

Title: *Good News for All*

Text: Romans 3:21-26

John Ortberg tells the story of a friend of his by the name of Jimmy.

Jimmy, and his son, Davey, were playing in the ocean down in Mexico, while his family — his wife, daughters, parents, and a cousin — were on the beach. Suddenly, a rogue riptide swept Davey out to the sea. Immediately Jimmy started to do whatever he could to help Davey get back to the shore, but he, too, was soon swept away in the tide. He knew that in a few minutes, both he and Davey would drown. He tried to scream, but his family couldn't hear him.

Jimmy's a strong guy — an Olympic Decathlete — but he was powerless in this situation. As he was carried along by the water, he had a single, chilling thought: *My wife and my daughters are going to have to have a double funeral.*

Meanwhile, his cousin, who understood something about the ocean, saw what was happening. He walked out into the water where he knew there was a sandbar. He had learned that if you try to fight a riptide, you will die. So, he walked to the sandbar, stood as close as he could get to Jimmy and Davey, and then he just lifted his hand up and said, "You come to me. You come to me."

If you try to go the way your gut tells you to go — the shortest distance into shore — you will die. If you think for yourself, you will die. God says, "If you come to me, you will live." That's it — death or life.

There is much about our salvation, or about the Christian life that seems counter-intuitive. One of the first things that is counter-intuitive is that we are not made right with God by our own efforts. A lot of people seem to have the idea that if they can just try a little harder, dig a little deeper, put forth a little more effort to be a better person and to do better things, they will somehow automatically be right with God.

Paul is introducing himself to the church in Rome and in order to win their support, he's laying out for them his understanding of the Christian faith. In so doing, he gives us the most comprehensive picture of our salvation seen anywhere in the Bible.

In this first section, he's laying out for us the sinfulness of humanity before God. That sounds so big and so vague that it may be hard for us to get our minds around it or to feel its emotional impact. The good news of the gospel is that although all of us are separated from God because of our sin, we can be made right with God through faith in Jesus Christ.

After introducing himself and making some introductory comments to his belief system, he affirms in 1:16,17, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."¹⁷ For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

Paul is writing to the Romans and he's telling them, I want to tell you good news and I want you to know that I'm not ashamed of this good news. I find that kind of interesting. Are

you ever ashamed of good news? If you get engaged, are you ashamed to tell anyone about it? If you have a child, are you nervous about what people will think before you tell them? If your nephew is coming back from the war, do you kind of slink back and mutter out of the side of your mouth, “Yay. I’m so happy!”

If you’re really excited about good news, you can’t wait to tell it and you don’t care who hears it. Why then would Paul have to affirm that he’s not ashamed of the good news? It could just be bravado, like you would tell a bully, “You don’t scare me.”

Maybe Paul, with all of his learning is tempted to feel inferior because rather than being some intricate, complex philosophy that requires superior intellect to figure out, he is setting forth a simple gospel. When he went to Corinth, he said, “²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.” He says, “I’m bringing you something that some people are just going to regard as so much foolishness, but I’m not ashamed of it because I see it as so much more than that.

Maybe it’s because he’s not advocating some superior feat that he has done. Instead, he’s telling about what God has done for him. In Ephesians, he says, “⁸ For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- ⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.”

In the last part of that chapter, he writes, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

He continues through chapter 2 to lay out the case that we are under the righteous judgment of God because of our sin. All of us have the tendency in our own heart, left to our own devices and our own inclinations, we would go our own way and do our own thing. In Romans 2:5-8, we read, “But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. ⁶ God “will give to each person according to what he has done.” ⁷ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. ⁸ But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.

When he comes down to Romans 3:19 and 20, he says, “¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the

whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”

When we read that verse, we might be tempted to despair to be depressed. It doesn't sound like there's much hope for us at all. We're under a law that we can't keep, we're unrighteous before God, we're made aware of our sin but we're not given any way out from under the crushing burden of our sin.

What's our normal human tendency in that situation? Try harder. Try religion. See what kind of contortions I can go through and hope and pray that these contortions might be enough to make me what I need to be. Some religions teach that if you just go through an endless cycle of reincarnation, you can get all of the badness purged out of you and you can pay for all of your past sins and get rid of your bad karma. The Jewish people of Jesus' day thought that they could build a hedge around the law to keep anyone from going close to breaking it and they weren't content to live that way just for themselves, they could win God's favor. They persecuted anyone who didn't adhere to their interpretation of how not to come even close to breaking the law.

Our instincts are to try harder, sit up a little more straight, be a bit more careful, but somehow, the harder we try to be righteous, the worse job we do. Into that situation of hopelessness and despair, we hear the words, “But now.” “But now, a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. The righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” It's great to look at the times the phrase “but now” or “but God” appears in the Bible. In John, the blind man says, “I was blind, but now I see.”

Romans 5:8 says, “⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Ephesians 2:4 says, “But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵ made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved.” The point is to say that when the situation seemed hopeless, God was the one who took the initiative. Religion says that we have to climb our way up to God. Christianity says that God has taken the initiative to make a way for us come before Him. Although it's the law that shows us what God is like and what he expects, but it's not the law that can make us righteous, because we can't keep the law.

So our instinct tells us, try harder, do more, be better. God says a righteousness apart from the law has been made known to which the Law and the prophets testify. It comes through faith in Jesus Christ – through trusting what He's done on the cross. Another thing that is counter-intuitive is that our salvation comes freely.

What is the most valuable thing you have? You could think about your possessions – your house, your car, some other asset – but you realize, at least I hope you realize after last week's sermon (and even before that) that those things aren't what is really most valuable. We value our relationships with friends and family, our children. Ultimately though, we know that it's the hope of eternal life and of a restored and right relationship with God.

It's that hope of a right relationship with God that drives people to do all sort of religious

things. To pay some great expense to be made right. We know we can't buy our way into heaven, but some people sure do seem to think that they have to pay some great price of religion or good works to become right with God.

Everyone who wants to be made right with God is made right with God the exact same way. It is through the person and the work and the intercession of Jesus Christ. God's way of restoring people to a relationship with himself is through what Jesus Christ has done. Paul says, "There is no difference. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." That means that all of us have a genetic defect in us called human nature. Our human nature is fallen and it doesn't matter how hard we try or what we do, it is not in us to rise to the standard of a holy God. We have all sinned and fallen short.

We often use that verse in evangelism. It's part of how we explain to someone how they can be saved or made right with God. In order to lead someone into a right relationship with God, they need first to realize that their relationship with God is not what it needs to be. When we say "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, we often put a period on the end of that statement where there really should be a comma. The rest of the sentence is in verse 24. It reads, "And are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came through Jesus Christ."

That basically means that Jesus Christ has already done all that there is to be done and all that is left for us to do is to receive what he's already done for us. That word grace there means the unmerited favor of God. I don't earn it. I just receive it. That's what's so counter-intuitive to a lot of people.

An old tale speaks of a man who died and faced the angel Gabriel at heaven's gates. The angel said, "Here's how this works. You need a hundred points to make it into heaven. You tell me all the good things you have done, and I will give a certain number of points for each of them. The more good there is in the work that you cite, the more points you will get for it. When you get to a hundred points, you get in."

"Okay," the man said, "I was married to the same woman for 50 years and never cheated on her, even in my heart."

Gabriel replied, "That's wonderful. That's worth three points."

"Three points?" said the man incredulously. "Well, I attended Christ church all my life and supported its ministry with my money and service."

"Terrific!" said Gabriel, "that's certainly worth a point."

"One point?" said the man with his eyes beginning to show a bit of panic. "Well, how about this: I opened a shelter for the homeless in my city, and fed needy people by the hundreds during holidays."

"Fantastic, that's good for two more points," said the angel.

"TWO POINTS!" cried the man in desperation. "At this rate the only way I will get to heaven is by the grace of God."

"Come on in," said Gabriel.

To show the magnitude or the greatness of God's grace is something else that runs against the grain of the way we think things should go. It doesn't make sense that God would be interested in us, but he is. It doesn't make sense that God would be willing to allow his son to pay the price for our sins. How many of us like to see our children suffer?

God presented Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood. In the Old Testament and even today in many religious systems of the world, it takes the blood of an animal to atone for our sins. Jesus Christ became the once and for all sacrifice of atonement, paying the price with his own blood so that we could know him. He did this to demonstrate just how willing he is to forgive.

He did this to satisfy his own sense of justice that a holy God has to deal with sin but in his love he wanted to justify those who have faith in Jesus Christ.

This Jesus who died gave us the Great commission. Only hope. .

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