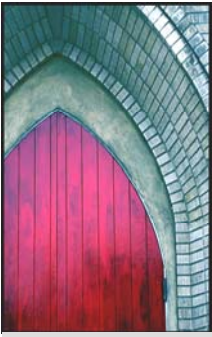


WHO CAN BE AGAINST US? *Oak Hills Birthday Message, 2007*

SCRIPTURE TEXT: ROMANS 8:31-39 (ESV)



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Happy Birthday!

Eight years ago a small group of people officially formed Oak Hills Presbyterian Church. By a precedent our planting pastor Scott Sauls established, we set apart the first Sunday of the year to celebrate our birthday as a church. And I love this Sunday because I get to reflect on the past year and the coming year, and I see the hand of God at work in our midst and the love of God emanating out from here through your lives. As we look back on 2006 and ahead to 2007, I pray we will see more than the passing of time. I pray we will see God building this

church. The text we turn to speaks to our assurance that God has not established His church for nothing. He is moving us out into the world to make known His astonishing grace!

Romans 8:31-39

³¹What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³²He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶As it is written,

"For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We Belong In The Camp:

The questions we need to keep before us as a church are what are we called to do and be, and what qualifies us for this call? Paul here is writing to a group he has never visited and doesn't know well personally. Yet he gives them some pretty specific assurances that **THEY BELONG IN THE CAMP OF THE LORD**. His assessment comes from truths deeper than their likeability or ministry successes. Their belonging to God comes by right of their being part of the Church universal—as we are. In this text Paul heralds how **COMPLETELY** the Lord has equipped His church for everything He has called them to do and become.

IN CHRIST, WE LACK NO PROVISION (VS. 32): Everything that we need for everything He has called us to do and become He Himself provides for us. And what's more, He does not give it begrudgingly with some "You'd better make this worth my while!" kind of demeanor. He gives them **GRACIOUSLY**. This means all He gives us He **wants** us to have! Paul appeals to the precedent God Himself set—the grounds upon which we can rest assured that He graciously gives us all things—He gave us His own Son, Christ. This is an argument from the greater to the lesser. If He did not spare His own Son, won't He provide everything else too? In Christ we lack no provision. Everything we need for everything He has called us to do and be He has provided.

IN CHRIST, WE LACK NO CREDENTIAL (VS. 33-34): What good is having everything we need at our disposal if we ourselves turn out to be unqualified for the work to which He has called us? Paul's imagery here is of legal credential. Do we have the right to serve Him? Or if you like, are we actually hired for this job? It a fair question. The problem with serving God is we need more than gifts and resources. We need to be shown to be in the Lord's camp, not the enemy camp. But sin sets us at war with God. And we have an enemy who constantly wants us to believe that we lack the credentials to serve the Lord with our gifts because of our sin, and are therefore useless to the Lord.

But for the believer, we lack no credential. Paul writes, "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? ...Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us." Our credentials for belonging in the Lord's camp come from Christ's intercession on our behalf. He stands opposite our accusers before our God, the Righteous Judge. For every accusation leveled against us, Christ appeals to His justifying blood applied to our lives. For every sin (*none of which, by the way, does the enemy need to make up. We supply enough actual sin that he doesn't need to fabricate our transgressions!*) Christ declares He took our condemnation on Himself, and the penalty for our sin has been paid in full. Exacting two payments for our sin by punishing us for it when Christ already died for it would be unjust.

Let's make sure we get this, because Paul is saying something very specific here—He's giving us **doctrine!** He's telling us peace with God was not achieved by Christ persuading God to change His mind about sin. Never once has our Holy God ever said if we'd only try and be more like Christ He'd turn a blind eye to our sin and relax His standards of righteousness required for relationship with Him. And this isn't what we want either! Why? Because asking God to deal with our sin by lowering His standards is asking Him to become like us, rather than to make us like Him. The minute God decides to accept me just as I am **without** dealing with my dark heart is the minute I no longer need Him because our standards of righteousness are the same.

But Paul is telling us here our justification before God has not come through God taking a softer approach to sin. Let this truth undo you! God has **DEALT** with your sin, not by ignoring it, but by exacting the wage it required—death. Only it wasn't your death. It was the death of His Son. But because Christ Jesus, our perfect sacrifice, was without sin, the wage He readily accepted could not hold Him in the grave. He has risen and is at the right hand of God making intercession for you now!

So who can condemn us now? Who can bring a charge against anyone for whom Christ died? We stand in the camp of the Lord because God has completely and perfectly dealt with our sin in Christ. And because He has, with Christ is the only place we actually **DO** belong! Not only do we have all we need for everything God has called us to do and be, we have **every right** to spend our lives using those resources He has provided!

IN CHRIST, WE LACK NO INTIMACY (vs. 35): Through vs. 34 Paul has built a magnificent case that not only does God equip us for everything He has called us to do and be, He has also credentialed us to serve by taking away our sin. We're not only equipped for service, we're also **fit** for service. But in vs. 35 he takes it one glorious step further. We're not just rank and file workers in God's union. We are the objects of His affection!

Paul writes, "*Who shall separate us from the love of God in Christ?*" This question rises above all the others. The image here is of Christ standing between us and all who would seek to separate us from Him. He doesn't fight for a purse or bragging rights or for respect. He fights for love—specifically, His love for us. The opponents line up—tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, the sword—and one by one they fall to the One standing between us and them. The believers in Rome were facing these very things. Paul tells them, and us, there is a motive in Christ's defense of you—His deep love for you!

Neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. In Christ, we lack no provision, no credential and no intimacy with God. What an amazing description of the church! When we examine who we are and what we are called to be in this world, texts like this insist that our answer had better be a glorious one. Christ has not established His church for nothing. And here we stand, Oak Hills Presbyterian Church, at the beginning of our ninth year, just getting started!

God's Faithfulness to Oak Hills:

So where have we come in the past year? Our focus last year was on our call to bear witness to Christ as individuals and as a church—to get involved in mercy ministry, missions, loving our neighbors well. For this we need all this passage promises—provision, credential and the security of His loving embrace. And we found God faithful in all these things. Here are just a few of many, many stories to tell of His faithfulness.

OAK HILLS' FINANCES: For the past three years Oak Hills' annual budgets have shown more projected spending than projected income. The leadership made some strategic staffing decisions that required us to dip into our reserves for a time, in the hopes that within a few years we would grow into our budget. Over this past year, your stewardship and faithful giving far exceeded our budget projections, bringing us much closer to a balanced budget for this year than we anticipated. This is exciting because it means we are growing in a direction that will enable us to invest deeper in ministry opportunities both locally and abroad. God continues to show Himself to be our Provider.

YAKAMA SUMMER MISSION TRIP: Last year we embarked on our first ever short term mission trip, and the Lord blessed that venture! For starters, the overall price tag for the 26 people (10% of the congregation) was \$26,000—every penny of which was raised through outside contributions and your designated gifts. So we left for our first trip fully funded.

The attitude surrounding that trip was blessed as well. The team really connected. There were many who wanted to go but couldn't for various reasons, but the entire congregation participated in this trip through prayer, contributions of VBS supplies and letters of support. Through that trip we had the honor of not only visiting the Yakama people, but also of having one of their elders, Wendell, visit us. We're not just building homes, we're building relationships. With Haskell University, the college of the Indian Nations, just 20 miles away, we may see our connections with the Yakama people lead to helping some of those kids we met on the reservation go to college. I don't know what the Lord has begun here, but it is exciting!

EMPHASIS ON GRACE: When I first interviewed here in 2002, I asked people what they liked about Oak Hills, and almost without exception the very first thing they spoke of was the emphasis on the grace of Christ toward sinners, and how the people here loved each other with that kind of grace. Many of those folks have moved on, but as new folks join us, they're saying the same thing. What's so encouraging to me is new folks are finding grace-centeredness coming from people who have joined us since my introduction to Oak Hills, meaning the Lord has preserved the centrality of the Gospel in this place.

SERVANT'S HEARTS: Pulling off a single Sunday here at Oak Hills requires a team of 30-40 people, set-up teams, musicians, nursery workers, Sunday school teachers, greeters, etc... This is one of the perks of being a "**tabernacling**" church—we've got a tent to set up and tear down every week, which means we need to serve one another. The people of Oak Hills have served this church with endurance and faithfulness and joy—some for many years now, and I have to believe this has only served to strengthen the health of this congregation.

HEALTHY LEADERSHIP: The Lord has blessed this church with a good long run of strong and healthy leadership. Our elders love this Body and the Lord to which we belong more than I can describe, and they consistently lead with spiritual wisdom and discernment. The deacons of this church are also a tremendous blessing. They lead with their hearts, loving people more than numbers. God's care for the health of the leadership of Oak Hills humbles me and I thank Him for these men.

Let Us Go Outside The Camp:

Just as sure as nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ, nothing can take away His call for us to bear witness to Him. We belong in His camp with a call to follow Him **OUTSIDE** the camp. From Hebrews we read: "*Jesus suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through him let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise.*" (13:12-15)

If we were established for the purpose of ministering in His name, and if we lack no provision, credential or intimacy with Him, if nothing, not even death itself, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, and if we see the evidence of this in how He has blessed us, surely we have nothing to fear in going outside the walls of the camp. May God teach us more and more what it means to walk in faith. May He deepen our ministry impact by deepening our trust in Him, our love for Him and for each other. May Oak Hills continue to be a church longing to know and make known the astonishing grace of God. May He lead us outside the camp, and may He get all the glory!