

“This Grace Given: 1) A Gospel of Salvation”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

June 1, 2008

Text: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also the Greek” (Romans 1:16).

One of the great heroes of First Presbyterian Church is the Reverend C. C. Beam. For many years he served as the Executive Secretary of this church and then as the Superintendent of Presbyterian Hospital. Shortly before his death in 1950, Mr. Beam wrote his last will and testament on a letter envelope. He did this (and I say this with some sense of fear and trembling, surrounded by so many lawyers) without the help of an attorney. He wrote simply that the income from his estate should be used “for the support of the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Him Crucified as the Only Means of Salvation, as the said preaching shall be provided or designated by the Session or the governing body of the First Presbyterian Church of Charlotte, N.C. or the lawful successors of the Presbyterian faith.”

Through the years, the generosity of the Beam Fund has contributed greatly to the ministry of the church. Today, it continues its beneficence as it supports this television ministry.

Several years ago, I visited the great Acropolis in the city of Athens. It is hard to be there without a sense that one is standing in the cradle of western civilization. It is doubtful if any other civilization has quite equaled the exquisite glory of Greece in the “Golden Age of Pericles.”

One of the scenic attractions of that place is a spot that is called “Mars Hill.” This was the site on the Areopagus where Paul preached to the citizens of Athens on his Second Missionary Journey (Acts 17).

When I was in Athens, I wondered whatever happened to Paul’s preaching. As far as I know, there was no church established by Paul in Athens. There was a church in Corinth, Rome, Ephesus, Philippi, and Jerusalem, but to my knowledge—not in Athens.

Maybe they just didn't understand Paul. After all, this was a group of intellectuals and they enjoyed discussing religion. There is an insight that is worth bearing. Paul tells us that when he came to Corinth, he was determined to preach "Christ and him crucified."

During the Sundays of June, we will look again at Paul's letter to the church at Rome (Romans 1-8). By many witnesses, this is not only the longest of Paul's letters, it is also the most important.

The letter to the church at Rome follows a typical pattern of Paul's letters. Chapters 1-8 contain Paul's finest and most succinct definition of the Christian gospel. Chapters 9-11 deal with the question about God's people, the Jews. Chapters 12-16 contain an ethical summary of the faith by Paul and conclude the Epistle.

Over the next five weeks we will focus our attention on these first eight chapters.

I.

In the first chapter of the Book of Romans, Paul states succinctly the theme of this epistle. "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 the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

The Christian gospel is not simply a word spoken out of the silence that encompasses us. It is also the power of salvation. God not only enlightens our ignorance, God also reconciles us by his atonement and renews us by his Spirit. That is the gospel we proclaim. There is a grace that enables ordinary people to live gracefully amid the crises and challenges of life.

This morning I want to say two things about the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

II.

The first is that the gospel is available only to those who acknowledge their sin and their need for God's grace. For some people in society, the gospel is the answer to an unasked question. For those who are young, wealthy, physically vigorous, with high IQ's and effective personalities, the need for grace may seem remote. After all, we live in a merit society and most of us are proud that we have made it on our own. They understand the God who calls them to action, but they cannot understand the Savior who redeems their failures. The only gospel they know is the gospel of hard work.

But one does not live too many years before discovering that there are some very tragic circumstances in life. Life is an uphill struggle and in the end, we all lose—unless there are resources of divine mercy and power that can redeem our lives from destruction.

The great distinction that exists between individuals in the New Testament is not the distinction between rich and poor, the powerful and the oppressed, male and female, the free and the enslaved, but between those who believed they were righteous and those who knew they were sinners.

Someone recently shared with me an email that this person received from Dr. James Howell, who is the minister of Myers Park Methodist Church. This email was part of a series on Methodism, and this particular one was called “Against the Presbyterians.” Now, James Howell is a friend of mine and I regard him as one of the most outstanding ministers in our community. In this email, he does raise a remarkable difference in terms of how we understand God’s salvation. In the Methodist tradition there is a lot of emphasis on the freedom of an individual to choose God’s salvation in Christ. Not so in the Presbyterian tradition. Yes, we believe that we are free and yes, we believe that we can choose God, but even that choice is God’s doing and not ours. Salvation is God’s activity and not ours. The only thing we can contribute to our salvation is our own sinfulness. The rest is done by God.

The gospel is therefore only for those who know that they are sinners, who cannot save themselves and who know their only defense. Jesus said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick...I have come not to call the righteous but sinners.” Jesus also said, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’” There are two important truths here. First, Jesus could only help those who knew they were sinners. Secondly, only those who know they are sinners, only those who have received mercy, can show mercy.

III.

The second thing that I want to say this morning is that the gospel of God is also the power of salvation that enables us to live our lives and leave the results of all that we do to God.

In the New Testament there are two words that must be held together in tension. The first is the command of Jesus in the Sermon of the Mount, that we are called “to be perfect as God is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). But there is a second word that must be set beside this command and it is the word that Jesus spoke to the paralytic— “My son, your sins are forgiven” (Mark 2:9). When we forget that the command to be perfect is set beside the promise of forgiveness, we either fall into despair or become self-righteous fanatics.

Often I have the occasion to speak with couples who are preparing for marriage. One of the questions I typically ask these couples is the question: “What do expect from this other person?” Often the answers I get are quite extensive. People are looking for a partner, a “soul mate,” a sexual companion, a “best friend,” a good mother or father, a person who can contribute to the income of the family, the list goes on. But who of us could possibly fulfill all those expectations? That is why we must live by a word of forgiveness. God does command us to be perfect as husbands and wives, as mothers and fathers, as citizens, as church people. But God also understands that we cannot succeed.

Therefore we have to strive always for perfection without the illusion of ever having attained it. We have to hunger and thirst after righteousness, but always with the poverty of spirit that mourns our own shortcomings.

When Paul speaks of the gospel, he does not say it is a witness to the power of God, he says it *is* the power of God for salvation.

As Dr. John Leith once pointed out, there is only one thing that the church has to say that cannot be said by someone else in our society. There are political scientists who understand the world of politics better than we do. There are competent psychiatrists and psychologists who are often far more able to administer therapy than those of us who are ministers can do. There are social scientists who have a much more profound understanding of the ills of society than those of us in the church.

There is, however, one word that the church can speak that no one else in our society can speak, and it is the word of the power of God in Jesus Christ to offer us freedom from sin and death.

In the end, that Word is enough. For it is the one Word that eclipses every other Word and has the power to give life and light.

Amen.