

**"The Final Diagnosis"**  
**Sermon Series on *The Fifth Gospel* #6**  
**Rev. Dr. Peter B. Barnes**  
**First Presbyterian Church – Winston-Salem, NC**  
**February 7, 2021**  
**(Rm. 3:1-20)**

**Introduction.**

There was once a man who was bothered by a continual ringing in his ears, bulging eyes, and a flushed face. Over a period of three years, he went from doctor to doctor trying to find the cause of his problem. One physician took out his tonsils, another took out his appendix, and still another pulled all his teeth. He even tried a goat gland treatment in Switzerland – all to no avail.

Finally, one doctor told him there was no hope and that he had just six months to live. The man quit his job, sold all his belongings, and decided to live it up in the time he had left. He went to a tailor, and he ordered several new suits and some dress shirts, too. The tailor measured his neck and wrote down "16 ½." The man corrected the tailor and said, "That measurement should be 15 ½." The tailor measured him again – "Nope, it's 16 ½." But the man insisted that he'd always worn a size 15 ½. Then the tailor said, "Well, all right, but don't come back here complaining to me if you have ringing in your ears, bulging eyes, and a flushed face!"<sup>1</sup>

That man had a difficult time getting a proper diagnosis of his problem. This isn't the case when we look at what the apostle Paul says in his final diagnosis about humanity which is found in the passage before us this morning. Paul provides the final diagnosis God makes regarding our spiritual condition apart from Christ. In Scripture God is called the Great Physician, and we should listen to what the Lord has to say about our spiritual health. It isn't a pleasant diagnosis to hear, and this isn't a comfortable passage to read. But it's the honest assessment God makes of our situation, and the good news is that He also proposes how He can heal our malady. In the course of our time together this morning I would like for you to consider three matters: 1) the patient's denial; 2) the final diagnosis; and 3) the divine cure.

**I. The Patient's Denial.**

Sometimes when we hear a doctor's diagnosis, we reject the truth and respond with denial. We don't want to hear what the physician is saying to us, and we pretend it isn't true. I remember when it came time for my mother to give up the keys to her car and quit driving because of her poor eyesight and slow reaction time. She was in denial that she couldn't see as well as she used to or that her reflexes were slowing down. It took a small accident before she was willing to give up the keys to her car.

In a similar way, many of us also don't like to hear the bad news regarding our spiritual condition, and our tendency is to respond with objections or to live in denial. It's not very

difficult to imagine the reaction of Paul's readers to what he has written so far in the book of Romans. They would have responded to him with a mixture of incredulity and indignation.

Let's review what Paul has said so far in his letter. (I'm indebted to J.D. Greer for some of these insights.) Paul started his epistle in chapter 1 by explaining that all of humanity has a problem, and the problem is sin. It's a disease of the soul. And he described how the wrath of God is being revealed against humanity because of our sin. He said that everyone who rejects God is without excuse, because God has revealed something about His character and His nature in creation. And whenever people reject God, the results are devastating and far-reaching both in terms of their behavior and their relationships. And you and I see the effects of this brokenness all around us in the world today.

Then in chapter 2 Paul anticipates an objection from religious people, and particularly pious Jews, who say, "Yeah, those Gentiles – those pagans, they're really messed up people. But not us. We Jews are religious. We've got the Torah, we've got the Word of God, we've got Abraham and the heroes of the faith, and we've got the Temple. We're different." So, Paul takes an entire chapter to demonstrate that religion doesn't really solve our problem. In fact, in some ways it makes the problem even worse, because religion can sometimes be a way of trying to manage God, or earn His approval, or twist His arm into doing what we want. And Paul draws a distinction between religion and the gospel.

Look at this chart Tim Keller has developed.

Religion	The Gospel
I obey - therefore I'm accepted.	I'm accepted-therefore I obey.
Motivation is based on fear and insecurity.	Motivation is based on grateful joy.
I obey God in order to get things from Him.	I obey God to get to delight in Him and to become more like Jesus.
When circumstances in my life go wrong, I am angry at God or myself, since I believe, like Job's friends did, that anyone who is good deserves a comfortable life.	When circumstances in my life go wrong, I struggle but I know all my punishment fell on Jesus and that while God may allow this for my training, He will exercise his Fatherly love within my trial.
My self-view swings between two poles. If and when I am living up to my standards. I feel confident, but then I am prone to be proud and unsympathetic to falling people. If and when I am not living up to standards. I feel insecure and inadequate. I'm not confident. I feel like a failure.	My self-view is not based on a view of myself as a moral achiever. In Christ, I am simultaneously sinful and yet accepted in Christ. I am so bad he had to die for me, and I am so loved he was glad to die for me. This leads me to deeper and deeper humility and confidence at the same time. Neither swaggering nor sniveling.
My identity and self-worth are based mainly on how hard I work or how moral I am, and so I look down on those I perceive as lazy or immoral. I feel superior to people who don't measure up to my standards.	My identity and self-worth are centered on the One who died for His enemies. I am saved by sheer grace. So I can't look down on those who believe or practice something different from me. Only by grace I am what I am. And I have no inner need to win arguments.

Far from fixing the problem of our sinfulness, religion and trying to be a moral person can actually compound the problem. It can give us a false assurance and tempt us to become prideful and self-righteous. So, Paul says, "You may be very moral, but you're still spiritually lost. You may be very religious, but you're still as lost as a person can be. In fact, your religion has caused you to become blind to your spiritual disease, and you're living in denial of just how spiritually bankrupt and dead you really are. You don't know how desperately you need a savior."

**II. The Final Diagnosis.**

As Paul presses on into chapter 3 of his epistle, the apostle anticipates another objection by his readers, and he conducts a mock debate which leads to the final diagnosis regarding our

spiritual condition. If God considers those who are moral spiritually lost, and if he considers those who are religious lost, then what advantage is there to being a Jew? And what is the value of knowing and following the commandments of God?

The three objections Paul anticipates, and answers, are: 1) this appears to undermine God's covenant with the Jews; 2) it nullifies the promises God made to them; and 3) it calls into question God's fairness. Whether these objections were real or imaginary, Paul took them seriously, and he responded to each one. He saw that the character of God was at stake, so he reaffirmed the truth that God's covenant has abiding value, that the Lord was indeed faithful to His promises, and that He is fair in His judgment. Let me show you how Paul does this.

Paul explains that God Himself inspired the stories in the OT and the requirements of the law, but their purpose wasn't to give the Jews some strategy or technique to earn God's love and favor or to remove their spiritual need for Him. Rather, the purpose of the stories in the OT and the laws of the covenant was to point Israel to their need for a savior.

Everything God gave the Jews in the Old Testament – the heroes of the faith, the Law, the rituals for worship – weren't designed to give the Jewish people something they could master which would earn them favor with God, but to bring them to a place where they would cry out, "I have no hope of ever being restored to a right relationship with You, O Lord, apart from Your grace." The rituals weren't intended to puff a person up with pride over their spiritual accomplishments, but to remind them how far we all fall short of living the kind of life God expects and to invite us to be humble before His saving grace.

Paul's argument continues. If the Law was supposed to lead the Jewish people to Jesus, then didn't God fail? After all, the Jews rejected Christ and collaborated with the Romans to have Him crucified. Paul's response is, "Absolutely not! Even though Israel in large part failed to believe, God still kept His promise to bring salvation. In fact, God took Israel's unbelief and turned it into an opportunity for people who aren't Jewish – namely the Gentiles, the pagans – to experience salvation too. He took Israel's unfaithfulness and used it to show even greater faithfulness on His part.

Paul continues: "Well then, if Israel's rebellion led to the salvation of the Gentiles, and that was all a part of God's plan, then how can God still blame the Jews and hold them responsible? Weren't they just playing their part in God's overall plan?" Paul's answer to this objection is that God will judge each person for his/her own belief and actions. Sure, God sovereignly works through and even overrules human choices to accomplish His divine will, but He still holds each of us accountable for the choices we make in this life. Just because God causes everything to work together for good and to accomplish His divine purposes in the world, it doesn't let any of us off the hook whenever we don't do the right thing or make the wrong choice.

Paul ends his little Q&A/debate with his fellow Jews by concluding, "So, what then? Are we Jews who have the law any better off in our hearts than Gentile sinners?" His answer, "No, not really. Everyone – both Jews and Gentiles – are all under sin." Then the apostle illustrates what he's saying by quoting a number of passages from the Old Testament which corroborate the truth of what he has just declared in this letter.

Friends, on the Day of judgment when everything is known about you and me and what we've done, none of us is going to come out looking good from a moral or spiritual point of view. The Bible says we all stand guilty before a holy God. This includes the most righteous

person you have ever known or who has ever lived. Moses, Abraham, Daniel, Esther, Billy Graham, Mother Teresa, and even your grandmother – whoever might be on your list. They are all sinners saved by grace. When the secrets of our hearts are exposed and the things, we've done in private are revealed, it's going to be a bad day for everyone. That's why Paul writes, "*There is none righteous, not even one*" (Rm. 3:10) from the perspective of a holy God.

Imagine 3 people on a beach near Wilmington, NC. One person can't swim at all, the second is a recreational swimmer, and the last one is an Olympic gold medalist. They all have the same goal of swimming from the coast of North Carolina across the Atlantic Ocean all the way to England. The first person sinks as soon as he gets out of his depth. The next flounders after swimming less than a mile, and he drowns. And even the Olympic gold medalist begins to struggle after swimming 30 miles, and after 50 miles he also drowns.

It doesn't matter which swam further. None was anywhere near England. And each ends us as dead as the others. In the same way the most moral and religious person in the world never comes close to the life of moral perfection a holy God requires, and they don't close to having a truly righteous heart. They are equally lost, and equally condemned to spiritual death apart from Christ.

Like a good physician, Paul has been ruthless in his honesty in telling us, his "patients," the truth, and now he approaches the end of his lengthy argument. He has already exposed in succession the spiritual decadence of much of the ancient world, the hypocritical self-righteousness of those who claim to be moral, and the overconfident self-righteousness of religious people. And now Paul proceeds to bring all of us before the court of God's justice and pronounce God's judgment on the whole human race. But here he shifts gears and Paul places himself, the Christians in Rome, and you and me squarely in the middle when he uses the word "we." Paul realizes that when he speaks these words of God's condemnation, he is speaking to himself as well, and he says that we all stand guilty at the bar of God's justice.

Paul asks, "Are we any better?" and he answers the question, "Not at all." The spiritual disease of sin is universal, it's pervasive, and it affects every single one of us and every area of our lives. And even our best actions are tainted with selfish motives. The repetition in this passage hammers home the point. There is no exception. No one is exempt.

D. Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote of these verses, "The best person, the noblest, the most learned, the most philanthropic; the greatest idealist, the greatest thinker, say what you like – there has never been a person who can stand up to the test of [righteousness demanded by] the law. Drop your plumb-line, and no individual is true to it."<sup>2</sup>

In verse 20 of this chapter, we reach the climax of Paul's argument against every attempt at saving ourselves, and he says that the law brings us the *knowledge* of sin, not the *forgiveness* of it. The apostle says that the purpose of the law wasn't to *correct* sin, but to *reveal* it. It was to function like a mirror that shows us just how sinful we really are.

Martin Luther wrote, "The principle point...of the law...is to make people not better but worse; that is to say, it shows them their sin, that by the knowledge of it they may be humbled, terrified, bruised and broken, and by this means may be driven to seek grace, and so come to that blessed Seed [which is Christ]."<sup>3</sup>

### **III. The Divine Cure.**

When we read these harsh words in Paul's letter, we may wonder, "What hope do we have?" In his commentary on Romans, John Stott suggests that when we read these words, we shouldn't try to evade the truth by changing the subject and talking instead about our need for self-esteem. And we shouldn't blame our parents or our family of origin, and we can't blame our education, or society. We aren't helpless victims. Rather we're responsible for our own conduct. Our first response to Paul's indictment, then, should be to make it as certain as we possibly can that we've accepted this divine diagnosis of our human condition as true.<sup>4</sup>

However, Stott goes on to say that our next response should be for us to read further, because in verse 21 of chapter 3 Paul writes, "*But now....*" And then he begins to explain how God has intervened on our behalf through Christ and His cross. \* Through the sacrifice of Jesus, the Great Physician offers a cure. "But now." What marvelous words! The diagnosis is serious; it's life threatening; and there is the potential for death. But now there is a cure! The good news of the gospel is that there is hope of recovery and healing, and there is hope for a new lease on life. And it's all because of Jesus.

Last Tuesday, Cyndy and I got our first doses of the vaccine for Covid-19, and it promises a better future when this pandemic is over. That experience reminded me of the time many years ago when I was a child, and I was given a vaccine for polio. I was in elementary school, and we all lined up in the auditorium where we were given these little cubes of sugar which had a yellow drop of the vaccine in them.

I thought it was a great day because I got to eat a sugar cube at school. But my parents thought it was a great day for another reason. They knew how devastating polio could be. They had seen iron lungs keeping people with polio alive. They remembered when pools were closed, and no one could swim because everyone was worried about spreading the disease. They personally knew people, including children, who had contracted polio themselves, and these individuals had to walk with crutches just to get around because the disease had permanently damaged their legs. My parents rejoiced because a cure had come, and it took away their fear.

Jesus said, "*It is not the healthy that need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners*" (Mk. 2:17). I don't have to tell you that the world is sick. One doesn't need special training to read the vital signs of our society and know that it is very ill. But because of God's unconditional love, He offers a cure in Christ. In Jesus God has a perfect cure for an imperfect world. But the question is, "Do we want to be healed? Do you want the healing Christ offers?"

### **Conclusion.**

How is it with your soul today? What is the spiritual condition of your heart this morning? Are you overwhelmed with a sense of helplessness and burdened with deep feelings of guilt because of things you've done in your past? Do you feel lost and worry that you have wandered too far from God to be found by Him? Or are you living in denial regarding the spiritual condition of your soul, and you think God is pretty lucky to have you on His team because you're such a religious and moral person? All of us are sinners who fall short of the glory of God, and each of us needs a Savior. But no one can fall so far that the Lord can't reach

them with His love and grace. Come to Jesus. God is the Great Physician, and Christ is His cure.”

There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole.  
There is a balm in Gilead that heals the sin-sick soul.<sup>5</sup>

Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup>Taken from *Parables, Etc.* 1985.

<sup>2</sup>D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Romans*, Vol. 2, p. 128.

<sup>3</sup>Martin Luther, *Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians*, p. 316.

<sup>4</sup>John R.W. Stott, p. 104.

<sup>5</sup>*There Is A Balm in Gilead* is a traditional African American spiritual. The date of composition is unclear, though the song dates at least to the 19th century. A version of the refrain can be found in Washington Glass's 1854 hymn "The Sinner's Cure". There is an allusion to the song in Edgar Allan Poe's poem *The Raven* (1845).