

PAUL TO THE ROMANS

A Martin Zender paraphrase

PART VI



Tryphena, at the Coliseum.

Now I shall tell you something you have not heard before, namely, that the gospel of grace which I bring to you concerns, not sinners, but Christ.¹

It was *the law* that concerned sinners. God, through Moses, decreed the way by which He should be approached and appeased. Under law, every man and woman stood alone—without advocate. God sat back, and one danced for Him. The only *real* gift, offered under law, is one's own performance. Many Jews will disparage that term, "performance," but that is what it was—and is. Who will claim to perform such feats of moral dering-do so that God Himself is rendered speechless? The Jews—that's who! May it not become this way with you.

We all want measuring sticks

There are beautiful people in this world, and how do they measure themselves? By mirrors. They stare at their reflections, either to confirm their beauty, or to



Martin Zender's Clanging Gong News

"If I know all mysteries and all knowledge, but have no love, I am a clanging gong" --1 Cor. 13:1-2



Two out of three isn't bad.

further it by every means.

Those who know me by face and form are aware of my shortcomings in these categories. And yet what I am *not* in the flesh, I at one time sought to become "in spirit," that is, I would become a perfect *moral* being. That was—and is—my ultimate temptation. It is a thorn with which I am ever tempted. Rather than using a mirror, I held myself up continually to the exacting standards of God's righteous law.

The balm of moral perfection

There is something inside me, still, that wants to be perfect. Back in the day, I tricked myself into thinking I wanted this for God's glory. What delusion. I wanted it for myself; I needed there to be a category in which I excelled everyone. What more

"I needed there to be a category in which I excelled everyone."

noble category than moral perfection? Physical beauty turns to the dust, eventually, but moral perfection follows one into the coming life—or so I thought. *Let them have their temporal pleasures*, is what I said to myself. *They laugh at me now, but I will laugh last*. I knew that when the rest of the world ultimately fell short, I would mock their torments. They would have brought such pain upon themselves.

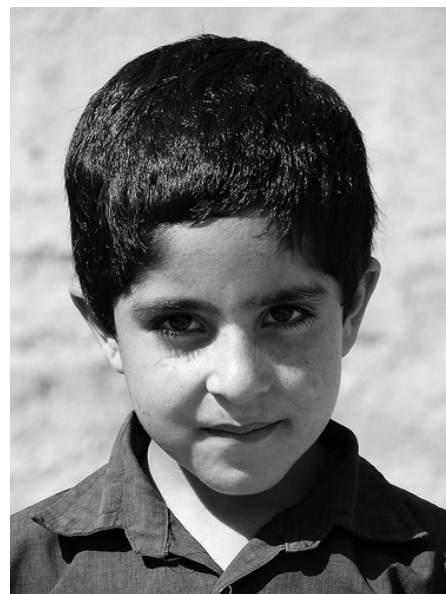
What a balm to my soul became my standing before God. No matter how sour my day, the thought of my singular, moral excellence buoyed me. It never failed. The Psalmist says that wine makes the heart of humans glad. Self-righteousness does this for the religious soul.

The fear of being ordinary

Competence in law was the one thing I had that distinguished me from the rest. I feared being ordinary. Some may have

been taller than me, or smarter, or certainly better-looking. They may have been better educated, or wealthier. They may have occupied the best neighborhoods. I despised anyone who was better than me. Against them all I would exact revenge!

Envy is chief among sins.



Age 5. The small cut on my upper lip is the remnant of a fight.

A little about my past

Many believe I was raised in privilege. This is a common misconception. I did not attend the best schools until I was seventeen. That is when my father died and my mother re-married. Before that, we eked out an existence from the soil, which is to say, our home was actually built of it. My real father was indigent; he moved about, seeking his treasure from other people's houses, that is, when they were not present in them. My mother was a candle maker. Because my clothes were used and my home was of the Adamic substance, I was the butt of jokes. I was small, and could not defend myself. Thus, I ended up on the worst

¹ Romans 1:3

end, always, of neighborhood scuffles. No wonder I resented everything and everyone. I hated people in their fine clothing. I hated people who lived in brick houses. This is the evil work of envy: It forces one to discover some other way in which to excel.

It is a human need to exceed others in some category. Since I could not attain this in flesh, as I said, I sought to attain it in “spirit,” or what I thought was spirit. If I had no earthly advantage, then all my advantage would be toward God. That way, I could deride and belittle those who derided and belittled me. I could comfort myself, then, knowing that such sinners would have forfeited all right to a place in God’s kingdom.

Oh, how I secretly—and not-so-secretly—relished this thought.

Who is in the dirt now?

In my room at night, I would entertain colorful images of how excruciatingly some of my neighbors would suffer in the judgments of God. “Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord,” was my favorite phrase from God’s Word, and I would scratch it onto the walls of my room. It is a true saying, but I over-savored it, degrading the righteous judgments of God to acts of punishment.

In the days of Moses and Korah, the earth opened and swallowed the lawbreakers (the sons of Korah) alive. This was my favorite fantasy—to picture the earth opening and consuming my enemies. I pictured them falling into a deep pit, and the earth surrounding them alive until they panicked and then died. I hoped and

prayed that their last moments would be filled with pangs of regret, and that they would be consumed with the knowledge that “Saul was right,” and that they were so fatally wrong. Their last conscious thought would not be of God, but of me, and how they had wronged me.

Perfection constantly nags

What nagged me was the constant knowledge, deep down, that I had certainly, somehow, left a part of the law undone. Nearly every waking moment meant, for me, the continual review of all 613 commandments. I knew that if I had failed in one, I had failed in all. Nothing kills happiness faster than the pursuit of perfection. This is why the Lord said to me, when He apprehended me on the road to Damascus:

“It is hard for you to be kicking against the goads!”

Kicking against the goads

A goad is a sharp, pointed rod used in place of a whip to urge animals to their task. My brother was once so angry that he slammed his fist into an oak tree. Oh, the poor tree! No, not at all. Rather—my poor brother’s fist.

I was kicking against an inflexible adversary, namely, God’s righteous law, or—in other words—Perfection. Perfection is like a sharp stick, or an oak tree, or a mountain (I refer, in this simile, to Sinai). One’s effort against perfection is nothing but a poor fist against a mass of rock. The drive for Perfection can only injure the one aiming for it, and never the Perfection itself.

Yet, for years, I attempted this. As I was never able to attain it, the only sequel for me was anger and frustration. Of course I could not show this, because these sickly emotions were the very opposite of the law I was trying to maintain. What endless torment! I was maintaining—or thought I was

maintaining—the law on the outside, yet inside I was seething like Vesuvius, ready to erupt.

The drive for perfection kills in every direction

What do you think made our ancestors kill the prophets? What do you think compelled Caiphas and Ananias—and the entire Sanhedrin—to kill the Lord of glory? What do you think makes the Jews of this day seek my life? It is the hatred born and stirred by kicking against the goad of perfection. It is the hatred born in secret of noting the happiness of others and despising it. How I came to

“Nothing kills happiness faster than the pursuit of perfection.”

hate those who did not try as hard as I did to be perfect!

Relief through Another

The gospel which I preach has delivered me of this torture. It does this because it is a different gospel than the one given to Peter, which still concerns law. *My* gospel, however, does not concern law. It does not even concern the sinner. It is all about Christ, and His accomplishments on the cross of Calvary.

The difference between Moses and me

Many of those among the nations suppose that my gospel is an exhortation to do good. It is true that I do exhort the saints to do the right thing. However, this is not the whole story. What is my alternative? Should I exhort believers to do evil? May it not be coming to that!

Moses did not exhort anyone. No, but he certainly commanded them. The difference is that my call to right behavior comes not from the shadow of Sinai—that is, from the declaration to, “Do this, or die,”—but rather from the declaration that we have been made righteous in Christ Jesus, and that we now freely serve a God of such unspeakably grand deliverance. God has already declared us to be righteous, through Christ. And this



is not of ourselves—it is the gift of God.² The Lord Jesus Christ took all of our sins (*all* of them) to the grave with Him, and then rose without them. Now, therefore, God looks at Christ’s work instead of ours, and He sees us as just and as perfect as He. Amazing!

Only One was perfect

Let us speak again of perfection, but from a different angle. There is One Who was perfect. It shall never be you, and it shall never be me. There *is* One Who accomplished the dictates of the law perfectly, every day of His life. There is One and only One Who never once displeased nor disobeyed God.

Shall either you or I improve upon that record? Shall we improve upon His perfection? Try it and see what happens! I will tell you ahead of time: You will be driven to want to murder people who are not as “righteous” as you.

Our call is *not* to be perfect, but rather to *rest* in the One who was and is perfect.

I have much to say to you

And so, in the balance of this letter, I am going to tell you, not of my accomplishments, which are nothing, but of the accomplishments of Jesus Christ. I am going to relay to you how impossible it is for you to please God in your flesh. By the time I am through with you, you are going to be magnificently depressed about your chances to “make the grade” of salvation. This will disappoint the religious souls among you. But the religious soul must be broken. I find that one must be crushed and bereaved of one’s religious and self-righteous aspirations before one becomes truly aware what a joy human failure is, and what liberation it is to embrace the sufficiency and success of Another, namely, Jesus Christ, our Lord.

The meaning of grace

Grace is favor granted to those deserving the opposite. Jesus Christ gave me grace in waves of love that overwhelmed me. Not only did I obtain grace from God so that, in me, God would have an example of how unworthy humans find favor with Him, but He made me an apostle and a herald of this message, for faith-

obedience among all the nations,³ for His Name’s sake.

Faith-obedience

You will no doubt find this a strange phrase: “faith-obedience.” When I say “obedience,” I know that you will think of the law of Moses and a long list of works. What will you think, then, when I join this with the word, “faith?”

I wrote concerning faith in my previous installment. Faith is an assurance concerning that which is not seen. What is it that you do not see? You do not see anything worthy about yourselves—nothing that would cause God to justify you. You consider yourselves in the “mirror of righteousness,” and you see only vessels deserving of condemnation and death. Then you listen to my gospel, and you hear that it concerns, not you sinners, but rather what Christ has *done* about you sinners. It is not me telling you, “Be good, so that you can be saved!” but rather me telling you, “Christ has saved you, so be good!” I en-



gage you, first, with the *work of Christ*. So it shall always be!

Different motives

Only as you realize your death together with Christ can you hope to behave *with the right motive*. The motive for good behavior under Moses—I acknowledge this—was justification. Yet no one could be just under Moses, for no one save Christ could do the commands. Israel has proven—once for all—the inability of flesh and blood to please God and to do what He commands.

What, then, is the motive for good behavior, now? It is to please the One *Who has already justified us*. Apprehend the difference, then, between working to be justi-

fied, and working to please the One Who has *already* justified. We no longer beg Him for favors, but thank Him for favors rendered.

I want you to believe what I am telling you—that God has already declared you to be righteous. This requires faith, for you do not feel righteous, no, not at all. Thus, I ask you to obey my word that perfection is no longer your goal, but rather, your goal is to apprehend—to realize—how God has already declared

“We no longer beg Him for favors, but thank Him for favors rendered.”

you to be righteous, through His Son, Jesus Christ.

It is a play on words, this “faith-obedience,” to show you that to obey now means a different thing than it used to. Before, it meant to do the whole law. Now it means to continually *hear and heed* (for this is the meaning of “obey”) *the truth* that God accepts you—not through your own righteousness and perfection, but through the righteousness and perfection of Christ.

I think this will become a popular saying: “faith-obedience.” At least, I hope so. I stayed up late last night, inventing it. I still want you to do something (we do not wish to be lazy people with no belief), but I did not want anyone to think I was submitting them again to law. So I made up “faith-obedience,” for you to constantly remind yourselves (“hear and heed”) that your happiness can only come from *understanding* the work of Another, and the truth that, even though you cannot see it, righteousness is now accounted to you in the faith of Christ.

I look forward to writing you again. Watch out, because I will be reminding you of how unworthy you are to even stand before God, apart from Christ. I will set the stage with the truth of your inability, that I might highlight the ability of your Lord and Savior.

Grace and peace to your spirits! Amen!



³ Romans 1:5
Photo credits: Boy by Hamad Saber; flower by “Dave-F”; Creative Commons License: Attribution