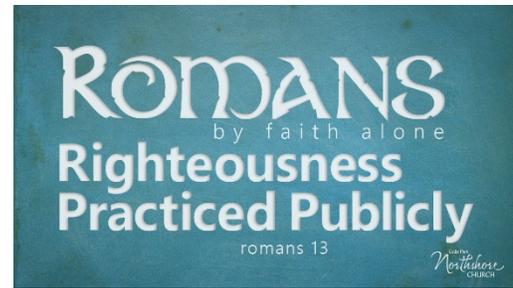


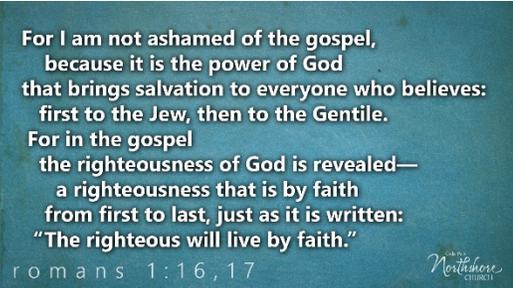
## Righteousness Practiced Publicly

Our series from the Book of Romans has us in chapter 13; you can see that I've given the message drawn from this chapter the title *Righteousness Practiced Publicly*.



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.

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, repenting 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.

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

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.

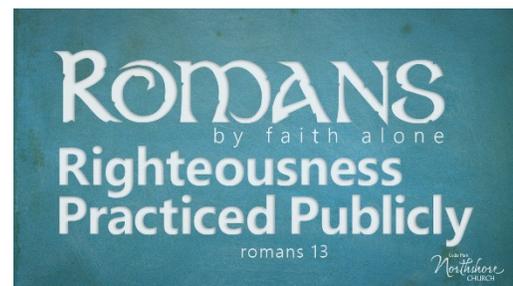
In Romans, we start with living out that righteousness individually and personally, and then move to living out that righteousness as the Church... working out that righteousness among believers.

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 is, for example, difficult for many to operate their businesses according to their faith (it is harder to have a Christian business these days). Others face opposition to openly conduct their faith in public spaces like schools.

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. A current example is Russia; newly enacted law appear to make it very difficult to have any public practice of faith, as it restricts sharing or public-proclamation of faith. It appears that in terms of religious freedom, Russia is intent on stepping back to the old Soviet way of demanding secularism.

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** had 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.

I bumped up a bit against some of those internal forces in a small way last week.

You may have noticed the Pokémon references outside the building today and wondered what that was all about. Or maybe you've been following some of this on social media as I posted pictures.



When I left church last Sunday I noticed a guy sitting on one of the rocks next to our main entrance on 68<sup>th</sup>.

As I thought about it on my way home, I put it together. I try not to think in terms of stereotypes... but this guy was a type. A *messed up mop* for hair, scraggly beard, squinty eyes from hours of staring at screens in the dark, the sort of look that one could assume that he smelled like dirty socks and Fritos... the guy was a gamer, playing *Pokémon Go* on his iPad.

For reasons beyond my knowledge, the game designers determined that churches would be good locations for *Pokémon gyms*. I'm guessing that it is because church property is generally accessible to the public and nobody lives there. By the luck of the draw (or Divine providence?) Northshore is a gym. So that means that some of the multiplied millions who are playing the game need to stop by gyms like ours to advance in the game. There has been a steady stream of people stopping by Northshore's campus, usually the parking lot, since the game launched on July 6.

I thought, "Why would anyone sit on that rock by the road?" And then it occurred to me... **there was nowhere else to sit**, at least not outside. Have you noticed that churches generally don't have chairs outside of our buildings? It isn't because we don't value chairs. Pastors like me are keenly aware of our chairs (we have 242 in our auditorium; I know because I counted them myself). But we are often focused on just those chairs. That is where people get the really good stuff, where they hear me talk and listen to the music I provide. *Of course* those are the most important chairs. We want people to fill those chairs, several times each weekend.

But what about some chairs by the door?

I wasn't really a Christian for the first twenty years of my life. I can remember that I didn't feel all that comfortable sitting in those chairs in church auditoriums. I didn't feel like I belonged. I didn't know what to do or how to act. I figured that the people who were comfortable in those chairs were probably judging me.

It could be that people who might not feel comfortable in the auditorium would like to sit by the door.

So I put some chairs by the door. I even took a few more steps, including putting up a few signs, and providing a place to plug in (*Pokémon Go* really drains batteries).

I've had some folks tell me this week that Christians shouldn't have anything to do with Pokémon because it is *evil*. I first thought that was pretty silly, but I did do a little investigating. I found a number of websites that referenced a *Time* interview with the creator of Pokémon. In the article he was quoted saying that he invented the game in rebellion to his Christian parents and his Christian upbringing. He was quoted explaining how the game was intended to focus on science, especially evolution, thus destroying the anti-science teaching and faith of his parents. Well... that certainly isn't great.

The Internet is powerful in that one can quickly find stuff like that... and the Internet is even better because one can *dig a little bit more* and find the **real** *Time* interview. That business about creating Pokémon out of rebellion is made-up nonsense. In the real article, the creator of Pokémon explained that he was a nerdy kid who collected bugs. Pokémon (short for pocket monsters) is bug collecting... plus some technology and a lot of creative imagination.

*Pokémon Go*, this latest evolution of the brand, adds whole new layers of technology and imagination with what is called *augmented reality*. Using the processors, GPS locators, and cameras in our phones, they are able to make the *real world* their *game board*. By doing so, the makers of Pokémon have introduced two things to gamers that they don't normally experience: the outside, and other people. To succeed in the game, you must go outside and walk around (a lot)... and in so doing, you usually end up meeting other people who are playing the game or are curious about the game. (Mothers of gamers rejoice!)

I'm not telling anyone they should play Pokémon. It may not be your *thing*, or you might think it is a colossal waste of time, or you might just think it is silly. But if you are afraid of Pokémon for some spiritual reason, you may just be focusing on the wrong things.

Within an hour or so after putting out the chairs, I had my first taker. And later that afternoon, that *gamer guy* showed up. I talked to him and learned that his name is Bennet; he lives in the apartments across the street. He exclaimed something along the lines of, “You did this? This is awesome! Most people just ignore people like me. Sometimes they tell me to go away, but I can usually tell that they want me to go away without them saying it. But you guys rolled out the red carpet! Thanks!”

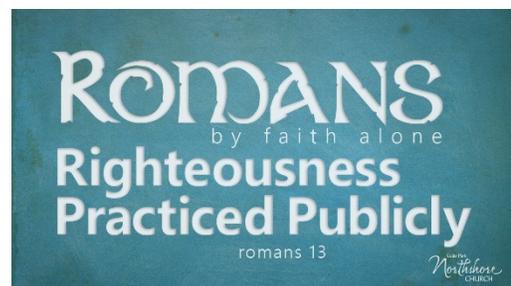
I’ve had a number of conversations this week in those chairs.

In this case, I **literally** put chairs by the door. But there are all sorts of ways that we **figuratively** put chairs by the door, ways that we let people be part of our church in peripheral ways. There are several of those figurative *chairs by the door* right at the top of our minds at Northshore these days. We just finished up VBS; we think of VBS primarily as an outreach to our community... a way for kids and parents to check us out (around 60 kids last week). We had an outdoor party on Saturday (Hot Spot in the Lot); friends and neighbors were welcome to join us for food and fun. And tomorrow we are more than doubling the distribution capacity for our food bank as we go to a weekly schedule. These are all figurative *chairs by the door*, ways to punch big holes in the hard shell that surrounds our church, ways that people can get a glimpse of the kind of people we are and the kind of God we serve.

Let’s be sure to keep putting *chairs by the door*... welcoming, comfortable places for people to enjoy that might just be a stop on the way to believing and belonging. These are some of the small ways that righteousness is practiced publicly.

So with that **short** introduction... let’s get to the text in Romans 13 (sorry about that... I don’t *get up on a soapbox* very often).

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

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>2</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.

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. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. 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. 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. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

romans 13:1-5

Northshore Church

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<sup>2</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 13:1-5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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 that maybe we don't like to hear).

<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>3</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. I'll admit it, every time I've read this passage I wonder why taxes *and* revenue... it always seemed redundant. On this occasion I finally looked it up. 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>4</sup>

This is also why you pay taxes,  
for the authorities are God's servants,  
who give their full time to governing.  
Give to everyone what you owe them:  
If you owe taxes, pay taxes;  
if revenue, then revenue;  
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if honor, then honor.

romans 13:1-6

Northshore  
CHURCH

Let no debt remain outstanding,  
except the continuing debt to love one another,  
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The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery,"  
"You shall not murder," "You shall not steal,"  
"You shall not covet,"  
and whatever other command there may be,  
are summed up in this one command:  
"Love your neighbor as yourself."  
Love does no harm to a neighbor.  
Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

romans 13:8-10

Northshore  
CHURCH

<sup>3</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 13:6-7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>4</sup> The New International Version. (2011). (Ro 13:8-10). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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).

It turns out that there is a theological lesson to be learned from all this Pokémon silliness (although I'm certain it was not intended). It is curious that they made churches what they call *gyms*. In the game (as in real life) you go to the gym to gain strength... but that is not where most of the game is played. The game is played out on the streets. And so it is with us... we Christians don't go to church to live out our righteousness, we come here to gain strength... and then we go out into the streets, living our lives, practicing righteousness publicly (and then we bring even more friends back with us, joining our team, gaining strength together).

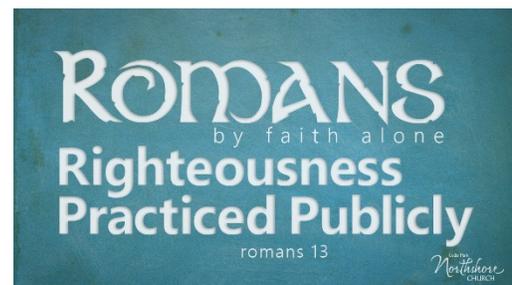
The work is out on the streets, loving our neighbors.

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, even their games.

So it is back to this week's example... If our neighbors are finding themselves in our parking lot, even walking up to our front door, and we don't even put out a chair... how can we say that we love them? How could we possibly say that we are *living up* to the command of Scripture? How can we say that we are living out and living up to righteousness?

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 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.