

Righteousness = The Power of Grace

by Rev. Durrell Watkins, MA, MDiv
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Philippians 3.4b-9; Matthew 21.42-46

My great-uncle Arthur decided my great-aunt Gladys had lost her edge as a home-maker. Uncle Arthur told Aunt Gladys, "Now Gladys, from now on when I come home from work, I expect to see a clean house, and I expect to see a smile on your face, and I expect to see dinner on the table." He didn't see any of that; in fact, it was three days before he could see at all out of his left eye.

Speaking of confrontations...

In the gospel reading today, Jesus confronts people who are using religion for their own privilege and power; people who use religion against others rather than as a means of including others.

Jesus has of course come into Jerusalem with a lot of fanfare. He's drawn attention to himself by ministering to sick people, by confronting greed and exploitation, by teaching a gospel that sounds subversive to some people.

In fact, "gospel" was a word used to refer to the good news of Caesar's reign. Caesar brought peace. Caesar brought security. Caesar brought prosperity. It was good news that Caesar was in charge, or so the official propaganda went. And for followers of Jesus to use the word gospel to describe his message must surely have annoyed the Roman authorities. The gospel is the good news about Caesar; by what authority do these followers of Jesus call his teachings a gospel?

Because of Jesus' activity since he arrived in Jerusalem, the chief priests and elders demanded that Jesus tell them by what authority he was doing all these things. Jesus exposes the religious leaders' hypocrisy and ill intent, and after telling a couple of parables meant to make the religious leaders look foolish, he concludes with the words we heard in this morning's reading:

Jesus says, "Therefore I say to you, the Commonwealth of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that will do what God would want." Prostitutes and tax collectors are more likely to understand divine grace than these religious "authorities" – or so Jesus says.

It's rather a heated confrontation. If we think of Jesus as meek and mild, seeing him so robust and confrontational may make us uncomfortable. We may not want to hear about Jesus challenging both religion and government, siding with the outcasts and the marginalized; but that is the story as we have inherited it. It is this kind of activity that so threatens the powers of his day that Jesus is finally betrayed, arrested, tried, convicted, tortured, and executed as an enemy of the state.

Jesus is killed about 29 AD. Matthew's gospel is written about 85 AD. And right in the middle of that timeline, between Jesus' execution and Matthew's missive, the Apostle Paul unleashes a tirade of his own in a letter he writes to a community in northern Greece called Philippi.

In the Philippian church, there are apparently people who doubt the Apostle Paul's credentials and who question his progressive approach to the scriptures. He has a very inclusive view of spirituality. Luke remembers Paul quoting a gay, pagan, poet named Epimenides to explain his inclusive theology. Paul uses Epimenides' words when he says it is "in God that we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17.28).

Paul told the Galatian church that using gender or religion or class as an excuse to exclude or belittle people was improper, because, as he said, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free person, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ..." (Galatians 3.28).

Paul also told the Galatians to NOT submit to the yoke of doctrinal or dogmatic slavery, saying, "For freedom Christ has set us free..." (Galatians 5.1).

And he said the fruit of the spirit was simply love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, and the like...and he reminded the Galatians that there is no divine law against kindness or compassion or mutuality (Galatians 5.22-23).

Paul told the Corinthians that in a world of impermanence, there are only three things that really last: faith, hope and love; and he added that the greatest of those lasting qualities is love (1 Corinthians 13.13).

Paul told the church in Rome that anyone who shows love to someone has fulfilled the intent of scripture (Romans 13.8).

Do you know what he told the church in Thessalonica? He told them "be joyful always! Pray all the time! Be grateful...test every assumption; and after testing theological assumptions, only keep what has proven to be good" (1 Thessalonians 5.16-18, 21).

The fundamentalists of Paul's day are afraid he's letting people off too easy. Paul wants us to think for ourselves. Paul values compassion and kindness over strict observance of rules that can leave us mean and petty rather than generous and kind. Paul wants us to use religion in a way that is progressive, positive, and practical. Spirituality, for Paul, should contribute to joy and hope and well-being. It should be useful and it should lift us up rather than weighing us down.

The fundamentalists of Paul's day do not appreciate his message. The thought Paul believed too much in grace, too much in divine love, too much in the spirit being bigger than our rules and traditions.

And so in Philippi, the fundamentalists insult Paul, and try to discredit him. And in response to their attack, he says, "If it was about the rules, I'd be in good shape. I was circumcised when I was 8 days old, like the rules say. I was born into a religious family, had a religious education, and even became a religious lay scholar – a Pharisee. When I believed that it was about the rules, I attacked people who didn't obey the rules as I understood them...I persecuted the church because they seemed to be breaking from our traditions. From a legalistic standpoint, my credentials were impeccable!"

But Paul then says he had a change of heart. He gave up all that legalism because he experienced the transforming power of divine graciousness. He says, "I no longer consider myself righteous because I keep the rules; when I was a rule-keeper I was mean and nasty and dangerous. No, I embrace the righteousness that comes from trusting the goodness of God, the goodness that has been communicated to us by Christ."

The legalists confront Jesus in Matthew's gospel. The legalists confront Paul in Philippians chapter 3. And both Jesus and Paul insist, even when such insistence could lead to their peril, Jesus and Paul obstinately insist that God's will isn't about dogmatic certainty or ritual purity; God's will is for us to learn to live in the power of love.

We are righteous when we are gracious, kind, generous, hopeful, loving. When we trust in goodness, we no longer need to hide behind the "fundamentals." Jesus' critics didn't like such a message of grace. Paul's critics didn't like such a message of grace. Our critics will not like such a message of grace. And yet it is grace...not venomous legalism, not fear, not prejudice, but grace that truly empowers us and lifts us up.

The Buddha said greed, hatred, and ignorance were the three mental poisons. I think Paul would agree, since he points out what is of the spirit – love, hope, joy, kindness, generosity, patience.

Right living isn't about obedience to rules that make us fearful or mean; Right living is a gracious outlook, optimistic thoughts, encouraging speech, working for justice, living honorably, having good intentions, being mindful of how our words and deeds impact others, and concentrating on the infinite goodness in which we live and move and have our being.

In the East, they might call that model The Eight-fold path; St. Paul simply called it righteousness through faith in Christ, that is, right living through trust in divine goodness. Jesus called such right living the Kingdom of God. The early followers of Jesus called it The Gospel of Jesus Christ. Whatever we call it, it is healing, it is hopeful, it is inclusive, and it is good news. Amen.

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**I am a wave in the ocean of goodness.
I am made in the divine image.
I am filled with divine love.
I am loving, hopeful, and happy.
I am kind and generous.
I am blessed in mind, body, and affairs.
I trust in God's goodness...
And I am therefore righteous.
Amen.**

Final Word: *Promote Sharing the Light*