

# bible<sup>+</sup>study: july 2016

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Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

## July 3, 2016 Text: Romans 2:17-29 "Ignoring God's Truth Within Us"

Sometimes, church folks wonder why there are not many new people coming to our churches. One clue might be found in Romans 2:24. Paul is addressing the Jewish community, but he might as well be addressing our congregations: "The name of God is discredited by the Gentiles because of you." That is a strong accusation. The apostle is saying that folks who are not already a part of the faith community watch carefully to see if our walk matches our talk. The sign out front might say "Loving as Jesus loves" or "Christ for the World" or "Growing in the Lord," but those who pass by do not judge us by our signs; they judge us by our lives.

Paul makes the point that it's possible to fulfill the detailed requirements of the Law without fulfilling the God-given spirit of the Law (Romans 2:13). Sometimes, those who do not claim the Name actually live out the Gospel more fully than those who "wear a Christian nametag" (Romans 2:13-14).

This in no way is meant to demean those in the community of faith who "keep the faith" and who "live the faith." Paul celebrates those in the Jewish community whose lives honor the meaning of circumcision (Romans 2:25). Most of us in the Church can name persons within the Church family who are living the Truth. Paul respects that kind of faith, but his challenge in these verses is to those of us who are Christ-like in name only. Ouch!

## July 10, 2016 Text: Romans 3:9-20 "We're All Under Sin's Power"

In this week's study text, the apostle Paul draws on Old Testament reflections and images to make the point that all of us—"Jew and Greek"—have been made captive to sin. One of my Bibles has a reference column that lists other biblical passages that parallel various verses. For this text (Romans 3:9-20), there are these Old Testament connections: Psalm 14:1, Psalm 5:9, Psalm 140:3, Psalm 10:7, Proverbs 1:16, Ecclesiastes 7:20, Psalm 36:1, Ezekiel 16:63, Isaiah 59:7, and Psalm 143:2.

Paul is making it clear to the Jewish Christians that what he is saying is not something new. The reality of universal human sin has been articulated before. In fact, the law (probably he means, "natural law" that everyone can know by the prevenient grace of God) helps us see just how sinful we are. In the Wesleyan tradition, it is this awareness of sin, this clarity about our brokenness, that leads us to repentance. We are aware of our sin because God's prevenient grace uses the law to show us just how far we are from God's intent.

Of course, I can more quickly identify your sin than I can my own! That is one reason that the early Methodist movement used small groups to have a setting in which believers could be held accountable by one another. Who loves me enough to tell me when I am sinning? In today's worship life, we often have unison prayers of confession. That is one way we stay reminded that "there is no righteous person, not even one" (Romans 3:10). We hear each other confess our own sinfulness.

## July 17, 2016 Text: Romans 3:21-31 "God Sets Things Right"

Rep Merritt and I were roommates for part of the time we were in college. Although he now lives in Maine, our friendship continues, thanks, in large measure to e-mail and the telephone. Rep and I both like to write, so about fifteen years ago we started writing a story. He writes one episode and I write the next. This has been going back and forth so long that the most recent episode was numbered 2485!

One thing that makes this so delightful is that each of us tries to close an episode by leaving our characters in some terrible predicament. It is up to the next writer to solve the dilemma and move the story along...and, of course, close the next scene with another problem to be solved. Great fun!

Now, I do not want to suggest that our exercise in creativity and tease has reached biblical proportions! However, this week's text in Romans has the feel of our story: each verse series seems to present a problem

What is the saying that is attributed to the early 20th century revival preacher Billy Sunday? "Going to church does not make you a Christian any more than standing in the garage makes you a car." Paul says, "Being circumcised does not you worthy of the praise of God" (Romans 2:28). It is the one who is "circumcised in spirit" who is praised by God (Romans 2:29).

For a lesson a few weeks ago I wrote that the Hebrew word for "seek" (as in "Seek the Lord") had a big sense of urgency about it, much as we might have if we were late for an appointment and could not find our car keys. "Help! Everybody help me look!" A funny thing happened within ten minutes of my typing those words (See June 5 lesson). I had to rush to a noon appointment and I could not find my car keys. God must have a sense of humor. Paul said it: knowing the words of what to do is not enough; we must do it.

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Gordon Wakefield (*Methodist Spirituality*, Epworth Press), wrote: "Perfection for (Wesley) was never a moral state which could not be improved; it was a life of constant growth in disciplined love to God and (human-kind)."

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Open me to Your Spirit, Lord, that I might live what I heard from You..."

The New Testament has several words that get translated as "knowledge." Often, the word means "knowledge as a fact that is learned." However, in Romans 3:20 ("knowledge of sin comes through the law"), the word for "knowledge" is more like what we mean when we say we recognize someone. (Oh, I know her, meaning I recognize her when I see her.) So, Paul invites his readers to an awareness that sin can be recognized. As Justice Stewart Potter of the Supreme Court once said about obscenity, "I know it when I see it."

If the story ended at this point, it would be a tragedy indeed. Although Paul goes on in the letter to the Romans to make it clear how Jesus Christ conquers sin, it is centrally important that we understand just how pervasive sin is. Sin? It seems to be a hopeless situation, but stay tuned; there is more to come!

### What Someone Else Has Said:

John Voelz (*Quirky Leadership*, Abingdon) has written: "The Bible gives us instruction on how to go about correcting and reproving people in our care...It is not our place to point out sin randomly to folks with whom we are not in relationship."

**Prayer:** As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: "Hear my confession, Lord..."

that has to be resolved and then that verse series leaves another problem for the next verse series to solve.

Note: Romans 3:21-21-23---all have sinned. *So, what do we do about it?* Romans 3:24-26---*Jesus Christ's faithfulness is enough.* Romans 3:27---*So, in that case, shall we dump the Law?* Romans 3:28---*No! But righteousness is through faith.* Romans 3:29---*Does that mean that God is not the God of the Jews?* Romans 3:30---*God's righteousness is for Jew and Gentile.* Romans 3:31a---*Ah! So we can ignore the Law?* Romans 3:31b---*No! No! No! How many times do I have to say "No!" We confirm/uphold/establish the Law!*

Now that leads to another question. What is this word that CEB calls "confirm" and NRSV calls "uphold" and KJV calls "establish"? I checked one Hebrew-English dictionary that had ten different sugges-

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tions for translating the word. All ten of the words imply a positive relationship between Law and faith. Maybe when we start to put down or ignore God’s Law, we should remember that adage about “the baby and the bath water.”

What Someone Else Has Said:

Thomas C. Oden (*John Wesley’s Teachings, Vol. 2*, Zondervan) writes: “The law has three functions: (1) The law curbs our native anarchic

temptation. It says to human self-assertion: ‘No, go no further. Intrude no further than this line on the well-being of the neighbor.’(2) The law leads us to despair over our (own) righteousness...(3) The law brings us into a fuller life of participation in Christ.”

**Prayer:** As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Open my heart to Your law, Lord, that I might be ready to receive and live Your grace...”

July 24, 2016 Text: Romans 5:1-11 “Not Without Hope”

Paul is realistic. The Christian life is not problem-free. Notice how various translations search for a word that captures that reality (Romans 5:3): problems (CEB), sufferings (NRSV), tribulations (American Standard), afflictions (Broadus), troubles (Moffatt), trials (J. B. Phillips), banged up (Cotton Patch), hemmed in (Message), distressful (Chrysostom). It’s enough to make a body want to crawl back into bed and pull the covers over the head!

But Paul does not leave it there. Like an athlete who knows that difficult rigorous training can lead to success on the field, the believer can find joy even in troubles, because God can use such problems to bring the gift of hope (Romans 5:4). I don’t think Paul is suggesting that this gift of hope is an easy slam dunk. The movement from trouble to hope can be a long journey by way of endurance (perseverance) and character (or, as the King James Version says, experience).

If the Christians in Rome were in despair because they still lived in sin, Paul points out that Jesus already knew that when He died on the cross (Romans 5:8). The gift of salvation through Christ was not because we had earned it; it was because we needed it. And that gift restores our relationship with God. What had been broken has been put back together. The King James Version uses the word “atonement” (Romans 5:11). That word means “at-one-ment.” Our relationship with God is “one” again.

In a text that includes words such as “righteous” (5:1), “boast” (5:2), and “pride” (5:3, 11), we might conclude that this is a passage about human accomplishment. Not so! It is righteousness through *God’s* faithfulness; it is a boast in *God’s* glory; it is pride in the love of *God* and pride in *God* through Jesus Christ. Now we can begin to see why there is hope!

Hope (Romans 5:3-5) carries with it eager anticipation. It is not mere wishful thinking; it is a confidence based on what God has done in Jesus Christ and given us through the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:4, 11). That’s not a bad deal.

What Someone Else Has Said:

In *The Theology of Hope* (Harper and Row), Jürgen Moltmann wrote: “Expectation makes life good, for in expectation (we) can accept (the) whole present and find joy not only in its joy but also in its sorrow., happiness not only in its happiness, but also in its pain. Thus, hope goes on its way through the midst of happiness and pain, because in the promises of God it can see a future also for the transient, the dying, and the dead.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let our prayer begin: “Thank You, Lord, for light in the midst of darkness, peace in the midst of turmoil, hope in the midst of life...”

July 31, 2016 Text: Romans 6:1-4, 12-14, 17-23 “Death Becomes Life”

There are numerous themes in this week’s study text. Where to begin? There is more about grace (Romans 6:1, 14). There is a lot about sin (Romans 6:2, 12, 14, 17-18, 20, 23). There is mention of death’s reality (Romans 6:3-4, 21-23). There is the celebration of eternal life (Romans 6:11, 22-23). There are images of the body as an instrument of sin (Romans 6:12-13, 19). There are calls for righteousness (Romans 6:18, 20). There is a reminder of the full meaning of baptism (Romans 6:3-4).

I am reminded of the story of the youngster who was asked to lead in prayer. The child agreed and then prayed this prayer: “ABCDEFGH-IJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ. Amen.” When asked about this rather unusual prayer, the young one said, “Those are the letters of the alphabet. God knows how to put them together in the right order so my prayer will be what I need to say.”

These verses in Romans are something similar to that. It is as if Paul spreads out a buffet of meaning, so each reader can choose what he or she needs. It is as if Paul has thrown a lot of balls into the air, knowing that God will help each of us grab the ball we need.

Then, all of a sudden, in the midst of all this imagery, Paul apologizes for the way he has been writing. He explains, “I’m speaking in ordinary metaphors because of your limitations” (Romans 6:19, CEB). I think it made Paul nervous to depict Christians as any kind of slave,

but he must tell the truth: the Christian can have no master other than God. So, you are slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:18)! They all could understand that!

These verses close with the memorable statement that the “wages of sin are death” (Romans 6:23). There are two New Testament words that get translated “wages.” One of them refers to the income you receive for work you have done. The other term describes the rations given a soldier going into battle: “This is what you have for food as you fight.” It is this second meaning that Paul uses. That is powerful; because of our sin, we are going into battle and the only thing we have to eat is death! Yet, there is the gift that God gives in Jesus Christ: eternal living.

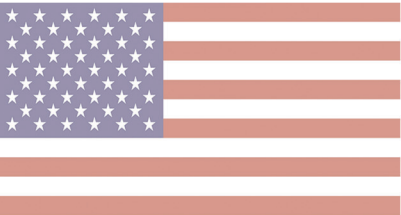
What Someone Else Has Said:

In Bishop William R. Cannon’s autobiography (*A Magnificent Obsession*, Abingdon), he wrote: “According to John Wesley, once we are forgiven God grants us the power not to commit a known sin, and as we live thereafter constantly with him, we grow increasingly like him, until we receive a second gift of grace, namely entire sanctification or perfect love.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord God, You have claimed us with grace, so now we seek to live in that grace...”

Happy July 4th!



Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. John 15:13 AKJV

Smile for the Day

A Christian lady is living next door to an atheist. Every morning the lady comes out onto her front porch and shouts "Praise the Lord!". The atheist yells back, "There is no God". She does this every morning with the same result. As time goes on the lady runs into financial difficulties and has trouble buying food. She goes out onto the porch and asks God for help with groceries, then says "Praise the Lord". The next morning she goes out onto the porch and there's the groceries she's asked for, of course she says "Praise the Lord". The atheist jumps out from behind a bush and says, "Ha, I bought those groceries - there is no God". The lady looks at him and smiles, she shouts "Praise the Lord --- not only did you provide for me Lord, you made Satan pay for the groceries!"