



DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

ROMANS 1:16-17

February 2023

WHAT'S THE REAL PROBLEM?

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.

Romans 1:16-17, ESV

The American culture is convulsing now as a result of conflicting ideological agendas vying for supremacy. Wokeism, CRT, LGBTQ-plus, Progressivism, Trumpism, Anti-Trumpism, Pandemic overreach, Immigration... Stress is high. Fear is rampant. Depression is problematic. Suicide is becoming more frequent. Drug use is rising. We have a problem. It is a big problem, and we are trying to solve it with little answers. Like with Covid, we are just treating the symptoms and trying to prevent it from spreading. A big question is: Can adjusting and implementing societal structures successfully order human relationships to flourish without dealing with the core human flaw? Martin Luther King, Jr. acknowledged that ignoring societal issues is fatal, but that laws and decrees are limited. He declared that you can't legislate morality, but you can regulate behavior. Judicial decrees can't change the heart, but they can re-

strain the heartless. We must decide if we want more than regulated behavior and restraint. If so, we must deal with the heart.

God's solution to the human dilemma tells us how big the problem is. He thought it was big enough that He became a human, died, was resurrected, and began a whole new creation. That means that the gospel is paramount in importance. It alone deals with the flaw in the human heart: *"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"* (Romans 1:16-17, ESV).

The story of Israel suggests that even a nation with the best laws and the strongest will to keep them cannot sustain true liberty and produce a flourishing society. It has never been an issue of better laws and more commitment. Only the solu-

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tion in the gospel can go deep enough to change the heart. Only a heart change will bring about societal change that will last. The permeating influence of salt and light is necessary for a culture to function. It does not require a majority in numbers, but does need a critical mass of people embracing the values of divine sovereignty and human dignity that are uniquely displayed in the singular narrative of biblical revelation. It is critically important to identify the agent who will define and declare the perspective of reality that allows humans to successfully navigate life on earth. According to the biblical story, that agent is the church. Paul told Timothy that the church is the ground and pillar of truth (see 1 Timothy 3:15). To the church in Ephesus, he gave an even bigger explanation of the identity and role of the church:

For this reason I, Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus on behalf of you Gentiles— assuming that you have heard of the stewardship of God's grace that was given to me for you, how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I have written briefly. When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of

his power. To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him.

(Ephesians 3:1-12, ESV)

Of course we should expect the cosmic forces of evil to attack the church with strategic assault on her identity, constituency, message, and role on earth. The church's role has been under attack since the beginning. It was the issue between Paul and Peter at Antioch. It was the topic of the first church council (see Acts 15). The church is constantly under assault from hell. Wolves are stalking it. Shepherds unaware of the warfare are helpless in protecting the sheep. Those focused on the wolves are paralyzed by fear. Only a true understanding of the nature of the church (**identity**), and its role on earth (**message**) will sustain its effectiveness.

IDENTITY: The church is made up of the people of promise. In the Garden of Eden, God promised Adam and Eve that the seed of woman would crush the head of the Serpent. God would win through human instrumentality. Guaranteed. When society became so corrupt that destruction was imminent, God saved a family through Noah to keep His promise. God then found

Abram in Ur and promised that through his seed the curse of sin would be stopped and the blessings of righteousness would be established. God's promise was initiated by Him and would be fulfilled by Him, regardless of the failures on the part of sinful humans. True to His nature, God worked through the natural to explain the spiritual. The first level of promise was about a physical son named Isaac. This narrative included hundreds of years and revealed the purpose of God to natural eyes and ears. Isaac had Jacob who had Joseph whose sons join those of Jacob to form the earthly family of promise, which typifies the future family that would be the fulfillment of the big promise. That family would share a common faith rather than a common bloodline. That family, identified as Israel, was tasked with carrying out God's purpose to bless the world that has been cursed by sin. God's plan was to expose the depth of sin in the world so He could deal with it decisively and eternally. Knowing that humans are bent on earning and winning rewards, He made a covenant with them through Moses to bless the fully obedient and curse the disobedient. They were inspired by the possibility of being the head and not the tail. They were sure they could fulfill the requirements. With the best intentions and the fullest commitment, they set out to be faithful. They failed even after many attempts. But God had promised that Israel would be the nation that blessed other nations and stopped the curse of sin. Prophets encouraged the exiles to believe that God would keep His promise. After 400 years and the passing of many kingdoms, God acted to fulfill His promise. He became a man, a Jewish man. He became Israel's representative. He lived

up to every stipulation in the covenant. He paid the penalty of Israel's failure. All the shadows of animal sacrifice became substance in Him. The promise of Adam and Eve, the promise to Abraham, the promise to the exiles... all were fulfilled in Him. He received all the blessings that come with obedience to God's covenant. He did what Israel couldn't and fulfilled the role He had given them. When Jesus was resurrected, the exile was over. The head of the serpent was crushed. The people of the promise, like a caterpillar becoming a butterfly, began to display the common life they shared with the living Lord. Those who trust Him are "in Christ." That is their identity and their hope. They are forgiven, justified, sanctified, unified, and empowered to carry the mission of Jesus to the whole creation. They are blessed in Him. He alone has the blessings, and He shares them with His people. The church is the body of Christ. All who are in it are forgiven, cleansed, indwelt by the Spirit, and sent with His authority to bless where the curse has been. The church is made up of all who believe Jesus, regardless of race, gender, geography, region, or culture.

MESSAGE: The truth of the gospel. The truth became alive in Jesus and those who trust Him know truth in that relationship. He is consistent with the laws that govern God's order. He verifies the words of the prophets and the stories of the Bible that reveal His ways and plans, but He is more. He is alive and inviting us to enjoy His life. The message of the church is Jesus - who He is and what He has done. It is first and primarily an announcement. When Jesus preached the "gospel of God," He announced that the

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time had come for fulfillment and that He was that fulfillment. He declared that the long-awaited kingdom of God had arrived in Him. This announcement demanded a response of belief or unbelief (see Mark 1:14-15). Those who could not make the change (repentance) became hostile and participated in His death. Those who believed became His people and were empowered to carry on His mission. In simple trust they followed Him to the cross and the empty grave. They were forgiven, reconciled, and restored as humans and friends of God.

The apostles proclaimed this event as the fulfillment of God's promise. Their message was later called the kerygma - the content of the basic and essential announcement of the event concerning Jesus. We can imagine how radical it was for them to believe that what their fathers had been looking for for thousands of years was actually happening to them. Many wanted to continue what had been. They held to the natural promise of land, temple, law, and bloodlines. Five hundred years had passed since Daniel had seen the parade of kingdoms that would precede the coming of the ultimate kingdom. Every synagogue had proclaimed it in hope. Now it had come, and it was hard to believe.

The church was promised in the Garden and to Abraham. It was typified in Israel. It was born at Pentecost when the Spirit came to indwell the believers to empower them to do what God's people had been created to do. God loves His creation - all of it. He has done everything necessary to have a people who are free from guilt, liberated from fear, cleansed from shame,

united together in love, and empowered to display the kind of love the world cannot create. We are sons of God in a special way that creates humility and confidence. We are aware that apart from His mercy we are totally inadequate, but with Him we can hold our heads up in the world. We are sure that the future is settled. Jesus is already at the right hand of the Father, and we are in Him. Our security is based on His faithfulness, not ours. We are learning to be focused on His purposes rather than our own status and qualifications. Free from needing to protect and promote ourselves, we can live for another, and in that we find a joy that is unspeakable and full of glory.

Without the gospel, people can't really be transformed. Unchanged people cannot precipitate societal change that will last. Without the message of the gospel, the world is moving toward darkness and corruption. Only when the church rightly identifies itself and begins to act like who we are is there any hope for finding answers to the questions that plague us and the problems that confound us. The problem is bigger than we have acknowledged. The solution is greater than we can imagine. A vibrant church submitted to its Head and working together toward His mission is God's answer. He paid a lot to give us the solution. Let's take it.



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