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The National Presbyterian Church

Inside God

Romans 8:1-4

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Through the middle of June in our Sunday sermons, we're following a series in which we're focusing on one of the great books in the Bible – one of the most influential historically: Paul's great *Letter to the Church in Rome*, and in particular, chapters 6,7 and 8.

So far we've been thinking about the issue of **Christian Moral Motivation**. That is, God freely gives to us his forgiveness. But this creates a problem of motivation. Doesn't our motivation primarily derive from knowing God's laws, and knowing that God will hold us accountable for keeping them? But *if* God is infinitely merciful, doesn't that seem to take away a vital element of moral motivation – so that our efforts become less than our best, because we know that at the end of the day, we'll always be forgiven? Let off the hook?

Good question – one that the early Christians were asking even within 20 years of Jesus' life and death, and to which Paul responds in Romans 6 and elsewhere by saying that keeping God's law is *not* what should be driving us as Christians (at least primarily), and that God gives to us other gifts as well that should be powerful motivations for changing our ways.

- God gives to us a new country (we are now citizens of the Kingdom of God), and the country we live in (or even visit) always impacts the way we live and act.
- God gives to us a new conclusion for our lives (his gift is to restore us to the image of God in which we were created – to be remade like Jesus!). If this is our 'conclusion' or goal, then we need to begin to move towards it, embrace it, right now!
- God gives to us a new covenant (a covenant of marriage: God is crazy about us, loves us passionately and wants to marry us. And wants us to marry him too! But marriage always changes us – not through obligation, but through love)

So each of these gifts should drive our moral lives in the direction of God's will and God's ways even when we know that forgiveness and mercy are abundant! But -- *if this* is true -- then it begs the question: **Why God's Law?**

If not driven by the Law, if we're not earning brownie points to get to heaven by striving to keep God's law, if we're not striving to "keep the rules" in order to show that we are better than other people, then *why did God give us his laws* in the first place? (For example, the Ten Commandments, and so many other rules and regulations that we find especially in our Old Testament?)

Another good question! To which Paul in Romans 7 responds by saying first that God's law is God's way of setting down in black and white the fact that *there really is* a right and wrong, *there really are* 'Maker's Instructions,' *there really are* good ways and bad ways to live the game of life -- the best way and wrong way!

So, for example, when someone's *playing the game of baseball*, they're *usually not* consciously thinking of all the rules; they're just 'playing the game.' But once in a while you

need *to pull out the rule book* printed in black and white, which, in the case of baseball, has over 70 rules, and numerous definitions and exceptions and clarifications! Without the book, memory fails, and so does the game!

So God gives us his Laws to show us how best to play the “Game of Life.” But – this is not the only reason. There’s a second reason as well that Paul gives in Romans 7 – one that at first seems quite negative: God also gives us his Law (says Paul) to make it clear to us that *NONE OF US has the ability in ourselves to keep it! – to continually do what is right . . . to be righteous, to play the game of life in the way God intended.*

In fact, Paul explains in Romans 7 as well that the Law of God – the very presence of rules – exposes a weakness and perversity in our human nature that leads us time and again to wanting whatever is forbidden; to doing -- even the things we don’t want to do! It’s an experience common to us all (see Romans 7:14-20):

*The good I would-do – I do not do,
But the evil that I would-not-do is what I end up doing!*

Think, for example of the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2

All was well in the Garden -- until God laid down His law, and said “*No further! Here’s the Limit. You may eat everything in the garden, **but** this one thing you cannot do – you may not eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; or DIE!*”

So what do Adam and Eve say to God in response (in effect)?

Not: “Wow, thanks for the warning! Wow, what generosity, all the fruit and only one little exception!”

But: “Who are You to tell ME what to do?”

And so they eat!

And the truth is: we’re all Adam and Eve. Their story is ours! We’ve all lusted after and eaten forbidden fruit. We’ve all decided to ignore God, and God’s word. We all think we know better than God.

Our sins and failures may be different: what bothers me may not bother you. And some of us may look a whole lot less saintly than others on the outside. But outside and inside are seen by God, and when the whole picture is taken into account, the fact is that all of us have missed the mark (Romans 3:23). As the old Episcopal Book of Common Prayer puts it:

*We have done what we ought not to have done,
And left undone what we ought to have done*

And the consequence is the same: we deserve the death promised to Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:17): “*The day you eat the forbidden fruit, you will die!*” That is, when we choose to sin, we break your relationship with God, and become alienated and separated from God, the source of your life (Isaiah 59:2). And without him we’re on our own. Without him, without the breath of his presence within us, we have no power within us to breathe – or live.

AND – This is really bad news, which raises a poignant and pressing question – *Can anything be done?*

- It’s like hearing news about a terminal disease: *Doctor, Can anything be done?*
- Or receiving the sentence of death in a court of law: *Judge, Can anything be done? Is there any recourse or appeal?*

To which the amazing answer God gives is **YES!**

Not that we can do anything for ourselves – we’re stuck in the mire! The more we struggle the deeper we sink! But rather that God has done something for us, that is truly amazing:

- *God sends his son to us* (says Paul in Romans 8:3)
Like a spy invading enemy territory
- *God sends his Son to us*
Before we were born, God took on our flesh and blood: and became like us -- in Jesus;
became like us -- in every way except sin:
- Where we are weak, he is strong;
- Where we follow the devices and desires of our own hearts
 - he follows the devices and desires of his Father in Heaven
- Where we sin and deserve to die
 - he never sins and deserves no death at all!

So that when he died – it was not for anything he had done, but rather for what we have done. He traded places with us so we could live. Theologians have called this ‘the great exchange.’ And so it is!

Of course – throughout human history, and in great literature, this kind of exchange is not uncommon.

So we think of men and women in time of war willing to die so that others could live.

Think of the 2000 troops who died on Omaha Beach in June 1944, so that those in Europe, those in the Concentration Camps, those of us here, across the ocean far away could live and be free!

Or think of Charles Dickens’ *Tale of Two Cities*.

It’s a story set in the late 1700’s in the two cities of London and Paris, where (late in the story) a man called **Charles Darnay** is in a French prison and is about to die – death by guillotine.

And then – out of the blue – a man called **Sydney Carton**, shows up! It’s a remarkable event, made all the more remarkable by the fact that Carton is the very man who has lost out to Darnay in love for Darnay’s wife, Lucie.

It could have gone the other way: with Darnay’s death, with Darnay dead and gone, Carton could have stepped back into the picture to win back Lucie’s love. **But this is not what he does.**

Instead he does the opposite!

He manages to get into France and into Darnay’s prison.

He manages to have Darnay drugged, and because they look alike to change places with him.

And so – when it comes time for death (for Darnay’s judgment and condemnation) it’s Sydney Carton who faces death by guillotine in Charles Darnay’s place: the innocent for the guilty, dying at the very time that the man condemned to die is whisked away to freedom and life.

And the Bible understands Jesus’ death in the same way.

Except that with Jesus death there’s one aspect that’s different.

That is, the effect of *the great exchange* doesn’t take place; the *trading of places* doesn’t take place for us, until we believe it and embrace it by faith.

Or to make the contrast clear from the case of Darnay and Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities*:

Darnay's life was saved, whether he wanted it to be or not! Remember? He was drugged, he was out of it! He had no choice in the matter of his freedom from death! But, if he'd been alert (like us, today), then to gain his freedom he would have needed to make some clear-cut choices:

- To have acknowledged his predicament (*that he had no chance of escaping by himself*)
- To have believed that Carton was actually willing to trade places
- To have been convinced that the plan of escape was actually going to work once he left the prison cell

and then (and more importantly) he would have had

- To have placed his life into the hands of the one who could lead him out of the prison and out of the country to a new life.

So that Darnay's belief, his faith, in Carton, would have been **no mere intellectual assent** (as if to say: "*Sure! I Believe You'd Be Willing To Die For Me. Thanks. Let me think about it.*"). But much more – it involves a deliberate handing over, a deliberate entrusting of his life, to the one who came to save him.

In fact, for us and Jesus, Paul puts it like this in Romans 8:1

*There is therefore now no condemnation
for those who are **in** Christ Jesus.*

And the statement is quite deliberate: "in Christ Jesus." This is a phrase he uses often (see appendix).

Paul does not say

*"There is therefore now no condemnation
for those who **believe in** Christ Jesus" . . .*

Though, of course, this belief is very much included: Paul absolutely wants us to believe in Jesus!

But what he means is this, that the only kind of belief that will do is the kind of belief that leads us to place our lives completely in Christ's hands.

- As if we were breaking and entering into Jesus!
- As if we were living inside him where he could protect us, and mold us, and shape us and carry us wherever he wanted.

So, for example, picture yourself **INSIDE** a large house – a palatial house, like Downton Abbey. Imagine this is your new address. Your new address. You are living there!

When you live **INSIDE** it, when it's your home (whether upstairs or downstairs!), when you are not just a tourist, or visitor, it becomes a part of you, and more especially – **you** become a part of **it**! You may change it a little, but **it** will change **you** far more!

In fact – such a place can have such a large and over-arching presence that it has the power to shape not just your life, but the lives of dozens of people, creating a whole new community of people, many of whom to begin with, may have had little else in common.

And that, says Paul is how Jesus is to be for us . . .

- To be believed in – to be sure, but not with any shallow kind of faith

But Rather,

- to be believed in with such conviction that we reckon our lives, as being lived INSIDE HIM, “in Christ,” inside of God, allowing him to protect us, and carry us in him, wherever he wants; allowing him to change us and re-shape us, to fit his mold, in any way that he wants

Is this how you see yourself? “IN CHRIST”?

- At Communion in a moment – as we eat bread and drink the cup, God offers to bring Christ’s life and death, to take up residence INSIDE US.
- But here in Romans, Paul adds to this God’s invitation for us to take up residence INSIDE CHRIST! Surrounded, inside and out, by Jesus our Savior!

It’s a good deal: *a great exchange . . . a great trade:* he loses all so we can gain all. But you need to take him up on his offer. Make **today the day!**

APPENDIX PAUL’S USE OF “IN CHRIST”

In Christ Jesus you were chosen and given grace before the world was created.

2 Timothy 1:9, “*He gave us grace in Christ Jesus before the ages began.*”

Ephesians 1:4, “*God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world.*”

In Christ Jesus you are loved by God with an inseparable love.

Romans 8:38–39, “*I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

In Christ there is no condemnation for our sin

Romans 8:1 *There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*

2 Corinthians 5:21, “*For our sake God made Christ to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*”

Ephesians 1:7, “*In Christ we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses.*”

In Christ Jesus you have eternal life.

Romans 6:23, “*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*”

1 Corinthians 15:22, “*For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.*”

In Christ Jesus you have become a new creation and a child of God.

Galatians 3:26, “*In Christ Jesus you are all children of God, through faith.*”

2 Corinthians 5:17, “*If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.*

The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”

In Christ Jesus you have been seated in the heavenly places -- now.

Ephesians 2:6, “*God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.*”

In Christ Jesus all the promises of God are Yes for you.

2 Corinthians 1:20, “*All the promises of God find their Yes in Christ.*”

In Christ Jesus everything you really needed will be supplied.

Philippians 4:19, “*My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.*”

Philippians 4:7, “*The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*”

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