

Too Good Not to be True

(This message is part of a series on Romans titled "Based on a Promise, Called for a Purpose.")

Romans 3:21-26

John Bradshaw is a psychologist who wrote some important books about families and relationships back in the 1980s. His lectures were broadcast on PBS for a while, and I remember how he used to talk about troubled families in those programs. He used a large mobile—you know, an oversized version of what might hang over a baby's crib. He would add a piece for each member of the family, but when he start to add extra pieces representing things like addiction or abuse, you could see the mobile twist and contort as it was thrown out of balance. In the end that was precisely Bradshaw's point: these problems or dysfunctions could throw families completely out of balance.

Think about that as we continue our journey through Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul's main point is that the world has been infected by sin—that the human family had been thrown out of balance—and that only Jesus Christ could make things right again.

21But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, 23for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— 26he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

As we begin it will help to remember the point of Paul's letter to the Romans.

Romans was written to convince one group of people that God could be trusted because of his faithfulness to another group of people.

Let me say that another way:

The letter to the Romans was written to convince the Gentile Christians in Rome that God could be trusted because he kept his promises to his Jewish covenant people.

It was also a reminder to the Jewish people that they hadn't left their old faith behind for a new one, but that Christ was the completion of the faith they'd held all along.

Our text comes right after an extended discussion of God's faithfulness, and just before a familiar passage about Abraham's faith. Note the 'Jewishness' of the context within Romans—it's all about the Law and Abraham's faithfulness.

What should we notice in our text?

"Righteousness by faith alone."

There is nothing here that is earned by human effort. A lot of times this is the hardest part for people to accept about the Christian faith. We live in a world where we have to earn everything—our pay, our security, even our love sometimes. All of that gets turned on its head here. The greatest gift we can ever imagine—by a long way—comes to us free of charge—free from measuring up—it comes by faith alone.

This is NOT like the end of the movie 'Saving Private Ryan,' where Tom Hanks' character's dying words to Private Ryan are: 'Earn this!' Christ doesn't ask us to earn anything—he just asks us to believe.

"There is no difference."

Part of this is about the ancient division between Jew and Gentile—this is Paul consistently making the world-changing case that God has entered the world for the entire world—no one has the inside lane on this. The differences that separate us from each other have been set aside.

Paul's teaching here points to our shared identity as people who go running after

other gods. 'There is no difference' becomes 'we're all in the same boat,' or maybe 'misery loves company.'

What it means is that when we talk about what the gospel means and what it requires, no one is excluded, but no one is exempt, either. This is for everyone.

Proof that God is faithful to his promises.

Remember that the promises God made to the people he chose were simple: Be faithful and I will bless you and make you into a blessing for the whole world. That's what's happening in Paul's letter to the Romans. Through Christ we see not only the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel, but also the keeping of the promise to bless the entire world through them.

This is one of those moments when we have to step back and consider just what it meant for God to come, to become human with all its weaknesses and problems, to suffer pain and torment and to die.

How does Christ's death mean that was God faithful?

All of this is part of a bigger story called the Atonement. We spent some time on that earlier this year: The Atonement is a drama in three acts—the Cross, the Resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The point of this drama is that we've been offered reconciliation to God, to ourselves, to each other and to the earth.

But it all begins with Christ's sacrifice on the Cross.

What we learn through the Cross is that there is a common plight and a common solution for all of humanity.

Our common plight is what the Scriptures call sin: anything that separates us from living and loving and serving in the presence of God.

The common solution is Christ's atoning work. Listen to how Scot McKnight describes the meaning of Christ's death in his book on the Atonement.

McKnight suggests that “we see the achievement of the cross in three expressions: Jesus dies ‘with us’—entering our evil and our sin and our suffering to subvert it and create a new way; Jesus dies ‘instead of us’—he enters into our sin, our wrath, and our death; and Jesus dies ‘for us’—his death forgives our sin, ‘declares us right’, absorbs the wrath of God against us and creates new life where there was once only death...A life shaped by the cross is a life bent on dying daily to self in order to love God, self, others and the world”

The Cross changes everything.

This passage is nothing less than a radical redefinition of what it means to be the people of God. What does this mean for us?

The human family is out of balance—like in that mobile John Bradshaw used to talk about the family. But the atonement puts us back into balance with God—literally, justified by him, through him, and for him.

So what do we do now? Two things:

First, live as people who have been bought with a price. Live as people who are trying to understand the gift we’ve been given in Jesus Christ.

Living that way changes everything—from the way we earn and spend, to the way we love and serve. From our parenting to our business practices—from what we look for in relationships to our treatment of the poor.

Living as people who’ve been purchased with a price becomes the way we define our lives. It replaces our education and careers, the achievements of our kids and the coolness of our cars.

Living as people who’ve been bought with a price transforms the way we fellowship with each other, the way we worship together—it changes the way we focus on growing into mature disciples and eventually the way we reach out to others.

Second, the call is on us to share that good news with the people in our lives. That looks different for each of us, but the principle is the same for everyone:

Experiencing God's forgiveness in our lives in a real way leads naturally—inevitably—to sharing that forgiveness with the people around us. We do that individually, but we also do it as a community of faith—as this church family.

In 'Deep Church, the book I mentioned last week, the author talks about the central role the gospel of Jesus Christ has in their church. He writes:

"The gospel is at the center of all we do. The 'gospel' is the good news that through Jesus, the Messiah, the power of God's kingdom has entered history to renew the whole world. Through the Savior God has established his reign. When we believe and rely on Jesus' work and record (rather than ours) for our relationship to God, that kingdom power comes upon us and begins to work through us. We witness this radical new way of living by our renewed lives, beautiful community, social justice, and cultural transformation. This good news brings new life. The gospel motivates, guides, and empowers every aspect of our living and worship."

Just to close: If the story ended with the pronouncement that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,' then we would live lives of hopelessness and despair.

But that's not the end of the story. The promise God makes to all of us is that no matter who we are or what we've done—no matter what we've said or even what we've believed before this moment.

No matter who we think we are, God sees us as the people he made and loves and gave himself up to save.

Whatever else you think about yourself, the good news is that when you come to him in faith, God sees you as perfect and spotless and shiny and new.

That's the good news—that's the gospel of Jesus Christ offered to each one of us, every day.

What's left for us is to accept it—to live it—and to share it with the world Christ came to save.

Amen.