

But now...

Romans 3:21-31

In the middle of her sermon, she stops and asks the congregation: “Am I talking too much about sin?”ⁱ Fleming Rutledge is an episcopal priest in New York City. She continues, “I am talking about it for 2 reasons. 1) the Bible talks about it 2) it is a daily reality of my life.” And then she tells a story from her daily reality about the everydayness of her sin. She writes:

“Three days ago I was driving from St. Pauls to West Hampton. I was in a hurry. I took several wrong turns and ended up on the south side of James. It took me half an hour to get back into town and then I made another mistake as I tried to get onto Interstate I95 going west. I was frustrated and angry. Then I saw a sign, I 95, and an opportunity. The only problem was that there was another sign, with an arrow going left and a line drawn through it. That meant the turn I wanted to take was forbidden. I glanced around, looing for police, and decided to ignore the sign. I sped up and started to pull into the left lane to make the forbidden left turn. It is not an exaggeration to say that I missed a broadside collision and probable death by a fraction of an inch as a car I had not seen zoomed by me on the left. By a miracle of God’s undeserved grace, I swerved at the last second. The driver of a car coming up behind me blared his horn at me for a very long time as if to say “I saw what you just did, you (expletive deleted).”

Rutledge continues, “Sometime when I tell a story like this people will say “That’s not sin.” They will say, well, you were tired, or, you made a mistake, or you did a dumb thing, but it wasn’t a sin.” People say those things partly because they are trying to make me feel better but also because they don’t understand what sin is. In this episode on the highway, we see how deeply ingrained certain attitudes are within the human being. In making that forbidden left turn, I had acted on the assumption that the rules didn’t apply to me.” Perhaps people say that’s not sin because they don’t want to come to terms with the sin in their own lives, to have to call a spade a spade or to face it head on.

Have you ever had one of those awkward conversations where the person is dancing around a sensitive topic, coming at it from several different angles, choosing their words ever so carefully so as not to say the wrong thing, until finally you just want them to get to the point, no matter how brutally honest, no matter how painful? Have we been talking about sin too much? We have been talking about it, about sin for the past 4 Sundays, every Sunday the same theme. Because Paul has been talking about sin in his letter to the Romans for 64 verses straight, without letting up, never stopping to ask the Romans who are reading his letter if he is talking about sin too much. He has been talking about it without giving even so much as a hint at easing up on us, sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph, building his argument, stating and restating, changing perspectives and different groups to focus on. And finally, today, he comes right out and says it straight so that there is no room for ambiguity, no wiggle room, no question who or what he is talking about: For all have sinned and fall short

of the glory of God. That's our purpose; that's why we were made. Humanity was the crowning glory of God's creation. After making us, in His own image, after His likeness, he stood back and looked at what He had made and declared that it was very good. The very first question of the Westminster shorter catechism asks: what is the chief end of man, in other words, what is our main purpose? And the answer: the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. To glorify God; that is our purpose, our *raison d'être*, our reason for being. But there's a problem: we can't fulfill our purpose, we can't glorify God because of sin, not sin in general, but our sin, your sin and my sin to get specific. Our sin has left us tarnished. Think about a penny. When it is freshly minted it is polished up and highly reflective. But as soon as it is exposed to oxygen, it begins to breakdown, it begins to tarnish until it is dull and leaving a metallic residue on your hands. That's us, no longer reflecting the glory of our maker but dull and dirty.

And Paul has done an excellent job, a completely thorough job of explaining the righteousness of God. What does this mean? When we say that God is righteous it means that He is right in all that He does, that He is just and fair in His decisions, and that these are consistent with His holiness. And so when Paul refers to the righteousness of God what is blatantly obvious in his long drawn out discussion of sin is that we are unrighteous. In fact, it is as Paul points out, that our unrighteousness makes the righteousness of God even more clear. And not even the law, the law which was given by God, can make us righteous. Instead, what the law does is show us where and how far we have strayed from it. And so, it seems absolutely hopeless. Left on our own we are tarnished and dirty, sinners, every single one of us. And there is nothing we can do to make ourselves right. We can't even obey the law, can't even stop ourselves from something as simple and insignificant as making a forbidden left turn.

After 64 verses of utter sinfulness our situation is beyond bleak. It's as though we were at a lake. All over the shore the signs are posted: Danger. Quick drop off. Rip tide. Do not go in the water. Danger. Many have drowned before. But we just can't stop ourselves. We're strong swimmers, we can handle it. We won't go in too far. It won't be that bad. And before we know it, we are in way over our heads and the current is strong and we are drowning. That's us. The signs on the shore are no good to us any more. And we can't do anything to help ourselves. After 64 verses of sinfulness and a certain outcome of despair, hope; six little letters open the door a crack and a little ray of hope streams in. But now. In the midst of doom and gloom, sin upon sin upon sin, unrighteousness, condemnation, even the law can't save you now, Paul gets our complete attention with those two small and seemingly insignificant words, but now. Those two little words introduce a reversal of what had come before. Those 64 verses have sealed our fate. Wait - Not just yet. Sin and law and death are not the last words. But now, God has provided another way. He is sending someone to save us. And not just anyone. But Jesus. Jesus alone can save us. We were drowning in sin. Death was the only outcome. But now, we are offered a righteousness which comes only from Jesus. We have done nothing, absolutely nothing to earn it or achieve or buy it. As Flemming Rutledge states plainly, "The gospel is quite different from the American scripture – God helps those who help themselves. The gospel is quite different "while we were yet sinners, Christ died for the

ungodly.” This is so revolutionary,” she says, “that it is hard to describe. Everything we believe about religion and God would have led us to believe that Christ would die for the righteous, the godly, the spiritual. No, says the Lord himself. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” We were drowning in our own sin but now God has given us Jesus. We need only do one thing: have faith. Have faith. It is by grace you are saved, through faith, Paul writes. It is not by grace you are saved by being a good person, by making a big donation, by using all the right religious language, or by praying the longest prayers or by obeying all the rules. It is by God’s grace you are saved through faith in Jesus. There is no other way. I want you to hear me when I say that. If you are still looking for another way, you are wasting your precious time. There is no other way. There is no job, no car, no house, no child, no spouse, no lottery, no magic pill, there is nothing that can save you except faith in Jesus. A drowning person reaches out in faith to the one who has jumped into the deep to save them. No one who says “I’m going to pass and wait for someone else” lives to tell. Jesus saves when in faith, we reach out to take hold of him.

Perhaps you remember the story of Jesus found in the first 11 verses of John’s gospel, chapter 8. Jesus was teaching at the temple courts when the Pharisees and the teachers of the law brought a woman to him, a woman who they claimed had been caught in the act of adultery. They made her stand there while the circle of judgment closed in around her. It would be fair to assume that they Pharisees and the other legal experts didn’t really care about the woman, she was just the kind of bait they need to entrap Jesus. Here, at the temple courts, in front of the gathered crowds, they could ambush him. They laid out the legal case against her and pronounced the sentence that was clearly handed down in the Law of Moses: stone her, to stone her to death. And then they turned to him. But now what do you say?

There stood Jesus. On the one hand, the law had already spoken. It was clear. She was condemned. God is righteous. He is right, just, fair. Jesus is the righteousness of God. Sinless, without blemish. He will uphold the law. On the other hand, she was drowning and there was nothing she could do to save herself. Her condition was broken – yes, she was a sinner and he had come to save her. And then, he stood among the gathered: the sinful woman, the Pharisees and legal experts who obeyed the law down to the finest detail though pride always got in their way, to the onlookers, their own lives tarnished by sin. And upholding the law, Jesus said “If any of you is without sin, let them be the first to throw a stone.” All, from the Pharisee to the woman, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” And they walked away, leaving only the woman, the woman, drowning in her sin, taking her last gasps of air. And Jesus, the very one who would become her righteousness, does not condemn her. Instead he tells her to leave her life of sin and sets her free. Jesus both fulfills the righteousness of God and becomes our righteousness in a way we could never do for ourselves. He knows that He will die so that she might live. Did you hear it? When the Pharisees made the case against her, and reminded Jesus of the death sentence upon her, they turned to him. They could not have known the impact of their words at the time. And then they said to him, six little letters, “but now...but now, what do you say?” Standing condemned to a death sentence, before God and his religious witnesses, absolutely hopeless. But now. John Newton, a slave trader

who eventually gave himself in faith to Christ, later wrote Amazing Grace. You may have never noticed those two words before but its no accident that Newton included them in his famous hymn: I was lost but now, I'm found, was blind, but now, I see. John Newton was lost, the woman caught in adultery was lost. But now, Jesus, the one who both upholds the law and saves us from our brokenness which can only lead to death when we come to him in faith. That's what it takes. Its not an automatic reversal. It takes faith on our part to believe that Jesus has done this for us. After 64 verses of nothing but bad news, hear the good news. God had a plan. Though our sin, my sin and your sin, the sins which are the daily realities of our lives, sin which took you and I down roads and talked us into taking forbidden left turns and would lead us further and further away from God, there is hope. We are drowning but God has sent us a life saver, a savior. And some of us have reached out in faith and have trusted Jesus to save us. Sin is still our everyday reality but now, by the grace of God, we aren't drowning in it. We are clinging to Him and He will not let us go. And I can tell you very personally, it is such a great relief. I remember what the drowning felt like. I was lost and far from God, bankrupt of hope, but now...forgiven and free. If you are drowning there is no hope of saving yourself. But Jesus is here and he is waiting for you to call out to him for help.

ⁱ Flemming Rutledge, "*God-Damned Christians*", [Help My Unbelief](#), William B Eerdmans Publishing, 2000.