

## **Releasing the Power of the Text: An Attempt at Illustration**

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Haddon W. Robinson, in *Biblical Preaching: the Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, makes this convicting and sad observation: “In many sermons the Biblical passage read to the congregation resembles the national anthem played at a football game—it gets things started but is not heard again during the afternoon.”<sup>1</sup>

Instead, the text should lay down the goal lines, the hash marks, the boundaries and the rules by which the task of biblical preaching is executed. Too much contemporary preaching is out of bounds and in violation of sound principles of solid expository preaching.

Wait! Let’s back up a bit. This in no way diminishes the credibility of stylistic variety in the preaching enterprise. The appeal, instead, is that the fruit of solid exegetical preparation must undergird and dominate in the utilization of any style.

Let me illustrate. Narrative (storytelling) preaching is much in vogue in today’s pulpits across America. To postmodern ears, this style is deemed more acceptably credible and appropriate. Imaginative excursions of creative thought are encouraged, and many find that environment most friendly.

The question is simply this: Whose story is it? Whether by proposition or by narrative, the answer must be the same:

his story, the story of the text. For that story to ring with clarity and accuracy, it must be lifted from the text—in tone, spirit, content and application. Style must bow to this unalterable principle. Only then may the preacher feel confident that the word preached is the Lord’s.

Before inviting you to review an abbreviated sermon manuscript taken from a series of messages from Paul’s letter to the Romans (likely a most inadequate illustration), it will be helpful to set in place those markers that will help to indicate points of interest and assessment as the sermon is read:

1. The selected text should stand as a manageable unit of biblical narrative – not so long as to be cumbersome nor so brief as to be skimpy in content.
2. The title should accurately reflect the core and essence of the passage under consideration. Accuracy and understandability are key.
3. The main points should be like “beacon lights” to guide both preacher and listener through the unfolding message of the text. Symmetry, parallelism and balance will help to make the journey smooth, adventuresome and filled with Spirit-inspired fascination.

4. The text should be treated comprehensively; that is, even what might be thought trivial at first glance can become glistening jewels that add color and intrigue as the message unfolds.
5. The emotional tenor and mood of the message when preached must be set by those very qualities as they have been discovered in the text. The blend of preacher and text in this regard becomes the essence of preaching with true integrity.
6. Illustrations and life experiences must be subservient to the text in content, placement and application. Sometimes preachers bend the text to fit the story. (“This story is so good I must find a place for it in the sermon.”) The text must reach through the preacher in order to glean appropriate material from life’s experiences, which will provide illustration and practical application of biblical truths.

Perhaps it would be appropriate now to invite you to consider the following sermon manuscript as an illustration of the six principles outlined above. Obviously, it is only partially adequate for the task.

### **A Special Kind of Righteousness** *Romans 3:21-31*

There is one essential—to be in right relationship with God! This must be the single passion of our lives. My wife, Elnora, and I have a question we often direct toward each another: “Everything OK?” That simple question, with proper response, establishes the righteousness

of our relationship. The adjective *righteous* describes the act of making something right, while the noun *righteousness* describes the state of being right. So that we who believe are made “righteous” by the gift of God’s “righteousness.” It all has to do with our “okayness” with God.

Interestingly, when we are OK with God, we are also OK with people. But when we are out of sorts with God, we will also be out of sorts with people.

Every relational problem in life is directly traceable to a relational problem with God. Are you not getting along well with your spouse, your friends, your family, your church? Well, that is because you are not getting along with God. Of course, some relationships can actually be impossible because of sinful ways, but even that relational challenge is impacted for good when all is OK with God.

The text for today is about “getting it right” with God and then “getting it right” with people.

### **Glorious in Its Origin**

“A righteousness from God” (Rom 3:21).

As a child, I enjoyed spinning tops. Every good top has a sharp point on which it spins. The four words of this part of the text collectively form the point on which all Christian doctrine and life spin—the being OK (righteous) with God. That is His doing, not ours.

All major religions of the world, save authentic Christianity, have this wrong. According to their systems of things,

being OK with God is the byproduct of human endeavor. Favor with God is to be earned, merited or otherwise deserved. No! God initiates the OK. It is his gift. Period!

How so? No matter how hard I try to “get it right” with God, I am doomed to failure. God’s impeccable purity against my obnoxious impurity creates a chasm I can never bridge. My only hope is that God will come and get me. This is precisely what John 3:16 is all about. It describes a God who has come to make it right with me and give me the priceless gift of acceptance, rightness or righteousness.

The songwriter caught the significance of this provision: “I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore, very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more. But the Master of the sea heard my despairing cry. From the water lifted me, now safe am I.” God’s initiative. He journeyed across the great chasm and rescued me. It was his doing completely. Rightness with him was his gift. The relationship becomes OK because of his profound work of redeeming grace.

### **Amazing in Its Transmission**

“This righteousness...comes through faith in Jesus Christ”  
(Rom 3:22).

How does it work? By what means does “everything OK” become a reality? How is so great a provision transmitted to us? How do we receive this rightness (righteousness) that is sourced in God?

Images, voices and power flow into our home through a variety of lines. While located underground, they provide the

linkup between our home and utility and communication companies.

Faith is that linkup with God and, fortunately, he strings the lines so that only response rests with us. As such, it is the response of simple trust that begins the life-giving flow. His righteousness courses through the trust linkup so we may now have an OK, right or righteous relationship.

Interestingly, faith or trust activates the flow—in that order. Some want to demand the receiving ahead of the trusting (i.e., if God wants me to believe, just let him get my attention). No! He wants our attention (trust), and then the flow of his righteousness begins.

This is an amazing transmission. Some speak of it as “amazing grace,” and rightly so. It is amazing that God should outsource this special righteousness into our very lives. I can ask God, “Everything OK?” and confidently know that it is so.

Again, it is a transmitted righteousness—a gift from God, and God alone. He strings the lines of connection, and all that is left to us is trust, reliance and abandon to so great a provision.

### **Dramatic in Its Demonstration**

“God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice”  
(Rom 3:25).

Can you imagine how such a thought would have sounded in the ears of the religious Jews? How can God who is perfect acquit a person who is guilty? Or, how can God make a relationship

OK, right, without the payment of consequences?

For the zealous Jew, one thing was needful and required—to demonstrate obedience to the law. A sinner declared innocent was an absurdity. A contradiction. A gross miscarriage of justice. He would be quick to ask: “Where is justice?”

Paul had it straight: the Cross is God’s answer. It demonstrates in dramatic ways the full satisfaction of the justice of God. It was there, when God the Father delivered his Son as a perfect sacrifice for sin. God’s soul was satisfied, and righteousness transmitted to sinners who could do nothing to save themselves.

The Cross is never far away in Pauline theology. Why? Because the Cross is the substance of grace. Without the Cross, there is no right relationship with God. Without the Cross, justice would be trivialized into absurdity. Without the Cross, atonement would remain only a proposed remedy for man’s alienation from God. Without the Cross, pardon is but a dream and there is no good news for man.

Some have suggested that had Jesus not died for our sins then we would need to each die for our own sins. No! Our deaths, no matter how agonizing, could never provide payment and materialize atonement. The Cross alone is able to pay the price for our sins and satisfy the call of God for justice. This took the sacrifice of the incarnate God—Jesus Christ, our Lord.

This further thought. No matter who you are and how difficult the circumstances of your life, the work of Jesus at Calvary

provides enough to meet your need. Enough payment. Enough satisfaction. Enough grace. Enough mercy. Enough power. Enough rightness. So you can confidently ask, “God, everything OK?” and know His answer will be an unqualified “Yes!”

The Cross is God’s showcase of love. It is there that we see, in bold relief, the depths of divine love. This love brings us into a glorious relationship of righteousness with our God. It assures us of an “okayness” with God. This is the answer to the most important question of life: “How can I be in right relationship with God?”

The practical and devotional implications of this truth are profound. Look at your job, marriage, work, church life, insecurities, pain and sorrow against the backdrop of Calvary. This perspective will provide the understanding and power to face all of the harsh realities of life. What a dramatic demonstration of the enabling agency by which righteousness has become a reality for the follower of Jesus Christ.

### **Humbling in Its Application**

“Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith" (Rom 3:27).

Here is the argument. If righteousness comes as a result of man’s efforts, this then is an understandable cause for boasting. But if righteousness is of God, there is no room at all for boasting. Boasting is excluded. “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift

of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:8,9).

My undergraduate studies were at a Midwestern Lutheran college. Well do I remember the strong lessons I learned about Luther’s definition of good works. He rightly argued that while man may please man with his benevolent activities, he cannot please God. The only work that gains God’s approval is work done in Jesus’ name. Boasting is, therefore, completely excluded! It has no defense.

However, there is a boasting that is appropriate. As the people of God, we find our boast in Christ alone. Only the rightness of God, demonstrated in Christ, is worthy of our boast. In fact, worship is just that—an expression of our boast in the Lord.

The Psalmist cried out: “My soul will boast in the Lord” (Ps 34:2). “In God we make our boast all day long” (Ps 44:8). Paul added: “May I never boast except in the cross” (Gal 6:14).

Jeremiah the prophet made the point powerfully in poetic verse. “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the

rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight” (Jer 9:23,24).

It is right to boast, not in what comes from men, but in what is comes from God. May this truth find an anchor in our hearts. Boasting in the righteousness of God, generously gifted to us by grace, must be the very vocation of our lives.

Two questions rise out of the text: One, is everything OK between you and God? Have you received this gift of rightness? Do you know for a certainty that there is nothing separating you from God?

Second, is everything OK between you and others? Your spouse? Your family? Your work partners? Your fellow worshippers? Everyone who is part of your relational world? If not, let the rightness you have with God find its expression in the relational life you have with others.

Indeed, Paul speaks in these verses of a very special kind of righteousness—the gift of right standing with God. What a gift!

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<sup>1</sup> Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1980), 20.