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Three Things That Matter*

Jeffrey Peterson

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Rom 8:1–4)

They tell us that we're living in an age of information. They tell us that we have available to us, each in our own living room, more pieces of information—more bits, they call them—than any people ever in the history of the world. With the push of a button, with the flick of a switch, we can instantly call up words and pictures from any point on the globe. From the comfort of your easy chair you can look up books in the libraries of great universities; you can turn on the TV and catch the evening news from Russia via satellite. You can hear prices quoted off the Tokyo stock exchange on the hourly business update as you drive around town, or sit in traffic, or you can follow the progress of a war as it happens on CNN. So, they tell us,

*A sermon preached at Sunset Ridge Church of Christ, 4 June 2000.

we're lucky to be living in an age of so many digital possibilities; they usually tell us this as they're getting ready to sell us the next piece of equipment they say we need.

But there are a few things they don't say. They don't tell us that all that information we command needs to be sorted out if it's going to mean anything to us. Erasmus is said to be the last person who had mastered the whole range of human understanding, in the sixteenth century. Well, maybe Erasmus could make sense of all the information that we're bombarded with, but that leaves the rest of us at a bit of a loss.

Another thing they don't point out: a troubling amount of the "information" we can find on the Internet or on cable is perverted and destructive and dehumanizing. And it's even less advertised that the vast majority of what the information age makes instantly available to us is utterly trivial and a waste of the time that God has granted us. They don't tell us that all that *information* we have such ready access to may have precious little to do with the *truth*—the truth of who we are, and what we ought to be doing, and how God made us to be.

So at the end of the day, when we're left to ourselves for a few moments, when we shut down the computer and turn off the TV and try to collect ourselves for a few minutes of evening prayer, with the images still swirling around in our imaginations and the words of broadcasters and advertisers echoing in our ears, in those moments we're left to wonder: in all of this chatter that we're constantly exposed to, what really matters?

That's where the word of God meets us in the text of Scripture today. The text is taken from the book of Romans. If Paul had wanted to give Romans a subtitle, he might have called it "things that matter," because it's in this letter that Paul leaves us his fullest account of the Gospel that he preached all over the world, the Gospel that he says as the letter opens is the very power of God to save all who are lost, to heal all of us who aren't well,

and to make us that are broken whole—and there's nothing anywhere that matters more than that. In Rom 8:1–4, Paul directs our attention to three truths that can anchor our lives no matter what's next to come down the information superhighway. And so we are invited to consider these three things that matter.

The first is the law of our Creator. The law of God is an important topic in Romans; it's mentioned frequently in the chapters leading up to chapter 8, and three times right in our passage. Now when Paul or any biblical writer talks about the law of God, we have to watch out that we don't misunderstand what's being said. Because it's a very special kind of law that they're talking about.

Most often when we think of law, we think of the law of the land, the sort of law that governs us when we drive on the highway: the law that sets the speed limit at 70 miles per hour, for example. Now we know that the law imposes speed limits to protect us and other drivers, and so we don't protest about it—not too much, anyway.

But from one point of view the law is arbitrary. Why 70 miles an hour? Why not 75? Why not 60? The speed limit doesn't have to be set where it is. It doesn't absolutely have to be there at all. We hear about highways in exotic places like Germany and (until recently) Montana that make do with no speed limit whatsoever. And even if we don't want to drive on highways like that ourselves, even if we agree that it's best for the law to limit our speed, still we can see how that kind of law is always a bit arbitrary.

There's a penalty to be paid for violating the speed limit, but the penalty is arbitrary, too; it's decided by legislatures which occasionally revisit it and adjust it up or down. What's more, we only pay the penalty if we get caught. And it's not only the speed limit that works this way: all the statutes that legislatures pass and policemen enforce and judges apply are

written down in public record, and they seem solid enough when we find ourselves up against them. Nonetheless, they're changeable; they don't have to be the way they are.

But there's another kind of law that governs us on the highway, a different kind of law. My family and I get around in a minivan equipped with a manual transmission, and every time I shift the gears, I engage a little device called a clutch. And there are no exceptions to this when you're driving our Voyager. You could say it's a law that when gears are shifted in our minivan, the clutch will be engaged. This law is even written down in a book, like the speed limit law; it's right there in the owner's manual.

Now when we're driving a five-speed, why is it that we obey the law of the clutch? Is it because we're afraid that if we don't we'll be pulled over and ticketed by the clutch police? How much sense would it make to launch a campaign to repeal the law of the clutch? What good would it do for a politician to declare, "The drivers of manual transmissions should be freed from this oppressive law; it's our duty as citizens to organize and overturn it"? No, if you're thinking that way, you don't understand the kind of law we're talking about. Because this is the law of the way the car is made.

And that's the kind of law God's law is. It's the law of the way *we* are made. You see, we have a creator, too, just as surely as Voyagers are made by Plymouth. Our creator made us to run in a certain way, just like Chrysler. His law is the way he made us to run. Now for our guidance God saw to it that his law was written down—in the law of Moses and the prophets of Israel and the writings of the Apostles. And you can look at the Bible and if you like you can say, "That's arbitrary; those are just words written in a book. There's nothing requiring us to live the way the Bible teaches; and if we choose not to, there's no penalty, at least none we can see." You can treat the owner's manual of your car the same way. You can

refuse to engage the clutch or change the oil. And it may run okay for a while; but sooner or later it's going to fail, and so will we if we disregard the will of the one who made us.

So that's the law that Paul's referring to in Romans chapter 8, the will of God expressed in Scripture but also experienced by each of us in our own lives. And there's nothing that matters more to any of us than discerning the will of God and conforming our lives to it. But that's where we find ourselves in a bind: we can't fully keep the law of God; we don't fully conform our lives to his will. Left to ourselves, we break his law again and again. The written record of God's will isn't powerful enough to overcome our sinfulness. And that brings Paul to the second of his things that matter, the sending of God's son into the world, the incarnation of Christ. In Christ, Paul tells us, God has done what the law could not do. His Son came in the likeness of our sinful flesh and in the death and resurrection of Christ God executed his judgment on sin itself.

We can learn from the Old Testament most of what we need to know about God's law and God's will, but it's the coming of Christ into the world that marks something new and extraordinary and life-changing in the Christian gospel that Paul preached. The sending of God's Son into the world means that the law of God is no longer just a theory. The will of God isn't just a nice idea for a life, a wonderful goal recorded for posterity in the Old Testament. Christ has come as the fulfillment of God's promises to the patriarchs and he's lived the life of perfect obedience that the Law and the Prophets call for.

And there's more; Paul spells his point out in Gal 4:4–6, where he speaks of two sendings, two missions that God has undertaken in the Christian era. First, God sent his Son to live and die and live again; then, he sent the Spirit of his risen Son into our hearts when we were baptized, and it's in that Spirit that we're able to call on God as our Father through Jesus Christ.

Because Christ has come into the world and lived a life like the one we're living and died a death as each of us will die, and because his Spirit has been poured out in our hearts, his life of perfect obedience to God's will has become a possibility for us, too. As Rom 8:4 says, "the just requirement of the law" can be fulfilled among us Christians who don't take our cues from the flesh, but from the Spirit of Christ that lives among us and within us. The good news of the gospel is that because of Christ we can become the people God would have us be—not all at once, not overnight, not ever finally in this life, but slowly and surely, as surely as Christ Jesus died to make us his.

And that's the third thing that matters: the way of life that Christ's death teaches and that the Spirit makes possible among us, the love of neighbor. Now love of neighbor isn't mentioned in our passage in so many words, but as we've just seen in v. 4 Paul refers to "the just requirement of the law"; and when Paul comes to explain what "the just requirement of the law" is in Rom 13:8, he says that it is summed up in one commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself." That is the commandment that is fulfilled in Christ's death. When we were his enemies, when we were sinners too weak to obey God's law ourselves, Christ died to benefit us; and God's law teaches us to give our lives to helping our neighbor, too.

The striking thing about this command is its universality. A scribe once asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" And Jesus answered, "Anyone you can imagine that you're in a position to help." That's what the parable of the Good Samaritan teaches. Your neighbor is the person sitting next to you on the pew; the husband or wife who faces you across the breakfast table; that troublesome, difficult person who occupies the office next to yours. Your neighbor is the beggar on the street whose sign asks you for money to buy food but who plans to spend anything you give him on booze,

and the unborn child whom your cousin or co-worker or daughter is considering not carrying to term.

Christians are naturally concerned for those we love; but we're also concerned for those who are loved by no one. They matter to us, because they matter to the God who created them. And we're summoned to extend to them the kind of sacrificial love that we see most clearly on an old rugged cross.

Paul begins this discussion of three things that matter with a declaration: for those who are in Christ Jesus, there is no condemnation under the law of God. If we've been made members of Christ in baptism, if week to week we're receiving the food that strengthens us at his table, if every day we're turning to him in prayer and being drawn by his Spirit deeper and deeper into his resurrected life, then we can rest secure that God will finally declare us innocent of all violations against his law; that's why Christ came. That's the gift he died to give us.

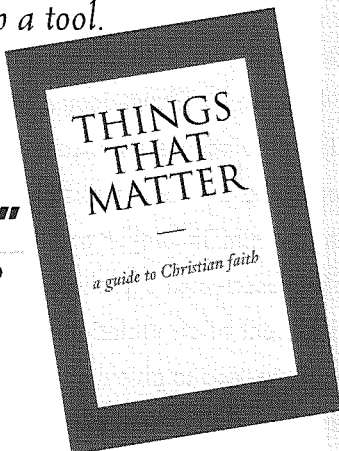
God's gift of new life in Christ is, as they sometimes say on TV, an offer not available in stores. But it is available wherever two or three are gathered in his name, because (he has promised) that is where he can be found; and so it is available here, today, as we stand to sing.

"Simple, yet Substantive."

I have often wished for an introductory guide to Christian faith to share with an earnest inquirer or a new Christian. Things That Matter is such a tool.

*It's excellent!
Simple, yet substantive.
I heartily recommend it!"*

Harold Hazelip
Lipscomb University



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