



God’s Saving Work in the Letter to the Romans: Lectionary Texts for the Pentecost Season

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The continuous reading of Paul’s letter to the Romans for sixteen Sundays, which the ecumenical lectionary prescribes, offers the preacher and the congregation an occasion for exploring a spiritual and theological classic. “This epistle,” wrote Martin Luther, “is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel.”¹ Luther advised persons to learn it by heart and declared:

In this epistle we thus find most abundantly the things that a Christian ought to know, namely, what is law, gospel, sin, punishment, grace, faith, righteousness, Christ, God, good works, love, hope, and the cross; and also how we are to conduct ourselves toward everyone, be he righteous or sinner, strong or weak, friend or foe—and even toward our own selves....It appears that [Paul] wanted in this one epistle to sum up briefly the whole Christian and evangelical doctrine.²

According to this passage, Luther looked upon Romans primarily as a scriptural repository of doctrinal concepts. That view was popularized even more by

¹Martin Luther, “Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans,” *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann; 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 35.365.

²*Ibid.*, 35.380.

Philipp Melancthon, who once called Romans a compendium of Christian doctrine (*doctrinae christianae compendium*).³

In our day interpreters have insisted that Romans should be read as a letter, not a theological text-book, and they are correct. Nevertheless, Romans stands as a towering monument to Paul’s theological, as well as literary, work. Though it is indeed a letter, it has a way of drawing the reader deeply into theological issues of importance. Its literary form serves its message, but its message transcends its form.

The sixteen lectionary readings begin at Romans 3:21 and end at 14:9. The loss at the beginning and end of the letter is unfortunate, but the readings assigned are powerful and deserve a hearing in the church. Here we can deal with only six. Each of them proclaims the saving work of God in Christ, articulating it with a wide range of imagery.

Second Sunday after Pentecost: Romans 3:21-25a, 27-28

We jump into the middle of things at 3:21. Up to this point in the letter the apostle has expressed thanks to God for the faith and witness of the Christian community in Rome and has indicated his plan for a visit there (1:8-15); he has made a declaration concerning the saving power of the gospel (1:16-17); and he has declared that the wrath of God is active and directed against the whole human race (1:18-3:20). All people—Jews and gentiles alike—are under the power of sin (3:9); all are accountable before God (3:19). In the final analysis, says Paul, God will reward or punish each person according to his or her works (2:6)! He carries on his case by means of diatribe (argumentation that sets up hypothetical viewpoints or questions and responds to them) to demonstrate that, before God, no one can stand. The Scriptures of Israel themselves show that even the Torah-observant Jew, the child of the covenant, has no special standing but is under judgment (2:24; 3:9-20). All this will change in Romans 9-11, where we read about God’s amazing grace upon Israel, but for now the rhetorical effect stands. No one can hide. Every person stands under divine wrath and condemnation.

At 3:21, however, the great reversal comes. “But now (*nuni de*),” Paul declares, “the righteousness of God” has been revealed in the Christ event. The shift is emphatic (*nuni* instead of ordinary *nun*), and it draws a sharp line of demarcation between the former time of wrath and judgment (apart from God’s grace in Christ) and the present time in which the righteousness of God has been revealed.

Much has been written on the “righteousness of God” theme in Paul.⁴ The term does not refer to a status before God that is imputed to the believer, but to God’s saving activity, the setting of relationships right between God and his people. For example, the term standing parallel to “righteousness” in Psalm 98:2

³Philipp Melanchthon, *Loci Communes*, 1521, in *Melanchthons Werke in Auswahl*, ed. Robert Stupperich, 7 vols. (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann; Gerd Mohn, 1951-75) 2.7. English translation: *The Loci Communes of Philipp Melanchthon* (Boston: Meador, 1944) 69.

⁴A survey of views is contained in Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul’s Gospel and Mission: The Outlook from His Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 12-46.

(LXX, 97:2) is “salvation,” although that is not obvious in most English versions. Further, there are passages in the Scriptures of Israel which speak of the manifestation of God’s righteousness in the messianic age (Isa 45:22-25; 61:1-2, 11) or in and through the Messiah (Ps 72:1-7; Isa 11:1-5; Jer 23:5-6). *Now* that expectation has been fulfilled.

All have sinned and fall short of God’s glory, but they are justified by God’s grace in the redemptive work of Christ (3:23-24). The extent of sin has been matched and exceeded by the redemptive work of God in Christ. In 3:25 Paul uses a term in reference to Christ that has been translated many ways; the term is *hilasterion*, and it has been rendered as “propitiation” (KJV), “expiation” (RSV), “sacrifice of atonement” (NRSV), and still other ways. But there are good reasons to stick with Origen, Eusebius, Luther, and others to see here a typological allusion to its Old Testament antecedent, the “mercy seat” (Hebrew, *kapporeth*; Greek, *hilasterion*), which Moses was instructed to build (Exod 25:10-22), and which was considered the place at which the Lord would be present, within the holy of holies (26:34), to meet the priestly representatives of the people for rites of atonement (25:22).⁵ Paul then speaks of the crucified Christ as the “mercy

seat,” meaning that atonement takes place not within the hiddenness of the holy of holies, but has happened in the death of Christ out in the open air on Golgotha, the waste management facility of Jerusalem.

All of this activity on God’s part, Paul argues, excludes boasting (3:27-28). It has been established that all people stand under God’s wrath (1:18-3:20). But God, who wants to be God for us, has opened the way to life by giving his Son over for us (8:32) and then condemning sin in his death on the cross (8:3). We are saved totally by grace, and justification is ours as we receive it by faith.

The lesson prompts a sermon on justification by faith. But the congregation probably hears one on that at least every Reformation Sunday. Another possibility is to treat the lesson in contrast to Romans 1:18-3:20, stressing how God deals with the world in terms of judgment and grace. The imagery of Jesus as the “mercy seat” provided by God, in light of its Old Testament background, could help people understand the meaning of Christ’s death.

Third Sunday after Pentecost: Romans 4:18-25

We rush ahead, jumping over some important material, to the next reading. On the way to this section Paul argues that Abraham was justified by believing the promises of God (4:1-8), and that that happened while he was technically a gentile (prior to circumcision, 4:9-12). Specifically, Abraham was declared righteous by God when he believed God’s promise of many descendants (Gen 15:6), which preceded the command that he be circumcised (Gen 17:10-14) and the actual circumcision itself (17:24). In rabbinic lore the first event (Abraham’s believing and his justification) happened when Abraham was 70 years old, and Gen 17:24 says that Moses was 99 when he was circumcised. Paul thereby establishes a typological

⁵For a discussion of the evidence for this view, cf. *ibid.*, 47-81.

continuity between Abraham and those who believe the gospel in the present, whether they be Jew or gentile. Abraham is the father of all those who resemble him in his gentile days (4:12). The type of faith that he possessed—faith in God’s power to give life to the dead (4:17b)—is held by believers, those who believe that God has raised Jesus from the dead.

The assigned reading (4:18-25) explores the contours of the faith of Abraham. Although he and Sarah were extremely old, and Sarah had always been infertile, Abraham believed God’s promises of numerous descendants (Gen 15:5 and 17:5). But Paul does not discuss Abraham as an example of faith in God in general. What makes Abraham the example here is his faith in God as willing and able to deliver on the promise of life out of death, which was followed by God’s justifying him. And that establishes that God counts a person righteous not on the basis of that person’s observance of the law, consequent upon circumcision, but on the basis of faith in God—whereby God is truly God, the giver of life, for that person. The same is applicable to us (4:23-24). Those who believe that God has raised the crucified Jesus from death to life are justified. Since the creation of the world, no other deed of God can match the Easter event. To believe in God as the one who raised Jesus is to believe in God truly. When that happens, God can declare the believer to be in a right relationship (justified, right-wised) to himself. There is no more, indeed there can be no more, to believe or do.

The passage is heavy going. How can one possibly lighten it up and proclaim a message from it? One way to proceed would be to explore the meaning of what God asks of us. Decency, yes. But God is honored and truly becomes God for us as we believe that he is the giver of life—in creation, the resurrection of Jesus, and in the life to come. Then God is God, and we are his children. That’s what God wants!

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost: Romans 5:6-11

Chapters 5 through 8, where this and the next three readings are located, take up “in house” concerns regarding the “new life in Christ.” Paul deals with a good number of topics and frequently exhorts his readers to live out the new life. He starts out by declaring that, being justified by faith, we have peace with God; from the divine side, there is nothing but grace, and so we are at peace. But since the old order still continues, we are not yet exempt from suffering and its effects (5:1-5).

In our reading Paul describes the human condition with a series of words: weak and ungodly (5:6), sinful (5:8), and hostile to God (5:10). This is the human condition as known in light of the revelation of God’s wrath and grace. It is the condition in which God has found us, and into which he has sent his Son, who died for us—weak, ungodly, sinful, and hostile though we are. God thereby demonstrates his love for us. We see that God does not love us because we are lovable, but because it is God’s nature to love.

It is not enough, however, for God simply to demonstrate his love for us; something has to be done. The way God has chosen is to send his Son, who died for us, and whose sacrificial death (i.e., “his blood” in 5:9) is atoning, a means of justification. Therefore we have salvation, and will have salvation, which is de-

scribed here as being saved “from the wrath of God” rather than “from sin, death, and the power of the devil.” Salvation is spoken of here as future, based on present justification and reconciliation in the death of Christ. There is a fascinating dialectic here. Salvation is from the wrath of God, but God has done the saving work in the sending of Christ and his subsequent death. There is no idea here of Christ as one who stands over against God to appease God’s wrath or to satisfy his justice on behalf of humanity. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19).

The reading offers an opportunity to explore in depth the gospel of God’s reconciling work in Christ. One might do that by bringing forth other passages that relate to this one. These include Gal 3:13; 2 Cor 5:14, 19, 21; and Rom 3:21-25; 8:3, 32. The composite one gets is that God’s judgment against humanity has been focused upon Christ whom God himself sent; therefore that judgment has been exercised, and we are free from it and free for eternal life. All this, however, should be set within the larger context of the human condition before God that Paul describes (weak, ungodly, sinful and hostile)—a plight that can be freely acknowledged in the light of wondrous love.

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost: Romans 5:12-15

It is puzzling why the reading stops at 5:15. Usually the unit is taken to go through 5:21, and one should not hesitate to bring 5:16-21 into the consideration of 5:12-15. In any case, in this

portion of Romans Paul argues that the universality of sin has been countered by the universality of grace—which is even greater.

In 5:12-14b Paul establishes that since Adam, sin has been in the world—and death as its consequence due to divine wrath upon human rebellion, as the story of Adam itself shows (Gen 2:17; 3:19). Paul concedes that although sin is exposed through the law of Moses, it actually existed prior to the giving of the law on Mount Sinai. The evidence for that is that people died within the era extending from Adam to Moses. In fact death “reigned” (“exercised dominion,” NRSV) in that whole era; it reigned over people whose sins were not identical to Adam’s particular sin (the transgression of a specific commandment Gen 2:17).

Christological and soteriological assertions appear in 5:14c-15. First Adam and Christ are related as a “type” and “antitype,” respectively, in the sense that they both head up an aeon and a humanity: Adam is head of the old age and the old humanity, which is perishing and passing away; Christ heads up the new age and the new humanity, which is destined for eternal life, and which even shares in it already (cf. 6:13; 2 Cor 5:17). Second, the work of God in Christ is declared to have been far greater in its effects than Adam’s sin. Adam and his sin are no match for God and his grace! The universality of sin, affecting every person, has now been overshadowed by the universality of grace for all. Paul goes on to argue the case more thoroughly in 5:16-21 (see especially 5:18-19), but already he has made his point.

Paul’s talk of God’s saving work in Christ is not simply about personal salvation at this place; it is cosmic and corporate in scope. When talk of salvation is

confined to one’s own state of affairs, a person can easily become indifferent to the divine project of the world’s redemption. To belong to the church, the community of faith in Christ, is to share already in the redemption that God intends for the creation as a whole—and to witness to it. Like all people, we are children of a fallen humanity. But by divine grace and election, and by our own believing the gospel, we are children of a new humanity, sharing in advance what God wills for the whole creation, when God will be everything to everyone (1 Cor 15:28).

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost: Romans 6:1b-11

In 5:12-21 Paul has argued that grace triumphs abundantly over sin. If that is the case, does it not follow that the best way to help grace along would be to “continue in sin”?

The answer is no, but Paul goes on to argue the case, using the analogy of baptism. The argument rests on two points: (1) the concept of the two ages; and (2) the believer’s incorporation into Christ. Regarding the first point, the old age (or “this age” or “present age”) has run its course, although it is still present (1 Cor 2:6; 10:11; Gal 1:4). But the new age has been inaugurated at the resurrection of Christ from the dead (1 Cor 15:20-23; 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). Second, through baptism the Christian has been incorporated into Christ and, being bound to him, shares in his destiny (6:8). The believer, being a new creation, belongs already then to the new age.

The imagery that Paul uses for baptism is radical. Baptism is not compared here to a mere washing; it is about death and life. In the event of baptism a person participates in crucifixion, death, and burial with Christ (6:4, 5, 6, 8); and the outcome is freedom from the power of sin, newness of life, and life with Christ (6:4, 5, 6, 8). Christ died “once for all” (*ephapax*) to sin

(6:10); that is, his sacrificial death marks the moment when God’s condemnation of sin took place (cf. 8:3). But God has raised him from death, and the reign of sin and death has no more power over him (6:9). By sharing in Christ’s death and resurrection, sharing therefore in his destiny, the Christian is to consider himself or herself in the same situation—dead in regard to sin (sin has no influence over those who have died) and alive to God (6:11).

In all of this Paul speaks of sin as an actual power (not just deeds) that seeks to rule over people. But the Christian has been transferred through baptism from the dominion of sin into the dominion of the risen Christ. It is still of course possible for Christians to continue in sin (6:1); they are free to become no longer free from its power. But Paul exhorts his readers to become what they are—persons who share the life of the new age with Christ. He reflects on this by using baptism as an illustration. A sermon on this text might do the same. Those who are baptized have been incorporated into Christ and share his destiny. What is left is for the baptized to become what they are, living out the meaning of baptism in daily life.

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost: Romans 7:15-25a

Since Paul uses the pronoun “I” (*ego*) several times in Romans 7—a discussion of the law, the flesh, and sin—this chapter has often been interpreted as an autobiographical section of the letter, in which Paul discusses his own personal struggles. In our time, however, there is a wide consensus among interpreters that Paul uses the first person pronoun as a rhetorical device to do a theological analysis of the human condition from the perspective of Christian faith.⁶

In 7:14-25 the apostle deals with the struggle of the law and “the flesh” apart from the deliverance which Christ brings (prior to faith). The law, he says, is spiritual, but humanity is carnal (*sarkinos*, living for that which is perishable, “a life of self-reliant pursuit of one’s own ends”⁷), sold into slavery under sin (7:14). For the person who takes the law seriously, therefore, there is a great struggle (a bondage of the will). There is an actual desire to serve God (7:15, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25). But “I” (such a person) cannot really carry this out (7:18); in fact, I do what is contrary to the will of God (7:15, 19, 23). Why? Because by myself I am sold under the power of sin (7:14); sin dwells within me (7:17,20), and with my flesh I serve the law of sin (7:25). I am captive to this because of the weakness of my flesh (7:23). I therefore call out concerning my hopeless situation in a lament, calling out for deliverance (7:24). Paul follows the lament with a thanksgiving (7:25; 8:1): deliverance has been won; there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ!

Paul’s analysis of the struggle between a person’s will to serve God and his or her incapacity to follow through on it consistently can be illustrated in many ways. The constraints of time and the conflicting demands on us from so many directions seem to hem us in, along with our best intentions, making it impossible for us to be and do what God created us to be and do. And then there is sin, which makes matters even worse! But God, who created us, knows our condition well. Indeed, God has delivered us, and will deliver us, from our plight, does not condemn, and rejoices in our reliance on his grace.

The author of 2 Peter said of Paul’s letters that “there are some things in them hard to understand” (3:16), and according to Paul himself, critics in his own lifetime charged that “his letters are weighty and strong” (2 Cor 10:10). We who are Paul’s modern admirers can agree with both statements, particularly when working with Romans. These six lessons from Romans

are indeed heavy and forceful. Some might consider them too ponderous for preaching in congregations today. But that is to underestimate the curiosity and spiritual hunger of many people. To devote six Sundays on these texts is a homiletical risk worth taking.

⁶The various possible meanings are reviewed by C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975-79) 1.342-47.

⁷Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951-55) 1.241.