

Glory

If you were to meet a risen saint at this moment, your first reaction would be to worship. It seems that we shall appear in the same glory that Christ had after his resurrection.²⁶ This is not something we earn – but it is something that is given to us in the here and now:

Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden *wisdom* which God predestined before the ages to our glory;
(1Co 2:6-7 NASB)

As Romans 8:23 puts it, we are up for adoption as sons of God. This has been God’s intention from before the beginning of time. We will be like Christ. More than that I cannot really say; more than that needs not be said.

²⁶ Colossians 3:4

New Heavens, New Earth

The universe, it seems, is to be redeemed; we are promised a new heaven and new earth.²⁷ Other than “new” – in what sense we don’t really know – we know that this universe is radically different: this is the one in which the lion and the lamb get along.²⁸ Laws of physics? Don’t I wish I knew!

But there is one thing about this new universe which should cause us to act now. Specifically:

"But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father *alone*. "Take heed, keep on the alert; for you do not know when the *appointed* time will come. "It is like a man away on a journey, *who* upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, *assigning* to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert. "Therefore, be on the alert--for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning-- in case he should come suddenly and find you asleep. "What I say to you I say to all, 'Be on the alert!'" (Mar 13:32-37 NASB)

The warning for the here and now – is clear.

What to do today

All this is well and good; but Paul recognizes that we need instructions for the here and now if we are to endure to see those good days.

Patience

It’s no use telling people to be patient if they don’t understand the nature of patience. It is not simple waiting; it is an active thing:

- ✚ Patience has an objective. We are patiently working our way into the kingdom of God, not just sitting around waiting for something to happen. Because it is God’s doing, we don’t know the timing – but we do know our tasks.
- ✚ Patience denies weariness. Those whose lives are run by emotions may not understand this. Patience looks down the road; today’s weariness will pass – but the eternal nature of the kingdom causes us to press on.
- ✚ Patience – perseverance in some translations – brings the Christian to maturity.²⁹ It has its benefits here and now as well as then.

Prayer

It is of great comfort that the Holy Spirit intercedes in our prayers. We see here three characteristics of that intercession, which we may imitate:

- ✚ Intercession comes from the righteous for the wicked.³⁰ Which means that we do not have to be perfect to be heard.

²⁷ 2nd Peter 3:3-14

²⁸ Isaiah 11:6-9

²⁹ James 1:3-4

³⁰ For example, see Abigail’s intercession with David for Nabal in 1st Samuel 23:25-35

- ✦ Intercession is made by the wise for the ignorant – ever wondered just how you should pray for a certain situation? Just what should you ask for when someone is dying painfully?
- ✦ The Spirit’s intercession is always done within God’s will. Even if you have no idea what that might be. God will do no evil accidentally on your behalf.

The virtue of hope

Hope sounds sort of “pie in the sky.” Christian hope is not.

- ✦ Christian hope is not a vague wish that God will do nice things. It specifically refers to the return of our Lord, the resurrection and the new heaven and earth. Unfathomable, perhaps – but not vague.
- ✦ Hope is supported by fact and reason.³¹ The fact is the resurrection of Christ; the reasoning comes from the words of God.
- ✦ Hope needs a mechanism to be implemented; that mechanism is faith. Without faith, there is no real hope. In every meaning of that sentence.

What is our hope? Our hope is in Christ, of eternal life, by the resurrection of the dead into the new heaven and earth. And nothing less.

³¹ Hoping the Dodgers win the pennant is hope supported by fact (2009). Hoping the Clippers win the NBA title is wishful thinking.

What Shall We Say? - Romans 8:28-39

It is at once one of the most famous and difficult passages in the New Testament. Sometimes the studies of this section get lost in predestination – but there is much more here.

Predestination

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

(Rom 8:28-30 NASB)

The Question: Who really decides?

A glance at any book on theology (or a visit to Wikipedia) will show you that Christian thinkers have been debating the nature of man's choice for a long time. It comes down to what appear to be contradictory views of the nature of the universe:

- ✚ At one extreme there is determinism. God predestines everything; physics controls the implementation at his direction. You only think you have free will. This has recently come back as being the hallmark of many humanist viewpoints. Except for the part about God. The religious view is that God not only knows what's going to happen, he predestined it that way. So why does one child follow the Lord and another from the same family goes astray? Predestination; nothing the parents could do about it.
- ✚ The other extreme uses free will. The child has choices; the child makes choices. God knows what those choices *will be* as all times are the same to him. We make the choices; we are free to do so; but since he knows the answer, to him all things are predestined. Combine this with his intervention in the world, which limits certain instances of free will.

The variations in between are numerous. All that can really be said is that "all is surveyed, and the power given." (Akiva) God knows the future, for all times are "now" to him. He has planned the universe by his will. And yet, we are told we have the free will to choose.

Types of Predestination

Some fruitful analysis can be made of the instances where God has made it clear that his intervention is in accordance with his predestination:

- ✚ There are certain individuals of whom the Bible clearly tells us that they are predestined to a certain role in life. Examples of these would be Jeremiah³² and John the Baptist.³³ These selections (see Moses) often seem arbitrary; God often selects on the basis that the individual is not really qualified; this shows that his results are God's doing.
- ✚ Nations and tribes are selected for particular roles in history. The most prominent example is Israel.
- ✚ Finally, as here, certain groups of people – those who love the Lord, for example – are singled out as being predestined for certain treatment by God.

In the last instance, it's difficult to distinguish predestination and cause-and-effect.

³² Jeremiah 1:5

³³ Luke 1:11-17

Our specific case

We may apply the test of Thomas à Kempis: if you knew the right answer, what would you do differently? I suggest the answer is: nothing.

We may look, however, at what God is doing in this instance:

- ✦ We are specifically told that God has predestined those he foreknew. Is this cause and effect based on our choice, or are we robots? What we really know is what God is doing – not why we're making our choices.
- ✦ If predestined, he will call us to Christ. A tautology?
- ✦ If called, justified – clearly his action, not ours.
- ✦ If justified, glorified. This refers to the resurrection of the dead and the glory to come. Is this a sequence in time – or just in logic?

That glory is this: that we will be like the risen Lord. Once you see that, you must realize that we are dealing with something outside our true comprehension.

One last note on this: there is power to paradox. If your religion explains everything, it explains nothing.³⁴ If there is mystery unsolved, God may be in it.

If God be for us

What then shall we say to these things? If God *is* for us, who *is* against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us.

(Rom 8:31-34 NASB)

It is a fact: the Christian life is not pie-in-the-sky, kick back and take it easy as long as you go to church. It is hard, and it is made hard by the fact that the world at large does not like Christ, Christians or Christianity. If you are a Christian, you will suffer in this world. But consider:

- ✦ The athlete who competes for a prize suffers too – training is tough. But this suffering is willing, because of the prize at the end. So too with us.
- ✦ The greater the prize, the greater the suffering. And what prize could be greater than the glory coming to us?
- ✦ So then, our earthly troubles are not eliminated by Christ – but by his strength we ride over them.

We aren't in control

The reason people are troubled by this is fairly simple: we know we are not in control. The athlete knows what the training regimen is; he can accept it or refuse to compete. We look at life and realize that there are things we cannot control, or control directly.

- ✦ Sometimes we screw up – and we are found out. We can be accused – and in this world there is no forgiveness. (Promoted until your first mistake.) We can't seem to avoid mistakes. Suppose one of those mistakes is eternally fatal?

³⁴ Example: everything is arranged by space aliens. All is explained, right? And we understand nothing.

- ✚ We are often dependent upon things outside our control. (How's your 401(K) fund this week?)
- ✚ We often don't have the knowledge to arrange things as we want them – if I knew which stocks were going up, I'd be a lot richer.

All these things work to convince us that things are not really under our control. It seems logical, then, to assume that things not under our control could keep us from God. After all, they are powerful things – and we are not.

It doesn't matter

The truth, Paul tells us, is that it doesn't matter. His logic is pretty simple:

- ✚ Despite all our disadvantages, and the fact that we are sinners, God gave his only son for us.
- ✚ His character is eternal – and therefore is consistent. If he did that, is it at all possible that he should cease to love us?
- ✚ If he loves us, will he not give us all good things? God doesn't do things half way.
God is his attributes; he is love (Aquinas). That pure love in his nature assures us that that which is truly good, is ours.

More than conquerors

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, "FOR YOUR SAKE WE ARE BEING PUT TO DEATH ALL DAY LONG; WE WERE CONSIDERED AS SHEEP TO BE SLAUGHTERED." But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Rom 8:35-39 NASB)

Powers of this world

"Be reasonable," says the world. Compromise; try to get the best of both. Let God comfort you spiritually – but fight tooth and nail for the next promotion. Claw, dig and scratch. Be one with this world, and use Christ as others use a liquor bottle.

God says instead, "Get your priorities straight." The things of this world are not that important. (Consider the lilies.) The most important thing is to stay in Christ's love. Do that; consider all the rest to be just difficulties along the way. If you do that, the things of this world will not get between you and Christ. Attitude!

Powers beyond this world

That works well for the modern materialist. But the ancient man had a different view – one which is returning to favor in our time. Ancient man was aware of the spiritual nature of the world.

In his time this might have been angels and demons; it might have been any number of gods and goddesses. But the spiritual world existed – and therefore it could be that some spirit might be able to stand between you and Christ. Certainly Satan would like to!

Today that concept is still with us – voodoo dolls to “New Age” thinking. It doesn’t matter which version you accept. There is one central fact which you must remember.

Whatever a spirit might be – angel, demon, goddess or “woo woo!” – it is a created thing. It is therefore inferior to and subject to the Creator. None of them can keep you from the love of Christ.

May I give you a parallel? If you go to the shore you will see the waves crashing on the rock. The waves are impressive; they have great power. But when the waves subside and the storm is gone, the rock is still there.

The things Paul doesn’t mention

May I point out to you the things that Paul doesn’t mention? Spirits and suffering may not keep you from Christ – but what about greed, envy and pride? Nothing in creation can keep you from Christ – except you.

Israel – Part One - Romans 9

Paul now takes on a subject which would be rather difficult. Just what is the role of the Jews, the chosen people of God, in the kingdom of Christ?

Paul's agony for his people

I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, *separated* from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the *temple* service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

(Rom 9:1-5 NASB)

From our last lesson

One of the problems the early church faced – at least in logic, if not practice – was this: just why are the Jews so hostile to Christ? How is it that God could let this happen?

Paul, who is of course Jewish, sees the problem as one of personal anguish: these are his people, and they have refused Christ their Lord. This opening statement is an emotional one:

- ✚ As Paul just taught us (last chapter) he can't be cut off from Christ – nothing can do that. This is a heart cry, not a theological proposition.
- ✚ Nor is this something Paul is writing to impress the reader. He is the apostle to the Gentiles; there is no glory in the Jews for him.
- ✚ But this is an imitation of Christ. As Christ was cursed for us, so Paul would be cursed for the people he loves.

Personal agony

Note, please, that the sorrow he has is great – the word means “heavy” as well – and unceasing. Anyone who has agonized over a wayward child, over a long time, understands the problem well. The theological problem is one thing, and an important one. The emotional problem for Paul is what brings it to the surface.

Advantages of the Jews

Perhaps the problem seems remote to you. But consider: when someone has “all the advantages” we expect more out of them. When that someone fails, we think it a tragedy. The same results from someone disadvantaged might be quite reasonable. From a religious point of view, that's what we have here. Consider the advantages the Jews had over the Gentiles:

- ✚ they are “Israelites” -- the descendants of Jacob. If you will, they have the right family connections.
- ✚ it is not just biology -- they are also adopted. (Have you ever picked out a puppy at the dog pound? What love is given such!)
- ✚ the glory of God -- they actually saw Him “face to face” at times such as
 - ↪ the pillar of fire in the wilderness
 - ↪ the filling of the Tabernacle
 - ↪ the filling of the Temple
- ✚ the covenants (possibly singular in some manuscripts) -- with whom else did God deal?

- ✦ the law itself -- above all others they knew right from wrong, and were often devoted to it.
 - ✦ true worship -- they alone knew enough about God to offer pleasing worship.
 - ✦ the promises -- and there are dozens -- were made to them alone.
 - ✦ the patriarchs -- and the tradition of wisdom and worship they started
 - ✦ and, finally, in God's own time, through them Jesus came.
- They were given so much – and thus their failure is much sharper. What a tragedy this is.

Did God Fail?

But *it is* not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are *descended* from Israel; nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED." That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants. For this is the word of promise: "AT THIS TIME I WILL COME, AND SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON." And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived *twins* by one man, our father Isaac; for though *the twins* were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to *His* choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, "THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER." Just as it is written, "JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED." What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, "I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION." So then it *does* not *depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH." So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.

(Rom 9:6-18 NASB)

Contention: God's Failure

Later, more cynical authors have viewed the relationship of Christ and the Jews as being evidence that God's "mission to earth" has failed. They assert:

- ✦ The Jews, the chosen people, should not have rejected Christ. It was not right (this is correct). Therefore, God's plan somehow went astray.
- ✦ The proof of this view is said to be in the Resurrection – that Christ's execution was not planned, and the Resurrection was God's way of rescuing a plan which did not go as desired.

On the contrary, the prophecies concerning the Crucifixion and the Resurrection are numerous and detailed. It would seem that God knew this was going to happen – which isn't the same as poor planning.

But we must ask: how does this square with the omnipotence of God? Couldn't he have made it happen "right?"

Concept: election

The answer, simply, is that he did make it right – the first time. The argument assumes that God is somehow bound to the best answer in our view. But we may ask: is God *forced* to pick some person or group of people for his favor?

The answer seems to be that he is not only not forced, but often selects people who seem to be the *worst* possible choices:

- ✚ Moses couldn't handle public speaking.
- ✚ Gideon was the great warrior-chicken
- ✚ Priests weren't chosen for holiness – but ancestry.
- ✚ Indeed, Israel was selected for being the least.

It might even be argued that God didn't select the "right" person to be head of household. Instead he assigned the task of love to the man (who finds it difficult, unlike the woman) and obedience and submission to the woman (who finds it nearly impossible). God often selects people *DESPITE* their merits. For example, the apostle to the Gentiles should be a gentile, learned in Greek wisdom – that's seeker friendly, right? Somebody who wouldn't object to the occasional orgy, as long as you went home with your husband, right? You'd never send a Pharisee, of all people, would you?

Right, you wouldn't. God would.

God is not fair

So, in the matter of who he sends, God isn't reasonable. He isn't fair; he doesn't pick the right people. He's the same way about whom he blesses. Why did he pick the Jews in the first place? Why did he allow the Gentiles in; what did they ever do for him? The answer is simply this: God does things his way – that's "election" – and sometimes we don't understand it. He said his way is perfect. He never said you'd see it that way.

When God selects, it's usually so that you can see the character of God. So our definition of "fair" may not apply. But consider this also: arbitrary is fair. Have you ever flipped a coin? Why did God pick out *that* man to be born blind so that we might see the glory of God?

Indeed, mercy and charity are not fair either. No one deserves mercy; that's the very definition of the word. God is righteous – but in his sovereign power elects not to be fair. The problem is not God; the problem is our limited perception.

Blaming God

You will say to me then, "Why does He still find fault? For who resists His will?" On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, "Why did you make me like this," will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use? What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction? And *He did so* to make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, *even* us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles. As He says also in Hosea, "I WILL CALL THOSE WHO WERE NOT MY PEOPLE, 'MY PEOPLE,' AND HER WHO WAS NOT BELOVED, 'BELOVED.'" "AND IT SHALL BE THAT IN THE PLACE WHERE IT WAS SAID TO THEM, 'YOU ARE NOT MY PEOPLE,' THERE THEY SHALL BE CALLED SONS OF THE LIVING GOD." Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, "THOUGH THE NUMBER OF THE SONS OF ISRAEL BE LIKE THE SAND OF THE SEA, IT IS THE REMNANT THAT WILL BE SAVED; FOR THE LORD WILL EXECUTE HIS WORD ON THE EARTH, THOROUGHLY AND QUICKLY." And just as Isaiah foretold, "UNLESS THE LORD OF SABAOOTH HAD LEFT

TO US A POSTERITY, WE WOULD HAVE BECOME LIKE SODOM, AND WOULD HAVE RESEMBLED GOMORRAH."
(Rom 9:19-29 NASB)

It's not my fault

Of course, the next argument must be seen coming.³⁵ If God's election is sovereign, then the reason I'm a failure is that God didn't elect me – in other words, it's not my fault. It must therefore be God's fault. Right?

We forget what's happening here: God is electing some few to rescue from their own sinfulness. That doesn't excuse the rest; we are still free moral agents. If Pharaoh was really a nice guy, he would have let the Israelites go without Moses having to argue with him.

Where were you...

This argument has buried in it an implicit assumption that is wrong. Specifically, it assumes that God and the sinner are equals. God was merciful to Joe; he wasn't merciful to me – and I'm just as deserving as Joe. Therefore God failed me.

Where did we get this idea? Our current excuse is the "good buddy Jesus" movement in the church, but the thought is much older. Either man is supreme, or God is. If man is, then it appears that God makes all sorts of mistakes.

But if God is in charge, do we really want him to be just? Or do we really want him to be merciful? You can't have it both ways.

Answer: in Christ

**What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith; but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at *that* law. Why? Because *they did not pursue it* by faith, but as though *it were* by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone, just as it is written, "BEHOLD, I LAY IN ZION A STONE OF STUMBLING AND A ROCK OF OFFENSE, AND HE WHO BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED."
(Rom 9:30-33 NASB)**

As it usually does, it comes down to Jesus Christ. If you think you are supreme, and that God should do what you want him to, you are stuck in your own righteousness. That righteousness depends upon your own works – and we have seen how successful that approach isn't. If you rely on your works, the standard you must meet is the life of Christ – sinless man. If you rely on Christ, the answer is found in grace. Either way, the answer is in Christ. You choose.

³⁵ If you're going to construct logical argument, it is required that you anticipate counterarguments and be prepared for them. (See Aquinas).

Zeal and Intolerance - Romans 10:1-15

This is an incredibly modern passage – when you look at it through the eyes of eternity.

The Perils of Zeal

Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for *their* salvation. For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not in accordance with knowledge. For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.

(Rom 10:1-4 NASB)

Zeal for its own sake

Consider, for a moment, that artifact of American civilization, the Wisconsin Cheesehead:



Source: <http://www.thriftyfun.com/tf90738424.tip.html>

As seen here, it goes nicely with the basic black cocktail dress. It is also the quintessential headgear for the Green Bay Packers fan. May I suggest that it serves two primary purposes:

- ✚ It defines “us” and “them.” No Minnesota Vikings fan would be caught dead in one.
- ✚ It also demonstrates what the Bible calls zeal – that enthusiasm that means you are so caught up in what you are doing that you take no thought for how ridiculous it looks.

This does not mean that zeal is an evil thing. On the contrary; it is necessary for human progress in practically anything. As Solomon tells us,

Whatever your hand finds to do, do *it* with *all* your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.

(Ecc 9:10 NASB)

It's necessary – but often misguided.

Zeal must be based on knowledge

Let's be clear: zeal is often mistaken for knowing what you're talking about. It shouldn't be. Zeal is no guarantee that you do know what you're talking about. Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are prime religious examples; you might be able to summon up some political variants on this too.

Of course, knowledge without zeal is worse than useless. One former priest, asked why he left the priesthood, said that it started in seminary, where "they laid God out on the dissecting table, and by the time I left he was dead." C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape* noted that of all people academics are the least effective for God – they want to study, not act.

It is zeal with knowledge that is effective; the two feed on each other. It's just that it's not fashionable in our world today.

Zeal based on righteousness

What happens when zeal is based on righteousness?

- ✚ If it is based on "my righteousness" we have a serious problem. It comes down to "I'm right, you're wrong – and I'm going to do something about it." Our liberal opponents know this. It's why kindergarten students in California are studying lesbianism, gay rights, bisexuality and transsexual lifestyles. Kindergarten students.
- ✚ But if it's based on Christ's righteousness, we cannot claim the right to ram it down anyone's throat. If it's Christ's righteousness, we must use Christ's methods. We are at his command – and he woos his people with love, not force.

Christ is the end of the law – and by implication any method depending upon my righteousness, not his.

Law and Faith

We have an interlude of familiar theology:

For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness. But the righteousness based on faith speaks as follows: "DO NOT SAY IN YOUR HEART, 'WHO WILL ASCEND INTO HEAVEN?' (that is, to bring Christ down), or 'WHO WILL DESCEND INTO THE ABYSS?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)." But what does it say? "THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, IN YOUR MOUTH AND IN YOUR HEART"-- that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus *as* Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.

(Rom 10:5-10 NASB)

The NIV oozes footnotes here. That's because Paul has gone to the "string of pearls" method of argument – one in which he strings together references to the Scripture and lets the reader fill in the steps of the argument.

Argument: Christianity is radically new

Implicit in Paul's logic is an argument he does not state. It says that Christianity must be false because it is such a radical change from Judaism. If Judaism is God-given, Christianity cannot be.

The center of this argument is in the supposed contradiction of Old Testament and New Testament. In the Old Testament, the argument goes, everything depends upon strict obedience, to the letter, of the Mosaic Law. The New Testament presents the radically new idea of justification by faith. Thus one of the two must be false. As Christianity claims that Judaism was God-given, it follows that Judaism is OK; Christianity must be false. Got the argument?

Counterargument: Old Testament speaks of faith

The obvious counter is to point out that the division – faith versus legal obedience – is not nearly as clear cut as that. How do we do that? Look into the Old Testament and see those places where faith is obviously shown. Paul did this earlier with Abraham.

His argument here is similar: at the giving of the Law there is no sense that rote obedience is the key; rather, it is the belief in the heart giving rise to obedience which is required.

We must be careful. This is not an argument for “no obedience, but feel-good emotion towards God.” Paul – nor anyone else in the New Testament – advocates this. On the contrary, James tells us that faith without works is dead. The idea of an “intellectual only” faith is what gave us the dissected God.

Mouth and heart, justification and salvation

Starting then with the faith which is one of commitment, not just intellectual assent, we have Paul's simple steps which shows us just how this fits together. If you believe (faith), then you put your mouth where your heart is: you confess that faith publicly. Belief permits the justification by Christ to apply to you; confession and commitment thus yield salvation.

One interesting detail given is this: just what set of facts are we supposed to believe? Only one is mentioned: the resurrection of Christ. All else follows from this.

Intolerance

For the Scripture says, "WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED." For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same *Lord* is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; for "WHOEVER WILL CALL ON THE NAME OF THE LORD WILL BE SAVED." How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "HOW BEAUTIFUL ARE THE FEET OF THOSE WHO BRING GOOD NEWS OF GOOD THINGS!"

(Rom 10:11-15 NASB)

Dorothy Sayers gives us the imagined history of St. Lukewarm the Tolerator:

St. Lukewarm was a magistrate in the city of Laodicea under Claudius (Emp. A.D. 41-54). He was so broadminded as to offer asylum and patronage to every kind of religious cult, however unorthodox or repulsive, saying in answer to all remonstrances: “There is always some truth in everything.” This liberality

earned for him the surname of “The Tolerator.” At length he fell into the hands of a sect of the Anthropophagi³⁶ (for whom he had erected a sacred kitchen and cooking stove at public expense), and was duly set on to stew with the appropriate ceremonies. By miraculous intervention, however, the water continually went off the boil; and when he was finally served up, his flesh was found to be so tough and tasteless that the Chief Anthropophagus spat out the unpalatable morsel, exclaiming, “*Tolerator non tolerandus!*”³⁷ (A garbled Christian version of this legend is preserved in Revelation 3:16).

St. Lukewarm is the patron saint of railway caterers, and is usually depicted holding a cooking pot.³⁸

OK, it’s rather silly. But it brings to mind for us two questions:

- ✚ Just why do we feel that we have to be “broad minded” in matters where there should be no doubt about right and wrong? Cannibalism seems to be a fairly obvious example.
- ✚ Why is it that those who are most “tolerant” in our world are so completely intolerant of those who don’t agree with them?

We should note here the difference between tolerance and love. Tolerance forms no judgment as to right and wrong (and the tolerant are proud of that fact). Love knows the difference – and seeks the redemption of the sinners. We may now examine the intolerance of the tolerant in that light.

Root of hatred

Timothy Keller³⁹ gives us an insight here. In explaining that when someone’s self-worth and identity depend upon their political cause (or race, or whatever else),

We must despise and demonize the opposition. If we get our identity from our ethnicity or socioeconomic status, then we *have* to feel superior to those of other classes and races. If you are profoundly *proud*⁴⁰ of being an open-minded, tolerant soul, you will be extremely indignant toward people you think are bigots.

Simply put, if I am better than you because (I’m white, I’m rich, or I’m not filthy rich, or I’m enlightened in my politics, or ... any number of other reasons) then I have to either sacrifice my pride or look down on you. Pride, our society teaches, is a virtue. So of course if you are proud of your tolerance, you must look down on those who don’t agree with you.

But how can a real Christian do this? That’s pride, the deadliest of sins. It is forbidden to us.

Not righteousness, forgiveness

The problem of the ancient Jew was precisely that: he was proud that he was Jewish, and he despised the Gentile as fit only for fodder for the fires of hell. But what of the modern Christian? Is it

³⁶ Cannibals.

³⁷ “The Tolerator is intolerable.”

³⁸ Christian Letters to a Post Christian World, R. Jellema, editor, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1969, p.5

³⁹ Touchstone Magazine, September/October 2009, as quoted in the book review titled *Manhattan Gospel* (page 44).

⁴⁰ My emphasis, not Keller’s.

not the case that our “claim to fame” is not in ourselves, but in the righteousness of Christ, the hope of the resurrection and the practice of the Gospel?

The struggle is between pride and love; being intolerant of the tolerant is not the answer. We have it here that there is no difference – all of us are one in Christ Jesus. So that means there are two kinds of people out there:

- ✚ Those who are our fellow Christians, whom we see here cannot be looked down on.

- ✚ Those whom Christ wants us to bring.

Our objective is to make “them” into “us.” How then can we look down on them? Christ died for us – and for them too.

Israel, Part Two- Romans 10:16-11:36

For reasons of copyright restrictions, we ask that you read Romans 10:16-11:24 without its being printed here.

Dealing with rejection – God’s way

Have you ever wondered how God deals with rejection? Perhaps the problem is different for him.

Excuses, excuses

One thing we may note quickly: God just doesn’t take our excuses for rejecting him with any seriousness. Paul gives us two examples here:

- ✚ “I never heard it.” In this day and age? You’ve got to be kidding. Ask anyone who uses this one what they think of televangelists. If they have an opinion, they’ve heard.
- ✚ “I didn’t understand it.” To the Jews Paul makes the point that even the troll-witted Gentiles got the Gospel – to the point the Jews should be envious about it. Can you possibly maintain that Christianity is so difficult that it’s the exclusive province of physics Ph.D.’s ?

To which I would add the common one of today: “Everybody knows it’s false.” First, that’s obviously not factually correct (“Everybody???”); it also means you haven’t bothered to examine the evidence for the existence of something that’s been around for two thousand years.

From evil, a greater good

God’s primary method of dealing with evil is simply this: he will permit no evil out of which he cannot bring a greater good. This, of course, means a very different attitude towards those who are evil. Think not?

- ✚ What was Christ’s attitude towards those who were crucifying him?⁴¹ Out of the evil of the Crucifixion came the greater good of salvation.
- ✚ Indeed, we are instructed to have the same attitude ourselves – to love our enemies.⁴² This is God’s method of bringing out the greater good, of overcoming evil with good.

The remnant

It would be wonderful to say that this method produces universally successful results. It wouldn’t make for much of a story, though – and it wouldn’t be the way things are in a universe full of creatures with free will. God also deals with rejection by reserving for himself a few, usually referred to as “the remnant”⁴³. It is a characteristic of God that he allows evil to blossom (there’s that free will again) and ultimately destroys it – leaving behind a remnant of those loyal to him. This process is repeated again and again, and hence is often referred to as “refining.”

Is it just possible that God, who does not change, is still doing this? Consider the doings at our own church. Our leadership is now enthusiastically on board with the emergent church movement.

⁴¹ See Luke 23:34

⁴² Matthew 5:44-48

⁴³ From 1st Kings 19:18, Elijah in the wilderness.

“Sin” is a seldom-heard word now (not “seeker friendly”); we are told (for example) that adultery *might* be harmful to your marriage relationship.⁴⁴ What is the reaction? Most members think this a welcome change from the old ways; but there are a few (not all of them senior citizens) who cling to the teaching of the Scriptures. When trouble comes – and it will – those who joined the happy social club will flit away. Refining, made simple.

All Israel

For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery--so that you will not be wise in your own estimation--that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, "THE DELIVERER WILL COME FROM ZION, HE WILL REMOVE UNGODLINESS FROM JACOB." "THIS IS MY COVENANT WITH THEM, WHEN I TAKE AWAY THEIR SINS." From the standpoint of the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of *God's* choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy. For God has shut up all in disobedience so that He may show mercy to all. (Rom 11:25-32 NASB)

Conceit

Being conceited is often connected to being ignorant. Human beings, it seems, naturally move towards being proud of themselves – proud, without real reason. Many of us cherish our ignorance in this. (This is a major factor in racial prejudice.) But what does wisdom say about this?

Trust in the LORD with all your heart And do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and turn away from evil.
(Pro 3:5-7 NASB)

It may be a bit of a surprise, but we have an American historical example in black slavery. Southern whites (and many others) felt that one reason they could cite for their racial superiority is that by slavery they had brought the faith to many black slaves who otherwise would have remained in complete ignorance of it. (Out of evil comes a greater good!). This is true – but tell me how this gives you bragging rights. After all, the first message to be delivered is that we are all sinners – including the slave owner.

Irrevocable election

The reader will please note that there are a number of theories concerning the prophetic portions of this passage. A common interpretation is that the Jews will, at the time of the end, turn to Christ. This is said to be a sign of the end times. There is an ample body of prophecy on this subject (see, for example, Isaiah 60). For our purposes here it is sufficient to note that it is clear that God has

⁴⁴ My wife informs me that it will not be harmful to our marriage relationship. It will be fatal. To the relationship and to me. Murder yes, divorce, no.

not yet finished or discarded the nation of Israel. His promises to them are numerous; their end has not yet come, nor will it until our Lord returns.

Indeed, this is just the specific example of two important concepts:

- ✚ God's promises do not lapse with the passage of time, or the lack of cooperation on the part of man. If he said it will happen, it will.
- ✚ In this instance, we see the reason for the prophecy: so that all men will know of the great mercy of God.

Bound all men to mercy

Human beings are curious: they will brag about their good fortune just as if they deserved it. It seems logically inconsistent to brag about being a Christian, for being a Christian means that you have accepted the mercy of God. And that means that you needed it.

It is also evident that God is not merciful to you because you are a nice guy, a white hat. No indeed; his mercy is available so that all might know the true character of God:

First of all, then, I urge that entreaties *and* prayers, petitions *and* thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority, so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

(1Ti 2:1-4 NASB)

You see Paul's point here: the object is that all might be saved, and thus know the truth about God. The only thing which stands between anyone and salvation is this: man has been given free will. It's either "thy will be done" or "my will be done." You pick.

The Nature of God

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him *be* the glory forever. Amen.

(Rom 11:33-36 NASB)

If you are to know the mercy of God you must indeed know the nature of God himself. Central to the faith is the idea that Christians are to develop a personal relationship with God through Christ, by the Spirit. To do this, we must have the proper knowledge. It starts with this (speaking of Christ):

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.

(Col 1:15-17 NASB)

All things – all things – are created for him; are created through him and for him. Herein is the basic knowledge of God that comes first.

We cannot repay

Once you see this, you can then reason forward to see the fallacy of two common theories about God:

- ✚ One is the “cosmic bean counter” theory. God is some sort of celestial accountant whose purpose it is (for whom?) to track our sins and good deeds. Weighing us in the balance, we are sent to heaven or hell. May I point out just one argument against this? It makes God so *small*.
- ✚ Another is this: by my good deeds (including, usually, the fact that I became a Christian) I have placed God deeply in my debt. God owes me! This is impossible; but it takes the majesty of God to see that.

Only one reaction to God’s mercy can be made a practical action of the Christian: to pass it along. If you are grateful for the mercy shown, imitate your heavenly father and pass that mercy along. Be merciful, as your father is merciful.

Unsearchable wisdom

We forget who the author and creator of wisdom is.⁴⁵ His wisdom is unsearchable by man; indeed, wisdom herself is his only counselor.⁴⁶ In short, “it’s not about you.” Bargain not with God. It wastes your time and annoys God.

⁴⁵ Did God create wisdom? See Proverbs 8:22

⁴⁶ Proverbs 8:30, and others

Living Sacrifices - Romans 12:1-13

It is an article of faith in many evangelical churches (including the one in which this author serves) that an intellectual Christian is, of necessity, a hypocrite. People who think about their faith are clearly (somehow) incapable of real Christianity. When asked how this squares with the command to love the Lord your God with “all your mind,” the answer is some variation on the idea of, “Check your brain at the door, ‘cause God wants your heart.” One prize example: “He wants you to love him with all your mind, but you can’t be intellectual about it.” Today’s passage is another embarrassing one to this point of view – but don’t worry, a little thought and we’ll have some way to deny the life of the mind in the Christian.

Life of the Mind

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith.

(Rom 12:1-3 NASB)

Therefore

We need to begin with a review of what has passed before:

- ✚ Paul has reviewed for us the history of Israel and Christ, noting that the chosen people have rejected Christ.
- ✚ We, the Gentiles, were therefore “grafted in” to the people of God. Thus, we didn’t earn it; God took their rejection and made a greater good of it. There is no credit to us.
- ✚ If we’ve been grafted in, then we can be pruned out.
It is in this context that Paul gives us his command.

Offer your bodies

There are two views of the human body with strikingly similar results which we must expose as being wrong:

- ✚ There is the modern view that the human being is pure animal. Misusing the body would be considered something like alcohol abuse; but adultery is simply just another form of sex. The only thing to beware of is damage to the machinery.
- ✚ The ancient view was that the flesh – the tangible human being – was evil, corrupt and passing away. Therefore, whatever you did in bodily form was perfectly acceptable; only the spiritual could be considered sinful.

Thus the modern accepts adultery as right and good; the ancient thinks it trivial. Arrogance was a sin to the ancients, but a virtue to the modern. We have progressed so much, you see.

The Christian view is rather different: the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, to be kept holy. Adultery is, therefore, a sin, for it breaks the marriage vow. The human being is not just a body, nor a dissociated spirit and body – but one united organism. (This explains, in one way, the necessity of the resurrection of the dead). The Christian is therefore responsible for keeping the body holy.

Transformation of the mind

You can thus see that the mind, far from being irrelevant, is indeed a major part of the Christian life. Like all else, it must be brought into its proper place:

- ✚ We are not to conform but be transformed. This is a mental transformation; the idea is that the Christian should NOT be thinking like the rest of the world. (Some thought about materialism might be appropriate here).
- ✚ There is a purpose to this. It is not just so that we will think happy thoughts, but rather so that we will know the will of God. Ponder that; the purpose of transforming your mind is so that you will know the will of God. Have you ever asked for that? Now you know how to get it.
- ✚ The chief obstacle, of course, is pride. If you continue in your pride, how can you transform your mind into the likeness of the humble Christ? And if you don't, how can you know God's will?

Body Life

For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, *each of us is to exercise them accordingly*: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.
(Rom 12:4-8 NASB)

Concept: church as body

One of Paul's favorite pictures of the church is that of a body. We may see these reasons for the usefulness of the picture:

- ✚ It reminds us that, as bodies are visible, we are the visible presence of Christ in the world. The church is the body of Christ; our hands and feet are his in this world.
- ✚ It shows us that there is unity in diversity as there is unity in the Trinity. There is no "typical Christian" – all races, classes, categories of any type are in the church. By this we become all things to all men so that we might win some to Christ.
- ✚ The body is united – we belong to all the other members. A body dismembered is no body at all. It is in our unity that we show Christ. If we bicker, who will listen to us?

Differing gifts

There are some interesting points not usually associated with the gifts to the church. Paul brings them out here, most likely out of concern for the unity of the body. Consider; have you heard this about the gifts of the Spirit?

- ✚ Sometimes, you need to "let" someone use his or her gift. "Let him teach." The modern method is not to look for someone with the gift of teaching; rather, that person is seen as not having the right college degree. Much better to draft someone from the right school.⁴⁷ (We don't seem to have this problem with the gift of giving.)
- ✚ Sometimes the nature of the gift determines the nature of the service. If you are to govern, then diligence is an obvious requirement. Form follows function – a creative artist might say.

⁴⁷ As might be obvious, my gift is teaching. The first reaction to this at my new church was to tell me that we wanted only staff members to teach classes. Just who's running things here? The Spirit, or the staff?

- ✦ Occasionally – not always – the use of the gift is in proportion to faith. That’s the case for prophecy, but not for giving, evidently. The connection, however, is obvious.

That they are gifts

We need to remember that our gifts are just that: gifts. If you have the gift of giving or teaching, it’s nothing to boast about. It’s a gift, not an award.

That’s one reason we are taught not to judge others. Who knows what gifts your fellow Christian might have? Perhaps he is in the wrong place of service, doing his best.

But whatever gift you have, it has one privilege: you can use it for the glory of God.

Sincere Love

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. (Rom 12:9-13 NASB)

Hate evil, cling to good

There is something quite deep here:

Consider first the character of God. God is love. He is also righteousness. Those who grow like him will begin to imitate his character.

- ✦ Thus, to love sincerely is to be like God. Since you are a part of the body of Christ, this is just what should be expected.

- ✦ What may surprise you is that *for exactly the same reason* you should grow to hate evil.

Christians do not grow into placid people, but zealous ones. Let me give you a test which might make this clear to you. Which one describes you:

- ✦ I object to people who perform abortions because they don’t think like I do.

- ✦ I object to abortions because they are morally wrong – and the people who do them are, as a practical fact, murderers.

- ✦ I object to abortions because they kill children – whom God loves, and so do I.

You probably don’t fit neatly in any category on this; but there is one thing you might see. For the Christian, the imitation of God means a definite reaction to the slaughter of abortion. It’s a part of just who you are.

Brotherly love

Paul gives us three ways in which we show our brotherly love in general:

- ✦ *Devotion to each other.* There is a reason the teacher wants to know if you’re going to be in the hospital. We are supposed to care for each other; to do that we must care about each other. We’re family.

- ✦ *Honor each other.* To treat your fellow Christians with respect; to see to it that they are applauded for such good as you can see; to make sure that they are not just another name on the roster – for Christ never did such a thing for his church.

- ✚ *Hospitality and giving.* Your brothers and sisters have physical needs – a place to stay at times; money, food, clothing or just the loan of a bigger shovel. It is God’s command that you do so. As Americans, the richest Christians in history, it applies even more to us.

Love God

Zeal, with knowledge, is a good thing. But just exactly how does one love God? Loving my neighbor is a visible thing; what about loving God?

- ✚ Be joyful in hope – remember that your hope is in the return of our Lord. Is not his return a thought of joy?
- ✚ Be patient in affliction – or, quit whining and wait upon the Lord.
- ✚ Be faithful in prayer.

May I leave you with one thought? Taken as individual commands these seem to be quite a laundry list. Taken as examples of loving God, and therefore his children, the matter is much simpler. It starts with the transformation of the mind, from the mind of sinful man to the mind of Christ.

In The World - Romans 12:14-21

In our previous session we saw Paul's prescription for how the church should get along with itself. Now we shall see his advice for the Christian in the world but not of the world. First we shall see his general advice; then the method of dealing with evil. Finally, we take up the question of revenge.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord. "BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

(Rom 12:14-21 NASB)

Getting along with the world

May I point out one thing first? Paul spins his words out in terms of what you should do much more than what you should not do. It reflects the fact that we easily accept a prohibition; active service is more tasking.

Rejoice with those who rejoice

We must remember that the usual method of writing in these days places the most important point first. We can see that in this statement. How? It is easy to weep with those who weep; who among us has not put an arm around a friend at a funeral? Such an action warms the heart.

But rejoicing with those who rejoice is harder than that. How so? Consider that we are rejoicing at someone else's success. If they are in any way a competitor to us, there is the temptation to envy. Take your mind back to the days when "good sportsmanship" was still in vogue; the measure of a sportsman (one who was a "good sport about it") was the sincerity with which he congratulated the victor. That same spirit should be in the Christian in dealing with someone else's success.

Be of like mind; live in harmony

Surely here is an antidote to pride. We are not to restrict ourselves to our own social class, but to move as Christians among all people, taking no thought for status or station. This does not mean denying who we are; it means acknowledging who Christ is. Consider:

- ✚ In Christ there is no distinction between rich and poor. These are but parts we are assigned to play on the stage of this life. Therefore regard poverty and wealth as facts, not judgments.
- ✚ We are not to rely on our own wisdom; rather, we are to seek counsel in all things. This is an antidote to pride. How much more so, then, if we seek counsel among those whom our society tells us are inferior?

Live at peace

In the peaceful life the typical Christian lets his light shine. Most of us are not going to be evangelists or preachers. But our example can be clear, at least. If your life is filled with anger and constant disputes, who will see the love of Christ in you?

Indeed, James takes this a bit further:

Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom.

(Jas 3:13 NASB)

Do you see it? Wisdom, which comes from God, directs you to do things in humility – and humility in your actions brings peace in your part of the world.

Paul adds two caveats:

- ✚ “If it is possible.” Sometimes it’s just not possible to live at peace with those around you. You may need to be prepared for trouble while working to avoid it.
- ✚ “As far as it is within you.” Each of us is at a slightly different stage of the journey; each of us started at a different point. Sometimes you don’t have the maturity to handle the situation. If it’s beyond you, seek help. But remember that God knows you’re not perfect yet. (Judge not).

What about evil?

All this sounds well and good – but the immediate reaction to “love thy neighbor” is “you don’t know my neighbor.” The fact is that evil exists; since it does, it is reasonable to expect that the Christian will encounter it. It’s easy to live at peace with the peaceable; what about the evil?

Suffering for Christ

It is not much preached in the pulpit these days – it’s really not seeker-friendly – but the plain fact is that the true Christian will suffer for Christ. It is an inevitable result of the existence of evil – and the Evil One. It is wise to pray to avoid this, but it will come in some measure.

We must recognize its blessing, therefore. Out of our suffering for Christ comes our growth as Christians. It is not the only way we grow, but it is an essential way. The fact is that as we suffer for Christ we should recognize that we are being honored – Satan thinks enough of us to apply his usual techniques. So the question is not whether or not we should suffer; the question is, what do we do about it?

Be careful to do what’s right

Note, please, that instruction to “be careful.” This takes thought and planning. Good enough just isn’t. Our suffering is an opportunity to be an example to others – an example we may never get to be otherwise.

That makes it an opportunity for evangelism as well. When you are suffering others will want to know what’s going on inside your brain – and they will ask. Be ready with an answer.

The one thing we must really be careful of is that we give no opportunity for slander. It is better that we are overly cautious about doing the right things so that those around us do not see the world’s way but Christ’s way, and therefore have nothing but good to say about the church.

Imitation of Christ

There is a simple principle in this: the imitation of Christ. Paul puts it this way:

Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.
(1Co 11:1 NASB)

We should see evil as a chance to follow Christ more closely. Therefore we must understand his method of dealing with it. Specifically:

"But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous. "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? "If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing *than others*? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.
(Mat 5:44-48 NASB)

The only sinners at whom Christ was ever angry were those who led the people away from the truth of God. For the rest, he set the standard shown above. Go, and do likewise.

Vengeance is mine

Of course, if you give evil the chance to work on your mind, and that evil comes from one person or group, your mind soon turns to vengeance. We must now deal with this.

Stealing from God

Look at it this way: God says vengeance is his. Therefore, if you take vengeance, you are stealing from him. So why is it that we do it?

- ✚ We fail to believe in his providence. Since his usual method does not involve lightning strikes from a clear blue sky, we think he does nothing. It is not so.
- ✚ We forget his omniscience and omnipotence. Yes he does know what's happened to you and he can do something about it. We need to "leave room" for this.
- ✚ We often don't have the faith to believe that he will recompense them.
- ✚ Finally, it requires courage to do this. Fear God; dread naught. Even the thought that somehow your enemy will get away with it.

Bless them

We are not designed to sit still. If we are to overcome the sin of anger we must have something to replace it. Our Lord prescribes it: we are to bless them.

Some variants of modern Christian life minimize the devotional life. Bible study is no longer encouraged; times of prayer and meditation are no longer mentioned from the pulpit. But it is the devotional life which permits this reaction. If you have no time alone with Christ you cannot hear what he whispers; if you cannot hear his whispers you cannot shout them from the housetops. It is in the devotional life that you get the strength to do this.

This is strength indeed – to be able to say that when my enemy did evil to me, I was able to repay him with goodness.

Overcome evil with good

There is the secret: do not overcome evil with evil; overcome evil with good. The supreme example of this is Christ at the Cross. The evil was great; an innocent man was being executed. Out of that came our salvation.

When you do such a thing, it is a personal victory, coals on your enemy's head. More than that, it is a triumph of your Christian growth, for in so doing you become more like Christ. Indeed, you will look back upon such things and see them as the blessing they are:

**"Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.
(Mat 5:11-12 NASB)**

Church and State - Romans 13:1-7

No subject engages the emotions of the conservative Christian today like that of church and state. There are those who believe that the church should not have anything to say in the public debate – and who believe the government should “regulate” the churches (for our own good, of course). It is only the latest in a long line of conflicts between church and state. From its first days through the present, the conflict is there. Church and state both claim supreme loyalty from the citizen; only one can prevail. Paul gives us a strong statement here, originally written to the Christians at the center of the world’s greatest empire.

Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same; for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for *rulers* are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing. Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax *is due*; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

(Rom 13:1-7 NASB)

Authority and Rule

We may begin by asking: just what is “authority?” I submit it has the following characteristics:

- ✚ Authority has both the right (at least partially) and power (if limited) to carry out the responsibilities assigned to it. Correctly assigned, responsibility and authority match.
- ✚ Such authority descends from the authority of Christ, which is complete.⁴⁸ Unless a government can show that it is exercising authority in the way Christ permits, it is not legitimate – it does not have the right.
- ✚ Such authority exists *for our good*. God grants such authority for the benefit of his children.

A side note: then what is tyranny? It is the abuse of authority. Authority is a good thing; tyranny is the corruption of that good thing. God created authority; it is one of his attributes. Satan corrupted it.

For what purpose?

Why, then, does God commission human authority? His own is undeniable (it’s his universe); why does he hand it out to us?

- ✚ First and foremost, for the good of his children. Think about it: when the fire truck roars by, sirens blazing, you submit by getting out of the way. Why? Next time, you might be the one with the house on fire.
- ✚ One specific purpose is the spread of the Gospel. Under benign authority the Gospel spreads well (see, for example, the British Empire and the great evangelism of the 19th century.) Even under persecution the Christian flees – and takes the Gospel with him.

⁴⁸ Matthew 28:18

- ✚ Sometimes God appoints a specific ruler with a task suited to the particular purposes of God. The ancient Israelites were conquered and carried off into Babylon – and Nebuchadnezzar was appointed that task.⁴⁹

Conduct of authorities

As noted above, true authority matches the responsibility given it. If the fireman roars down the street, shoving all out of the way, only to pick up his pizza while it is hot, we complain to the fire commission. If he roars to the rescue of a heart attack victim, we praise him for it. Therefore, the first principle for those in authority is to neither exceed their authority, nor fail to perform all their responsibilities.

But note what Paul tells us: those in authority also exist as agents of God. At the least this implies that they should conduct themselves with the rectitude an agent of God. Seem strange? Just how do you feel when yet another public official is found to have taken a trip to Tahiti to study tropical water systems?

Our forefathers had it right: they are supposed to be public servants. When this attitude wanes, all sorts of evil comes in.

Christian's Duty to a "good" government

We might next ask, then, just what does the Christian owe the government? We will start with the "good" government – not perfect, just good. A government whose attitude towards the church is favorable, one which is doing its best to fulfill its duties, should be supported by the Christian.

Satan teaches rebellion

Let's take this in two easy steps:

- ✚ Rebellion against God is sin.
- ✚ Therefore, rebellion against God's agents is a) sin or b) virtue?
If you listen to our culture, the answer is c): cool. God created authority; Satan twisted it by rebellion. So why do you have Che Guevara on your t-shirt?

Render unto Caesar

The classic statement of the Christian's duties is summed up in Christ's, "render unto Caesar."⁵⁰ We may summarize the normal Christian's duties, to most governments of most times, as follows:

- ✚ "Fear the sword." Remember that the police powers of the state are there for your benefit, and be obedient to the law.
- ✚ Pay your taxes.
- ✚ Give honor and respect to your leaders, such as custom and law demand.
- ✚ Pray for your leaders.⁵¹

You do this not because they are so worthy, but for the sake of the Lord, as Peter tells us:

⁴⁹ Jeremiah 27:5-8

⁵⁰ Matthew 22:15-21

⁵¹ 1st Timothy 2:1-3

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men. *Act as free men, and do not use your freedom as a covering for evil, but use it as bondslaves of God. Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king.*
(1Pe 2:13-17 NASB)

You see the point? The rulers – and the rest of the citizenry – ought to see the Christian as one who is a blessing, not a troublemaker; righteous, not evil.

Christians in a democracy

We must, I think, take some consideration of the fact that we live in a democracy. This imposes upon us particular duties by virtue of our form of government:

- ✚ First is the ordinary participation of the citizen. Vote; run for office if the Spirit so wills; show up at the city council meeting.
- ✚ Send, remember that “Republican” does not mean the same thing as “Christian.” In either direction.⁵²

Our form of government, however, rests upon an assumption. We often think that one of being a government of, by and for the people. That’s not it. The assumption is that the king is not above the law. That doctrine – the core of the Magna Carta and the Declaration of Independence – is critical to the survival of democracy. We are “one nation, under God.” If the king is above the law, how long can government by the people survive?

Christian’s Duty to an “evil” government

It should not come as a surprise to the student (but often does): evil governments exist for God’s purposes as well. Think of these:

- ✚ The early church was persecuted by the government – and Christianity spread like wildfire.
- ✚ Nebuchadnezzar oppressed the Israelites – and refined their remnant. It is in his court that the prophet Daniel outlined the future.
- ✚ Adolf Hitler killed six million Jews – and out of that came the nation of Israel, so important in modern prophetic interpretation.
- ✚ The Chinese church now grows quickly in the spiritual vacuum left by Chairman Mao, one of the bloodiest tyrants of all time.

God allows no evil out of which he cannot make a greater good.

The Christian’s reaction

What should the Christian do about living under an evil government?

- ✚ All the usual forms of respect and duty should be rendered – all but those which cooperate with evil.
- ✚ It is likely enough that the Christian will suffer – and as so should suffer for Christ. How so? Your conscience is not suspended by government decree.
- ✚ Remember, if it comes to it: the blood of martyrs is the seed of the church.

⁵² Time for humor: during the Restoration period after the Civil War, carpetbagger Republicans would tell black voters that there were two political parties in the Bible: publicans and sinners.

Just what's important here?

It helps to keep our eyes on what we are doing. I might point out three things that the Christian should see as most important in the struggle against an evil state.

- ✚ First, remember that you are a servant, just as Christ was a servant. You serve a servant king; indeed, a suffering servant. If suffering and death came to Christ, why are you unwilling to imitate your Lord and Master?
- ✚ Next, governments are temporary. The oldest government on the planet dates back only to the 17th century. In these things God is always in control; his purposes will be fulfilled. To be downhearted in the struggle is to deny the sovereignty of God.
- ✚ Remember that you are commanded to spread the Gospel. You may have to do this from inside prison walls – but prisoners need Jesus too. You may have to flee – and bring the Gospel to new places. You may have to suffer or die – to be an example of the faith to others.
- ✚ Finally, remember that the Christian does not overcome evil with evil, but overcomes evil with good. The battle belongs to the Lord.

Law of Love - Romans 13:8-14

In this short passage Paul prepares us for the controversy of Romans 14. He lays out for us the law of love for all Christians.

Law of Love

Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled *the* law. For this, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY, YOU SHALL NOT MURDER, YOU SHALL NOT STEAL, YOU SHALL NOT COVET," and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of *the* law.
(Rom 13:8-10 NASB)

Debt

Human organizations in general are based on one of two principles: terror, and debt. Terror is easily understood – but not too stable. History has shown that stable organizations built by man work on the Godfather principle: do someone a favor – and now you owe me one. Lyndon Johnson, as president, told his staff that whenever he called a congressman, they'd better make sure that congressman owed the president a favor.

God, in building his church, rejected that principle. It's not to be a Mafia-like or political organization, but rather one which gives without expecting anything in return – just as Christ gave at the Cross.

This is somewhat difficult for most Christians. When you ask them about "love thy neighbor" they almost always think in terms of giving. In principle they are in favor of this; but they work on the principle of "if I were a rich man." Small charities are easy when you are rich. Most of us aren't rich. But do you not see that the measure of your love for others is not what you do in your wealth, but in your poverty? Anyone can be generous with a pot of gold. Especially when it's someone else's pot. (I will be so generous once my rich uncle dies.)

It is true, though, that when we help someone else they do feel obligated to return the favor. There is a simple way to practice true love in this. Let them indeed feel obligated – but tell them to pass it on instead of repaying you. That way your good deeds are multiplied more than you know, and the only debt left is the debt of love.

Sum up the commandments

Paul here repeats Christ's summation of the commandments:

And He said to him, "YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD WITH ALL YOUR HEART, AND WITH ALL YOUR SOUL, AND WITH ALL YOUR MIND." "This is the great and foremost commandment. "The second is like it, 'YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF.' "On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."
(Mat 22:37-40 NASB)

We are introduced here to the principle of *displacement*: the idea that the "thou shalt not" of the Old Testament's Ten Commandments is not replaced but displaced by the "thou shalt" of the New Testament. By substituting the positive we fulfill the negative.

The problem, of course, is in the doing. “Thou shalt not” has the advantage of being crisp and clear; “love your neighbor” is rather vague. C. S. Lewis gives a fine insight on this. He points out the phrase, “as yourself.” Just how do I love myself? Quite well, thank you; I’m very forgiving, think highly of myself and generally consider myself the life of the party. No problem says Lewis - if you simply apply the same standard to everyone else. Fair is fair, right?

This lifts matters to a higher plain. Instead of asking, “what can I get away with and stay within the commandment” we simply ask ourselves what we’d like to have done in the same situation. This simplifies matters greatly.

Do no harm

It often seems that the Bible is very good at confronting black and white decisions. When all the consequences of every possible action are known – even probabilistically – making a decision can be reduced to mathematics. We’re good at black and white.

Technicolor takes a little more help. Making decisions when the consequences are uncertain or unknown to us is more difficult. Even the process of making such decisions is often cloudy – just how shall we decide? In those situations the human mind reaches for guidelines – sometimes called proverbs, or rules of thumb, or “I wonder what my dad would have done.”

Here is the guideline of love: First, do no harm. This is a commonplace among doctors and medical personnel. Not sure what to do? Don’t undertake any treatment that could harm the patient. It may appear as hesitancy, but there’s a reason the paramedic waits for the backboard.

The same is true with us. Not sure what to do in a situation? First thing: don’t do anything that “might help” but certainly will harm. Dare we say, “wait upon the Lord?”

Second Coming

Do this, knowing the time, that it is already the hour for you to awaken from sleep; for now salvation is nearer to us than when we believed. The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.

(Rom 13:11-12 NASB)

It sometimes surprises those new to reading the Scriptures how often this subject is connected to the Second Coming of Christ. Because of recent changes in church thinking, we need to explain this more fully than in the past.

Emerging church thinking

It was rather a surprise to this teacher that our new pastor could preach a sermon on heaven and not once mention the second coming, the resurrection of the dead and the last judgment. Upon further inquiry, there appears to be some rationale behind this.

✚ First, this is not “seeker friendly.” It is presumed that the seeker is not at all desirous of hearing about sin, judgment and hell. But who is? My doctor tells me when things are bad medically; my preacher ignores these spiritual warnings. So it is.

- ✦ Second, it is “too complicated.” Not so much sin and judgment, but the study of Revelation can become quite complicated. This is particularly true for those with no education in world history. My opinion? You may be right about Revelation; but the seven last things are mandatory.
- ✦ Finally, it is “religious activity” – study of the Scripture as opposed to right living. The emergent church holds that orthodoxy is the enemy of orthopraxis (right living.) The classic view is that orthodoxy is the foundation of orthopraxis.

We see here the perils of Christianity Lite: By ignoring this we eliminate much of the motivation of love:

Now as to the times and the epochs, brethren, you have no need of anything to be written to you. For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon them suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape.

(1Th 5:1-3 NASB)

What does the Bible say?

At the risk of too much of a side trip, just what does the Bible say about this?

- ✦ First, that the judgment (and return of Christ) are coming.⁵³
- ✦ Second, that people will pooh-pooh this.⁵⁴
- ✦ Finally, that the Lord is delaying because of his patience, wanting all to be saved.⁵⁵

Practical command

So what shall we do? Positive and negative:

- ✦ Put aside the “deeds of darkness” – list to follow, shortly.
- ✦ Put on the armor of light.

Here again is the principle of displacement. It is not sufficient to clean up your act; you must replace the sinful life with the spiritual one.

Daylight Behavior

Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to *its* lusts.

(Rom 13:13-14 NASB)

Midnight Sin

Have you ever wondered why midnight sin is so prominently discussed in the Bible? Recall that they had no electric lighting! But there are other reasons:

- ✦ One is that it is more tempting. It’s done in secret, and that adds a tang to the sin. Adultery by appointment doesn’t sound nearly as attractive as a sudden, passionate, “irresistible” affair.

⁵³ Hebrews 9:27, and similar

⁵⁴ 2nd Peter 3:2-4

⁵⁵ 2nd Peter 3:8-9

- ✦ Another reason is that we still have enough sense of shame to know it's wrong. That doesn't stop us, but we don't like the consequences if we are found out.
- ✦ But that's better than the alternative: a hypocrisy which separates our pious image of the day and debauched character of the night.

Obvious – or not

Paul breaks things down for us into three categories, one of which is somewhat surprising:

- ✦ First, there is group sin. Oh, we might feel guilty having an affair – but hey, it's a party, everybody's doing it. Sex and alcohol seem to go well together in large groups.⁵⁶
- ✦ Some of us are introverts. Sex is a private affair; but note that it's paired with "debauchery." The word in the Greek means "filthiness." Let your mind wander over that for a second or two.
- ✦ Here's the surprise: sex, drunkenness and debauchery we expect to make this list. But dissension and jealousy? Surprise!

Imitation of Christ

There is an answer to this: "clothe yourself with Christ." Since the earliest days of the church the principle of right living (orthopraxis again) has been the imitation of Christ (WWJD?) Displace, squeeze out the sin and debauchery and replace them with Christ himself. How do you do this?

- ✦ First by prayer and meditation.
- ✦ Second by reading and studying the Scripture. Know the mind of Christ.
- ✦ Finally, by imitating the good deeds of your Lord and those who follow Him.
Love God, and do as you please.

⁵⁶ And it is not just a young man's sin; the orgy isn't unknown in the retirement village.

Weaker Brother - Romans 14

A perennial source of difficulty in the church is highlighted in this chapter. Over and again we see someone adding to what the Scripture teaches – for our own good, of course. Often this person is seen as one who is a superior, mature Christian – when in fact just the opposite is true.

Who is the weaker brother?

Now accept the one who is weak in faith, *but not for the purpose of* passing judgment on his opinions. One person has faith that he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats vegetables *only*. The one who eats is not to regard with contempt the one who does not eat, and the one who does not eat is not to judge the one who eats, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person regards one day above another, another regards every day *alike*. Each person must be fully convinced in his own mind.

(Rom 14:1-5 NASB)

Follow the rules

It's a common concept of Christianity: surely it must be better to have a neat, complete set of rules instead of relying solely on the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures. We make decisions about "what a Christian should do" – and it is so easy to turn our decisions into "thus saith the Lord." Rules take much less effort than responsibility. For example:

- ✚ Those of us of an older generation will recall that wearing a suit and tie to church was an *absolute requirement*. You were to dress with reverence! Indeed, some of us dressed not only in reverence but in boastfulness – tastefully done, of course.⁵⁷
- ✚ How many of us "know" that Christ didn't use real wine at the Last Supper, but grape juice? This chapter is now used to justify that practice. We shall see if this holds up.⁵⁸

Such people were (and are) considered strong in the faith. Paul's point is just the opposite: they are the weak in the faith. The issue is one of faith, not of rules. If you need rules to supplement the faith, then you are the weaker brother, at least in some sense.

Who is, and who is not

Let's be clear about who the weaker brother really is. This is not:

- ✚ The legalist – the one who adds rules to the faith *as being necessary to salvation*. When you substitute rules for Christ, you are a legalist – and a heretic.
- ✚ A man with a problem. The man whose *personal* (applies to me, not to others) law is never to touch alcohol is likely an alcoholic, and a wise man. When he extends that law to me, then we must ask, "Did Christ really command that?"
- ✚ Nor are we talking about the man who accepts such a rule *for the sake of the harmony of the church*. We use grape juice for communion; I think it should be wine. But is the argument really about something essential? Does it benefit the church, or tear it apart?
So who is this weaker brother?

⁵⁷ It must be admitted that the female of the species was more susceptible in this. Suits are uniforms, not plumage.

⁵⁸ The reader will find it instructive to investigate the history of one Thomas Branwell Welch and his son Charles in this matter.

- ✦ It's someone who prescribes a rule of practice in *addition* to the clear teaching of the Scripture.
- ✦ The rules added are usually a result of "extended inference." That chicken you're eating might have been used previously in a Santorini animal sacrifice ritual – you'd better stick with hamburger. Better yet, stay with kangaroo meat.

Do not condemn

Of course, once you see all this, the temptation is to rush to your weaker brother and straighten him out. Stop! If the matter is one of individual requirements for him, so it is for you. Please remember:

- ✦ God has accepted this Christian as his servant. To condemn him is to tell God that he made a mistake with this one. The bustling ignorance that makes us try to convince everyone that we are right in every detail is indeed an opportunity for long suffering.
- ✦ Indeed, we have no authority to condemn this person. Their conscience is at stake, and we want to attack that conscience for the purpose of making a non-essential point?
- ✦ Curiously, such action is a lack of faith on our part. It says that God cannot redeem such a one, cannot turn them into a successful Christian without our help.

Preparing for Death

It's time for a little motivation here.

He who observes the day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who eats not, for the Lord he does not eat, and gives thanks to God. For not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, "AS I LIVE, SAYS THE LORD, EVERY KNEE SHALL BOW TO ME, AND EVERY TONGUE SHALL GIVE PRAISE TO GOD." So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God.
(Rom 14:6-12 NASB)

Preparing for Death and Judgment

May I make three obvious points?

- ✦ You are going to die, should the Lord delay.
- ✦ In any event, you are going to face the Judgment.
- ✦ That judgment is based in part on what you did – or didn't – do for your brothers in Christ. So don't you think you ought to get ready for this?

Live and die to the Lord

So, what should we do?

- ✦ As Paul tells us in verse 5, each of us should be "fully convinced" in our own minds. As Davy Crockett once said, "Be sure you're right, then go ahead." This implies that you've taken the time to search the Scriptures and reason upon them. If you make a mistake, then God will deal with that – but lightly, as he knows your heart.
- ✦ Remember, you're not alone in this. At the very least you are with Christ, so whatever you decide will be done at least in companionship. More than that, you are with the church. It may be that you

see no problem except that of the harmony of the church. Is your liberty so valuable that this would be destroyed for it?

✚ Finally, please remember that anything may be done for the glory of God.⁵⁹ Just because it seems mundane and worldly, don't forget that he made the mundane and worldly. Use it for his glory.

Lordship of Christ

The central issue is simply this: the Lordship of Christ. If "it's all about me," then I am the standard of judgment on all things – and the harmony of the church suffers for it. Often enough I do too.

But if "it's all about Jesus Christ," then I must ask what pleases him. The harmony of the church, my care for my brother in the faith – these are things that please him.

Duty

Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this--not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this *way* serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then we pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another. Do not tear down the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are clean, but they are evil for the man who eats and gives offense. It is good not to eat meat or to drink wine, or *to do anything* by which your brother stumbles. The faith which you have, have as your own conviction before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because *his eating is* not from faith; and whatever is not from faith is sin.

(Rom 14:13-23 NASB)

Stumbling block (verses 13-15)

We are not to be stumbling blocks. Isn't this just simply a form of "love your neighbor?"

What surprises many of us is that we can be stumbling blocks just by "enlightening" our fellow Christians. Even if what we believe is right, if we insist on it and thus destroy the conscience of another Christian, we sin.

How does this work? We have been taught by modern psychology that the "conscience" in the old, Biblical sense doesn't really exist. What you have instead is "guilt." Guilt is no longer a factual matter, but one of feelings. Since it's "just feelings" the psychologist works to get rid of those feelings. In other words, he works to get rid of your conscience.

Scripture teaches the opposite. The conscience is to be preserved and kept working. That mechanism is important – even if the rule at hand is trivial. We should not destroy one of the great

⁵⁹ 1st Corinthians 10:31.

things God has given us to keep us from sin just because we believe our brother mistaken about some unimportant detail.

Liberty is not license. Liberty includes responsibility. We are our brothers' keepers.

“Do not allow” (verses 16-18)

At the same time we are not to allow every little rule given by every weak brother to creep into the faith. We have to be reasonable about this. The steps are relatively simple, as regard to eating and drinking:

- ✚ Everything that God created was created good. There is nothing he created that is intrinsically evil; nor can Satan create – he can only twist. Therefore the “do not touch” rules are not automatically right.
- ✚ We should not allow “lowest common denominator” Christianity. Take it to its logical extreme: if I think driving a car is evil (God didn't create cars, after all), then shouldn't all the rest of you stop driving?
- ✚ How do we settle this? May I suggest a life of study of the Scriptures, loving God with all your mind – and then discussion in love rather than verbal combat? We can agree to disagree; I can agree to place no barrier to your rules.

Peace in the church

There is one very good reason for this: peace in the church. It would be just wonderful if we all agreed on every little detail. I see no possibility of that any time soon. But that does not mean we must squabble about those details. We can choose to have peace in the church. If it's not essential, either we have mutual edification (you may, after all, have a point) or it's time to keep our opinions to ourselves. Sometimes it's best to argue rationally and in a scholarly way; other times, it's best to just shut up.

Life of an Apostle - Romans 15

It seems at first disjointed – a few things said at the end of the letter. Many scholars hold that Paul actually stopped talking at the end of the chapter; the next chapter being an addition by the man who wrote it down. But there is still something to learn, and we shall try to do just that.

On Hope

Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength and not *just* please ourselves. Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification. For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "THE REPROACHES OF THOSE WHO REPROACHED YOU FELL ON ME." For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God. For I say that Christ has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God to confirm the promises *given* to the fathers, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy; as it is written, "THEREFORE I WILL GIVE PRAISE TO YOU AMONG THE GENTILES, AND I WILL SING TO YOUR NAME." Again he says, "REJOICE, O GENTILES, WITH HIS PEOPLE." And again, "PRAISE THE LORD ALL YOU GENTILES, AND LET ALL THE PEOPLES PRAISE HIM." Again Isaiah says, "THERE SHALL COME THE ROOT OF JESSE, AND HE WHO ARISES TO RULE OVER THE GENTILES, IN HIM SHALL THE GENTILES HOPE." Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

(Rom 15:1-13 NASB)

Strong and Weak (verses 1-3)

If there is any one defining aspect of chivalry, it is this: the strong have a duty toward the weak. Today, of course, the damsel in distress would not await her knight in shining armor but karate chop the living daylights out of all and sundry. This exemplifies the "self-reliance" so valued in America. It also helps us ignore the duty of the strong to the weak.

In the church, that duty is clear: it is to build up your neighbor. If your brother in Christ is struggling with something, your duty as the strong (one not struggling with it yourself) is to help. For example:

- ✚ Is your brother taken in poverty? If you are the rich, what should you be doing?
- ✚ Is your brother suffering from disease or misfortune? Those who are at peace in Christ are to come along side.
- ✚ Indeed, if your brother is taken in sin, who is supposed to help?

The supreme example is that of Christ: He who rules the universe became like one of us to rescue us. The imitation of Christ is still the first rule of Christian conduct.

Acceptance (verses 4-7)

Paul gives us the result of that duty: the unity of the church. He shows us that unity in two ways you might not have thought of:

- ✚ First, there is the unity of endurance and encouragement. If I am suffering and must endure, the unity of the church grows when you come along side to encourage me.

✚ There is also the inner unity of heart and mouth. Encouragement which is only lip service is taken politely; encouragement from the heart is welcomed in the heart.

The result of this is that we accept one another wholeheartedly. If I am rich and you are poor, this may be a barrier to unity. But if you come along side in my time of need, the barrier is broken.

Purpose: the glory of God (verses 8-13)

The objective of all this is not just a happy campout on the ranch. It is the glory of God. You can see this in the service of Christ:

✚ First, Christ comes as the servant king to us – not so that we will feel warm and fuzzy, but that we may praise God for this incredible gift of love.

✚ To this end Christ fulfills the promises made to the patriarchs thousands of years earlier. It is to show the Gentiles (!) that God is faithful – and worthy of praise.

To promise is to look to the future. If you have the hope that comes from the faith, you will give glory to God not just for what he has done; not just for what he is doing in your life but also for what he has promised to do. He is indeed the God of hope!

How does this work out in your life? Hope is not just assurance for the future (“someday things will get better”) but it is also joy and peace now. You know how things will work out; you can therefore at least be at peace now, joyous at the thought of the future. It’s the Indiana Jones principle.

Indeed, if this hope comes through the Holy Spirit (as it should) then you cannot contain it – it overflows. It’s contagious – and an encouragement to others, again aiding the unity of the church. What goes around, comes around.

Ministry to the Gentiles

And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able also to admonish one another. But I have written very boldly to you on some points so as to remind you again, because of the grace that was given me from God, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that *my* offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God. For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by word and deed, in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit; so that from Jerusalem and round about as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. And thus I aspired to preach the gospel, not where Christ was *already* named, so that I would not build on another man's foundation; but as it is written, "THEY WHO HAD NO NEWS OF HIM SHALL SEE, AND THEY WHO HAVE NOT HEARD SHALL UNDERSTAND." For this reason I have often been prevented from coming to you; (Rom 15:14-22 NASB)

To the Romans (verses 14-17)

Please note: Paul is writing to the *good* Christians. When speaking to the idiot or the corrupt, a certain caution is enjoined: you want them to keep listening long enough to hear your plea. But these Romans have already put up with fourteen chapters worth; therefore Paul writes to them *boldly*. If you’re really good at something, it’s worth having a coach tell you how to become excellent at it.

But boldness carries with it an intrinsic disadvantage. By its very nature it says that the person being bold must be a leader worthy of the title. In short, it's borderline bragging. In one way this is appropriate to an apostle, the holder of the highest earthly rank in the church. In another way, not so good. Which is the right way, then?

Christ in me (verses 18-19)

The trick is simple: I only brag about what Christ has done in me. It's not about me; this is not the First Church of the Rock Star. It's about Christ. Even if I do signs and miracles, I will give credit to the Holy Spirit working in me.

Every Bible teacher understands this. It will eventually happen to anyone who teaches the Scripture to adults: someone comes up after class and tells you what a brilliant insight that was – in fact, you wrote that lesson just for me, didn't you? I didn't. The Holy Spirit might have, but I didn't.

Those who are great in God's power are often small in men's sight – which is just as it should be.

Mission and ambition (verses 20-22)

Paul, like all of God's great leaders, puts his ambition where his mission is. His mission is evangelism – bringing the Gospel to the un-reached. The Romans have indeed been reached; Paul will see them when God gives him the time.

On to Spain

but now, with no further place for me in these regions, and since I have had for many years a longing to come to you whenever I go to Spain--for I hope to see you in passing, and to be helped on my way there by you, when I have first enjoyed your company for a while-- but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. Yes, they were pleased *to do so*, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual things, they are indebted to minister to them also in material things. Therefore, when I have finished this, and have put my seal on this fruit of theirs, I will go on by way of you to Spain. I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, that I may be rescued from those who are disobedient in Judea, and *that* my service for Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints; so that I may come to you in joy by the will of God and find *refreshing* rest in your company. Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen. (Rom 15:23-33 NASB)

Passing through (verses 23-24)

Paul does something here which is exceedingly difficult: he recognizes that his work is done. He must move on. He could stay on as father figure to the churches he had established, but that is not his mission. But where to go? Spain comes to his mind; no one has been there yet. It's the outer marches of the Roman Empire – and a place of intellectual ferment at the time. On his way, he'll stop by the Romans.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ There is some debate about whether or not Paul ever made it to Spain. The Spanish cherish the tradition that he arrived about AD 62; there are several references to the trip in the early church fathers.

One thing is certain: Paul was just passing through Rome on his way to his next assignment. God, evidently, had other plans. But the attitude of “passing through” shines here. We all ought to remember that we are always “just passing through.”

Church United (verses 25-29)I

We sometimes forget that the church is one. It is shown here in the gift the Greek churches made to the church at Jerusalem. Paul comments that this is a right thing to do. The church at Jerusalem (the Jews) brought the Gospel to the Greeks; it is only fitting that the Greeks in return would provide for the Jerusalem church in its hour of need.

“They owe it to them.” Each of us should feel that same way. Someone brought you to Christ. Perhaps that someone was sent for the purpose. Think how much different your life is because of their work! Is it really unreasonable to share your blessings with such a person? Those of us in rich America might feel embarrassed to receive such a gift. The church in most places and times did not feel embarrassed, but grateful.

See how Paul presumes this of the Roman church: he knows that he will receive a full measure of blessing from them, once he has been with them for a time. Is he demanding service of them – or does he just know that’s how real Christians react?

Which gives us the question: just how do we react to such things?

Prayers (verses 30-33)

Paul closes this section with a request for prayer. How the great saints always desired the prayers of the faithful! The point is still true today: what more could I ask of you than to go to God Almighty in prayer, seeking his aid and blessing on my behalf? What does he ask, then?

- ✚ First, that he might be rescued from his enemies, so that the work might go on. None of us asks for martyrdom; we just want to keep on doing what we do.
- ✚ Next, he asks that his service would be acceptable. All of us want to be a success; the humble among us realize we are not totally in charge of that.
- ✚ Finally, that when they do meet, the unity of the church will be again revealed in joy.

The church is a band of brothers; the cause of Christ is greater than any one of us, no matter how famous. To God be the glory; to his people unity, charity and joy.

Mentioned in Despatches - Romans 16

In European military forces there exists the custom of honoring individuals and units with a “mention in despatches.” It means that in the summary report drawn up by the commander after a military action, certain individuals are mentioned, and possibly certain units, for which they receive a medal.⁶¹ Paul does something similar in this chapter of Romans.

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church which is at Cenchrea; that you receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and that you help her in whatever matter she may have need of you; for she herself has also been a helper of many, and of myself as well. Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who for my life risked their own necks, to whom not only do I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles; also *greet* the church that is in their house. Greet Epaphroditus, my beloved, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia. Greet Mary, who has worked hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners, who are outstanding among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me. Greet Ampliatus, my beloved in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and Stachys my beloved. Greet Apelles, the approved in Christ. Greet those who are of the *household* of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my kinsman. Greet those of the *household* of Narcissus, who are in the Lord. Greet Tryphaena and Tryphosa, workers in the Lord. Greet Persis the beloved, who has worked hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, a choice man in the Lord, also his mother and mine. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas and the brethren with them. Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you. Now I urge you, brethren, keep your eye on those who cause dissensions and hindrances contrary to the teaching which you learned, and turn away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting. For the report of your obedience has reached to all; therefore I am rejoicing over you, but I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you. Timothy my fellow worker greets you, and *so do* Lucius and Jason and Sosipater, my kinsmen. I, Tertius, who write this letter, greet you in the Lord. Gaius, host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer greets you, and Quartus, the brother. [The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.] Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, *leading* to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.

(Rom 16:1-27 NASB)

(The interested reader will find a fascinating article on the subject of Junias – or Junia – at <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=21-08-022-f>. We do not have time or space to match this learned article, but it brings light on the extent of radical feminism’s touch on Gospel scholarship.)

⁶¹ Those interested in the concept may see a good summary of the practice by Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mentioned_in_Despatches. And yes, the spelling is correct – it’s British English.

Mentioned in Despatches

The reader who has followed this series on the web will note that our older series on Romans does not include this chapter. It seems, on the surface, to have little to say – just a collection of personal greetings. But there are some nuggets of gold in here. Let's examine first the kind of people Paul mentions, their deeds and why they mean so much to him.

What kind of people are they?

Paul tells us:

- ✦ Such people are *servants*. It is a simple distinction, but one which is often forgotten today. Prestige and “do it my way” conflict with this; it is well to remember the task to which you are called, and do it humbly.
- ✦ They *worked very hard*. They took their tasks seriously and bent their backs to them. It is something which in this time of ease and comfort seems less than probable. But they knew it well.
- ✦ They were *tested and approved in Christ*. The results of their labors were clear. Temptation? Tribulation? We don't know the testing, but we know they passed.

What they did

Some did what would seem to be small and ordinary things; others had the privilege of greater risk and sacrifice.

- ✦ Some were said to be a great help. For everyone who leads there must be some who not only follow, but help. The leaders are grateful for followers – but love the help.
- ✦ Some, probably the more wealthy, had the church meet in their homes. Recall that church buildings had yet to be devised. So often it seems that the rich are called only to give money; here we see that they too shared all they had.
- ✦ Others provided hospitality to the saints, including evangelists and apostles. A place to stay with friends is a grand thing when your other option is an inn likely enough to be a brothel too.
- ✦ For others things were more serious – they had been imprisoned with Paul. It seems so distant, but we must remember that in many parts of the world the penalty for being a Christian is imprisonment – or death.
- ✦ Indeed, others risked their lives for Paul's sake. Can you imagine such a thing at our comfortable church?

Who they are to Paul

We may also look at them from Paul's point of view. How did he see these people? How would we like to be seen by those who are great in the faith?

- ✦ First, he saw them as his fellow workers. There is no sense here of “you peon, me boss.” Each member of the team has his or her part to play.
- ✦ They are also dear friends – it seems to be the natural result of working together for Christ.
- ✦ Paul also mentions those that he “loves in the Lord.” There are some who become like family to you.
- ✦ Indeed, of one woman he says that she was like a mother to him. Unpopular in these feminist times, but somebody has to do it. The evangelist needs someone to see that his socks match.

Taken together, we see the picture of a church which is very loving and very close, a model for us even today.

Look Out!

Paul also warns us of those who are harmful to the church. It's not all warm and fuzzy at First Christian.

How to recognize the wolves

Paul gives us three characteristics of those whom Christ called wolves in sheep's clothing:

- ✚ They are those who *cause division*. That's the original meaning of the word, "heretic." It's interesting that our pastor now tells us that people who know the Bible best are the most divisive. No one is quite so subversive, I suppose then, as a Bible teacher.
- ✚ They *put obstacles in your path*. Remember that the obstacles may appear to be good things. For example, feeding the poor is certainly a good thing – unless it becomes the primary goal of the church. Then it's an obstacle to the faith.
- ✚ They teach what is *contrary to the faith*. Enough said.

Recognition test

Of course, that might not be sufficient for your purposes in identifying them. Paul gives us two clues to recognition:

- ✚ First, they are not serving Christ but their own appetites. If the preacher's first concern is his paycheck, we have a problem. (This is one reason this teacher is not at all fond of televangelists.)⁶² But note also: there are those who don't serve Christ because they believe that the church must be fundamentally altered to survive.⁶³ Do they serve Christ, or their own vision of the new church?
- ✚ More visibly, you can tell them by their smooth talk and flattery. If they are always telling you how wonderful you are, and never admonish you, it's a dead giveaway.

What should the saints do?

Other than watch out, you'll notice that Paul doesn't give any specific action relating to such people. That's interesting! It seems that we are to deal with such a situation by doing the ordinary, obedient things of the Christian life. Some examples:

- ✚ In one instance he commands the Romans to "receive her in a way worthy of the saints." We are to provide the practical help the workers of the Gospel may require.
- ✚ He tells us to be wise about good, but innocent about evil. Never spit at a skunk. Do not ask how you may out-wicked the wicked; rather, overcome evil with good.
- ✚ Finally, we are to be obedient. We all know that only those who believe, obey. But as Bonhoeffer pointed out, only those who obey can believe.

Doxology

Let's examine the end of this book again:

Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of

⁶² The example of Billy Graham and the "Modesto Manifesto" is highly instructive here.

⁶³ But see Daniel 2:44. Of His kingdom there shall be no end.

the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, *leading* to obedience of faith; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.
(Rom 16:25-27 NASB)

(Verse 24 apparently is a late addition to the original text, and is either omitted or marked as a late addition in all the modern translations. Curiously, the Vulgate also omits it. Its place thus disputed, we have chosen to omit it here.)

Able to establish you

It is of some comfort to those making a major purchase to know that they are dealing with a “well established firm.” The assumption is that if they were complete frauds they wouldn’t have been able to stick around so long. We too can be established:

- ✚ First, by the Gospel of Christ. The power to become firmly established in Christ is not something that comes from within you – but comes from him. It does not depend upon you. You did not create the light; you just flipped the light switch.
- ✚ Second, by the proclamation of Christ – the word also means “preaching.” If the word of Christ comes to you, should you dam it up and hide it, or should you let it flow through your life?

Who

Paul now explains the mystery of Christ – as much as can be explained.

- ✚ He was a “mystery.” The word doesn’t carry the meaning of “murder mystery” but rather something that was hidden. Perhaps “secret” might be a better translation.
- ✚ But now Christ has been revealed. One way in particular: through the writings of the prophet. The mystery had clues, but now the end of the book is here, and God reveals the answer – Jesus the Christ.

Why all the secrecy? Prophecy fulfilled is a testimony to Christ, just as your own personal testimony is. Both have the same purpose: that all might believe, and believing, obey. God wants all people to be saved.

To Him be the glory

It’s a doxology; it is to bring glory. The word itself is composed of the Greek words *doxa* (meaning glory) and *logos* (meaning word). There is somewhat to be learned here too:

- ✚ The glory is to God – the only God. There is no other. No one is like God; no one else deserves this glory.
- ✚ He is wise – indeed, we sometimes speak of *the* holy wisdom. It is to his glory that we recognize his wisdom.
- ✚ Such glory is given through Christ – the only mediator between man and God.

Well: there it is. A lesson on Romans 16. It didn’t look like there was much there, did it? The Scripture is infinitely deep, for it is of God. It aids our humility to remember that.