

The Boast That Is Faith

Romans 3:19-28

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[Sermon preached on the Feast of the Reformation, 1986, at LSTC]

It is the best people, I suppose, who know best that they are not the best people. The better we become the better we realize we are not better after all. But realizing that takes the enjoyment out of our betterment. Well, you say, that figures: if we truly are not better, then what's to enjoy? Anyway, isn't that only to be expected as part of growing up? As we mature morally and spiritually, we mature also in our self-honesty. We give up our childish, inflated illusions about ourselves. Gone is the juvenile flaunting and the gloating. Isn't that the mark of mature religion, religion which gives all credit to God, soli Deo gloria, sola gratia? Ah, but the trouble is, as the gloating diminishes, so does our glowing, our radiance, our glorying. No longer can we glory in how our lives impress God, knowing that they don't. We cannot revel in how tickled God is with us. We cannot bask in how our performance delights the Creator. Gone are the gratifying divine compliments, gone the Creator's doting on our works and ways - which we so need in order for us to thrive. Gone is the rollicking, shrieking pleasure of "Daddy, Mommy, watch me dive in without holding my nose." Still, isn't that what life is supposed to be all about, being able to exult in how we thrill the fatherly-motherly Creator, and letting that show in how we glow? For good reason we cannot do that anymore, seeing who we truly are. We know better now, thanks to the sobering truthfulness of our religion. Of course, we could always lie. But really it is too late for that, too.

What I have called "religion" Paul calls "the law." It is that potent, busy, everywhere-active process in our lives by which, on the one hand, God is making us better - "the works of the law" - and by which, on the other hand, God simultaneously shows us the

opposite, "the knowledge of [our] sin," shows us that we are not really better after all. Good religion does that - not necessarily Christianity, just good religion or, if you prefer, the law. It promotes good works but then, precisely by doing that, it exposes how we idolize those works, to our shame. This religious law of life drives us relentlessly to be better – better in our use of inclusive language, better in meeting deadlines, better in our prayer life, better in sticking to our diet, better in taking a joke, better in our political involvements, better in our concept of better. In a religious community like this one, getting better is something in which we major, to the point of being almost professional about it.

But then the same religious force, this law of God, turns right around and blames us for gloating over our betterment, or blames us for disdainning others who are not better the way we are, or blames us for begrudging others who are better the way we are not, and then blames us for feeling so blamed guilty. The very works which the law promotes, until it gets us excited about them, it then demotes, because we overrate them. We act as if those works could justify us, could entitle us to life. As if, given a little more power or a little more time to achieve them, we could live off them. This fallacy, honest religion exposes in us, having itself helped to set us up for it. Where we go wrong on the works of the law, says Paul, is that we "boast" of them.

That need not mean that we boast of having accomplished them. Even when we despair of accomplishing them, we "boast" them; that is we boost them out of all proportion to their real purpose. We boost them into a salvational significance they were never meant to have. Religion exposes that "boost"-fulness in us.

But realizing that we do that will not cure us of doing it. Religion cannot eliminate our boasting the works of religion, not even with the most critical self-awareness. Not even the Christian religion, insofar as it is a religion, can eliminate such boasting. How, Paul asks, will such boasting ever be removed? "By the law of works?" Answer: "No!" All that religion can do, or the law, is to exacerbate our boasting and then rub our nose in it.

Some verses later Paul adds, "The law angers [us.]" So does any really honest religion. Might it be that that is its purpose?

Are you getting the sneaking suspicion, as Paul did, that the law of God (what we have called "religion"), whatever else it is meant to do, is not meant to save us? In this sense there is no such thing as a "saving religion" or a "religion of salvation." Not even the Christian religion can be that, qua, religion. Criticize us? Yes. Criticize us by making us experience our boasting at firsthand, discovering clinically how defensive our boasting is, how thin-skinned? Yes. But if that is what religion does for us, improves us so as to incriminate us, it hardly gives us what we so sorely need to go into life purring, strokes from a doting God. If the better you are the better you know you are not, try frolicking knowing that. With the law, Paul discovered, comes the knowledge of sin; and while the knowledge of sin does well to expose our boasting, it absolutely devastates any self-confidence we might have had about how beautiful we look to our Maker. It stifles altogether any "Mommy, Daddy, watch us...dive into Wednesday without holding back."

The more religiously knowledgeable we are about ourselves, the more do we, as Paul says, "fall short of the glory of God." We fall short of glorying in God. When it comes to glorying in the divine approval, we all fall flat on our face, thanks to the crippling truthfulness of religion. The more religious we are, the more critically honest, but also the more we dance before the Holy of Holies like klutzes. Good dancers never watch their feet. Religion means watching your feet, and so you fall. No wonder religious communities often resort to such bizarre devices, even intoxicants, to pump up their spirits, to deceive themselves, really to counteract the bitter truthfulness of their own religion. Frank Sinatra once said he was in "favor of anything that will get you through the night, whether it's booze or religion." We've got news for Old Blue Eyes: you're only half right; don't count on religion. As with the law, you cannot live without it but neither can you live with it. Nor were you meant to. But if it's all you've got it's a killer.

However, it is not all we've got, and killing is not all that is in store for us. True, that is the beginning: dying - dying out on ourselves - something which religion by itself cannot

bring off, though God knows it tries. The mortification which is part of every religion or, in a secular age, the mortification which is implicit in our whole culture of criticism, is also part of our being justified before God. But dying dare only be the initial part. The trick is restricting our dying - whether our terminal dying or our daily dying - to only our beginning, not letting it finish us off. When left to ourselves, even our own most religious selves, we can only die in our sin, as Paul says; we cannot die out on our sin. Henry the Fourth was right, "We owe God a death." But how to pay all we owe and still have anything left over to live off of?

Paul's answer: "The redemption [of our debt] is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith." Notice, the expiation is not presented to God. It is presented by God, and not only because we could not have presented such an expiation but because God, as we know, "takes no pleasure in the death of sinners but wills rather that sinners turn from their sinful ways and live." Now there, in Jesus the expiating, sinner-happy Christ, is the sort of child - unspoiled and selfless and brave - of whom even the most demanding Creator must be proud as punch. "Are you also 'well pleased with this my beloved son'," God asks of us. "Then be our guest," says God, "The Boy is yours as well. If you are not too proud to have him, his blood instead of yours, then we would be proud to have you, your sin and your boasting and all. And we'll call it even. Never another word about debts still owed. Redemption, complete!" - That, sisters and brothers, is a God with class or, if you will, "righteousness." The last of the great spenders! Would you believe that?

As you do believe it, notice what happens next. The fond, doting Creator turns the doting glance on us as well, the orphaned children, the snot-nosed tagalongs with Jesus, and says to us, "What great faith you have, my cute little kids." Or the Son says, "Oh woman," or "Oh man, great is your faith," or "Your faith has made you whole" - not just better but whole - or "Your faith has saved you." "Our faith?" we ask dumbfoundedly, "what's so great about that?" In fact, isn't our faith just a subtle variation on our old "boasting," not really all that different from that miserable, fatal boasting which the law of religion has been trying so hard to eradicate in us? Psychologically, religiously there does not seem to

be all that much difference between the old "boasting" and this same old thing in lamb's clothing called "faith." The only difference we can see is what the boasting is boasting in: formerly "the works of the law" and now Jesus the Christ.

Exactly, says Paul. That is what makes all the difference. That is what suddenly gives your boasting class or, if you prefer, "righteousness." What great good taste you have in your faith, says the motherly-fatherly Creator, seeing who it is on whom our boast has now been re-targeted. Notice then, says Paul, how the old boasting is eliminated, but without for a moment eliminating our glorying before God: not by that paralyzing preoccupation with our religiosity and motivations and spiritual formation but rather by re-fitting our trust with a new Trust-ee, Jesus our Lord. Talk about making a sow's ear into a silk purse. "Abraham believed and God counted that to him for righteousness," in view of the promised Seed in whom he believed. It is wild, brothers and sisters, and I would not advise your buying into it unless you are prepared to commit Reformation. And there's no telling where that will end.

For now, may I suggest it is time we get down to some serious frolicking and doing so with all the resources - get this! - of religion. For even the old wet blanket, religion, "the law," is redeemed by Christ. Through him "the law," once so dead-ended and futile, comes into its own. "Do we then," Paul asks, "overthrow the law by this faith? By no means!" "On the contrary, we uphold the law." And so, with the fatherly-motherly God watching expectantly, go ahead and dive in - ceremonially, religiously, baptismally - and never mind holding your breath. You are diving with Christ, you breathe from the Spirit, and the resurrection is always right on the other side. And while we don't serve Old Blue Eye's brand of booze, there is something better: the wine which is the life blood of Christ. Religion may not save us. Not even Christian religion does. But Christ saves us, and saves even our religion.

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The Festival of the Reformation, 1986

