

The Essentials Of Salvation  
Romans Summer Sermon Series – August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007

**Series: Extreme Make Over**  
**Text: Romans 10:5-17**

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Stacey D. Jones at Northminster Presbyterian Church on Sunday August 19, 2007.

A friend of mine told me that he had been out at breakfast and someone had recognized him. My friend didn't recognize the man, so he responded by asking him where they had met. The man said, "Oh, we have never met, but I am a regular at your church on Christmas and Easter."

They for a few minutes, and then in an attempt to be friendly he made what was a rather disturbing insight into the way I fear many people view religious faith. He said, "*I guess you don't have to be a Presbyterian to get into heaven, but why take a chance, eh?*"

Isn't it unfortunate that we Christians have communicated a view of our entrance into the life which follows this life as if we will be graded on a curve; that membership in one denomination might give you better odds at entering the Kingdom of God than another denomination? The idea is surely not rooted in the Bible. Earlier in Romans (Romans 3:23) Paul has made the argument that "*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.*" Paul did not separate one sin from another. He didn't say that one church is better than another or one sin was less offensive than another. Paul says ALL have sinned and fallen short of what God intends for our lives, and all through the first nine chapters he has been making the case that it is God's grace and not our adherence to the Hebrew Law which assures us of God's love.

The ninth, tenth and eleventh chapters of Romans are a rather brutal condemnation of the Jewish attitude toward religion. If read out of context, some might consider it anti-Semitic. However, a closer reading of these texts will reveal that there was no anger in Paul toward his Jewish background. Instead, there is nothing but what Wm. Barclay calls a "*wistful longing and a heartfelt yearning.*" Paul was a Jew, and it was the deepest desire of his heart that his fellow Jews might know God and the intimacy of the relationship with God that he has come to experience since his encounter with Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9).

Paul knew that faithful Jews were zealous for God. He had been one of those Jews. He just felt that their zeal had been misdirected. Instead of allowing their lives to be ordered by their response to God's gracious love, the life of the religious Jew was ordered by meticulous attention to the detail of the Law. It was rules, not relationships, which were the foundation of daily life for the faithful Jew. So Paul is pleading with brothers and sisters who share his ancestry to consider a new possibility for their lives.

I have said it before in this series. Jewish Law was very exacting. However, if you are like me, when someone tells me what to do, I usually respond in one of three ways. Sometimes I actually do what is asked of me, but all too often I will either ignore the request or spend an inordinate amount of time trying to figure out how I can circumvent it. Tell me I have to do something and my rebellious nature kicks into overdrive trying to find a way around what has been asked of me.

Maybe you have heard the story of a priest and a rabbi who stood by the side of the road. The priest was holding up a sign that said, "The End is Near!" The Rabbi was holding another sign which said, "Turn Back Now!" They planned to hold up the sign to each passing car, but as the first car sped by them, the driver shouted, "Leave us alone you religious nuts!"

A few seconds later from around the curve they heard a big splash. The priest looked at the rabbi and said, "Do you think we should just put up a sign that says 'BRIDGE OUT' instead?" Jewish Law laid down exactly how far someone could walk on the Sabbath. It said that no food could be cooked on the Sabbath. It said in the event of sickness, measures might be taken to keep the patient from becoming worse, but it forbade doing anything to make him better. To this day there are orthodox Jews who will not flip a light switch because it requires more work than the Law allows, but it does not keep them from installing timers on their lighting system to be sure the lights come on when it gets dark. (Wm. Barclay, Romans, Daily Study Bible, p. 137) Such attention to the Law was not and is not a joke to the orthodox Jew.

It was the way he or she honored the presence of God in their lives. However, it did not allow the orthodox Jew to enter into a relationship with God as the focus of their ethical, moral, and spiritual life; a relationship based on forgiveness and unconditional love.

So in this tenth chapter of Romans, Paul lays down what I like to call the "*Essentials of Salvation*": 1) Confess with your Lips that Jesus is Lord; and 2) Believe in your Heart that God Raised Him from the Dead.

### **Confess with your Lips that Jesus is Lord**

This morning our total worship attendance will be around 100 people. Now, of those 100, I would venture a guess that 90 will not be the least bit comfortable with the admonition of Paul that in order to experience our salvation, we must confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord.

Like many, if not most, Presbyterians, we are a people whose faith is centered between our ears. We like to think about concepts and debate positions, but to confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord; that would violate our comfort zone. Now most of those 90 people know that Jesus is Lord and is worthy of our praise. They believe with Paul that one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. They are just uncomfortable saying it out loud in front of someone else.

One of the privileges of ministry is to enter into the lives of people at their most intimate moments. And so I officiated at weddings and a funerals. Tears flow at all of the events; tears that reflect how important the day is to the participants. As the brides and the grooms say their vows to each other, they weep because they are sharing their hopes, dreams and aspirations for their future. As children and adults sit in the front row grieving the loss of their only living parent, they weep because they are aware of the depth of their loss and all that family had meant to them.

As a culture, we find it difficult to talk about the meaning of everyday things like marriage and family which we take for granted until those moments when we are asked to place them into a larger context. Imagine how difficult it is to talk about a faith in Jesus Christ which sets the stage for all the other things we value.

So what say we do it together and get our discomfort behind us? Will you simply say with me: *Jesus is Lord!* Let's try it one more time: *Jesus is Lord!* And again: *Jesus is Lord!* Now that wasn't so hard, was it?

In 2005, Ashley Smith's moral integrity found a way to say those words to an accused murderer, Brian Nichols, who was holding her hostage. Do you remember that story? It resulted in Smith counseling her captor using Rick Warren's book, The Purpose Driven Life. Commenting on the incident in Time magazine, Andrew Sullivan wrote:

*These people weren't saints. Grace arrives, unannounced, in lives that least expect or deserve it. I say that as a believer. The crimes Nichols is suspected of are inexcusable. The serenity of Smith is close to inexplicable. But the message of the Gospels is that God works with the crooked timber of human failure. That was an exceptional moment of redemption. But every day we have smaller, calmer chances to turn another's life around, to serve, to listen. How often do we simply not see what is in front of us? How often do we believe that the world's evils—from terrorism to crime to emotional cruelty—are beyond our capacity to change? Or that there is no one in front of us whom we can serve? Smith and Nichols' story is a chastening reminder that we may be wrong. (Citation: Andrew Sullivan, "When Grace Arrives Unannounced," Time (3-28-05), p. 80)*

Brian Nichols will still have to face the death penalty for what he did, but the truth of the matter is this: Had Ashley Smith not shared her faith, she might be dead today, and because she confessed her faith, a man whom she barely knew has found the possibility of meaning and purpose in his life which he never knew.

## **Believe in your Heart that God Raised Him from the Dead**

The other essential of salvation is to believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead. Allow me to give that a different language: to believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead is to affirm that God has the power to transform life as we know it. It is one thing to know something in your head, but believing it in your heart means that you are committed to do something about it. If I say these words, "Tom, take this to heart...", you know that the words which follow are things that are important to me; things that give my life meaning and purpose.

John Ortberg, the preaching pastor at the Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, draws a distinction between Law and Grace as the difference between conforming to boundary markers and authentic transformation of our lives through faith. He writes:

*"The church I grew up in had its boundary markers. A prideful or resentful pastor could have kept his job, but if ever the pastor was caught smoking a cigarette, he would've been fired. Not because anyone in the church actually thought smoking a worse sin than pride or resentment, but because smoking defined who was in our subculture and who wasn't—it was a boundary marker.*

*As I was growing up, having a "quiet time" became a boundary marker, a measure of spiritual growth. If someone had asked me about my spiritual life, I would immediately think, "Have I been having regular and lengthy quiet time? My initial thought was not, "Am I growing more loving toward God and toward people?"*

*Boundary markers change from culture to culture, but the dynamic remains the same. If people do not experience authentic transformation, then their faith will deteriorate into a search for the boundary markers that masquerade as evidence of a changed life. (Citation: John Ortberg, "True (and False) Transformation," Leadership (Summer 2002), p. 102)*

## **Conclusion**

Sunday mornings you come to worship the Lord, I am wondering if you will try something new. As you prepare for worship, say to yourself: *"I believe in my heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, and with your help, Lord Jesus, I believe that you can change whatever is in my life that keeps me from experiencing the fullness of God's Love; whatever is in my life that keeps me from making a difference in the lives of others."* At the end of worship, say to yourself, *"Jesus is Lord."*

If you are able to let God go to work with prayers like that, Paul says you will experience salvation.