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St. Paul's Lutheran Church  
2100 16<sup>th</sup> Street SW  
Austin, MN 55912-1749

Pastor Ted Barthels  
Sermon preached on  
January 19, 2014  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Epiphany

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 8:20-22; Luke 4:14-32  
Hymns: 235:1-3; 352; 306:1-5; 309

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Romans 10:1-12

Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they may be saved. 2 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. 3 For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God. 4 For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. 5 For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, "The man who does those things shall live by them." 6 But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down from above) 7 or, "'Who will descend into the abyss?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). 8 But what does it say? "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart" (that is, the word of faith which we preach): 9 that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame." 12 For

there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him.

(NKJV)

This is the Word of God!

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, the Savior of all the world, dear fellow Redeemed.

INTRO: Close to God

Are you close to God? I mean do you have a close and personal relationship with the Lord? If this sounds like a question that may be asked by a different type of protestant religion you may indeed be correct. It is the kind of question I have been asked by people of a reformed background a number of times in my life. It usually goes along with the questions, “Have you decided for Christ?” or “Have you been born again?” or “Have you given your life to Christ?” At that point we may find ourselves uncomfortable and looking for a way out of the conversation, without really knowing why we are uncomfortable, or why we feel that at least some of these questions don’t sound quite right. The problem is that the questions are muddled in some spiritual misconceptions that make the right answers sound wrong to us, and the expected answers seem may even cause us to wonder if we are doing all that we should to be closed to God. And of course we know that we are lacking, soooo?

It all comes down to how it is that we come to have a close, personal relationship with God. Is it based upon our will and our actions? Or is there some outside power that brings this to pass that we are indeed able to call God, “our God” and that we are assured by the Lord that we are indeed “His people?”

In this Epiphany season our worship is focused on the glory of the Lord, and how that glory of Christ is made manifest, or

revealed to us. Indeed that last part is of great significance. How is the glory of Christ revealed to us? How is that we find ourselves –

## **THEME: Drawing Near to Christ?**

This is not only a vitally important issue for us but it is also a matter of great concern for us about the people we care for. In the opening words of our text the Apostle Paul is expressing his concern for the spiritual wellbeing of the people of the Jews. He refers to them as the people of Israel in our text, as he is referencing not only the people that happen to live in the region of Judea and Galilee, but those of his people who are scattered in the nations of the world. He had a special concern for them because he feels a connection with them that goes back to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to whom the promises had been given that from their physical descendants the Savior would be born into the world. The Jews possessed the promises, the blessings of God, the words of the prophets. They had every spiritual advantage, and yet they had not recognized Jesus as the Christ. They had not drawn close to God, but rather had distanced themselves from the Lord. They had made an error, a tragic error for they did not understand that drawing near to God was --

### **I. Not Achieved through the Righteousness of the Law.**

Sometimes we make the mistake of assuming that people who aren't close to God don't care. There certainly appears to be enough spiritual apathy in the world to infect everyone. But when we look at some of the other religions of the world it is easy to see that the opposite is also true. There is a great deal of fervor and even zeal to be found in the false religions of the world, their adherents carrying out the traditions and spiritual customs of these religions with faithful dedication. Indeed we may often see a greater zeal and rigorous observance of religious tenets in other religions than we may find among ourselves! That is to our shame! (But that is a

sermon for another day.) The point that we need to comprehend is that religious zeal or sincerity of belief is not the one ingredient that brings one close to God, that draws one close to Christ. The Apostle says that his fellow countrymen, for whom he prayed that they might be saved, failed because they pursued salvation ignorant of the truth.

**Romans 10:2-3** For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. 3 For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and seeking to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted to the righteousness of God.

Their zeal was not directed by the truth. It was directed by their own notions of securing righteousness by the strict adherence to the law. Follow the customs, fulfill the ceremonies, say all the right prayers, perform all the right deeds, offer all the right sacrifices and offerings, and you will secure a righteousness which will be acceptable and commended by God. That is not the way it works. It can't work that way because we aren't capable of living up to the demands of God's law. We are reminded by James in his epistle:

**James 2:10** For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all.

People like to rationalize that most of the time they are pretty good, maybe not perfect, but pretty good. Maybe a stray thought from time to time. Maybe a harsh word, or a bit of gossip comes along, but overall we try to treat others the way we would like to be treated. We try to see those opportunities to help others and behave with love, and so **God should be pleased with how we live our lives**, and we should be saved by our own righteousness.

That kind of rationalization is common among men. We are susceptible to it ourselves because we have a natural man, and

it is appealing to be able to think, “**I’m good people!**” But that is not righteousness. It is maybe being a nice enough neighbor, but it is not righteousness before God. Any one of those little indiscretions is enough to **make you guilty of all!** You violate the law and you are a lawbreaker. You are UNrighteous! You are a sinner who deserves to be condemned before the Lord! Zeal, or sincerity, or concerted effort doesn’t change the facts. The facts are you are lost and you are condemned because of your sin!

That’s not close to God. That’s not close to Christ. That is distant, estranged, enemies. Well, we gotta change that! But you can’t change that,--

## **II. Not even by Heroic Spiritual Experience.**

How are you going to get close to Christ? You have heard that one needs to get close to Christ. Where is He anyway? Up in heaven. or He’s dead and buried, with only His philosophy of love and self-sacrifice left behind for us. That is not the way to Christ. There are some who talk about the wonder of ecstatic spiritual experience being the key to the Lord. They may suggest that you need to go in a trance, or to see a vision, or speak in tongues, or hear the Spirit speaking directly to you in your head. Or ascend into heaven to get Jesus to be close to you, so go beyond the grave and have a spiritual connection with Christ. In our text Paul makes it clear that is not the way of true righteousness which is of faith.

**Romans 10:6-7** But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down from above) 7 or, “‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).

So then focusing on our own spirituality, on our own wondrous experience of spiritual events in our lives is not the righteousness of faith. It is focusing on self, and glorifying

self instead of Christ. This was something that Paul had to address again and again in the early church as they were deceived into looking for a higher knowledge or higher personal spiritual experience instead of clinging to the merits of Christ alone. It is no different today. People find it exciting to talk about one's personal spiritual journeys, or of the self-fulfillment found in a pilgrimage, or in the fine deeds done for others. Drawing close to Christ isn't about what I do, **“For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes”** (Romans 10:4). There in Christ is life and salvation. It comes to me through the Spirit's working in my heart –

### **III. Through the Revelation of God's Word.**

**Romans 10:8** But what does it (that is the righteousness of faith) say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach).

That is the Lord's message for us today. What we need to be close to God in Christ is right there in the Word! If it is our desire to be drawn closer to Christ, then let's get in the Word. If it is our prayer for others that they know Christ as their righteousness, then bring them the Word! That's the point Jesus was making when He read from Isaiah in the synagogue in Nazareth. The Word directed the people to Him. He is the fulfillment of the Word. Indeed He is the Word incarnate. When we read the Old Testament Scriptures we read of Christ in the promises of God, that He would send a Savior to deliver us from death. In the gospels we read of the fulfillment of that promise in Jesus, who died for us and rose again. In the epistles we read of the blessings Christ brings to us all, and how we have forgiveness and life **through faith** in His name. We read of the righteousness of God, the righteousness that begins with Him, and is given to us by grace through faith! This faith worked in our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit brings us so close to Christ and God that it fills our hearts and is evident in our lives.

**Romans 10:9-11** ... If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. 10 For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. 11 For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.”

Faith that fills your heart with the assurance of God’s love and forgiveness, such faith is a living thing. It is not a cold, calculated knowledge of the intellect. NO, it is a power that makes us alive and vibrant with a true spirituality. The truth that fills our hearts is also going to be expressed by our lips. We **will** confess our faith. We do this most commonly with our fellow believers, when having devotions and Bible studies, and prayers, even table prayers. We confess Jesus when we gather in church, and confess our sins and seek forgiveness in Christ, and when we stand and together profess our faith with the words of our creeds. We confess our faith in Jesus when we sing our hymns. We also tell others of our faith. We confess with our lips the truth that fills our hearts because we know the hope of salvation and the joy and peace of believing that comes to us by grace through faith, because of the saving merits of Jesus, our Savior God. That is a living faith. That is a saving faith.

We know the wonder of being close to Jesus, even though we have never seen Him, or touched Him, or literally heard the sound of His voice. We are so close to Christ because the Spirit has drawn us to God through faith in Christ. This is just as good for us as anyone. And this is just as good for anyone as it is for us. It is there for all who believe!

**Romans 10:12** For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him.

God is rich in His love and in His grace toward all who believe. The gospel invitation is there for all! **Hear the Word**

**of the Lord! Hear and believe! Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household”**  
(Acts 16:31).

**CONCLUSION:** Oh, the wonder of it all – to be close to God, to be so very close to Christ. We are granted this confidence in His Word so that we may confess with our mouth --

**TLH 373:5** “By Grace! This ground of faith is certain;  
So long as God is true it stands.  
What saints have penned by inspiration,  
What in His Word our God commands,  
What our whole faith must rest upon,  
Is grace alone, grace in His Son.

**AMEN.**

And the peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.