

The Unshakable Promise of God

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, July 30, 2017, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Romans 8:26-39](#) and [Matthew 13:31-33, 44-51](#)

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I love this passage from Romans. It is one of my two favorite passages from the Epistles, the collection of letters in the New Testament. I include it frequently in memorial services and I want it read at my memorial service (though I hope that detail isn't needed for a long time). I agree with Jim Wallis who says, "This remarkable and uplifting passage describes the unshakable promise of God."¹

Notice what Paul doesn't say in this passage. He doesn't say that people who follow Jesus will live a life free of hardship, conflict, and weakness. In fact, "Paul assumes that weakness, conflict, and hardship are normal for the Christian life and, for that matter, human life."²

How's that for good news? Congratulations, Christian, your life will have plenty of hardship. You will face conflict (perhaps especially because of your faith). And when you face the principalities and powers you will see how weak (at least as culture measures it) you are.

Do you see how antithetical to our culture's general messages all of this is? The general message of our culture is that you cannot just feel powerful, you can *be* powerful. The general message of our culture is that conflict should be avoided because you can't be happy if you're in conflict (I sometimes call this the tyranny of 'nice'), and happiness (not joy, but happiness) is the to be pursued. The general message of our culture is that if you are facing hardship it's your own darn fault; you, in some way, chose this.

Is it any wonder that the "prosperity gospel" is an American invention? Even if you haven't heard the term before, you know of this theology. It's a theology that is more steeped in American values than Christian values. It's a theology that tells us that the goal of the Christian life is "to get out of adversity and into security."³ People who subscribe to this particularly American form of Christianity (that has become very popular in parts of Africa and South America) are pushed to believe in the God of the quick fix who will make us happy, prosperous, and protected. It's a theology that says that all of our uncomfortable feelings, our insecurities, and our weaknesses are bad that that we should move into strength, security, and control.⁴

This is how Wikipedia defines it: "Prosperity theology (sometimes referred to as the prosperity gospel ...) is a religious belief among some Christians, who hold that financial

¹ Jim Wallis, "The Unshakable Promise of God," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/unshakable-promise-god> (accessed 25 July 2017).

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

blessing and physical well-being are always the will of God for them, and that faith, positive speech, and donations to religious causes will increase one's material wealth....

"The doctrine emphasizes the importance of personal empowerment, proposing that it is God's will for his people to be happy. The atonement (reconciliation with God) is interpreted to include the alleviation of sickness and poverty, which are viewed as curses to be broken by faith. This is believed to be achieved through donations of money, visualization, and positive confession."⁵

Televangelists have embraced this theology and made it famous. Oral Roberts was a huge proponent of this theology. T.D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, and Creflo Dollar are three of the more prominent contemporary preachers of this. The whole "Prayer of Jabez" movement – if you don't know about it, don't worry, you can ignore it – came out of this theology.

All of this is a false gospel.

What Jesus preached was not personal prosperity. What Jesus preached as the kin-dom of God. And the kin-dom of God was always presented as an alternative to the kingdom of Caesar. This kin-dom of God is subversive and infiltrates the systems that oppress, the systems that allow a small elite to be wealthy at the expense of the masses. The kin-dom of God is how the arc of history bends toward justice. Just look at the parables in today's gospel reading.

The kin-dom of God is like a mustard seed sown in a field. It grows into a big old shrub and birds come and nest there.

A mustard bush is neither big nor wonderful; it is invasive, fast-growing, and impossible to get rid of (like darnel, the weed sown among the wheat in last week's parable). To say the kin-dom of God is like a mustard seed is to say that the kin-dom of God is like kudzu, that it's like Scotch broom, that it's like like morning glories and dandelions. "And birds of the air? The last place we want them is in our grain fields. You've heard of scarecrows?"⁶

The kin-dom of God is like yeast that a woman mixed into three measures of flour until it was all leavened.

Have you ever heard the expression, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump"? This little aphorism actually *is* from the Bible. It's in both the letter to the Galatians and the first letter to the Corinthians. Paul uses it in much the same way we might use the expression, "One rotten apple spoils the whole barrel." "Jesus shows the same understanding when he warns against the leaven of the Pharisees and Herod (Mark 8:15). His parable begins with the common assumption: Leaven equals ... corruption."⁷

⁵ "Prosperity theology," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology (accessed 29 July 2017).

⁶ Laurel A. Dykstra, "A Pearl Like a Fishnet," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/pearl-fishnet> (accessed 25 July 2017).

⁷ Jim Douglass, "A Parable of Corruption," *Sojourners*, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/parable-corruption?> (accessed 25 July 2017).

And three measures of flour? According to Jim Douglass, that's about 50 pounds – enough to make bread for more than a hundred people. Oh my goodness, the leaven of God is far more corrupting than a rotten apple somewhere in a barrel.⁸

And consider the woman's actions. She "hides" the leaven, the corrupting leaven, in the flour. She sneaks God's tiny corrupting power into the giant bin of flour, transforming the whole shebang. I like the way Douglass restates the parable: "The reign of God is like a tiny, corrupt substance, which a shrewd woman took and hid in a huge amount of flour, until it accomplished a [massive] transformation."⁹

The kid-dom of God is like a buried treasure that someone finds, so he goes and sells all he has so he can buy the field. The kin-dom of God is like a merchant who finds the perfect pearl and sells all he has so he can buy it. The kin-dom of God is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught every kind of fish."

Here's the thing: The kid-dom Jesus announces turns things upside down. Once it takes root, you can't get rid of it and it upsets all your plans for your farm and for the rest of your life. In the kin-dom Jesus announces, serfs are buying land, a peasant woman bakes bread for 100 and feeds them. The kin-dom Jesus announces is rising, "and there we find our daily bread. Fish are breaking through nets, the rich are selling all they have [so that maybe they, too, can be part of it]. The kin-dom Jesus announces is springing up faster than we can uproot it.

I hope you noticed that "the objects described [in this series of short parables] are inseparable from actions and actors: Seed is sown by a sower, yeast is hidden by a woman, the treasure hunter and the merchant buy and sell, the fishers fish. The kingdom is not about static symbols but about people engaged in action."¹⁰

The kin-dom Jesus announces is "subversive, unstoppable, invasive, a nuisance, urgent, shocking, and abundant. It requires action and commitment and inspires extreme behavior."¹¹ It is not about your financial blessing and physical well-being.

If we make the commitment to the kin-dom of God that Jesus announced, our pets will still die, our spouses will still disappoint us from time to time, we will watch our children make bad choices or suffer and there won't be a thing we can do about it, we will watch our parents and grandparents grow old, and we will face health crises and financial hardships at different points in our lives. In fact, if we make the commitment to the kin-dom of God that Jesus announced, we will face more hardship than that. The principalities and powers in their many forms will try to stop us, sometimes simply with inertia and sometimes with more overt forms of persecution. This is especially true when we undertake the extreme action the kin-dom requires of us.

What Paul is saying in the passage from Romans is that "adversity is part of life, and especially part of the Christian life lived in conflict with the world.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Dykstra, *op. cit.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

“Success, according to this passage, is not the avoidance of adversity but knowing the love of God in adversity. The promise made by the passage is not that God will remove the difficulties of life, but that God will continue to love us through them.

“Those who accept the adversities of life and find God’s love in the midst of them are those who become the wise, healed, whole, and joyful people. Often Christians whose faith has been purified through suffering are the most joyful of all. On the other hand, those who spend their lives in the desperate attempt to avoid hardship and pain often end up most miserable and filled with anxiety.”¹²

That said, “Suffering does not necessarily lead to spiritual maturity. It can lead to bitterness, frustration, anger, and violence. We all know people who have allowed their suffering to embitter them and destroy their lives. Even social movements, in response to injustice and suffering, can become violent forces of revenge and hatred.

“But oppression and suffering can also lead to trust in the love of God. Suffering can help us let go of everything and realize that there is no alternative but to depend on God. Abandoning ourselves to the love of God leads to spiritual maturity and wisdom.”¹³

Paul asks, Who can separate us from the love of God? Can trouble? No. Hardship? No. Persecution? No. Famine? No. Nakedness? No. Danger? No. Sword? No.

So, what are you afraid of?

“Are you afraid that your weakness could separate you from the love of God? It can’t. Are you afraid that your inadequacies could separate you from the love of God? They can’t. Are you afraid that your inner poverty could separate you from the love of God? It can’t.

“Difficult marriage, loneliness, anxiety over your children’s future? They can’t. Negative self-image? It can’t. Economic hardship, racial hatred, street crime? They can’t.

“Rejection by loved ones, the suffering of loved ones? They can’t. Persecution by the authorities, going to jail? They can’t. The President? He can’t. [Congress? They can’t.] War? It can’t. Nuclear war? Even it can’t.”¹⁴

That is the promise of this passage: the unshakable promise of God. Whether we feel it or not, whether we accept it or not, it’s there. It’s our choice. Amen.

¹² Wallis, *op. cit.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*