

The Pauline Setup

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Romans 2:1-4

I don't know how well you actually know the book of Romans. This is LaGrave, and more than that, this is the evening service crowd at LaGrave, so I'm sure the general knowledge of the book is better than average. My guess is that almost all of you know some of the most quoted parts of the book. Romans 8: "Who shall separate us from the love of God?" Romans 12 "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." My guess is that most of you are not very familiar with the passage I just read. It's one of those passages in Romans that you read past on your way to another place. I think I must have read it many times before I really heard what Paul was saying and what the Holy Spirit was saying through him. Tonight let's all stop and listen to Paul and the Spirit.

To do that I have to give you a sense where these four little verses fit into the whole letter. So let's go back to chapter one and get a sense of where Paul has been. I will tell you where he's been, but it might even be helpful to get out your Bibles and see for yourselves. I'd also like us to imagine this, not as a letter, but as a political speech delivered at a political convention. I know. Like you don't have enough politics in your life already. But work with me here. I promise that in doing this, I'm not trying to evoke either side of our modern political divide. I'm just trying to help us get the flow of things. So imagine Paul up in front of the crowd. The whole Church of Rome is there, both Jews and Gentiles are spread out before him. They are all eager to hear Paul explain their party platform.

Paul starts off his speech with the standard niceties. It's good to be able to talk to you. I really appreciate all of you, you mean a lot, I'm thankful for you etc., etc. That's verses 1-15 of the letter. There are hints of his main concerns in this introduction, but in form it's a boilerplate introduction. So Paul's opening puts everyone at ease and they settle down. Then, in verses 16 and 17, the speech begins. Paul shifts into a new gear and the crowd settles into their seats to listen. And like any good speaker starts off by giving the theme of his speech. "Ladies and gentlemen I would like to talk to you today about a new righteousness. A new way of being made right before God! A new way of straightening out our lives and our world! This righteousness comes to us through faith in Jesus Christ and it is available to everyone, both you Jews and you Gentiles." That's the theme of his speech. Everything Paul talks about in the next 16 chapters of Romans explains, celebrates and encourages this new righteousness. Paul is on fire about new righteousness. So next time somebody asks you what the theme of Romans is, if you say 'it's about a new way of righteousness,' you'll have the right idea. So that's Paul's theme. And it's a popular theme. Everyone applauds and leans forward to hear what Paul will say next.

Now He gets into the meat of his material. Like a lot of good speakers he starts off by establishing a need. "I hardly think I need to tell you how much we need righteousness in this world." "God is not happy with the way the godless people of this world have been ignoring the truth and destroying his world. In fact, 'the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness.'" This must change! We need righteousness! The crowd applauds, enthusiastically. "Yes Righteousness! Preach it Paul!" Here again Paul's speech is following a pretty typical pattern: before you offer

your solutions for restoring the world, you explain what you see as the problem. Politicians do this all the time. "This country has been suffering under the yoke of bad government for too long. Our standards are decaying. Our moral fiber is unravelling. Those bureaucrats on the beltway are strangling us. Those Wall Street fat cats are keeping us down!" Paul starts with the problem: a lack of righteousness in the world today. Crowds love that sort of thing.

So far Paul has stated the problem general, but starting in verse 22 he starts getting into specifics. Paul explains what's wrong with the world. His voice starts to rise. His gestures become wide and expansive. "The problem with the world is those pagans out there!" says Paul, "these pagans do terrible things. Those people out there are godless! They have Dark hearts! They have shameful desires! They have depraved minds. And what's more, they should know better. God's glory has been made plain to them through what he has made. They are without excuse!" As he names the sins of the godless pagans, he pauses and the crowd's applause grows louder and more forceful. With a rhetorical flourish Paul builds up momentum: he ends the chapter with the crescendo of condemnation we see in verses 29-32: "*They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death...*" And at this point the people in the crowd are on their feet. They're shouting, "Preach it Paul. Give it to those pagans. Tell it like it is! That's the problem with this world! It's all those no good perverts out there! It's people like that who are poisoning God's world!"

Paul pauses in his speech, He lets the cheering go on for a while. And when it dies down, he speaks the words of our passage. Paul looks at them straight in the eye and says, "*And as for you, you people in the crowd, you have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge another, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things.*" Do you hear what Paul is saying? "Yes those people are perverts, yes those people are full of envy strife deceit and malice, and you people are just like them." Can you imagine the reaction? Suddenly there is stunned silence. The cheering has stopped. It was a setup. Paul expected us to cheer and shout amen and get into the spirit of condemnation. He wanted us full of self-righteous outrage, he wanted us pointing fingers at those people out there and crying sinner, because in the end that cry and that finger would point right back at us.

In these verses, Paul has done the same thing the prophet Nathan did to David. Remember that story? David had killed Uriah the Hittite so that he could marry Uriah's wife. Nathan came in and told David the story about how a rich man in the kingdom had stolen a sheep from a poor neighbor. It was the only sheep the poor man had, and he loved it like a pet. The rich man had taken it, killed it and eaten it without a second thought. And when David heard the story he too rose up out of his seat and started shouting, "Who is this no good scum! He deserves to die!" Same as Paul right? Those people deserve to die!!! (Notice both David and Paul talk about the sinners deserving death!) And Nathan says to David, "You are that man!" David is stricken. David is cut to the heart. "Against you and you only have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight!"

Why is Paul doing this? Why does he setup the crowd? Why does he set up the reader? Why does he want us to see ourselves as the same as those ruthless, heartless, godless people of chapter 1? He's not trying to be cruel; he's breaking up the soil. The new righteousness that Paul is announcing in Romans does not grow in the field of pride. The new righteousness is a

righteousness by grace through faith and it is a gift of God so no one can boast. There is no boasting! There is no more competitive righteousness; looking from side to side, making sure you are ahead of the other competitors. There is only falling to your knees and looking to Jesus and receiving a gift of love and grace that you don't deserve. Paul is trying to root out the pride. So long as pride and comparison are there, grace and joy and real community cannot grow.

Let me give you an example. Seminary. What better place to illustrate depravity, right? When I first got to Calvin Seminary and started class there, it was really intimidating. (Of course, by year three I realized that EVERYONE felt the same way. We were all intimidated and afraid.) At the beginning I was young and I looked around at all the other students and they all seemed so bright, so accomplished. I heard where they'd studied and what they'd accomplished and I said to myself: "Yikes! These people are really bright! I'm having a hard time tracking with these professors but they all seem to be keeping up. And they all make such intelligent remarks! I feel really inadequate." That's how I felt. There are two ways a person can go in that situation. You can take the road of pride. You can cover up for your inadequacies by pretending to be smarter than you really are. You can try to say smart things in class. You can pretend to understand when you really don't. You can drop names, you can say things like 'that sounds very Dooyeweerdian to me', even when you don't really know anything about what Dooyeweerd actually said. If everyone chooses that road, what happens to community? A lot of posturing, a lot of pretending, a lot of posturing, a lot of fear. Not much intimacy. Not much joy. On the other hand, you could take the road of humility. On this road you get to the coffee shop and you say, "I know you guys all seemed to follow, but I had a really hard time understanding that lecture today. I find this place so intimidating. The professor was talking about Dooyeweerd, I've never heard of the dude." What happens then? Probably two other people say, 'me too! I feel like I'm in over my head.' And out of that place of humility a different kind of community has a chance to form. Out of that vulnerability you can find honesty, real friendship, intimacy and joy.

In a recent op ed, David Brooks told a story about something that happened to him years ago in a class he taught at Yale. He was teaching a group of High achieving students – this was Yale after all – but he also happened to be going through a personal crisis. The crisis was bad enough that he was forced to admit his problem. "I made an announcement to my class. I said that I was going to have to cancel office hours that day because I was dealing with some personal issues and a friend was coming up to help me sort through them. I was no more specific than that, but that evening 10 or 15 students emailed me to say they were thinking of me or praying for me. For the rest of the term the tenor of that seminar was different. We were closer. That one tiny whiff of vulnerability meant that I wasn't aloof Professor Brooks, I was just another schmo trying to get through life." A little bit of vulnerability, a little bit of honesty and, all of a sudden, grace and kindness could grow in the field of that classroom.

With this setup, Paul isn't trying to make everyone feel miserable about themselves. He's trying to create a community of honest need and genuine vulnerability, a community where grace and kindness and joy can flourish. He's trying to create a group of people who know that they are ordinary schmoes saved by grace. The danger of pride is always there. Especially in churches which are full of big churches full of good people who seem outwardly successful and put together. It's very easy for people to walk in here and feel like they might need to pretend to fit in. It's very easy for people to feel like there are things that they might need to hide in order to fit in. For example, it's simply a fact that many of the neighbors feel like someone like them could never really belong among people like us. I think they're wrong. I know they're wrong. We are

ordinary schmoes saved by grace. I hope we can show them that they are wrong. I hope they will find that this is a place full of ordinary, vulnerable open people, a place where the new righteousness lives, a righteousness that is by grace through faith. A righteousness that is a gift of God, so that no one can boast.

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