**Upper Path Valley Presbyterian Church**

**Sunday, January 24, 2021**

**A Light and A Lamp, Part 47**

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This week in our journey through the Bible we spent most of our time in the book of Romans; Paul’s letter to the believers in Rome. This letter contains Paul’s fullest explanation of the Gospel or the good news about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Romans contains the theologically rich concepts of justification, sanctification, and righteousness. It was these themes in Romans that led Martin Luther to jump into and be a key figure in the reformation, which is how the Protestant Church came into being. And it is Romans that God has led us to read in the beginning of 2021. Let’s pray: Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have gathered us around your Word today. We thank you for the preservation of your word and the deep insights that this letter contains. As we listen to your word today, open our hearts and minds to what you have done for us. Draw us into your presence this morning and bring new life to your words today. Amen.

Last week Pastor Meagan read off a long list of characteristics or attributes of Christ followers found in 1 and 2 Thessalonians. This list included many things such as faith, loving deeds, enduring hope, etc. I didn’t write down the full list, but if you missed it I’m sure we can get it for you. One of the things that stood out to me on this list was in my own words was to grow love for others. Grow love for others...because I confess I have not loved others in my thoughts, actions, or deeds as Christ calls me to. We have witnessed the tearing down of others so much in our lifetimes that it takes intention to grow love. Mr. Fred Rogers said once, “Love isn’t the state of perfect caring. It is an active noun like ‘struggle.” Love is an active struggle. But I think Paul’s letter to the Romans can help us in this active struggle.

In his letter to Romans, Paul is writing to followers of Christ in Rome, and the church in Rome was made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers. Believers who had different cultural backgrounds and because of these different backgrounds were divided. The Jewish believers believed that all followers needed to obey the Jewish law that was passed down to them from Moses. They believed that by following the Law they were made right with God (they were righteous). They were a divided people so Paul put them all on a level playing field. Paul reminded them of what united them all, and he reminds us of what unites us. Romans 3:21-26, “*But now apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, attested by the Law and the Prophets. The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, since there is no distinction. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. They are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God presented him as an atoning sacrifice in his blood, received through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his restraint God passed over the sins previously committed. God presented him to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so that he would be righteous and declare righteous the one who has faith in Jesus.”*

Paul straight out tells them...listen I know you think you are in good standing with God because of all the good works you do, but I’m here to tell you that you can only have good standing with God through the redemptive blood of Jesus. And he reiterates this over and over again in Romans 4 and 5. Romans 4:3-5, “*What does Scripture say? Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Now to the one who works, wages are not credited as a gift but as an obligation. However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness.”* And Paul continues in verses 23-25, “*These words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness - for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”* And then we get this great section in chapter 5. *“You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

While we were still powerless, while we were still sinners, while we were still enemies with God, while we were so unlovable Scripture says But God in his immense love and grace sent his Son to die for us. For you and for me. God credited righteousness, a right standing with him, to us. We can’t earn a right standing with God. We cannot, I cannot justify myself no matter how good I think I am. I heard a story on a podcast(black) last week about a man named George in a Starbucks drive thru line. George was in line to order breakfast and an orange juice and while waiting in line he noticed the driver of the Range Rover in front of him throw a cigarette butt out the window. Some people might not even notice this action or care about the other driver’s actions, but to George this was a very big deal. George became very angry and was just about to exit his vehicle to go and pick up the cigarette butt in the parking lot and throw it back through the Range Rover’s still down window. But he restrained himself thinking “this could go bad and not end well if I do this” and “this person is also made in the image of God and I shouldn’t feel such hostility toward him. I don’t even know him.” George was still very upset so he decided to as the woman at the window if the Range Rover guy seemed like a decent person. When George gets to the window the woman informs him that the Range Rover guy had paid for George’s meal.

Did George do anything to deserve to be credited a meal? No, in fact he was seconds away from doing something that would have caused him to deserve something else. While George was still angry with the man, this man paid for George’s meal. Now the man in the Range Rover obviously had no clue that George was so upset with him and if he did he probably would not have done what he did. But God did...God knew George’s heart and God knows our hearts and minds. God knows our flaws, he knows our sinful actions and he still sent Jesus to liberate us from our sins and our bondage. God knew how often we would turn away from him and how we would treat our neighbors, and still he loves us so much and offers us access to Him. And nothing can separate us from his amazing love and grace!

It is this amazing love and grace that is one of the uniting factors in Romans. This love is for Jew, Gentile, man, woman, child, Republican, Democrat, American, European, Asian, Arab, black, white, tall, short, upper class, lower class, middle class...anyone who has faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as Lord and Savior. There is redemption and reconciliation available to all who believe in Him. And to those who believe in Him there is adoption into God’s holy family making us brothers and sisters in Christ despite our differences. What unites us is the overwhelming love of God and his redemptive act of love in our lives.

But what do we do with this amazing love? How do we live in the light of this overwhelming grace and love? There once was a rich man who leant, who credited one of his employees a large sum of money. The employee tried as hard as he could to repay his boss back but he just could not earn enough or save enough money to do so. Well the rich employer was running low on patience and really wanted his money back so he called his employee and requested to be paid back. The employee didn’t have the money and so he pleaded with his boss, please show me mercy because I cannot repay. The rich employer had pity on the man and forgave the loan of the employee. This employee was filled with joy when he left work that day. However, on his way home, he remembered a friend of his owed him money and he wanted to get it back. He went to his friend's house and demanded to be repaid his money. However, his friend didn’t have enough funds to pay him back as he had just lost his job. When the employee saw that he wasn’t getting his money back he decided to take his friend to court over the matter. The rich employer heard about his employee’s actions and called his employee once again saying, ‘I cancelled your loan when you begged for mercy. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your friend just as I had on you?’ Then he fired this employee and threw him out on the street. - This was my version of Jesus’ parable in Matthew 18. God has shown us immense love...love that we in no way have earned or deserved. What shall we do with this love...we give it freely to others whether we think they have earned our love or not.

Here’s another image that maybe will help us out. Think of our lives and the love God has bestowed on us as a farmer planting a field of corn. The farmer (God) gets the field (the world) ready by tilling or plowing the field and then he gets the seed planter out (those who have believed in him). He puts the corn seed (his love) in the planter, he hooks up the planter and he takes it to the field. Then the planter as it follows the farmer in the tractor disperses the seed (God’s love) throughout the field. That little seed in the field grows and with the proper care and nourishment that love grows and grows and there is a bountiful harvest. We are called to disperse God’s love in those places that God has put us in.

Paul gives us the practical ways of doing this in his final section of his letter. “*Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship. Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God...Don’t just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. When God’s people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute. Don’t curse them; pray that God will bless them. Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with each other. Don’t be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don’t think you know it all! Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For Scriptures say, ‘I will take revenge; I will pay back,’ says the Lord. Instead, if your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads. Don’t let evil conquer you, but conquer evil with good.”*

The second and final thing that Paul says unites as followers of Christ is our call to live out the command of Christ to ‘love our neighbor - those people we see every day in person or online - as ourselves.’ Dispersing the love God has so graciously given to us to a world in need of love. Love that is the fulfillment of the entire Law and the Prophets. Love for others is an ‘active struggle,’ but God has liberated us in order to love him and to love others. Out of the reality of God’s love for us let us live in a way that is pleasing and honoring to him, being planters of his love in the lives of others and being dispensers of his grace to a world that is in desperate need of his love and grace.

Would you join me in prayer: *Heavenly Father, you are our creator, sustainer, our strong tower, and our redeemer. Because of your immense love you have redeemed our lives from the grave and have granted us access to a right standing with you through the blood of your Son, Jesus Christ. Oh Lord, we confess that we have not always lived in light of the reality of your love for us. We confess that we have not always conducted ourselves in a manner that is honoring to you or others. We confess that we have not loved others as you have loved us. We release our pride, bitterness, and unforgiveness up to you today. We thank you for the amazing grace and love you have shown us. In humility and faith we offer up ourselves, our hearts, souls, minds, bodies, to you. Lord have your way in our lives and help us to be ambassadors of your Kingdom wherever we go. Use us to dispense your love, peace, reconciliation, and grace wherever we are and with whomever we are with. May others see your love for them through us. We love you and we praise you. Amen.*

