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The Magna Carta of Christianity

Romans 1.16-17

Series: The Pure Gospel

The Village Church

March 12, 2023

I. Story and Meaning

- A. May surprise you
 - 1. Rarely gotten phone calls as a pastor after 11:00 p.m.
 - a. Pastoral ministry is a 24-7 calling
 - b. But most people are considerate of others' time – including the time of pastors
 - c. In my experience, late-night phone calls have been rare
 - d. Certainly not much here – way past most of your bed times!
 - 2. But two phone calls were memorable
- B. One was from Gale Catlett
 - 1. Gale was the head basketball coach at WVU for about 24 years
 - a. Quite successful over the years
 - b. Was coach when WVU moved into the Big East
 - 2. Gale and his wife Anise attended our church in Morgantown
 - a. My university office was in the WVU Coliseum where they play basketball
 - b. So his office was down the hall from mine
 - c. I should clarify
 - d. My office was in the academic wing of the Coliseum; his was in the Department of Athletics wing
 - e. The Athletics side was where the money was; the academic side was pretty pedestrian
 - f. If you left my office, turned left, went through a set of double doors, you entered another world
 - g. A world where the Mountaineer Athletic Club made sure that the best flooring, the most luxurious paneling, the highest quality artwork, the most posh furniture graced the spaces
 - h. That's just the way the world works at major universities where the football and basketball coaches make more money than our whole college budget
 - 3. But about once a week Gale would condescend to enter my world
 - a. He would come through those double doors, into the academic wing
 - b. And he would come into my office
 - c. I would shut the door
 - d. And we would study the Bible together, and pray together

- e. By the way, we would use the same Scripture Union Encounter With God that we use today in Study with the Pastor!
- f. It was a special relationship
- 4. Perhaps that's why he felt he could call me after 11:00 p.m.
- 5. The occasion was following a basketball game
 - a. WVU was playing away – they were at Syracuse
 - b. Syracuse, under Jim Boeheim, has been to four final fours, and won the national championship
 - c. They played their home games at the Carrier Dome – really an indoor football stadium that they reconfigured for basketball
 - d. It was an incredibly difficult place to play if you are a visiting team
 - e. And visiting teams rarely won there
 - f. WVU had never won there
- 6. Until that night
 - a. Gale had a pretty good team that year
 - b. They had gone up to Syracuse – February if I remember
 - c. February in Syracuse is fraught with challenges even before you try to play basketball there
 - d. And WVU had won! Upset the 'Cuse!
- 7. And when Gale had gotten back to his hotel room, he called me!
 - a. He was so excited
 - b. He had to share it with someone
 - c. I was honored that he called me
- 8. Now that story has nothing to do with the sermon
 - a. Except that it is time for March Madness
 - b. My telling it lets Jean (and everyone else) know that I'll probably be watching more television than normal in the next three weeks
- 9. But it was one of the two most memorable phone calls I received after 11:00 p.m. as a pastor
- C. The other was from my friend Edd Bills
 - 1. He also was in our church
 - a. Edd was a forester by trade
 - b. His work took him all over the Eastern U.S. to forests he and his company were managing – he was out of town a lot
 - 2. He was taking a class in our study center that I was teaching
 - a. The class was on Romans
 - b. And he loved to study the Bible
 - c. And used what could be lonely times on the road to do the homework for the classes that I taught
 - 3. We were in the middle of studying the 9th Chapter of Romans
 - a. A chapter that is fraught with controversy
 - b. Where human responsibility and God's sovereignty seemed to meet in a head-on collision
 - c. Where scholars have nearly lost their minds in debates
 - 4. Well, it was 11:30 or so; I was getting ready for bed

- a. And the phone rang
 - b. Yes, it was back in the day when phones rang; remember land-lines?
 - c. I thought to myself, who could be calling me at this hour?
 5. It was Edd – calling from some hotel in southern WV or Kentucky (can't remember which)
 - a. I picked up the phone
 - b. The first thing I heard – I don't even think he said, "Hi, this is Edd"
 - c. The first thing I heard was, "I got it!"
 6. Of course, I knew it was Edd
 - a. But I was still perplexed
 - b. I said, "Ok, what exactly did you get?"
 7. He said, again, "I got it! Romans 9 is about His glory!"
 - a. The most difficult chapter in the entire study of Romans
 - b. Maybe the most difficult chapter in the NT apart from Revelation
 - c. And in the midst of wrestling with the text, meditating on the text, ruminating on the text
 - d. The light had come on!
 - e. The dark corners of the room were now illuminated
 - f. It all finally made sense
 - g. And Edd said, "I got it! It's about His glory!"
 8. "Yes, Edd. It's about His glory!"
 - a. "Now can I go to bed..." (No, I didn't say that)
 - b. Just the opposite – this pastor thrilled with my brother
 - c. Delighting in what the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Truth, had revealed to him
 - d. And we talked for some time about how that revelation came about
 9. Edd took lots of classes with us in our study center over the years
 - a. But he would later tell me that the study of Romans was the study that was the most transformative in his walk with Christ
 - b. It had affected him more than the study of any other book
 10. As we will see this morning, Edd is in good company
 - a. Romans has had a transformative effect on an incredible array of Christians over the years
 - b. And on an incredible array of unbelievers leading them to faith as well
 11. Why is that?
 - a. What is it about Romans that makes it so significant in this history of the Christian faith?
 - b. That makes it what some have called the **Magna Carta of Christianity**
- D. We have just completed our (lengthy) study of the Gospel of John
1. Spent more than six years, on and off, studying John
 - a. And I've not had anyone tell me over the course of that study that they were tired of it

- b. (Not everybody would share that with me; but usually information like that gets back to me!)
 - c. But what makes the Gospel of John so compelling?
 - 2. The Gospel of John addresses every major doctrine of the Christian faith
 - a. I can't think of one doctrine that doesn't come up in the course of that gospel
 - b. But I don't think that's why John is so compelling
 - c. Nobody (or almost nobody) says to me, "Wow, how exciting is it that we get to study propitiation again!"
 - d. Or "I can't wait to see how John's gospel deals with the eschatological expectations of the Kingdom!"
 - 3. No, if we're honest, the Gospel of John is so compelling because of its Stories
- E. The **Stories of the Gospel of John** are so memorable and engaging, aren't they?
 - 1. Calling of the first disciples – the remarkable way Jesus engages each of them in a unique way
 - 2. The wedding at Cana – turning water into wine
 - 3. Jesus cleansing of the temple, overturning tables of the money-changers
 - 4. Late-night meeting with Nicodemus
 - 5. Samaritan woman at the well
 - 6. Healings on the Sabbath
 - 7. Feeding the 5,000
 - 8. Jesus walking on water
 - 9. Jesus dealing with the woman caught in adultery – how he deals with the Pharisees in the process
 - 10. Healing of the man born blind; how he's thrown out of the synagogue, yet defends Jesus in the face of the religious authorities
 - 11. Death and resurrection of Lazarus
 - 12. Mary's anointing of Jesus at Bethany
 - 13. Triumphal entry on Palm Sunday
 - 14. Washing the disciples' feet
 - 15. Judas' betrayal; Peter's denial
 - 16. Peter's restoration after the resurrection
- F. Powerful stories
 - 1. Each one captures our attention and imagination
- G. But what do they mean?
 - 1. Taken by themselves, they are just stories
 - 2. Somebody needs to take them apart and put them back together for us
 - 3. Like the encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch
 - a. Where the Ethiopian official is reading Isaiah 53 and he doesn't understand what it means
 - b. And Philip jumps up into his chariot and explains it to him
 - c. And the Ethiopian comes to believe and gets baptized
 - d. Like my friend Edd, says, "I got it!"
- H. That's what Paul does in Romans

1. He tells us what all these events mean
 - a. The stories give us the events
 - b. Romans gives us the truth
 - c. Truth that makes sense of the stories, the illustrations

II. **The Power of Romans**

- A. The key verses in Romans – the verses that establish the theme of the entire book
 1. **Romans 1:16–17** (ESV) —
 - a. 16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.
 - b. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”
- B. Title of the series: **The Pure Gospel**
 1. Paul introduces the word in this first chapter
 - a. And the rest of the book unfolds the essence of the gospel
 2. The need for the gospel in the sinfulness of humanity
 3. Person who is the embodiment of the gospel – Jesus Christ
 4. The means by which the gospel is received and experienced – faith alone in Christ alone
 5. The life-transformation that takes place because of the gospel – the process of sanctification
 6. The history of the gospel as its redemptive power has operated through the centuries, among the Jewish people and among Gentiles
 7. The application of the gospel as it impacts every aspect of our lives as believers
 8. The book is about the gospel
- C. But Paul says in these verses **“I am not ashamed of the gospel”**
 1. We tend to be ashamed of the gospel, don’t we?
 - a. After all, how many of us routinely tell others about how God has transformed our lives in Christ?
 - b. How many of us tell others about the gospel?
 - c. How many people do we call at 11:30 at night and tell them “I got it!”
 2. But Paul couldn’t wait to proclaim the good news, the gospel, every waking hour of every day
 - a. Why?
 3. Because **“... it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...”**
- D. There is power in this gospel
 1. This is no mere text; no dusty document meant for museum shelves
 - a. This is the good news that comes from God Himself
 - b. The only means of redemption for a lost humanity
 - c. The only cure for the human condition, for our moral maladies
 2. The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes

- E. It's power comes to us in multiple dimensions
 - 1. Here are some of them this morning

III. Intellectual Power

- A. When we study the book of Romans we will be walking in the footsteps of the greatest minds in the last 2,000 years
- B. What book has been studied by more brilliant, highly motivated people than any other?
 - 1. Bible
- C. But what book of the Bible has captivated the brightest minds more than any other?
 - 1. Unquestionably, Romans
- D. Boyce compares Romans to the Constitution of the US
 - 1. Many people have dissected it, analyzed it, adopted its various principles
 - 2. But only concerns this nation
 - 3. Romans has been studied for hundreds of years longer
 - a. And by people from hundreds of nations
- E. Studied by the greatest Christian minds
 - 1. Augustine – the greatest theologian in the first 1,000 years of Christian history – was converted by it
 - 2. Luther was transformed by it
 - 3. Calvin's mind was shaped by it
 - 4. Puritans like John Owen was steeped in it
 - 5. Early American theologians like Jonathan Edwards and Charles Hodge basked in it
 - 6. Great preachers of the 19th and 20th Centuries like Charles Spurgeon, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones and John Murray fed their congregations with it
- F. Must be something about Romans to captivate Christians like that
 - 1. Studying Romans is like walking through 2,000 years of theological history
 - 2. Romans has profound intellectual power

IV. Conceptual Power

- A. Most of God's revelation is in narrative form (stories)
 - 1. OT – greater part made up of historical books
 - a. Genesis – story of creation, Abraham, patriarchs
 - b. Exodus – Deuteronomy – story of Israel's journey to Canaan
 - c. Joshua – story of conquest of Canaan
 - d. Judges – story of deterioration of moral and religious life in generations following conquest of Canaan
 - e. 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles – story of kingdom of Israel up to the time of the Babylonian exile
 - (1) Chronicles has some commentary;
 - (2) Mostly history
 - f. Ezra & Nehemiah – story of return of exiles

- g. Ruth and Esther – stories at particular places in Israelite history
 - h. Job – also a story, probably predates much OT narrative
 - i. These are all stories
 - 2. Rest is situated within that history, within those stories
 - a. Prophets – Speak to Israel at various places within that history
 - b. Jeremiah warning Judah of the impending Babylonian siege
 - c. Ezekiel speaking to the exiles about the future
 - d. Prophets spoke mostly during the period of the divided kingdom or following the return of exiles
 - 3. Psalms – rooted in events and stories
 - a. Psalm 51 – David’s sin with Bathsheba, revealed by Nathan
 - b. Psalm 18:1-3 – David’s rescue from hands of Saul
 - c. Psalm 52:1-4 – Doeg the Edomite tells Saul where David is hiding
 - d. Other Psalms not explicit, always situated in a story
 - 4. NT stories
 - a. Gospels – stories, history of Jesus
 - b. Acts – history of early church
 - c. Revelation – story of the future of the church; future history
 - d. Even epistles, though not stories, are situated in stories
 - e. Philippians and Thessalonian letters differ from Corinthians and Galatians letters
- B. How do you make sense of the stories?
- 1. What takes them beyond the use of a literary anthology – where you might read some of them in a high school English class?
 - 2. **What do they mean?**
 - 3. To know what they mean we need an interpretive framework
 - a. Romans provides that
- C. OT story of Abraham and the covenant
- 1. Significance of that?
 - a. **Human sinfulness – Romans 1-3:20**
 - b. God’s provision of **Righteousness by faith – Romans 3:21-31**
 - c. Paul’s illustration – **Abraham and the covenant – Romans 4:1-5**
- D. Romans provides conceptual or explanatory power
- 1. Key to understanding much of the rest of the Bible
- E. **Type of literature**
- 1. Letter, yes, but
 - 2. Purest form of **Didactic literature**
 - a. Didactic = instructional
 - 3. Systematic theology
 - a. Most comprehensive and concise statement of the basic doctrines of the Christian faith in the Bible
 - b. I have several systematic theologies in my library
 - c. Augustus Strong’s Systematic Theology – great Baptist theologian
 - d. Wayne Grudem’s Systematic Theology
 - e. Both way more than 1,000 pages

- f. Neither one has anything more than you will find in Romans – 16 short chapters
- g. See – you’re getting off easy!
- 4. **God’s truth is a coherent system**
 - a. Elements relate to each other in a meaningful way
 - b. Only through some kind of system can we truly understand the meaning of something
 - c. The Bible’s meaning is revealed in such a system as that
- 5. Boyce: Christianity has been the most powerful, transforming force in human history – and the book of Romans is the most basic, most comprehensive statement of true Christianity.
- 6. Luther: [Romans is] the chief part of the New Testament and the very purest gospel.... Every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, [and] occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of his soul.
- F. Paul used it that way
 - 1. **Acts 19:9–10** (ESV) —
 - a. 9 But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus.
 - b. 10 This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.
 - 2. What did he teach?
 - a. Content of the book of Romans
 - 3. Romans has profound conceptual power
 - a. System of truth gives meaning to all the particulars
 - b. All the particulars in the Bible
 - c. All the particulars in our lives

V. **Life-changing Power**

- A. Paul desired to do more than merely to help people understand the Bible
 - 1. Desired that their understanding would affect their lives
- B. **Augustine**
 - 1. Noted philosopher and teacher
 - 2. Household
 - a. Father – Greek unbeliever
 - b. Mother – Christian (Monica)
 - 3. Handsome, articulate, engaging
 - a. Fell into ungodly lifestyle
 - b. Alcohol, womanizing, etc.
 - 4. Began to come under conviction of truth of Christianity
 - a. Prayers of Monica
 - b. Unwilling to submit to it
 - 5. Garden of friend’s estate near Milan, Italy
 - a. Heard child singing words of song: *tole lege, tole lege*

- (1) Take and read
 - b. Never heard that before – received as message from God
 - 6. First Bible he found, was opened at random
 - a. **Romans 13:13–14** (ESV) — 13 Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14 But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.
 - 7. Augustine: Instantly, as the sentence ended – by a light, as it were, of security infused into my heart – all the gloom of doubt was vanished away.
 - a. Never be the same again
 - b. Like my friend, Edd: “I got it!”
 - c. Greatest Christian from Paul to Luther, especially during the first 1,000 years of the church
- C. **Martin Luther**
- 1. Opposite end of the spectrum
 - a. Apparent Christian; pious monk
 - 2. Desperately wanted to please God
 - a. No peace in his soul
 - 3. Seemed to try everything
 - a. Pilgrimage to Rome
 - b. Religious acts
 - c. Endless confessions of every peccadillo
 - d. Made his confessor, Staupitz, tell him to get a life
 - 4. Found God’s standards for acceptability to be impossible to attain
 - a. Left him deeply distressed and depressed
 - 5. Turned to a study of Romans
 - a. **Romans 1:17** (ESV) — 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”
 - 6. Realized it wasn’t his own righteousness that would save him
 - a. A righteousness from God
 - b. We acquire it by faith alone, not by any works
 - c. Great principles of reformation – sola fide; faith alone
 - 7. Took God at his word and felt himself to be reborn and entering Paradise
 - 8. Luther: I had no love for that holy and just God who punishes sinners. I was filled with secret anger against him. I hated him, because, not content with frightening by the law and the miseries of life us wretched sinners, already ruined by original sin, he still further increased our tortures by the gospel.... But when, by the Spirit of God, I understood the words – when I learned how the justification of the sinner proceeds from the free mercy of our Lord through faith.... then I felt born again like a new man.... In very truth, this language of Saint Paul was to me the true gate of Paradise.
- D. **John Wesley**
- 1. Great evangelist; founder of Methodism

- a. Wasn't truly converted until after he was a preacher
 - 2. Wrestling with various aspects of his own sinfulness over a period of time
 - 3. On May 24, 1738, at a meeting of a small religious society in Aldersgate St., London
 - a. Wesley experienced a religious conversion while listening to a reading of Martin Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans.
 - 4. Wesley: In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.
 - 5. This experience of salvation through faith in Christ alone was the burden of his message for the rest of his life.
 - a. Became one of the greatest evangelists in history of Christian faith
- E. Those examples teach us the life-changing power of Romans
 - 1. Boyce: If we are spiritually moribund, we need to be brought from a state of spiritual death into a state of spiritual life through the gospel. If we are lethargic in our discipleship, we need to be awakened to the glories of a renewed life in Christ. If we are indifferent to the spiritual state of others, we need to be alerted to their peril apart from Christ and be moved to take the gospel to them.
 - 2. That's why we study Romans
 - a. It has a life-changing power

VI. **Reformational Power**

- A. Power not just confined to individuals
 - 1. Also to movements
 - a. Though reformational movements take place through individuals
 - 2. Constant need for the church as a whole to be reformed and revived
- B. **Reformation and revival** – both necessary terms
 - 1. True revival doesn't happen without reformation
 - 2. True reformation leads to revival
- C. Reformation – church returns to fundamental biblical truths
 - 1. Rooted in doctrine
 - 2. Revival without reformation is merely emotionalism and chaos
 - a. History has shown a lack of staying power
 - 3. Frederic Godet: ... every great spiritual revival in the church will be connected as effect and cause with a deeper understanding of this book.
- D. Live in age in which we are praying for revival
 - 1. God: Here's how to get it: read and apply Romans
- E. The problem is well articulated

1. Boyce: ... we cling to a man-centered, need-oriented teaching. And our churches show it! They are successful in worldly terms – big buildings, big budgets, big everything – but they suffer from a poverty of soul.
 2. The great antidote to that poverty of soul is the God-centered true Gospel
 - a. The great and only theme addressed by Paul in Romans
 3. We have never lived in an age in which the gospel is more poorly understood than today
 - a. Possible exception of the corrupt medieval church
 4. Most evangelicals don't understand the gospel
 - a. Most still think we get to heaven because we are above average, reasonably good people
- F. We need to study the book of Romans
1. It has reformational power
 2. A true movement of God will not happen apart from the clear understanding and articulation of the gospel
- G. Robert Haldane: Paul, writing without any of the aids of human wisdom, draws his precepts from the fountain of heavenly truth, and inculcates on the disciples of Jesus a code of duties, which, if habitually practiced by mankind, would change the world from what it is – a scene of strife, jealousy and division – and make it what it was before the entrance of sin, a paradise fit for the Lord to visit and for man to dwell in.

VII. Conclusion

- A. **Romans – the Pure Gospel**
1. We need it to transform our thinking
 2. We need it to give meaning, to make sense of human existence
 3. We need it to change us personally
 4. We need it to revitalize and reform a moribund church