

“More”

Romans 3:21-31; Luke 19:1-10; Exodus 20:1-17

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I. Introduction

New tires. I don't think about new tires much. I don't notice the ads. I don't pay attention to the sales in the paper. I don't see the racks of tires and sale prices along the street. New tires are just not part of what I think about every day. New tires are an answer to a question I'm just not asking.....a solution to a problem I don't have.

That is until I need new tires. When I have my SUV in for an oil change and tire rotation, or a state inspection, and I hear, “You need new tires”.....now I'm thinking about new tires. Now the ads matter. Now the sales matter. Now I've got a question, and I'm looking for an answer. Now I've got a problem, and I'm looking for a solution. Now I'm all about new tires. Now new tires matter.

The apostle Paul has done a similar thing in Romans. Probably most days we don't think about salvation much. The grace and power of God in Jesus Christ is church talk, but not really talk at work, or home, or across the yard with the neighbor, or with friends in the mall. We may know it matters, but it is often an answer to a question we're just not asking.....a solution to a problem we don't think much about.

So Paul begins Romans with the problem. He says, “Life is off.” Look around. You know it. Violence. Fear. Addictions. A football game gives way to a melee. The Angel Food ministry, which got food to people in need, closes and it is discovered that there is graft at the top. We've started our BackPack and AfterSchool missions because the basic needs of children are not being met in troubled homes. Life is off.

And if we dare to be honest we know life is off on the inside too. Lies. Gossip. Vengeance. Lust. Pride. The help we don't share. The hurtful word we speak. The hospitality we withhold. If we pay attention, we know the “Confession of Sin” in Sunday morning worship is more honest than we would like to admit. Life is off. We have a problem. We need new tires. We need an answer to sin.

So....what's the answer? Read books about 10 steps to a better you? Become more religious? Find a flavor of Christianity that just covers it up? Give up? Try a different god? Paul in Romans says, “No, no, no, no and no.” Life is off. That's the problem. That's the question. Here's the answer.

II. Text

Read Romans 3:21-31.

III. Brief Exegetical Discussion

The text is hard. The words are hard. The sentences are hard. The Greek is hard. And whatever English translation you have...that's hard too. This is a difficult text. So, we're going to focus on the one big, theological idea that Paul presents here.

Life is off. That's the problem. The answer given here swirls around the meaning of "righteousness," or it's sometimes translated justification; "the righteousness of God," "having been made righteous," "justified by faith." It's all the same word: "dikaiosuna" (Greek). It's the foundation of Paul's answer. It's the central idea when Paul talks about salvation.....and it's what often gets misunderstood.

Paul's understanding of God's salvation in Jesus Christ is grounded in his Old Testament understanding of righteousness ("dikaiosuna"). To be "just" or "righteous" in the Old Testament is to uphold an agreement, to be faithful to a promise, to act in ways that are faithful to a covenant. Righteousness describes a relationship, like marriage or a deep friendship or a contract. To be righteous is to act in ways that honor and uphold the relationship. To be unrighteous is to act in ways that are faithless, and destroy the relationship. And "to be made righteous, or to be justified," is to be put into, or restored, to positive relationship with someone. Yesterday I met with a couple to be married. We talked about how marriage is a promise of faithfulness. And the years that follow are about honoring that promise.....one choice and one day at a time. That's righteousness. Righteousness is all about faithful relationships. This is what Paul means.

Here's the point in this important text. Life is off. We call it sin. We believe and act in ways that destroy a relationship with God, and with each other. We have broken the covenant. That's the problem. Here's the answer; God is righteous, or we might say "faithful." Despite our sin, God acts to uphold the promise to us....God is faithful to us.....God saves us from a way of life and eternity separate from God, and dominated by sin. God saves us from the consequences of our sin.....from the consequences of our faithless choices.....our unrighteousness. In Jesus Christ God shows us that God is still for us.....that God remains faithful to the relationship with human beings.....that God is righteous. And also that Jesus Christ is God's means of our being made righteous.....that we are restored back to a relationship with God. The good news of Christian faith is that Christ represents God's decision to "so love the world" (John 3:16) and uphold the relationship with humanity, and give humanity a new opportunity to enter into this relationship. This relationship we call salvation, and it is completely dependent on God. We don't deserve it, nor can we earn it. And it is already done in Jesus Christ.

That's what God has done. Our part is faith.....which is really trust. We have to trust that God really loves us. We have to trust that our relationship with God is really restored by Christ....already done for us. And we have to trust in a new way of life as God's people, loving God and loving our neighbors.....living into who we really are.

The best illustration I know of salvation is one that I have shared with you already. I have friends who have adopted two children from Ethiopia. The children were as different from my friends as could be; different language, different food, different culture, even different color of skin....completely different life experiences. And the future for these little children before they were adopted was one with very little hope. Life would be harsh, limited, violent, and perhaps short. But completely out of love my friends adopted these two children. The children had nothing to do with it. They were the subjects of a great act of love. In a very real sense, they have been saved. It has already happened.

Now and in the years to come those children have some choices to make: Will they trust the love of their new parents? Will they live into their new life? Will they believe that life is more than it was in an orphanage in Ethiopia? They can choose to rebel.....to doubt the love of their parents.....to choose to live the hard life of the old way.....to believe they have to earn the love that is given to them. They could choose that. My friends know that. And my friends could know the pain of that rejection. That is the cost of love. But they hope for more.....and because they love these children they could do nothing less.

That is salvation.....and that is what Paul means here. We are adopted by God from a country far away. It was a place very different than loving God and neighbor. We have been saved.....it has already been done. In return God asks that we trust God's love. God asks that we believe the relationship has been restored through Jesus Christ. God asks that we trust the new way of life before us, and live with love. We can and do rebel. But God hopes for more.....because God loves us, and could do nothing less. That is salvation. This is what righteousness is all about.

Did you hear it in the Ten Commandments? "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery....." (Ex.20:2). That's the beginning of the Ten Commandments. God acts first in grace to save a people.....to rescue them from a terrible place....to adopt them as children of God. And in response they are asked to trust this love, and live a bigger life as God's people by following the Ten Commandments. The Jews were never saved by the Ten Commandments. Rather they are saved by God's grace, and have the choice to trust God's grace and live for more in the Ten Commandments.

And did you hear it in the story of Zaccheus? Before Zaccheus ever changes anything, Jesus comes to his house. Grace is extended to a corrupt and sinful tax collector. He's adopted. And in a moment of faith, Zaccheus chooses to trust God's grace shown in Jesus. He opens his eyes to his new situation as a child of God. And so he will change his life, and live a bigger way as a child of God. Salvation does come to that house, because grace is followed by faith.

And like all our stories, this is the story of John Newton. Raised in the hard life on the sea, he became a slave ship captain 18th C England. It was a terrible, violent life. In his mid-20's he experienced a conversion to Christianity, but he did not leave the slave trade. That would take a few more years. Looking back on his life he saw that God's amazing grace was first extended to him. He didn't deserve it or earn it. It was purely the faithfulness of God to him. Though he was faithless, God remained faithful. And in due time John Newton would come to grow in his trust of God, and change his life. He would become an Anglican priest, hymn-writer, and supporter of the abolition of slavery in England. He opened his eyes. Trusting God's grace, he lived into a bigger way as a child of God. It was grace followed by faith. Newton's hymn "Amazing Grace" is his own statement of faith.

IV. Final Reflection

Salvation is all about God faithfully restoring relationship with us in Christ, our trust of that action, and our choosing to live in a new way as a child of God....opening our eyes.

Like you I sometimes hear that salvation is about going to heaven when we die. The hope of resurrection and eternal life is part of salvation.....but it's more. It's also freedom from the burden of guilt that so often eats away at us. It's new relationships with God and people shaped by love. And it's a whole new way of life as a child of God in a new country. Salvation is about more.

There are dark powers that whisper to us life is more with more money, or more power, or more stuff, or more youth, or more things for your kids....just get more. And that Christianity is about less.....your life is less.....salvation is less....following Jesus is less.

But the truth is when we listen to those whispers we find it's like chasing the horizon....we never get there, and there's an emptiness. Our lives are less....and we are alone.

And those who trust God's salvation in Christ and live as the adopted children of God discover more; joy, laughter, forgiveness, reconciliation, peace, purpose, healing, love, fellowship, hope and life...the things in the end that we will know matter most.

Salvation is about more; more grace, more faith, more life, more love, and more hope. Why would we believe it is less?