

"LETTER TO OUR GENERATION"

A Series of Sermons on the Letter of Paul to the Romans

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by

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

IV

"Realistic Life"

Text: Romans 7:21, 8:39

What kind of life do I live when I accept the gospel and become a Christian? In Chapters 6, 7, and 8 of Paul's letter to Rome there are some fascinating clues. Let me point up three of them.

At the beginning Paul makes one fact clear. He has no intention of producing a crowd of escape artists who accept the grace of God as a gift but not as a way of life.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

.....Romans 6:1-11

It is conceivable that one might argue as follows: Since grace is so powerful and wonderful, why not count upon it and sin boldly to get more out of it? The flaw in such a pattern of life is twofold: it misunderstands the meaning of grace and the meaning of our life. The grace of God is not a general truth or a quantity of spiritual medicine to be generously applied upon the wounds of man. Grace is an interpersonal encounter, a relationship. When a man has a relationship with someone else, does he need continually to test it with various jabs and parries? In fact, an individual receives more love by building creatively upon the love he now has and not by resorting to defiant temper tantrums which are, in fact, proofs that he is uncertain of the foundation and wants to "test it once more just to be sure." We hardly need to sin to find out that God is good though it is true that when we do sin we find that he is good. But God's love is a companionship for the journey in life and, therefore, not a gift to be received as we receive gold or even food.

Paul rejects escapism for a second reason too, escapism misunderstands the strategic part we are to play in the fulfillment of history itself.

. . . because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning together in travail until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

.....Romans 8:21-25

In other words, the Christian life is an exciting engagement with the world around us and of which we are a vital, even crucial catalyst agent.

The second major theme that the apostle develops in these chapters is that living the Christian life involves a dynamic tension between the ideal, that is to say, the nobility of the total claim of God's grace upon the Christian's life, and polarized with this is the everyday weakness and inadequacy of the Christian man to meet the high claim. This is a classic ethical and devotional dilemma which cannot be easily resolved. The simplest solution would appear to be a reduction in the idealism and towering challenge of the claim. This approach has been taken at various moments in the life of the church. Its appeal rests in an appearance of flexibility and even compassion for the admittedly weak resolve of man, but both appeals are superficial.

Another solution is to attempt a denial of the weakness of the Christian man and proceeding upon this faulty presupposition, the Church has been tempted to exalt selected saints who have in the opinion of Christendom succeeded at the challenge with perfectly obedient and powerful lives. This way has as many dangers as the first. It results in either self-deception or withering self-analysis, depending upon how honestly you measure your life.

Paul's solution is as bold as it is honest. His challenge to us is to live the Christian life within the tension between the high ideal and claim of Christ that calls us to obey in spite of the fact of human weaknesses. We must hold to this call and at the same time admit our weakness.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

.....Romans 8:26-27

It is a fact that the strong challenge of Jesus Christ to follow faithfully as his disciples is both the offense and the appeal of Christianity. Ironically, this mixture of strong claim and recognition of human weakness is what makes Christianity realistic. Where I grew up as a boy, there were two mountains; the one was a 10,000 foot peak, Mt. Eddy, and the other was 14,000 feet, Mt. Shasta. The first mountain was only of average difficulty to climb, an afternoon's work, the second was a two-day effort and one that only a small percentage of those who made the try were successful in reaching the summit.

There we have two challenges, the one clearly within reach, the second much harder and more problematic. But, there is another difference between the two mountains. Everyone who matters climbs Mt. Shasta; it is the mountain to try your wits against, but only Girl Scout and Cub Pack groups are seen on Mt. Eddy. There is a basic principle at work here. If you really want to win a hearing, then the challenge quotient must be greater than the normal ability level of people at large. No high school boy is interested in turning out for the football team where the coach is soft, the demands upon the team easy. The reason is simple. That team will not win on Saturday afternoon and very few people deliberately choose to join a losing team.

How very wise Jesus Christ is when he calls out to the fishermen at Galilee with the words, "Leave your nets and follow me. . ." He did not ask for their vote in the provincial election or their casual support, but the call is total. Over against this challenge is the weakness of man "that which I would I do not, that which I would not do, I do. . ." Nevertheless, the challenge stands in spite of our inadequacy. Our hope is the inward help of God; his grace not only to redeem us but to strengthen us to live within the challenge he calls us to face.