

In the Letter to the Romans

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the essential nature of Christianity, focusing on the importance of being in right standing with God for true spiritual experience.

Scripture: Matthew 3:17, Romans 3:10, Romans 6:5, Romans 8:1, Romans 12:2, 2 Corinthians 4:10, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 2:8-9, Philipians 3:10, Hebrews 12:1-2

Topics: "Spiritual Experience", "Right Standing with God"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the importance of understanding the true nature of Christianity as presented in the letter to the Romans, focusing on the concepts of right standing with God and the necessity of experiencing this truth in daily life. He explains that both the pagan and Jewish worlds are in need of redemption, and that Jesus Christ serves as the representative of humanity, demonstrating that all have died in Him and must accept His death and resurrection to be in right standing with God. Sparks highlights that true spiritual experience involves walking in the Spirit rather than the flesh, and that believers must continually seek to be conformed to the image of Christ. He urges the congregation to commit fully to God and to recognize the significance of their position in Christ for spiritual growth and progress.

Transcript

Our hearts are very much out to Thee, oh Lord, concerning this hour. Thou hast been very gracious to us during these days. We can see that having received the help which comes from God, we continue until now. Our confidence is that having helped, Thou would still help. However great the help Thou has given, we are still in need. We are very ready to confess our dependency upon Thee; take account of this, we pray, for unless the Lord helps us, we are helpless. If it could please Thee, give a very special blessing this afternoon. Crown this ministry with something very definite. Again, it is the voice of the Lord that we want to hear. Deeper than the speaking and the interpreting, may we all be given an ear to hear the voice of the Lord. In Thy great mercy and faithfulness answer us, we ask this all for the glory of Thy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In this series of messages our object has been to reemphasize the true nature of Christianity, and we have gathered that into three things - the mission, the meaning and the message of Jesus Christ. In the four Gospels we found the foundation position of Christianity, and in the book of the Acts we saw that position preached by the Apostles and the scattered believers. There that position was demonstrated by the Holy Spirit by signs and wonders - what the New Testament calls the 'powers', that is, the many aspects of the

power of the Holy Spirit. And it might be as well for us to note that that was the object of the Holy Spirit's working at that time - to demonstrate that the message was true, to give evidence of the truth of the foundation of Christianity. My own conviction is that the signs and wonders relate to beginnings, to the foundation position. They do not belong to the later development of spiritual life, but to the elementary stages of Christianity.

Then in the book of the Acts the position proclaimed was accepted in various degrees. What was proclaimed was received with varying degrees of understanding. Some received the message very earnestly, with a whole-hearted committal to the position, and among these were the Thessalonians, the Ephesians and the Philippians. These, and those like them, made a very whole-hearted committal to the Lord, but the response of some was a compromise between Judaism and Christianity. Their attitude was that Christianity was only a plus to Judaism, and they very largely remained Christian Jews. Thus they had failed to recognize the true nature of Christianity. There were others who made a response, but with a compromise with paganism, that is, they brought over their paganism into Christianity. Of these the Corinthians are an example.

Now the letters of the New Testament were intended to explain and reaffirm the true nature of Christianity, on the one side to correct the misunderstandings, and on the other side to recover from declension. Such were the letters of John.

This is the way in which we should read the New Testament: A fundamental position made clear - that is the Gospels. A fundamental position demonstrated - that is the book of the Acts. Then there follows the section dealing with fundamental experience. The position is not enough: the experience must follow. So the later part of the New Testament has to do with the basic experience of the position, that is, the true nature of Christianity in spiritual experience. I will not go back over the Gospels, but let me illustrate from the Gospel by Matthew.

We have seen that the message of the Gospel by Matthew is the absolute Lordship and authority of Jesus Christ. Now many people believed that as a doctrine, and accepted that as a position at the beginning of their Christianity - as far as they understood it - but there can be a very great difference between BELIEVING that Jesus Christ is Lord and EXPERIENCING that truth. Many of these letters in the New Testament show that the people accepted it as doctrine but did not live accordingly.

We are now going to look at the letter to the Romans, for this is a very clear example of what I have been saying. It is the foundation of Christian EXPERIENCE, a correction of misunderstanding and an explanation of the true foundation of experience.

RIGHT STANDING WITH GOD

Many definitions have been given to this letter. The disciples of Luther and his school have their own name for it. The reformers always called this letter to the Romans by one name, and most of you will know what that is, but I am going to use one title for this letter. It is a phrase found in a later translation: "Right standing with God" - a position which is absolutely acceptable to God. Everybody will agree that it is essential to true spiritual experience! That is not only the position of the New Testament - it is the issue of the whole Bible. Before God can do anything in any life there must be a right position with Him. You will remember how often in the Old Testament God had to stand back from men until they got into a right position with Him, and that is brought out so clearly in the New Testament. It decides everything as to whether God is going on with us and we are going on with God. If God is not going on with you, then

examine your position in relation to God. He is waiting for something, and that is your adjustment to Him.

Let us take a very simple example in the Old Testament. You remember the Prophet Elijah. After that great event on Mount Carmel Jezebel, the queen, threatened his life. Now we are not going to blame Elijah, for if we do we shall be blaming ourselves! Jezebel threatened his life, and then Elijah fled for his life. He fled to try and save his life. The next thing we see is Elijah under a juniper tree and saying: 'Lord, take away my life.' What does the Lord do? Does He get under the juniper tree with Elijah and say: 'Poor Elijah, I am so sorry for you!?' No, He stands outside and says: "What doest thou here, Elijah?" In effect, the Lord said: 'I am not going to get under juniper trees, Elijah. That is not the right position with Me. If you, Elijah, want Me to go on with you, get out from under your juniper tree. I am not coming on to your ground - you must come on to Mine!' The juniper tree is a cul-de-sac, and the Lord does not believe in those things. We must be in a right standing with God if He is going on with us. That is the message of the letter to the Romans.

THE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE HUMAN RACE

As you know, the first five chapters of this letter are divided into two sections. The first section has to do with the pagan world, and the second section has to do with the Jewish world, and at that time these two sections comprised the whole world. The Holy Spirit, through the Apostle Paul, shows that both sections - that is, the whole human race - are not on good standing with God. The whole race has fallen out of God, and it is in that context that the mission, meaning and message of Jesus Christ are presented in the New Testament. It is in that relationship that the Lord Jesus is introduced, and He is introduced as the representative Man. You will see in chapter 5 how He is connected with Adam, and in chapter 4 He is connected with Abraham. He is of the seed of Abraham. Adam represents the human race as a whole, and Abraham represents the human race in Israel, but all are gathered together on to this ground: Not one man is found to be in right standing with God. The statement here is: "There is NONE righteous, no, not one" (3:10).

From chapter 5 we move into chapter 6, and I advise you to remove the chapter divisions. Chapter 6 is not a new chapter, but is the continuation of chapter 5. In chapter 5 all men are dead, which is how God views the human race. 'In Adam all died', and the argument here is that it is the same with Israel. Israel is a part of the human race and is included in this position: 'all are dead'. What is it that we come to immediately we begin to read what is chapter 6? It is a baptism. And what is this baptism? Well, of course, it is the baptism of the Lord Jesus, but what does that mean? Jesus is the representative of the human race. He is the Son of Man. Why must He be baptized? That is, why must He die and be buried? Because He is taking the place of the whole human race. The Cross of the Lord Jesus is a demonstration of the fact that all men have died, and the Apostle Paul says here that when Christ died all men were represented. The Cross was a universal baptism. Perhaps you would think that I was preaching heresy if I were to say that every unsaved person has been baptized, but please understand me. All men have died in the death of the Lord Jesus, so it is the whole world that has been baptized in the Cross of Jesus Christ. In the death of Christ the whole world is dead IN THE EYES OF GOD, but, although all men have been baptized in the death of Christ, all men are not raised in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The death is universal, the baptism is universal and for the whole race, but the resurrection is selective. On resurrection ground only one Man in God's universe is in right standing with God. You remember how, after His baptism the heavens were opened and a voice came out of heaven saying: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matthew 3:17). God did not say: 'This is My beloved world. In it I am well pleased.' On resurrection ground only One is in right standing with God.

This, then, is the message of chapter 6. To be in right standing with God men have to say: 'His death was my death. When He died I died. That is my natural position in the sight of God.' But then, secondly, men have to say: 'His resurrection was my resurrection.' You know the simple words of Romans 6:5: "If we have become united with him by the likeness of his death, we shall be also by the likeness of his resurrection; knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him." To be in right standing with God demands that we shall be, by faith in Jesus Christ, dead and raised. We have to accept His death as our death. The world will not do that, and Israel would not do that. Therefore the world and Israel remain dead in the sight of God, and it is only those who have accepted that by faith and have then taken their position in Christ risen who are in right standing with God. It is only with such people that God can go on.

And remember that this is not only an initial position; it is an abiding principle. Paul said: "Always bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our body" (2 Corinthians 4:10). In effect he said: 'I die daily. Every day the Cross of the Lord Jesus has a meaning in my life.'

THE POSITION ESTABLISHED

Now let us go on with this letter. Chapter 6 shows the position of spiritual experience. We move on, without dividing into chapters, and presently we come on to what is shown as chapter 8, and here we find what has happened in chapter 6. A great divide has been made.

First, the position is established: "There is therefore now NO condemnation to them that are IN CHRIST JESUS" (verse 1). All the condemnation has been exhausted in the death and burial of Christ. To those who by faith are in Jesus Christ risen from the dead there is no more condemnation. I wish we knew the truth of Christianity! If there is no condemnation, then we must be in right standing with God! There is no controversy between God and us. Do you not see how important it is for us to recover the true nature of Christianity? There are many Christians who live out their lives under condemnation. Even when they pray they bring their miserable selves to the Lord, and say: 'Lord, I am no good. I am a miserable creature!' And what does the Lord say? Well, sometimes He does not say anything at all. If He did say anything, it would be: 'I told you that two thousand years ago in the Cross of Jesus Christ. I knew more about you then than you know about yourself, but if any man is in Christ Jesus there is no condemnation.'

But the Apostle goes on with a provision. He uses this little word: "Who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit" (verse 4), that is, those who walk on the ground that they have died with Christ and risen with Christ. The great divide has been made by the Cross between flesh and spirit. What do we mean by that word 'flesh'? The flesh is the self-life: MY will, MY desires, MY ideas, anything that is just ME. If you know anything about yourself, you know that you are not good, and you will agree with the Apostle Paul, who said: "I know that in me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing" (7:18). The flesh is the self-life in any, or all, of its forms. So that this statement in verse 4 of chapter 8 could be: 'Who walk not after the self-life.' 'I am going to have what I want. I am going to take the way that I want to take.' The self-life has very many complexions.

Now these people do not walk after the flesh. It says: 'They walk after the spirit.' What is that? That is the God-life - not the self-life, but the God-life. Now it is: 'What GOD wills, what GOD desires. It is GOD'S thoughts that I want.' There is no condemnation if we walk the God-life.

What does this word 'walk' mean? Well, we are on a spiritual journey. That comes out a little later. We are on the journey of a new nature, and on this journey there is a new discipline. The journey is not

geographical, but from what we are in ourselves to what we are in Christ. You know, you can shorten that journey, for you get there sooner or later according to this discipline. What is the end of the journey, of this spiritual walk? Now that comes out at the end of this chapter 8: "Whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son" (verse 29). That is the end of the Journey.

There are two conformities here in this letter. In chapter 8 it is "conformed to the image of his Son", and in chapter 12, verse 2 it says: "Be not conformed to this world". 'Be not conformed to this world, but be conformed to Christ.' That will determine how quickly you are covering the journey and how quickly you are getting to the end! Those who are conformed to this world are making very slow spiritual progress, but those whose hearts are wholly set upon being conformed to Christ make very quick spiritual progress.

You can see these two kinds of Christians. I can see today many young Christians who have started on the journey but have either come to a standstill or are making very slow progress, and when I look to see why it is I see that it is because they are taking the fashions of this world.

So the true nature of Christianity is to be conformed to the image of God's Son. That demands our acceptance of His death as our death, and demands that we live on the ground of His resurrection. It also demands that we do not live the self-life, but that we do live the Christ-life. The life of the Lord Jesus is to be reproduced in us by the Spirit, and that is what it means to "walk after the spirit". It does not say: 'Stand still', and it does not mean: 'Take a first step.' It means: 'Keep on walking and do not allow this world to stop you going on with the Lord.'

Well, that, in brief, is the message of this letter to the Romans. This is the foundation of Christian experience. You have accepted the foundation position; now accept the foundation experience, and that foundation is standing in right position with God, seeking His grace that in every day, and in every thing we are in good standing with God. On THAT ground we shall reach the goal - conformity to the image of His Son.

I do not think that there is anything to be desired more than that. What is the greatest desire in your life? Is it not to be like your Lord, and that all that is true of Him shall be true in you? May the Lord help us to understand!

Now go back to your letter to the Romans and read it again in the light of these words: 'Being on right ground with God.' It is the letter of an utter committal to God in Christ through the Cross.

We do ask Thee, Lord, to write this deeply into our hearts. We want to go on with Thee, Lord, but more than that, we want Thee to go on with us. We want Thee to be able to commit Thyself to us - not to have any reservations toward us - then teach us from this message the way of being on good ground with Thee. May we all be those who make quick progress toward the goal. In the Name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

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