

Lectionary 17A  
Romans 8:31-39

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*<sup>31</sup>What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup>He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup>Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup>Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup>Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup>As it is written,*

*"For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered."*

*<sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

This is the third week we have been reading from the 8th chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. The section we read today begins, "What then are we to say about these things?" This is obviously a terrible place to begin a reading. It's like going to the new Harry Potter movie without having seen the first seven movies in the series. If you start with movie #8, you have no idea about the characters or the plot of the story. The same is true here when we start where Paul writes, "What then are we to say about these things?" "These things" that he refers to are not just the first thirty verses of chapter 8. When Paul wrote this letter, he didn't divide it into chapters and verses. Here's your "fun fact" for the day: The church didn't divide the books of the Bible into chapters until the 13th century and didn't divide the chapters into verses until the 16th century, the time of Martin Luther. Paul just wrote a letter like we might write a letter, not broken into sections but as a unified whole, so when Paul refers to "these things", he is talking about everything he has written up to this point in the letter.

I don't think anyone here wants me to re-read all seven and a half chapters to catch you up on what "these things" consist of, so let me attempt a very brief summary. The thesis statement for this letter is in the opening sentences: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'" (1:16-16)

Paul then proceeds to use four or five different ways to explain how the righteousness of God, seen in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, is good news for us.

To say that God is righteous means that God acts to restore or uphold a covenant, a promise first made to Abraham that can be traced through the history of the people of Israel to a descendent of Abraham named Jesus. God's covenant promise it to restore human beings to a positive relationship to himself. A synonym for righteous is "faithful". To say that God is righteous is to say that God is faithful to his promises.

In chapter 3, Paul says that God's righteousness is seen in the death and resurrection of Jesus: "But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified [made righteous] by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith." (3:21-25)

In other words, Jesus shows God's faithfulness to his promises, as Jesus is also the means by which a restored relationship is offered to us. Paul systematically makes the case that all human beings are sinners and that our chief sin is idolatry – making something other than God the lord of our life. Later, Paul calls this self-idolatry "living according to the flesh." Because of our sinfulness, we are on our own "unrighteous" and "in the flesh", we are unfaithful to the covenant God made with us. But even though we are not faithful, God remains faithful, God remains "righteous", and God's righteousness is manifested in Jesus. It is the good news of the gospel that Jesus Christ represents God's decision to uphold the relationship and give humanity a new chance to enter into it. But we enter this relationship with God because God has upheld it, not because we deserve it or have earned it. Only on such terms can we enter the renewed relationship. Those terms Paul calls "faith" – that other key term in his thesis statement; "The one who is righteous will live by faith." The best synonym for faith here is "trust" – when we trust that God has in fact restored us to himself in Christ, this relationship becomes real and life-giving to us.

With this summary in mind, we have kind of caught up with Paul's proclamation thus far and we are ready for the question, "What then are we to say about these things?"

Paul begins a series of questions, with each question being answered with another question. That method can be a little hard to follow, so I'll paraphrase his argument.

If God is for us, who is against us? The desired answer is, "no one can be against us," and Paul expresses that by stating the obvious: God, who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, has shown that he's "all in", to use a poker term. God has played all his chips and given us everything he's got.

Who will bring any charge against us, God's chosen ones? Will God, the ultimate judge, bring a charge against us? Of course not! God has already shown that he keeps his promises to us and has justified us.

Who will condemn us? Will it be Jesus? Of course not! Jesus is the one who died for us. He died for precisely because we are sinners. He's not going to make that huge sacrifice of love and then turn around and condemn us.

So who or what will separate us from the love of Christ? Is there anything in this messed up world that would indicate that God has withdrawn his love from us? Paul names several possibilities: hardship or distress (economic recession or unemployment)? Persecution (like that which is encountered by Christians today in many African and Asian countries)? Famine (like the terrible one hitting Somalia right now)? Nakedness or poverty (rampant around the world)? Peril or sword (like the unfathomable violence in Norway this week, or our own experience on 9/11, or a tornado or hurricane)? Can any of these things separate us from the love of Christ?

No! says Paul. None of these things are indications that God has withdrawn his love from us. It is a common and normal reaction to assume that, since God is in control, when sickness strikes or tragedy befalls it must reflect God's rejection of the person. As Paul makes clear in this passage, this is not the conclusion that we are to draw from such events. Tragedy and evil exist, to be sure. We and others often make bad decisions that have tragic, even deadly consequences. But these are not signs of God's will or intention for us. These verses provide us with the assurance that despite whatever suffering and afflictions we may encounter, such things do not mean God has abandoned us. The resurrection of Jesus is the down payment on our future, assuring us that the future will not be defined by evil and tragedy, but by God's loving care.

In one of the commentaries I have on Romans, Paul Achtemeier asserts that the greatest comfort in this passage lies in the fact that we too are creatures. If no creature can separate us from God's love, and we are creatures, then in the end even our own almost limitless ability to rebel against God is overcome; and we are saved from our last and greatest enemy, ourselves. Armed with that knowledge, we can face the future with hope and confidence, knowing that the Lord of all creation is a Lord of love and that God is for us, not against us. God's grace and love always win.

And so, we can almost hear Paul's voice rising with confidence and certainty as he closes this section of his letter: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

If you want to have a verse of Scripture at hand when you are going through a tough time in your life, there is no better one than this: Nothing is able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In our next hymn, Lina Sandell expresses this confident, joy-filled hope in God's grace this way:

*Oh, what joy to know that you are near me when my burdens grow too great to bear;  
Oh, what joy to know that you will hear me when I come, O Lord, to you in prayer.  
Day by day, no matter what betide me, you will hold me ever in your hand.  
Savior, with your presence here to guide me, I will reach at last the promised land.*