

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Romans 3:9-26

Sermon Title: "Messed-up, Resurrected People of God" (A Journey through Romans)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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We are all messed up. {SLIDE} We are all one great big mess that somebody's got to clean up. Somebody has to do it, but nobody can. We cannot clean ourselves up and stop being messes. The person next to you cannot clean you up and stop you from being messed up.

Paul tells us and those new Christians in Rome that we are all messed up. Both "Jews and Greeks are under the power of sin," Paul says. "There is no one who is righteous, not even one. There is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God."¹ Paul doesn't make this stuff up on his own, but he quotes from Psalm 14. The words that he uses come from King David: "The Lord looks down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there is any who understand, who seek God. They have all turned aside, they have together become corrupt; There is none who does good, no, not one."² We are all messed up.

"Their throats are opened graves," Paul continues

¹ Roman 3:9, 10-11.

² Palms 14:2-3.

to say. “They use tongues of deceit. The venom of vipers comes from their lips, and their mouths are full of curses and bitterness.”³ There are people who are so messed up that they keep adding to the mess. They constantly revolt against God and they don’t care.

{SLIDE} They are right in their own eyes, and they don’t need the Creator of the world to tell them how to behave. They are so messed up that they see God sitting on the throne of power, and they want to dethrone God. They want to strip all God’s power, all God’s ability to make things right, and they want to place themselves on that throne and rule as they please.⁴ This is how messed up they are.

That’s what sin is. Sin is what messes us up. Sin thinks it knows what is right for us. Sin thinks it can solve all our problems, wipe away all our stress. Sin tries to act like God, and tries to care about us like God, and tries to take us away from God. Sin recklessly tries to occupy the throne that only belongs to God. Sin tries to be our authority, our leader. And if we follow sin – if we buy into the lies – we find us in a world of trouble. We find ourselves in world of hurt. Sin is what messes us up, and keeps us messed up.

Here’s a theological term for you: total depravity.

³ Romans 3:13-14.

⁴ John Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World*, cf. 100.

{SLIDE} Total depravity is another way of saying that people are affected by sin. St. Augustine first coined the idea from his studies of Scripture, and it was John Calvin, the one who started the Presbyterian Church, who attached to the idea and made it a part of our beliefs. Total depravity looks back to the fall of Adam and Eve, when they listened to the serpent and ate from the forbidden tree. Ever since then, we believe that “every person born into the world is morally corrupt.” We are all “enslaved to sin” and “apart from the grace of God, [we are] utterly unable to choose to follow God or choose to turn to Christ in faith for salvation.”⁵ In other words, we are the image of God, but we don’t know it. We are God’s children, but we are not able to understand that for ourselves. We cannot wake ourselves up to it. There is nothing within us that can make us think about God or choose to follow God. Apart from the grace of God – that is, God waking us up to the fact that we are his children – we fall deeper into our sin and remain lost. This is total depravity. That is how messed up we all are.

We go back to what Paul said to the Romans in Chapter 3, the same words that David used in two of his psalms, and we begin to understand. We understand what is being said. No one is righteous on

⁵ <http://www.theopedia.com/total-depravity>.

his or her own, ever since the fall of humans through Adam and Eve. No one has the capacity to think about God or speak about Christ on his or her own. Such an idea would never strike as something we should consider. Such faith would never be invented, if God just left us on our own.

And what is really scary is that we are so messed up in sin, that if it weren't for the Spirit speaking to Paul to write what he did in Chapter 3, he would never have written it in the first place. Paul would be so far gone in his sin that he could not say, "No one is righteous, not one." He couldn't come up with the words of his own. He could never invent the ideas with all his brain power... unless God gave them to him. King David would never have come up with the words in two of his psalms, saying that people turn from Gods ways. He couldn't see or perceive God's ways, unless God was speaking to his heart. We could read these word and have no clue what is going on, unless God opens our eyes and lifts the burden of sin from our minds and hearts. Total depravity: apart from the grace of God, we will not choose to follow God or choose to turn to Christ in faith for salvation.

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Consider a frog placed in a metal container. The lid is placed on top of the container, and there sits the

frog. It is never getting out of that container. It will climb up the walls, hang off the lid from the inside, rest on the bottom, but it is never getting out. It doesn't have the wherewithal to get itself out. And it will probably die in that container, unless someone takes off the lid. Somebody has to help the frog escape, somebody who knows how containers work. The frog then can climb up the wall from the inside and then climb down from the outside.

There is no way we can find our way out of our sin unless Somebody shows us the way. We will remain in our sin, and die in our sin, unless Somebody, Jesus Christ, lifts the lid and provides for our exit.

“All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God,” Paul tells the Roman church.⁶ It doesn't matter who they are. God sees no difference, whether they are Jews or Gentiles in this brand-new Roman church. All have sinned and all have fallen short. And God knows that all have sinned and all have fallen short, so that is why God provides the means to not fall short anymore. “The righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed,” Paul says. This righteousness was prophesied by the law and the prophets, and has finally come in human form. Jesus Christ is the righteousness of God. God comes to us

⁶ Cf. Romans 3:23.

in human form. God personally deals with our sin, because God knows we cannot. God personally provides the way out of our sin, because God knows we cannot. I love how Karl Barth puts it: “The righteousness of God is that ‘nevertheless’ by which [God] associates us with Himself and declares Himself to be our God.”⁷ Paul says that all have sinned and have fallen short. We aren’t getting out of the container. But Paul also says, “Nevertheless, the righteousness of God is revealed. Jesus Christ is our Escape. The battle against sin and death that Christ won is given to us as a reward. If we believe in him through faith, then we are justified in him, and we are plagued by sin no more. {SLIDE}

God’s glory is extended out to us. We fall short of it – on our own we will always fall short of it. So God extends it out to us. God covers the gap that we can cross over. God does for us that we cannot do for ourselves, and we brought into God’s brilliant glory.

God removes the sin from our lives. We all have sinned – we will keep sinning, if we rely only on ourselves. So God removes the sin. God makes us right in his eyes; and when we mean “being made right by God,” we mean being cleared, being acquitted in God’s court of law. Law requires that are guilty person

⁷ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 93.

should pay for his or her crimes. If found guilty, a lot of pain awaits the person. But God makes us right through righteousness in Christ. God removes the negative verdict from his court. God removes the crimes itself from our history. There is no reason to be judged for punishment. We are cleared, we are acquitted. We are saved from our sin.

{SLIDE} That takes us back to the subject of God's wrath, if only for a moment. Paul has been saying that the wrath of God falls on those who know about God and yet they reject God. Ever since the creation of the world, Paul said back in Chapter 1, God's eternal power and God's divine nature has been revealed. They might be invisible to the eye, but the human mind and heart has sensed God. God's power and nature have been understood with God's help. People would have been unable to grasp it on their own, but God has helped everyone with this task. God helps us all see who he is and what he is capable of doing.

God's wrath falls on those who have understood with God's help, and yet they have ignored God. They have rejected God's favorable power over their lives. They try to throw God off the throne and place themselves there. They have ignored God's nature. Jesus Christ stands before us all, beckoning us to accept his free gift of salvation. But some choose to

accept something else. They accept cheap imitations. They accept possibly nothing but pain and frustration.

{SLIDE} God's wrath falls on those who see that the lid has been lifted from the container. Light pours into the space. Warm air lifts the person from her gloomy thoughts, and gives energy to her muscles. And yet, the person remained still. The person doesn't accept the fact that the lid is removed. Christ stands at the exit, telling the person to come out. The person refuses. The person makes the container his home. At some point, God's wrath falls on those who think that the container of sin is the only life there is to know.

Paul says to the new Christians in Rome: Do not remain in the container. Do not even think about going back to the container, which holds your old pointless, aimless lives. You have escaped God's wrath. Remain free. Remain free in God through Christ. Live the way God wants you to live. Enjoy the life that God has given you.

{SLIDE} When I first accepted Christ as my Savior, the leaders somewhat hammered into me and the other this idea of sin. We were babies in the faith, and the leaders were concerned that we might lose what we gladly received during our week at the retreat. "Don't forget what you've learned here," they said. "In this

place you had a great time with friends. You heard the word of God every morning, every afternoon, and every night. You listened and you believed. But when you go out to the world, you will not have God's word offered to you every morning, every afternoon, and every night. You will be busy, you will have other things to do. You may forget to read your Bible. You may forget to pray. Other youth may laugh at you for what you believe. Don't lose what you've learned here, and build on it. Build on your faith in Christ with prayer, study, worship, and service."

Sin is quite strong in this world with all its worries and distractions. It is a nuisance to the youth who just accepted Christ, or the adult who have done the same. Sin was strong in the lives of those new Christian in Rome, who were trying to figure out how to live out faith in a pagan world. In the first three chapters of his letter, Paul hammers home the topic of sin and God's wrath. "Do not lose your faith. You were there in Jerusalem, when Jesus rose from the dead. You were there when Jesus rose up to heaven, and when disciples instantly began speaking different languages. What you saw in Jerusalem have given you a great foundation for faith. Do not lose it, despite the distractions in Rome, despite the persecution you might experience." Paul hammers home the topic of sin and God's wrath. We are all messed up.

{SLIDE} But thanks be to God who un-messes us up. God will do everything to help us not lose our faith in Christ. God will do everything to put the lid of our sin and shut it tightly, so we do not return to it.

Although we are small, our God is ginormous. Although we are weak, our God is strong. Although we are limited, God is infinity itself. When we fall short, God falls long, and snatches us up from our sin, and seals us in the resurrection of our Savior, Jesus Christ.

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.