

Joyfully Sharing the Love of Jesus: It's An Obligation

First in a Series of Three Sermons

September 6, 2020

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Romans 1:14 - I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek

Romans 10:8 Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.

Romans 15:1 - Now we who are strong have an obligation to bear the weaknesses of those who are without strength, and not to please ourselves.

I Corinthians 9:16 - For if I preach the Gospel, I have no reason to boast, because an obligation is placed on me. And woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!

Dear Friends in Christ,

A few days ago, a good friend of mine messaged me on Facebook to comment on one of my posts and to let me know she was disappointed. She was looking to me for kindness and compassion, and instead, she indicated that several of my posts in recent months were hurting her heart. She told me several stories about how people she cares about had experienced cruelty and exclusion and how she was looking to leaders in the community to be uplifting and encouraging.

My first reaction was to be defensive and at the same time apologetic. On the one hand, I wanted to stand up for what I believed in and at the same time I want to care deeply about the opinions of friends and family. Some might call that wishy washy or bending in the wind, but I am thinking of it as paradoxical.

“Paradox” is the word for today. By definition, a paradox is a seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement or proposition that when investigated or explained may prove to be well founded or true. Luther spoke in paradox language when He declared that we are simultaneously saint and sinner. At the same time, the Law condemns us as guilty and the Gospel declares us not guilty.

St. Paul spoke paradoxically when he wrote “**For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.**” And again, “**For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.**” And to the Corinthians he wrote, **For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.**”

Two seemingly self-contradictory statements I invite you to explore with me today, as we take a walk-through Scriptures in Ezekiel, Romans, and Matthew.

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Paradox #1 is that we are at the same time debt free and in debt.

Many of you know that joy of working hard to pay off a vehicle or student debt or a house or a farm and then making the last payment. This is the work ethic instilled in millions of children by their parents and teachers and coaches over the years - get a job, get up every morning, be disciplined, go to work, pay your bills, take care of your obligations.

In terms of paying off our spiritual obligations, of course, our good work ethics won't get it done. Apart from Christ, we have no way of climbing that ladder into heaven or piling up enough good work points to satisfy the holy God of this universe. And yet much as a generous father might pay off a son's vehicle or education debt, so has your father in heaven paid your debt and mine not with gold nor silver nor credit cards, but with the holy precious blood of his only son. Christ the great high priest entered the holy of holy place and paid the price once and for all not with the sacrifice of a thousand goats, not with the bloody butcher of ten thousand cattle, not with the suffering and death of 100,000 sheep, but with the innocent suffering and death of Jesus Christ. Christ is crucified, dead, buried, and risen again, and the verdict is in. Debt forgiven; we owe nothing. That is, in relationship to our God, our obligations have been met, and there is nothing we can add to what Christ has already done. Case closed. Free as a bird.

And yet at the same time, Paul would teach us today that we have this daily obligation to love one another in fulfillment of the law. As the mercies of God are new every morning, so do we have an obligation to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. When Cain killed his brother and was confronted by God, he tried to excuse himself from responsibility by asking, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

In our lessons for today, God answers that question in the affirmative. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God made it clear that the prophets were responsible for sounding the alarm, the watchmen had an obligation to give the sinners the warning that if they didn't change their ways, their souls would be lost. If the prophet delivered the warning and it was ignored, the wicked person would die, but the prophet's soul would be delivered. But if the prophet neglected to preach repentance and the wicked perished in his iniquity, the blood of the prophet would be required also.

So also in our Gospel lesson for today, Jesus teaches all Christians that if your brother sins against you, you have a responsibility to go to him alone and tell him, persuade him, convince him of his need to repent, and if he repents, you have gained your brother.

So also in Romans 12 and 13, we find evidence that we have been set free not just to eat and drink and be merry and do as we wish, we have a duty to preach the Gospel, woe to us if we

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don't. We have an obligation to do as our Mission Statement declares, which is to be empowered by God's Word to joyfully share the love of Jesus Christ with all people. Woe to us if we don't! In chapter 12, Paul makes the point that love must be genuine, that love for God will abhor what is evil and hold fast what is good. Paul would look us in the eyes today and challenge us to be outdoing one another in living in such a way that the name of Christ is honored and others are attracted to Him!

Paradox #1 is that we are at the same time debt free and in debt. The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers where the pressure is off and on at the same time. The pressure is off in terms of trying to earn the favor of God because they believe with all of their hearts that God has already favored them. The pressure is on in terms of carrying out their obligation to preach the Gospel and to be practicing what they preach. The pressure is off as often as they receive and enjoy and live in the great resurrection victory, they have been handed on a silver platter. The pressure is on as they reason together about the best way to be sharing that great victory with all people.

Paradox #2 is that the Gospel appears to be unimpressive, but is in fact more powerful than dynamite.

When Paul writes that he is not ashamed of the Gospel for it is the power of God unto salvation, the Greek word for "power" is dynamis, from which we get the English word dynamite. I looked into the history of dynamite and found that it was invented by Alfred Nobel. Nobel was a Swedish chemist and inventor who owned a manufacturing company that produced cannons and explosive devices. One of his brothers was killed in an accident involving dynamite in its early stages. He was raised a Lutheran, but in his later years he became atheist. Towards the end of life, Nobel was criticized for profiting from the sale of arms. In reaction to that, he donated fortune to establish the Nobel Peace Prize. Yet one more paradox to think of a man who was at the same time an inventor of dynamite and the founder of a prize promoting peace.

In so many ways the Gospel seems unimpressive in these days, and yet we know that it is in fact the most life changing force in the history of humanity. On the one hand, we know that the preaching of the Gospel seems to be having less and less effect on the hearts of people in these days. Two examples I offer as proof.

Example #1 is an article I read this week with the title, "59% of millennials who were raised in the church have left the church and they're not coming back. I won't give you all 12 reasons they give for rejecting the church of their parents, but five reasons caught my eye - 1) Nobody is listening to us. 2) We're sick of hearing you talk about values and mission statements, 3) Helping the poor isn't a priority, 4) we don't feel valued at church and 5) we

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want to be mentored, not preached at. All of which supports the first part of this paradox, that the effects of Gospel preaching seem unimpressive.

Example #2 was an article with the title, "How to explain to your Kids Why Social Justice Warriors Hate Christians So Much." The premise of this article is that there is not just an indifference towards a Christianity that holds to traditional teachings, there is a growing hostility.

And yet on the other hand, we know the power of the Gospel to change hearts and lives. It is the power of the Gospel that allows us to be still in the midst of the storms of life and know that God is God. It is the power of the Gospel that has helped countless marriages stay together through thick and thin. It is the power of the Gospel that has made it possible for the forgiveness of sins to sweep over broken hearts and bring about a new beginning. It is the power of the Gospel that allows Christians of all ages to walk away from gravesites of loved ones saying out loud and believing with all of their hearts that there will be a resurrection of the dead.

Paradox #2 is that the Gospel appears to be unimpressive, but is in fact more powerful than dynamite. Paul considered himself to be under obligation to preach both to the Greeks and the Barbarians, or to say it another way, both to the educated and the uneducated. Jesus sent out his disciples to preach first of all to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. These days, we are obligated to support the preaching of the Gospel both in season and out of season obligated to share the love of Jesus Christ both when people want to hear what we think and when they don't, obligated to share the love of Jesus not only to the baby boomers and older generation but to the millennials and the gen xers, obligated to share the love of Jesus not only with words but also and especially with our actions.

Paul wrote to the Romans in chapter 15, "**Now we who are strong have an obligation to bear the weaknesses of those who are without strength, and not to please ourselves.**"

The kingdom of God is like a medium sized church in a medium sized city full of folks who wake up every morning full of themselves and at the same time full of God's Holy Spirit, they go to work each day intent on paying their own bills and at the same time rejoicing that at Calvary their Savior paid it all, they live their days anxious to enjoy the fruits of their labor and at the same time eager to deny themselves, pick up their crosses, and follow Christ, they go to bed resting in the forgiveness of their sins and at the same time wondering how they can do better. In Jesus' Name. Amen.