

biblestudy: may 2019

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

May 5, 2019 Text: Romans 3:21-31 “Called to Righteousness”

Have you ever been reading a book or a magazine article and suddenly come across your own name? That is not likely to happen to most of us. But it happens in this week’s study text. “All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory” (Romans 3:23). If you don’t see your name in that verse, go back and read it again. (Out of curiosity, I did a little digging into the Greek word for “all,” pas. All the standard lexicons include a phrase similar to this: “This includes Belton Joyner and anyone reading this stuff.”)

But keep reading. As soon as Paul has labeled us as “sinners,” he tells the rest of the story: “treated as righteous freely by his grace...” (Romans 3:24). Being given grace is no cause for pride (Romans 3:27). It is a cause for righteous living. In fact, the root for the New Testament word “righteous” is a word meaning “show.” Righteousness is not just an inner spirit or feeling; righteousness shows the values of Jesus Christ.

The assurance of this grace is a gift I need today. How about you? On the day I write this, the United States is having 2018 mid-term elections---how will the outcome affect our nation? Yesterday, I read of a large group of United Methodists who said they would have to leave the denomination if the 2019 General Conference decided on a plan with which they did not agree. By now—as you read this—you know what happened in February, but right now I do not. I need the assur-

ance of this word of grace. How about you?

We have a way of dividing up people into “us” and “them.” God does not play that way. In the midst of a major cultural and religious bifurcation, Paul tells the believers in Rome that God’s grace was extended both to Jew and to Gentile (Romans 3:29). It is done through Jesus Christ. This is so remarkable that translators have struggled to find a way to express it (Romans 3:24): ransom (Common English Bible), redemption (King James Version, New Revised Standard Version), deliverance (Twentieth Century New Testament), salvation (New Testament according to Eastern Texts), liberation (New English Bible) , sets them free (Today’s English Version), taking the rap for everyone (Letters to Street Christians), a pure gift (The Message), redemptive act (J. B. Phillips), emancipation (Cotton Patch).

What Someone Else Has Said:

Walter Brueggemann (*From Whom No Secrets Are Hid*, Westminster John Knox), writes: “Righteousness, in sum, is glad acceptance of the good ordering of reality given and guaranteed by the creator...”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Thank You, Lord Jesus...”

May 12, 2019 Text: Romans 8:1-14 “Called to Life in the Spirit”

In this week’s study text, Paul does not give us much wiggle room. Selfishness vs. Spirit (Romans 8:7) . Self-centeredness vs. Spirit. (Romans 8:8) Death vs. life (Romans 8:13). It doesn’t get much clearer or forthright than that. (Compare those Common English Bible translations with other translations.)

Life in the Spirit is from the same one who raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 8:11). That is the power of resurrection. That is the power of new life. That is the power that writes “Yes” by tomorrow. In that Spirit’s power, we dare to live with hope.

Interestingly enough, throughout these verses in Romans the word “you” is plural—“y’all,” “all of you.” The dangers of living in the flesh (selfishness) apply to the community, as well as to the individual. Sometimes, alas, the Church family is exclusive, turning its back on those “not like us.” Sometimes, alas, the gathered congregation has signaled that “everybody else has got it wrong, but we have got it right.” As I sometimes say, “There is enough sin to go around.”

As I was typing this, my cell phone signaled a call. I was glad to see it was from my long-time friend Conrad Glass. He often sends me the latest joke or hilarious cartoon. I opened the e-mail that came to my phone and began enjoying the laughs. There were a series of jokes

and drawings that made fun of our dependence on cell phones. One of the funniest ones was a picture taken at a beach; everyone was looking at his or her phone and the caption read “Would anyone like to plan a get-away week-end so we can all go stare at our phones?” I laughed, but suddenly it dawned on me: the reason I got this message while I was working on this Bible study was because I had put my cell phone on my desk so I would instantly see if any messages came. Oops! It is easy to see faults in others and easy to miss them in ourselves.

What does life in the Spirit look like? In Romans 13:8-10, Paul gets specific. It looks like love. Spirit-love does not measure deserving. Spirit-love chooses compassion and hospitality. Spirit-love invites others to claim the Spirit’s presence...and thus to love.

Paul’s word is about a call to life in the Spirit. As Joshua said so long ago, “Choose this day whom you will serve.” (Joshua 24:15).

What Someone Else Has Said:

Jon Meacham in *The Soul of America* (Random House), quotes President Theodore Roosevelt who said, “But we must keep steadily in mind that no people were ever yet benefitted by riches if their prosperity corrupted their virtue.”

Prayer: As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Holy Spirit...”

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May 19, 2019 Text: Romans 11:11-24 “The Call of the Gentiles”

Riches (Romans 11:12). A batch of dough (Romans 11:16). Olive tree branch (Romans 11:17). Olive oil (Romans 11:17). Do you note this variety of metaphors and images that Paul uses? The apostle is struggling to find some way to explain to “God’s chosen people” that God also loves the Gentiles (Romans 11:11).

We use figures of speech all the time in our daily interactions. “I put my foot in my mouth” has nothing to do with gymnastics. “I’ll knock your head clean off” has nothing to do with skull removal. “My heart is broken” does not refer to the need for cardio-surgery. We often turn to this kind of talk when ordinary vocabulary paints with a black and white brush while we want our pictures to be in brilliant color. So, it is not surprising that the apostle makes his theological point, not so much with technical “church talk,” but with everyday pictures.

Has God rejected the Jews because some have not believed the gospel? No! (See Romans 11:1). Can God use our unfaithfulness to achieve God’s purposes? Yes! (Romans 11:7-10). Do Gentiles get to enjoy the blessing of God’s love? Yes! (Romans 11:12). Can Gentiles with faith succumb to the sin of pride? Yes! (Romans 11:22). Is there hope for the Israelites who have fallen away? Yes! (Romans 11:25-26). These are not simple understandings and because they are difficult to grasp and accept, Paul turns to common imagery so we can have a handle for picking up these powerful testimonies.

May 26, 2019 Text: Romans 12:1-8 “Called to New Life in Christ”

Okay, I know it is a bit ridiculous, but I have thirty-two clocks in my house. One advantage is that I can always find one that shows I am leaving for that next meeting at the right time, even though another one shows me five minutes late. Last fall, my niece Carol and her husband, Jeff, visited me from their home in Idaho. Jeff noticed that five of my clocks were not running at all. “Why not?” he asked. “Well, I have tried to fix them, but I guess I don’t know how.”

Twelve hours later, all the clocks but two were chipping away with the correct time. (He had to go buy some parts for those other two.) Jeff obviously has a gift for clock repair that I do not have! What a blessing when each gives of the gift with which he or she is equipped.

In the twelfth chapter of Romans, Paul writes of spiritual gifts. The New Testament word for gift is “charisma.” (Recognize the word “charismatic”?) Literally, the word means “spiritual endowment.” In my mind, “endowment” usually means a huge sum of money set aside for a particular purpose. (Think of the Duke Endowment.) But, just because the money is there does not mean that it is getting spent. I am left to wonder: Has God given me a gift (a spiritual endowment) that I am not spending?

The apostle gives some examples of such spiritual gifts. (I am going to list them and will note some various ways the word has been translated.) Verse 6: prophecy (preaching, inspired utterance).

The point comes through: if we have been broken off from the good news of God, we can be grafted back on. One way to say this would be: God sees a comma in our lives, not a period. In Paul’s religious world, he speaks of God’s love for Jews and for Gentiles. That about covers it! That’s everybody!

How remarkable it is that God can even use our weaknesses to move some to faith! In Romans 11:13, Paul writes of how God might turn jealousy into belief. That has not been in my playbook! God’s far-reaching love doesn’t want to let go, and for that we can be thankful. Riches! A batch of dough! Olive tree branch! Olive oil! Praise God!

What Someone Else Has Said:

Ruth Bell Graham (*Prodigals*, Baker Books) tells of something said to a woman whose son had strayed: “If you heard a timid knock on your door one day...only to find your child standing there, bruised, wounded, bleeding, dirty, and tattered, what would you do? Slam the door in his face? Or would you throw open the door and welcome him into your arms?”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let our prayer begin: “I’m coming home, Lord...”

Verse 7: service (ministering, administration, practical service). Verse 7: teaching (teach with your life, instruct). Verse 8: encouragement (exhortation, stirring speech, strong and helpful, stimulating faith). Verse 8: giving (charity with a generous heart, with sincerity, generous in helping others, with singleness of mind). Verse 8: leader (ruler, in authority, rule diligently). Verse 8: mercy (give help cheerfully, kindness to others, show pity gladly).

John Wesley argued that preachers should move from station to station because no one preacher had all the gifts needed in any one place. (That’s one reason United Methodist clergy are subject to a new appointments every year.)

It is not uncommon for us to look at that list in Romans and feel that these gifts have all been given to others and not to us. These verses are not, of course, a comprehensive naming of all the gifts that God will give. What gift do you have? Are you using it?

What Someone Else Has Said:

Darryl Stephens (*Out of Exodus*), has written; “Through these channels of grace, we experience the Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives.”

Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Let me use my gifts for You...”

