

Romans 1:8-17  
Reconciled: The Gospel According to St. Paul  
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6-15-14

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In our lives, sometimes the wounds we inflict upon ourselves and one another, the dreams we cling to, the silence and the noise we endure, the injustice and the hopes we hang on to are too powerful, too personal, too memorable for us to endure on our own. In these moments, as the song we just sang proclaims, the Holy Spirit breathes new life into us, brings the presence of Christ to renew our hearts and heal us. Without Christ and the witness of the Holy Spirit, reconciliation can become an impossible task—merely an elusive dream.

In 1958, Samuel McKinney began serving as the Pastor of Mt Zion Baptist Church in Seattle, Washington. Shortly after his arrival, conversations began to percolate about a man from the south who spoke of equality for all, a man named Martin Luther King, Jr. “Has anyone ever heard of this man?” was asked once in a meeting in which McKinney was a part. “I have,” McKinney responded, “we grew up together.” This initiated what would become an invitation to MLK to come and speak in Seattle.

Unfortunately, his church was too small for the expected crowds, so Pastor McKinney and his team went to their neighbors, the First Presbyterian Church of Seattle. A gentleman’s agreement was had, and a date was set to meet with the church leadership to discuss the particulars of the event.

As time drew near and publicity was being sent out, the two churches met. Leading the meeting was the clerk of First Pres’ session, a tall stately white attorney. “It appears that the proper paperwork was not filled out, so you will not be able to hold your event here,” the clerk said. “I thought we had a gentleman’s agreement,” replied McKinney. “No sir.” Then sensing the situation was getting tense, the clerk tried to soften things by saying, “We know you spent some money on this, give us the bills and we’ll take care of it.” “We don’t want your money,” McKinney said.

Even in a place like Seattle that was supposedly more open, deep injustices and deep divides were existed. Reconciliation was needed for healing to take place. Then about 50 years later, Dr. McKinney received a letter from First Pres, which he initially filed in the circular file. But something inside him said, “Take it out and read it.”

Inside was a letter from the new minister. It read: “I understand that a great injustice took place at the hands of my congregation many years ago. I would like to meet with you to apologize.” Shortly after, that minister from down the block came over to Mt. Zion to apologize, and thus began the process of reconciliation that was nearly 50 years in the making.

Truly there is nothing new under the sun. We all have experienced hurt and division for one reason or another, and the same was true of the early church. There was deep division between Jews and Gentiles (non-Jewish believers).

And nowhere are divides like this more difficult to live into than at our tables. When people are in conflict with one another, they do not sit down at table to eat with one another. We see this in the conflicts surrounding Jesus; He was always eating with suspect people. We see it in conflicts in Galatia and Corinth, that the table became a place of segregation and separation, rather than a gathering place of grace and peace, the way Jesus intended it when he said in Luke's Gospel that people will gather from east and west, north and south and sit at table together. We see it in segregationist America when blacks and whites were not permitted to dine in the same rooms with one another. One of the most difficult and important challenges that the Apostle Paul had to overcome in working with new and budding communities were often the conflicts that would take place over dining with one another.

And this is where Paul's letter to the Romans comes, into the places where division and segregation come, with the good news of the power unto salvation. Which is our only hope.

So as we step into Romans, let me give a little context. It's not the first letter Paul wrote, that's Thessalonians. And it's not the last either, that was probably Philippians. But Paul's letters in the New Testament are actually situated in a pretty logical way: by length. Romans, being the longest is first, then the Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, and so on, with Philemon, the shortest, coming last.

Now, there is no way that we can cover all of Romans in 20 minutes, so I want us to look at Romans with this one question in mind: How do we get through the impossible situations of division and segregation in our lives? That's our only focus for this morning.

Paul wrote the letter most likely from Corinth. He had not been to Rome before, even though he was born a citizen of the great city. Paul's missionary ventures had taken him all over the Mediterranean, and now he was beginning to think about moving west with the Gospel. And his sights were set on Spain, Rome's great Western territory. So on his way to Spain, he was going to visit these congregations in Rome that he had heard so much about.

A few years earlier, probably about 49 AD, the Jews were kicked out of Rome by an Edict of Emperor Claudius, and in 54 AD, those limitations were lifted. Now Jews from Rome who had been kicked out were returning to their homes and to the house churches that were gathering there. And they find themselves in a city that would rather not have them. And therein lies the occasion for Paul's letter: what is this gospel that we live into and how can it help us to become the people God wants us to be?

So I would ask that you turn in your Bibles to Romans chapter 1 beginning at verse 8. We've also made it available to you on the screens above. And let's stand together as we listen to God's word to us.

**First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well 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 I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. 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 for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."**

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of the Lord lasts forever. Amen, and you can be seated.

In about 54 AD, there was a new emperor in Rome who allowed the Edict of Claudius to lapse and allowed the Jews and Christians to come back. And there weren't many. By most scholars' account, there were probably only about 200 Christians in Rome at this time. But instead of meeting in a large room like this, they met in homes. The problem Paul saw was that they were segregating themselves, Jews were meeting with Jews and Gentiles with Gentiles. And this flew in the face of what Jesus taught about the Kingdom. Jesus spoke about how at the Kingdom Feast, people from all places will sit together in the Kingdom of God. So these followers of the Gospel are living out the Gospel in a way that doesn't even match what the message actually says, because they live in segregation among themselves.

The Old Testament Prophets spoke and Jesus confirmed that when the Kingdom of God is happening, enemies and foreigners will sit at table together. And if this is not happening, then that must mean that the gospel is not being announced or understood. So Paul has to address this, and we see this throughout the first 11 chapters. Paul, in chapters 1-11, lays out in very clear and descriptive detail what the gospel says to Jews and Gentiles alike.

Then in chapters 12-15, Paul gets practical and lays out the ethical implications, the behavioral aspects of living into this message that Jesus announced. He says in chapter 12, "Don't think about yourselves more highly than you ought, but what you should be doing is outdoing one another in showing love." Then he takes up table fellowship, when he says, "Don't pass judgment on those who follow certain dietary practices, the bottom line is that there is a rule of love here. If your brother or sister can't in good conscience

eat certain things, don't serve those things. Sit with your brother or sister, don't put stumbling blocks in front of one another."

Paul addresses conflicts in the church's programmatic life in chapters 12-15, and this is incredibly practical for us. But there are 11 chapters before this wherein Paul sets up his practical guidance by telling the people what God has done. **Before our efforts in the Christian Faith, what Paul wants them and wants us to know even before this, God's efforts are of fundamental importance.** And why this is key for us to remember is that what God has done to make way for this reconciliation between Jew and Gentile is unheard of in human history. At no other time has any culture advocated for unity among foreigners. Chapters 1-11 in Romans are all about how God is the one who initiates this union, this reconciliation, this forgiveness that leads to grace and mercy and love.

Like I said, there is no way I can tackle all of Romans in one morning, but I do want to share with you the headlines of what Paul is getting at with this letter. Paul knows that there are issues that lead to division, and they're not just matters of personal taste—like hymns or praise choruses, or high liturgy or Starbucks in worship. But that there are cosmic forces at play, and what it will take to bring reconciliation is the intervention of a power greater than all these earthly powers.

Paul says in chapter 1: **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 for faith, for as it is written the righteous shall live by faith.**

What is the gospel? Announcement that Jesus is the Messiah. It's not a program or a system or a curriculum, it's an announcement of Good News that Jesus is the only one who can reconcile things. Because **what Paul wants everyone to know, first off, is that we are all outsiders.** Romans 3:23 says that **all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God**, so in a sense, we're all outsiders. None of us has the ability or the righteousness or the holiness to solve the problem. But then comes the announcement that Jesus has already done it, he has redeemed us, he has reconciled us to God and offers us a new life. And this is the first theme of Romans 1-3: everyone Jew, Gentile, male, female, slave, free – *everyone*, says Paul, is an outsider.

You see, there is a power at work in our world, the power of evil, and we need something more powerful than a program, more effective than education that can eradicate the problem. We need the power that can take us unto salvation. Our human efforts to promote equality and justice and unity are good, but they're anemic, they're not enough. We cannot save ourselves

So Paul goes on to describe how God eradicates this problem with an invitation to faith, an invitation to a banquet. God throws a party, sets a table, and sends invitations and that Abraham is the first to RSVP. It says in chapters 4-8 that Abraham was the first to live by faith, to believe that God was going to do what he said he was going to do, and he lived into that hope. The person who invites us is Jesus Christ. So Jesus saves you a seat. Then

Paul goes on to tell his readers that there is a Spirit that will live inside you that will enable you to say yes to that invitation, again and again to that free gift of grace. Paul says in Romans 8:15-17, **you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of adoption as sons and daughters. The Spirit bears witness with ours that we are children of God...not only children but also heirs.**

So (1) Everyone is an outsider, but thanks be to God by his grace, (2) Jesus saves a place for you and me—not by our merit, but by his grace. And finally in chapters 9-11 Paul tells us that (3) God does not play favorites. It would have been so easy for the Gentile Christians in Rome to just ignore the plight of the Jewish brothers and sisters who are being persecuted and marginalized. But Paul reminds the people that God does not and will not play favorites. God has made a promise to the Jews, and God will never go back on God's promise. And for the non-Jews, just because they are a part of the new community, doesn't somehow negate the promise. Don't think that somehow God has replaced the Jews and is starting over with you. God doesn't play favorites. We live in a world in which we believe that our enemies are God's enemies and that God's enemies are our enemies. But what Romans 9-11 is saying is that God has made a sovereign choice, an irreversible and undeniable choice, and that is that salvation will come to all the nations through this one people, the Jews, and that through them all people will be delivered and know that God is gracious and just.

So why do we need Romans 1-11? Because we live in a world that absolutely denies that everyone is in the same predicament. It denies that we're all outsiders. We live in a world in which tables are exclusive, that some people are welcome and others are not, that some people are worthy and others are not, that some people are valued, and others are not. We live in a world that denies the hope of the Kingdom of God that is for all people.

And so what is needed is a people, you and me, a people who with their lives embody this welcome table. Will we embody this by opening our homes and our tables to people who are different or scary to us? Will we be a people who face the forces that say that only some are worthy of God's love, witness to the message that there are no elites in God's kingdom, that we are all miserable, broken, reprehensible, repulsive, and redeemed people. There is none that is righteous, not me, not you.

So will we face that reality and turn enemies into friends, outsiders into side-by-siders? Will we realize that God does not play favorites and in so doing find the greatest peace we can ever know because Jesus offers us grace? Will we realize that we need to hear this as much as anyone else, because above all the gospel is the announcement of Good News to the poor—even if the poor are fabulously wealthy? We need this letter to remind us that the hope of the feast of the Kingdom of Heaven can be tangible in the city of Wabash, but it begins with you realizing that you too were an outsider, but Jesus invited you in, because God does not play favorites. After all, why would God when all of creation bears witness to the goodness and glory of God? Amen.