

Having grown up attending church all my life... there are certain stereotypes that I have been motivated to avoid. One of them is that ... every pastor I sat under... it seems would at one time or another use a “Snoopy cartoon” as a sermon illustration. Up until now (Folks) I have avoided it. (I guess having been around Beagles in recent years... has worn this edge off of me a bit... And I understand perfectly why Charles Schultz used a beagle for his cartoon. Snoopy depicts the typical beagles that I have known.)

So... in the Peanuts comic strip that I cite today... Linus had just thrown a stick for Snoopy to retrieve. His first instinct was to chase the stick. But he paused a few moments and decided against it. *"I want people to have more to say about me after I'm gone than 'He was a nice guy... he chased sticks.'"*

Our passage today is about the power of the gospel. You know... when I am reminded of the gospel's power to change lives... I am motivated to stop "chasing sticks" and get back to what is really important. And there is no better time than right now for every one of us to “stop chasing sticks” and focus on the important.

When we look at the terrible division that is ripping our country apart right now – Folks(!) we have the answer! If we think supporting the right political view is the answer - we are just chasing sticks! Politics cannot change the human heart. Demands for change – even if it brings better laws and policies that stress equality – sure do seem to be worthwhile efforts ... but (think about it) - even with these improvements... the kind of injustice that

was horrifically given to George Floyd will happen again and again – because human hearts need to be changed. ... [P A U S E]

I'd like to believe that I am unprejudiced ... but I'd be deceiving myself.

Prejudice and bias based on race... ethnicity... social or economic status and political views—these sins are woven deeply into the human heart ... into my heart... (and into yours.) ... They entered the world at the fall. ... They are evident throughout the Book of Genesis (which we just concluded)... and the rest of Old Testament... and the New. ... Look how quickly they showed up in the early church.

Acts 6:1 (ESV)

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution.

Galatians 2:11-13 (ESV)

¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. ¹² For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. ¹³ And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy.

Church-sanctioned racism supported slavery in the U.S.... while other churches championed abolition. ... State-sanctioned doctrines of ethnic superiority fueled World War II... leading to the deaths of over fifty million people.

Although most western societies now renounce overt racism... various forms of prejudice still taint our daily lives today. ... Scientific research shows that people naturally notice others and interact with them... not only on the basis of

race... but also of gender... social and economic status and physical appearance.

And it starts early. ... According one researcher (Howard Ross)... babies as young as three months can exhibit a preference to be around people of their own race.

We don't automatically shake these tendencies as we grow older. A study conducted at Brigham Young University showed that white NBA referees call more fouls on black players... and black referees call more fouls on white players. ... Another study showed that recently released white felons have greater job hunting success than young black men with no criminal record.

“Human beings are consistently, routinely and profoundly biased.” ... But Jesus came to pull down these walls. ... So... Church(!)... In light of what we have (so rightly) been appalled by this week - Why are we chasing sticks?

The best way to get back to what is really important is to examine our motives. ... The Apostle Paul (in the verses we will be studying) describes what is behind his own burning motivation to minister at Rome. ... Paul had never visited the Roman church... and he had never seen the believers at Rome - yet here he is writing to them! ... We can well understand Paul's concern for the churches that *he* founded... but why would he be concerned about the believers at Rome? ... He was unknown to many of them... yet he wanted to minister to them and was deeply concerned about their welfare.

As we examine his motives... may it encourage us to evaluate what ours are. Oh that we might incorporate some of these same motives in our own

lives... so that we stop chasing sticks... and seek a greater Gospel impact to our society! We need to have our hearts set aflame for the gospel. ... In our passage today... we will look at 1) motives... 2) the power of the Gospel... and 3) what the Gospel can do in battling prejudice.

Romans 1:8

The first thing that we see that motivated Paul... was a proper reputation. The church at Rome had a reputation for the right thing... and Paul was grateful.

Their reputation was for their what...? (Their faith!) ... Their faith was becoming widely known. ... Other Christians were talking about it. "*Do you know that there is a group of believers in Rome?*" ... "Yes... and did you know that they have a strong faith?" "*Indeed! They are faithfully serving Jesus Christ in that wicked city?*"

The church at Rome was a famous church which was known for their faith. ... Is that what we are known for? ... Do people say of us "*Wow! You really ought to check-out Living Water of LaPine. Man(!) They have such a strong faith!*"

Is that what makes churches famous today...? Strong faith? The church at Rome was famous for it throughout the world? No... it's different today.

We most often evaluate churches by their size. When we hear of a church that has ten thousand members... we are ten times more impressed than if we learn of a church that has only a thousand members. ... But what about

a church with a congregation of ten? ... Please don't misunderstand. I am not denigrating large churches. ... I am glad for them. Large churches can do things smaller churches cannot do. They launch specialized Christian ministries... for example.

Another thing we do... is evaluate churches on the basis of programs. The more the better! ... (Or... the more original the better... particularly if the pastor ends up writing a book about it!) Again... I am not against programs... or pastor authors. ... I am simply saying that I do not believe this is the proper way to evaluate churches. Programs do not prove God's blessing.

Faith (really) is the essential thing... not numbers or programs... not budgets or buildings. It is by faith that we "*destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ*" (2 Cor. 10:5).

So please allow me to tell you the kind of reputation that I pray we might have at Living Water of La Pine. I pray that Living Water might be known as a church where people believe in the power of the gospel... that it changes lives forever. ... I want Living Water to be a church known for strong faith in Jesus Christ... (that we follow Christ to the degree that it makes others thirsty for the true and satisfying "Living Water" (a drink which they did not even know existed.) I would love our church to be known for it's rock hard faith - in adversity... as well as in prosperity... when we are praised as well as when we are persecuted. ... I think this is a reasonable reputation worth having... and therefore asking God to let us have.

I somehow don't think God is as pleased... if our motive is pride-based. "Look at our numbers... our programs... and our numbers... doubt that we would be motivated.

The next motive that we see of Paul's was that he served God with his spirit.

Romans 1:9-10

Paul served God from the depth of his being. "*With his spirit*" he writes... in verse 9. God's spirit and his spirit co-mingled inside of Paul. ... Not all who profess to serve Christ serve Him from the inside out. It is far more external. It is show... trying to please other people rather than the Lord. Paul knew of people like this himself. He called them "detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good."

Titus 1:16 (ESV)

They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works. They are detestable, disobedient, unfit for any good work.

Paul was not like them. ... What kept Paul from falling into these traps? Clearly he was sustained by fervent prayer... from the depth of his being (with his spirit.)

As the fires on Israel's altars were never to be extinguished... so Paul's great heart burned unceasingly for the souls of men. The smoke of his intercession rose day and night to God.

Most of us are faithless enough in praying for our own family and friends... and how much less do we pray unceasingly for those in other cities and lands whose faces we have never seen.

We come now to the next driving force in Paul's life. Paul was also motivated by the potential of mutual encouragement.

Romans 1:11-13

This is leadership in the Christian sense. Paul was not planning to give them a spiritual gift they lacked. ... He was planning to share with them his spiritual gift... the gift of knowledge... the gift of wisdom... the gift of apostleship.... Paul would be strengthened... in turn... by the spiritual gifts the believers in Rome had to offer. ... He expected to be *himself* edified and strengthened by them.

Paul makes it clear that he will not come as simply the teacher and giver—he will be open to be given to and encouraged as well. When Christians gather... everyone should give and receive. This mutuality is always one of the grand underlying motivations for ministry. A church that does this has the most motivated members. It is a church on fire! Its members do not come to church only to get something.

The next motive that we see of Paul... involves a sense of obligation.

Romans 1:14

Paul's obligation was to proclaim Christ's salvation to all types of people in different cultures... crossing cultural... social... racial... and economic lines. ... The educated and uneducated referred to the classes in Rome versus the peoples of other "uncivilized" places. No barrier would stop Paul from bringing the Good News.

But we should notice that Paul's debt was to God. ... The payment was to every type of person... but his debt was to God. ... The great nineteenth-century missionary to China... (Hudson Taylor)... realized this... as was seen when it was suggested by someone that he had given his life to China because he loved the Chinese. To this he shook his head and answered thoughtfully, "*No, not because I loved the Chinese, but because I loved God.*"

It made little difference to Paul whether a man was cultured or crude, an intellectual or an ignoramus. He was committed to God.

The command we have to evangelize is an obligation... Every Christian should have the same sense of obligation that Paul speaks of here in Romans 1:14–15. ... We need to pray that God will impress on our hearts such an obligation. I'm not there... yet. Are You?

Friday morning I was watching the News and a commercial with Franklin Graham came on. He spoke of our nation's current problems and said it was a heart issue. He asked the viewers to invite Christ into their life. The ad took about one minute – but it was a very clear presentation of the gospel. I was so encouraged by Franklin Graham's obligation to share the

gospel. (Just like his father... whenever he is on TV he always shares the gospel. It is a clear obligation.)

Romans 1:15

Chuck Swindoll wrote:

Paul's passion burned with the urgency of someone who had just found the fire escape in a burning high-rise. Desperate to save others, he shouted, "Come this way, come this way! Rush down this stairway! This is how you get out. This is the escape route!"

Is our Christian service done in a spirit of eagerness? Or do we serve out of habit... a feeling of obligation... or perhaps even with a feeling of reluctant duty (much like a child who has to take a bath)? ... Ask God to rekindle that fresh eager attitude that wants to obey Him in the manner that Paul did.

Paul announces his intention to preach the gospel "to you who are at Rome". What can he mean by this, since he is writing to people who are already Christians? Look at a verse we covered last week...

Romans 1:7a (ESV)

To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints...

Paul wants to preach the gospel to those who are already believers! Why? Because the gospel is not only an evangelistic message that we respond to when we give our heart to Jesus. It also includes the continuing work of discipleship that follows evangelism. ... Discipling is a necessary component of the initial preaching of the gospel itself.

Romans 1:16

Paul's confidence in the power of the gospel is a massive theme of the book of Romans and is the essence of Christianity.

If you had indeed discovered a completely effective... completely free cure for all types of cancer... how little would you care about what people said? If your daily joy was to see terminally ill patients leave their hospital beds and enjoy long... healthy lives... would you worry about criticism? ... Paul remained energized and unconcerned with human opinions... because the gospel is too wonderful and too compelling to disregard.

Before we came to Christ... we were in rebellion against God... and we had no way of being His friend. ... In fact... we were to be judged by Him. We are polluted by our sin. ... We were as filthy in God's sight... as the most disease infected... loathsome individual could be. (Listen... in... and of ourselves... you and I are no better than the former police officer who despicably killed George Floyd... or any destructive rioting looter in the aftermath.) ... We were just as filthy in God's sight... and in that state we deserved to be banished from His presence forever when we die.

We were like swimmers drowning in a vast ocean of cold water... or explorers sinking in a deep bog of quicksand. ... We were like astronauts lost in the black hostile void of outer space. ... We were like prisoners awaiting execution. ... [P A U S E] ... But there is good news! ... God has intervened to rescue us through the work of his divine Son, Jesus Christ.

The gospel is mighty! ... It is called power... and the power of God. It is not a feeble and ineffectual wishful concept. ... It is "mighty to the pulling down

of strong holds," (according to 2 Corinthians 10:4,5... verse 5 - I quoted earlier. ... It has shown its power to be effective against every degree of sin... and every combination of wickedness. ... It has gone against the sins of the world... and displayed its power to save sinners at the lowest levels of shameful immorality.

Jeremiah 23:29 (ESV)

Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?

The point is this: God has chosen to use His power in a loving way by sending men the "good news," the gospel of salvation. Being all powerful... God could wipe men off the face of the earth... but instead He has chosen to give men the good news of salvation.

Why be ashamed of that power?

At first glance it is an extraordinary thing that Paul should say that he is "*not ashamed*" of the gospel. For when we read that statement we ask... "*But why should anybody be ashamed of the gospel? Why should the apostle even think that something so grand might be shameful?*"

We can understand why one might hesitate to convey bad news... of course. It was four o'clock in the morning several years ago when my phone rang. When I answered a distraught woman named Louisa through her tears said, "Pastor, Steve just died. The police and coroner are here, can you come over?" Steve was my friend. He and Louisa and their two young boys attended our church. I went right over and did my best to try to console Louisa and also Steve's mom (Gloria) who also was a member of our church. We talked and we prayed and we cried. And then Louisa

asked me to go into Little Stevie and Kevin's room to wake them up and to tell them that their daddy had just died. Boy! That was the most difficult think I have ever had to do as a pastor. Giving bad news is something none of us wants to do.

But the gospel is GOOD NEWS. It is the best news imaginable. Why would Paul think there was any possibility to be ashamed of it...?

Because the gospel was despised in Paul's day. ... For one thing... the Gospel was identified with a poor Jewish carpenter... who was crucified. The Romans had no special appreciation for the Jews... and crucifixion was the lowest form of execution given a criminal. ... Why put your faith in a Jew who was crucified?

And Rome was a proud city. The Gospel came from Jerusalem... the capital city of one of the little nations that Rome had conquered. The Christians in that day were not among the elite of society. They were common people and even slaves. ... Rome had known many great philosophers and philosophies ... Why pay any attention to a fable about a Jew who arose from the dead?

If we are honest... most of us would have to admit to being ashamed of the gospel sometimes. We fear two things in particular. ... One is the fear of intellectual shame. This is the fear that the gospel does not measure up intellectually. ... The second is the fear of social shame. We might fear if we proclaim the gospel... we will be... ridiculed... rejected... mocked... ignored... abused... and even killed.

We must never be ashamed! ... The wonder is that God is not ashamed of us. ... The gospel is powerful.

The world does not need a better system of education... more social reform... or new ideas in religion. ... It can make drunken men sober... and turn the most hate-filled prejudice person – selfless and loving. It is a message sufficient to transform the life of any who believe.

By the way... “*to the Jew first...*” means first - *in order of time*. Paul's phrase "first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" has led readers to think that he was saying something like "to the Jew above the Gentile" or "to the Jew simply because he is a Jew and therefore of greater importance than other people." But, of course, this is not what Paul intends.

The Jews had been committed with the oracles of God. ... The Messiah had come through them. ... They had had the law... the temple... and the service of God... and it was natural that the gospel should be proclaimed to them before it was to the Gentiles. ... This was the order in which the gospel was actually preached to the world, first to the Jews... and then to the Gentiles.

Romans 1:17

This word (“for”) implies that he is now about to give another reason why he was not ashamed of the gospel of Christ. That reason is... because faith in the gospel pronounces us “righteous.” We are all justified by faith.

Our righteousness begins because of God's faithfulness to His promises. It is accomplished from start to finish by faith ("from God's faithfulness for our faith...")

The emphasis on "justification by faith alone" is one of the most important principles of the Good News. ... Our only hope of salvation lies in throwing ourselves wholly onto Christ our Savior... trusting Him to do for us... what we cannot do for ourselves. We do this in faith... and then we continue living our life by faith.

It is living on by this faith that I want to conclude with. At the beginning of this message I announced that I would be talking about 1) motives... 2) the power of the Gospel... and 3) what the Gospel can do in battling prejudice. It is #3. that I will conclude with. The gospel has the power to tear down walls! ... The early church was infected with these tendencies (no less rabid than our own day.) It had to wrestle with ethnic and religious walls that had grown for centuries. But Jesus came to pull down these walls.

God is the designer and builder of every human being. It is He who assigns each of us our racial background... gender... and even our human deficiencies — so that we can be channels of his grace and power.

All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's design for us (Romans 3:23). Our beliefs... emotions... thoughts... and prejudicial attitudes... are all tainted by sin.

In His great love for us... God sent his Son... Jesus Christ... into the world to pay for our sins by dying in our place on the cross and to give us new life through his resurrection.

Having been delivered out of the dominion of darkness... God has brought us into the kingdom of his Son... where we are all adopted as dearly loved sons and daughters - regardless of our differing characteristics.

Galatians 3:26-28 (ESV)

²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

As God's chosen, holy and beloved children, we are called to turn from our sins (including the sins of prejudice and racism)... and to display a unity across all distinguishing lines that shows the world the reality of Jesus' redeeming and unifying grace. Jesus prayed...

John 17:20-23 (ESV)

²⁰ "I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹ that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, ²³ I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

These spiritual truths require a concrete response on our part. So... let me mention some very practical steps that you and I can take today. These are based on a blog that I read by Ken Sande.

Ask God to open your eyes to your own personal blind spots... prejudices and racial sins. Resolve to push against your inclination to gravitate toward people of your own racial or ethnic group and consciously seek conversation... understanding and friendship outside your familiar circles.

Pray that God would give you courage to take personal action when you witness unjust or discriminatory behavior. George Floyd would be alive today if just one of the three other officers present on the scene had taken action when they heard George say, "I can't breathe."

Weep with those who weep and mourn with those who mourn. George Floyd's family has experienced one of the greatest blows humans can ever know, the loss of a loved one through an act of violence. Their pain is excruciating. Try to imagine how we would feel if we were in their place. If you are not grieved by their loss, ask God to forgive you for your hard heart and to give you the compassion of Christ.

Pray for former officer Derek Chauvin. He has done something God did not design any of us to do: he has taken a human life. Whatever legal consequence he justly experiences... the guilt of killing another man is a burden he will have to bear on his conscience for the rest of his life. ... Pray that God would give him grace to turn to God... repent and grieve deeply over his sin and confess it to the Floyd family.

Pray that God will give people grace to stop pointing at the logs in other people's eyes and to humbly seek to see the specks in their own eyes

Pray that God would mute the voices and actions of those who would use these events for their own personal advantage or to incite violence.

Support your local law enforcement realistically and avoid painting all officers with a single brush ... just as we should avoid judging any group by the actions of a few. As one police chief has observed, "There are three kinds of police officers: great officers who do their job well every day and deserve our

appreciation and support; good officers who make mistakes and need to be taught how to become great officers; and bad officers who need to be identified and quickly removed from the force.” Recognizing these distinctions, take action to encourage the great law officers in your community. When you see an officer on duty or having a meal, take a moment to walk over and express your appreciation for his or her service to your community.).

Most importantly... ask God to give you grace to share the gospel of Christ more openly and frequently... because it is only through a renewed heart that any of us can sincerely live out the steps outlined above.

... ..

Some of us who know Christ are busy chasing sticks when we should have as our goal something far greater — the ministry of the gospel wherever God has placed us. ... If we are "chasing sticks"... and if we continue as we are... we will be remembered for that alone.