

People with a Purpose

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God's Greater Story / Purpose; Mission of Christ; God: Grace / Romans 10:5-17

› Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

in 1961, a visitor walked into the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in Glasgow....carrying a brick. He found a painting of the crucifixion and started to destroy it. His anger...his violence.... his desecration of Christian art was not done out of hatred for Christianity but out of love for Christ. He objected to the way the artist had portrayed the crucifixion of Jesus.

Salvador Dali was the artist and the painting was Christ of St. John of the Cross. In it, one sees Jesus, hanging on the cross, over the world. The problem, for the visitor, however, was one of perspective. Dali had changed the traditional perspective people have on the crucifixion. Rather than standing below the cross, looking up into the face of Jesus, Dali asks the viewer, for a moment, to be situated above the cross, looking down upon Jesus, who himself is looking down upon the world. For the visitor, this stance is sacrilegious. You place yourself above Jesus.

For others, however, this stance is divine. Some people see what this visitor didn't see - they see an artist inviting you, for a moment, to have God's view of the world. Our heavenly Father looks down upon the fallen world and he sees it through the eyes of His Son Jesus, dying on the cross, for all people.

This vision is hard, even for Christians to see. As we look at the world, we can often see something we want to run away from rather than run into. We see the social fabric of God's creation tearing apart at the seams. An open acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle, homosexual marriage. Free-range divorce, and couples living together outside of marriage have altered God's plan of one man and one woman for one lifetime. The complacent killing of children in the womb and yet the ardent fight to preserve and protect nesting places of an endangered species of a world that has lost its moral compass. Rather than valuing all of life, our world encourages us to value only some of life, particularly if it isn't human. Now we see another round of racism taking center stage. We are also seeing very troublesome things against the church with governors and mayors threatening to turn off water, electricity and even close churches that don't bend to their demands. Seeing poverty that walks out streets looking for a place to sleep while others are buying their second vacation home makes one want to leave this world behind, to enter into some Christian cocoon and wait for the Day of Resurrection, the recreation of all things.

How easy it is for us to enter church and turn our eyes upward to the cross and leave the world behind. All we can see is Jesus and seeing him, we can forget where we are or what he would have us be doing. We can simply gaze at Jesus, hanging on the cross, dying for us and forget that we live in the world and that God has chosen us to be involved in his mission. Here. IN TIME.

This is the perspective the apostle Paul had upon the world. This is the vision the apostle Paul was inviting Christians in Rome and Christians today to see. God has called us to be part of his people for his purpose, his purpose of reaching out to the ends of the earth with Christ's saving love. This morning, as we reflect on this text from Romans, we will consider two details of Paul's vision of the people of God. We are people saved by grace and people involved in God's mission.

One of the odd things about Dali's depiction of the crucifixion is the body of Jesus. If you look closely at his painting, you will notice that Jesus hangs on the cross without any wounds. There are no nails piercing his hands. There are no nails piercing his feet. His body hangs from the cross but there is nothing that holds him to it. For some, this detail is disturbing. It makes it look like the crucifixion never happened or it denies the pain and suffering of the Son of God. For others, however, there is a deep spiritual insight in this painting.

When Jesus was crucified, we indeed nailed him to the cross. His own people tried him, found him guilty of blasphemy, and rejected their God. And we would do the same had he come among us today. There is no doubt that God himself was rejected by his people and hung upon the cross to die. But that is not the only reason Jesus hung upon the cross. He could have delivered himself....if he wanted to. Remember on the night when Jesus was betrayed how Peter drew his sword to try to protect him. Jesus then turned to Peter and said, "Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?" When Jesus hung upon the cross, the religious leaders mocked him. They called out for him to come down down from the cross and save himself if he were truly God. But Jesus stayed on the cross, not because he was only human couldn't get down but because he was truly God and wouldn't get down. Jesus stayed on the cross because he didn't come into this world to save himself. No, he came to save you. It was the pure love of God that led Jesus to that cross and it was the pure love of God that held Jesus up there—offering his sinless life for the sins of the whole world. Jesus hanging on the cross without nails is not a realistic picture of what happened at the crucifixion but it is true picture of what happened on that day. God, in Jesus Christ, willingly gave his life for you and for the world that you live in.

This is something that the Apostle Paul understands. Salvation comes to us purely by grace. It is only by the love of God poured out for us in Jesus Christ that we are saved. We are part of God's greater people saved by grace.

As Paul proclaims this truth among the Roman Christians, he does so by revisiting a familiar text for God's people. Just as Dali took a traditional picture of the crucifixion and offered new

insight, so Paul took a traditional text and asked God's people to hear it and read it again, Paul turns to the book of Deuteronomy, that record of covenant renewal among God's people.

God's people are there, on the edge of the Promised Land. After 40 years in the wilderness, they are about to enter the land of God's promise. Before they enter the Promised Land, God renews his covenant with them. In the beginning of that covenant renewal, God warns the people of Israel. He warns them about how they should view this moment. Moses says, "Do not say in your heart after God has thrust the nations out before you, 'It is because of my righteousness that the Lord has brought me in to possess this land...Know therefore that the Lord your God is not giving you this good land because of your righteousness. , for you are a stubborn people.'" Here, Moses asks them to look at their own past. They were a stubborn people and did not earn the Promised Land by their own righteousness. At the end of that covenant renewal, God prophesies to the people of Israel. He speaks of a time when they will depart from God and be exiled from their land and then God, in mercy, will come. They will repent and God will bring about restoration. Here, Moses asks them to see their future. Their future lies only in the mercy of God.

It is that vision of that future that Paul quotes here. Only as Paul quotes this vision, he adds his own words for emphasis. He wants us to see the love of God, freely given for all people...now...in Christ. Listen to Paul. He writes,

the righteousness based on faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) 7 "or 'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). 8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim).

For Paul, that day of restoration had come to God's people. It came in Christ Jesus and it came purely by grace. With these words, Paul reaches out to his Jewish brothers and sister and invites them to join with the Roman Gentile Christians in confession salvation in Jesus Christ, by grace, through faith. At the heart of God's covenant lies not what we do for our salvation but rather what God does for us. We are saved not because we are a mighty or numerous or particularly holy people. No, we are stubborn and rebellious and sinners before God. But we are saved by God's mercy made known for us in Christ. At the heart of God restoration of all things lies the work of God in Jesus. He came down from heaven, he entered into hell, and he rose again that we might be forgiven and be part of God's people who live by grace through faith.

As Paul offers a vision of life in the Promised Land, he helps us see Jesus. But he also helps us see Jesus at work through his people in the world.

As you listen to this text, notice how the Promised Land is not limited to a small piece of ground in Israel. No, the Promised Land expands to include the whole world.

When Paul continues writing, he reveals this world-encompassing mission of God:

11 For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." 12 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. 13 For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

In Paul's Words we hear an emphasis on everyone. All people. Jew and Gentile. God's mission is to bring his salvation to the ends of the earth.

For Paul, that mission of God is not something that merely hangs there in the sky. No, Paul brings that mission of God down to earth into the very mouths of God's people. Paul asks a series of questions to which the answers are obvious:

14 How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? 15 And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"

God brings people into his kingdom through the word of faith that his people proclaim.

Paul understand that he is part of this mission. He anticipates traveling to Spain in a missionary journey and wants to stop in Rome on the way. His stop in Rome, however, will not be one of conversation-with Paul telling the Roman Christians what to believe. No, Paul anticipates that he too will hear words of encouragement and spiritual power from the Roman Christians. He writes early on in his letter:

11 For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— 12 that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

Paul knows this truth about God's greater story. When God brings people into his kingdom, he brings them into his mission, his mission that extends to the ends of the earth. God gives every person a confession of faith, a word of faith that when spoken touches others with the power of God. Paul writes that the Gospel of God "is the power of salvation to all who believe." Paul wants the Roman Christians to know and you, as God's people today, to know that you have a purpose, a purpose in God's kingdom. God uses you in his mission to share with others the news.

Dali's painting offers us a visual reminder of this work of God. There, in the heights of heaven, is the cross. Jesus in love offering his life for the world. There below him is the world. It extends outward, across a lake, into the distance. This love of God is a love that will reach to the ends of the earth. The question, however, how is this love to be communicated to all of those people? How will God make his saving love known.? There at the bottom of the picture, you see the answer. Two men, going about their task of fishing near the boat. They seem to be plain men. Fishermen. Nothing would set them apart from others as God's special instruments to the world. And yet, that is what happens in the ministry of Jesus. He comes and calls plain fishermen to follow him. These men are not sent into Rome to learn rhetoric from famous speakers. No, they are invited to live with Jesus. To listen to Jesus. To witness

what he has done. And then, Jesus gathers these men together on Pentecost and sends his Holy Spirit upon them and they become apostles, those sent out to bring the good news of salvation to the ends of the earth.

I have often thought about those apostles and the challenge that was set before them - especially now and the challenge we find ourselves in. These were fishermen. What did they know about public speaking or oratory? What did they know about the intricacies of the Greek Language? It would be like giving a child a box of crayons and asking him to adorn to the Sistine Chapel, to retell in beautiful picture, the story of God. God's Work, however, comes not through human eloquence or wisdom. It comes in the foolishness of the gospel, a story so simple that even a child could tell it. A story so amazing that only God could bring it about.

This work of Jesus, sending his Spirit to speak through his people, was not limited only to the apostles. As persecution arose in Jerusalem, the laity were scattered as the apostles stayed there, willing to die for the faith. And the laity were the ones who carried the message with them, perhaps even being the first people to speak of salvation in Rome. I'm sure that their words were not the most skillful, not the most eloquent. They were probably simple testimonies of faith. But through their simple words, God's work of mission was done. And through your simple words, his work is done today. You don't need special training to speak of what God has done. As Paul writes: "The Word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart." God has called you, chosen you, to be his people who live by his promise and live for his purpose, his mission to bring salvation to the ends of this earth.

After a visitor attacked Dali's painting it was removed from the art museum. Through careful work, the painting was restored and, over time, brought back to the museum. Today, thousands of visitors go to Glasgow to see this painting. They stand there and marvel at the beauty of Dali's work.

Paul, however, knows of another restoration that causes God's people to stand there in wonder. Paul sees that in Christ God has fulfilled his promises to Abraham. Through this one nation, God has brought salvation to all the nations of the earth. Through this one person, his Son Jesus Christ, God has offered a love that encompasses all people.

As we come to worship today, Paul asks us to stand here, to look up, and see Jesus. But we don't only see Jesus. No, Paul changes our perspective so that we see Jesus at work through his people bringing salvation to the ends of the earth. Paul wants us to catch that vision. It catches your breath and causes you to cry out with wonder: "how beautiful..."

"How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"

In Jesus Name. Amen.

- › Now may the peace of God which passes all human understanding, guard your hearts and your minds and keep them focused in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.