



“WHO SO EVER WILL” SUNDAY LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Ben Sanders, III, Guest Lectionary Commentator

Ph.D. student in Religious and Theological Studies, University of Denver & Iliff School of Theology

Lection – Romans 3:21-24 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 21) But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, (v. 22) the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, (v. 23) since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; (v. 24) they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

“Who so ever will” Sunday is set aside to acknowledge the worth of all of God’s creatures. This worth is based not in social conventions of race, gender, economic status, sexual orientation, or physical or mental ability, but in God’s free gift of grace which is given indiscriminately to all. When slave owners of the so-called New World distorted the Christian message in an effort to justify a social order based on the dehumanization and murder of Native Americans and Africans, the best of Afro-American Christian faith witnessed to the fact that no unjust social

order can stifle God's desire for creation to exist in the goodness of redemption and freedom.¹ This liturgical moment reminds us that all iterations of Christianity that devalue or demean the inherent worth and goodness of any of God's creatures must be rejected if we are to remain faithful to the God who saves all out of gracious love.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Romans 3:21-24

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

"The doors of the church are now open." In Christian churches all across the country these or similar words and phrases are spoken to initiate the time in a worship service when congregants are welcomed to respond to the movement of the Spirit. The Pastor of my church often adds, "Give us your hand, and give God your heart." Some come for prayer, others come seeking assistance in the face of particularly difficult times, many come seeking church membership, and still others come, having encountered the love of God through worship, confessing their faith in God's saving promise. I have been deeply moved and impacted by these moments. Indeed, I have found this time, the time when the doors of the church are opened, and the shape of our church community will again be pressed and molded by the work of Spirit in the lives of God's people, to be profoundly powerful and incredibly important.

The power and importance of these moments certainly has to do with their impact on the lives of those who feel compelled to walk through the church's open doors. However, I believe this moment is also, and perhaps more so, important to the nature of the Church itself. There have been times when I can't help but wonder: What kind of openness does this moment inaugurate? Are *ALL* truly welcomed to walk through the open doors or are there spoken and/or unspoken expectations regarding the "who," "what," and "why" of those who might dare respond to the invitation of God's grace? How the Church responds to these questions is of the utmost importance. Much harm has been done when the Church has tried to take up the mantle of divine judge, thus forgetting its intended nature and work as a community of creatures graciously bound to and by the promise of God's saving love for all.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

Remembering Jewish Roots

Widely believed to be the latest of Paul's biblical letters, the letter to the Romans was likely written in the 6th decade of the current era (CE). In order to grasp the theological aptness of both our particular passage (Romans 3:21-24) and the epistle to the Romans as a whole to "Who so ever will" Sunday, it will be helpful to revisit both who Paul was as a religo-cultural figure and the social context into which his letter was sent. These two details are often mistreated and overlooked in reading Paul's writings, and consequently readers are often left with impoverished readings of both this important document and its author.

First, a bit on the social context to which Paul wrote. Near the close of the 5th decade of the current era, the emperor Claudius had all Jews expelled from Rome. When Claudius died in 54 CE, he was succeeded by his great nephew, Nero. Under Nero's reign, Rome was reopened to

the Jews. Thus, when Paul, in Romans 11, reminds the Gentiles that they are “a wild olive shoot . . . grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree” (v. 17), and admonishes them saying “do not boast” (v. 18) and “do not become proud, but stand in awe” (v. 20), he is speaking to the disdainful way that many Gentiles (all non-Jews) treated Jews in light of the latter having been banished and only later reinstated. Holding in mind this bit on the socio-political context to which Paul wrote, we can now take a quick look at Paul’s religio-cultural identity.

Paul was *not* a Christian.² Indeed, he says so himself (e.g., Romans 11:1: “I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendent of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.”). Paul was and remained, even after his encounter on his way to Damascus, a Jew. This is a simple yet complex and important claim to rereading the epistle to the Romans (and by extension, Paul’s other writings as well). Paul would have been mystified to be referred to as Christian, in part because what we now know as Christianity was still being formed and was yet to be named during Paul’s life. He was a faithful Jew who had an encounter with the life of Jesus, the Son of God, who was also a faithful Jew, and was then sent out to do what was considered unclean work: to open the Jewish way of Jesus to Gentiles.

The fact that Paul was not a Christian is important to grasping the theological shape of his epistles and, more specifically for our purposes, what Romans 3:21-24 has to say to us regarding the theme of “Who so ever will.” When Paul writes that “apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed” (v. 21) he is not saying that the law does not matter, nor is he speaking of a reality outside of Judaism. The law here refers to the Torah, the written law of Israel, and it is before this law that Jews are judged. Furthermore, when Jews fall short of this law, they find themselves, in guilt, standing alongside the Gentiles. The disclosure of God’s righteousness “apart from the law” is not the revelation of a reality *beyond* God’s promises to Israel; it is the *fulfillment of* God’s promise to Israel working in a way that was previously unthinkable. God, through the fulfilling of the promises to Israel, is working not only to redeem Israel, but is also claiming the previously viewed as unclean Gentiles as God’s own (Acts 10).

Traditional Christian readings of Romans 3:21-24 assume that the Roman epistle was written to Christians. Thus interpretations of righteousness and law and what both have to do with Jesus Christ (vv. 21-22) are often read in ways that separate Christianity from its rootedness in Jewish culture.³ However, God’s righteousness in Christ cannot be properly understood apart from the belief that YHWH has always been faithful to Israel, despite Israel’s often un-law-like behavior. God’s declaration that Israel is God’s chosen people (e.g., Exodus 6:7) remains unchanged. What is revealed most clearly in Jesus Christ is how this chosenness will function. Through the life of Jesus, we encounter the same gracious God that declared Israel as chosen **doing a new thing**. This new thing is the opening up of the *Jewish* way to the Gentiles through the life of the Jewish God-Man, Jesus. Thus we do not encounter God discarding Israel; instead we find that the persistence of God’s promise to Israel, despite its brokenness, has become enfleshed in Christ and as such is extended to all flesh (vv. 23-24).

When we as non-Jewish Christians forget that Paul was a Jew writing to a community of Jews and Gentiles—**not Christians**—we not only lose the ability to properly read today’s passage, but we also forfeit the miraculous nature of Christianity. We forget that *we* are the unclean outsiders

that God graciously decided to call clean (Acts 10:9-23). Having forgotten this, we easily perpetuate hermeneutical and discipleship patterns which teach that the only grounds on which Christians can encounter “others” are the grounds on which “we” (Christians) will try to convert “them” (non-Christians) into us.

We forget that Christian faith and discipleship ought to be rooted in an unexpected (indeed, miraculous!) encounter with an-other, *the Other*, Jesus Christ, the Jew who came to live his life for all others. That is to say, in forgetting that our faith is rooted in a culture that is not our own, we lose the ability to invite “who so ever will” to come. Our story, the story of Christianity, becomes *the* story into which all other stories must be bent and broken in order to fit. The terms of our invitation, the terms of “who so ever will,” become inherently violent and violative if we lose the ability to remember that we Christians are ourselves branches graciously grafted to the life of a root that is not our own.

Celebration

The Good News of “Who So Ever Will”

There is **plenty** of good news found in today’s Scripture passage, when it is reread with the above insight in mind. Paul writes so that we might know that, in Christ, the way has been opened for us to be saved from isolation. Through Israel—God’s chosen people—the way has been prepared for even Gentiles to take part in God’s promise of redemption. Who so ever will come seeking wholeness, despite their many encounters with brokenness, will find it through the enfleshed fulfillment of God’s promise to Israel. Because the possibility of Gentile redemption is dependent upon the grace that is revealed through another people, we as Gentile Christians have no recourse other than to welcome “who so ever will” to come too. Come too, and get aboard the train that is bound for Glory. Come too, and meet the one who saved us from darkness and brought us into the marvelous light. Come too, and let us all praise the Savior for so great a salvation. Indeed, we love this way because the God of Israel, through the life of Christ, first loved us. The doors of the Church are open, “who so ever will,” let them come.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include but are not limited to:

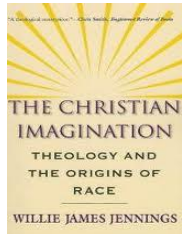
Sounds: The “sound” of “the Law and the Prophets” testifying to the righteous of God in Christ (vv. 21-22) (What does this testimony sound like? What does it mean for Christians to hear the Law and the prophets testifying to the righteousness that is revealed in Jesus in a way that honors Christianity’s Jewish foundations?); and

Emotions: The difficulty of rethinking one’s identity; and the gut-wrenching feeling of having to accept those you do not want to accept but must accept because you have been accepted.

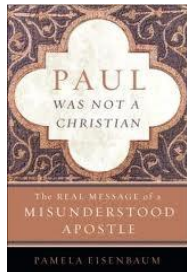
III. Other Sermonic Suggestions

Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion, and national origin? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion, or is it due to a basic weakness in the religion itself? The question is searching, for the dramatic demonstration of the impotency of Christianity in dealing with the issue is underscored by its apparent inability to cope with it within its own fellowship.

—Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*



Professor Willie Jennings of Duke Divinity School has written a wonderful book examining how Christian theology, infected by supersessionism, has been made to function inside of a “diseased social imagination” that produced racialized modes of place, language, and intimacy. Along with being theologically insightful this book is also well-written.



In *Paul Was Not a Christian*, Professor Pamela Eisenbaum explores how the Apostle Paul understood his identity and world. What did it mean for Paul to be Jewish? How have scholars interpreted Paul’s identity? How does Jesus Christ factor into Jewish identity? Eisenbaum skillfully engages these issues in this book which is vital to any serious engagement with Paul’s writings.

Notes

1. Raboteau, Albert J. Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South. Updated ed. (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
2. Eisenbaum, Pamela Michelle. Paul Was Not a Christian: The Original Message of a Misunderstood Apostle, 1st ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2009).
3. For two outstanding works on the problem of Christianity severing itself from its Jewish roots, see J. Kameron Carter, Race: A Theological Account (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) and Willie James Jennings, The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).