

*Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.*

*Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that "the person who does these things will live by them." [Leviticus 18:5] But the righteousness that comes from faith says, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" [Deut. 30:12] (that is, to bring Christ down) or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' [Deut. 30:13] (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say?*

*"The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart" [Deut. 30:14]*

*(that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.*

*The scripture says, "No one who believes in him will be put to shame." [Isaiah 28:16] For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." [Joel 2:32]*

*But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" [Isaiah 52:7] But not all have obeyed the good news; for Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" [Isaiah 53:1]*

*So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ.*

Continuing our series on Paul's letter to the Romans, this week we find ourselves in the second of three weeks, and the second of three chapters, with Paul outlining how he understands God's relationship to Jewish people who do not believe Jesus is the messiah for whom they have been waiting. Picking up his line of reasoning somewhere after he starts and stopping somewhere before he finishes feels a little to me like being on one of those rope bridges you see in action movies or exotic vacation spots, suspended high above a rocky ravine – you know the ones -- so high that you can't even see to the bottom. If you stop for too long at any one step along the way, you'll just start thinking about how shaky, even rickety, the structure is; but if you charge across, eyes closed, intent only on getting from point A to point B, you'll miss the views that are part of the point of being there in the first place. You have to find a balance between getting from one side to the other and appreciating the perspective in between. That's what we'll try to do today.

Right at the beginning of chapter 10 Paul is talking about "them", that is, Jews who are not also Christians. Paul, himself a Jew, is talking not about a separate group of people so much as he is talking about family, friends, and neighbors with whom he shares much in common, except that they differ on whether or not they accept Jesus as the messiah. Those who don't, "them," well, he says, "they have a zeal for God but it is not enlightened," that is, they're working with incomplete information. I suspect that when we hear about this "them" who aren't enlightened, we are tempted fill in an "us" who must therefore be correct, and then we read the rest of the passage that way, understanding it as a list of litmus tests which we have been appointed to use to judge and sort other people.

To read it that way requires ignoring two key things. First, nowhere here does Paul actually set up two groups; it's two thousand years of interpretive history that has predisposed us to hear it that way. Paul says "all who believe" and "everyone who confesses" and we hear the emphasis on the verb, and fill in another clause about "those who don't believe" or "those who don't confess" and speculate about what might happen to them. Paul, however, is emphasizing the first part of the phrase: *all, everyone, "all who believe" and "everyone who confesses."* Paul means these phrases to be expansive and inclusive, connecting Jews with one another, and connecting Jews and Gentiles in communities of faith.

Second, all along in this letter Paul has been describing key terms about relationship with God – righteousness, faith, justification, belief – as gifts God gives, not things God requires anyone to produce. To hear "believe" and "confess" as requirements is to fall into the trap of trying to establish one's own righteousness and ignoring God's righteousness, which Paul says is the main problem with "them" who are unenlightened. To read this passage as a series of litmus tests is to turn promise into demand, and gospel into law. Christ is the end of the law, Paul says – that is, in Christ is the fulfillment of the law, its completion, not a doubling down on requirements. Faith is a gift, and one God gives generously, without regard for the categories we tend to assume and use.

Something else happens in the reading of this passage, something that I don't know whether Paul intended or not but I'm confident the Holy Spirit who inspired him to write these words knew would happen. To prove his point about those people "who have a zeal for God but it is not enlightened," Paul quotes a whole series of phrases from the Hebrew Bible, what we now call the Old Testament (at the time, there was no "New Testament" – none of the gospels had been written down; Paul was writing these letters but they had not been collected together, let alone thought of as scripture). Now, remember that the community of Christians to whom Paul is writing in Rome is made up of both Jews and Gentiles. Plenty of the people first gathered to hear this letter read out loud would not have known that these words came from Scripture – they would've assumed they were Paul's own words. I'm certain that's of course not the case among us this

morning – you’ve got today’s text printed in the bulletin, but I’m certain it was entirely unnecessary for us to add in the biblical citations for those Old Testament verses, as everyone here of course could have identified each of these quotes as well as where each of them came from, right?!

I can just hear the conversations the congregation might have had after hearing Paul’s letter read aloud that first time, as they made their way into the fellowship hall for coffee and cake or wherever it was they gathered for conversation and whatever it was they had to eat and drink. A group of Jewish Christians is discussing how Paul applied the promise from Joel; just then, a Gentile Christian comes to join them at the table, and, hearing their discussion, says, “You mean those weren’t Paul’s words? There’s a book in the Bible called Joel, and those words come from there? I had no idea! I didn’t know this new thing God is doing in Jesus Christ was connected to a word of promise made many generations ago through a prophet called Joel.” And then there’s a group of Gentile Christians discussing Paul describing the word being near, on your lips and in your heart, as a Jewish Christian joins and says “I grew up hearing those words, knowing them by heart – and I had never really thought about how those verses in Deuteronomy about ‘word’, which I understood to mean ‘law’, could also mean Jesus Christ, and the good news about what Christ has done. I had no idea! I hadn’t connected the word made flesh with God’s word that has been near all along.”

Everyone who had heard “them – the ones with zeal for God but not enlightened” and thought of themselves as “us” turned out to be the “them” with incomplete information who were in need of enlightenment! The Jews and Gentiles in that congregation would’ve had to work together to make sense of this letter, setting aside any notion of “us and them” to learn as “we together.” God’s faithfulness throughout generations, the promises God has been making and fulfilling, the new things God is doing and the ancient words that pointed to them – it took people from different backgrounds and experiences and perspectives to piece together this big picture of God’s faithfulness and mercy and love. They needed each other, not only to understand Paul but to more fully understand the gospel good news they were called to proclaim. That’s the point Paul is driving at here at the end of the passage – not who is in or out, but that all together are called to proclaim this good news of God’s word of promise made and fulfilled, God’s expansive mercy and love.

In some ways I wish this was nothing more than a thought experiment, an academic exercise looking at the nuance of Paul’s words and how they may or may not apply. But I don’t think that was the case in Paul’s time, and it hasn’t been the case throughout Christian history, and I know for sure it’s not the case in our own time. Perhaps you have been following the news out of Charlottesville, Virginia in the last 36 hours, where white supremacist groups – many of them claiming to be Christian – have gathered for a rally. These groups point to some of Paul’s words here in Romans and in other parts of the Bible to say that Jews have been cut off from God’s promise, that they are not part of God’s people, that they ought not be welcome in society. These groups lift phrases out of many parts of the Bible and claim they prove that people of other ethnicities and nationalities and religions are inferior to those who are white and Christian. And they came with that message, with hatred and weapons and anger, to Charlottesville.

Counterprotestors have gathered in Charlottesville too, including clergy. A seminary classmate of mine is a pastor in Charlottesville, Virginia, so I was aware of the planned events for this weekend there. I was watching a Facebook livestream on Friday night as hundreds of clergy from all over the country, from many different faith traditions, and many different ethnicities, gathered in a church near the University of Virginia campus for worship before the protest the next day. I was watching as they learned that they were unable to leave at the end of the service, trapped in the church by white supremacists who had encircled the church, with torches and baseball bats, and were shouting hateful messages. I was watching as clergy, many who were white and many who were people of color, waited, praying, for police to come and break up the unlawful gathering outside – pushing the hate groups back to the street so that the clergy could leave the church and go to their cars and homes and hotels, helping one another get to safety. Another classmate of mine, a religion professor at a college in Indiana, was counterprotesting this weekend with a group of UVA students, faculty, and alumni. She had been an undergraduate at UVA, and returned this weekend to her alma mater to stand with that community against hate and fear and division. She is Jewish. She spent her Sabbath facing down hateful, armed people calling for her extermination.

Dear friends in Christ, Paul’s exhortation to proclaim the good news of God’s love, faithfulness, and wide embrace has never been more relevant or urgent. There are so many people in our churches, our neighborhoods, our communities, and the world who need to hear us proclaim this good news, with our lips and our lives. These white supremacists do not speak for me, and the message they proclaim is not about a God or a gospel I recognize. But how is anyone ever going to believe that God is love if people who claim to be Christian are shouting messages of hatred and we remain silent? How can anyone know God’s word of promise if we aren’t proclaiming it? Paul says God has rooted faith in our hearts, and puts good news in our mouths, and gives us feet to take it to places where this word of hope and peace is most needed. May we who have received these gifts boldly and faithfully respond, proclaiming with our lips and our lives. Amen.