



## SUNDAY SERMON

# How to Read the Bible: Sermon Series (2 of 3)

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### DATE

Epiphany 6  
Sunday, Feb. 17, 2019

### PREACHER

The Rev. Jason Cox

Good morning Friends. This sermon is the second in my series, “How to Read the Bible.” Last week I explained that it was important for you to figure out for yourself what we think the Big Story of the Bible is— the main point the Bible is trying to make— in order to make sense of all the little stories that make up the Bible. And I proposed one option for that Big Story: that the Bible is a story about our oppression by the powers of this world, and God’s intention to liberate us from these powers and make us free citizens of God’s own Kingdom.

And we considered the original version of this story: how God liberated Israel from the oppressive power of Egypt, and brought the Jewish people to their own land where they could build a new, egalitarian society. Next week we will hear a similar story, when we consider Jesus’ confrontation with the oppressive power of Rome.

In both of these stories, the Biblical paradigm shift is concrete and obvious: the power of Empire versus the values of God’s Kingdom.

This week is a little different though, less about our material struggles and more about our spiritual struggle. Today we turn to the Apostle Paul and the radical reinterpretation of Judaism that his mystical encounter with Jesus brings about. For Paul, the basic human conflict is not between an external power and the Kingdom of God. Rather, the oppression starts within: the human predicament is how we — all of us — think about God. How we use God as an excuse to create a world of vast inequality.

Human beings are trapped in believing that God is like us, only bigger and more powerful. We imagine that God’s justice operates like human justice does: If I’m good I’ll be rewarded; If I’m bad I’ll be punished. We think God’s favor may be won by following the rules.

But Jesus liberates Paul from this way of thinking. He shows Paul that God’s love for us doesn’t depend on our love for God. It isn’t our righteousness that matters: only the righteousness of God matters. God’s love for us comes first. God’s faith in us precedes and enables any faith that we may have in return.

Now if this seems a little less . . . urgent than standing up to the worldly powers who are oppressing God’s people in material ways, well — I would agree. And I think there’s a reason that Paul is less focused on concrete issues than Jesus is. You see, Paul and Jesus were from vastly different class backgrounds.

Jesus came from a poor backwater town. His father was a construction worker. His friends were laborers and fishermen and unmarried women. He never ventured outside of Judea.

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Paul, by contrast, was sophisticated and cosmopolitan. He was born in Tarsus, a wealthy city in present-day Turkey. He was well educated and could speak and write multiple languages, including Greek, the language of learning and commerce. And significantly, he was a Roman citizen by birth, a relatively uncommon status, especially for a Jew. You're less likely to criticize the power structure directly, when you benefit from being a part of it.

And friends— please don't take this the wrong way— but I'm going to bet that if most of us met Paul and Jesus at a party, it would be far easier for us to relate to Paul.

In addition to being well-educated and well-travelled, Paul had another identity, before his radical conversion: He was a Pharisee. He calls himself that, proudly. You may remember from the Gospels that Jesus and the Pharisees didn't exactly get along. The Pharisees insisted on a strict interpretation of the Torah purity code — they were always trying to make serving God harder; Jesus is always getting into conflicts with them trying to show that God's love is so much easier and freer than they imagine.

Jesus and Paul never met during Jesus' life. Paul knew about Jesus though: in fact, as a good Pharisee he was a zealous persecutor of the Jesus sect. Paul was actually on a mission to round up Jesus-followers in the northern city of Damascus when he had a life-altering mystical experience — he was struck down by blinding light and heard the resurrected Jesus asking him "Why are you persecuting me?"

Paul was blind for three days. He made it into the city, and on the third day one of the Jesus followers, Ananias, came and laid hands on him and prayed for him. And, as it says in the book of Acts, "something like scales fell from his eyes," and he could see. He got up, and was baptized, and went from being a zealous pharisee to being a zealous apostle of Jesus.

And without Paul, the Christianity we know today wouldn't exist. Remember how cosmopolitan and well-travelled he was? Well that was key in planting new communities of Jesus followers around the Mediterranean basin. Paul would travel to a new town: Philippi, or Thessalonika, say, and would go to the local synagogue, and start talking about this new radical teacher named Jesus, who had been executed by the Romans in Jerusalem.

Paul never stayed too long in one place — he wanted to spread the Jesus message far and wide. But he kept up a correspondence with the churches he had founded — letters which make up the earliest writings we have about Jesus.

There was an interesting phenomenon happening at this time in these diaspora synagogues: they often had Gentiles — that is, non-Jews — who attended meetings, people who were interested in the ethical teachings of Judaism but who didn't want to convert. This isn't something that would have happened in Jerusalem, but out on the wild frontier the rules were a little looser. So the synagogues tolerated, even welcomed these Gentiles. They called them "God fearers."

Well it turns out, some of the people most interested in Paul's message about Jesus were just these Gentile "God-Fearers." And Paul came to feel that he had a special mission to bring the news of Jesus to these Gentiles. This set up a terrible conflict among early Jesus followers, a conflict that ended with the Jesus followers parting ways with Judaism, despite everyone's best intentions.

To be clear, this isn't what Paul wanted. He thought of himself as a faithful Jew until the day he died. But he did want to offer a radical reinterpretation of Judaism, based on what had been revealed to him by Jesus. We heard one version of that revelation in the passage from Paul's letter to the Romans this morning. Romans is Paul's magnum opus, the last letter he wrote, the summation of his twenty years of ministry.

He writes: "I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith."

He goes on to explain that God's righteousness is manifest in Jesus' willingness to take our place. I should say that I don't personally square with Paul's willingness to accept the Temple's theology of sacrifice. In fact there are plenty of voices within the Jewish tradition that had been questioning that theology all along.

But I appreciate Paul's drive to rethink our conception of God. After all, the God of the Temple was hardly the only God demanding sacrifices and doling out rewards and punishments. Thinking about God this way is a human problem, not just a Jewish problem. And the place Paul ends his thinking about sacrifice is truly radical: "For we hold that a person is justified by faith; apart from works prescribed by the law."

In other words: you can't earn God's love. You can't buy it with the right sacrifices at the Temple. You can't win it with good behavior. Trying harder doesn't matter. God's essential character: "the righteousness of God," as Paul puts it, is generosity. God's love is abundant and free.

Friends: this is liberating good news. Imagine a world where those in power were certain of God's love for them, and who understood that God had provided more than enough, of everything, for everyone.

Before Paul, no one had ever imagined that God's love was free. And this is where I think Moses', and Jesus', story of liberation connects with Paul's. Earthly powers, like Egypt and Rome, rely on a judgmental, angry vision of God to legitimate their power. The lie that God's love is a scarce commodity undergirds a world where a few at the top control vast amounts of power and wealth. They must deserve it, right? Because they have earned God's favor.

If God's love is actually free, and for everyone, everywhere, what does that mean for my power and wealth? Maybe this vast inequality isn't how the world is supposed to be. This message was so threatening to the Roman authorities that they executed not just Jesus, but Paul too.

That God's love is free is a radical idea, and it leads Paul to a position of preaching radical equality. When the church in Galatia fell into a fierce conflict about who was in and who was out, Paul writes them a letter explaining that there isn't an in and an out any more. He explains: "In Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

All religions have the potential to magnify our worst impulses, to trap God in a cage of human pettiness, and use God as an excuse to oppress those who are different from us. Paul wants to liberate us from ourselves, to free us from the false divisions we create. In Christ, there is only radical equality, because all of us belong to God as God's own children.

Amen.