

The Break

Romans 3:19-28

Cradock Presbyterian Church

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Some changes are sudden and breathtaking; they're a complete break from the past. You have to change; you don't have a choice. In a sense, YOU have been changed. Many of you remember Pearl Harbor, and World War Two that followed. Though we now know that American involvement was sort of inevitable, it seemed at the time like a break, **a break with a way of life**. We weren't so secure anymore. You didn't have a choice, your life – and of course the lives of *every* American – were changed. Some of us remember the assassination of President Kennedy that way, too, and did you realize that next month, it will have been 50 years since that awful day? We never thought such a thing could happen IN America, in our homeland; we were invulnerable! – or so we thought. In the space of about 8 seconds in Dallas on that November afternoon, change hit us in the face. There was no escape. It was a break from our up-'til-then innocent life. And now, post-9/11, we're living in the wake of another dramatic break. The danger is in our very midst, now; or do you need to be reminded about the Boston Marathon bombings just a few short months ago?

Some "breaks" are NOT dramatic, maybe because we didn't recognize them for what they were. We saw the *process* all the way, but somehow we didn't understand it. The best modern example I can think of is desegregation. The Supreme Court decision in 1954 that wiped out "separate but equal" – well, that was just a bunch of judges talking. Won't affect me! We know that within ten years, the country was in turmoil over the Civil Rights movement and school desegregation. And not just schools! Brown vs.

Board of Education, as it turned out, was about more than just schools; the ruling affected *everything*: bus terminals, lunch counters, department stores, on and on. People were forced to realize that their lives were changing in a dramatic way. But when the ruling was handed down, no one recognized the powerful, permanent break. And if you don't recognize it, how can you make a decision? Every time there is a break, you have to decide: do I accept it? Or try to turn things back?

Paul knew that men and women were oriented towards their own achievement for salvation, and they had a system in place to track it. But since it was human-centered, since it relied on humans, it could only be corrupt and sinful. That's the way we are! That's what he means by "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;" our own human nature guarantees that we'll bend anything, even a system for salvation, to our own desires. We corrupt everything; we try to make everything work towards our advantage. That's why Paul goes on to say, "they are now *justified* by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus". Do you remember what "justified" means? "Justified" is a theological word; all it means is "made right." God has "made us right" through his son Jesus. And it was a *gift*, something unearned. That way it could be pure, uncorrupted, un sinful, because it comes, not from us, but from God.

Now, let's think about gifts for a minute. What if somebody gave you a nice gift, say at your birthday party? Then you open it, and there's an IOU in it! "You owe me 10 hours of work for this gift!" That ain't a gift! That's a contract! And here's another side to look at: what if you *expected* the gift? What if you believed you were *owed* something? When you got it, would it feel like a gift, feel good? Or would it feel like, "It's about time!"

I don't think any of this feels like a gift. A real gift is something that surprises you, something you didn't see coming, something that makes you feel great, because it's someone else making a statement about you. A GOOD statement: that you're the kind of person worth giving a gift. I mean, apart from relatives, do we ever give gifts to people we dislike or consider worthless?

I worry that the easy lives we have in America today might just have corrupted us, might have fooled us into thinking that we're always owed something, even in our relationship with God. We might actually believe that there's a formula of "right living" that'll ensure our entry into God's graces now, and entry into heaven later. I worry that that might be the mindset that has overtaken us. Paul's words here in Romans are a sharp rebuke. "There is no distinction" between us, says Paul: ALL have sinned. He could very well have written "and all *still are* sinning," because that's what he meant. Hey, I guess we're not so good after all! How could we get good, then, according to Paul? We couldn't; we can't; God had to do something totally surprising; something no one saw coming. And it was something that told us how valuable to him we were and are. In other words, we needed a gift *from God*. We got that gift in the person of Jesus Christ. See, if you or I or anyone else had died on the cross, it wouldn't have made any difference. But because it was the Son of God who did it, it changed everything! It made a break from a hopeless existence and set us up for a glorious one. Since we couldn't do it, since we couldn't earn it, it had to be a gift, even though *we didn't deserve this gift!* Why did God do this? God arranged it this way for a reason. Paul says "it was to prove at the present time that [God] himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has

faith in Jesus.” You are made right, you are justified, you make a break from your hopeless life, through your faith.

And what is “faith?” I know you’re used to talking about it as “belief” or “having *faith in*” somebody or something. What faith is, is a *relationship*. What Paul means when he says “has faith” is “has a relationship with Jesus Christ.” He’s already pointed out to us that this relationship is a free gift. There’s nothing we did, or could do, to earn it. *That means there’s nothing we can do to effect our own salvation.* And today, you and I sitting here, don’t even need to worry about doing it. *Why? Because God has already done it!* IT IS A GIFT. And that means this new thing, this salvation because of faith, is *totally* a break with the way we do everything else!

We can’t do anything but accept this gift graciously. So what *do* we do to accept it?

The answer, I think, is in what Paul says in verse 27. “Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. “ I can tell you from the original language that you could also translate the genitive there to say it is “the law *that comes from* faith” or “the law *that is* faith.” It doesn’t come from humans at all! It comes from the relationship that God has created with us in Jesus Christ. That, my friends, is the “break” we needed. Paul goes on to say, improbably, that those “without the law”, Gentiles, are equal to the Jews of his day, because God “will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.” It’s no longer human-based, which is what being “circumcised” means, but comes from God.

That is the biggest “break” we’ve ever had. No matter how wretched we are or become, we have salvation if we accept it; thank God, we don’t have to be the source of it. If we did, we’d be doomed! But *God* doesn’t want us doomed! *God* has guaranteed salvation for us, *if we only live in relationship to him* – if we only live in faith. He’s even given us the Holy Spirit to help us do that very thing!

So what *do* we do? *We live like people who belong to God*. That means we give ourselves completely to God. *Completely*. Which is, of course, the only *right* way to relate to God. Here’s Paul again, from the sixth chapter of this same letter to: “No longer present your *members* to sin as *instruments* of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your *members* to God as *instruments* of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” “*Members*” here means your *limbs*, the parts of your body, your earthly existence; in other contexts, Paul talks about “flesh.” *Instruments* is another way of saying “tools.” And the word “present”, as in “present yourselves,” has the meaning of offering something to someone for their use. Like a gift! What we’re supposed to do is offer ourselves for God’s use. *Every part of us* that exists here in this worldly life. That’s another gift. In essence, because we’re in a relationship with God, we’re *exchanging gifts* with God.

That’s a very big break from the ways of the world today. What has the world taught you? Almost everything you’re taught in this world has to do with you taking care of you, first and foremost. Whatever extra we have, maybe *that* can go to God. If he heard that, Paul would have a fit! Our “gift” is to put ourselves completely at God’s

disposal. Then we'll be "living right," as those who have that relationship with God. The gift is on the table, ready for you to take, and hold, and enjoy. What gift do YOU bring to the party?