

“Christ is Available”

Romans 10: 5 - 13

Makemie Memorial Presbyterian Church

February 1, 2008

Romans 10: 5 through 13.

Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that “the person who does these things will live by them.” But the righteousness that comes from faith says, “Do not say in your heart, `Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or `Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say?

The word is near you, On your lips and in your heart”
(that is, the word of faith which we speak);
because if you confess with your lips Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

This ends the reading of the word.

What an extraordinary passage.

It's a good example of how the scripture is made. Paul focuses on Moses, he uses some Leviticus 18 some Deuteronomy 30. But the striking thing about it is Moses is presented in the book of Exodus as giving the law to Israel at Sinai. But there is in the Old Testament a book called Deuteronomy, which is a second giving, a second telling, a retelling of the law. But in Deuteronomy its Moses said, Moses said, Moses said, even though the book comes from the 8 th- 7 th century long after Moses is dead. After there is a monarch, there are kings, there are problems, there are prophets, there are great difficulties, political and religious. "What does Moses say to us today? That's what Moses said to them then, what does Moses say to us today?" And so the marvelous book of Deuteronomy is a sermon or series of sermons from Moses. "What would Moses say to us in this new situation?"

Isn't that marvelous? That's the way scripture is built. And then that is translated into Greek for other people, we call it the Septuagint, and Paul takes it from there and gives it a Christian interpretation. For instant, Moses at the end of his sermon says to the people of Israel, "Now don't complain and say this word is too difficult.

Don't say who is going to go up into heaven and bring it down, don't say who is going to cross the sea and bring it to us, the word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart, the word of faith," Paul says.

Now that's the way scripture is built. Exodus, Deuteronomy, Septuagint, Paul, and then we do our part through sharing of faith, through teaching and sharing the word, to continue that living witness to the word. It is layered in that way. What is scripture? It is the interpretation of scripture. Not only that but if one of you would ask this question, then it also becomes an exercise on how do you read scripture. Because everybody knows a flat "it is written" is not enough. There is scripture and then there is scripture. Then there is scripture that interprets scripture and all of that. Notice what Paul says, "Moses writes concerning the righteousness according to the law. But the righteousness according to the faith, says." Do you see the difference in the verbs? Moses writes; fixed, permanent, on the stone, in the book, there it is. But the righteousness according to the faith, says; it is a word released, available, accessible, in the air, for everyone to hear, for after all this is what Paul wants to talk about. That the same God is reached by all who call upon God. There is no distinction. Anywhere in the world. No distinction. Male, female, race,

color, anything else. The same word is available to everyone. And how can it be more available than for it to come off the page and into the air and be a word that's preach. Christ is available through the sharing of the word. That's what he is talking about.

And I do on occasion have people who ask about the Bible. I had one the other day, wanted to know where the measurements for building the ark was in the Bible. All this rain, you know. Another said, they were thinking about preaching a Sunday. Good. She said, "You got any ideas?" Well. I do get questions. I got one the other day. "How come in Genesis it says "in the beginning God created heaven and earth," and in the gospel of John it says, "in the beginning was the word." "Which was it, Debra, physical world or word?"

I do get questions but not this question. And even though I haven't gotten this question, yet, I would like to spend a few minutes talking about the marvelous achievement of Paul in this passage. He takes, he takes those words of Moses in Deuteronomy 30, "the word is near you in your mouth and in your heart," and locks in on that. That word that is available to everybody. Now what was important in the early church and I still think it's important is for the word to be released into the air for everybody anywhere to hear it, that is if you

want it to be accessible, available, affordable, anytime, anywhere, anybody. What you want to do is frame it in a very clear concise way so you can just take it with you. Just do it. Boil out all the water in the pot and just have the stain in the bottom of the pot and then preach that stain. Just give it to me in a nutshell. What's the whole thing?

Paul said, "Here's the whole thing. Here is the whole thing. He takes Moses words; mouth and heart, and frames a little four line poem, a little quatrain, a little what we called in Hebrew class a chiasm: it's an a, b; b, a:

"If you confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord,
believe in your heart, God raised him from the dead,
you'll be saved, for with the heart one believes and is justified
and with the mouth one confesses and so is saved."

Mouth, heart, heart, mouth. We can remember that.

We can take it, we can wake up in the middle of the night and say it. We can go anywhere in the world and say it. That's the whole thing right there. Easy to remember. Highly portable. Distilled. Succinct. And on target. The boiled down truth of the whole thing.

Now in the early church that kind of exercise was extremely important. It's not original with the church. People have done that

time immemorial. In oral cultures where people didn't have books, couldn't look up things, no libraries, no search engines, things were transmitted in memorable ways, we call it maxims, proverbs, sayings, every culture has them.

“Bad marriages can beget good children.”

“The one who can't dance, thinks the band can't play.”

“When smashing idols, save the pedestals, they'll be used again.”

We just have those sayings. Marvelous sayings.

“If you are bitter in your heart, sugar on your lips won't help.”

The world is full of those. Just distilled in a crisp way. What is the sum of the matter?

Now James does it. James is the best example we have of early Christian wisdom. Just read the book of James. Time and time and time again. “Be doers of the word and not hearers of it.” “Faith without works is dead.” “Resist the devil, run from him.” “Draw near to God, God will draw near to you.” “Every good and perfect gift comes down from the Father of lights, in which there is no variation nor shadow you can change.” Any questions? Crisp, clear. That's it. It's a marvelous exercise. We find them in the pastoral letters, called

faithful sayings: “Christ came into the world to save sinners, in whom I’m the chief.” That’s the heart of the matter.

Jesus according to the gospels, was the master of the one-liner. Got a hundred and ten, a hundred and twenty one-liners from Jesus. Here it is. Zing! “You strain gnats and swallow camels.” That’s fairly clear. You’ll remember that all your life. “It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man get into heaven.” Any questions? No we got that one.

Isn’t it a marvelous way. You don’t even need to put it on a piece of paper. “Don’t cast your pearls before swine.” “A city set on a hill, cannot be hid.” “Physician heal thyself.” “If they do this when the wood is green what will they do when it’s dry?” Marvelous exercise. Paul did it. The different thing about Paul doing it is he wanted to make sure in every one of these little poetic, proverbial sayings there was the gospel. There wasn’t just advice there was the gospel.

“If you confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord,
believe in your heart, God raised him from the dead,
you’ll be saved, for with the heart one believes and is justified
and with the mouth one confesses and so is saved.”

Little four-line poem, that's the whole of the matter. He loved to do it. "The one who knew no sin, became sin that in him we might become the righteousness of God." He loved to do it. "Remember the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, he was rich, became poor, that by his poverty we might be rich." The whole thing right there.

If you were in prison as he often was you had the word. In a frontier situation you had the word. You had something on the lips, in the mouth, you could say & generate and sustain the faith that saves.

In order to be interested in this exercise however, one has to be convinced of the importance of words. And I think that's our rub. There is such a glut of words. Just words, words, words. I remember hearing in my first preaching class, one of my classmates say, "Oh, preaching. Well, listening to sermons is like being stoned with popcorn. You know there is nothing that happens, no damaged done, nothing happens." Thinking you're going to change the world by words is like thinking you're break a stonewall by throwing a light bulb against it.

What is a word anyway? It's vibrations across the ear. I can say to you, "Peace", whoosh, quiver, gone.

Even Jesus said, “The word, the word of God is like a seed that falls on a path and birds come and get it.” How vulnerable, how fragile, subject to everything. Yet, are we to give that much attention to these words? Yep. Yeah. Because Jesus said, “you will be forgiven of every sin, **every sin**, you will be forgiven of every sin, except one, if you speak against the Holy Spirit.” Do you mean to tell me that the unpardonable sin, the sin that lies beyond the reach of God’s grace is committed with the lips? Yeah. Yeah.

For Jesus said in that same chapter, chapter 12 of Matthew, “For by your words you’ll be justified, and by your words you will be condemned, and by your words you will be held accountable for every lazy, unemployed, empty, vain word you speak.” Yeah.

And I’ve become aware of how important words are. Every now and then it comes back. Once in a while you get a sense of it. I remember, when my friend Janey’s mother died. She had been invalid in Janey’s house for three years. And my friend had that strange painful beautiful ambiguous experience of taking care of her mother who was now her child. And her mother died. And it was extremely, extremely hard on my friend Janey. And I was in her home, trying to talk to her and she was in the kitchen trying to do the

dishes, and she didn't want to do the dishes but everyone brings in all that food with that little tape on the bottom of the bowl that says bring me my bowl back and all of that. And she's trying to take care of the food that nobody wants and the dishes that she has to return and she's standing at the sink and she's crying and she sits down. And I said to her a little line from Emily Dickinson. "This is the time for sweeping up the heart and putting love away." She said, "Yeah, that's it." And she went to the sink and did the dishes. What happened? That's it. Have you ever had the experience of words piling up around you and then somebody says the right word? That's it. It's okay.

I would like for you to imagine that the world of words is few. A slim volume. Lean words as we go forward in this new year. And that among these few words you get one sentence. This is your sentence. You get one sentence. You get one line. I would like to ask you to reduce all your words. Piles of words, mountains of words. To one saying. What would it be? You are Christians. What would your one sentence be? Here's an example:

"For the one willing to believe, final proof is not necessary. For the one unwilling to believe final proof is never enough." Yeah, that's

it. Wouldn't language really be something if one sentence did it.

Maybe even one word?

I remember the first winter I was at seminary. We had a four-day ice storm that January. Couldn't get out of the driveway. Snow everywhere. A deep snow. But one of the pastors from my home presbytery was coming in for a doctoral class and I had told him I would pick him up at the airport. My friend Hector Reynosa, dug out the driveway. Clearing out all the snow, he just about had the entire driveway cleared when a huge snowplow came down the road. And with its big blade it scooped up four or five feet of snow onto the driveway. Hector stood there and leaned on the shovel and said one word. I had never heard him say anything close to this before. He is a man of beatitudes and good things. But he stood there and looked that snow now piled up at the end of the drive and the snowplow going down the road and he said that one word.

We are going to have one sentence to take us into 2010. Karl Barth, who wrote volumes and volumes of theology, trillions of words, was asked to reduce all his writing to one sentence. And he said, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

And they came to Jesus and they said, “Jesus we have so many rules, we have over 1500 on keeping Sabbath alone, could you just boil it down to the main one?” And he said, “Yeah. You shall love the Lord your God with all your mind, your soul, your heart, your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

You get one sentence. One sentence until 2010. What’s it going to be? I know what some of you are going to say, “For God so loved the world that he was sent.” Some of you, if I know you right will say, “May the peace of God which passes all understanding keep sentinel watch at the door of your heart.” That’s a good one. I know one person in this room will say this, “If anyone is in Christ they are a new creation.” They are a couple here that have already decided on theirs & they didn’t even know what this was about but their circumstance, their family circumstance has made them say, “Our sentence is this, ‘Nothing is impossible with God.’” Tim Tebow the quarterback for the Florida Gators has his sentence, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Do you have your sentence? You don’t have to have it now. This is important. But get one today and pass it along. And when you say it to someone let it be clear of all the words in the world this is my

sentence. Paul has offered you one it's a good one. I however have decided to take a different one of Paul's. My sentence is influenced by the study we are doing in adult Sunday school; the influence of immanence or the God within. It's from Colossians. This is my sentence. "And the mystery is that Christ lives in you." Amen.