

When Religion Doesn't Work

Romans 7:15-8:2
Matthew 11:28-30

Only God can deliver us.

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
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I heard a story recently about a guy who invited a friend of his on an elk hunt. They went far into the wilderness of the Canadian Rockies, so remote that their hunting camp could only be reached by a small plane on an airstrip between the mountains. The two friends had an excellent hunt together, and when the plane returned at the end of the week, they had bagged six elk. But the pilot of the small plane said they could only carry four elk home. Six was too heavy.

The experienced hunter protested, "Last year, the plane that carried us out was exactly like this one. The horsepower was the same; the weather was the same, and last year we also had six elk."

Hearing this, the pilot reluctantly agreed to try. So they loaded up the six elk and all their equipment and took off. Unfortunately, the little plane did not have sufficient power to climb out of the valley with all that weight, and they crashed into the side of the mountain.

Stumbling out of the wreckage, the friend asked the experienced hunter if he knew where they were. "I'm not sure," he said, "but I think we're about a mile from where we crashed last year."

Those hunters had a case of something we are all familiar with: persistent humanity. We are all inhabitants of the human condition. We all repeat the same mistakes over and over again. Sometimes we even expect the results to be different, which is the definition of insanity. We all have to deal with our constant shortcomings, our vulnerability, our failures. If we are honest, we are all and each of us enslaved to our sins.

Crying out from our human condition, we expect religion to be of help, and we are disappointed to find out it really is not. Religions—all of them—are sets of rules governing the behavior of believers. There are things you are supposed to do and things you are not supposed to do. There are rules about certain rituals that believers perform in order to connect them with a god or gods. There are propositions or principles that people are supposed to accept and believe. But none of these things deal with the real issue—our

persistent humanity. The rules, the rituals, and the propositions of belief do not change our fundamental human condition. They do not deliver us from our sin.

In Paul's terminology, the rules of religion are the Law of Moses, the commandments of the Jewish religion. In the Letter to the Galatians, he compares the Law to a babysitter. The Greek word is actually *paidagogos*, from which we get "pedagogue" and "pedagogy." The *paidagogos* was a servant who was given the responsibility of raising a boy child and teaching him how to behave. It's usually translated "disciplinarian" or "custodian." The function of the disciplinarian is good, but he is only temporary, until the child grows and matures. The function of the Law is good, but it is only temporary, until our faith grows and matures. Paul writes, "*Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be reckoned as righteous by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.*"¹

The Law—the rules of religion—may be helpful in defining our limits or controlling our behavior, but they are temporary fixes to our persistent humanity. In fact, knowing what's right often tempts us humans to do what's not right. The power of sin can use the law to lead us in the wrong direction. Does this mean that the rules/laws are bad? No, Paul says. But it does mean that religion itself can be an obstruction to the kind of relationship God wants to have with God's children.

This is the bind we find Paul in today. He is trying to explain to the Roman church the difference between a religion of law and a relationship with Jesus Christ. Christianity is not about law; it's about relationship. Paul doesn't even know the Romans, so this is a remarkably humble and vulnerable part of the letter, as he admits that he, too, struggles with his persistent humanity: "*I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact, it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me. For I know that the good does not dwell within me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do the good lies close at hand, but not the ability. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me.*"² Paul is a hot mess, just like we are! Give him credit for his honesty and vulnerability, but ultimately his attempt to follow the rules ends in futility: "*Wretched person that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?*"³

Trying to have a relationship with God by following rules reminds me of any number of fad diets that people try. You can go all "carrot juice and tofu," or you can spend thousands of dollars in a physician-supervised diet program, and you can lose weight. But even the docs will tell you that for the diet to work long-term, there has to be a fundamental shift of attitude toward food and habits of eating. If you don't make that fundamental change of heart, then when you get off the diet regimen, your eating habits are still the same, and the pounds come back on. Trying to be religious by following laws or trying to be good by sheer human effort is the same way. It may work for a while, but eventually, without that fundamental change, sin will win. It's too powerful. It will overwhelm us and frustrate our every effort.

That's where Paul is headed with all this. If you read the Letter to the Romans from the beginning, Paul builds a case for a new kind of relationship with God. He is preparing us for a total paradigm shift from Law to Grace. He starts by talking about the inevitability

of sin, then he introduces the alternative of faith. He remembers Abraham as an example of faith. Then he introduces Jesus and says that the faith that justifies us before God is a faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is what reconciles us to God. But sin is persistent, and we keep trying to be righteous by our own efforts, and it just ends up in failure and despair. Therefore, finding no hope in our own efforts, we put our trust in Jesus, and—Boom!—the ground shifts under our feet. The world changes, and we see life in a different perspective. The climax of Paul’s argument starts with these words from Romans 8: “*Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death.*”⁴

Through faith in Jesus Christ, our sins are forgiven; our mistakes are wiped away; our guilt is gone. We have a personal relationship with God, and we are on the way to salvation. This is the gift of grace, and it changes everything.

This should be the greatest news of all, but sometimes we find grace a hard gift to accept. In one of his books, *In the Eye of the Storm*, Max Lucado tells a story about Napoleon Bonaparte, the one-time emperor of France. One day his horse got away from him. An alert private jumped on his horse and chased down the emperor’s horse. When he returned the horse to his general, Napoleon smiled at the courageous soldier and said, “Thank you, *Captain.*”

The soldier’s eyes widened at what he had heard. Then he snapped to attention, saluted, and said “Thank you, sir!” He immediately went to the barracks, got his bags, and moved into the officers’ quarters. He took his old uniform to the quartermaster and exchanged it for a captain’s uniform. By Napoleon’s word, the private had become a commissioned officer. He didn’t argue. He didn’t doubt. He knew that the one with the power to do it had done it. He accepted the truth, and he rejoiced.

If only we could do the same. God smiles at us and says, “You are my child. You are forgiven. You belong to me.” But as Lucado says, “We prefer to get our salvation the old-fashioned way. We earn it. To accept grace is to admit failure, a step we are hesitant to take. We opt to impress God with how good we are rather than confessing how great [God] is. We dizzy ourselves with doctrine, burden ourselves with rules, think that God will smile on our efforts. [God] doesn’t.”⁵ It’s so hard to understand and accept the gift of grace when you’re trying to do life the old-fashioned way.

In a former church, I had a friend named Frank. He was active in the church, sang in the choir, and we played golf on occasion. He was 84 and could shoot his age. One day after church, Frank came up to me with tears in his eyes. I asked him what was wrong, and he said, “Absolutely nothing. Today, for the first time, I understood what grace was all about.”

I don’t know what I even preached about that day, except that I do mention grace and faith and Jesus a lot. I don’t think it was my sermon; it was the movement of the Holy Spirit. Frank continued, “I was in World War II. I saw a lot of things and did a lot of things that were unforgivable. All these years I’ve been asking myself, ‘Who pays for this?’ Now I get it.”

Friends, that was 60 years after World War II! For 60 years, Frank had been wondering how he was going to get forgiveness for the things he had done. For 60 years, he had been going to church, listening to sermons, attending Sunday School, being a good person, following all the rules, and finally, finally, he got it. Jesus paid for that. Forgiveness was a gift that Frank didn’t have to earn, because he couldn’t. Suddenly the tectonic plates of

his heart shifted, and he was released from his guilt. His paradigm shifted from Law to Grace, and his soul was at rest.

I find it interesting that the Gospel reading paired with this text today contains some of the most comforting words of Jesus. I like the way *The Message* translation renders it: “*Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.*”⁶ Are you weary today from hauling around baggage that maybe you have been carrying for much too long? Have your attempts at religion resulted in a heavy burden of guilt over things you couldn’t change on your own? Do you ever wonder who can save you from this meaningless merry-go-round?

Jesus says, “Come to me.” Come to Jesus and find rest. Come to Jesus and find peace. Come to Jesus, and all your sins will be forgiven, and all your anxiety about trying to be somebody you’re not will disappear. It’s not about you. It’s all about him. It’s all grace. As Paul said in a different letter, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*”⁷ It’s all grace, and it’s all good.

In a book called *Believe and Belong*, pastor Bruce Larson describes a huge statue in New York City. It is located in the International Plaza of Rockefeller Center. It is a statue of Atlas, the figure from Greek mythology. The statue is 45 feet high and weighs 14,000 pounds. Atlas is a perfectly proportioned man, with all his muscles straining, because he is holding the world on his shoulders. Even though he is the most powerful man on earth, he can barely stand up under this burden. That’s one way to live, trying to carry the world on your shoulders.

Literally across the street from Rockefeller Center on Fifth Avenue is St. Patrick’s Cathedral. Behind the high altar of the church is a shrine to the boy Jesus. There is a statue there, too. It is four feet tall, of Jesus maybe eight or nine years old. He is not straining; he is radiating peace. He holds the whole world in his left hand.

Bruce Larson wrote, “We have a choice. We can carry the world on our shoulders, or we can say, ‘I give up, Lord; here’s my life. I give you my world, the whole world.’”⁸

Do you want your faith to work in a whole new way today? Are you tired of trying to follow all the rules? Are you spiritually exhausted by trying to make it on your own? Are you done with straining to hold the world on your shoulders?

Then let me suggest this. Let go. Let God have control. Make that fundamental shift from Law to Grace. Make the choice for God. Then you will find your burden lifted. You will find rest for your soul. You will hold the whole world in the palm of your hand.

¹ Galatians 3:23-26.

² Romans 7:15-20.

³ Romans 7:24.

⁴ Romans 8:1-2.

⁵ Max Lucado, *In the Eye of the Storm* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

⁶ Matthew 11:28-30. Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2005).

⁷ Ephesians 2:8-9.

⁸ Bruce Larson, *Believe and Belong* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1982), 21.