

God's Way of Putting People Right  
Romans Summer Sermon Series – June 3<sup>rd</sup>

**Series: Extreme Makeover**  
**Text: Romans 1:16-17; 3:22-28**

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Stacey D. Jones on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2007 at  
Northminster Presbyterian Church.

This morning we are beginning a series of sermons which will take us right up until the fall, with a few skipped Sundays for guests. Summer worship has a different feel to it than what we do the other 9 months of the year, and I hope you will want to come the Sundays you are in town as we preach our way through Paul's Letter to the Romans. However, I know that summer is a time of travel. I know I won't see all of you every week, but I hope wherever you go this summer you won't take a vacation from worship. Worship is our weekly offering of thanks to God for the gift of life God has given us, so I hope you will taste different styles of worship in the communities you visit and enrich your spiritual lives in that way.

Here at Northminster Presbyterian Church of Ames I have chosen a systematic visit to Romans as our preaching text because Romans is a textbook in biblical theology. It is one of the most thorough articulations of the Gospel you will find in the writings of the New Testament. It talks about being transformed from the inside out, and it is a great book to study in a time of year when we focus on re-creating ourselves from the busy schedules of Fall, Winter and Spring. Admittedly though, it will be a bit of a challenge for Chris as he tries to keep us going with our power-point for contemporary Sundays!

The Letter to the Romans was written by the Apostle Paul about 35 years after the death of Jesus. It was written to people he did not know who lived in a city he had never visited. Yet the church in Rome was a strategically important church in Paul's missionary strategy because it was in a city which was the seat of great ideas. Rome was the place where great philosophy, art and music were being developed in Paul's time, and from Rome these ideas spread throughout the Roman Empire. So, in his Letter to Rome, Paul takes pains to be sure he communicates his great ideas clearly and in a way that will stand up to some of the other great ideas being circulated.

There is a debate among scholars as to whom the letter is addressed. Some say it was written to Jewish believers in an attempt to get them to

lay aside their sense of privilege to enlarge their understanding of the grace of God to those who had not been born Jewish. Others say it was written to Gentile believers trying to get them to understand that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is for both Jew and Gentile.

The truth is we do not know which audience he was addressing. However, the content of this letter is such a clear presentation of the Gospel message that it has been a primary study for seminary students to understand theology of the Bible without it being colored by the biases which are contained in the books we call Gospel: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.

One commentary on Romans is entitled *The Clearest Gospel of All*, because even though Romans does not tell stories about Jesus, it communicates the Gospel in a clear and systematic format. I, however, have chosen to call this series *Extreme Makeover* based on the reality television program where a crew of people show up at a home that is in shambles and in a week's time they transform the house into something beautiful which changes the family's life who live there. This is the focus of Romans—transformation from the inside out.

To help you on our journey, I have developed a reading plan and a scripture memorization plan for the next 17 weeks that I commend to you as a way to go a bit deeper into the preaching and to stay current while you may be traveling. It is available in the gathering space. I hope you will join us on a journey of clarity; a journey of transformation; a journey in the Gospel.

With this background, we begin with the first chapter of Romans, and I invite you to listen, again, for the word of God as it is found in Romans 1:16-17 and Romans 3:22-28. I will be reading from The Message translation by Eugene Peterson.

Chapter 1: <sup>16</sup>It's news I'm most proud to proclaim, this extraordinary Message of God's powerful plan to rescue everyone who trusts him, starting with Jews and then right on to everyone else! <sup>17</sup>God's way of putting people right shows up in the acts of faith, confirming what Scripture has said all along: "The person in right standing before God by trusting him really lives."

Chapter 3: <sup>22</sup>The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus--setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this. <sup>23</sup>Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, <sup>24</sup>God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.

<sup>25</sup>God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world of sin. Having faith in him sets us in the clear. God decided on this course of action in full view of the public--to set the world in the clear with himself through the sacrifice of Jesus, finally taking care of the sins he had so patiently endured. <sup>26</sup>This is not only clear, but it's now--this is current history! God sets things right. He also makes it possible for us to live in his rightness. <sup>27</sup>So where does that leave our proud Jewish insider claims and counterclaims? Canceled? Yes, canceled. What we've learned is this: God does not respond to what we do; we respond to what God does. <sup>28</sup>We've finally figured it out. Our lives get in step with God and all others by letting him set the pace, not by proudly or anxiously trying to run the parade.

### **The Human Condition**

Paul begins his letter with enthusiasm. The New Revised standard version says: *"For I am not ashamed of the Gospel."* The Message says *"It's news I'm most proud to proclaim, this extraordinary Message of God's powerful plan to rescue everyone who trusts him, starting with Jews and then right on to everyone else!"* For Paul there is no greater calling than to preach the message of God's saving grace.

By his self-description (Philippians 3:4-6), he had lived most of his life as a faithful Jew. He had been diligent in his attention to the Law of God. He was one of the spiritual elite of Judaism who had been taught that if he could just keep the Ten Commandments and the over 600 laws that had become part of their interpretation, he could earn his way into a right relationship with God. He hated Christians and their claim that God had raised Christ from the dead to establish a new relationship with

humankind. Their message was an affront to his faith, and he saw himself as chief among the persecutors early church.

However, something happened to him while he was on his way to Damascus to kill more Christians which changed him forever (Acts 9). He met the risen Christ, and in an instant it became clear to him that the good news these people, whom he hated, were preaching was good news for him, as well. On the Damascus Road Paul realized that there was nothing he could do to earn his way back into the good graces of God.

Paul was a student of the Law. He operated under the belief that the Law was God's way of restoring the relationship between God and humanity which had been broken by an act of disobedience in the Garden of Eden. What he experienced on the Damascus Road was a whole new paradigm. He understood that if the relationship between God and humanity was to be restored, it had to be at God's initiative. He learned theologically what marriage counselors learn clinically. When a relationship is broken because of unfaithfulness, the offending party cannot earn his/her way back into the good graces of the person they have offended. The only way the relationship can be healed is the willingness of the other person to forgive.

A couple comes into our office with their relationship shattered by infidelity. The good news is that according to national statistics, 64% of those marriages can be saved. (Source: [Divorcepeers.com](http://Divorcepeers.com)). Yet how does a marriage survive infidelity? It can only happen when the offended partner is willing to forgive and begin the relationship as if it were brand new. If the offended party cannot forgive or if the offender refuses to alter their behavior, the chances for success drop drastically. If the offended party needs to nurse a grudge or exact some kind of revenge for what has occurred, the chances of the marriage relationship being healed become less.

This is the human condition according to Paul. The relationship between God and humankind has been breached so badly that it cannot be repaired. It must be healed, and in order for the offending party to be restored to a right relationship, he/she can only be forgiven. The good news of which Paul is not ashamed is that God has provided a way for this to be accomplished in Jesus Christ.

## **God's Initiative**

Paul is bold to proclaim that the restoration of the broken relationship is at God's initiative. The theological word we use for this is justification. The broken relationship we have with God has been restored not by something we have done, but by something God has done.

The word in the original Greek implies that God looks at the human condition just as we are and still counts us as worthy of a relationship. Even though we are the ones who have been unfaithful, God remains faithful to the covenant which He established with Abraham.

Dr. Roy Gufstason tells a story to illustrate this principle. It seems that there was a man in England who put his Rolls-Royce on a boat and went across the continent to go on a holiday. While he was driving around Europe, something happened to the motor of his car. He called the Rolls-Royce people back in England and asked, "I'm having trouble with my car; what do you suggest I do?" Well, the Rolls-Royce people flew a mechanic over! The mechanic repaired the car and flew back to England and left the man to continue his holiday. As you can imagine, the fellow was wondering, "How much is this going to cost me?" So when he got back to England, he wrote the people a letter and asked how much he owed them. He received a letter from the office that read: "Dear Sir: There is no record anywhere in our files that anything ever went wrong with a Rolls-Royce."

This is what the concept of justification means. It is not that we are without fault. It is that God chooses to treat our faults as if they never happened and to offer us a way to live a life that is more satisfying. Even though we have sought after other gods, God chooses not to punish us by breaking the relationship with us. Instead, God balances the scales by the sacrifice of Jesus. God lays the price of our infidelity—when we seek other gods and make them more important than our relationship with Him—on the shoulders of Jesus Christ and nail our infidelity to the cross of Calvary. The price for our sin is paid. We are free to engage in a relationship with God just as we are because God has made us worthy of that relationship.

The gods of our culture are always enticing us to believe they are more important than the God who created us in His image. You've experienced it, and so have I: How do you feel about your own security when you are

asked to take a risk to welcome the stranger into your life? How do you feel about your material comfort when we talk to you about giving a percentage of your income to further the Kingdom of God? We live in a world of sexual temptation at every turn. How do you feel about your sexual pleasure when we speak of fidelity in relationships? How do you feel about standing up for what you know is right at the risk of losing the approval of your peers? Are you willing to admit that we live in a culture which has given racial privilege to those of us with lighter skin, and what are you doing to right that wrong?

Paul says that God sees all that and judges it, and then puts on a pair of glasses which allows Him to see deeper into each one of us to that good and perfect being which He created. Jesus Christ paid the price for our disobedience. We deserve to be cut off in our relationship with him, but we are restored to a right relationship with God because of the price that Christ paid on the cross once and for all. It is as if our sin never existed.

We are saved by grace through faith not by our work alone. That's justification.

### **Our Response**

One final thing needs to be said about these two passages. In chapter 3 Paul ends by reminding his Jewish listeners that justification by faith does not mean that they rest on their laurels. At one time they were the chosen people, but in Jesus Christ, God has changed the relationship from exclusive to inclusive. Our relationship with God is not about birthright. It is about accepting the grace that has been extended to us and living in grateful response.

Living life as a grateful response is at the heart of the Gospel. We are no longer bound by shame and guilt which is the way many choose to live their lives. Instead we are free to respond to God's grace in everything we do.

Last weekend we celebrated Memorial Day which is all about the legacy of those who have gone before us and what their lives have taught us. In life we are to live our lives by letting God set the pace; letting God choose the agenda.

In the book *The Five People You Meet in Heaven*, Mitch Albom tells the story of Eddie, a carnival maintenance worker who dies saving the life of a little girl. In heaven he meets five people who had been part of his life.

The second person he meets was captain of his army unit in Vietnam. For the first time Eddie learns the captain died saving his life. As they reminisce about their time together, the captain talks about the significance of the sacrifices each of them made.

"Sacrifice," the Captain said. "You made one. I made one. We all make them. But you were angry over yours. You kept thinking about what you lost. You didn't get it. Sacrifice is a part of life. It's supposed to be. It's not something to regret. It's something to aspire to. Little sacrifices. Big sacrifices. A mother works so her son can go to school. A daughter moves home to take care of her sick father. A man goes to war..."

He stopped for a moment and looked off into the cloudy gray sky.

"Rabozzo (a member of their unit who died in captivity) didn't die for nothing, you know. He sacrificed for his country, and his family knew it, and his kid brother went on to be a good soldier and a great man because he was inspired by it. I didn't die for nothing, either. That night, we might have all driven over that land mine. Then the four of us would have been gone."

Eddie shook his head. "But you..." He lowered his voice. "You lost your life."

The Captain smacked his tongue on his teeth. "That's the thing. Sometimes when you sacrifice something precious, you're not really losing it. You're just passing it on to someone else."

This is what Paul claims God has done for us in Jesus Christ. He has passed on his love for us through the sacrifice of Christ on the cross so that we might be free to share that sacrifice with others in need whom we meet in our neighborhoods, in our community, and in our world.

## **Conclusion**

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So there is your first installment in Romans.

- Salvation by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.
- Justification by faith
- Gracious and generous living as a response

May God grant us the courage to live out the implications in our daily lives.  
Amen.