

Sermon for the First Sunday in Lent, February 21, 2010

“Justification by the Law or Gospel?”

by The Rev. Alan R. Crippen II

Texts: Deut. 30:11-18; Ps. 91:9-15; Rom. 10:5-13; Luke 4:1-13

Let us pray:

Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of thy holy word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast, the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

Introduction

This morning I have a confession to make to you. I don't like Lent. I don't like anything about it. It's depressing to me. It's too somber and sobering for me. Why can't Lent be more like Christmas? I miss the happy, holiday cheer, the joy and wonder, the spirit of goodwill. It's a season where everybody seems to be Christian. Most people come to church, and as if caught-up in the tide of it all, even the agnostics and atheists like to sing Christmas carols and holiday songs. Christmas is wonderful. I really wish Lent could be more like it.

Maybe the “Mad Men” of Madison Avenue can help with this? After all, they've done sheer wonders for Christmas. I think the Christmas season now starts in September in most of our retail stores. Maybe these guys are the ones to work on Lent – to improve it and make it more marketable, more popular and palatable to our culture and modern times?

Think about last Wednesday, the so-called “Ash Wednesday.” I woke-up at Oh-dark-thirty in the morning to have Fr. Zolner smear ashes on my head and say: “You are dust and to dust you shall return.” How depressing is that? I probably should have stayed in bed. During Lent I am forced to confront the pathetic and miserable condition that I am a sinner, very far gone from righteousness and in desperate need of salvation. Today and during this miserable season I sure could use some good news.

Historical Background

So it's appropriate that our Epistle reading for this first Sunday in Lent is from Romans, chapter 10. This particular scripture lesson frames the season of Lent in the contours of the Gospel or good news. Written by the Apostle Paul, the book of Romans is a “Christian manifesto...of freedom through Jesus Christ.” This particular book, argues the Anglican preacher-theologian John Stott, is “the fullest, plainest, grandest statement of the Gospel in the New Testament.”¹

Great saints have been converted by reading this majestic book of the Bible. St. Augustine was converted to Christ by reading a passage from this Epistle. Martin Luther's spiritual experience was crucially shaped by coming to an understanding of what Paul says in this important book. The Reformation was the spiritual and cultural consequence of Luther's

¹ Stott, John R.W., *The Message of Romans* (Downers Grove, Illinois; InterVarsity Press, 1994) p. 19.

new understanding of the teaching of Romans. This was a great era of recommitment and renewal to biblical teaching, a time and context in which our mother church in England was re-born. Later in 18th Century England, the then-Anglican priest John Wesley was also converted upon hearing the reading of Martin Luther's preface in his commentary on the book of Romans. As you may know, Wesley's conversion at that famed bible study meeting at Aldersgate in London later transformed the Church of England. Wesley's gospel preaching and that of his colleagues including his brother Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, and John Newton (the slave ship captain turned priest and hymn-writer of "Amazing Grace") resulted in a great spiritual awakening in England and America. People were converted to Christ and transformed by the Gospel. William Wilberforce, future member of Parliament, social reformer, and a founder of the British and Foreign Bible Society was one of them. In the 20th Century the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth was converted by reading the book of Romans. His grappling with its content compelled him to abandon theological liberalism and recover Christian orthodoxy. Later Barth influenced thousands of others to do the same.

When people study Paul's letter to the Romans, lives change, things happen, and nations are moved. What is the central theme of this book that has made such an impact on world history and our story as a people of God? The theme of Romans is God's justification of sinners by grace through faith. This is a central tenet of our Reformed faith as Anglicans.

You see when you look fully into the face of a holy and righteous God and hear the words: "Thou art dust and unto dust thou shalt return," the pressing question of the weight of God's glory is: how can I possibly be saved? When confronted with God's holiness and righteous demands your response ought to be like that of the prophet Isaiah: Woe is me! I am undone. (Isaiah 6:5)

You ought to be asking yourself: "What can I possibly do to be made righteous before a holy God? What can I do to be justified before God's throne-room and high court? How can I be saved from the deserved wrath of a God who demands absolute and perfect obedience to his law?"

The Text

These sobering questions of eternal consequence were before the Apostle as he penned the words found in our Epistle lesson for this morning. The immediate context of our lesson falls in the midst of a discussion about Israel's future. Paul is dealing with the spiritual and political consequences of Israel's unbelief in Christ and whether or not the nation has a future. He's grappling with what went wrong leading Israel to reject the Messiah which she had been promised. His assessment is that Israel, although zealous for God, was spiritually and theologically ignorant of God's plan and purposes of salvation. Their fanaticism or zeal without knowledge had led them to establish a righteousness of their own, rather than submit to God's pro-offered righteousness in his Son.

The passage under examination today deals with the need for understanding the Gospel in light of two competing ways of righteousness or two methods of justification: works v. faith. In light of Christ's incarnation, temptation, ministry, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension the question this passage deals with is: What truly constitutes

righteousness before God? Is one justified or made right with God by works of our own doing or by trusting the righteousness of Christ's doing what he wrought-out for us?

So to discover the Apostle's answer to this question, let's begin by looking at verse 5. The first kind of righteousness he discusses is described as that which Moses wrote about: a "righteousness that is based on the law." The Apostle then alludes to the teaching of Leviticus 18:5: "You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them...." In other words, obedience to the law to secure righteousness or justification requires perfect compliance. Simply obeying one precept of the law in one place while failing to obey another (no matter how apparently minor) is not good enough. Therefore, righteousness by the law, justification by the law or being made right before God by the law demands absolute and complete perfection. A perfect, holy, righteous God can demand nothing less than this.

In verses 6-7 the Apostle contrasts this idea of a 'righteousness that is based on the law' with "the righteousness based on faith," i.e., a righteousness that is received from Christ in faith. What's the difference? Well, the righteousness that is based on the law by perfect obedience on our part, quite frankly, is impossible. To attain justification by the law is as feasible for you as ascending into heaven "to bring Christ down" to earth or descending into the abyss "to bring Christ up from the dead." You can't do this. You didn't accomplish the incarnation. You didn't accomplish the resurrection. You can't save yourself – no matter what good you do. You can't be justified by your own works of righteousness. It's impossible. Your works are not good enough. They will not measure up.

And the good news is that the Gospel requires no such impossibilities like sailing to heaven or diving to the depths of the sea. No one is required to do the impossible. God's plan of salvation does not demand from us what cannot be done. So how is one to be saved? How is one to be justified in the throne-room of God's high court?

The Apostle tells us in verses 8-10. What the gospel demands of you is a cordial, heartfelt faith in Christ and open profession of him. Verse 8 says that the word of faith is easy, not impossible. It's near you, "in your mouth and in your heart." The righteousness of faith is attainable not by impossible feats, not by acts of one's own doing, but rather by simple trust and profession. Read verse 9: "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Justification is by grace through faith. But what does this entail? There are two requirements:

The first is confession. To confess Christ is to profess Christ. Confession or profession is "the fruit and external evidence of faith."² What is the thing to be professed? It is the idea, the reality that Jesus Christ is Lord. Didn't Jesus say, "So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 10:32, 33)

Confessing the Lord Jesus Christ means acknowledging that he is who he claimed to be. He is the Messiah and holds the offices of prophet, priest, and king. He is the Word that

² Hodge, Charles. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan; Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994) p. 341.

was from the beginning. He is the Savior of mankind. He is the Sovereign over everything that exists. Jesus is above all principalities and powers, spiritual and earthly. Angels are subject to him (and so are the devil and his demons). All power in heaven and on earth is given to him. Christ reigns over all the earth. He is the ruler of all nature. He rules over human societies and cultures. He rules over kings and princes. He has ultimate sovereignty over politics, law, and government; science, technology, and education; commerce, business, and economics; the arts, architecture and music; as well as religion and the church. Jesus Christ is Lord. And lest you think this confession is without consequences remember that this very confession did send and is sending Christians to their deaths in various regimes that will not tolerate the idea of Jesus' Lordship over all of life. To confess that Jesus is Lord is no easy believism, no cheap grace, but rather, it is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words: "the cost of discipleship."

The second requirement is faith. In the Hebrew mind, the heart was more than merely a seat of the affections. To believe with the heart therefore involves much more than being swayed by emotions. Faith is not fideism or some speculative leap in the dark act devoid of reason. To the contrary, faith is an act of the mind in the wide sense of this word. Faith or believing with the heart is certainly more than an intellectual assent; rather, it is "a cordial receiving and resting in Christ alone for salvation."³ This cordial receiving and resting in Christ alone is based upon a truth, an historical reality: Christ lived, died, and was raised from the dead. By Christ's resurrection from the dead, God has publicly acknowledged that Christ is all that he claimed to be and that God has accepted all that he came to perform. Christ's obedience unto death and resurrection unto life is the basis of our righteousness, the fount of our justification, the rock of our salvation.

The Meaning and Application

The sobering and depressing Lenten invocation at the imposition of ashes, "You are dust and to dust you shall return" is not the whole story. The season of Lent and its focus on the bad news of our sinfulness and mortality is framed by the contours of the Gospel. The feasts of Christmas and Easter bookend this miserable season and instruct us in the truth that by Christ's incarnation, temptation, ministry, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension he has made a way of salvation for us out of our lost, pathetic, and miserable condition. The righteousness he wrought-out for us can be appropriated to you by personal faith. This is amazing grace. In the face of God (*Coram Deo*), sinner though you are, you can stand in his throne-room and high Court justified, not by a legal righteousness of your own doing, but by simply receiving and trusting a righteousness that is not your own. In the words of the Apostle, "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

In the name of God, the Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

The Rev. Alan R. Crippen II is founder and president of the John Jay Institute for Faith, Society and Law in Colorado Springs, Colorado. As a para-academic center its mission is to prepare principled leaders for public service. Mr. Crippen is a clergyman in the Anglican Church in North America.

³ *Ibid.* p. 234.