

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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Romans 3:19-26 *"The Heart Of The Gospel"*

Today's *Ask the Pastor* question is: *"Unlike evangelical churches, mainline Christian denominations rarely speak of personal salvation or "being saved." The emphasis seems to be on understanding God's moral law and trying our best to follow it. How can our Sunday School students go through years of classes without an understanding of salvation?"*

That is a very perceptive and profound question, and one that cries out for clear understanding on the part of adults who are called to teach children *the relationship between law and grace*; or more simply, about where they and all of us stand before God. The last part of the question carries some ambiguity: is this a rhetorical "How can we not teach more clearly...!" or a pleading "How can we tell our children about grace?" Either way it is certain that we adults need to be *clear about salvation* before we can *teach it* to our children, and we need to *experience grace* before we can *demonstrate it* to children. So let us think about law and grace - on "trying our best to follow God's moral law" vs. "having faith in Jesus that he has saved us."

1) *Law vs. Grace is not Old Testament vs. New Testament*

Let us be clear that this is not about Old Testament vs. New Testament; about a "God of law and wrath" vs. "Jesus the redeemer of sinners." Adults who say that sort of thing

do not understand the Old Testament or the New Testament, or what the law was for, or what grace is.

God's moral law was his gracious gift to his people Israel, and through them to the whole world. Without his law we would have no clear knowledge of what is right in God's sight, or how we sin. If there are no rules, anything goes and nothing matters! Look around our society and you can find plenty of examples. So God's law is a gift to people who would otherwise be in the dark, left with only the remnants of their fallen consciences to guide them.

God established a covenant with his people - a solemn and binding agreement to be their God. If the people failed on their side, there would be consequences, but the LORD would never renege on his commitment to them. He established this by oaths, by ceremonies, and by providing means for repentance, sacrifice and atonement of sin. We read that on Mt. Sinai, as God gave Moses the stones of the law (for a second time, in a great act of mercy): *"the LORD came down in the cloud... and passed in front of Moses, proclaiming "the LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished.... punishing sins to the third and fourth generation..." "*

Here is the balance: God is compassionate but also just: he is gracious, loving, faithful to his people, forgiving – but he lets no-one who persists in sin “get away with it.” Those who persist in sin suffer for it, even though God never stops loving them. So what does the law do? It guides people to God, it brings them to their knees before him, and it introduces them to the “Father of the Prodigal,” who always waits with his arms outstretched for the person who “comes to his senses” and “turns towards home.”

Romans 3 has been called the most important paragraph ever written. The events it describes and interprets certainly changed the world. *“No-one will be declared righteous by observing the law... rather through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God apart from the law has been revealed...this righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.”* The law leads to Christ. In Jesus we find another righteousness – his righteousness – in him we find that we are reconciled to God by a better sacrifice than any that was made before: *“There is no difference; all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood...”*

Faith in Jesus means trusting that he reconciles us to God, that our sin – past, present and future - is wiped out, covered over, paid for; that we have been freed from its guilt and power, at a price; that we are “made righteous” before God by his free act of forgiveness. That is “salvation for all who believe.” That is the heart of the gospel of grace; that is what we must grasp by faith for ourselves, long before we can teach it to others.

I know from experience, as many of you do, that this gift of grace is not easy to accept.

There is a pride in us that says “I don’t need anyone paying my way...” I have had conversations with adults who have been in church all their lives, but who had trouble with the idea of grace. They thought they were living well, according to God’s rules, and teaching their children to do the same. All seemed “right with the world.” Then they had teenagers! Inside five years, they learned more about grace than they had ever known before. They understood about loving people who don’t deserve it and often reject it; they knew about forgiving “wickedness, rebellion and sin” in their children’s lives and their own lives. They knew that without grace and without forgiveness, there can be no reconciliation, and that it has to start from the parent, because the child is incapable of it. From having teenagers, they now understood God and experienced grace in a way they had never done before.

But remember: salvation does not come from being a parent of teens! It comes from faith in Jesus Christ, the one the law guides us to.

2) Law and Grace are not Alternatives

So we need to remember that law and grace are *not alternatives*. You cannot choose one or the other as your way to God. It is not “following God’s rules for good people” and “redemption by Jesus’ blood for bad sinners.” It is not Torah obedience for Jews and Calvary faith for Christians. It is not “moral living” for the religious left/mainline church and “being saved” for the religious right/evangelicals.

“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Whether you are a social conservative or a social liberal; whether you think obeying God’s moral law today is about abortion and gay marriage or about poverty and global warming, there is no place to stand on your own or my own obedience to God’s law. We all “fall short” and have come to God seeking

forgiveness. Thanks to Jesus Christ, there is no barrier between us and God except our own pride, our own sense that “we are doing well, especially in comparison to those other people.”

And law and grace are not alternatives for children and adults. We cannot bring our children or grandchildren to Sunday School to *learn morality*. We cannot spend most of our very limited hours with our church’s children teaching them to be *good*. If we do, then we leave them with the impression – which many of us grew up with – that being good will make God love you; that he is like Santa, and rewards or punishes those who have been “naughty or nice.” God help the child who has been taught that when they become a teenager – especially in today’s society ! Do you wonder that they leave the church so quickly once they are out from under their parents’ insistence that they should “make their Confirmation”?

Every teen and twenty person in our culture lives with huge guilt about their choices, but they can only express it as rebellion and anger towards the church, and towards their parents. If we have not taught our children about grace and redemption in church and at home, we cannot be surprised if they are unable to be reconciled to God or to us.

How do we teach “salvation” to our own children or our Sunday School? Some people argue that “law always come before grace” – that you have to start by teaching God’s rules so that people know they have broken them. I think there is some truth in that. But I also think our time is too short; that we often don’t get beyond law to grace; that we lose our kids before they understand and experience grace. I think kids from 5th through 9th grade need to see grace in action in their teachers and in their parents; to learn from adults what it means to “mess up” and be forgiven, to hear parents and teachers

admit they aren’t perfect and need daily forgiveness; that they know about guilt and grace. No, that doesn’t mean “spilling our guts” to our kids about our past mistakes; it doesn’t mean scaring kids with stories of how bad we once were; or deceiving them with overly dramatic tales of conversion.

I think at the base, at the foundation, of our teaching, beginning with the very youngest children, is the love of God. A nursery-age child needs to hear about God and his love for them, and to experience it in the activities of his class and above all in the attitudes of his teachers. The same ought to be true at home, where the pre-schooler spends most of 167 hours a week against 1 hour in Sunday School!

I think young children need to be taught God’s law, but that it better at all times be held in balance with God’s grace – not least by showing how the “great heroes of faith” in the Bible are all people of sin and failure as well as of faith. I think older kids need to understand that the law shows us sin, and leads us to Christ for redemption, but then reappears as instructions for the “holy life” we are called to by God; that we are “*saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ*” so that we can enter a life of “*good works that God has prepared in advance for us to do.*” (Ephes 2:8-10) – and that the “best works” a teenager can do are to help their peers who are in trouble to find their way to salvation in Jesus.

Paul writes that “*the law is a school-teacher [a pedagogue] who leads us to Christ*” (Galat 3:24); but once we have met Christ, Paul asks “*shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!*” (Rom 6:15). Some people, in Paul’s time and among parents today, are scared of grace. They fear that without enough law, children will wander into sin. Paul knows better, but often we don’t. To be sure, there is a fine line as a parent between being gracious and loving

and becoming an “enabler” of destructive behavior. Only experience, some of it bitter, can teach you that.

But if we are going to teach children who are entrusted to our care in Sunday School, we better be sure they understand salvation! By the time they “make their Confirmation,” we say they have “reached an age where they can make their own professions of faith in Jesus Christ.” I think we ought to be sure they know what that means, and we have experience of it ourselves. I’m not talking about who gets or doesn’t get a Certificate of Confirmation – I’m talking about who is prepared to step out into the world *with faith*; with a faith built on more than a collection of what sometimes seem like “moralistic fairy tales about God.”

It is a huge challenge. I cannot think of one that is more important for any church, especially in this culture and time. May the Lord lead us to teach our children well.

Let us pray...