

"LETTER TO OUR GENERATION"

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

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by

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III

"The Stronger Force"

Text: Romans 5:12-21

Humanity confronts a wholesale problem and, therefore, needs a whole-scale solution. "Total help for total need." (Karl Barth) The solution must grapple with both the personal/interpersonal core as well as the cumulative power of the problem. This is what Paul now considers in the Book of Romans.

Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through and so death spread to all men because all men sinned-- sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.....

Romans 5:12-14

He explodes two myths in the "two Adams" thesis. The first is that somehow I am not involved; the second myth is that I can handle my own rescue from the crisis. I remember an occasion when I was asked to lead a discussion at a university student meeting, and one of the students on noting that I was a Presbyterian minister decided evidently to embarrass the speaker. His first question was to establish that as a Presbyterian I could be safely considered a Calvinist. I agreed with that title at least tentatively, and then he asked his really tough question: "Sir, how can you justify in the Twentieth Century Calvin's doctrine of the total depravity of man and his whole idea of original sin?" I hesitated for a moment to collect my thoughts, trying to decide on the strategy for answering such a question. I decided to go on the offensive, and as I began to throw myself into the battle, I realized how profoundly wise Paul had been in this famous Romans 5 passage. I said, "I'm glad you asked that question." (I thought I should begin with a little touch of hypocrisy.) "You know that is one of my favorite doctrines. I like it for two reasons: because it is realistic and, secondly, because it is democratic." Calvin and Paul before him are

trying to affirm just these two points: that we all have a solidarity with each other in the fact that we all share in a common crisis and, therefore, graduated scales of our involvement or guilt are meaningless, hence the terms 'total,' 'original.' So I hurled the challenge back to my questioner: "What analysis of man do you propose in its place that will be equally realistic and will preserve your solidarity with the man next to you?"

Notice that in Paul's text the fact is that we all share in the same crisis and yet Paul preserves the gift and responsibility of freedom for each of us with the important phrase, "because all men sinned." This same concern on Paul's part for the integrity of individual man is preserved in the second part of the "two Adams" thesis with the qualifying phrase, "as many as received."

But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the effect of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.

Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous. Law came in, to increase the trespass; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.....

Romans 5:15-21

The reply of the Christian gospel to man's wholesale crisis is expressed with very great philosophical depth in this Romans 5 paragraph. The solution is both personal and powerful. In very simple terms the Christian answer is a man for a problem. Paul claims for this solution the immense cumulative power that can outrun even our most complicated problems. What does he mean by this and how does it work? I believe that the best way to understand this is to observe the theological principle at work in a concrete instance. John's gospel records the following encounter between Jesus Christ and several different kinds of people:

They went each to his own house but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. Early in the morning he came again to the temple; all the people came to him and he sat down and taught them. The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman who had been caught in adultery, and placing her in the midst they said to him, "Teacher, this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. Now in the law Moses commanded us to stone such. What do you say about her?" This they said to test him, that they might have some charge to bring against him.

Jesus bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. And as they continued to ask him, he stood up and said to them, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her." And once more he bent down and wrote with his finger on the ground. But when they heard it, they went away, one by one, beginning with the eldest, and Jesus was left alone with the woman standing before him. Jesus looked up and said to her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No, my Lord." And Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you; go and do not sin again."

I want to point up three things about this encounter: (1) First of all, notice that Jesus Christ sweeps away the various judges, leaving only Himself as judge before the unfortunate woman. This has heightened, simplified and universalized her crisis. Where before she was in trouble before assorted accusers with assorted technical laws and legal interpretations over against her, now she is alone before the Master. Somehow her sin seems far worse now than before, precisely because the technicalities of her mistake are swept away. She stands now as a simple human being who cannot make it alone, who has failed to solve the riddle of life and is living without meaning. She is worse off than before because the trivial accusers have gone away. Jesus made them feel their own guilt and their own solidarity with the woman they were prepared to stone so much so that from the eldest to the youngest (youth take longer to recognize their own frailty). The accusers have all left. "Where are your accusers?" "They have all left, Lord." So you see now the meaning of total crisis. Jesus cannot really help this woman until he has simplified, heightened and universalized her problem. Jesus Christ as judge must stand before us before we can fully understand Jesus Christ as friend. He sweeps away all excuses, all defenses, all insignificant causes for remorse so that we can stand as we really are. The woman, is she Mary Magdalene, accepts the judge. We usually resent him. Do you remember Professor O'Reilly in T. S. Eliot's "The Cocktail Party," who must face his proud patients Edward and Lavinia? There is no way but to challenge the facade of the two patients:

"My patients such as you are the self-deceivers  
Taking infinite pains, exhausting their energy,  
Yet never quite successful. You have both of you pretended  
To be consulting me; both, tried to impose upon me  
Your own diagnosis, and prescribe your own cure.  
But when you put yourselves into hands like mine  
You surrender a great deal more than you meant to.  
This is the consequence of trying to lie to me.

"LAVINIA: I did not come here to be insulted.

"REILLY: You have come where the word 'insult' has no meaning;  
And you must put up with that. All that you have told me--  
Both of you--was true enough; you described your feelings--  
Or some of them--omitting the important facts.  
Let me take your husband first....."

(2) But Jesus of Nazareth is not a provincial judge and there is very little gain in the ability to see through the shallowness of man if this is all. The Lord speaks to Mary "Neither do I condemn you." This is remarkable. Jesus takes upon himself the responsibility for her heavy and complicated sins. He forgives the serious offense of the woman and the forgiveness of that moment like all real forgiveness is costly. Jesus is in trouble with almost everyone who matters. They will now be able to say that he "excused" her. Forgiveness is never popular and this is what lies at the heart of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's famous sentence, "The forgiveness of sin is costly because it cost God the life of his Son....." Nevertheless, Jesus Christ set loose in this incident and by his suffering on the cross the tremendous cumulative power of forgiveness, the only force great enough to outdistance our sins and the damage they do.

(3) Then Jesus sends the woman back to the city "Go and sin no more....." Jesus sends everyone of us back into the city to live by a new standard, motivated by a new source of motivation: the very gospel that sent the lawyers and angry men away; the gospel that made her feel so completely lonely and guilty for those few agonizing moments as Christ wrote in the sand; the gospel that set her free from death and sin and now bids her to live in freedom and love. "Where sin did abound, grace did much more abound," and there is no greater force in all the world. Karl Barth put it this way:

"And now we must not say that it is not enough to live by forgiveness 'alone.' This objection has been raised against the Creed and strengthened against the Reformers. What folly! As though just this, the forgiveness of sins, were not the only thing by which we live, the power of all powers! As though everything were not said in that phrase! It is precisely when we are aware that 'God is for me,' that we are in the true sense responsible. For from that standpoint and from that alone is there a real ethic, have we a criterion of good and evil. So living by forgiveness is never by any means passivity, but Christian living in full activity. Whether we prefer to describe it as great freedom or as strict discipline, as piety or as true worldliness, as private morality or as social morality, whether we regard this life under the sign of the great hope or under the sign of daily patience, in any case we live solely by forgiveness....."