

“Without the Law”

Psalm 119:137-144; Romans 2:12-16

October 30, 2022

As many of you already know, I went to Charlotte Country Day back when I was in high school. I confess there are some advantages to a private school education. At the same time, there are quite a few disadvantages. One of those shortcomings was the emphasis that was placed by your peers on what kind of car you drove. One of my friends, Marc, he drove a brand new 1987 BMW 320ix. He got it on his 16th birthday. The ix meant that not only was it a BMW, it was a four-wheel drive BMW sports car, the very pinnacle of style and performance at the time. I remember getting into that car and being filled with the aura of it all. It sparkled in the sunlight, a gleaming white. The inside held that new car smell we all love. There was the iconic logo on the hood, the soft-leather bucket seats, the roar of the finely crafted German engine.

When I turned 16, I was blessed to be handed the keys to a car...a much different kind of car. It was a domestic sedan. It was a red 1976 Plymouth Volare. Instead of soft leather bucket seats, it had a bench with red vinyl that was cracking in a great many places. Instead of an iconic logo on the front, it had a missing hood ornament. Instead of having an engine which roared with power, the Plymouth's engine knocked and pattered and pinged.... sometimes even after you turned it off. Now look, the Plymouth wasn't a bad car by any stretch of the imagination. It dutifully went from point A to point B perfectly fine. In fact, on the day that I got my license, I remember opening the windows up and driving off on my first parent-free outing. I'd never felt so alive. I loved driving that car because in held in its humble shell the freedom that every teenager desires!

Well, I should say I loved driving that car every place but one. When I drove it into the parking lot at Charlotte Country Day School, I didn't love it so much. There I saw BMW's and Mercedes and other sports cars lined up side-by-side. In comparison, my red 1976 Volare sedan made me feel ashamed. I didn't want to be seen in it. As a habit, I deliberately got to school extra-early in order the ignominy of having to be seen get out of it. It wasn't that the car was bad but I certainly wasn't going to flaunt it to the world. I was just ashamed of it.

In the book “If Christians were really Christian,” author John Killinger wonders - “What kind of Good News do we have for people who jet halfway across the country to attend a ball game? What kind of good news do we have for people who live in houses whose garages or swimming pools are bigger than the house they grew up in?” What kind of Good News do we have in a world that tells us there's no need for God, that we can do it all for ourselves all by ourselves.” His questions get us to a good point.

In today's Western world, a great many Christians are often ashamed of the Gospel. It's mocked, sneered and dismissed in newspapers, and on the internet and on television. Many Christians decide to keep their faith secret lest they become an object of scorn or ridicule. Not surprisingly, fewer and fewer Christians share their faith with others. The results, as they say, are in. Fewer and fewer people are becoming Christian as the people called to proclaim it silently appreciate their own faith but dare not tell others. So, it begs the question –Why are we ashamed of the Gospel? In a way, that old Plymouth Volare of mine offers us some good insights into why we might be ashamed of the Gospel.

To begin with, the Gospel is OLD, ancient in fact. And if there's anything out of step with our lives these days, *it's old*. As we all know, NEW is the only standard that matters anymore. Technology comes and goes so quickly that if it's 6 months old, it's probably already obsolete. And even if what we have is far from useless, if it isn't the latest and the greatest we just aren't happy. Just look at the lines at Apple stores whenever a new iPhone comes out. There, standing in line are people with perfectly functioning iPhones less than a year old. These people are willing to endure hours in queue just to get the latest product. Or take in for consideration that to be “so last year” has become an epithet of great derision. If there is a mantra for our age its this – if it's new, it's wonderful. If it's old, sell it on Ebay.

Christianity certainly isn't the new kid on the block by any stretch of the imagination. It's an ancient religion, one practiced for millennia now. Closer to home, for a great many of us, Christianity is the faith of our parents and our grandparents. And as we all know, we don't share much else in common with them. Our attitudes and world-views are and should be very different from the world around us. In fact, the great struggle of young adulthood has always been to differentiate ourselves from our elders. So why in the world would we want to

boast about anything that we share with our forebears. So, we Christians are sometimes ashamed of our faith because it's old instead of being cutting edge. It's kind of like my car in high school. We love our faith secretly in our hearts but aren't we aren't proud of it. Or maybe we're ashamed of the Gospel because it doesn't seem to as easily lend itself to getting us the things we think we want. We look around at a culture that thrives on acquisition and we question a faith that asks us to simplify our lives. In the silence of our hearts, we wonder about the corporate raiders and people driven to make money no matter what the cost. They seem to be living high on the hog, don't they? We watch shows like "Million Dollar Rooms" and "the Bachelor" and we so long for those lives which seem unattached to any faith whatsoever. None of these people appear to be guided by the ethics Christianity calls us to. Jesus Christ tells us to renounce many of our worldly possessions and to live holy lives in order to pick up his cross. We think, gosh, denying ourselves and bearing that cross seems so inadequate when there are better things to be had, better things to be done. So again, we're back to my car. We're ashamed of the Gospel because at some level we're envious of what others appear to possess.

But there's another reason, deeper, darker we're ashamed of the Gospel that doesn't quite fit my car analogy. There's one reason that that we all reject the Gospel for moments or minutes or days from time to time. And it has to do with our nature. *You see, the Gospel is good news ONLY for those people who believe themselves to be terribly flawed.* Paul gets at this in our passage from Romans this morning, that's why he's been focused on the difference between those with the law and those without. His point – they are both the same because they both stand under the watchful eye of an impartial judge. If we don't acknowledge ourselves to be profoundly broken, then the Gospel isn't Good News...it's extraneous. After all, why would we need to have a Savior to love us and save us if we don't need saving in the first place?

I think this is the toughest nut for us to crack. Somewhere stitched into us is this irrational belief in our infallible goodness. For no good reason, we've latched on to the idea that the problems with the world or in our lives are somebody else's fault. We tell ourselves – "It's those other people! They're the selfish ones, they're the dishonest ones, they're the immoral ones." But the plain fact of the matter is if we were able to see ourselves with the eyes of another, we'd see that our life is as replete with all the sins under the sun as anyone else on God's green earth. That's what we talked about last week – hypocrisy.

Paul is going to take aim at this hypocritical tendency directly in a few verses earlier in Romans, we talked about that last week when we talked about judging. But I want to bring it to light here because it helps us understand why we may be ashamed of the Gospel. *We're ashamed because at some level, we think we're as white as snow. To proclaim the Gospel to others is to admit to ourselves and to the world around us that we are imperfect.* To proclaim the Gospel is to admit that we ourselves are hypocrites, liars, lustful, sinful **BROKEN**. And even though we know it to be true, we're ashamed enough of flaws not to want to spread that news around too much.

In his book, *Blue Like Jazz*, Donald Miller talks about the beginning of his spiritual life. The funny thing is, Donald had been raised in a church but he claims that the beginning of his spiritual life came much later. He tells us in the book that while he'd been in the church, he wasn't really a Christian because he didn't really believe this one piece of the puzzle. Then, one day, after protesting some injustice in the world by carrying signs decrying the powers that be and marching with others, God reached into Donald's heart. Reflecting on that day, Miller writes "I think every conscious person, every person who is awake to the functioning principles of reality has a moment where he stops blaming the problems of the world on group think, on humanity and authority and starts to face himself. The problem isn't out there; the problem is the same as it's always been. The problem is the needy beast of a thing that lives in my chest...that night, I wanted to make a sign that screamed to the world the truth of the matter – "I am the problem."

We may cite Christianity's age or be envious of other world-views as reasons we're silent with the Gospel but the real reason we're ashamed is uglier. We're ashamed of the Gospel because we're embarrassed to need salvation. We ARE the Problem, so to speak. In a world that tells us that we're to pull ourselves up by the bootstraps, the Gospel is anathema. In a culture that tells us that the more we have the happier we'll be, admitting our internal bankruptcy is frightening. But therein we find the terrible distress so many of us find ourselves in. Here we find the ache, the burn, the longing that nothing and no one is able to relieve us of. It's what keeps us wandering around like lost pets, hoping against hope to find our way home. We want the Gospel

but at the same time, we don't want to let go of our earthly pretensions. It doesn't work though.

In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine puts it this way "When the joys of eternity call us from above and [earthly things] hold us fast below, a soul is in no position to embrace either. Claimed by truth for the one, the other clamped by custom, *the soul is torn apart in distress*." What he's getting at is that we pine for salvation but struggle against it. That's what Paul has been talking about in Romans and why now, he's talking about the impartiality of God. Two things become very clear in this passage from Romans. First, God is impartial. Second, that God's ways are written on the hearts of everyone. That means when we deny God, we are "Without excuse" to use Paul's language from earlier in the letter.

Ultimately, things are resolved only when we stand at the end of our rope and acknowledge the depravity, the loneliness, the emptiness in our hearts. It's only then that we're filled with the Holy Spirit. Only then when we're able to reach up and take that outstretched hand of Jesus. It's then and not a moment before that the shame of the Gospel falls away. Shame slides away because it's overwhelmed by the flood of God's love into hearts. In the language of the church, when this happens is called conversion. It's when your heart changes for the better. You start hating the person you were and at the same time find yourself desiring to know Jesus much more closely than ever before.

Now a lot of us have some funny notions about conversion. Some of us may hold that it *has* to be a stunning moment in which the angels of heaven appear and convict us of the goodness of God otherwise it isn't real. On the other end of the spectrum, some believe that this conversion business is non-sense. We're saved by Grace and that's all that matters. What need have we for conversion? But the Scriptures suggest mightily that conversion is a necessary part of our spiritual development. And what that means is that even if we've been in the pews all of our lives, unless we've truly been converted, we'll always be ashamed of the Gospel. But that doesn't mean that you need to have one shining moment. Sometimes conversion is a much slower process, one that takes years and time. Diogenes Allen, in his book, *Spiritual Theology*, notes that if I were to stand here with my arm out, within 6 hours I'd be pointing in a completely different direction due to the rotation and spin of the earth. Conversion can be like that but no matter how it happens, it does change us. It does point us in a different direction. Conversion in Christ moves us from being ashamed of the Gospel to recognizing it as the font of everything good in our lives. The Gospel tells us that even in our brokenness, even in our rebellion, there is a good and wonderful God who loves us with power and might and vigor. His power is so great he's spun death on its ear. Now, death, that very thing which would keep us from eternity has been vanquished in Jesus Christ. Broken and needy sinners given the salvation they didn't merit through his life, death and resurrection. And it isn't just a future hope. The salvation that Paul talks about here in Romans is far more than that. Salvation is clearly presented by Paul as a present reality. Salvation is the freedom to live happily even in imperfection. Salvation is being brought together with sisters and brothers in Christ to feel the joy in worship and in service. Salvation is that comforting knowledge that tells us that in life and in death we are utterly and entirely God's. It's what keeps our hearts filled, our minds content no matter what trouble or turmoil surrounds us.

And believe me when I tell you, that's news that the people in the world around us desperately want to hear. Even though they may have erected intellectual and philosophical fortresses to keep the Gospel out, the Gospel will penetrate them all because it holds the power of God. Even now, the Gospel is reaching into the hearts and minds of people we thought were somehow safe from its effects. Scientists are becoming Christians. Muslims are turning to Christ. So are Jews and atheists. In Jesus Christ, God has unleashed His power in the world. He's taken human flesh onto himself to purify it and raise it up to the level of the divine. He came into the world to provide us redemption, salvation and the life everlasting. He came to tell the sinners, the unrighteous the unclean that their days of sorrow and suffering and yearning were over.

What kind of Good News do we have for the world? We have the best news of all...the Gospel.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.