

The Practical Application

Romans 16:1-16

Romans (no. 44 in the series)

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Video and audio versions available online:

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This document was prepared by Brett Eades using Peter's notes and the video version of this sermon. If you encounter any significant discrepancies or errors in this document, please let Brett know. Thank you!

Message

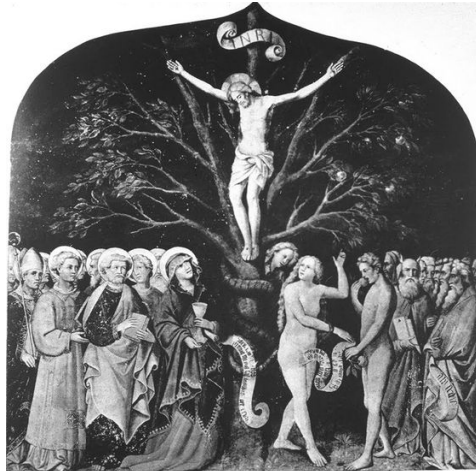
Today, after 16 months of preaching through Romans, we have reached the last chapter. I think it's entirely safe to say that there is no letter in the history of humanity that has done as much to change the world as Paul's letter to the Romans. And yet, there's something incredibly strange about that, for Paul hasn't yet really told us what to do—there has been no real practical application point.

I used to love to listen to Chuck Swindoll and at the end of each sermon there was always a “practical application point,” like write your mom a note, join a small group, go on the mission trip, or eat more greens etc. etc. In the 1980's church growth was the rage, and so they told us to end each sermon with a practical application point, and yet, over and over, I'd get to the end of a text and realize that I'd just have to make something up, and then I realized that folks wanted me to make something up.

In Romans Paul has primarily just told us the way things are—in other words, he's announced the decision of God. And when he mentions our decisions—well, it's just not all that practical.

For instance:

Romans 6:12, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body.” We think, “Great he's going to give us a list,” but what he actually wrote was “Let not the sin reign in your mortal body.” And we learned that “the sin” had something to do with how we relate to the tree in the garden sanctuary of every human soul (heart).



"The Fall and Redemption of Man" by Giovanni da Modena

Romans 12:1, “Present your bodies a sacrifice.” That’s hardly practical.ⁱ He seems to make a list in chapter 12, but when we translated it literally, we discovered that it was more like a description, rather than a prescription.

In 12:14 he does just say, “Bless those who persecute you.” That’s a little more practical, I guess, but you’ll need some folk to persecute you first.

In 12:21 he says, “Overcome evil with good.” But what does that mean? Don’t we need more knowledge of Good and evil to know how to use the Good to defeat the evil, and yet that sounds vaguely evil, doesn’t it?

In 13:7, we got our first truly practical application point. And now I quote: “Pay your taxes.”

In 13:13 he does say walk properly—not in orgies or drunkenness but we wondered is it 2 beers, 3 beers, or 4 beers—How do we judge?

Then in 14:13 he says, “Let us not judge.” And yet that’s exactly why practical application points are so helpful: I can do them, judge myself to be righteous and judge my neighbor unrighteous. “Judge not” is an entirely impractical, practical application point.

So, you see what I mean? Apart from “Pay your taxes,” there are no solid practical application points in Romans, until now. For, at the end of our text today, in the last chapter of Romans, I think that Paul actually does command us to do something, that you can do, and then have a fairly good idea whether or not you’ve done it. And yet I don’t know of any churches, in America today, that actually do it—that which Paul commands to be done.

Romans Chapter 16—At first this may appear boring, but it’s not so boring once you realize that you’re reading someone else’s mail.

Romans 16:1-2:

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant [*diakonos*: deacon] of the church at Cenchreae (That’s the eastern harbor of Corinth), ² that you may welcome her in

the Lord in a way worthy of the saints (What is the way worthy of the saints, that is “the holy ones”), **and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron** [*prostatis*] **of many and of myself as well.**

So, Phoebe is a *prostatis*, which means she supports Paul and others, probably with finances and management—kind of like Paul’s manager. And she’s a deacon, which is fascinating, for in 1 Timothy 4 Paul tells Timothy that a deacon should be the husband of one wife, and Phoebe has no wife. She’s from Corinth, from whence, apparently Paul is writing to the Romans. Corinth was the Las Vegas of the ancient world—It’s said that one thousand prostitutes served at the temple of Aphrodite just to the south of town.

“Prostitute” is *pornes* in Greek, it’s where we get our word “pornography.” They didn’t have any photographs, or movies in Paul’s day, but they did have a lot of paintings and statues, but Paul doesn’t mention them. Abortion and infanticide were common in Paul’s day, but Paul gives no practical advice about legislation or political action.

It was to Corinth that Paul had written a few years before, in reference to a man sleeping with his father’s wife and bragging about it—and of course, that’s helpful...DON’T DO THAT! But there’s a whole lot of grey between sex with your mother and walking past a statue. So, when Jesus said that stuff about looking on a woman, or wife, with lust—Did that include statues? It would be nice if Paul had given a little more direction in that regard.

And you see this is what people want from Pastors: practical application points like “no R-rated movies,” “no Greek statues” or “kissing in church.” And that makes perfect sense, because sexual abuse is rampant in Denver (in our culture) as it was in Corinth and Rome, and something should be done about it.

We want moral direction, and political advice. In 146 BC, in response to a revolt, a Roman General had exterminated all the men in Corinth and sold their wives and children into slavery. And now Paul is writing to Rome, and sending this letter with sister Phoebe, a Corinthian from Corinth. I’m just pointing out that there were incredible ethical and political tensions in Rome and Corinth, just as there are in America today, and so we the church would like some practical advice, on how to address all those tensions. Next verse:

Romans 16:3-7:

Greet Prisca (“Priscilla,” f.) **and Aquila** (m.), **my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,** ⁴**who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well.** (Paul had met Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth, as recorded in Acts 18.) ⁵**Greet also the church in their house. Greet my beloved Epaphroditus** (m.), **who was the first convert to Christ in Asia.** ⁶**Greet Mary** (female Hebrew name), **who has worked hard** [R 16.7-12] **for you.** ⁷**Greet Andronicus** (m.) **and Junia** (f.), **my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known** [“notable”] ~~to~~ [*en*: in, among] **the apostles, and they were in Christ before me.**

That's fascinating for Junia is a female name, and Paul seems to be saying, rather clearly, that she was an Apostle, and not just any old apostle (that is "messenger"), but one commissioned by Jesus himself, and commissioned before Paul was commissioned on the road to Damascus.ⁱⁱ

In the Middle Ages, church leaders began arguing that Junia was short for Junian which is a masculine name, for they couldn't abide a female apostle.ⁱⁱⁱ And you see that's understandable, considering that to the Corinthians, and to Timothy, Paul had written some rather confusing directions about women in leadership.

But here, in Romans Junia appears to be an apostle—Priscilla has a church in her house—and Phoebe is a deacon in Corinth of all places—which seems to imply that Paul was speaking to some specific situations in Timothy and 1st Corinthians and didn't expect folks to read his mail and make a bunch of rules hundreds of years later.

And yet he did know that the Romans would be reading this mail, and still Paul gives absolutely no practical instruction on how to run a church. I was ordained in two Presbyterian denominations. We had hundreds of pages of detailed instructions on exactly how to run a church. We spent countless hours arguing over policies, procedures, our stance on abortion, sexual ethics, and political issues, and most importantly, who we would judge in, and who we would judge out, of our institution. And Paul, has done none of that in Romans. Paul continues:

Romans 16:8-15:

Greet Ampliatus (m.), my beloved in the Lord. ⁹ **Greet Urbanus (m.), our fellow worker in Christ, and my beloved Stachys (m.).** ¹⁰ **Greet Apelles (m.), who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the family [household] of Aristobulus.** (There is a good chance that this Aristobulus was the brother of Herod Agrippa.^{iv}) ¹¹ **Greet my kinsman Herodion (m.). Greet those in the Lord who belong to the family of Narcissus (m.).** ¹² **Greet those workers in the Lord, Tryphaena (feminine) and Tryphosa (feminine). Greet the beloved Persis (feminine), who has worked [R 16.13-15] hard in the Lord.** (It's interesting that Paul has only mentioned women as working hard in the Lord.) ¹³ **Greet Rufus^v, chosen in the Lord** (From Mark 15, we learn that this Rufus was likely the son of Simon the Cyrene who carried the cross with Jesus.^{vi}) **also his mother, who has been a mother to me as well.** (Isn't that a juicy tidbit? Paul must've referred to her as "Mom.") ¹⁴ **Greet Asyncritus (m.), Phlegon (m.), Hermes (m.), Patrobas (m.), Hermas (m.), and the brothers who are with them.** ¹⁵ **Greet Philologus (m.), Julia (feminine), Nereus (m.) and his sister, and Olympas (m.), and all the saints who are with them.**

So far Paul has mentioned 10 women and 19 men.^{vii} Some are Jews, some are Romans, and some are Greeks. Some appear to be upper class, while others hold names that were common to slaves; there had to have been ethical, political, and ecclesiastical tensions, but Paul gives them no real practical direction regarding church government, public morality, or politics; No practical application points other than, "Pay your taxes."

And yet he did just command all of them to do something. He did say “Greet,” in the imperative tense, sixteen times: “Greet.” But what does he mean by “Greet?” Next Verse...this is the practical application point; this is where the rubber meets the road; this encapsulates the Theology of St. Paul in Romans. And this is the thing that we American Christians very rarely do. [R 16.13-16]

Romans 16:16:

Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

We think, “Well, surely Paul doesn’t actually mean that. It must’ve been a meaningless gesture for them; it would be awkward for us and dangerous. [R 16.6 – 1 Peter 5.14] Well, I think he actually meant it.

- 1st Thessalonians ends with this statement “Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss...” Right now, holy kiss everyone in church.
- 1st Corinthians 16:20, after long sections on the sexual improprieties in Corinth, Paul writes: “Greet one another with a holy kiss.”
- 2nd Corinthians 13:12, “Greet one another with a holy kiss.”

We tend to think that “holy” means “without feeling,” but Peter tells us what “holy” means, when he ends 1 Peter with the same admonition. 1st Peter 5:14, “Greet one another with the kiss of love,” Peter doesn’t use the word “eros;” he doesn’t mean erotic kisses. He uses the word “agape;” but “agape” doesn’t mean without feeling, but just the opposite—God is Agape, God is Holy, and God has feelings!

In Luke 7, Jesus (30 years old and single) is at a formal dinner with a Pharisee, when a woman (most likely a prostitute) interrupts the dinner by washing Jesus’ feet with her tears and covering them with her kisses. When Simon the Pharisee grows indignant, Jesus reprimands him for not being more like her. “You gave me no kiss” says Jesus, “but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss (*kataphileo*—super kiss) my feet.”

Now we don’t know if Simon kissed other teachers that entered his home, but we know that he would’ve never kissed anyone the way that woman kissed Jesus—she loved (agape-d) much. So, there may have been some cultural convention around kissing rabbis, but nothing analogous to the kissing commands of the New Testament.

According to the highly respected Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary, (and I quote): “There is general agreement that the ‘holy kiss’ had its origin in the practice which emerged in the early church among the believers themselves, with the impetus probably coming from the shape of their life with Jesus himself. Nothing analogous to it is to be found among any Greco-Roman societies, nor indeed at Qumran (that’s the Jewish community that produced the Dead Sea Scrolls).”

So yes, the Holy Kiss was clearly the accepted practice of the early church. And yes, it would’ve felt awkward to Gentiles and Jews. And yes, it does seem to be dangerous.

By the third century the Holy kiss was no longer allowed between genders, and religious leaders began warning of its dangers. In the 13th century in Britain—which makes sense—they stopped kissing people and substituted a kissing tablet called an “*osculatorium*,” which was then used throughout the Roman Church as a substitute for people, an antiseptic kissing tablet.^{viii} Today in many Catholic and Orthodox churches, the clergy, in obedience to Paul’s command, literally do the kissing for you as part of the liturgy. Which is better than most protestant evangelical churches, where we just don’t kiss and if you do, someone will call the police.^{ix}

And I totally get that. I worked in two churches in California where the Senior Pastors were cheating on their wives with a host of church ladies and then, even hitting on the girls in my youth group. And so, I want to say, if you think anyone on staff or in the congregation of the Sanctuary has kissed you in an inappropriate way, I’m begging you to tell me, or if you think it’s me, tell the church board, ok?

But having said that, Romans 16:20, writing from Corinth, (the Las Vegas of the Ancient world, riddled with sexual licentiousness and abuse) and writing to Rome, (the Washington DC of the ancient world, riddled with more scandal than Corinth, Vegas, and DC combined). Paul commands the Romans to “Greet one another with a Holy Kiss.”

Why a Kiss?

There are entire scholarly works on that very question.^x But no one actually knows the answer... for Paul never tells us. He kind of reminds me of my dad when I was a little boy—he’d get frustrated over one more argument between me and my two sisters, and so he’d just say, “Peter, kiss your sister.” It definitely wasn’t erotic, and yet I can’t deny, it did do something.

Why a Kiss? Well maybe because our Dad is quite the kisser. You know Jesus told a story about our Dad, who is also his Dad, and the power of his kisses. We were all made with a kiss, Our Father breathed his breath into the dust and man became a living nephesh, a psyche, a soul. We were made with a kiss and are still being made with kisses.

So, Jesus told a story about a father & a prodigal son; you know it, but you may not have noticed that the story pivots on the power of our father’s kisses. It’s actually the story of two sons but begins with the youngest son coming to his father and demanding his share of the inheritance. In that culture meant, “Dad, you’re dead to me, and I want your stuff.” Remarkably, this father gives this boy just what he, apparently, desires.

The boy travels to a far country where he squanders everything on “profligate living”—that is unholy kisses, in the words of his brother: prostitution. Once he has become entirely destitute, this desperate boy comes up with a plan that some seem to think is righteous but was probably the very pinnacle of his unrighteousness.^{xi} He decides to return to his father because he knows that his father is still rich. He practices a speech in which he confesses his sins, and then asks to be a hired servant—that is an employee, not a son, an employee who works for the Father’s stuff. From a distance the Father sees his son, and then runs to him on the road, where he falls upon the boy’s neck, and before the boy can get a word in edgewise, the Father “*kataphileisen*”—it’s the same word as that used for the prostitute at Jesus’ feet—the Father kisses and kisses and kisses his boy.

And, at that point, that boy must've surrendered to his father's kisses, for when the boy delivers his speech, he leaves out the last line, in which he had planned to plead with his father for employment. He no longer wants to be an employee; he wants to be a son.

Romans 2:4, "It's the kindness of God that leads you to repentance." And so, the Father heals his boy of the wounds inflicted by all of those unholy kisses with a river of holy kisses, and everyone starts to party.

Everyone starts to party except the older brother. We discover that he believes that he's earned all his kisses, and so he is offended by the river of free kisses lavished upon his little brother. And yet kisses that are earned, bought, or paid for, are the very definition of unholy kisses—that's the definition of *pornea*, it is the prostitution of a soul. If you think you've earned your kisses, you cannot receive holy kisses, in fact they'll burn you like fire. The story ends with the father standing in the outer darkness with his older boy, saying "Son you are always with me and all that I have is yours." But the older brother doesn't want his younger brother, or his father's kisses.

When my dad used to drop me off in Junior High, he'd always give me a kiss, and I'd wipe it off because I was trying to be proud. Well, this father goes to the outer darkness with his self-righteous son. His presence undoubtably burns like a fire. But now we know what he wants: The Father wants each of us to receive his kisses, and then kiss our sister, kiss our brother, he wants us to greet each other with his holy kisses.

Now, you think that I'm going to make you kiss each other. And I'm not. But maybe God is—Read your Bible and ask him. He doesn't tell us why we must do it; He just tells us to do it. But I do suspect that he would like us to ponder.

So, here are some of my observations about kisses.

1. Kisses are communion.

So, pucker up, turn, and look at your neighbor. It's almost freaky, isn't it? Between those two tender membranes, that we call lips, flows the breath that Paul has told us is "life." (Romans 8:10) It flows in and out of the earthen vessel that is your neighbor. Wind, Breath, and Spirit are all one word in Greek and in Hebrew.

When my Dad told me to kiss my sister, and I actually did kiss my sister, I think my heart had to acknowledge that in some amazing way she was me and me was she, we breathed the same breath, the same spirit.

When I became a dad, I was surprised to discover that I just couldn't help but kiss my kids—whether they were clean or dirty, good or bad. When they were bad, they would often refuse my kisses, so I'd just wait for them to fall asleep, then I'd sneak in and lightly kiss 'em on the cheek.

According to Paul in Romans 13, we're all asleep but I bet that all along our Father has been lightly kissing us on the cheek. And yet, it's time to wake, according to Paul, and God wakes us with a kiss—a kiss that shatters our self-centered dreams and reveals the presence of Love who's been with us all along.

2. Kisses make us vulnerable.

When the father ran to his boy and covered him with kisses, he made himself vulnerable to incredible pain. And yet, that father had always been vulnerable and, I would imagine, had always offered his son those very same kisses. The father had always been vulnerable, but the boy had never been so vulnerable as he was on the road that day. All his arrogant dreams of a life without his father had been shattered by the far country, and now his father's kisses revealed that his judgment of his father had just been part of those arrogant dream. He could never earn his father's kisses, and his father would never ever desire such a thing, all of his kisses are 100% Grace; they're Holy.

3. Kisses are dangerous.

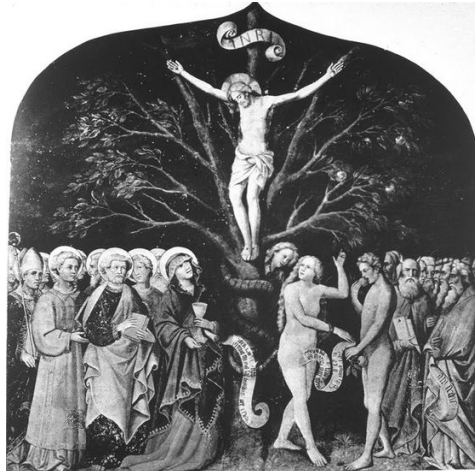
Not just unholy kisses, but holy kisses. It was dangerous for the father to commune with his prodigal son in such an extravagant and unguarded way—it cost him. And it was dangerous for the boy, or I should say, his ego—It was the father's kisses that shattered all the boy's arrogant illusions.

- Holy kisses are Grace, and unholy kisses are an arrogant illusion.
- Holy kisses give life, and unholy kisses simply consume life; they take life.

Unholy kisses are dangerous, to the kisser and to the kissed because they take life, which then tempts everyone to hide their life in an ego which can no longer offer kisses or receive kisses. And yet starving for kisses we then try even harder to take kisses, which means we can no longer receive kisses, for we're convinced that all kisses are unholy. Well, if you've been wounded by an unholy kiss, then of course Paul's kissing command seems incredibly dangerous, and in a way, it is. But I want you to know that you're not the only victim of an unholy kiss.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus was betrayed with a kiss—the most unholy of kisses; I think it's the very definition of evil. And yet (Romans 12:21) Jesus didn't return evil with evil, he conquered evil with the Good. And he is the Good; he conquered the evil with himself. Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss, and Jesus called him “friend.” I don't think Jesus rejected the kiss, but somehow, he absorbed that kiss and transformed that evil into something else entirely: the Gospel of Grace. Evil kissed the Good, and the Good received the kiss, and conquered the evil.

Jesus lifted his head on the tree and cried “Father forgive them.” And who is them? Wouldn't that, at least, include Judas, and you? He cried “Father, forgive them; they know not what they do.” And then he delivered up his Spirit, his Breath—that's the holiest of all kisses.



"The Fall and Redemption of Man" by Giovanni da Modena

Maybe this is the holy kiss, and the father has been kissing us all along, but we don't know his kiss, until we've taken his kiss, and then seen that he's always given his kiss, and so surrender to Love revealed in his Holy Kiss. And, maybe we're all the victims of unholy kisses, but we can't be free of those kisses, until we suffer those kisses with Jesus and forgive as we've been forgiven. Whatever the case:

- Holy Kisses seem to be quite dangerous.
- Unholy kisses clearly are very dangerous.
- But no kisses is the most dangerous, for then each one of us is all alone, and that's hell.

4. A world without kisses is hell.

I think most psychologists and sociologists would agree that it's children who have never been kissed with holy kisses or never been able to receive holy kisses—It's those children, who grow up to inflict the most unholy of kisses on everyone else. You see God made us for intimate communion, and if we don't receive that intimate communion, we will try to take intimate communion in the most unholy of ways. And so, it makes sense to me that St. Paul would prescribe the "holy kiss" to remedy the curse of unholy kisses which plagues us all.

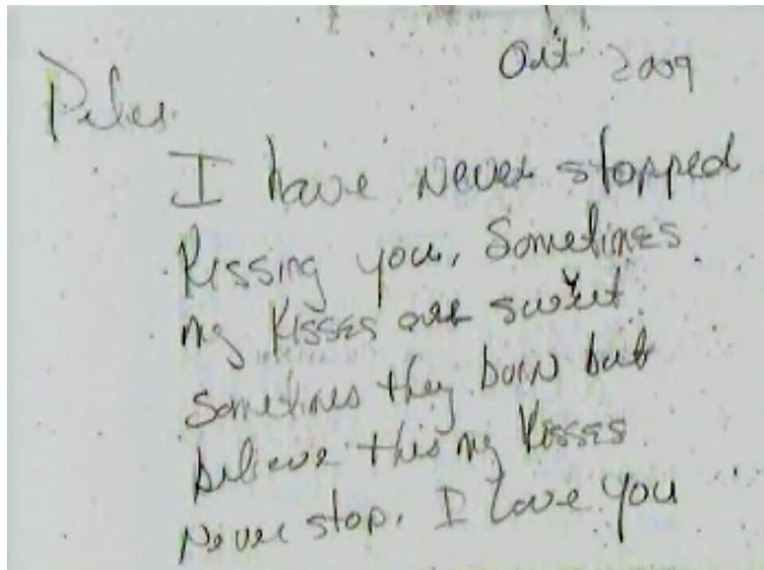
5. Holy kisses are a communion called Life.

Fifteen years ago, I didn't want to live anymore. I felt—whether it's true or not—I felt like I had been betrayed by hundreds of kisses. We've all been there in some form. Maybe it was the day your friends wouldn't sit with you on the bus, or the day you received the notice about your divorce, or perhaps the day you woke up in rehab having betrayed yourself.

Fifteen years ago, we had just started the Sanctuary, and yet my heart felt so wounded that I just wanted to quit everything. I was sitting in church, when I felt a puff of air on my neck and thought that's odd. It happened several times, this "puffing." The next week, I happened to preach on the Song of Solomon and learned that a literal translation of my text, Song of Solomon 4:16 read as follows: "Awake, oh north wind, come, oh south wind. And 'puff' upon my garden." The puffing happened for several months, during the services. Sometimes barely

perceptible, sometimes quite strong. Once I watched it actually move my notes. I remember thinking “What the hell... God. Are you puffing? Or am I just going insane? I could really use a bonified raise the dead miracle right now, and all I get is puffing?” And yet, when it would stop, I would worry that God had given up on me.

One night, at our Sunday night service in October of 2009, it was just silly—it was happening all over my body, and I couldn’t help but laugh. I looked over at Susan, and she handed me this piece of paper:



It was what she had just heard: “Peter, I have never stopped kissing you. Sometimes my kisses are sweet. Sometimes they burn. But believe this: My kisses never stop. I love you.”

6. Kisses can burn...(and kisses can be sweet).

You may remember that in Dostoevsky’s *Myth of The Grand Inquisitor*, Jesus returns to earth during the inquisition and is imprisoned in Seville Spain by the Grand Inquisitor, who accuses Jesus of destroying the work of the church by offering freedom to the children of Adam. After this priest just rails on Jesus with pages of brilliant and biting diatribe. Jesus stands up walks across his prison cell and kisses the Grand Inquisitor on quote “his old bloodless lips,” and Dostoevsky writes, “And that is his only answer... the kiss glows in his heart.”

I would imagine that it burned. It burned like my father’s kisses when he would drop me off in Junior High. It burned, but once our world has been reduced to ashes, it no longer burns, and nothing could be more sweet. Kisses can burn, and kisses can be sweet.

7. Kisses can destroy, and kisses will create.

200 years ago, a young boy, made a terrible mess with a set of paints while his mother was away, and he was supposed to be watching his sister. When she came home early, he braced himself for her judgment; she looked at the painting, picked it up, and said “What a beautiful painting of

your sister.” Then she kissed him on the cheek. Years later, Benjamin West—one of the greatest artists in our nation’s history—Benjamin West would say, “It was that kiss that made me a painter.”

You know Paul was brutally honest in his letters to Corinth and even to Rome. At times they had made a real mess of things, but to make it all something beautiful took far more than policies, rules, or a list of practical application points; It required a holy kiss, freely offered to all.

8. Holy Kisses are the Judgment of God incarnate in human flesh.

I stand by the bed where a young woman lies, writes Dr. Howard Selzer, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy... A tiny twig of the facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed... The surgeon had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had to cut the little nerve. Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously, greedily? The young woman speaks.

"Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks. "Yes," I say, "it will. It is because the nerve was cut." She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. "I like it," he says, "It is kind of cute." All at once I know who he is. I understand and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.^{xii}

That young bride had a wound in her body; I think sin is a wound in our soul, but our bridegroom bears our wound to reveal the glory of his kiss. We crucified the Holy Kiss, and he let us crucify him, and miracle of miracles, that’s how the Holy Kiss works and works all things.

It was that night in 2009, as Susan handed me that piece of paper that I last felt the puffing.^{xiii} But on the Paper it had been written, “Peter believe this: My kisses never stop.” And so, I make a habit of imagining what is true, imagining him kissing me. But it’s easiest to imagine, when I’m kissed by one of you, or hugged by one of you, or smiled at by one of you—especially when I know I don’t deserve it. Then, you are the incarnation of my Father’s constant kisses.

9. Kisses bring us home.

Tim Bayly rebelled against his father and broke his father’s heart. Joe was a pastor; he tried everything, but just couldn’t get through to Tim, his son. Finally, Tim left home and joined a commune in downtown Chicago (profligate living).

One night, around eleven p.m., Joe received a call, “This is the police. Your son was arrested for a DUI. We have him here in the town jail.” Joe got out of bed and drove a half hour in the bitter cold to that town. But when he got there, they told him, “We don’t have a Tim Bayly here.” Joe thought that perhaps he had heard wrong, so he drove to the next town, and then the next, and the next, and the next.

Finally, around 4 a.m., he decided to drive to that old house in downtown Chicago, where he knew that Tim had been sleeping. The door wasn't locked. He stepped over bodies looking for his boy. Then, in the faint light of the darkened room, he saw his son asleep in a sleeping bag, strewn across an old mattress.

Quietly, he walked over to the mattress and stood over his boy. And then, without thinking, he bent down, quietly kissed his son on the cheek, stood up, turned around, and went home. In the months that followed, Tim started visiting his parents. Then he started going to church. Then he re-committed his life to Christ. And then he announced he was going into the ministry.

One day, years later, on a walk, Joe turned to Tim and asked, "Tim, what brought you back?" Tim stopped, looked at his dad, and said, "Don't you know? Dad, remember that night years ago when you got a call that I was in jail? Dad, that was my friend. It was a prank. When you came to the house, I only acted asleep. Dad, I was wide-awake. I knew you'd driven all night in the cold, and so I wondered what you would do to me and all you did was bend down and kiss me gently on the cheek. Dad, it was the kiss that brought me back."

10. Kisses bring us home.

11. Kisses are home.

12. Kisses make all things new.

I don't remember ever teaching this to my children, so I imagine that it was my children that taught it to me. When they were little, and they'd suffer some sort of wound. They'd come running to me, usually at church in front of a crowd, just sobbing and wailing, crying "Daddy, Daddy, I got an owie...kiss it, kiss it, kiss it!" It was often embarrassing, for they just wouldn't stop crying and demanding, and sometimes they had fallen on their behind: "Kiss it, kiss it, Kiss it!" So, I'd pick them up give them a little kiss, set them down, and they'd run off laughing and giggling as if I had actually healed their wound.

And you see maybe I did. Life hurts, and no one likes pain, but the thing that makes it all just terrifying is believing the lie that God cannot save or that God does not want to save, that God is not All-Powerful Love for you all the time. Well, I think that's the point of Romans, and that's why Paul's practical application point is "Greet one another with a holy kiss." Our Father actually does make all things new—broken smiles, broken bodies, broken hearts, and broken souls—and he does it with his Holy Kiss.^{xiv}

13. Jesus is the Holy Kiss.

"If you want to know, does he love you so, it's in his kiss—that's where it is."

Communion

And so, on the night that he was betrayed by all of us, he took bread and broke it saying, “This is my body broken for you. Take and eat and do it in remembrance of me.”

And he took the cup saying, “This is the covenant in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you and do it in remembrance of me.”

So, we invite you to come forward, take a piece of bread, dip it in the cup, and touch it to your lips. That’s the Holy Kiss.

Benediction

When George Wishart was being executed in 1546 for preaching the gospel against the dictates of the Roman Catholic church, it’s recorded that his executioner hesitated and at that, Wishart bent over, saying, “Here is a token that I forgive you.” And then he kissed him on the cheek.

You do not kiss people that you think your Father in heaven hates and may endlessly torture. You kiss people because you’re convinced that your Father in heaven endlessly loves them, kisses them, and desires them.

And that’s the Gospel, right there in the old kisser.

Well, you just received the Holy Kiss at the communion table, and now you’re surrounded by others who are “The Holy Ones,” the Saints. What would be an appropriate way to welcome them, to Greet them, to remind them who they truly are?

Endnotes

ⁱ 12:2 “Do not be conformed to this age; be transformed by the renewal of your mind.” What does that mean?

ⁱⁱ *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.* —1 Corinthians 15:3-9

ⁱⁱⁱ Dunn, Romans 9-16 (Word Biblical Commentary), p. 894-895

^{iv} Ibid., p. 896

^v *And they compelled a passerby, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross.* — Mark 15:21.

Most Scholars seem to think that the Gospel of Mark was written from Rome based largely on the testimony of Peter. So, there’s a good chance that this Rufus in Romans 16 is the same Rufus as that in Mark 15 and that Mark mentions him in his Gospel because they were friends. It also makes sense that when Paul mentions the fact that Rufus was chosen in the Lord, he was picturing Simon being chosen to carry the cross of Christ.

^{vi} Dunn, p. 897

^{vii} Six are apparently jews, although two of them have Roman names.
Two of the nineteen have Hebrew names. Six have Roman names and eleven have Greek names.

^{viii} [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pax_\(liturgical_object\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pax_(liturgical_object))

^{ix} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kiss_of_peace

^x <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/a-brief-history-of-the-christian-ritual-kiss/>

^{xi} This becomes clear when carefully observing how Jesus structures the Story. One of the best scholarly works on this story is by Kenneth Bailey in Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes (Eerdmans Publishing).

^{xii} Brennan Manning, *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, pp. 105-106.

Similar story appears in: Michael P. Green, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1989), pp. 201-202.; and Alice Gary, *Stories for the Heart*, (Gresham OR: Vision House Publishing, Inc., 1996), p.55.

^{xiii} You may never feel the puffing, but you must believe the truth, and that is that he never stops kissing you.

Eighteen years ago, I preached on this topic and a woman sent me an email in response. In it, she described a dream, that God had clearly given to her five years earlier. She had gone to sleep condemning herself, but she dreamed this dream and recorded it in her journal upon awakening. In the dream, she was walking down a highway covered in “sorrow and apathy.” Then she saw a group of men milling about. She hoped they’d notice her. She writes,

My heart resigns itself to being overlooked. And then I see one of them look at me. . . He will not look away . . . I go to him. He holds me in his arms, and I feel his lips on mine. It is a kiss that takes nothing from me. He gives everything in it, and in that moment, I know down to the core of my being that I am deeply wanted—beyond imagination. And in that kiss, I know purity and passion as one. There is no impurity in true passion, for he is passion. I am held. I am beautiful. I am deeply loved. And in his embrace, I know that I am worthy of all his love because he wants me, and that, in itself, makes me worthy.

His kiss floods me with warm sunshine and deep peace. I am finally able to rest, to breathe in knowing that this man will never reject me. He knows all my wounds and broken, dirty places and he still believes that I am beautiful, that I am worthy. He still sees me as perfection. He loves my white skin and my dark hair. He gives me gifts . . . He loves me, but I do not love him — or do I? (If I do it is deep down inside me.) I leave him there by the road. His dark eyes watch me leave. But he is not angry. He is longing with his whole heart for me to change my mind and choose him. He is patience incarnate. He has a grim steady look in his eyes and in his demeanor that promises he will wait forever if necessary and at the end of forever, he will still love me as much then as in the very beginning. I know that I will always be a great beauty to him, and he will always want me. There is nothing in heaven or hell that will change that.

She shared how that kiss had haunted her, judged her, romanced her for five years as “she ran from the Lord.” And then she wrote, “Thank you for reminding me of the holy kiss.

^{xiv} He does it with a holy kiss out on the dusty road home, or even a holy kiss in the outer darkness where the older brother weeps and gnashes his teeth. Actually, he does all things with a Holy Kiss. For this is “the plan for the fulness of time to unite all things in him (Eph. 1:10).”