

Romans: The Good News of God

A Reputation worth Having

Romans 1:8

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A Reputation worth Having

Scripture

Benjamin Franklin once said, “Glass, china, and reputation are easily cracked and never well mended.”

William Shakespeare’s Othello lamented the loss of his reputation after he had acted foolishly, “Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself; and what remains is bestial!” (*Othello*, Act II, Scene 3).

Reputation is a strange thing, isn’t it? How are we to think of reputation? Is it fragile like glass and china? Is it immortal? Is it worth having? Or is it better for us not even to be concerned about such matters?

The answer, it seems to me, is that it depends on what we have a reputation for.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul commends the Christians in Rome for the reputation they had acquired. In fact, the reputation of their faith is the very first thing Paul notes as he begins the body of his letter. We read about this in Romans 1:8:

⁸ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is being reported all over the world.
(Romans 1:8)

Introduction

Paul commends the Roman Christians for their faith. Their reputation was for their faith in Jesus Christ. Paul tells us that their faith was being spoken about all over the world.

This does not mean that every individual in every remote corner of the world had heard of the faith of the Roman Christians. But it does mean that their faith was becoming increasingly widely

known—no doubt because people were talking to one another about it.

“Have you heard about the group of Christians in Rome?” they asked one another. “Have you heard how strong their faith is, how faithfully they are serving Jesus Christ in that wicked city?”

Since Paul thanks God for the reputation of the Roman Christians, it seems that however worthy or worthless worldly reputations may be, a reputation for faith is worth having.

Lesson

Now, what is it about their faith that gave the Roman Christians a reputation worth having? I want to suggest two qualities about their faith that gave them a reputation worth having.

I. Their Faith Was Genuine

The first quality about their faith that gave the Roman Christians a reputation worth having is that *their faith was genuine*.

It was a true faith. It was an authentic faith. It was the real thing. Now, this is an important place to begin, because there is so much so-called faith that is non-biblical faith and is therefore a flawed and invalid basis for any reputation.

A. *What Genuine Faith Is Not*

Before I show you what genuine faith is, let me show you what genuine faith is not.

First, genuine faith is not *subjective religious feeling*, entirely divorced from God’s written revelation. I remember talking to a man who thought like this. He told me he was a Christian. But as we talked I learned that he did not believe in the deity of Jesus, his bodily resurrection, and several other cardinal Christian doctrines. When I asked him how he could deny teaching central to Christianity and still call himself a Christian, he said he did not

know but that deep down in his heart he believed he was a Christian. Clearly this is not genuine faith. Genuine faith is not subjective religious feeling entirely divorced from biblical truth.

Second, genuine faith is not *credulity*. This is the attitude of people who will accept something as true only because they strongly wish it to be true. Sometimes a faith like this is fixed on a miraculous cure for some terminal disease, like congenital heart failure, AIDS, or cancer. But credulity does not make a cure happen. Wishful thinking is not genuine faith.

Third, genuine faith is not *optimism*. Norman Vincent Peale has popularized this false faith through his best-selling book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*. Peale suggests that we collect strong New Testament texts about faith, memorize them, let them sink down into our subconscious, and then recall them and recite them whenever we find faith in ourselves wavering. He says, “According to your faith in yourself, according to your faith in your job, according to your faith in God, this far will you get and no further.”¹

In this statement, however, faith in yourself, faith in your job, and faith in God are all apparently the same thing, and what this means is that the object of one’s faith is irrelevant. Author John Stott challenges this distortion accurately:

He [Peale] recommends as part of his “worry-breaking formula” that the first thing every morning before we get up we should say out loud, “I believe” three times, but he does not tell us in what we are so confidently and repeatedly to affirm our belief. The last words of his book are simply, “so believe and live successfully.” But believe *what*? Believe *whom*? To Dr. Peale faith is really another word for self-confidence, for a largely ungrounded optimism.²

There is some value in a positive outlook on life, of course,

¹ Norman Vincent Peale, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (New York, NY: Prentice-Hall Publishing, 1952), 99.

² John R. W. Stott, *Your Mind Matters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1972), 35-36.

just as there is some value in a positive self-image. But this is not the same as genuine faith. And this is not the faith for which the apostle Paul thanked God for on behalf of the Roman Christians.

B. What Genuine Faith Is

Now, if genuine faith is not subjective religious feeling, credulity, or optimism, what then is genuine faith? Genuine faith consists of three elements.

First, genuine faith consists of *knowledge*. You must know the facts of the gospel. You must know that God is holy, that you are a sinner, that your sin has cut you off from God, that you are spiritually dead, and that you are without hope and that you are on your way to hell except for the sovereign mercy of God. You must also know that God has provided a way of escape, and that way of escape is through his Son, Jesus Christ. You must know that Jesus lived and died never having committed any sin, and that he *alone* can reconcile you to God. Without a knowledge of the facts of the gospel, there can never be genuine faith.

Second, genuine faith consists of *assent*. Not only must you know the facts of the gospel, you must agree that they are true.

Now, it is precisely at this point that many people go wrong. They think that because they know the facts of the gospel and that they assent to them, that they have genuine, saving faith. But nothing could be further from the truth.

James says, “You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder” (2:19). If I could somehow take a survey of all the demons in hell, every single one of them would not only acknowledge all the facts of the gospel, but they would agree that it is all true. But the demons are still in hell. They do not have genuine faith. Why? Because all they have is knowledge and assent. They do not have that absolutely essential third element of genuine, saving faith.

The third element of genuine faith is *trust*. Genuine faith consists of all three elements: knowledge, assent and trust. (To

help me remember what genuine, saving faith is, I think of it as *kat*—*knowledge*, *assent* and *trust*).

The best illustration of trust I can think of is that of the tightrope walker, Blondin. One day he stretched a tightrope across the Niagara Falls. A large crowd gathered on the side to watch him walk across and back, and cheered when he arrived safely back on the bank of the river.

The second time Blondin pushed a wheelbarrow filled with a large sack of potatoes across and back. Again the crowd cheered.

Blondin asked the crowd if they thought he could safely push a man in the wheelbarrow across and back. Many in the crowd said, “Yes!”

Then Blondin went up to one of the men who said, “Yes!” and asked him, “Sir, would you get in to the wheelbarrow?”

Now, if that man truly believed in Blondin he would get in and *trust* himself to Blondin to carry him over the Niagara Falls.

Genuine faith is exactly like that. It not only knows and agrees that Jesus alone saves but it trusts in Jesus to carry us to heaven.

Now, *this* is the faith that the Roman Christians had.

In the opening statements of his letter to them, Paul summarized the gospel, defining it as the good news from God “regarding his Son” (1:3), and concluded that the Roman Christians “also are among those who are called to belong to Jesus Christ” (1:6). Then Paul praised God for the faith of the Roman Christians, and it is evident that Paul had genuine, saving faith in mind. Their faith was genuine because it consisted in knowledge, assent and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as God’s Son and Savior.

The question I want to ask you is this: Is your faith like that? Do you have genuine faith in Jesus Christ? Does your faith consist of knowledge, assent and trust in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation?

If it does, you can be assured of your salvation. But if it does not, if it consists merely of subjective religious feeling, or credulity, or optimism, or knowledge, or knowledge and assent,

then I must warn you that your faith is not genuine, saving faith.

The only faith that is genuine is a faith that consists of knowledge, assent and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the only faith that saves.

II. Their Faith Was Contagious

The second quality about the faith of the Roman Christians that gave them a reputation worth having is that *their faith was contagious*.

What I mean by this is that their faith was not merely heard of and talked about throughout the known world, but that it was also a faith they communicated to others. And because they shared their faith, the Roman church grew. This is suggested by verse 17 in the phrase that says “by faith from first to last.”

The apostle Paul says in Romans 1:16-17, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is *by faith from first to last*, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”

Now I know that the phrase “by faith from first to last” can be interpreted in two ways. In Greek the verse contains a repetition of the word *faith* in the phrase so that it literally reads, “from faith to faith” (ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν). The first way to understand that phrase is the way in which the translators of *New International Version* apparently understand it, as meaning “by faith from first to last.”

But it can also mean—and a more literal translation of the phrase suggests it *does* mean—“from the faith of one who has believed in Christ to another who comes to believe as a result of the first Christian’s testimony.”

As I say, the phrase “from faith to faith” does not necessarily mean this, since both translations are possible. But I think it does. However, whether or not this is the correct meaning, there is no

doubt that this is the way the gospel spread in the early centuries of the Christian church, undoubtedly (at least in part) from the strategically located and growing church in the capital city of the Roman Empire.

We must remember that this faith that was being reported all over the world was spread without the help of modern media. The Roman church had no modern media at its disposal to “get the message out”! There were no Christian books. There were no Christian magazines. There were no television preachers. In fact, the Roman church did not have a superstar preacher! We don’t know who planted the church, and we don’t even know who the pastor/preacher of the church was at the time that Paul wrote to the Roman church.

So how do you suppose that the Roman Christians succeeded, as we know they did, without the tools of modern communication? D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones has the answer:

A revival never needs to be advertised; it always advertises itself. . . . Read the history of the church. When revival breaks out in a little group, it does not matter how small, the news spreads and curiosity is awakened and people come and say, “What is this? Can we partake in this? How can we get hold of this?” Man does not need to advertise it; it becomes known; it spreads throughout the whole world. It had happened here. This is revival! This is Pentecost! This is the work of the Holy Spirit, and the news had spread like wildfire in that ancient world with its poor means of communication, and its absence and lack of advertising media. Isn’t it time we began to think in New Testament terms?³

So, how do we begin to think in New Testament terms? First, we must recognize that all evangelism must be done in the power of the Holy Spirit. After his resurrection Jesus told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the gift of Holy Spirit. Then he said to them, “[Y]ou will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and

³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 1, The Gospel of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), 179-180.

you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

Later, when Peter was before the Sanhedrin with John, the Scripture says that he was “filled with the Spirit” as he spoke to them (Acts 4:8).

After Peter and John were released from prison, they went back to their own people. After a season of prayer, the Scripture says that “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly” (Acts 4:31).

Just like the first-century Christians, we must share our faith in the power of the Holy Spirit. And how do we do that? Pray. Ask God to fill you with his Holy Spirit each day. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you into opportunities for sharing.

And along with prayer for the filling of the Holy Spirit, I would suggest that you think of and pray for specific individuals in your life who need the gospel. Make a list of one, two or three individuals with whom you have some regular contact. It might be your professor, your colleague, your neighbor, a family member, your hairdresser, your server at your favorite restaurant. All of us are in regular contact with people, and some of those individuals are not Christians. Write their names down on a list and begin praying for them. Ask God the Holy Spirit to give you opportunities to share your faith with them.

I am convinced that if each one of us regularly prayed for the Holy Spirit to fill us and if we prayed for certain individuals in our circle of contacts, our faith would also be contagious, just like the Roman Christians.

Conclusion

The Roman Christians had a reputation worth having because their faith was genuine and it was contagious. Their faith was being reported all over the world because they trusted in Jesus Christ alone as their Lord and Savior. And because Jesus Christ had rescued them from hell, they were passionate about sharing the

good news with the lost and perishing.

An unknown author wrote that on a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks were frequent, there once existed a little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted volunteers kept a constant watch over the sea. With no thought for their own safety they went out day and night, tirelessly rescuing the lost. Many lives were saved, and the station became famous.

Some of those who were saved, along with others in the surrounding area, wanted to become associated with the station. They gave time, money, and effort to support its work. They bought new boats and trained new crews, and the lifesaving station grew.

Some of those who volunteered at the station soon became upset that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. So they replaced the emergency cots and beds and put better furniture in a new, larger building.

As a result, the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its volunteers. They decorated it exquisitely and began to use it as a club and even charged membership dues. Because fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, they hired lifeboat crews to do the work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed on the club emblems and stationery, however, and there was a symbolic lifeboat in the room where club initiations were held.

About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in loads of cold, wet, half-drowned people. Because these survivors were dirty and sick, they soon messed up the beautiful new club. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built outside the club where the shipwreck victims could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting there was a split in the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the lifesaving activities altogether because they thought it was a hindrance and unpleasant

to the normal social life of the club. Other members insisted on lifesaving as their primary purpose and pointed out that, after all, the club was still a lifesaving station. But those members were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of various people shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast, which they did.

As the years went by, the new station gradually faced the same problems the other one had experienced. It, too, evolved into a club, and its lifesaving work became less and less of a priority. The few members who remained dedicated to saving lives founded yet another lifesaving station.

History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that coast today you'll find a number of exclusive clubs along the shore. Shipwrecks are still frequent, but most of the people drown.

What a striking illustration of the history of so many churches! Jesus Christ calls us to trust him and to tell others about him. Let us not become sidetracked by secondary issues. "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). And let us tell others about our great and wonderful Savior.

The Roman Christians had a reputation worth having because their faith was genuine and it was contagious. I pray that you and I may also have a faith that is genuine and contagious. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, what a precious gift a good reputation is. The Roman Christians were known for their faith.

If there is anyone here today who does not have genuine, saving faith, will you please grant that person the gift of faith? Enable that person to know the facts of the Gospel, to assent to those facts, and then to trust in Jesus Christ alone for the gift of eternal life.

And Father, help us who are already Christians to have a faith that is contagious. Fill us with your Spirit. Give us names of family members, friends, coworkers, and neighbors for whom we can pray regularly.

May it be said of us here at the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church that our faith is being reported all over the world.

And all of this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.