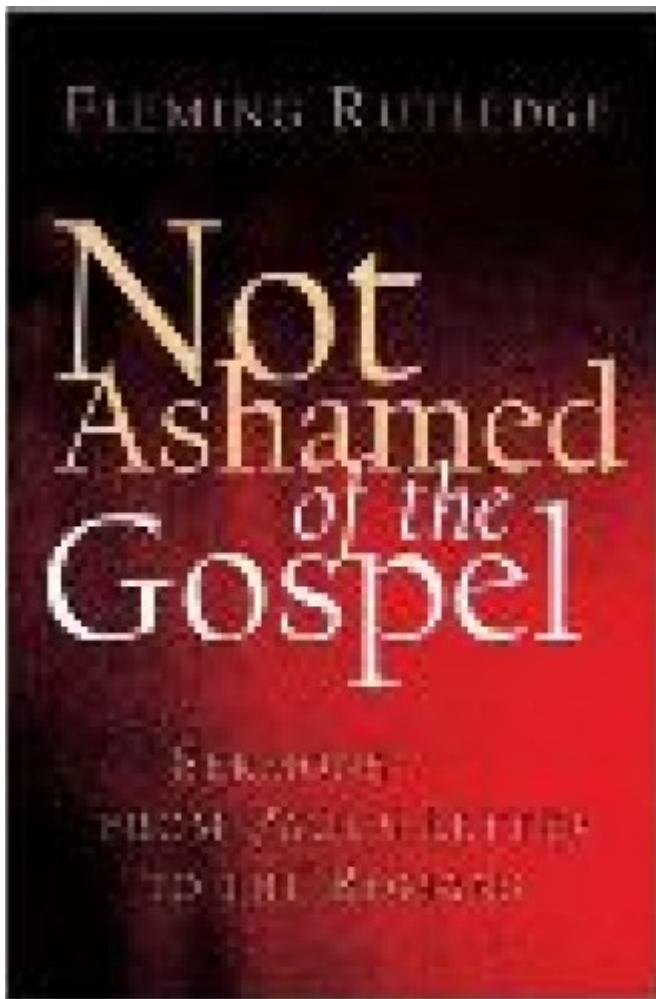


Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Sermons from Paul's Letter to the Romans

reviewed by [James C. Howell](#) in the [June 17, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Not Ashamed of the Gospel: Sermons from Paul's Letter to the Romans

Fleming Rutledge
Eerdmans

When I carried this book into a gas-station diner I saw the waitress look at the title and roll her eyes. I turned the book over. But was I ashamed of the gospel? Well, of course not—so I turned its face up again, wondering what else might happen.

A large man with a beard and many tattoos, who had pumped gas into his motorcycle right next to my Accord a few minutes earlier, peeked at the book from the next booth, smiled broadly, gave me a thumbs up, and said, “Jesus is coming again soon.”

On my way out, I laid the book down near the register. The cashier read the title aloud and declared that she was not ashamed of the gospel and that she was just last night reading “Revelations” for the fifth time. “If you really want to read a good book that will change your life,” she said, “get . . . oh, I can’t remember the title. You know, the one with the tree on the cover?” I knew exactly which book she was talking about.

What is the function of published sermons? To spark conversation in diners? To help preachers with the daunting task of preaching to cashiers and bikers? In this collection of Fleming Rutledge’s sermons, as in her *The Bible and the New York Times* (1999) and other works, I have found help, inspiration, models, material and the ever-elusive turn of phrase to explicate some homiletical thought.

The virtues of this collection of 50 sermons are many. Best of all, Rutledge keeps the subject of the sermon straight. In “The Order of the Sentence,” she declares that sermons shouldn’t be about me, my faith, my spirituality, my doubt, my good deeds; sermons are about God!

These sermons are artistic in a clean, sober way; the artistry never overwhelms the clarity of the message. While Rutledge mines newspapers, the city where she is preaching and things she has read recently, she never veers far from the scripture, and there is never the slightest question of her dogged trust of the text at hand.

Rutledge is courageous, exposing idols and voicing hard mandates, although her words don’t have an in-your-face feel: she tackles war, wealth and the decadence of society. One of these sermons was preached to some very affluent friends of mine who own expensive second homes in the mountains of North Carolina. She labeled her hearers “elite” and “nice” (in a gently mocking way) and suggested that “somebody, somewhere does not want you to be a new person in Jesus Christ. . . . It

would embarrass them.”

This collection is just that: a collection, not a comprehensive homiletical commentary. Quite a few texts are left untreated, and by her own admission Rutledge doesn’t have a sermon on the ticklish passage in Romans 1 invoked so frequently by those debating homosexuality. But she does not shrink from other difficult texts. Many preachers have a blind spot for chapters 9-11, but not Rutledge. She offers not one but three sermons on Romans 11:32 (“God has consigned all to disobedience”).

Rutledge’s sermons are clear and memorable, deftly negotiating the paradoxes in Paul’s message, never in mere black and white but articulating the nuances of a gospel too marvelous to be simplistic. Evil isn’t something in somebody I don’t like; it cuts through all of us. The gospel isn’t some salve that makes my aches better; an invitation to a radically new life is involved. Preachers desperately need skilled guides to help them preach the delightful complexity of the gospel instead of succumbing to the kind of paltry caricature of the message popularized in books like the one with the tree on the cover.

I could quibble with this or that detail in *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*. But what sermon isn’t subject to a few quibbles? Treating Romans 11:12, Rutledge offers a new perspective on the idea that Paul wants nothing less than “full inclusion,” but she never questions the NRSV’s seemingly tendentious translation of *pleroma*—a term with richly textured connotations, none of which imply the kind of modern-day inclusivity listeners might hear in “full inclusion.” The sermons seem pitched to educated, cultured audiences, not to the biker and cashier I met, and I find myself longing for a bit more stirring rhetoric, a bit more emotional freight.

The peculiar virtue of the sermons gathered here is that they satisfy my pet rule: “This sermon only works in this place on this day with these people.” Not that we should only chat chummily about what is local and familiar. But there is a timeliness (not a timelessness!) to every exposition of the gospel, and when we preach, we explicate the gospel in a particular place to a band of listeners like no other in the world. If we are preaching Paul, we aim to do the kind of thing Paul did, as described by J. Christiaan Beker:

Paul is able to make the gospel a word on target for the particular needs of his churches without either compromising its basic content or reducing it

to a petrified conceptuality. . . . Paul's hermeneutical skill exhibits a creative freedom that allows the gospel tradition to become living speech within the exigencies of the daily life of his churches. The "core" is for Paul not simply a fixed, frozen message.

Rutledge has this hermeneutical skill in spades; I feel privileged to overhear (overread, actually) sermons that are right on target. She helpfully supplies cues at the beginning of many of the sermons here, like "The week this sermon was preached, eight Amish girls had been shot in Pennsylvania," or "This congregation was struggling with the aftermath of a leader's misconduct." Within each sermon, she alludes to what the choir just sang, to the Olympics going on that week, to a baseball game in the city the night before, to what everybody noticed (or nobody noticed) in that week's *New York Times*.

The risk of being too contemporary, of inserting too much dailiness, is huge. But if the preacher can model the connection between the ancient gospel and what is currently happening in the real world, then listeners learn that the gospel isn't a relic of humanity's religious past and that it is hardly confined to church buildings. Then the preacher will be fashioning a flock of theologians who go to ballgames, read the morning paper and work in diners, who will in all humility not be ashamed of the gospel.