

Monday June 29, 2020
Read Romans 1:1-17

Just What We All Need

There probably will not be a long list of people who look back and declare, “2020 was the best year of my life.” I don’t need to recount the many tales of illness, fear, misinformation, injustice, violence, financial distress, depression and murder hornets. For different people, various items would be at the bottom of their lists. But everyone has one thing in common: everyone is starving for some good news.

In that sense, nothing has changed in 2020. Everyone is always starving for some good news. No matter your financial position, skin color, age, or any other marker that divides us in this world. We are united in this: everyone is always starting for some good news. It was just as true 2,000 years ago as Paul wrote his letter to the Church in Rome. So, in these first 17 verses, he speaks of “the gospel” (literally – *the good news*) at least 4 times.

Who needs the Gospel in the letter? Who needs THE good news? Greeks and barbarians, wise and foolish. Jews and Greeks. The first list would have been the way Greek-speaking people separated the world. The second list would have been shorthand for how Jews separated the world. In other words, this is the good news everyone needs.

No wonder then that Paul declares, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” The gospel may appear foolish to the world. The gospel may seem limited. But the truth we will discover in this letter is that the gospel, the good news of what Jesus has done, rescues us from sin and death, gives hope to the world, and shapes how we live every moment of our lives. Truly this is the good news we ALL need.

Prayer – Dear Jesus, help me rejoice in Your good news and never be ashamed to share it. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Wednesday July 1, 2020

Romans 1:18-32

The More Things Change...

Many people look around themselves, see the world as a wonderful playground. Here they see excitement, joy, opportunity - and then they ignore the obvious question "Where did all this come from?" Grabbing their desires, they act, thrilled to pander to everything they think they could want. But when they do that - they find that their desire keeps looking for more. The thrill vanishes, replaced with desperate searching for something more real than filling their desires.

The French have a saying, "The more things change, the more things are just the same." Changing names, changing sequences may change the look, but under it all things are the same. When we overlook God, nothing really fills our desires. Each activity only proves that initial lack, that desire never realizes.

God has made the world, God has put beauty, variety, achievements, and fellowship in the world for people to belong, to appreciate, to employ; but we are slaves to ourselves, to our desires. We misuse, misunderstand, and fail - because we overlook God.

Paul takes his readers on an extended vision of the collapse of human morality when God is ignored. Human relationships become corrupted, become a search for personal benefit and a source of unhappiness rather than a bedrock for life and experience. There is a cure; there is a better way. God took on Himself the burden of the consequences of our selfish interest - Jesus lived like us without yielding to those desires. His death and resurrection enable us to live in Him, the conqueror of those pressures on us.

Paul's list of consequences gives us an appreciation of what God has done for us. There but for the grace of God, for His intervention in our lives, would go us. The attraction of those wrongs fades, as I trust Jesus that His ways, His fellowship is the better. I find that He gives that foundation to all my life acts that give them completeness and me happiness. Paul's words are a warning but more they are an encouragement to us - that what we see in the world is glitter and falseness. Jesus is worth much more.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, help me find truth worth in You. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Arthur Bolstad

Thursday July 2, 2020
Read Romans 2:1-16

No Partiality

For good and for bad, we fail at being impartial. We may aim to “not play favorites,” but we do at times. We try not to judge a book by its cover, but we pile up assumptions by the appearances of others. Our experiences, our upbringing, our likes, our dislikes, our intuition all color the way we look at others – even before they ever open their mouths to say a word to us.

Yet God has no bias. **“For God shows no partiality.”** He doesn’t judge by appearance (not skin color, hair color, height, weight, anything). He doesn’t judge some more harshly and others more leniently. All are viewed the same.

That might not be such good news. As Paul says, **“He will render to each one according to his works.”** By *God’s* measure of goodness and righteousness, He evaluates our works. We might think, “I’m a pretty good person.” Yet God judges by the measure Jesus outlines in Matthew 5, **“Be perfect as your Father in heaven in perfect.”** God’s impartial judgment reveals each of us to be guilty and worthy of condemnation. His lack of bias is a big problem by the standard of His Law.

Yet, His complete fairness also means His salvation is equally for all. His forgiveness is free for all. Christ died and rose for all. No matter the magnitude of Your sin, His salvation is for you! Such is His mercy for all who trust in Jesus.

Prayer – Dear Jesus, thank you for your impartial salvation that rescues even me. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Friday July 3, 2020

Read Romans 2:17-29

What Counts is Faith

The two trees that were struck by lightning this week had to be taken down immediately. One of the trees was blown in two and had most of its bark blown off by the strike. The other tree didn't seem to have the same sort of damage. It retained most of its bark and had plenty of green leaves, but when the second tree was taken down a good portion of the inside of the tree was hollow. It had the appearance of life, but was dead inside.

This is the concern Paul seems to have with some of the Jewish Christians in Rome. They knew the Law of God. They spoke about it. They even followed it. Outwardly, they appeared to be alive, but they were hollow inside – lacking faith in Jesus.

This reading from Romans 2 led me to think of another passage that Paul wrote. In Galatians 5:6 Paul tells us, **“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love.”** Like the people in Rome, we are always tempted to put on a good show, while being hollow inside.

What counts is faith. Trust in Christ enlivens us from the inside out. Knowing and trusting in the forgiveness of Jesus shapes us from the inside out. We are full to overflowing with His mercy, love and goodness that He has showered on us. In turn, the same mercy, love and goodness grow to characterize our lives also. And we don't do God's will to seek the praise of the world, but to borrow an image from Jesus (Matt. 7:17), He makes us healthy trees filled with His life by faith, and so we bear good fruit.

Prayer – Dear Jesus, may Your Spirit help me trust ever more in You that I also bear fruit that gives You glory. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Saturday July 4

Read [Romans 3:1-18](#)

“Sometimes the Truth Hurts”

Many painful conversations start with the question, “which do you want first: the good news or the bad news?” In the case of today’s reading, however, the choice is between bad news – and more bad news. Today’s reading is nearly all Law.

In the first two chapters of Romans, Paul described two kinds of sinners – those who sin without having knowledge of God (the “Greeks”), and those who “know” God but go through the motions of worshiping and serving God, only to hide their sin and deceive themselves into thinking they’ve earned righteousness (the “Jews”). Here, in chapter three, Paul declares both of these groups as unrighteous sinners: **“None is righteous, no, not one”**.

And then, he goes on for eight more verses, quoting Old Testament scriptures that support that argument: **“All have turned aside; together they have become worthless”**. **“No one does good, not even one.”** **“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”** That’s hard to read. “Is that talking about me?” we might ask. That kind of thinking could drive you to despair. That’s the Law.

So how could King David write in the Psalms, **“Oh how I love your Law! It is my meditation all the day.”**? You see, David was the king, and knew he had all the power in the land. But he also knew he was a sinner – with just a word, he had already sent his neighbor to die in battle and took his widow as his own wife. And so, he rejoiced that God had written His Law – for him – so that he would remember his own sinfulness and turn to God for salvation.

You and I have much in common with all these people – we sometimes sin “like a Greek”. We are blessed with God’s Word, “like the Jews”, but sometimes take too much pride in the good we do. And, like David, we can rejoice that we have a gracious God that loves us so much He reminds us of our sinfulness so that we turn to our true Savior, Jesus.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You for showing me my total failure in saving myself to instead turn me to You for salvation. In Your Son’s Name, Amen.

PS: Stay tuned for Monday’s devotion where chapter three concludes, loaded with Gospel!

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jeff Nelson

Monday July 6, 2020
Read Romans 3:19-31

God Gave You Two Ears and...

Perhaps you are familiar with the helpful bit of wisdom that says, “God gave you two ears and only one mouth for a reason.” The idea is that we should be twice as eager to listen. Our reading today goes further in silencing our one mouth. First Paul tells us, **“We know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped.”** Later we are asked, **“what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded.”**

Why all the silence? First, we have no reason to boast because, **“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** We are all in the same boat when measured against God’s law, **“for by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight.”**

But once we are silenced by the law, we are prepared to listen to the greatest news in all the world. **“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.”** Instead of boasting about how good we are or pointing to our own righteous works, we are silenced by the law to hear that instead we **“are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”** When you receive a gift, there is no bragging over how great you are that someone gave you a gift. The honor belongs to the giver. It is right to say, “thank you,” but boasting is excluded.

In view of the gift of salvation in Christ, constant “thank yous” of praise are appropriate, but so is the wondrous silence that is eager to listen good news of Jesus again and again.

Prayer – Dear Jesus, silence my boasting by Your Law in order to hear and receive the gift of Your good news. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Tuesday July 7, 2020
Read Romans 4:1-25

Accomplishments

There is a great joy in accomplishing a work, any work, just getting it done. We feel powerful, in charge. And getting a pay check is a deserved receipt. We earned it, we accomplished successfully both the work and recognition of that work - our reward, a paycheck.

So we try to do something to bring to God - some great work, perhaps, a resistance to temptation or a helpful hand to a neighbor. But somehow, we don't get that glow of achievement; somehow, what we have accomplished doesn't succeed. There is always something missing!

The story of Abraham, in the Book of Genesis in the Bible, tells of someone who left everything at God's direction. Sacrificed what he had, where he was to travel, where he did not know. But The Bible says he simply trusted God, not as one who deserves anything, but as someone who believes promises and lives in their truth. Abraham trusted God "**and it was credited to him as righteousness**". Trust is the free relationship God accepts and gives you.

We, too, have our accomplishments. We too have things we think we could boast about. Forget them. There is no value before God in them, no payment. So our accomplishments won't pay God for anything, so like Abraham simply trust God - God who keep his promises, God who has promised to be with you, protect you, and bring you with Him forever.

Prayer – Dear Jesus, thank You for doing all the work to accomplish my salvation .
Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Art Bolstad

Wednesday July 8, 2020

Read Romans 5:1-21

God Shows His Love for Us

We have many ways to show love. Some give gifts or flowers. Some write letters or do acts of kindness. For your spouse, parents, children and friends, you can probably think of dozens of ways that you have shown love to those you care about. For those you love, you may sacrifice your money, your energy and even your life.

Yet God's love for us is extraordinary in a number of ways. **"God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."** Despite our sin, God gives the greatest possible gift, the very life of Jesus. Not only this, while we might be willing to give for the sake of our family members or close friends, **"while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son."** Though, our sin makes us enemies of God, we are reconciled to God through Jesus. His death moves us from enemies to friends of God.

The display of God's love is the cross. He becomes sin to take ours. He suffers the pain of the cross to shoulder all of our pain. He endures the torment of hell on the cross, so that we never will. There is no greater show of love.

Prayer – Dear Jesus, thank You for the greatest display of love in Your death for me. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Thursday July 9, 2020

Romans 6:1-23

Sin and Death, Gift and Grace

Have you ever received a gift? Many probably, but none can compare with the gift Paul describes in today's reading. Baptism is a means through which God delivers His free gift of grace through Jesus Christ's death and resurrection, washing the filth of deadly sin away forever for you!

Today, yesterday, and forever, the promise of eternal life in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ given for you in Baptism united you with Him by God's gift and grace. God's promised Word in Baptism does not wear out like a filthy rag left drying in the baking heat of the sun. Rather, Baptism saves and makes us new, clothes us in robes of righteousness, washed white as snow in the precious blood of the Lamb. God's promises in Baptism are powerfully effective through this life in the world's brokenness, our sickness, emotions, and sin till Jesus returns on the Last Day making all things new.

The LORD God spoke all creation into existence, and it came to be, and it was good, Christ Jesus spoke words, "Paid in Full" on the cross, and it was so, and it was good. Jesus crushed Satan's head and buried sin and death in His life, death, and resurrection, given for all. The promises of forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and peace with God were fulfilled in Jesus' death and resurrection, **"For if we have been united with Christ in Baptism in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His."** We have been raised from the deadness of sin and into eternal life in Christ united with Him. We are set free and justified from the power of sin and death in Christ Jesus alone through faith. God's power and gift through grace enable us to see His goodness and live in Christ's death and resurrection today and forever as new creatures sanctified to Him. No gift can compare to this!

Prayer: Thank you, LORD God, for the free gift of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection for all delivered through Your Word and Sacrament, freeing all from the wages of sin and death forever. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pre-seminary student Nathan Tritch

Friday July 10, 2020
Read Romans 7:1-20

Fighting Ourselves

At times, Paul's arguments in Romans get confusing, but this comic does a perfect job describing the dilemma that Paul is agonizing over...



I would change the description in the corner to “the essence of the sinful nature,” but you get the idea. The nature of sin in our hearts is to bristle against any law, but especially God's Law. Paul describes this tendency to rebel upon his learning the command “You shall not covet.” **“Sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness.”**

Then Paul goes into a section at the end of our reading that appropriately sounds like a tongue twister. **“For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me.”** Paul is tied up in knots describing the war that is waged in him. As Christians, we really have been made new. We are baptized into Christ and are covered with His righteousness. Yet sin still clings to us and rebels against God's Law at every turn. We are both sinner and saint.

When temptations come, we constantly need God's help to endure. When we fall into sin, we constantly need the forgiveness of Christ. And the good news is the forgiveness of our faithful Savior and His strength to endure are always there for us even as the fight within ourselves rages.

Prayer – Dear Jesus, help me each day in the fight against sin that rages in my heart.
Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Saturday July 11, 2020

Read [Romans 7:21-8:17](#)

“No Fear”

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Paul spoke these words near the beginning of his letter to the Romans because that’s the blessing God gives to every Christian. It’s because those words aren’t just a wish, but a statement of fact, that many pastors begin their sermons by repeating Paul. We go to church every week because we need to be reminded of that basic message because it’s simply “too good to be true”. Grace and Peace – from the King of the Universe – for me?

For a few chapters now (seemingly, in only one, loooong sentence), Paul has been telling of the conflict that lives in every believer. Flesh vs Spirit; Law vs Life. Now, in today’s reading, there is some conclusion: **“So then, brothers...”**. First of all, no, while we’re in this life on earth we remain “in the flesh” and are surrounded by temptation and sin. But, far more importantly, **“the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.”** What does that really look like?

Imagine, if you will, that you wanted to learn to walk the tightrope (I don’t either, just pretend with me). What’s your biggest fear? Death, perhaps? But you don’t begin by stretching your rope between two skyscrapers in New York City – you lay it on the ground and practice on it. Then, you stretch it tight a foot off the ground, and continue. That way you can learn without fear of death being your teacher.

In our new lives in Christ, you and I don’t have to perpetually live in fear. We don’t have to “watch our step”, “look over our shoulder”, or “walk on eggshells” – constantly afraid of eternal death. While we strive to follow God’s Law, we have peace in knowing that Jesus has already died for us, and that now, by grace, **“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”**

Prayer: Dear Father, thank You that, through Jesus’ death, You give me true peace to live my life fully for You. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jeff Nelson

Monday July 13, 2020
Read Romans 8:18-39

Nothing

In a year where everything in life has been turned upside down, the hardest part for many has been separation. Many friends, family and loved ones have been kept at a distance. Whether from precaution or necessity, this separation has been agonizing. Consider that in some nursing homes, residents were kept to their individual rooms for months on end. In some cases, this meant husband and wife who received different levels of care didn't see each other for 8, 10, 12 weeks even though they were in the same building.

Others have been separated in less dramatic ways – from normalcy, from activities and place they love, from long planned celebrations. Others have been separated in more consequential ways – losing a loved one and often not being able to be there. Separation has been the great agony of this year.

Such pain makes clear that **“it is not good for man to be alone”** (Gen 2:18). Yet this sin-broken world often leaves us separated from one another. But such separation does not happen with our God. The victory of Christ over sin and pain and death reigns even over separation. Paul asks, **“Who shall separate us from the love Christ?”** He then goes looking for an answer – Tribulation? Distress? Persecution? Famine? Nakedness? Danger? Sword? Death? Life? Angels or other powers? Anything happening now? The uncertain future? Distance? The answer to each thing that would separate us from God is, **“NO, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us...(NOTHING) will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** Your Lord suffered separation from the Father on the cross and overcame death and hell and sin and pain for you. His promise? Nothing will ever separate Him from you.

Prayer – Dear God, strengthen me by Your promise that nothing in creation can separate me from Your love in Christ Jesus my Lord. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Tuesday July 14, 2020
Read Romans 9:1-18

Wanting Things My Way

How I long to tell God how to do it all! I see Him having mercy on some - and I complain because His mercy is not mine. I wanted Him to do something else.

Remember the story of Jonah? How he wanted to force God to obey what Jonah wanted? In Jonah's anger at the enemy of his people, Jonah tried to prevent God's mercy by refusing to preach (running away!). God used a large "fish" to bring him back. Then after Jonah finally went and preached, he tried to shame God into punishing people he, Jonah, didn't like by overtly watching and waiting for the punishment. While watching, Jonah mourned the death of a plant more than the possible death for his enemies.

Paul talks to us about his anguish because his fellow Jews don't want to reject their adherence to earning their salvation. We, too, have friends, family, who reject their Savior. We, too, want to tell God, "You just don't understand!" But in Romans 9, Paul explains, "God is in control. He has the right to do whatever He wants." After all, he says, **"God shows that He chooses to give blessings as His own will, not that of others, pointing out that He blessed Isaac not Ishamael, Jacob not Esau."**

So, we ask God for mercy for others, even as He had mercy on us; but even there, we ask God for His mercy on us, helping us to accept His will, even when we disagree with His will. And that He will give. Rest in Him, even in such sorrows.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me trust in Your, especially when I would have a different idea. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Art Bolstad

Wednesday July 15, 2020

Read Romans 9:19-33 (esp. 32-33)

Stumbling

Stumbling is one of those great words that sounds like what it is – tumbling over something. The discussion of stumbling in today’s reading made me think of the common practice in many homes when something needs to be put away, and it keeps being forgotten. As a last resort, the item is moved right in the way of traffic, so you can’t help but stumble over it. If you ask why, the answer comes quickly, “I put it there so you would trip over it.” The person isn’t looking to hurt you. The item is placed right in the way so that you can’t possibly miss it.

This is the sense of the “stumbling stone” that Paul speaks of. The Israelites of Paul’s day kept missing the mercy of God. They pursued a law that would lead to righteousness, but they couldn’t do it. As they pursued a law that would lead to righteousness, they missed THE stumbling stone – Jesus and His mercy and forgiveness through His death on the cross.

The stumbling stone is then put front and center as **“the Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness”** nevertheless attain righteousness. Not by doing anything, but by faith. Think how shocking this would be to Israelites: they are working so hard to earn righteousness, but the Gentiles receive it as a gift! It’s not fair!

Yet the mercy of God is meant for all. As the passage from Isaiah is quoted by Paul, **“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”** God desires all people to trip over the truth of Jesus’ death and resurrection. The truth? We can’t work our way to righteousness, but to **“whoever believes in him,”** He *gives* righteousness. It’s not fair...it’s grace.

Prayer – Dear God, may I constantly stumble over your love in Christ and trust in Him alone. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Thursday July 16, 2020
Read Romans 10:1-21

Confession of the Heart

You hear the news, receive the message, and everyone must know. Whatever the news might be, you cannot contain it without sharing. Right? News such as, National French Fry Day, which serves free French fries annually. Yet, news like this comes and goes, and ultimately falls short of good news.

The best news is THE Good News. Unlike free French fries, the saving message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ lasts as the love of God come down from Heaven is revealed in the flesh to live and die for your sin and rise again from the dead on the third day for you. This is Christ's righteousness for you through faith, "For the Scriptures says, **'Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.'**"

Whoever hears "**the Word of Christ,**" receives the righteousness of God, is justified through faith, and "**if you confess with the mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.**" In the Creed, we confess, "I believe in God the Father Almighty . . . and in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord . . . [and] in the Holy Spirit." This confession joyfully and desperately sings, proclaims, and meditates on these words every day, most days, and, on Sunday.

Often, these words seem far from our hearts and minds by distractions, evil desires, temptations, troubles, and worry as a mere repetition of words. By grace through faith, confession responsively proclaims the Good News as true words of life, the credited righteousness from God given for you in Christ, "**For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.**"

God's righteousness in Christ is for everyone, "**For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing His riches on all who call on Him.**" How prevalent of a message this is in the sinful world of confusion, the tension of ethnicity and race. Thankfully and forever, Jesus is Lord of all, one with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

Prayer - Thank You, LORD, for Your Word of Christ in my heart given by grace through faith, the forgiveness of sins, and salvation given for all people, nations, tribes, and languages, for everyone to believe. In Jesus Name. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pre-seminary Student Nathan Tritch

Friday July 17, 2020
Read Romans 11:1-24

Grafted In

Paul describes the people of God as an olive tree. Olive trees were the most widely cultivated fruit tree in the Mediterranean world. Everyone in Rome and Greece and Israel and everywhere in between had some familiarity with olive trees. Not only this, the Old Testament used the olive tree to symbolize the people of God.

The root of the tree represents the patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, etc. The natural branches of the tree are the family of faith that grew from Abraham – the people of Israel. These were the first to be given life in the promises of God. Sadly, Paul points out, some abandoned the faith, and as dead branches who cut themselves off from true life, they were pruned from the tree. But it is a common practice to graft in new branches to an olive tree. In fact, by this practice some trees have lived and produced olives for hundreds (some believe even thousands!) of years. Paul describes Gentile Christians (those not of Jewish ancestry) as “wild olive shoots” grafted in the tree of God’s people.

What stands out here is that God’s grace is THE source of life. Branches don’t choose to grow out of a trunk or transfer themselves to a better tree. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3, “**only God gives the growth.**” He alone gives the life of faith. This is seen all the more in those grafted in. You see, the imagery of wild olive shoots being grafted into a cultivated olive tree is not realistic. Farmers, in fact, do just the opposite; they graft branches from cultivated trees into wild ones in order to improve their production. The point? God’s grace in Christ is such that He can accomplish what no one could – make the wild shoots His and give them the life of His tree.

Prayer – Dear God, thank You for grafting me into the tree of Your people. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Saturday July 18

Read [Romans 11:25-12:13](#)

“...by the mercies of God”

We’re beginning to see again more restrictions due to the Corona-virus. Masks are becoming mandatory in more places. Some businesses are being closed again and others are delaying re-opening. People have been groaning under all this pressure, and now it looks like we’re taking a step backward.

At church, too, we’ve come through a lot over the past few months. Services stopped. The ECC closed. We learned how to post sermons and services on YouTube, Bible studies on Zoom. Finally, we opened the doors again, but in strange, new ways. Masks, cleanser, rubber gloves, no singing. And then, the lightning.

Paul begins chapter 12 of his letter to the Romans by calling to their minds something you and I need to recall as the next phase of the virus begins: **“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God...”** That’s where it starts: God’s mercy is what forgives me, a poor miserable sinner, and adopts me into God’s family as His son or daughter. For the Christian, God’s mercies are what gets us out of bed in the morning. Only God’s mercy can make us look beyond ourselves and notice others, more in need than ourselves.

Right now, the world around us is looking pretty ugly in places. And I’m not referring to the injustices, the protests, or the ongoing pandemic – I’m talking about the despair in so many people’s hearts and on their faces. It’s relentlessly dawning on people: youth and health are fleeting; our government can’t or won’t always protect us; and living in the richest, most promising nation in the world seems to be only smoke and mirrors.

But, the promise God made to you in the waters of your baptism stand, forever. Jesus died, “once for all”, and the forgiveness he earned covers all sin, forever. His Spirit sanctifies you and keeps you holy, forever. Remember these “mercies of God” today, tomorrow, the next day – when you hear the world groaning around you, needing your help and God’s salvation.

Dear Father, remind me every day of your endless mercy, and that it may continue to transform me, learning to know and do Your will. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jeff Nelson

Monday July 20, 2020
Read Romans 12:14-13:14

Overcoming Evil

I was recently listening to a book about life in London in 1940 – the year of the Blitz. This was the time of nightly bombings from the Nazis, as they tried to finish their conquest of Europe. While the rest of Europe had surrendered, the British people (and Winston Churchill in particular) refused to give in to the evil. They would fight back. One truly striking example was that in the previous year the British Royal Air Force had been reduced to 45 fighter planes. But to try and stop the nightly assault of Nazi bombers, a huge effort was undertaken to fight back. In less than a year, they built more than 1,000 fighter planes.

This is the way of war in this world. Fighting evil with evil. Yet this is not the way of spiritual battle each Christian has been called to. Nations may fight back with the same weapons that are hurled at them (the second part of our reading from Romans 13 describes this).

But individual Christians are called to something very different. **“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”** The Christian is not called to merely surrender and run for the hills – **“do not be overcome by evil.”** Yet we do not advance the evil of the world either – **“if your enemy is hunger, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.”** We are to **“overcome evil with good.”**

This is shocking, and yet what we should expect. It is shocking to treat an enemy with grace and kindness. This is not the way of the world. Yet this is precisely the way Christ has treated us. Remember Romans 5:8,10, **“While we were still sinners, Christ died for us...while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son.”** As Christ has overcome the great evil in our hearts by the goodness of His sacrificial death, we are called to show such grace to others – even our enemies.

Prayer – Dear Jesus, help me reflect You in overcoming evil with good. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Tuesday July 21, 2020
Read Romans 14:1-23

Practicing Patience

We Christians have a great blessing! We have been brought out of the judgment of God, a deserved judgment, leading to condemnation; we have been brought out of that judgment into Life. As Psalm 103 says, He has removed our judgment “as far as the East is from the West”.

With that gift of Life, God has given us the privilege of supporting our fellow members of Christ. We all have different skills, different life situations, and different drives for success. And we all, we ourselves as well as others, have weaknesses, areas of life we could improve.

One blessing God gives His children is the freedom and power to care about and for others. Paul gives us examples. Meat in the market had been offered to idols - some Christians knew that idols are meaningless but to others, eating meant being part of pagan worship. For these last, eating such meat would mean breaking the First Commandment! So for them, they should not eat - but if they see a brother Christian eating - they may well decide that Christians are allowed to break inconvenient Commandments. Paul encourages us to not allow our behavior, good in itself, be a false teaching to fellow Christians.

We have a second blessing here. We are given the opportunity to be Godlike in practicing forbearance, being willing to accept others as they are without casting a judgment upon them. This is God’s way, and He makes it our way!

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to practice patience by showing Your kind of patience toward others. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Art Bolstad

Wednesday July 22, 2020

Read Romans 15:1-13

Beautiful Obligation

“We who are strong have an obligation...”

Obligation is not a word that we particularly like. We think of an obligation as forced, unnatural. We tend to think in terms of rights and freedoms.

Obligation sounds so legalistic. Imagine the heartwarming scene, a young man professes his love to his future bride with romantic words, “I’m obligated to love you.” That’s just not how we talk.

Perhaps obligation gets such a bad rap because we think of our freedom, even our freedom in Christ, in terms of ourselves. Scripture’s way of thinking is different. We have been set free from concern over ourselves through Christ. Our sin has been paid for by another. Our freedom has been guaranteed by another. Jesus gave of Himself for you. **“For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, ‘the reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.’”** Instead of using His freedom to please Himself, Christ freely absorbed the punishment that belonged to us in order to set us free.

As people of Christ, we are free to use our freedom for the sake of others, as Christ has for us. **“Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up.”** This is the beautiful obligation that Paul encourages – to use our freedom in service to others. How will you approach your relationship with your family, friends, co-workers, neighbors, if you consider first what is for their good? I would suspect our actions and attitudes would change significantly if our first concern would be the good of our neighbor, not ourselves. Dear people of Christ, you are called to this beautiful obligation because Christ has already put Your eternal good above Himself on the cross.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to look to the good of my neighbor, to build him up. Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Thursday July 23, 2020
Romans 15:14-33

God's Power and Peace in Christ

Have you ever shared a true story with someone; once, twice, three times, or more? True accounts of events in a person's life can be quite interesting and entertaining, but are they worth dying for? Sharing the Gospel, the Power and Love of God in Jesus Christ given for our sin and the sin of the world is exactly, the only True story worth suffering for, and even dying for.

Paul described his encounters and journeys, by the grace of God, as a “**minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the Gospel of God,**” and his plans to visit believers in Rome on the way to Spain so that he may “**preach the Gospel, not where Christ has already been named . . . as it is written ‘Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.’**” Luther helps us out in his *Commentary on Romans*:

For to preach where Christ is known is not disgraceful, because there the first shame of the Gospel is endured and overcome. But where He is not yet known, the disgrace poured upon the Gospel is still new and very great . . . to preach the Gospel is to bestow the greatest benefit, even if it is done through the greatest persecutions and enmities of the whole world (*LW:25*).

Through faith, we who trust in Christ alone, are “**not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the Power of God for salvation to everyone who believes**” (Rom. 1:16-17). The God of Peace is with us, Messiah Jesus died for our sin and rose from the dead on the third day, and ascended into Heaven; this is the power of God for salvation for everyone to hear, see, believe, understand, and bring to others, especially those who have not heard. Paul comforts the church in Rome, and the church today, “**May the God of peace be with you all.**” For the sake of Christ, and in Christ alone, God's Peace is with us always!

Prayer: Holy God of Peace, thank you for the Gospel for salvation heard and declared by Your instruments of righteousness and peace to see Jesus Christ given for me and the world to believe and be set at one with You now and forever in Jesus' Name. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pre-seminary Student Nathan Tritch

Friday July 23, 2020
Read Romans 16:1-16

Greetings

The first part of Romans 16 seems like an odd thing to include in Scripture. We are reminded that this was a letter written by a man who knew the people of God in Rome, and they knew him. Much of Romans contains rich, complex theological teaching, and we can forget that this teaching is from Paul who cares about the people in the Roman church and want them to be strengthened in the Gospel.

At the same time, we are reminded of the personal nature of the church. These are people whom God has made His own and also have been servants in their own lives. We get a glimpse of God's far-reaching mercy...

There's Prisca and Aquila "**who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well.**"

There's Epaenetus "**who was the the first convert to Christ in Asia.**"

There's Andronicus and Junia who "**were in Christ before me.**"

There's beloved Persis, "**who has worked hard in the Lord.**"

There's men and women. There's Jews and Gentiles. In Paul's list of 26 people in these verses, you see a snap shot of what could be our congregation. In every sentence, there is a unique story of how God has brought His salvation to each particular person. Think of the people at Hope. We have people of various family backgrounds and from many places. There are recent converts and life-long Christians. There are Sunday School teachers, ushers, altar guild members, and people who help cut the grass. Many gifts. Many backgrounds and backstories. All united in One Lord, in One faith, in Hope in Christ Jesus.

Prayer: Dear Lord, help me to rejoice in how You bring many into Your body through the forgiveness of Jesus. Amen.

Today's Devotion was written by Pastor Jason

Saturday July 25

Read [Romans 16:17-33](#) (especially v. 20)

“The God of Peace”

Paul closes his letter to the Christians in Rome with more greetings and supportive advice, and a glorious doxology. But sandwiched in the middle, is the strange statement, **“The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.”** Paul has been using this title for God before, notably in Thursday’s reading, where he wished, **“May the God of peace be with you all.”**

That’s how we usually think of our “God of Peace” – He’s simply a nice, kind, peaceful sort of God. Jesus was called the “Prince of Peace”, naturally, because He is the Son of the King of Peace. It’s just a warm, pleasant name. So what is Paul saying, that this “God of *Peace*” will *crush* someone?! That doesn’t sound very peaceful!

God’s true nature is Love, Mercy, and Peace. So, as His adopted sons and daughters, you and I see that side of Him most clearly. But, as sinners living in a sinful world, we understand wrath and vengeance; power and destruction. We understand the idea of crushing your enemy.

God doesn’t like to come out of His true character. He loves the whole world, all of creation, all people. But Paul wrote this strange line as some needed encouragement to the Romans who, like you and me, were Christians living through these End Times. Satan, the great deceiver, has fought God from before time and attacks God’s creation, especially God’s children, with special zeal.

What’s encouraging about this is that, just as God promised to Adam and Eve after they sinned and despite His peaceful nature, He sent His own Son to a horrible, agonizing death on the cross because He is the God of Peace. His Peace shone through the darkness as Jesus hung there, all the way to lighten our lives today. That day, Satan bit Jesus’ heel, but Jesus crushed Satan’s head.

The Roman Christians, like you and me, needed this reminder. While wounded, Satan still attacks us. But he is *mortally* wounded. Jesus defeated Satan on the cross, and will return again, soon, to free us from those attacks and take us to live with Him in paradise, forever.

Prayer: Heavenly Father, surround me with Your Peace, so that in these Last Days; faith, hope, and love overflow, spreading to all around me. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Today’s Devotion was written by Pastor Jeff Nelson