

## Righteousness Practiced Publicly

We are nearing the end of our series working through the New Testament Book of Romans that we are calling *Living By Faith*. We have today's message and just two more.

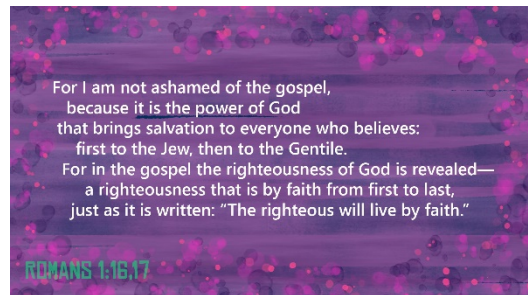


We are in chapter 13, which begins to answer an important implied question: How should followers of Jesus behave in the **public** sphere?

The previous 12 chapters of Romans have made it clear that our behavior doesn't qualify us as God's people; God's People are qualified by faith alone, by believing in Jesus, by trusting Him and His Gospel.

But while our behavior is not a **prerequisite** of salvation, we ought to think of our behavior as a **postrequisite**. Behavior matters. Our behavior cannot qualify us for God's favor, but it ought to demonstrate God's favor. Our lives ought to be different... different than they used to be, and different from what they would be without God.

It has been a while since we have revisited what I think is the *key verse* for Romans; (Romans 1:17). Let's stand and read verses 16 and 17 together:



<sup>16</sup>For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. <sup>17</sup>For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”<sup>n 1</sup>

The righteous will live by faith... by faith alone. With significant theological depth, Romans has been, for us these past months, a textbook for righteousness.

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<sup>1</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 1:16–17). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

We started with the foundation that righteousness is first and foremost God's *imparted* work for and to us. We confronted *the bad news* that there is no hope for us to ever **earn** a righteous standing before God. God is too holy, and we are too *not holy*. The chasm is far too wide; we are simply incapable of attaining righteousness.

But that *bad news* is totally overwhelmed by the **Good News** of the Gospel. What we could not accomplish to stand righteously before God, God accomplished by sending His Son. Jesus, the only Righteous One, took on our punishment, purchasing our righteousness. When we turn from our sin, repent even of our own righteousness, and believe in Jesus, we find complete forgiveness from sin and a truly righteous standing before God. We are justified by Jesus; this is the only foundation for righteousness.

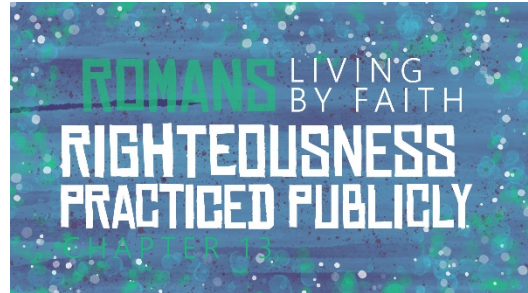
Romans goes on to teach us that **these lives matter**. That righteousness is both a completely accomplished work **and** an ongoing work... when we believe in Jesus we are both given a righteous standing before God and called to *live up to* that righteousness in these lives. It is an *imparted* righteousness, a righteousness to be lived out day by day. The theological word is **sanctification**. Our righteousness in an eternal sense before God is secured by Jesus, and we are called to *live out* and *live up to* that righteousness before others with the empowerment of God's Spirit.

Now in Romans 13, the circle widens to a more outward focus. What started in our individual hearts (personal life) moved to the circle of believers (church life), and now Romans 13 begins to answer the implied question, "How should this righteousness impact our public life."



This is a big, important question. Our personal relationship with Jesus is important, and how we go about our own spiritual disciplines and such to live out our righteousness personally. And it is vitally important that we live out our righteousness, as the Church, among one another. But that is not enough. We are called to live out our righteousness publicly. How are we going to do that?

One easy answer is this: **don't**. Keep all that *righteousness stuff* to yourself; don't practice righteousness publicly. There are all sorts of forces that want us to only practice our faith privately, or at least within the walls of our churches.



There are **external** forces. In our country there are those who think that *the separation of church and state* means that faith should be separate from public life.

It seems we have a way of complicating our public practice of faith. Our Constitution says in the Bill of Rights (First Amendment): Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. Yet it often seems that cultural forces are intent on imposing freedom *from* religion rather than freedom *of* religion. Our Founders understood that chief among the values of our great Country must be freedom... freedom of the press, freedom to assemble, freedom of speech, and freedom to worship. All appear to be under attack in one way or another from many sides... and that ought to concern all who love freedom.

We could blame the government, I suppose... but it isn't just governmental forces that drive faith inward; our culture pushes faith out of the public space as well. Besides... when it comes to government in *our* country, *we the people* are the government. So who is to blame?

As bad as those external forces might be in our country, we enjoy great freedoms that cannot even be imagined in other parts of the world.

The **external** forces are real, and even appear to be gaining strength. But there are real **internal** forces as well. There are significant, inward-focused, internal forces that keep us from righteousness practiced publicly.

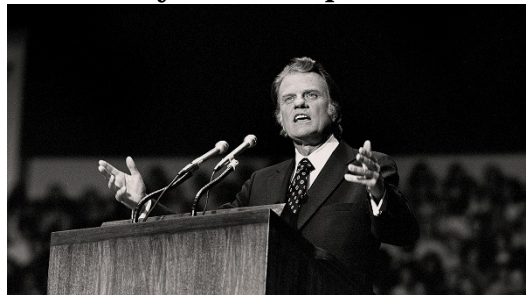
Northshore's roots are in theological streams of Christian faith that are historically more *inward focused* than *outward focused*, so concentrated on personal righteousness that *righteousness practiced publicly* might have been neglected or even opposed.

- Our ***Evangelical roots*** placed such a high priority on our **personal** relationship with Jesus that we may have forgotten about our responsibilities to one another, and our calls to service and social justice.
- Our ***Holiness roots*** placed such a focus on *separation from sin* that our severance from the **ways** of the world may have also severed us from the **people** of the world.
- Our ***Pentecostal roots*** may have us so fascinated with the work of the Spirit in our worship services that we may have forgotten about the work of the Spirit in God's world.

Hear me. I am all in favor of Evangelicalism, Holiness, and Pentecost... but we cannot allow any of that to *crowd out* our responsibility to righteousness practiced publicly, to living out our faith in public space.

Our Constitution's guarantee of free exercise of religion assumes that faith includes (if not demands) public expression. Yet current forces in our culture are at work to quench that free expression... whether it is formally in legislation or court rulings, or informally by ridicule.

Nevertheless, we recently saw support for a place for faith in the public sphere when represented with excellence that is nearly above reproach. With this week's passing of Billy Graham, there was general agreement that his was an admirable life, a life marked by an unmatched demonstration and proclamation of faith in the public sphere.



Billy Graham's influence was expansive.

Through his preaching (both in stadiums with huge crowds, and through broadcasts watched by millions), the work of his organization, and through institutions he either helped found or heavily influenced (like Christianity Today, Fuller, and Gordon-Conwell)... Graham touched millions and millions of people, around the world, in life changing ways. With such a high profile, his life was and continues to be scrutinized... but the general consensus is that Graham was a good man.



He is an excellent example of what it means to live out faith in the public sphere... the point of our text in Romans 13.

It turns out that in this case, the final verse of chapter 13 provides a great summary. When it comes to the public practice of faith, I think these words direct us best:

clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ<sup>2</sup>

Clothes are important. They keep us warm and safe (the inward focus of clothes)... but they also have an important outward-focused purpose... right? When we look at one another, we see faces and body shapes and such... but for the most part we see clothes.

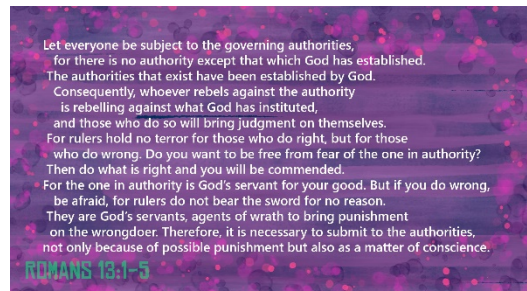
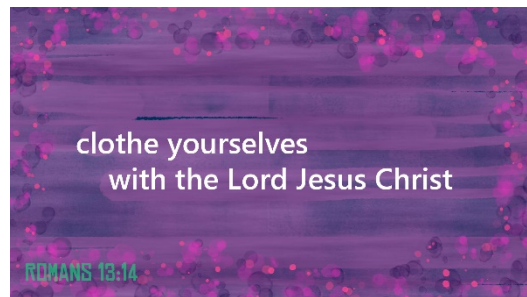
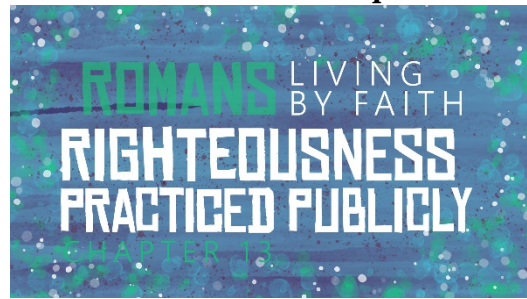
When Christians are clothed with Jesus... that is predominantly what everyone sees when they look at Christians. The world sees Jesus.

Romans 13 is about righteousness practiced publicly... not as much in the *cultural* domains, but in the *civic* domains. It is about practicing righteousness as a citizen.

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God.

The Bible teaches us that God establishes three human institutions:

1. Marriage (and the Family)
2. Church
3. Government



<sup>2</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 13:14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Over and over again, the Bible demonstrates that God is active through all three. Even when mishandled by humans, even brutally abused by evil people, God works through these human institutions.

<sup>2</sup> Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. <sup>3</sup> For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. <sup>4</sup> For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. <sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.<sup>3</sup>

There is a lot to *unpack* here; allow me to hit the high points.

Remember, this is the letter to the Romans; Rome was the capital of the empire. Government was *front and center*. It was more than just a matter of government, it was the local business driving the economy and the focus of culture (similar to how *government* is the *business* in D.C.).

We can see that the text is placing government in high regard... yet it still puts it in its place, explaining that those in authority are **God's servants**. Remember, these were the days when the Caesars were literally proclaimed to be gods (unlike today when our leaders merely *act* like gods).

Whether good or evil, righteous or not... the command of Scripture is to work within the constraints of government. In Paul's day, the only way to work with government was submission. There was no vote, no running for office, no other way to engage but submission.

In our context, the opportunities are certainly different... yet we have the same command to engage. We are constrained to work within the governmental system... and since we can, we should take up our role to shape it, use it, and even change it when we can do so for the good of all.

The text goes on (in a way that maybe we don't like to hear).

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<sup>3</sup> *The New International Version*. (2011). (Ro 13:1-5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>6</sup>This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing.

<sup>7</sup>Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor. <sup>4</sup>

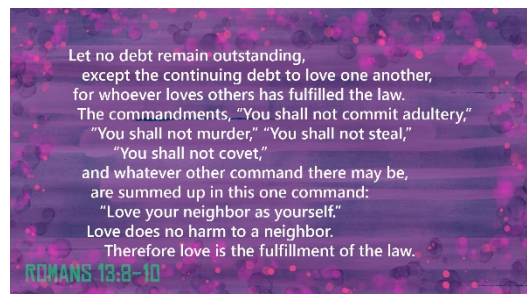
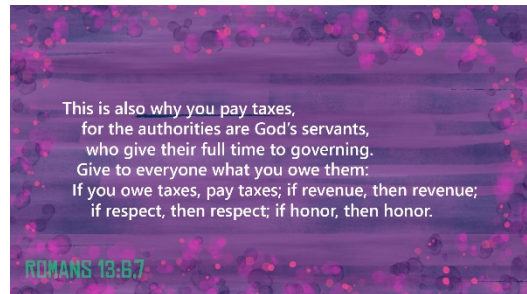
**Our loyalties are always aligned with our wallets. If you want to know if you are truly *on board*, take a look at your finances. That is true when it comes to government... and it is true about most everything else, including the Church. If you think of this as your Church home, but you are not giving... well, are you really on board?**

Here Paul says, "Give what you owe." And then he rattles off these examples: taxes, revenue, respect, and honor. Taxes *and* revenue may seem redundant. The word *taxes* has to do with a tax on what you have, like property tax (or even your *life* when there is something like a *head tax*). The word *revenue* is a transactional fee, like our sales tax. As far as that goes, respect and honor are similar words too. In this case respect is a word more aligned with fear (what the authorities could do to us) whereas honor is the good we might attribute to our leaders.

**In all of it...** <sup>8</sup> Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup> The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," <sup>y</sup> and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." <sup>a</sup> <sup>10</sup> Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. <sup>5</sup>

**Out of the specific example of how *righteousness practiced publicly* relates to government, Paul then broadens the scope to really encompass the entirety of public space. When Paul said "love others" he blows it wide open. He goes so far as to say that "love is the fulfillment of the law."**

**Loving others doesn't save us (doesn't make us righteous)... but because we are saved we love others (living out righteousness).**



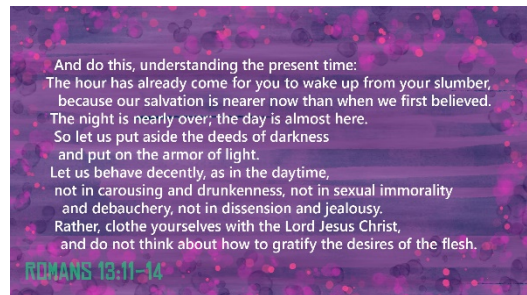
<sup>4</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 13:6-7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>5</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 13:8-10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

The work is out on the streets, loving our neighbors.

Loving our neighbors means we ought to be **friends**. We might like to say that we may have to *love* our neighbors, but we don't have to *like* them... but actually **we do**. How can we love them, and win them, if we don't like them? And how can we be their friends if we don't show any interest in the things that they like, their causes, their families, even their games.

<sup>11</sup> And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. <sup>12</sup> The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light.<sup>6</sup>



Wake up!

We can certainly **wake up** for our own, personal sakes. And we can wake up for the sake of our closely held networks like our families and our church. But the context here remains in the public sphere. God is calling us to wake up from our slumber in regard to the public sphere... we are to wake up **to** our culture and wake up **for** our culture.

There is a phrase, really a word of slang from current popular culture, which comes to mind. I'm *going out on a limb* here because I don't want to be accused of cultural appropriation or anything like it... but it truly applies. The word is **woke**. Do you know what that means? Are you **woke**? I suspect many of us gathered here today don't know what it means; I wasn't exactly sure, so I did some research.

I found a clip of video that is really helpful. It is from an unlikely source, at least for me... a source that I don't think I've ever used: **Essence**, the monthly lifestyle guide for young, black, women (I am not any of those three).

Nevertheless, this 2-minute clip does a great job of unpacking what is commonly meant by the word **woke**. Pay careful attention. I suspect that some of what is said won't align with the way that all of us see things, but listen carefully because we might just learn something.

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<sup>6</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 13:11–12). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.





Are you woke?

If *woke* means a constant state of being outraged, angry or agitated, I'm not woke.

But if it means:

- Being engaged in the work of justice
- Speaking up for those who are not heard
- Eyes wide open to the work that needs to be done
- Being part of solutions (world changers) and bringing people along
- Living out what I believe

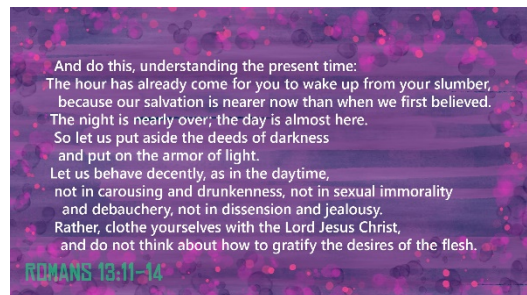


Well... I probably won't get the t-shirt, but I'd like to be **woke**. If anybody is going to be **woke**, shouldn't it be Christians? Shouldn't the People of God be the most **woke**?

Wake up!

Discern the times. Realize that our time is short, whether it is because life itself is short or because the Lord may return at any time. Stop being so selfish.

clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.<sup>k 7</sup>



The world needs to see Jesus. If we are going to effectively show the world Jesus, we need to wake up, pay attention, listen and understand.

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<sup>7</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 13:14). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

In big ways and small, this is the call of God from His word to *live out* the righteousness He provides in every way we possibly can.

Let us pray.

In this atmosphere of prayer, let me ask that foundational question, “Are you right with God today?” This can be your day to believe. There is forgiveness for sin and the promise of eternal life. Today can be the first day of a new life walking with God.

And for us all, let us hear the call of Scripture, and even hear the call of the Spirit’s voice specific to our opportunities and circumstances, and commit to *live out* our faith publicly. To love our neighbors the best way we possibly can, demonstrating the Gospel in genuine, compelling ways.

Father, thank You for the Gospel and the way we see it today portrayed before us in Your Word. Every time we see the Gospel we take it as an opportunity to believe, and to allow that faith to impact our actions and even our motives. Give us big hearts and open arms for our neighbors. Reveal to us ways in which we can serve, and demonstrate how the Gospel changes lives. Thank You for your mercy and grace... forgiveness for sin and power for living these lives. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

