

“Heartfelt Belief”

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Romans 10:5-15

5 Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that “the person who does these things will live by them.” 6 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) 7 “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). 8 But what does it say?

“The word is near you,
 on your lips and in your heart”

(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); 9 because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved. 11 The scripture says, “No one who believes in him will be put to shame.” 12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. 13 For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

14 But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? 15 And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

LAYING DOWN THE LAW

When we get angry with a child, we might say something like,
 “I’m gong to lay down the law to that boy.”
 In other words, follow the house rules or else.

When I was a boy I had the law laid down to me several times,
 and I’m sure I richly deserved it!

Sometimes we have to lay down the law to protect our children.
They don't understand that they are putting themselves in danger.

But, laying down the law only works for so long.
As our children get older and approach adulthood, we have to take a different approach.
Our influence is based not so much on rules and regulations but upon a personal relationship.

Sadly, some parents never get beyond the laying down the law phase of life.
And that means, for many years, the relationship they have with their children is not so good.
In fact, some of us bear the scars of an excessively strict upbringing for the rest of our life.

We can never make a relationship stronger by laying down the law.
But, heaven knows we still try.

How many marriages are on the rocks because one person is trying to re-make the other one in his or her own image? You can't make your marriage better by laying down the law.
How many businesses have a culture that is toxic because of a boss who is dictatorial and will not listen to the advice of others. You can't make people be loyal employees by laying down the law.

And so forth ...

THE LIMITS OF THE LAW

Now don't get me wrong.
Laws are necessary.
We have to maintain common expectations or society cannot function.
We need laws.

Stricter laws and stricter law enforcement can restrain the worst behavior.
But, laws alone cannot make people righteous.
Laws alone cannot bring us together ... even the best of laws.

Do you know why?

Because the human heart is deceptive.
It is always possible to adhere to the letter of the law but not the spirit of the law.

The apostle Paul was a good example of this.
Before he became a Christian, he was very zealous for the law.
He was a Pharisee. He had the law memorized.

And yet what did that lead him to do?
Paul's zeal for the law led him to persecute the Christian Church.
He was blind to what he was doing.
In his zeal to follow God's law he was actually persecuting God's people.

It took Divine intervention ... it took the presence of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus to turn Paul around and help him see. And in our lesson for today Paul continues to wonder out loud why the same thing hasn't happened for the rest of God's people.

Why can't they see what he now sees so clearly?
Laying down the law is never enough.

Our understanding of faith has to grow and deepen.
It's not enough to know the Ten Commandments and the basic stories of the Bible.
We need something more.

We need to change on the inside.
We need a change of heart.
We need a personal relationship with the Lord.

From the very beginning people tried to reach God the wrong way.
Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree in an effort to be like God.
Men and women tried to build the Tower of Babel as a way to reach heaven.

But, that's a futile exercise.
We can never build a building high enough to reach heaven.
And we can never follow the law well enough to save ourselves from the abyss.

We cannot have a close relationship with the Lord if that relationship is built on rules and regulations. We will either congratulate ourselves (falsely) on our ability to follow the law and so succumb to the pitfall of pride

... or we will live in fear of an angry God who is always laying down a law that we cannot follow.

The result is the same.
We find ourselves estranged from God.

We can't build a tower that reaches to the heavens.
We can't follow the law perfectly and save ourselves from a fall.

So what's the answer?

THE LORD IS NEAR

God comes to us.
God takes the first step toward a new relationship.

It's not a relationship based upon law.
It's a relationship based upon grace.

In fact, grace has always been the reason for the law.

Why did God give his people the law in the first place?
God did it to restrain their worst impulses.
God did it to keep them safe in the wilderness.

But, God also told his people that they needed more than laws and elaborate rituals.

They needed to change on the inside.
They needed His law written on their heart.

The law had to be something that they loved,
something that was a part of who they were as a people.

That's the point Paul is making in our lesson for today in verse 8.
Quoting from the Old Testament Paul writes,

“The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.” (Deuteronomy 30:8)

God’s people believed that the Lord was near them.
The law was more than just rules and regulations.
It was the word of the Lord.

They rejoiced in the law.
The law became a part of their daily speech and lives.

Why? The Lord was near.
Through the mighty acts of God,
those who were once no people ... now had become God’s people.

SACRED HISTORY

It was this sacred history that bound them together.

Let me give you an example of how that works today.
In this country we say that we are a nation of laws.
And we are.

We pay attention to the laws that we make, and we try to live by them.
But, are the laws the only things that bind us together as a country?
Of course not.

The real secret is what’s in our heart.

We’re Americans.
We love our country.
We love freedom.

We love the ideals and traditions on which our country was founded.
This is what brings us together.

No law can command us to love our country.
But, we do.

We have, in a sense, a personal relationship with this land that we love.
And that makes all the difference.

The same was true of God's people.
 They were people who had been called by God.
 This God was in their hearts and his word was on their lips.

They had, as Paul put it, "a zeal for God".

MISGUIDED ZEAL

But, there was a problem.
 Their zeal was "not enlightened". (Romans 10:2)
 Their zeal for God was not guided by a correct understanding of the Scripture.

It's not hard to figure out how this can happen.

We can have the best of intentions.
 But, if we don't have a correct understanding of Scripture,
 and in particular a correct understanding of God's grace as revealed in Jesus,
 ... our zeal will be misguided, and maybe even destructive.

We talk about grace a lot in the church.
 But, are we gracious?
 Do we really want the world, the whole world to be saved?
 Is that our prayer?

Most of us here have memorized John 3:16.
 God's love is for the whole world.
 God didn't send his Son into the world to condemn the world.
 He sent his Son into the world to save the world.

But, having the right answer doesn't always lead to right action.
 We still have this desire to establish a righteousness based upon what we can do.
 When we do that, it leads us away from God.

The answer to this problem is not stricter rules and regulations.
 The answer to this problem is not to try harder.

The answer to this problem is to develop a heart for God.

And we do that by talking about and trusting in Jesus.

JESUS IS LORD

Paul lifts up two specific points.

First, we are encouraged to confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord.

Remember, Paul was writing a letter to the Romans.

And who was Lord according to the Romans?

Caesar!

If the Romans started saying that Jesus is Lord instead of Caesar, that would be a real problem.

And that's exactly what happened.

Caesar is no longer "lord", but there are others in our world who want to lay claim to that title.

Just as Caesar offered peace enforced on the end of a sword so others claim the same thing today.

But, don't be fooled.

Jesus is Lord.

And that means no Caesar wannabe can claim that title.

RESURRECTION

The second point Paul makes is that we must believe "in our heart" that God raised Jesus from the dead. This heartfelt belief in the resurrection is the reason that we can say that Jesus is Lord when all around us there are false gods who are making that same claim.

Our heart belongs only to the grace of God as revealed in Jesus.

And it's this belief that saves us.

No matter what happens ... in life and in death ... we belong to God.

You see the resurrection was not just about what happened to Jesus long ago.

It was the beginning of a new age, a new creation.

And we're a part of that story.

Paul wrote in his first letter to the Corinthians that when Jesus was raised he was the first fruits of those who have died.

When you have a harvest, the first fruits are the produce that ripen first. But, you know that's not the end. It's just the beginning. The same is true with the resurrection.

One day those who sleep in the Lord will be raised to newness of life.
(1 Corinthians 15:20-21)

This is not just a story that we tell at Easter.

This is a heartfelt belief that we must remember and cherish every day of our lives.

We must have a deep down trust in God's ability to save us.

And if we have that.

If we truly believe in our hearts that we belong to God in life and death, then the power of resurrection will not just be a future hope.

The power of resurrection,
this deep down heartfelt trust in God's desire and power to save will be a tremendous source of comfort for the living of our days.

THE GENEROUS LORD

Paul writes that the Lord is the Lord of all, Jew and Greek and (any other nationality for that matter). This Lord is generous.

In fact, when all is said and done "everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved."

This is quotation from the prophet Joel.

You may recognize it.

We often read this passage at Pentecost when we celebrate the coming of the Spirit and the birth of the church.

Joel talks about a time when God's Spirit would be poured out on all flesh.

Sons and daughters will prophesy.

Old men (and women) will dream dreams.

And on that great and terrible day of the Lord,
“everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.”
Everyone.

The Apostle tells us that in the coming of Jesus the prophecy of Joel has been fulfilled.

The grace of God is for the whole world.

And we have the opportunity and the responsibility to tell that story.

Paul’s argument goes this way.

God in Christ gives us hope ... hope not only for this life but for life everlasting.

And that news is too good to keep to ourselves.

If we have eternity in our hearts, we can’t help but have the story of salvation on our lips.

And after all, if we don’t bring the message, then who’s going to do it?
How can people believe if they haven’t heard?

Heartfelt belief leads to public proclamation.

When we have resurrection in our heart, our lips (and our lives) will say “Jesus is Lord”.

This is evangelism as the Bible understands it.

Evangelism is not a program, a door to door campaign to drag people into the kingdom.

Evangelism is a passion.

Evangelism is a heartfelt desire to see people ... all people ... come to faith.

And, as we said last week, we never, ever give up on anyone
... because God in Christ never gives up on us.

This past week we’ve heard a lot of news about North Korea.

We’re frightened by the strong words and the dangers of military conflict.

We see the images of a strange dictator and his millions of cult like followers and wonder who these people are and what they really want.

But, in the middle of this scary news there was something else that happened.

A Presbyterian Minister from Canada was released by the North Koreans.

His name is Hyeon Soo Lim.

And he had been held since 2015 and was in very poor health.

The 62 year old pastor had been sentenced to a life of hard labor.

His crime? Harming the dignity of the supreme leadership and trying to use religion to destroy the North Korean system.

Let me translate that for you.

He proclaimed with his lips that Jesus is Lord (and not Kim Jong-un).

And he had the heartfelt belief that the news of the resurrection was too good to keep to himself.

How could the people of North Korea believe in Jesus if no one ever told them about him?

Pastor Lim almost died delivering that message.

Many in Canada chided him for making such a foolish trip and costing the Canadian government so much money.

Most of us certainly don't have the courage or maybe the foolhardiness to make such a trip.

But, we should have at least one thing in common.

Like Pastor Lim we need to have a heart for the people of North Korea.

They haven't heard anything but what their dictators have told them.

Can you imagine what would happen if someone had a change of heart?

That would be stronger than military might.

That would bring peace.

THE MESSENGER OF PEACE

I know.

There's no indication that this will happen.

There's no willingness on the part of the North Koreans to talk to anyone.

But, that was true of Caesar and the Roman government long ago.
 They said Caesar is Lord.
 They persecuted Christians horribly when they insisted that Jesus is Lord.

And yet over time the power of the resurrection and the message of grace proved stronger than the Roman Legions.

I believe that the power of God's grace and the message of the resurrection is stronger than any force on earth. And I believe one day that will indeed be our theme in glory.

But, until that day we look toward the future with hope and we pray. We pray for the ones we love, and we pray for our enemies ... that the power of God's grace might turn them into friends.

Paul closes our lesson for today with a partial quote from the prophet Isaiah 52:7.

He writes, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

The full quotation goes like this,

*How beautiful upon the mountains
 are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
 who brings good news,
 who announces salvation,
 who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'*

The punctuation of this verse makes it evident that this is poetry. The answer to a world of death and destruction is poetry ... God's poetry ... because in our hearts we know the truth ...

The messenger of peace has come.
 The power of resurrection has come to earth.
 And with him there has come a new kingdom
 ... a new heaven and a new earth.

Brothers and sisters ... take this message to heart ...
 and spread the good news.

Amen.