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Peale or Paul?

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It would be a perfectly obvious statement to say that Norman Vincent Peale did not write the *Epistle to the Romans*. As you know, Dr. Peale is noted for being the advocate of the power of positive thinking, and the book of Romans does not begin with positive thinking – it begins with the power of negative thinking. It is the stripping away of all the self-confidence of man in order that we might see ourselves as we are.

Now, I mean no personal attack on Dr. Peale in using his name in this connection. I am only referring to the approach it represents – what has been called the philosophy of mental aspirin – this power of positive thinking.

Somebody has said that the difference between Paul and Peale is that Paul is appealing, while Peale is appalling. But I don't think this is quite accurate; actually, I think the reverse is true. I think there is a very real sense in which it is Paul who is appalling, and Peale who is appealing. In fact, it is the very sense that Peale is appealing that makes him appalling, and it is the fact that Paul is appalling that makes him appealing.

Now, if you will bear with me, I will show you what I mean. I have a quotation I would like to share with you. It was not written by Norman Vincent Peale, but it does represent, I think, something of the school of thought he represents – it is typical of that. It is from an article that appeared in the *This Week* supplement of the *San Francisco Chronicle* some time ago, called "The Art of Being Yourself," in the column, "Words to Live By." I quote, as follows:

The art of being yourself at your best is the art of unfolding your personality into the man you want to be. By the grace of God you are what you are. Glory in your selfhood! Accept yourself, but go on from there. Champion the right to be yourself. Dare to be different and to set your own pattern. Live your own life and follow your own star. Re-

spect yourself! You have the right to be here, and you have important work to do. Don't stand in your own shadow. Get your little self out of the way so that your big self can stride forward. Make the most of yourself by fanning the tiny spark of possibility within you into the flame of achievement. Create the kind of self you will be happy to live with all your life. Be gentle with yourself. Learn to love yourself, to forgive yourself; for only as we have the right attitude toward ourselves can we have the right attitude toward others.

Now, isn't that appealing?

That kind of talk always strikes us with a very right note, doesn't it? And, if you place it alongside these words from Paul in the third chapter of Romans, you can see what I mean in stating that Peale sounds appealing and Paul sounds appalling, for Paul says: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one." "Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." But, you see, despite the popular appeal of this type of approach, there is one fatal flaw in this philosophy of self-improvement – it can't be done.

Take a little closer look at some of these things and see what I mean. Our quotation says: "Don't stand in your own shadow. Get your little self out of the way so that your big self can stride forward." Now let me ask you, very practically: How do you do this? It sounds good, doesn't it? But, how do you do it? Your little self is in the way. Your big self is back here, and yet the same self that you are trying to advance is the one that stands in the way. You see, we are only one self. Then how do we do this? This kind of a philosophy is really a problem trying to solve itself – which is impossible.

It reminds me of the little rhyme that says:

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I had a little tea party
this afternoon at three.
It was very small, three guests in all,
just I, myself, and me.
Myself ate up the sandwiches,
and I drank up the tea.
It was also I who ate the pie,
and passed the cake to me.

This is about as much real nonsense as this kind of thinking. It sounds beautiful – it sounds challenging – but it is totally impractical because there is no way of accomplishing it. It is like wrestling with yourself. Did you ever try that? I suggest that, in the privacy of your own room, you attempt this – wrestle with yourself! When you’ve got yourself down, who’s on top?

So, you can appreciate the realism of the Apostle Paul, who carefully documents his arguments from real life and sums up his conclusions with the remarkable statement of **man’s problem** that we read here.

Let me begin with Verse 9:

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all; for I have already charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, as it is written:

**“None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands, no one seeks for
God.**

**All have turned aside, together they have
gone wrong;
no one does good, not even one.”**

**“Their throat is an open grave,
they use their tongues to deceive.”**

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

**“Their mouth is full of curses and bitter-
ness.”**

**“Their feet are swift to shed blood,
in their paths are ruin and misery,
and the way of peace they do not know.”**

**“There is no fear of God before their
eyes.”**

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For no human being will be justified in his sight by the works of the law since through the law comes the knowledge of sin. {Rom 3:9-20 RSV}

As you read Verses 10-18, you see that these are quotations Paul has gathered from the Old Testament. He has gone back through the library of the Hebrew Scriptures and gathered up verses from Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Isaiah, and has brought them all together here. So, here is the indictment and the conclusive word as to the problem of man.

As you read this list through, it’s very revealing, isn’t it? I am always amazed at the way people can read this passage and add, mentally, “except me.”

None is righteous, no, not one, *except me*.
No one understands, no one seeks for God,
except me.
All have turned aside, *except me*.

As you read this through with people, you can oftentimes sense them adding those two words. Or, as they finish reading this passage, they say, “This is true of everybody else, but not of me.”

Now, Verses 10-12 are an evaluation on the part of the apostle. He is simply gathering up what is true and showing us that, in man’s heart, there is often much religion, much seeking after *a* god, but not seeking for *the* God – with a capital “G.” Across this vast land, there are thousands of churches packed with people – like this congregation this morning – and yet this indictment of the Apostle Paul would include all of them. Among all these people, in churches and temples all around the world, there is none that seeks for God – no, not one!

Isn’t that amazing? The natural heart of man is not really looking for God!

Now, men look for *a god* all the time. This is the entire drive of religion around the world – to find *a god* that man can worship, because man cannot live without *a god*, and every man *has* his god. We see people out on Sunday mornings polishing and waxing them at times, and taking them on trailers down to the water’s edge, and so on. There are lots of gods, all kinds of them, many different varieties – and every man has his god.

But Paul says – as he knows the human heart in this divinely-given look at what man is really like – there is *not one* that really wants to discover God unless God draws that man to himself. That is what Jesus said: “No man can come unto me ex-

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cept my Father draw him,” {cf, John 6:44}. If you have hunger in your heart for God – with a capital “G” – and I know many of you do (and across this land there are many like you), it is not because you want God, but because *God wants you!* God is seeking you, and drawing you, to himself – that is what Paul brings out here. Man wants God, in a sense, but man wants to use him. Every effort to find God on the part of the natural man is tainted with the attitude that we want to bargain with God when we find him, we want to accept him as an equal, but not as our Lord. And that is what God must be – *our Lord!* This is why Paul makes this statement.

You see, we want God at times –

- when we are in trouble,
- when we are in danger,
- when we need comfort,
- when we need surcease from sorrow or heartache we want God,

– but we don’t want him all the time. But, if God be God, he must be God all of the time – that is the whole point. And so man denies God’s right to be God.

Now, Verses 13-17 are an examination of man’s condition. What are the results of man’s rejection of God? And notice how up-to-date this is:

It affects his talk, first of all:

“Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive.”

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” {Rom 3:13-14 RSV}

When man refuses to bend his will to the will of God, it begins to affect his talk. You can tell it in the tone of his voice, in the words he chooses, in the biting sarcasm that comes forth, in the curses and bitterness, in the foulness of the tongue oftentimes, in the jealousy that is evident there. So, you see, it is true what Jesus says, that out of the heart of man, out of his inner being, come forth murders, adulteries, fornications, and foulness of every kind {cf, Mark 7:21}. This is man. It affects his talk.

Someone has said that if you want to prove this verse is true, go out on the street, go up to the first

man you see and hit him in the mouth, and you’ll see what comes out – curses and bitterness.

And it affects his walk:

**“Their feet are swift to shed blood,
in their paths are ruin and misery,
and the way of peace they do not know.”
{Rom 3:15-17 RSV}**

Someone has suggested that this would be a very remarkable verse to write above the doors of the United Nations building in New York: “Their feet are swift to shed blood, in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they do not know.” Isn’t it true? Here are the nations gathered together – gathered to seek peace – but the outcome of it is constant friction, and trouble, and disturbance, and heartache, and bloodshed, and misery, and they do not know the way of peace.

Now the explanation is given in Verse 18 – one short sentence:

**“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”
{Rom 3:18 RSV}**

There is no understanding of God’s being – no concern for his opinion. To put it in the words of the street today, “man couldn’t care less about what God thinks about him” – and this is the root of all of the problems in human life. There is no concern for God’s opinion in man’s life.

So we have this final sentence of indictment in Verses 19-20. Paul points out that even the Ten Commandments can’t help you here. What good does it do to have these laws, moral as they are, ethical and right as they are, – even though everybody subscribes to them – when all they do is simply point out how much we fail to keep them.

You often hear somebody say, “I don’t need Christ, all I need is the Sermon on the Mount,” or, “the Ten Commandments.” The obvious answer to such a claim is: Well, that’s fine, but do you *do* this? It isn’t enough just to have this code hanging up on your bedroom wall, or even to subscribe to it mentally, but, do you *do* these things?

Law is such that, if not kept, it demands retribution. The Ten Commandments, as Paul points out here, are for only one purpose:

through the law comes the knowledge of sin. {Rom 3:20 RSV}

As we measure ourselves alongside of the ten rules which God has given man, we discover that we have all failed. So it merely reveals how far short we have come.

Now, if we stopped here (and this is where so many people stop in their understanding of the Christian message) we would have the most discouraging, depressing message that man has ever heard. This is negative thinking, isn't it. And no wonder nobody wants it. If this is all there is, it leaves us with all our self-respect thrown away, our confidence gone, and we have nothing left. We are naked before God and man – and who wants to be that way? But, you see, if we stopped here, it would be only half the gospel, only half the story. Don't stop here! The other half is what makes it wonderful – **God's answer to man's problem.**

Notice that Verse 21 begins with the words, "But now." That word "But" is a *corner* word – you come to it and you turn a corner:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus. {Rom 3:21-26 RSV}

Do you understand that? It is saying that what no man can do by self effort – that is, to be righteous and accepted by God – God will do for him *if* that man yields to Jesus Christ the right to be Lord of his life: This is the gospel.

Now, Paul points out that there is no use trying to press to any other point: There is no distinction at all between men in this matter in God's sight. There is no need to show your Boy Scout badge, or your baptism certificate, or your church membership, or your lodge emblem. As Paul says, "there is no distinction" here – the ground is level at the foot of the cross. All men have fallen short, as

Phillips so beautifully puts it, "of the beauty of God's plan" {Rom 3:23 J. B. Phillips}.

Who can argue with that? Have you fulfilled the beauty of God's plan for your life? Of course not! Then *all* have sinned and fallen short, and missed the beauty of God's plan. And *the only way* to be justified is by faith in Jesus Christ. All men can have him. And no man can be justified apart from him, who, by his death in our place, made it possible for God to receive us, and give us Christ's righteousness. Now, that is the gospel.

As you can see, the cross is the great place of exchange. As Paul writes in Corinthians, "He who knew no sin [Jesus] was made sin for us that we who knew no righteousness [in ourselves] might be given [or made] the righteousness of God through Jesus Christ," {cf, 2 Cor 5:21}. And this is done at the moment of faith, at the moment of acceptance of the Lordship of Jesus Christ at the cross.

Now, this is a great mystery. I confess I never fully understand it – and no one else does – and we never will. What took place on the cross of Jesus Christ is a vast and insuperable mystery. We never can fully enter into it, but Paul points out two things that are made clear in the cross of Christ:

1. The first one is that, although God apparently overlooked evil in the past, and allowed it to go on, this does not mean that he is not righteous, as some men think. For, when God's Son took the place of sinners, and, on the cross, was *their representative*, God looking down at his own beloved Son, who had done no wrong, *spared him not*, but poured out upon his innocent head all the wrath that a holy God reserves for men who live in rebellion against him. It is forever on record, therefore, in the cross of Christ, that, though God accepts a sinner, he hates the sin and will not bend to it in the slightest degree. Thus, God's record stands vindicated by the cross. God, even when his own Son was there, would not spare him.
- This means that you and I can never get by with trying to get God to be lenient with us, for even when his own Son was there, he wouldn't spare him.
 - It means that God is righteous and even though he passes over sin, and doesn't judge it immediately, and lets men go on in

their ways, and lets horrible things happen in human history, it doesn't mean that God is simply powerless, or careless, about what is taking place.

- Rather, the cross indicates that God has a holy hatred, continually, against all that stands against his righteous rule in men's lives.
2. But, on the other hand, the cross demonstrates his willingness to receive all who come to Jesus – he is the justifier of him who believes in Jesus – this is the declaration that Paul makes. Without distinction, love overcomes all our suspicion and gives us what we cannot earn.

Now, I hope this is clear because there are so many words that are spoken today that pervert and distort this wonderful message from God.

God denies all effort, all power of positive thinking,

- *Until* there has come the recognition of the complete lack of anything to offer him.
- *Then* he gives us all that we need, and,
- *From then on*, positive thinking is the only possible thing that will meet the need.

I remember that when I was in Dallas I taught for awhile at the Southern Bible Training School, which is a school for colored people founded by Ed Ironside, the oldest son of Dr. Harry Ironside, when he was a student at the seminary.

Dr. Harry Ironside was a member of the board of that school, and, during its early days, the school had a very precarious existence. They were meeting in just one room in a house in Dallas, and there were only about ten or twelve students that they had managed to persuade to come to the school. It used to be quite a heavy drain upon Dr. Ironside because Ed would write to his father for funds whenever the school ran short. Dr. Ironside told us at Dallas one day that he came down to the school, and they had their usual need of funds, and he said to his son, "Ed, I wonder if it is worth going on. This school is just such a continual drain on us all the time, and I really wonder if we are getting any-

where. Sometimes I think it would be better if we stopped." Ed Ironside didn't say anything. He waited a moment, and then said, "Well, Dad, I'll tell you: You come to the school session tomorrow night and just see what is happening."

So the next night Dr. Ironside went down to the house, and there were about ten or twelve students there, and Ed Ironside was teaching them. Ed stood up, and said to them, "Now men, you know my father here, and you know the concern he has had for this school, but you know also that there has been a real financial drain upon him. My father said to me yesterday that he wondered if it was worth going on, that perhaps we ought to stop the school. I wonder what you men think about that."

Well, nobody said anything for a moment. And then one man got to his feet and began to speak. As you know, they have a very natural eloquence, and he said something like this: "Mr. Ironside, does I hear you right? Did you say something about closing this school? Why, let me tell you something. When you started this school last year I heard about it, and I was pastor of a church here in town. I had a big church of about 500 people. I used to love to be pastor of that church – I dressed up in my very best clothes, and put on my nicest white gloves, and I used to go to church every Sunday, and stand up in the pulpit and wave my hands and lead the singin' and I was so proud to be the pastor of that church." And he said, "I didn't know what to preach very much, but I knew you had to put 'rousements in. And, every Sunday, I used to put the 'rousements in till the people would be shoutin' all over the church. And I thought I was a wonderful pastor. But then I heard about your school and I came over to it. The first night you were teachin' the book of Romans. I listened to you, and as I sat there, and heard what God thought about man, I discovered that I was not dressed in fine clothes, as I thought, but, in the sight of God, I was dressed in filthy, dirty rags." And he said, "One by one, as I listened to you, you just took those filthy, dirty rags off me, and I just stood naked in God's sight. I went away and I said to myself, 'I am never going back to that place again; this is no place for a man in my position.' But," he said, "something drew me back the next night, and I came back again. That night you were on the third chapter of Romans, and you talked about what Jesus Christ had come to do, and how he came to give us his own righteousness, and how I

could have all that wonderful righteousness of Jesus to clothe myself in, instead of the dirty, filthy rags of my own righteousness. And," he said, "as I listened to you that night, Mr. Ironside, I asked Jesus Christ to come into my life, and he clothed me with his righteousness. And I went back and began to preach **that** to my people. There came a great change in our church, and you ought to see how many have come to discover that wonderful gift of righteousness for themselves. Mr. Ironside, if you close this school, the only light that us poor colored folks has in Dallas is going to go out."

Well, you know what happened. Dr. Ironside couldn't close it, and the school is still going on now – still ministering to those people in Dallas, preaching the righteousness which is by faith and not by us, a righteousness that can only be received as a gift.

Back in Exodus, the fifteenth chapter, is the wonderful accounting of the children of Israel on their wilderness journey into Canaan, and we are told that they came to a place called the Valley of Marah, and they found water there. They tasted the water eagerly in their thirst, but found that the waters were bitter, so they named them "Marah," which means "bitter," {Exod 15:23}. The leaders of the camp went to Moses, and said, "Moses, what shall we do? These waters are bitter. We can't drink them. Here we are, out in a vast and trackless desert, without water. What shall we do?" {cf, Exod 15:24}. Moses went to the Lord, and we are told that the Lord showed him a tree, and told him to cut down the tree and cast it into the water. When he did, the waters were made sweet.

Now, all those Old Testament stories are pictures for us of truth that applies to us. The bitter water is a picture of the dark and bitter passions within the soul of men. These very things that Paul is describing, that you and I know are in our own hearts, all the tears and fears, the anguish, the sorrow, the death, the crying, the dying of life are the bitter waters in which we live. But there is a tree – Peter says, "Who his own self bare our sins in his

own body on the tree," {1 Pet 2:24 KJV} – a tree that has the ability, when cast into the midst of the dark and bitter waters, to cause them to become sweet. That is just the picture of what God is offering us in Jesus Christ. A life that finds no fulfillment in itself – in its own constant, tiresome round of self effort to justify itself before God or man – ends only in futility and frustration. But when that heart looks to the cross of Christ, and believes what God has done there, and is willing to surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, there comes the healing effect of that tree in his life, and he stands justified before God.

If you haven't begun your Christian life at this point, you haven't begun it at all – because this is where man begins his life with God.

Every one of us here has a righteousness that we are seeking to establish. It's either our own, or we are resting on Christ, one or the other: There is no other ground. Now, my question to you is this: Which are you resting on today?

Which is yours? This is the great question.

Prayer:

Our Father, we see that in your sight there is no man who is good enough, no one who can be good enough, for you know us as we are, Lord. You see our inner hearts, you know us just as we are. Give us grace to stop trying to draw these filthy rags of our own righteousness about ourselves, and to thus try to clothe ourselves in your sight. Give us the grace to stop this, and to gladly and freely accept from thee the perfect, righteous standing that is provided in Jesus Christ. May any man or woman who is without Christ, in this moment, ask him to come into their life, ask him to become Lord of their life, and, thus, in him, by receiving him, receive the righteous standing that you offer in Jesus Christ. We pray in His name. Amen.

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