

Help for the Helpless Romans 3:20-30

Over the last few weeks, in recognition of the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, we've been looking at the truths that the Reformers considered to be most important. We've seen that they looked to Scripture alone as the sufficient rule of their faith and practice, refusing to place equal emphasis on reason, tradition and experience. Last week, we saw how their understanding of human nature, an understanding rooted in what the Scriptures teach, led them to profess that the only way anyone can be saved is by God's grace alone, a free gift extended to those who cannot earn it and to those who do not deserve it.

Today, as Paul begins to explain how sinful human beings can gain access to God's grace, he reaffirms how much we need this gift of God. And as he is wont to do, he is rather blunt about the human condition in verse 23: "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." And however much we might want to object, however much we might want to exclude ourselves from this blanket statement of guilt, Paul has made clear in the preceding chapters that "all" includes everyone – Jew and Gentile alike. Moreover, in the preceding verses, he has underlined the desperate nature of our sin problem, quoting from several of the Psalms, from Isaiah, and from Ecclesiastes to make his point:

¹⁰ As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one:

¹¹ There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.

¹² They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

¹³ Their throat *is* an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps *is* under their lips:

¹⁴ Whose mouth *is* full of cursing and bitterness:

¹⁵ Their feet *are* swift to shed blood:

¹⁶ Destruction and misery *are* in their ways:

¹⁷ And the way of peace have they not known:

¹⁸ There is no fear of God before their eyes.

Now, I know we would very much like to deny that these verse describe any of us. But let's take a closer look at what sin actually is. After all, you can look at sin in one of two ways. One way is legal, breaking God's Law. And remember, we can break God's Law either by doing things God has told us not to do, or by leaving undone things God has told us to do.

So, can anyone here claim that he or she has perfectly kept God's law all our lives? Let's think especially about how King Jesus explained this law. He said, for example that we are to love all our neighbors, even our enemies, just as much and in the same way that we love ourselves. Have any of us even come close to that high standard?

Moreover, because God is the sovereign King and Creator of the world, rebelling against His law means we should be removed from His realm, removed from the world He has made – we should receive the death penalty for our treason. And the more we know about God’s law, the less room we have to insist on our innocence.

But there’s another way we can understand our sin problem – we can see it in commercial terms. For it is possible to say that all of us owe God a debt we cannot pay. Because God created all of us for His own glory, we all owe Him our love and obedience. In fact, King Jesus said we are to love God with all we are and all we have, even more than we love our family. But in living for ourselves and in focusing on our own interests and desires, we have not paid that debt. We have not given God what He deserves – instead we have cheated Him, holding out on Him.

And so we can see, if we are really honest with ourselves, that what Paul says in verse 23 is absolutely right. We are all guilty, deserving God’s wrath and curse. We are all debtors, owing God a holy life that we cannot live. We all have a terrible sin problem, a problem we can do nothing about.

And that means that we are, in a sense, very much like infants. When an infant is wet, he can’t put on dry clothes. When he is hungry, he can’t feed himself. If he had to defend himself, he couldn’t. He’s completely helpless in the face of his problems, just as we are helpless in the face of our sins.

So, how can what Paul says in verses 21 and 22 be good news for us? How can we rejoice that Christ reveals the righteousness of God? After all, a guilty criminal doesn’t want the judge to be righteous and do justice – he wants the judge to be lenient and show him some mercy. So, if God were to do the righteous thing with us sinners, we would all be condemned, right? So, how can God’s righteousness be good news for anyone?

Verse 25 explains all this, even if it uses an unfamiliar word – propitiation. When God gives Jesus to be a propitiation in His blood for us, that means that Jesus is the sacrifice which satisfies God’s justice. Yes, we all deserve the death penalty, but the good news is that Jesus Himself is the propitiation, the substitute that pays that penalty for us. This is what John the Baptist meant when he said that Jesus is the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world. Just like one of those sacrificial animals in Old Testament times, Jesus died in our place, taking our punishment upon Himself.

But, remember, there are two ways to look at our sin problem – we have broken God’s law, but we have also failed to pay God the love and obedience that we owe Him. Jesus solves that problem for us too. Verse 24 says that we also have redemption in Jesus Christ – Jesus redeems us. If propitiation is a judicial word, meaning that Christ pays our penalty for us, redemption is a commercial word meaning that Christ pays a price for us. As our redeemer, Jesus purchases us out of the slavery to sin and death in which we all begin our lives. He also fulfills the Law on our behalf, living the life of

perfect obedience that we cannot live, and paying to God the debt of love and service we cannot pay.

And so once again we see an apt comparison with a little infant. For the fact is that Jesus Christ does everything for helpless sinners like us, just like parents do everything for their babies. Parents make sure that their helpless babies are safe and warm and dry and well-fed. In a very real sense, good parents thus model for their children what it means to experience the grace and love of God.

But even the best parents can't take care of all the children in the world. Instead, their own children, whether born or adopted, receive all these blessings because of their special family relationship. Parents naturally reserve their greatest blessings, the lion's portion of their limited time and resources, for their own children. And so we might reasonably ask, "So, what does it take for me to become part of God's family? Who exactly are the ones whom Christ has redeemed, the ones for whom Christ died?"

Over and over again in this passage, Paul gives us the answer, an answer which would have surprised most of his original readers. After all, the Jews of Paul's day had come to believe they had to keep all of God's Law in order to be righteous in God's sight. And the Gentile pagans of Paul's day had come to a similar understanding – they thought they had to perform all sorts of strange rituals, worshipping all sorts of false gods in order to be safe from harm.

Moreover, Paul's answer also surprised a lot of the people who were alive in Martin Luther's time. Many of them had come to believe that they could only be saved by making contributions to the Church or by performing certain Christian rituals, like taking the Lord's Supper. The sad fact is that most people throughout the history of the world have lived with the burden of thinking that they have to do something to save themselves from sin, something that we have seen is as impossible as an infant trying to care for itself.

But verse 22 simply says that the righteousness of God is given by faith, given to all who believe in Christ, given to all who trust in Christ. Verse 25 says that we gain access to the propitiation Christ offers to us through faith in his blood, simply by trusting in His perfect sacrifice for us. Verse 28 clearly says that a man is justified, declared righteous in the sight of God by faith in Christ alone, completely apart from any good works he might do.

Yes, that's what Paul is saying. We are not saved by our hard work or our good intentions. We are not saved by being nice people and going to church and putting offerings in the plate. No, that's why verse 27 says there is no room for anyone to boast or feel good about himself, just as it doesn't make sense for an infant to be proud of his warm crib or his full stomach or his dry diaper. He didn't earn any of those things, and he couldn't get any of those things for himself if he tried.

In the same way, God's grace is not restricted to those who happen to be the biological descendants of Abraham. Instead, verses 29 and 30 make it clear that God's

grace is available to everyone in the world who trusts in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile. Moreover, verse 25 reminds us that salvation has always come through this kind of faith. It reminds us that the complete, final sacrifice provided in Christ is the reason that God passed over the sins of all the generations who preceded Jesus. For on this side of the cross we can see that Jesus was the One perfect sacrifice to Whom all the animal sacrifices of the Law of Moses were pointing.

So, what's the solution to the problem of helplessly sinful human beings living in a world created by a perfectly holy and righteous God? Verse 26 summarizes the good news: the answer is faith alone in Christ alone. Yes, God is just, and that means that God must always do justice. And so the only way He can justify, or declare sinful human beings like us to be innocent and blameless in His sight is for Christ to take our punishment. The only way God can declare human beings to be righteous, fulfilling all the demands of His law, is for Christ to pay the debt of our love and obedience for us. And verse 26 makes it clear that the work of Christ is only applied to the one who believes in, the one who has faith in Jesus.

But Paul wasn't the only person who taught all of this. After all, didn't we read the same thing from John's gospel as well? For what did John say? "Whoever would do good works will not perish?" Nope. "Whoever tries as hard as he can will not perish?" Nope. "Whoever tries to be socially acceptable and nice to everyone will not perish?" Nope. It's "whosoever believeth in Him," whoever trusts in Jesus – those are the ones who will not perish. It's those who trust in Jesus who are blessed with the free, unmerited, gracious gift of eternal life.

So, what does it really mean to trust in Jesus? We Presbyterians might be tempted to get all theological at this point. We might point to our Westminster Standards and insist that someone needs to know all that stuff in order to receive God's grace. But that's not what John and Paul are saying, is it? They don't say we need to know a lot of stuff about Jesus – they say we need to trust Jesus.

And in fact, knowing a lot of stuff about Jesus doesn't necessarily mean that someone trusts Jesus. After all, when you take even the most casual glance at the gospels, you discover that when Jesus cast demons out of people, those demons knew exactly Who He is. In the very first chapter of Mark, for example, one of the demons calls Jesus "The Holy One of God" – the disciples wouldn't realize this until chapter 8. But just because demons know a lot about Jesus doesn't mean they trust Him – and in the same way, knowledge about Jesus won't save us either.

So what does it mean to have saving faith in Christ? Think again about our example of a little baby. When he's hungry or tired or wet, he knows that mama or daddy will solve that problem for him. He knows them and he trusts them, and his trust is not disappointed. That's what faith means – it's that sort of supreme confidence in God, that sort of assurance that He will care for us no matter what happens.

And so that is the best news of all. If we are trusting Jesus Christ to save us, we can be assured that He will do that. For when we look at the cross, the blood He shed for us, how can we doubt His love? When we remember the empty tomb, how can we doubt His power? When we think of the tremendous price He paid for us, how can we doubt His grace? And given His love, His power, and His grace, how could we ever imagine that He would turn away anyone who comes to him in faith?