

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Romans 2:12-24

Sermon Title: "Faithfully Doing What God Wants" (A Journey through Romans)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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Do you remember what we discussed last week? Maybe you do and maybe you don't. Here is a quick recap. {SLIDE}

Paul is writing to a group of new Christians who live in the capital city of Rome.¹ They are Jews and Gentiles alike. Some grew up learning and practicing the laws from Moses written in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, and others did not grow up learning these things. Their church is brand new, not as large as St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican City, but made up of a smattering of meeting places in person's homes around the city. And these new Christians live in a non-Christian world full of pagan ideas and practices, surrounded by people who may not accept them as followers of Christ and who might be willing to hand them over to the authorities for punishment. This is the situation Paul has in mind, as he writes his letter to the Romans.

Today, we are going to focus on the fact that these Christians were Jews and Gentiles alike. {SLIDE} In

¹ Much of the following comes from Thomas Nelson Publishers, *The Nelson Study Bible (NKJV)*, cf. 1876-1877.

Rome a group of Jews and Gentiles decide to put aside the differences. They choose to gather together in one spot, and worship one Lord over all. Their faith in Christ brings them together. They can meet and practice spirituality however they do: the Jew continuing to follow the law and the Gentile refraining from falling back into old pagan practices. Each grows and matures, and strengthens the other in all matters of life.

Paul carries over the theme of God's wrath in Chapter 2. He spends the first three or so chapters in his letter to the Romans discussing a topic that we might be uncomfortable with. Paul writes on this topic, because he is trying to emphasize a point among these new Christians. Since they are young in faith, they need to know that the temptation to fall away from faith is too easy. What they experienced in the past might not be the same that they experience in the future. Faith starts as a wonderful touchy-feeling thing, but it has to become something deeper, something richer, less touchy-feely and more understood and solid.

He doesn't want them despising the richness of God's goodness. He hopes they will not become hard of heart and thick of head, or else the wrath of God

falls on them once more.² They would be in danger of losing it all. {SLIDE}

Paul discusses those who have sinned, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. He is imagining all those who reach the end of their lives, and if they have lived in such a way as to write off God, trying to get rid of God at every turn. As Hebrews 10 puts it, they trampled the Son of God underfoot and insulted the Spirit of grace.³ All they have to show for their lives in the end is brokenness, emptiness, and ungodliness. So whoever these folk could be, Paul says that they are guilty.

And it doesn't matter who they are. They could be Gentiles who have no law – that is, no Ten Commandments from God and the like – and they will perish as people without the law. They also perish without God, because this is how they ran their lives. No law, no God, end of a sad story. It's easy to pick on the Gentiles, because it sounds as though they are unruly creatures. They are naughty individuals who follow no real standards or morals, but just pursue life according to their selfish thoughts and desires. Anybody who lives like that, we could easily point to and say, "See the sinner over there. It's obvious where

² Cf. Romans 2:4-6.

³ Cf. Hebrews 10:29.

you are going.”

But, Paul says that they are not naughty creatures without morals. They know God’s law, whether they call it God’s law or not. We established that from the message last Sunday. We all know there is a God. It is a seed deep within us that need to be recognized, and then watered and cultivated. “Ever since the creation of the world,” Paul says, “[God’s] eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made. So they are without excuse...”⁴ The Gentiles do have some knowledge of God’s standards. By nature they do things that are required by God’s will, whether they call it God’s will or not.⁵

{SLIDE} When we treat a person with respect, whether we recognize that God gives us the ability to do so, it is still God’s standard we uphold. When we are upset and yet we choose not to hit back. When we see somebody doing something wrong, and we try to help them correct the situation. When a person is in trouble and we want to lend aid. People who have faith in Christ and those who do not have faith: both are carrying out God’s will.

I’ve told the story before, but when I was a teenager I worked as a bagger. People bought

⁴ Romans 1:20.

⁵ John Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World*, 72.

groceries and I put them in bags. When I was working, the concept of plastic bags was just catching on, so I would have to ask customers, “Do you want these in paper or plastic?” Most people wanted paper bags, while others found plastic bags to be easier to transport. Once in awhile, I would get one person who would say, “I want plastic, because I don’t like all those trees being cut down.” Some people were environmentally mindful of the planet, and they didn’t like to hear about rainforests being knocked down, and nature itself being destroyed. It takes a lot of trees to make paper bags, so they wanted to save the planet and go with plastic.

Now, every time I heard this, I wanted to ask, “Do you want plastic bags to save the planet for the planet’s sake, or do you want plastic because you feel it is your duty to treat God’s creation with respect? Are you doing this for some environmental ideal, or are you doing this because it is God’s will?” I never asked this out loud, but I always thought it. If they weren’t saving trees and nature to please God, I felt like they were missing something. They had come to a door of faith and opened it, but never stepped through.

The theologian John Stott says, “[The] work of [God’s] law (literally) its ‘requirements,’ its ‘effect,’ its business,’ has been written on the hearts of all human being by their Maker... when [God] writes his law on

our hearts in the new creation he also gives us a love for it and the power to obey it.”⁶ Paul says that the Gentiles are not naughty creature without morals. They have God’s morals. They carry out God’s work. But if they do not do this with faith in Christ, their morals judge them. Their good deeds cry out to them to take the next step. Open the door of faith in Christ and walk through. See who gives you the ability to do good things and praise the One who has set the pattern for our lives.

In this Roman church there are also Jews. **{SLIDE}** Paul is in his own wheelhouse now, because he understands what it means to live as a Jew. Paul tried to become the Jew of all Jews by rising through the ranks as a Pharisee. He was given permission to persecute the new Christians that were surfacing. He could punish them and even kill them without any repercussion. So Paul knows what it is like to rely on God’s law, and allow God’s law to motivate them in all they do or think or say.

But he wants to offer a warning. Jews may have a law from God, handed to them through Moses. They may even boast about the law: how it draws them closer to God and places them in good standing with

⁶ Ibid., 87.

God.⁷ However, do not let your heads get too big. Don't think for one minute that God's law saves you just because you hold it in your hands. You can quote all sorts of Scripture, but are you doing it? Are you carrying out what God requires through the law?

{SLIDE} This was the problem of that young rich man that Jesus ran into in Matthew 19. The man said, "I have kept God's law, and all the way back to childhood!"⁸ Great, Jesus said, you know the law in your mind, but you do not carry out with your hands and feet. Get rid of your arrogance, become humble before God, and serve others as Christ serves.

This was the problem with Simon the Pharisee who invited Jesus over for dinner.⁹ He and his fellow Pharisees gathered around the table for dinner, but then a sinful woman from the town burst in, and started to clean Jesus' feet with her tears and hair. Jesus asks Simon and guests about forgiveness, telling them a parable about people owing a lot of money but being forgiven of it. "Who is more thankful for the debt removed?" Jesus asks. Simon answers, "The one who owed the most." Jesus then shows his host and the people around how they assume too much as Pharisees. They sit on the law as though

⁷ Cf. Romans 2:17 (18).

⁸ Mark 10:20, also Matthew 19:16-22.

⁹ Cf. Luke 7:36-50.

they are cushy pillows. They wrap God's law around them like they are cozy blankets. But God's law doesn't save them from their sin. God's law doesn't exempt them from serving others, or showing compassion to those in need. In fact, God's law demands us all to get up and go out. {SLIDE}

Christians may act no differently than these people who assumed too much. They may carry their Bibles around like they are some protective shields. They may go to church thinking their good deeds will keep them out of hell for at least another week. We cannot ride our faith like we would ride a conveyor belt, thinking it will automatically take us to where we want to go. All words in Scripture call us to get up and go out. Scripture demands us to move, serve, help, give whatever we can in any moment. As we teach others, we teach ourselves.¹⁰ As we look to turn the thief's heart around, we make sure we appreciate all we have and not grasp for more. We want people to be faithful in relationships, and so we too are faithful. We want people to ignore the false idols they hold on to, and we chose to eliminate any we have created. If we boast in anything, we boast in the Lord, and we try to do what God requires of us.

And that is the point when it comes to those who

¹⁰ The following sentence follows Paul's words in Romans 2:21-23.

have God's word. If we know what God's word tells us, then we do it, and we do it for the sake of Jesus Christ. All the things we know that are right, we do them because they honor God. They cause our faith in Christ to grow. We don't do anything because an agenda tells us to do it, whether it's called Christian or not. We don't do anything because everybody else thinks it's cool, whether it's called Christian or not. We do because God wants us to do. It pleases God. It carries out God's will for the world.

James tells us to be doers of the word.¹¹ {SLIDE} The person who doesn't know God and yet knows certain things are right to do, they need to open that door of faith and walk through in order to see Christ. The person who has walked through the door of faith cannot merely listen to what God has to say. The person of faith must respond. In both cases, people may know what to do that is right, and they should do those things for the sake of Christ. They should do such things that causes them to understand more so the things of God. They should do such things in order to grow closer to God in love and joy. WE not only escape the wrath of God when we are faithful to God. What we have is a deep, vibrant relationship

¹¹ James 1:22.

with God. Such a relationship is the greatest thing we could ever have. God would very much like to be in such a relationship with us.

Assurance of Pardon:

Hear the Good News: what we deserve to have, Jesus has carried for us: sin and destruction and death. Jesus is the source of eternal life, and we can have such life when we accept him and believe. Believe this good news, brothers and sisters: In Jesus Christ you and I are forgiven! Thanks be to God! Amen.