

ROMANS 16 GETTING AND GIVING THE GOSPEL

Does anyone, anywhere, anymore, ever play...tetherball?

In tetherball, there is a tall pole. Attached to the pole is a rope, and attached to the end of the rope is a ball, like a volleyball.

I stand on one side of the circle surrounding the pole, the rope and the ball, and you stand on the other side. I try to strike the ball and get it to fly around and wrap the rope around the pole one way, and you try to strike the ball and get it to fly around and wrap the rope around the pole the other way.

Tetherball is a great game for young men, because we always wanted to see how hard we could hit that ball. No matter how hard we hit it, the ball would always stay attached to the rope, the rope would always stay attached to the pole, and the pole would always stay anchored in the ground.

Today, we finish our walk through the glorious book of Romans. At the start of this year, we pondered this verse in chapter 1:

“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”

The gospel of Jesus Christ is powerful. The gospel of Jesus Christ is like the concrete that anchored that tetherball pole in the ground. With such an anchor, you are strong, no matter how hard you get hit.

Romans 16, like the rest of Romans, is about the gospel. It is about the Romans, and us, getting the gospel and giving the gospel.

This morning, let's enter the story of Paul and the Romans one more time. As we finish this year and begin a new year, let's use two questions to anchor ourselves in the powerful gospel of Jesus Christ.

Here is the first question: DO YOU GET THE GOSPEL?

You say, “Of course I do!” If you are here this morning, you probably would say you are a Christian of some sort, and you would likely say you get the gospel. But do you? Do you really?

SOME DON'T. In the midst of all these greetings, Paul writes of people who do not get the gospel. These people “cause divisions” and “put obstacles” in the way of the church.

Who are these people? We don't know for sure. Paul does not describe what they are doing or teaching. All we know for certain is that they teach something that is opposed to the true, powerful gospel of Jesus Christ.

Based on what we know from other parts of the New Testament, we can guess these teachers are one of two sorts of people. Maybe both kinds are causing trouble for the Romans.

We might call some the “plus” people. They believe in Jesus, but they also believe you have to keep following the Old Testament law, to be saved. Jesus is great, but you need Jesus “plus” your obedience, to really be right with God.

Paul may have been thinking of the “plus” people when he wrote the words of chapter 4. He wrote of works and law, and how Abraham was right before the Lord not through obeying God's law, but through faith in the Lord.

If you know the story of Abraham, you know his obedience was imperfect and inconsistent. He could not “justify” himself before God. He had to trust in God to do for him, what he could never do for himself.

But somehow the “plus” people do not get this part of the gospel. They think if they just do all the right things, God will see that good, and he will then be pleased with them.

One group might be the “plus” people. Let's call the other group, the “party” people. They believe Jesus died for all of their sins. But how will they respond to this?

They act as if they are free to live however they want, and no matter what they do, they will be saved. Jesus saves. Let's party.

Paul may have been thinking of the “party” people when he wrote the words of chapter 6. “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” After all, if Jesus forgives it all, why not give him a lot to forgive?

No, writes Paul. If you have truly understood the grace of God in Jesus Christ, you have God's Holy Spirit in you. He is changing your heart and your life, and you hate the thought of continuing to sin.

“Plus” people and “party” people.

Make no mistake: these people are good. Paul writes of their smooth talk and flattery. They speak well, and they make you feel good. But this gospel they proclaim is not the powerful gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, writes Paul, stay away from them. Do not accept them as part of your fellowship.

Please, writes Paul, be wise. "...be wise about what is good, and innocent about what is evil." You must know what is good. You must not join in evil.

Some don't get the gospel.

Now make sure you understand this: Paul is not writing about unbelievers who openly oppose Jesus Christ. He is writing about people who say they are believers, yet who offer a "plus" gospel or a "party" gospel, to the harm, and even to the destruction, of the people who listen to them.

Some don't get the gospel. DO YOU?

Yes, you. Yes, you who have been raised in the church. Yes, you who have made a profession of faith in Jesus. Yes, you who presume that since you know other religions are wrong, you must have everything right.

Yes, you. Yes, you who are eight years old. Yes, you who are eighty years old. Yes, you who are 50 years old.

Yes, you. Yes, you who lead in the church. Yes, you who serve in the church. Yes, you who give money to the church.

Yes, you. Yes, you who send your children to Christian school. Yes, you who homeschool your children. Yes, you who have children in public schools.

Do you get the gospel?

Or are you a "plus" person? Are you trying to add something to Jesus, to get God to love you?

Maybe you are trying to add good works, to get God to love you.

This is what our culture often presumes. We are so sure that we can do enough good, and be good enough, to be good before God. We are like a child putting pennies in his piggy bank. I will put in enough, to make God happy.

This is what we may do, even in the church. I am an elder. I am a deacon. I teach Sunday School. I pass out bulletins. I give money.

But do you see that the gospel teaches the opposite? The entire first portion of Romans shouts, "You are not nearly as good as you think you are, and even if you are, it is not good enough to make up for how you have done terrible things before a holy God."

Good works will not get God to love you. Not a bit.

Maybe you are trying to add great guilt, to get God to love you.

This is the cry of the tortured soul. Woe is me. I feel terrible about what I have done. And if I just feel terrible enough, God will be glad I am saying I am sorry, and he will forgive me.

Yes, we are guilty. Yes, we should be sorry for what we have done. But our guilt does not secure forgiveness from God. Our sorrow is not a button we need to push, to get God to love us.

Works? Guilt? They are opposites, but they are alike. They both say, "God will save me, because of something about me." The "plus" gospel.

Are you a "party" person? How do you respond to God's calls to holiness?

Maybe you respond with indifference. It is nice to follow Jesus. It is a good choice. I am really impressed that you are so "religious."

You hear the Word preached. You hear the Word taught. Maybe you read it sometimes. You feel good. Then you do what you want to do.

Maybe you respond with opposition. You know the good you ought to do. You know the evil you should avoid. But you love the evil, far more than you love the good.

So you refuse to change. Maybe you say, "That's just the way I am." Or you even resent God for trying to get in the way of your freedom.

You have said a word for Jesus as Savior, but you have anointed yourself as the Lord of your life.

Are you a "plus" person? Are you a "party" person?

You. Yes, you. Yes, me. As we end this year, and start the new year, I offer this: we must know, live and believe the pure gospel.

Mark these words in your mind, and write them on your heart:

I am not saved by anything I do, but purely by what Jesus has done.

The Bible teacher Harry Ironside used to tell a story about a man who gave his testimony to the church. He described God's love, God's call, God's cleansing, and God's healing.

A man came to him afterwards and said. "I appreciated what you said...But you didn't mention anything about your part in it."

"Oh yes," said the man. "I apologize for that. I really should have said something about my part. My part was running away, and his part was running after me until he caught me."

I am not saved by anything I do, but purely by what Jesus has done.

Then mark these words in your mind, and write them on your heart:

I am not saved to do what I want, but to do what Jesus wants.

I offer you again a story I told you earlier this year. It may not be true, but it reflects the truth of the gospel.

Abraham Lincoln went to a slave auction. He saw a woman, and he bid for her and bought her. As she walked away with him, he told her to go, because she was now free.

She responded, "I want to go with you."

If you know that you are not saved by anything you do, but purely by what Jesus has done, how can you respond in any other way?

I am not saved to do what I want, but to do what Jesus wants.

This is the gospel. No "plus." No "party." We believe it. We proclaim it. We defend it. We live it.

And we give it. As we finish our year in the book of Romans, I offer you a second question. **WILL YOU GIVE THE GOSPEL?**

We are never quite sure what to do, when we reach chapters like Romans 16. Who are these people? How do you say their names? Why did God want to give us these words?

When we ask questions like this, we need to remember this: God tells his story, through the stories of people. He has given us commands, but so much more than commands. He has revealed himself and his purposes, through the lives of people. We can learn for our story, from their story.

So what do we learn about these people, and ourselves, through these greetings?

THEY GAVE. They gave the gospel.

They really gave. How does Paul describe these people?

* "Servant" - one who serves not himself, but someone else.

* "Fellow workers" - co-laborers, in a great effort.

* "Risky their lives for me" - willing to give even life.

* "Worked very hard" - work and work and work, until weariness.

* "In prison" - not for breaking the law, but for giving the gospel.

* "Tested and approved" - proved faithful, surely through suffering.

They really gave, and Paul really loved. How does Paul express his love for these people?

* "I love in the Lord" - I love the Lord. You love the Lord. I love you, for we share the same love.

* "My dear friend" - the friend I love.

* "Has been a mother to me" - surely this person has cared for his needs, as no one else did.

Paul is passionate about these people, because they have labored with him in the cause of giving the gospel.

Now notice this: most of these people were not "pastors." They were not full-time ministers or overseas missionaries. They were common people. They lived common lives. But as they lived, they worked for an uncommon cause.

They really gave. He really loved.

At our last Presbytery meeting, we received two men "under care" of the Presbytery. That means they are in training for ministry, and we will hope to help them in that process.

The men were both from our sister church in Indianapolis - Redeemer Presbyterian. The pastor, Jason Dorsey, spoke briefly to them, and with each of them, he used the image of the warrior.

I have thought often of his words. They keep coming back to me. The image of war is a risky image, because people can misuse or misunderstand it.

But it is appropriate. With spiritual weapons, we are fighting a spiritual war, because we want to give the gospel to people.

As a pastor who senses Paul's pastor's heart, I would say this in response to Paul's words: Lord, give me warriors. Give us brothers and sisters who will fight even the demons of hell, with the weapons of heaven, that we may give the gospel.

Give us people who will fall to their knees in prayer, and plead for the souls of people who need the gospel.

Give us people who will open their homes and their ears, and listen to the sorrows of the brokenhearted, that the gospel may bring healing.

Give us people who will serve the church in small, silent ways, so we can continue to publicly proclaim the gospel.

Give us people who will speak the truth in our world, daring even to speak with gentleness and respect, to people who do not believe.

Give us people who will share in the work of missions, even by going and joining in that work, for a season or a lifetime.

Give us people who will give the gospel as they work honestly, bless others generously, play

fairly, and strive to live as godly gospel warriors everywhere.

What is Paul's vision here? It is a vision of people captured by the truths of the gospel, captive to the notion of giving the gospel in their daily lives - no matter who they are, where they are, or what they are doing.

Not just Paul was called. Not just the pastor is called. All of Paul's believing readers were called, and all of us are called, to give the gospel.

So ARE YOU? They gave. Are you?

As we close this year of rooting ourselves in the truths and claims of the gospel, and as we look ahead to the new year, I want you to consider several other questions, growing from this question.

1) How will the gospel change the way you live your daily life?

Here are some examples...

* The gospel ought to change the way you do your work. You can never earn enough money to impress God, or give enough money to buy off God.

But you can shine like a star, as you work with honesty, integrity, and diligence. You can be salt and light, as you care for people as people, while you work for them or with them. You can be an ambassador of Jesus Christ, when you demonstrate the joy of the Lord, even in the struggles of each day.

* The gospel ought to change the way you love your spouse. Jesus is your bridegroom, so you live the gospel before your bride or groom.

You serve, instead of being served, because your Savior came not to serve, but to serve, and to give his life.

You speak with kindness, instead of speaking with harshness, because the Lord Jesus Christ spoke the truth, but in love.

You pursue a relationship that is not just functional, but intimate, for the Messiah has come to redeem and strengthen your relationships.

* The gospel ought to change the way you relate to other people. Jesus is the friend of sinners, so you live the gospel in relationship with people.

You forgive. You forgive. You forgive. You extend grace, for God has extended grace to you.

You endure. Jesus is enduring with you, so you endure with those whom God has called you to love.

You encourage. When your heart is heavy, Jesus ministers his grace to you, so you offer such encouragement, to others.

You are not saved by anything you do, but purely by what Jesus has done. You are not saved to do what you want, but to do what Jesus wants. How will the gospel change the way you live your daily life?

2) What will you give up, so that you can give for the sake of the gospel?

Jesus said, "You cannot serve God and money." He could have said, "You cannot serve God and anything else." Someone or something will possess first place in your heart.

What is really important to you? (If you don't know, ask your spouse, or your children, or your grandchildren, or your best friend!)

What might God ask you to give up in the year ahead, so you can give for the sake of the gospel?

Maybe sleep, so you can listen to the troubled neighbor.

Maybe the vacation you long for, so you can take part in a short-term mission trip.

Maybe the financial plan you have crafted, so you can give to a valuable project for the kingdom.

Maybe the security you enjoy, so you can minister to the poor.

Maybe the good friend, because you must be loyal to your best friend, named Jesus.

3) Will you ask God's Spirit to transform you into a gospel warrior?

Not a gospel spectator, who watches while others do the work of the kingdom.

Not a gospel hoarder, who loves the truths of the gospel, but never strives to give the gospel.

But a gospel warrior, who knows that the gospel is the power of God for salvation, and who fights to live for Jesus, in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

And here is the joyous result: warriors become stronger! As we give the gospel, God works in us. The gospel is powerful: not just in others, but in us.

As we invest ourselves in the Lord, he makes us strong, so that we are strong to stand, no matter how hard this world hits us.

A pastor once told the story of two soldiers, watching as the Duke of Wellington rode by during the heat of a battle. One of the soldiers said, "There goes the Duke, and there is sure to be warm work."

Warm work. Hard work. If we get the gospel, we give the gospel, and surely it is warm work.

It is warm work, to tell the truth in your job, when truth-telling might cost you that job.

It is warm work, to boldly but humbly say, "The only person who can truly help you is Jesus

Christ.”

It is warm work, to sit across from a young person, and listen to her tale of heartache and heartbreak.

It is warm work, to serve and serve and serve in the church.

It is warm work, to pray again and again and again, against the false god who rules the life of the one you love.

It is warm work. It is war. But the gospel is powerful, and the Savior of the gospel is powerful, and even as we do warm work, he makes us strong.

What will hit you hard this year?

Get the gospel. Not the “plus” gospel. Not the “party” gospel. But the pure gospel. Get it in your mind, and get it in your heart.

Give the gospel. Let it change you. Be willing to give up what is good, so you can give what is better. Ask God to make you into a warrior.

You will stand strong.