

Romans 1-3

The Sin of Man

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Romans 1-3: The Sin of Man

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This volume was compiled using the notes from a series of sermons through the book of Romans that Pastor Paul delivered to his congregation at Branch of Hope OPC in Torrance, California.

This section, titled *The Sin of Man*, is comprised of sermons on the first three chapters of Romans.

At the end of each of his sermon notes, Pastor Paul has included a section of “Questions for Study and Meditation.”

We hope the reader will find these helpful in their study of and meditation on the Word of God.

Soli Deo Gloria

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Romans 1:1

Paul I Recognize, But Who Are You?

January 8, 2012

Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God (Romans 1:1).

Introduction

There might not be a more humorous story in all of Scripture than an account given in the 19th chapter of Acts where some **“itinerant Jewish exorcists undertook to invoke the name of Jesus over those who had evils spirits, saying, ‘I adjure you by the Jesus who Paul proclaims.’”** The evil spirit’s response was: **“Jesus I know, and Paul I recognize, but who are you?”**

After this the **“man in whom was the evil spirit leaped on them, mastered all of them and overpowered them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded” (Acts 19:13-16).**

I should hesitate to make light of this since this, no doubt, would have been a terrifying event to observe. In fact, Luke records that **“fear fell upon”** all the residents of Ephesus **“and the name of the Lord Jesus was extolled” (Acts 19:17).**

It is no small thing to speak for God. Those who do so ought to do so with quivering lips.

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness (James 3:1).

How much greater judgment on those who might recklessly claim to have the office (not merely of a teacher) of a prophet or apostle! For a prophet or an apostle was not merely one who wrestled with the meaning of God’s word (the way we all might); they spoke God’s word as if they were an extension of the lips of God itself.

As we set sail on our voyage through Romans, the first thing we’re greeted with (in both the English and Greek) is the name of its author, Paul. Along with his name, we’re given a couple of titles.

Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called *to be* an apostle (Romans 1:1a).

Paul

I won't labor the history of Paul and his conversion—matters well known by Sunday school children. Suffice it to say he (as Saul—his Jewish name) was a fierce persecutor of the church, beginning with the stoning of Stephen (Acts 7:58), followed by his wreaking **“havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison” (Acts 8:3).**

While **“still breathing threats and murder against the disciple of the Lord” (Acts 9:1)** Saul journeyed toward Damascus where he had an encounter with the Lord (or should we say the Lord had an encounter with him!). Saul, who heretofore would be called Paul (Acts 13:9), was, at his very conversion, given marching orders by Jesus:

‘But rise and stand upon your feet, for I have appeared to you for this purpose, to appoint you as a servant and witness to the things in which you have seen me and to those in which I will appear to you, delivering you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me’ (Acts 26:16-18).

This is the ordination of Paul as an apostle. Unlike the ordination of elders and deacons throughout the course of history, Paul's ordination was **“not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised Him from the dead” (Galatians 1:1).**

What we will be studying in this letter is perhaps Paul's greatest effort in fulfilling the appointment to open eyes that men might turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to

God...receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Jesus.

What kind of herald would God use for this glorious task? What kind of person would you pick and by what title would you have him present himself? By all accounts Paul was small of stature (the meaning of the name Paul) and physically unimpressive (1 Corinthians 2:3). And his first designation is not “vice regent” or “archduke” but “bondservant”.

Bondservant

Bondservant was a word to describe a slave in a culture where slaves were common. It is clear from 1 Corinthians 7:21 that many slaves had come to faith in Christ. Paul would seize this cultural phenomenon (not necessarily approving it, as some mistakenly suppose) as an instructional tool.

Those bondslaves who had come to faith in Christ should view themselves as the Lord’s **“freedman.”** And those who were free when called to Christ should recognize they are now a **“bondservant of Christ.”** One of Paul’s recurring themes throughout Scripture is that you will be someone’s slave (Romans 6:15-23). To the Christian he finishes the above thought, **“You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men” (1 Corinthians 7:21-23).**

There is a certain advantage a culture rife with slavery has over our current western fantasy of autonomy. The bondservant had an idea of who their master was. The prospect of being traded would be accompanied by thoughts of who their new master might be and what effect that might have on their lives.

Today we’re surrounded by slaves who don’t know who their masters are and live under the fiction that they are not slaves at all. They’re like prisoners in a cell, barking epithets at those walking free, not indulging the thought for a moment that they might be on the wrong side of the bars, unaware of their tiny cell.

Like the priest in *The Count of Monte Cristo* they spend years digging in search of an answer only to find their tunnel has led to an even smaller cell. One will be a slave of righteousness in Christ, which leads to eternal life or a slave to sin which leads to death. It is a worthy pursuit for one to discover who their master is and where this master will lead them.

Paul does not shrink back from the title of bondservant. One might say he rejoiced in the role.

As the Christians used it, the term conveys the idea of complete and utter devotion, not the abjectness which was the normal condition of the slave. Paul is affirming that he belongs to Christ without reservation.¹

It would be the slave who, if given the option to choose to leave, would stay. The master might say to this slave, “I set you free.” The wise slave then surveys all other masters, recognizing that it is the necessary condition of a created being to have a master. The wise slave then, by the grace of God, turns and explains, “I’ll stay.” The world is comprised of a host of harsh taskmasters.

Paul may have seen his role as a bondservant as a sort of succession in a long line of bondservants. God Himself applied the term to Abraham (Genesis 26:24) as He did to Moses (Joshua 1:2). It is a title given to David as well (Psalm 18:1, title). Similar to these Old Testament saints (see also Amos 3:7; Isaiah 20:3), Paul knew who his master was. He was a bondservant of Jesus Christ; more on that in a moment.

Apostle

Distinct from other believers, who should all rejoice as bondslaves under a wise, good, serving and sacrificial Master, Paul was called to be an apostle. Paul almost always uses the word “call” in an effectual way. It was not merely an outward call, as in “**many are called but few are chosen**” (Matthew 22:14) but a call that would assuredly bring about its purpose.

For Paul his call to faith was concurrent to his call as an apostle. Although this happened on the road to Damascus, Paul understood this as something ordained by God from eternity past.

But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased

¹ Morris, L. (1988). *The Epistle to the Romans* (36–37). Grand Rapids, Mich.; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone (Galatians 1:15, 16).

Yet another testimony to the sovereignty of God over the events of creation!

The word ‘apostle’ in its basic form simply means “messenger” or “one who is sent”, in contrast to ‘disciple’ which means “follower” or “to follow”. *Apostle* would become a unique office, an office not given to all the disciples/followers of Jesus.

And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles (Luke 6:13).

Anyone who deigns to convey the deep, hidden, mysterious and absolute truths of reality ought to have weighty credentials. Rock stars, movie producers and comedians fall short. Even the sheepskins of modern academia haven’t a shingle worthy of the devotion of the human soul.

And what of the cleric? The pastor, priest, reverend, guru, minister, rabbi, imam (et al) are only valuable to the extent that they accurately convey the word of God contained in the sixty-six books of Scripture, delivered to humanity first by the prophets, then the apostles—the very foundation of the church (Ephesians 20:20), Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.

When Paul identifies himself as an apostle, he sets himself apart as one who is delivering the word of God itself (see 2 Peter 3:16). The conditions for this office exclude anyone beyond the age/era of the original twelve. Even Paul found himself defending his own station!

Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord (1 Corinthians 9:1)?

A prerequisite for this office, among other things, was a personal encounter with the **“Lord Jesus...a witness of the resurrection” (Acts 1:22)**. It was perhaps for this reason people

questioned Paul’s apostolic authority. Paul explains that Jesus had appeared “**last of all**” to him “**as to one untimely born**” (1 Corinthians 15:8).

But it wasn’t the mere assertion on Paul’s part. He also explains to the Corinthians:

The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works (2 Corinthians 12:12).

The signs which “**bore witness to the word**” (Acts 14:3) given by Paul were public and numerous. Not the least of which was healing the sick (Acts 28:8) and raising people from the dead (Acts 20:9, 10). Beyond this God was...

...doing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were carried away to the sick, and their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them (Acts 19:11, 12).

...an event which led to the “*I know Paul but who are you?*” episode!

I labor this issue because we live in a culture—even our Christian culture—which has lost its foundational sense. I was confronted with this early on when a man in our church (this took place many years ago), when asked what his ministerial desires were, answered: “I want my shadow to heal people.” This was taken from Acts 5:15 where Peter’s apostolic authority was affirmed. And if ever there was a context where a healthy, skeptical/discerning “*Paul I recognize, but who are you?*” reaction is appropriate, it is in the matter of “the gospel of God” concerning Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ

Paul was an apostle for the gospel of God and a bondservant of Jesus Christ. *Christ* means *Messiah* and *Jesus* means *Savior*. As we shall see in the verses ahead, Jesus Christ is the Messiah—the long

awaited, anointed One that God had promised would bring deliverance. It is the gospel—the good news.

But we shall see that Romans is more than an extended tract, informing people on steps to salvation. Remember, it is a letter about God. We shall soon discover that the good news is also a proclamation that God has kept His promise. The King has come and men are called to the “obedience of faith.” This is an issue we will take up in our next meeting.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why should teaching the things of God be approached very cautiously?
2. How was Paul's ordination as an apostle different from the ordination of elders and deacons in today's church?
3. Why do you think God might pick an unimpressive person to be His herald?
4. What is a bondsman? Are there people who are not bondsmen? Explain.
5. Why might Paul rejoice in the notion of being a bondsman?
6. Discuss the different meanings of the word "call".
7. When was Paul set apart by God?
8. What is an apostle? Do they still exist today? Why or why not? Why is this important?
9. Who is Jesus Christ? What is the meaning of His name/title?

Romans 1:1b-3a

The Ancient Paths—The Good Way

January 15, 2012

Paul taught that as an apostle, he was...‘**set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son**’ (Romans 1:1b-3a).

Introduction

As people grow older, they tend to call upon their years as a means to legitimize their thoughts and actions. A relatively successful engineer or physician with twenty-five years of experience may mention that number when seeking to explain to a younger colleague why theirs is the proper way to do things. Although there is something to be said for experience, the mere passage of time doesn’t necessarily justify an action. Just because something is old doesn’t make it right.

This, however, cannot properly be applied to religion. If a person’s god happened upon history somewhere in history’s midst, how can that god truly be God? People will seize upon this in their criticisms of the Christian faith, as if Christianity began two thousand years ago—this weighed against other religions that extend further back into history and, therefore, have a ‘weightier resume.’

In Paul’s opening chapters of Romans, he will be leveling the playing field of humanity in his instruction on the universal sinfulness of man from Adam on. With this, Paul will lift up the name of Christ in such a way as to reveal the universal need man has for that which only Christ can grant—that is deliverance from that sin and consequential death.

This is the “**gospel of God**” for which Paul was set apart. Note that it is the “gospel of God” thus maintaining our premise that Romans, although containing numerous topics, is a letter about God—that even the focus on the gospel here is not so much where it goes (to the ears and hearts of men) but where it’s from (God). Paul then points to the history of the gospel of God and where it is found.

...which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures (Romans 1:2).

Holy Scriptures

One thing that jumps out at us is Paul's high estimation of the Holy Scriptures—an attribute lost in our culture and, sadly, even in today's church, which often seeks existential fulfillment over propositional truth.

We frequently go to church or the Scriptures with the hopes of acquiring serenity, motivation, encouragement, direction and consolation; and that is understandable—the law and gospel of God found in the Scriptures and (hopefully) preached in the church promises those very things.

But they also (at some level) promise just the opposite—promises of consternation, discouragement, pandemonium and difficulty. Is this not found in the words of God about Paul himself? When Ananias was unsure about Paul's conversion, God assured him:

Go, for he (Paul) is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name (Acts 9:15, 16—parenthesis mine).

The foundation upon which we trust our souls and build our lives is found not in the cloudy instruments of human sentiment but in the defined message God has graciously deposited in His word.

So God stabilizes (if that's the correct word) the pandemonium we might experience in our circumstances, passions and psyches by informing us through His word that He has matters well in hand—from the sparrow falling to the ground (Matthew 10:29) to the decisions of kings (Proverbs 21:1).

The numerous expressions of **“peace be to you”** (Luke 24:36) spoken by the Lord along with the glorious imperative **“be anxious for nothing” (Philippians 4:6)** by Paul are not words of empty solace. We are to know amidst life's storms (storms ordained by God—Psalm 107:23-32) that we all well tethered—Christ being the

very anchor of our soul in heaven (Hebrews 6:29). God has graciously granted us this information in His word.

It is not without warrant that we see this emphasis:

Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (2 Timothy 2:15 KJV).

Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching (1 Timothy 4:13).

Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine (1 Timothy 5:17).

Paul would include his own letters in that same category:

Or was it from you that the word of God came? Or are you the only ones it has reached? If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord (1 Corinthians 14:36, 37).

And what do we make of the much repeated admonition of the Lord saying, **“Have you not read?” (Matthew 12:3, 5; 19:4; 22:31; Mark 12:26, etc.)** I certainly realize that the Scriptures don’t always provide the immediate entertainment and gratification found in Harry Potter or The Hunger Games, but the sound meal found in the Holy Scriptures relegates all other literature to a diet of fog. For soundness of soul and mind, we must eat well, for **“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4).**

The Genesis of the Gospel

But perhaps more to the point is Paul’s drawing of his readers to the genesis of the gospel—literally found in Genesis—the *protoevangelium* (first gospel) of Genesis 3:15 where God promises

that the head of the serpent would be crushed by the seed of the woman.

The gospel is also seen in Noah who was “**a herald of righteousness**” (2 Peter 2:5) and an “**heir of the righteousness that comes by faith** (Hebrews 11:7). How clear is the promise of the gospel given to Abraham that in him “**all the families of the earth shall be blessed**” (Genesis 12:3), which Paul equates to justification by faith:

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed” (Galatians 3:8).

Add to that Moses:

By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward (Hebrews 11:24-26).

The term “Christian” was not used until the New Covenant church was well under way (Acts 11:26). But it is no stretch to call Moses a Christian—a man of faith who trusted in the promised Messiah.

The Christian faith, according to Paul, was not introduced two thousand years ago but at the very dawn of history, at the fall of man. Paul is not introducing a new religion but clarifying the promise of God from the very beginning.

Thus says the Lord: “Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls” (Jeremiah 6:16).

This would be very significant information for a church who felt that the gentile Christians were, so to speak, *Johnny-come-latelys* to the program. God had a plan for history which was (and is) unfolding just as He determined.

“In the fullness of time” (Galatians 4:4) God would keep His promises by sending His Son. Why was the fullness of time two thousand years ago? We can only guess. Had God accomplished this at the dawn of history there would have been only two people to observe it. Had God done this in the modern era it would be too easy to perpetrate a hoax—Jesus came during the most powerful and oppressive government in human history (an opinion) and during an era when religion, even the true religion, had fully fallen into the hands of Satan (John 8:44). Jesus was truly a light shining in a dark place (John 3:19-21). Still, just a guess.

As a bondservant, with the authority of an apostle set apart for the gospel and with the Scriptures in hand, Paul’s salutation would crescendo with the words “concerning his Son” followed by the identification of who Jesus is in the flesh and who He is declared to be according to the Spirit of holiness—that is, who He is, what He did and why this qualifies Him to call all nations to the “obedience of faith” which we will take up in our next meeting.

For now, let us again consider the words recorded in Jeremiah, along with the last sentence in the verse—the sentence I left out above.

Thus says the Lord: “Stand by the roads, and look, and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls. But they said, ‘We will not walk in it’ (Jeremiah 6:16).

Let us pray that by God’s grace, that not be our sentiment or the sentiment of those by whom we are surrounded.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Do the amount of years a person does something make it more or less legitimate? How does this relate to religion? Explain.
2. Why do you think Paul calls the gospel “the gospel of God”?
3. What do we find in the Scriptures and why is it important?
4. Where do we first see the gospel?
5. Did saints in the Old Testament believe in Christ? Explain and give examples.
6. Read ahead to what Paul writes “concerning his (God’s) son.” Why would this qualify Jesus to call all nations to “the obedience of faith”?

Romans 1:3-4

According to the Flesh—According to the Spirit

January 22, 2012

Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called *to be* an apostle, separated to the gospel of God which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared *to be* the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:1-4).

Introduction

When we speak of the Christian faith, are we speaking of something material or spiritual? There are those who think it is biblically virtuous to extinguish any material aspect of their faith in Christ. This can be done to the extent that their faith may not touch their physical lives at all; there is a compartment in their make-up as a human being called ‘religion.’ That compartment is for church and Jesus. When they die that compartment, like an insurance policy, will become highly valuable—but until then it stays put with the occasional uncomfortable answer they must give those who ask that they are, in fact, a Christian.

Variations of Christianity from the time of Christ (at least), such as Gnosticism and Docetism, have sought to downplay things that extend into time and space—concrete things. In short, according to this emphasis, material is bad, spiritual is good. Not to overstate or understate the issue, but remnants of this way of thinking continues to this day in those who consider themselves Christians but see no connection between their faith in Christ and the way they conduct their lives—whether with their neighbors, church (whether they attend at all), politics or even their own families. All those things have different compartments.

On the flipside of this error are those who view their Christian faith through purely empirical eyes—as something that works. Individuals come to church or seek after God with a need or a hurt and they’ve heard that Jesus will help them. Struggling people,

marriages, families, communities and nations will be straightened out, so to speak, if they get in lockstep with Jesus and His laws. Whole-hearted efforts are made (at least it seems) at living in this world the way we should and we wait for the good times to come. We give our faith two terms in office—that should suffice! Some see results, some don't. Some persevere, some don't. They leave the faith, and leave the church with the sentiment, "It didn't really work for me."

There is clearly a flesh/spirit distinction we see on the pages of Scripture. One needn't be much of a student, if at all, to acknowledge that the world consists of things material and immaterial—fleshly/carnal and spiritual. What do we make of this distinction? How far along were you in your Christian faith before you realized you'd spend eternity, not as a mere spirit-being, but in a physical body? How many of us understand Paul's writings in such a way that we think all we need to do is rid ourselves of our physical cages in order to know the fullness of joy? A view more Platonic than Christian.

Here, very early in Paul's letter to those in Rome, he will begin to speak of Jesus according to the flesh and according to the spirit.

Review

In quick review, we see Paul as a *bondservant*—no longer a slave of sin leading to death but a slave of Christ leading to eternal life. Paul had the office of *apostle*—an office that is not perennial, that does not extend beyond those specific individuals, chosen by Jesus who were witnesses of the resurrected Christ.

Paul was *set apart for the gospel* of God promised in the Scriptures—even the Old Testament Scriptures—reminding us that the foundation upon which we trust our souls and build our lives is found not in the cloudy instruments of human sentiment but in the defined message God has graciously deposited in His word—a message from the beginning of history—a message **“concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord,”** Christ meaning *Messiah* and Jesus meaning *Savior*.

...who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared *to be* the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:3b-4).

According to the Flesh—The Seed of David

Clearly the reference to Jesus being the “**seed of David**” is to His physical or fleshly descent or lineage (Matthew 1:1, 6). It is not as if the birth of the Messiah would be random—that the Christ could have been born to any person at any time. In the same way the birth of Moses brought the ire of those in power, the birth of Christ had specific promises attached to it (a particular lineage or genealogy—Genesis 49:10; Matthew 1:1-16; Luke 3:23-38) bringing similar horror to the generation of children by which His birth was surrounded (Matthew 1 and 2). Jesus didn’t become King through political maneuvering. He was born King (Matthew 2:2).

Paul will reference David along with Abraham in chapter 4. But here he mentions only David. I don’t think it’s a stretch to suggest that Paul mentions David here, rather than Abraham, because of the images it will drum up in the minds of those conversant with the Old Testament Scriptures to which Paul had just alluded. There are distinctions between Abraham and David.

Abraham was the father of the faithful (Galatians 3:9). Paul will use Abraham as a model of one who “**believed**” and it was “**accounted for righteousness**” (Romans 4:5; Galatians 3:6), Abraham’s example being one of the intense sacrifice of offering his only son (Hebrews 11:17). Although we certainly wouldn’t say that David lacked faith, one would be more inclined to view David as a conqueror and a conquering king—first over “**lions and bears**” and then over the powerful enemy of God’s people, Goliath (1 Samuel 17), and finally leading the nation of Israel to the apex of its strength.

The promise attached to the Messiah was that He would sit on David’s throne. We read of that promise made to David:

..that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ(Acts 2:30-31).

There is attached to the Messiah, a promise of untold victory. According to the Old Testament the conquest associated with the efforts of the Christ would be universal:

All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you. For kingship belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations (Psalm 22:27, 28).

The One who would sit on the throne of David would not only be the Omni-benevolent (all good) One, He would be the One to whom all rulers must bow:

Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him (Psalm 2:10-12).

All rulers—all nations are to be “**under God**”, perhaps more particularly “**under Christ**.” Oftentimes it isn’t until the smiling politicians begin to function like Nero that we long for leadership that would acknowledge the authority of an all-wise, all-powerful, all-present, all-good God.

At the time of the writing of this letter, it was the ruthless madman Nero who governed—a despot with no inclination whatsoever of bowing to anyone but his own mirror. Jesus, in a certain sense, had come and gone, yet there remained Nero—using the followers of Christ as torches in his gardens and whose deaths at the jaws of beasts would provide entertainment in his vast stadiums.

Was there not a promise of deliverance by the Messiah? After the feeding of the five thousand we see the followers of Jesus seeking to force, as it were, His royal hand:

When the people saw the sign that he had done, they said, “This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world!” Perceiving then that they

were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself (John 6:14, 15).

One must wonder what was on the mind of the mother of James and John when she made the request of that her two sons sit on His right and left hand in His kingdom:

Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” They said to him, “We are able.” He said to them, “You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father” (Matthew 20:22-23).

It appears as if they thought Jesus would provide the immediate overthrow of Rome. The cup they would drink be the cup of sacrifice—like Paul being poured out as a sort of **“drink offering” (Philippians 2:17)**. Was there not an expectation, at some level, of the political overthrow of Rome by those in Jerusalem during His so-called **“Triumphal Entry” (John 12:12, 13)**? Even at His ascension, Jesus seems to be clarifying the nature of His redemptive mission:

Therefore, when they had come together, they asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” And He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:6-8).

In the epistle we are currently studying the question will come up more than once—**“What advantage has the Jew” (Romans 3:1; 11:1)**? Where is the deliverance of Israel? There is, according to Paul, something to be said regarding the Israelite **“according to the flesh”** which we’ll get to when we reach those passages.

But with the fullness of the promises associated with David (or at least the One who would sit on David’s throne) in mind, Paul will now inform us who the One born of the seed of David was declared to be **“according to the Spirit”** that his readers might realize that the heart of the faith is to those who belong to God according to **“the promise” (Roman 9:8)**, according to the **“spirit” (Romans 8:13)**.

In all of this we should not think Paul is teaching one to the exclusion of the other as much as it is a clarification of one as it relates to the other. In short, we should not think the promises associated with the Messiah were merely ethereal or spiritual any more than we should think Jesus was not truly human—made of flesh blood. Jesus was truly born a descendant of David—a human descendant with all the attributes of humanity, **“yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15; Roman 8:3)**.

But as Peter pointed out and Luke recorded, Jesus’ taking of the throne of David was not accomplished through the immediate political overthrow of the Roman Empire, or of any other empire for that matter. It was at His resurrection (which also included His ascension) where He was **“exalted to the right hand of God” (Acts 2:29-33)**. Paul brings our attention here to the same event.

...and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead (Romans 1:4).

According to the Spirit—The Son of God

Jesus was born of the seed of David—in the flesh, the body of Jesus came into being (Hebrews 10:5); but Jesus never came into being as the Son of God—He was declared to be the Son of God—which was not a statement of His birth but a designation of His divine person (the eternal Son of God).

We may not initially view **“Son of God”**² as a very explosive term; but it did carry with it divine implications. One example is recorded by John:

² **12.15 υἱὸς τοῦ Θεοῦ**: (a title applied to Jesus, literally ‘son of God’; parallel in semantic structure to phrases consisting of υἱός followed by the genitive of class or

This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God (John 5:18).

In chapter nine Paul will again use the phrase “**according to the flesh**” which will again be followed by a reference to Christ’s other nature, divine nature. Paul writes of Israel...

“...from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen” (Romans 9:5).

We must keep in mind that a dead Messiah, in the minds of many followers, is a Messiah who simply did not succeed in His appointed task. But a resurrected, living Messiah, who is Himself God, has not merely succeeded, He has conquered. And those who trust in Him, through Him are to see themselves as “**more than conquerors**” (Romans 8:37) even against the backdrop of being “**killed all day long...sheep...to be slaughtered**” (Romans 8:36).

Those who view merely the outward promises associated with the Messiah (whether it’s a good marriage or a good government) miss the primary target in the Messiah’s mission—that target being sin and death.

For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Romans 8:2-4).

kind; compare 9.4) one who has the essential characteristics and nature of God—‘Son of God.’ εἰ υἱὸς εἶ τοῦ θεοῦ, βάλε σεαυτὸν κάτω ‘if you are the Son of God, throw yourself down on the ground’ Mt 4:6.

Jesus didn't merely triumph over the symptoms; His victory was over that darkness from which all the symptoms and attending sorrows come—sin and death. As a man Jesus was the fitting sacrifice and as God He had the divine power. As Calvin taught:

His divinity possesses power, righteousness, life, which by his humanity are conveyed to us.³

In His resurrection we see the acme of power and authority. Jesus the God-man did not sink under death—even a death that contained the infinite wrath of God's justice (Isaiah 53:5, 6).

For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father (John 10:17, 18).

In his letter to Corinth, Paul will again make the flesh-spirit distinction when he compares Adam to Jesus.

And so it is written, “*The first man Adam became a living being.*” The last Adam *became a life-giving spirit* (1 Corinthians 15:45).

I think it is a mistake to relegate all of the blessings and benefits of the Christian faith to the immaterial realm. But we also must recognize that front and center, the Christian faith is to be heralded with our eyes toward what Jesus did **“according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection of the dead.”** Information, by the way, conveyed to us by the Spirit (Romans 8:16).

Not readily apparent in the English is that the word **“dead”** *nekron* is plural. Jesus, raised from the dead is **“the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep (died)”** (1 Corinthians 15:20).

Let us conclude with one more comparison:

³ Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 1:3). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive (1 Corinthians 15:21, 22).

Let us not lose the clear implications of such a message, ever acknowledging (as we so clearly see in the world around us) that in Adam all die—that we might cling to Christ—holding firm to the faith (1 Timothy 1:19) that in Christ we be made alive.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Is the Christian faith to be thought of in spiritual or material terms? Explain your answer.
2. Give a quick review of Paul's opening words in this epistle.
3. Could Jesus have been born to any person at any time? Explain why or why not.
4. Why do you think Paul mentions David rather than Abraham or some other Old Testament saint?
5. Discuss the various promises associated with the Messiah. How do you think people may have misunderstood this?
6. Was Jesus truly human? Why do you suppose this is important?
7. When did Jesus take the throne of David?
8. Jesus was "born" of David but "declared" to be the Son of God. What is the difference?
9. Why would people seek to kill Jesus because He God's Son?
10. How could Jesus have appeared to fail as Messiah? How has He in fact succeeded? What does that mean to you (as a Christian)?

Romans 1:5

Obedience to the Faith

January 29, 2012

Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called *to be* an apostle, separated to the gospel of God which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared *to be* the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name (Romans 1:1-5).

Introduction

Many tracts are written to present the gospel. How would you present the gospel? What would the tract include? What would the message contain?

Review

In quick review, we see Paul a Bondservant—no longer a slave of sin leading to death but a slave of Christ leading to eternal life. Paul had the office of apostle—an office that is not perennial, that does not extend beyond those specific individuals, chosen by Jesus who were witnesses of the resurrected Christ.

Paul was set apart for the gospel of God promised in the Scriptures—even the Old Testament Scriptures—containing propositions upon which we trust our souls graciously deposited in His word—a message from the beginning of history—a message **“concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord,”** Christ meaning *Messiah* and Jesus meaning *Savior*. Jesus was born of the seed of David—the long awaited Messiah who would bring redemption to the world—and declared to be the Son of God according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead indicating that though fully human, He was also fully God, and what He would accomplish on

David's throne would first and foremost be the victory over sin and death.

Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name (Romans 1:5).

Grace and Apostleship

Paul had received **“grace and apostleship.”** Some prefer to translate it the **“grace of apostleship”** but I prefer to take it both ways. The grace of apostleship is correct since Paul did not merit this office. Prior to his call he was **“breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1).** He didn't fit the requirements of a minister. There is not a reputable church in the land who would have ordained Saul of Tarsus based upon his resume. He was an apostle by the grace of God.

But I would also understand it (at least theologically if not exegetically) as the grace necessary for the job description. How many of us would apply for employment if we read that the work included:

...in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often...five times...forty stripes minus one...three times beaten with rods...once stoned...three times shipwrecked...a night and a day in the deep...perils of waters, perils of robbers, perils of our *own* countrymen, perils in the city, perils in the wilderness, perils in the sea, perils among false brethren...in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things...a daily deep concern for all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:23-38).

At the end of Romans, Paul will ask the church to pray for him that he **“may be delivered from those in Judea who do not believe” (Romans 15:31).** Seeking to honor and serve that which is good,

right and true—seeking to honor the name of Christ—can be terribly uncomfortable on a number of levels.

Obedience to the Faith

Paul understood his mission to be that of calling **“all nations”** to the **“obedience of faith.”** This is not, generally speaking, the way we generally hear the gospel presented. We see the gospel presented more as an invitation—and at a certain level that is understandable. Jesus did compare the kingdom of heaven to a wedding to which people were invited (Matthew 22:2). But it is not as if the king in that parable is indifferent toward those who **“paid no attention”** (Matthew 22:5) to the invitation. We are told (especially of those who persecuted the ones issuing the invitation) that the king was **“angry”** (Matthew 22:7).

This is not to be understood as the king merely being hurt and temperamental for having been slighted. The wedding feast was for his son to whom all owe allegiance. All who were invited owe their very existence to the son, for it was through the son that all things were created (Colossians 1:16). The king’s son was the one who made the ultimate sacrifice to deliver men from the darkness of sin and death.

As we had mentioned last week, the king’s son is the Messiah to whom all the **“families and nations shall worship”** (Psalm 22:37), the one to whom the **“kings”** and **“rulers of the earth”** are to bow (Psalm 2:10-12).

We invite people to church and, in one sense, the gospel is presented as an invitation. But it would be a mistake to view the kingdom of heaven as a mere social event where the host patiently awaits our RSVP, moderately apathetic toward our response. Rather, it is more like a royal decree informing the citizens that the king has arrived and we should respond with grateful hearts and bowed knees.

Paul understood his role as an apostle to call all the nations to **“obedience to the faith.”** Some seek to interpret this as the obedience that comes from faith—that is the fruit of faith, and true faith should and does produce obedience. But prior to the daily and routine obedience produced by faith is the obedience to the faith itself. As has been said:

...for obedience to the faith—rather, “for the obedience of faith”—that is, in order to men’s yielding themselves to the belief of God’s saving message, which is the highest of all obedience.⁴

Paul was a bonds slave of Christ—he gloried in this, knowing that it is only when a person is a slave of Christ that they will know true freedom from the slavery of the world and its consequential death—precisely what Jesus was teaching in the eighth chapter of John with the words, **“the truth shall set you free” (John 8:32)**. Paul was a bonds slave of Christ and he was calling **“all the nations”** to follow suit. Paul was not advancing a mere religious preference but obedience to a legitimate authority.

To some this may sound more like a Christian Jihad than the polite western Jesus who courteously remains outside the boundaries and territories to which He has not been invited. And if so, then recognize that the only blood that is to be shed in this Jihad is the blood of the King’s Son. This is not an argument for pacifism or against just war or capital punishment, etc. It is a statement that the **“battle is the Lord’s” (1 Samuel 17:47)** and He won it at the cross (Colossians 2:14, 15).

Let us pray the gospel be presented in such a way that men recognize that the obedience to the faith is not a call that smacks of the servile submission of a slave but is rather the joyful obedience of a child who has come to see the wisdom and grace of his heavenly king and father (John 15:15).

Resistance to the obedience to the faith may prevail in cultures where (generally because of the faithful before them) relative freedom and prosperity are common. But when men are left to the capricious whims and vacuous ethics of other men, rather than a holy God, the inevitable blight and debris of human wreckage will manifest the folly of our thinking.

Obedience to the faith means renouncing all others as Lord and trusting in Christ alone as supreme Master (Luke 14:33). Obedience to the faith means to forsake all lesser gods and trust in

⁴ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D., & Brown, D. (1997). *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Ro 1:5). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Jesus as our only hope for peace with our Maker (Romans 5:1). This was Paul's mission. Calvin taught:

We hence learn, that they perversely resist the authority of God and upset the whole of what he has ordained, who irreverently and contemptuously reject the preaching of the gospel; the design of which is to constrain us to obey God. ⁵

Name

Paul's mission was to herald the **“obedience to the faith among all the nations.”** There was no territory outside the jurisdiction of this message. And Paul pursued this “for His name”, that is, for the name of God. Let us be clear that the name of God is used as another way of referring to God Himself. It is not the mere word of “handle.”

A reference to the name of God is a way of saying “God.” So when we read passages such as:

But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel (Acts 9:15).

For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Romans 10:13).

We recognize the name as referring to God. So to do things “in” His name is to do things as His ambassador (2 Corinthians 5:20). And to do things “for His name” is to do things with a heart to His glory; if there is another name deserving of glory, I would very much like to hear it. But I very much doubt that would be the case.

May God give us the grace to perceive that the greatest and most intimate gifts we find deposited in our lives and souls have, at the same time, the chief end of His glory. Is this not what we read in the much recited Psalm?

⁵ Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 1:5). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake (Psalm 23:3).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. If you were to make a tract for the gospel, what would it contain?
2. Review the first four verses in Romans. How do they lead into verse five?
3. Discuss “grace and apostleship.” Did Paul merit his apostleship? Explain. Why would Paul need grace while acting as an apostle?
4. Is “obedience to the faith” the way we generally hear the gospel presented? Does this mean we’re saved by our obedience? What right does God have to call people to obedience?
5. How is there freedom from slavery in regards to Christ?
6. Explain how the call to obedience to the faith is different than Jihad.
7. What are some components of obedience to the faith?
9. Discuss the “Name” of God. What does it mean? What does it mean to do things “in” His Name or “for” His Name?

Romans 1:6

The Master's Conspiracy

March 4, 2012

Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called *to be* an apostle, separated to the gospel of God which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared *to be* the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; to all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called *to be* saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 1:1-7).

Introduction

During the infamous O.J. Simpson trial, one of the many theories was the notion of a conspiratorial effort by the LAPD to convict an innocent man. I recall reading one attorney's response to the folly of the theory in light of the other accusation of how poorly the LAPD handled the crime scene: "One would have to believe that the LAPD are master conspirators, while at the same time bungling investigators."

Conspiracies are intriguing and yet are (I am told) very difficult to prove. I have little doubt that there are great and sinister minds working in concert (wittingly or not) to dismantle all that is good, right and true—whether in the church, family or society in general. I also believe people should be savvy to this darkness and the effect it will have on our souls and the souls of those we love.

But we also must rest assured that the true and living Triune God has His own worldwide conspiracy⁶—the Father sending His Son

⁶ I realize *conspiracy* has a negative connotation, but etymologically the word (*con*=with & *spire*=breath) simply means to breathe together as an orchestra might with wind instruments.

(John 3:16), the Son honoring and glorifying His Father (John 17:1-4), and the Spirit through His word and power convicting the world of the truth of this great redemption (John 16:8). It is a glorious and gracious conspiracy. And it is a conspiracy which will not fail (Matthew 16:18)!

Review

In quick review we see Paul a Bondservant—no longer a slave of sin leading to death but a slave of Christ leading to eternal life. Paul had the office of apostle—an office that is not perennial, that does not extend beyond those specific individuals, chosen by Jesus who were witnesses of the resurrected Christ.

Paul was set apart for the gospel of God as promised in the Scriptures—even the Old Testament Scriptures—containing propositions upon which we trust our souls, graciously deposited in His word—a message from the beginning of history—a message **“concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord,”** Christ meaning *Messiah* (anointed) and Jesus meaning *Savior*.

Jesus was born of the seed of David—the long-awaited Messiah who would bring redemption to the world—and declared to be the Son of God according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead indicating that, though fully human, He was also fully God and what He would accomplish on David’s throne would first and foremost be the victory over sin and death.

Paul then explained how he received grace and apostleship, which could be understood two ways: that Paul was an apostle by grace since he didn’t initially fit the requirements (being hostile to the faith); and, that he was dependent upon God’s grace to do the job. The grace and apostleship was for **“obedience of the faith for the sake of his name among all the nations”**—that is, the call to faith should not merely be viewed as an invitation but as a moral obligation to yield to a legitimate authority—keeping before us that the yielding to this authority is the source of untold and eternal blessings. Paul then continues his salutation:

...among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; to all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from

God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 1:6, 7).

Paul had mentioned in verse five that the gospel was not confined to some specific territory, but the call to obey the gospel (Romans 10:16) was to be extended to “all nations,” leading to these words in verse six:

...among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ (Romans 1:6).

A Broader Undertaking

All the church was under the authority of apostles (Ephesians 2:20). Today, that translates into all the churches being under the authority of Scripture since, as we have pointed out earlier, all apostles have since been received into glory (i.e. died). This is not to say the church (those of faith) are not under the authority of God, but as many would deign to speak for God without warrant, God has protected His honor, His glory, His word and His people by committing His message to the written word.

In particular, what I would like for us to consider in these few words (i.e. **“among who you also are...”**) is how (especially in today’s context of many Christian churches and denominations) we should view ourselves as part of a broader undertaking—two points here:

Other Churches

First, we must recognize that God is at work in other Christian churches. There are certainly disagreements among Christians. And there may be a level where a church so departs from the law and gospel of Christ that the Lord removes its **“lampstand” (Revelation 2:5)** entirely. And rather than a church of Christ we may see a **“synagogue of Satan” (Revelation 2:9)**. But the Lord endured with great patience those churches which struggled for truth, and so should we—especially since, at some level, that includes us all. In time it becomes readily apparent which churches no longer hold to what can be considered a true form of biblical Christianity.

Nonetheless, God was doing a marvelous work in very imperfect churches—churches that were engaging in doctrines and behavior which would raise eyebrows in any era—such as the churches in Galatia and Corinth which were embracing false gospels and became puffed up in the tolerance of sexual immorality (Galatians 1:6; 1 Corinthians 5:1).

So even though we have a responsibility to **“study”** the word (2 Timothy 2:15), ever repent in the face of **“correction”** (2 Timothy 3:16), **“contend for the faith”** (Jude 3) that we all may **“excel still more”** (1 Thessalonians 4:1), we must also recognize that the Master’s holy and glorious conspiracy to redeem the world will not be quelled by human weakness.

But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

So we should be encouraged and encouraging when it comes to God’s work in the body of Christ at large.

The ‘You’ Who is Called

Secondly we must recognize that even though God is at work in other churches in our wider church (our denomination), our regional church (our presbytery) and our local church (the Branch of Hope) there is a danger in getting lost in the plural ‘you’ *hymeis* of this verse because a plural ‘you’ is necessarily made up of a collection of individual ‘you(s)’—all those individual ‘you(s) that God has **“called of Jesus Christ.”**

Charles Hodge observes that this word ‘called’ is **“never in the epistles applied to one who is merely by the external call.”**⁷ It is the *effectual* call—it is a call which will transform the human heart from **“stone” to “flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26).** And how does one know if

⁷ Charles Hodge Commentary on Romans; p. 23.

they are “called” and “chosen of God?” Paul elsewhere writes of the blessed assurance of knowledge of God’s election. It is the God-given response to the gospel accompanied by faithful fruit:

We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers, remembering without ceasing your work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the sight of our God and Father, knowing, beloved brethren, your election by God. For our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit and in much assurance, as you know what kind of men we were among you for your sake (1 Thessalonians 1:2-5).

No Redundancies in Christ

God is performing a grand work of redemption throughout the world and we, to a person, are to view ourselves as integral elements and active instruments in His mighty hand. In business they have a term—*redundancy*. It means having more than one resource to perform an activity or function. If you’re redundant you’re likely to be downsized. There is no redundancy in the kingdom of God. There is no redundancy in the body of Christ.

If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable

parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together (1 Corinthians 12:17-26).

If you are part of Christ's church, then you are a necessary part of Christ's church and should view yourself as such. I pray there is not a person in this room or who might hear this message that would not, first and foremost, obey the gospel to eternal life and subsequently see themselves as a vital limb or muscle in the body of Christ. I pray we might all have eyes to see the spiritual death by which we are surrounded—the dead bones:

Dry Bones and Chariots of Fire

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord" (Ezekiel 37:1-6).

Even the driest of bones—those who appear long dead in their souls—can be made alive when hearing the "word of the Lord." Perhaps we've been seduced into forgetting and neglecting our

neighbors. Or maybe we underestimate the power of God in the gospel, especially today, in the face of its many detractors.

Again, I appeal to an event where God pulls back the veil, that we might not be deceived by a supposed impotence of God's mighty hand. When the king of Syria sought to shut the mouth of God's prophet Elisha he sent horses and chariots and a great army by night and surrounded Dothan, the city where Elisha slept (2 Kings 6:14). We begin our reading with Elisha's servant waking up, having a look at the armies by which they were surrounded, and responding, understandably, with fear:

When the servant of the man of God rose early in the morning and went out, behold, an army with horses and chariots was all around the city. And the servant said, "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" He said, "Do not be afraid, for those who are with us are more than those who are with them." Then Elisha prayed and said, "O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see." So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha (2 Kings 6:15-17).

The Syrian king came with horses and chariots; the Lord provided horses and chariots of fire. The glittery machinations of man have no power over the glorious conspiracy of a God who is short of neither love nor power! It would appear sometimes that the only lacking element is our own abbreviated perception—which, sadly, can be paralyzing. Calvin aptly heralds the source of our life and the continual provision of our heavenly Father:

...for he means, that they were by calling made partakers of Christ. For they who shall be heirs of eternal life, are chosen by the celestial Father to be children in Christ; and when chosen, they are committed to his care and protection as their shepherd.⁸

⁸ Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 1:5). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Conclusion

The Father, Son and Spirit have, if you will, breathed together the great plan of redemption and have graciously included us, as the ESV translates, **“including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.”**

There is no greater joy or purpose than to honor God with our lives and words, recognizing God has called us to this glorious task. And there is no greater power than that message—**“the power of God for salvation” (Romans 1:16)**—that there is a God in heaven who has sent His Son to die for sinners. Let us turn the meditation of our hearts toward that as we come to the Lord’s Table.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Are there dark and evil minds working against that which is good, right and true? Can you think of examples? How should we respond to this?
2. Review the first five verses of Romans 1.
3. At what point do you think a church is no longer a church?
4. How should Christians view their relationship with Christians from other churches?
5. What does it mean to be “called” of Christ?
6. What is a redundancy? Are there redundancies in the church?
7. Discuss the meaning of the dead, dry bones and chariots of fire. How is that applied to our lives today?
8. Has God included you in His work (His ‘conspiracy’)? If so, what does that mean in your life?

Romans 1:7

Beloved Saints—Grace and Peace

March 11, 2012

Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called *to be* an apostle, separated to the gospel of God which He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared *to be* the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. Through Him we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name, among whom you also are the called of Jesus Christ; to all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called *to be* saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 1:1-7).

Introduction

How do you address people when writing them a letter, text or e-mail? And with what thought do you leave them at the end? I am always interested in the various types of greetings and sign-offs in correspondence I receive. From the very cold and business-like “To Whom it May Concern” followed by “Sincerely” to “Dear Pastor” followed by “In Christ.” I must say, I wrestle with how I address people and what final thought I leave them with. Here, in verse seven, we read what might be considered the apex of Paul’s salutation. Seventeenth century theologian Francis Turretin wrote:

The ancient Greeks and Romans wished to those to whom they wrote, in the inscription of their epistles, health, joy, happiness; but Paul prays for far higher blessings even the *favor* of God, the fountain of all good things, and *peace*, in which the Hebrews included all blessings.— *Ed.*⁹

⁹ Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Review

In quick review we see Paul a Bondservant holding the office of apostle—an office that ended with the last witnesses of the resurrected Christ. Paul was set apart for the gospel of God promised in the Old Testament Scriptures—a message from the beginning of history—a message “**concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord**” who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh and declared to be the Son of God according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead—fully God and fully man fulfilling all the promises of the Messiah—of the redemption of the world.

Paul received grace and apostleship for “**obedience of the faith for the sake of his name among all the nations**”—that is, the call to faith should not merely be viewed as an invitation but as a moral obligation to yield to a legitimate and benevolent authority and there is no territory (whether geographical, institutional or philosophical) outside of His holy jurisdiction. Paul now completes his salutation:

To all who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 1:7).

All in Rome

Paul writes to “**all who are in Rome.**” In a world of electronic media, I must say that I still enjoy a good old fashioned letter in the mailbox. I walk up to the house and see a stash of envelopes. I rifle through the junk and the bills in hopes of seeing a handwritten envelope (hopefully with some indication that it’s a friendly letter—like a sticker or something) with my name on it. It’s personal.

Paul is not writing merely to the elders or deacons but to *all*, similar to his letter to Philippi where it’s addressed “**To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons**” (Philippians 1:1). Not merely the overseers and deacons, but to all.

To a person we are to take these words of Paul (more specifically—the Spirit of God) as directed to us—these words

containing the most intensely personal and profoundly critical dynamics affecting our very souls. How quickly we might race home if it came to our attention that there was a letter from God to us waiting in our mailbox. What might that letter say?

Beloved of God

How comforting to receive the sentiment from our Creator, King and Judge that we are His beloved! **“To all who are in Rome,”** Paul writes, **“beloved of God.”** It may be the greatest commandment for us to love God (Matthew 22:37), but the greatest source of human comfort is not found in the depth of our love for God but His love for us.

Many years ago I recall speaking with a very fine Christian man who was headed for the ministry. He offered me a very succinct reflection of his objective as a pastor—“All I want,” he explained “was to get people to love Jesus.” It was an honorable quest. But in time I came to believe that prior to that would have to be the message of God’s love for us. I might alter the objective to “All I want (not really “all” but first and foremost) is to get Christians to understand God’s love for us.”

Paul addresses the church as those who are “beloved of God.” In chapter nine Paul will explain how this is not generic to humanity, but is rather the result of an act of God’s free grace.

As indeed he says in Hosea, “Those who were not my people I will call ‘my people,’ and her who was not beloved I will call ‘beloved’” (Romans 9:25).

Man is conceived in rebellion (Psalm 51:1), then becomes God’s beloved by the power and love of God through the cross of Christ. The love of God extended to unworthy creatures as a result of grace alone and nothing seen in them by God, either past, present or future, as we shall soon see, should not be approached as a cloak for vice (1 Peter 2:16) or license for sin. But the love God has for us in Christ (above all things and distinct from all things) should be the table and hearth where cold and weak sojourners find food and warmth for their souls.

But the comforted and well-fed saint should not remain idle. The answer to Question One of the Heidelberg Catechism presents glorious overtures of our peace and comfort with God found in what He alone has done for us. But the last line in the answer begins to inform us of what that grace produces vis-a-vis the inclination of the human heart:

Question One:

What is your only comfort in life and in death?

Answer:

That I am not my own, but belong body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.

He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

It is in light of God's love for us that we seek to love Him and live for Him. Our love for God is distinct from His love for us—it is not like human relationships where *our eyes met and a mutual love was nurtured*. No, His love for us has no assignable cause except His own good pleasure. But the assurance that we are His—that these words of being “beloved of God” actually apply to us—in terms of human experience is our faith in Him (Romans 8:16) and our God-given willingness to live for Him.

Called to be Holy

We find this in Paul's words "**called to be saints.**" Calvin states that we are to "aspire to holiness, for he hath not called us to uncleanness, but to holiness." It is in light of our behavior that Paul writes to the Thessalonians that "**God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness**" (1 Thessalonians 4:7.)

It is the power of God's grace alone that every last believer in Christ is called a "**saint**" (Ephesians 1:1). Perhaps we don't think of ourselves as saints since the church, long ago, created a classification of 'super Christian' who are particularly given that designation. But if we are in Christ, and if in viewing us God sees the righteousness of His own Son (2 Corinthians 5:21), how can we be anything but saints?

But what we see along with the free gift of sainthood is that call to be saints (or the call to be holy, being the same root word: *hagios*). To the Corinthians, Paul writes:

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours (1 Corinthians 1:2).

Believers are both called holy and called to be holy. As Peter writes:

but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:15, 16).

Having been made holy is always accompanied by being made holy.

For by a single offering he has perfected (perfect tense—having been made holy) for all time those who are being sanctified (present passive—something God continues to produce in us) (Hebrews 10:14; parenthesis mine).

In one respect we are a “**new creation**” in Christ, the “**old has passed away**” (2 Corinthians 5:17). But in another sense we are called to “**put off our old self, which belongs to the former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires**” (Ephesians 4:22). Writing to the Colossians, Paul calls the saints to a certain behavior:

But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive (Colossians 3:8-13).

Christians are both holy and called to be holy. We are made in the image of God, but are also being “renewed” after that image. These words from Calvin are worth considering:

Here a rich truth presents itself to us, to which I shall briefly refer, and leave it to be meditated upon by each individual: Paul does by no means ascribe the praise of our salvation to ourselves, but derives it altogether from the fountain of God’s free and paternal love towards us; for he makes this the first thing — God loves us: and what is the cause of his love, except his own goodness alone? On this depends our calling, by which in his own time he seals his adoption to those whom he had before freely chosen. We also learn from this passage that none rightly connect themselves with the number of the faithful, except they feel assured that the Lord is gracious, however unworthy and wretched

sinners they may be, and except they be stimulated by his goodness and aspire to holiness, for he hath not called us to uncleanness, but to holiness (1 Thessalonians 4:7).¹⁰

Grace and Peace

We can see, in light of the continual call to holiness the need for *grace*—meaning kindness, and especially the underserved kindness seen in the unmerited goodness of God in saving and refining sinners. The church should never be thought of as a stagnant pond. If so, it will eventually evaporate and become no good to itself or others.

No, the church is to be a vibrant stream of living waters. It is a place of wrestling and contending—a place ever in need of the grace of God. **“Grace,”** Charles Hodge states, **“includes everything that we can desire or need, the favour of God, and all the blessing that favour secures.”¹¹**

And anyone who has ever served in the ministry recognizes the dependence upon God for *peace*, yes even in the church; this peace, first and foremost emanating from our peace with God. As Paul will later write:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God (Romans 5:1, 2).

To the Colossians, he also writes:

...and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Colossians 1:20).

¹⁰ Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 1:7). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

¹¹ Charles Hodge, Commentary on Romans. Pp. 23, 24.

It is from that peace that we can begin to anticipate **“the peace of God...which guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7)** and peace within the body of Christ itself (Ephesians 2:15).

From God—From Christ

Finally, Paul isolates the source of this grace and peace with the words **“from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”** So important in our day of multiple authorities, all seeking our primary allegiance and affection, to recognize the One true God from whom all blessings flow. **“From God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.”**

“Nothing” it has been said,

speaks more decisively for the divinity of Christ than these juxtapositions of Christ with the eternal God, which run through the whole language of Scripture, and the derivation of purely divine influences from Him also. The name of no man can be placed by the side of the Almighty. He only, in whom the Word of the Father who is Himself God became flesh, may be named beside Him; for men are commanded to honor Him even as they honor the Father (Jn 5:23) [Olshausen].¹²

¹² Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., Fausset, A. R., Brown, D., & Brown, D. (1997). *A Commentary, Critical and Explanatory, on the Old and New Testaments* (Ro 1:7). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How do you greet and sign off in your correspondence? Why?
2. Review Paul's salutation. What do you find particularly significant?
3. How should we personally view the Scriptures? Why is it important?
4. Why do you think that knowing we are "beloved of God" is more of a priority than our loving God?
5. Does knowing that we are beloved of God mean it is okay to live a life of sin?
6. Why does God love us?
7. Are all Christians *saints*? Are all Christians called to be saints? Explain.
8. Define *grace* and *peace*. If Christians are already saved, why do they need grace and peace?
9. Is Jesus God? Why is the answer to this question important?

Romans 1:8

God-Given Faith

March 18, 2012

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers, making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established—that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me (Romans 1:8-12).

Introduction

Prior to and along with being a pastor of this church, I have held the roles of youth pastor, coach, teacher, volunteer, para-church minister, short-term missionary, etc, both locally and outside the area. At some level, I would hope, I was seeking to honor God with these efforts, whether they were directly ministerial (such as a youth pastor) or indirectly (such as a coach or teacher).

One of the tools I have used in my own heart to evaluate the genuine nature of my love and concern for these past acts of service or ministry is whether or not I still care about them. Am I at all concerned with past churches, schools, organizations or mission fields where I once served? Or were those things sort of stepping stone jobs I had which led to other jobs and now here I am at my final job with my final customers?¹³ I must ask myself, *is my ministry about where I end up, or should I approach with an altogether different disposition?*

Having completed his salutation, Paul now begins his introduction. And we will see in his introduction heartfelt love and

¹³ This is not to belittle “jobs” of any sort. Good workers will often be considerate of former customers, even when it is no longer to their financial advantage to serve them.

concern for brothers and sisters in Christ whom Paul had not even yet met.

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world (Romans 1:8)

“First”

He begins as if he’s starting a list of things: “First,” he writes. But further examination reveals that there is no “secondly.” Paul could just be saying that he’s going to say this before he says something else, but since there is no “secondly” it is possible for us to understand this brief introduction to be above the remainder of the entire epistle in terms of importance or priority. Paul uses the same root word when he speaks of himself:

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the *foremost* (1 Timothy 1:15—italics mine).

And of the preeminence of Christ:

He is the image of the invisible God, the *firstborn* of all creation (Colossians 1:15—italics mine).

Before Paul enters into his theological arguments (of which there will be many) he wants his readers to know how thankful he is to God for their faith.

Faith

What conclusion can we draw that Paul is thankful to God for the faith of Christians? Paul thanks God for their faith because God is the giver of it. Thanking God for something is not the same as thanking a person in that we thank a person partially but thank God in totality. For example, when I thank my wife for a meal she has prepared, I am thanking her for her part in it (she purchased the food, prepared it, set the table, etc.).

But when I thank God for the meal I am thanking Him for everything (for the farmer who works, the crops that grow, the workers that harvest, the trucks that deliver, the grocery store that sells, my wife that buys and prepares, my mouth that eats, and on and on). Paul is not engaging in meaningless chatter when he thanks God for their faith (which likely speaks of the totality of their religion) the way people may thank God when they win an award. Paul recognizes in a very legitimate sense that their faith is the fruit of God's grace.

Jesus is the author of faith (Hebrews 12:2); the apostles appeal to Christ for increased faith (Luke 17:5); Peter acknowledges God as the one who grants repentance (Acts 5:31), as does Paul (2 Timothy 2:25). This confirms our early assertion that Romans, above all, is an epistle about God.

I doubt there was a person in that church who would have taken offense at Paul being thankful to God for an attribute found in them; I suspect it was quite the opposite—they would rejoice to know that the very faith they found in themselves did not proceed from man or through man—their belief in Christ was not by birth, blood, **“nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (John 1:12, 13).**

Through Jesus Christ

Let us make note that even the thankfulness Paul extends toward God is through Jesus Christ. So wretched is man (Romans 7:24) and so pure are the eyes of God that He cannot **“see evil...(or) look at wrong” (Habakkuk 1:13).** We often tack the name of Christ onto the end of our petitions like a sort of holy credit card that seals the transaction. Instead we should recognize every time we use the name of Christ in our prayers that these words testify to our own sinfulness and full dependence upon the grace of God for any good thing—including the very faith by which we are saved.

Our very praises would be a stench in the face of God apart from the blood of Christ. For this reason the author of Hebrews writes:

Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of *our* lips, giving thanks to His name (Hebrews 13:15).

My God

Perhaps all this talk of man's sin against the backdrop of God's holiness perpetuates a sentiment of distance between that two—the God out there who I can never seem to please! But Paul's use of the first person, genitive, singular (literally, "the God of me") seems to suggest otherwise. Might I propose that it was Paul's acknowledgment of his being the "foremost" of sinners (which itself was by the grace of God) that was the first step (at least in his experience) toward granting him this great intimacy.

Notice in the passage below how God is the primary active force in a passage which culminates with this wonderful expression of intimacy.

Their children also shall be as before, and their congregation shall be established before Me; and I will punish all who oppress them. Their nobles shall be from among them, and their governor shall come from their midst; then I will cause him (him either referring typologically to Christ or representing all the people) to draw near, and he shall approach Me; for who *is* this who pledged his heart to approach Me?' says the Lord. 'You shall be My people, and I will be your God' (Jeremiah 30:20-22—parenthesis mine).

The faithful can call upon God in a very personal and possessive way—not in such a way as to define God, which is so popular today with the preface, "My God is a God who does or doesn't do such-and-such a thing," which is then generally followed by some abject denial of the attributes of God found in Scripture. On the contrary, it is the very God of Scripture—the Righteous, Holy, Creator, Judge who cannot look at sin and will in no way acquit the guilty (Numbers 14:18)—that Paul calls his God.

How, but by counting as rubbish the entirety of human excellence, can he/we be found in Christ "**not having my own righteousness, which *is* from the law, but that which *is* through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith**" (Philippians 3:9)?

The Whole World

Paul continues his commendation and encouragement by informing the Christians in Rome that the knowledge of their faith is widespread. One thing we learn here is the proper use of biblical language—the whole world *holos kosmos* certainly didn't include the Mayans and Aztecs but a large portion of the Roman Empire; and even then it didn't likely include the testimony of pagans which were by far the dominant population. This knowledge may be helpful when examining the use of those words in other contexts.

But we might finish by asking why Paul would write this? Perhaps due to the encouragement Christians need in the face of their many detractors. At some level those who put their faith in the public should expect discouragement. It was with this obvious anticipation that Jesus preached:

Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:11, 12).

Not that it is always easy to ignore or even rejoice in the face of evil, but it is the necessary consequence of taking rank against the world and its ways. One might do an evaluation to find it is entirely absent from one's life and why.

Though we should have the conviction to do our works to be seen by the Father rather than men (Matthew 6:5), we also need to recognize our human weakness and the need for encouragement—as Paul will discuss in verse twelve.

This was a source of encouragement for the faithful who were outnumbered by pagans a thousand to one—how much more encouraged ought we be having seen the power of the gospel of Christ far along in that promise that it would cover the earth (Isaiah 11:9)!

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. With what kind of disposition should we approach our ministerial efforts?
2. Why do you suppose Paul begins with the word “first” but then doesn’t have a “second”?
3. Why does Paul thank God for their faith? What are the implications of this?
4. Why do Christians pray “through Jesus Christ”? What does this tell us about ourselves?
5. God is holy, Paul was a sinner. How does Paul have the right to call God “My God”?
6. When the Bible talks about the “whole world” does that always include every last single person? Explain.
7. Why do you suppose Paul tells these Christians about their faith being spoken of through the whole world?

Romans 1:9-10

God is My Witness

March 25, 2012

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers, making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established—that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me (Romans 1:8-12).

Introduction

As a teenager coming to faith in Christ I visited a variety of Christian churches. Some were liberal, some were charismatic, others highly formal and liturgical. One thing I noticed early on was a general agreement that the final authority rested in the Bible. I figured that's the book to know. As I studied the Bible I found myself, at some level, on the receiving end of theological questions. I enjoyed that. I enjoyed studying to find the answers and at some level I enjoyed the lively discussion these theological questions would generate.

In time I came to realize that these were not merely academic issues. *Theology* (and I realize the very word sounds academic—the study of God) is intensely personal. Through a certain amount of pain and heartache I concluded that talking about the things of God required a certain bedside manner. To simply blurt out verses and humiliate opponents was neither pleasing to God nor beneficial to others. There was this requirement of caring.

As I entered the ministry I came to observe that my ability to love and care for others was under constant evaluation. There were those who would quickly offer the encouragement found in the words, “You really have a pastor’s heart.” Then there were others who eyeball me with suspiciousness from day one, just waiting for me to show my true colors and how my heart is not pastoral at all but I’m

governed by pride, prestige, power or a host of other ungodly ignitions.

All of these things are hard to ignore. And I'm not saying that I entirely try to ignore the critique of others. There is value in receiving comments in terms of how one is perceived. But I do know this: nobody but God alone truly knows my heart. I have a difficult enough time evaluating it myself. Paul's words to the somewhat critical church at Corinth reflect my thoughts:

But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself (1 Corinthians 4:3).

It may have been a "small thing" for Paul to be judged by others, but as we shall see in this introduction, it wasn't nothing.

Review

In quick review, the first word of Paul's introduction (both in Greek and English) is "first", as if to say that prior to all the correction in life and doctrine that he'll be addressing, he wants his readers to know how thankful he is to God for their faith.

Paul thanks God for their faith (which amounts to the totality of their religion) because God is the giver of it. God commands faith and then graciously gives the very thing He commands.

Paul thanks God "through Jesus Christ." All interaction with God (even giving thanks) is through a Mediator, who is Jesus Christ our High Priest. If God is a holy God (and how can the true God being anything but?!) sinful man cannot approach Him apart from the imputed, freely given, righteousness of Christ.

This should not foster a feeling of distance from God; just the opposite. Paul, who was the chief of sinners, speaks of God as "my God." When we dispense with man's righteousness and approach God with a righteousness that is not our own (rather, with the righteousness of Christ) we will have true peace with God and can claim Him as our own heavenly Father.

In the face of what appeared to be the overwhelming power and persecution of Rome, Paul encourages the Christians in Rome that their faith, like a powerful antidote against a deadly disease, is

spilling out throughout the world. How encouraged would they have been to see the advancement of Christ's kingdom two millennia later, even as it has reached our ears this morning!

Paul continues his introduction.

For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you (Romans 1:9, 10).

God My Witness

“For God is my witness,” Paul writes. We should speak the truth and when we say we're going to do something we should do it. So why do we need vows and oaths? (A vow is to God and an oath can be made to men with God as witness—they're like extra true, super-promises.) Jesus taught against performing oaths in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:33-37). Yet there appeared to be a context for that prohibition based upon what a circus oath-taking had become:

Woe to you, blind guides, who say, ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it is nothing, but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath’ (Matthew 23:16).

Jesus Himself was put under oath and responded:

But Jesus kept silent. And the high priest answered and said to Him, “I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!” Jesus said to him, “*It is as you said*” (Matthew 26:63, 64).

Proper oaths and vows are taught in Scripture:

It is the Lord your God you shall fear. Him you shall serve and by his name you shall swear (Deuteronomy 6:13).

You shall fear the Lord your God. You shall serve him and hold fast to him, and by his name you shall swear (Deuteronomy 10:20).

Paul made it a somewhat common practice in his writing to call upon God as a witness to his words.

For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:8).

Now *concerning* the things which I write to you, indeed, before God, I do not lie (Galatians 1:20).

And it would appear that Paul did this with a solid recognition that it carried great weight in the mind of God.

Moreover I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth (2 Corinthians 1:23).

There may not be a more heart wrenching story in all of Scripture than the vow of Jephthah:

And Jephthah made a vow to the Lord, and said, “If You will indeed deliver the people of Ammon into my hands, then it will be that whatever comes out of the doors of my house to meet me, when I return in peace from the people of Ammon, shall surely be the Lord’s, and I will offer it up as a burnt offering” (Judges 11:30, 31).

God did give Jephthah the victory. But what would be the outcome of such a frivolous vow?

When Jephthah came to his house at Mizpah, there was his daughter, coming out to meet him with timbrels and dancing; and she *was his* only child. Besides her he had neither son nor daughter (Judges 11:34).

Not to enter into the speculation of what this all meant and how it all worked itself out—the point for now rests in the importance of vows and oaths—in calling God as a witness to your words. Calvin taught:

God is so called as a witness, that he is also appealed to as an avenger, in case we deceive; which Paul expresses elsewhere in these words, “God is a witness to my soul.” (2 Corinthians 1:23)¹⁴

“I swear to God” has become a bit of a thoughtless statement made by children. We may wish to rethink what comes out of our mouths, especially as it relates to our promises to and before God.

But if all our words should be true and all our promises should be kept, what need is there for vows and oaths? There is great need: For one, we recognize there are circumstances which may overrule a routine statement or promise. If I promise the children we’re going to go swimming and there’s a lightning storm the promise is overruled. If the Pharaoh is killing babies he deserves to be lied to (Exodus 1:19, 20).

The circumstances which may terminate an oath or vow are exceptions which require their being expired and often spelled out in the vow, e.g. the words “as long as we both shall live” indicate that a married person’s vow ends when their spouse dies and they are free to remarry.

Oaths and vows also serve to strengthen the hearts of those who make them.

For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong on behalf of those whose heart is loyal to Him (2 Chronicles 16:9).

It is the opposite of the double-minded man who is unstable in all his ways (James 1:8). We make vows and take oaths because we know things will be difficult and we’ve made a solemn promise before man and God. It strengthens conviction. When a husband

¹⁴ Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin’s Commentaries: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin’s Commentaries (Ro 1:9). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

stands before his wife or an elder stands before a church or a child visits their infirmed parent and promises they will love, serve and never abandon (or whatever the vow might be) it solidifies and helps to set the jaw like flint.

Oaths and vows also serve to encourage the ones who benefit by the words or promise.

For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation (Hebrews 6:16).

There are solemn occasions for vows and oaths in baptisms, church memberships, ordinations, marriages, political offices, etc. It should be a source of comfort for the person or people who are on the receiving end of the vow to know of the conviction of the one who made it.

It is not uncommon for the dismantling of the church or culture to be accompanied by those who either don't take their vows seriously or morph the meaning of the words into something waxy and incoherent.

The bottom line, especially in the statement made by Paul that **"God is my witness"**, is that it is a statement we can only evaluate in our own hearts before God. Only God knows how big of liars we are. But for a person to call upon God as a witness to their assertion, at very least, provides the greatest human confidence available of the veracity of the statement. It is that statement that Paul as a minister of Christ's gospel made regarding the recipients of this epistle.

Serve With My Spirit

Paul writes of the God he serves in/with his spirit. There are many outward ways to serve God, but we're called to serve with both outwardly and inwardly. The word "serve" used here is a word used of service in worship. Paul uses it in application to his service in proclaiming the gospel. Churches are full of people serving God in the flesh. But that very service will ring as a testimony against them if there is no service which comes from faith—from the heart. As Jesus taught:

This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me (Matthew 15:8).

As David charged Solomon:

And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches all hearts and understands every plan and thought. If you seek him, he will be found by you, but if you forsake him, he will cast you off forever (1 Chronicles 28:9).

Outward service, words and actions are not to be viewed as unimportant—they are in fact necessary fruit. But Paul wanted his readers to know that his ministry toward them was something generated by his spirit which had been regenerated by God's Spirit.

For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh (Philippians 3:3).

Where does this leave us in this portion of the introduction? Paul was serving God in his spirit in the gospel. Though a sinner saved by grace, the genuine nature of his faith had the substance to call upon a God who searches the thoughts and hearts of man to witness to something he was doing. Paul wanted this church to know what was going on in his own heart. Genuine ministry has a heart to the spiritual advancement of the souls of others.

What did Paul want this church to know? He wanted them to know that he was praying for them, asking that he might, by the will of God, come to them. Why would Paul want to go there? Why not just write the letter? And what was the nature of Paul's prayers? What were the petitions he made for those to whom he was accountable to God?

The elders in this church have two types of meetings. Though both are ministerial, one tends to focus on the business of the church while the other is a time of sharing and praying for the congregation. How should ministers pray? What should they have as a goal for those whom they serve? We will discuss the prayers of Paul next

week. But I might suggest that those introductory words—this heartfelt ministerial disposition we see in the Apostle—should be a disposition that accompanies every chapter, every passage and every doctrine that Paul will teach in the entire epistle.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Do you ever feel judged by others? How *do* you respond? How *should* you respond?
2. Review Paul's introduction. What do you find particularly significant?
3. What is a vow? What is an oath? Is it ever wrong to make a vow or oaths? Explain.
4. What are the benefits of vows and oaths? What are the dangers?
5. How did Paul serve Christ?
6. Is outward service unimportant? Explain.
7. What did Paul want for those under his care?

Romans 1:11-12

That You May Be Established

April 1, 2012

First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all, that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world. For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers, making request if, by some means, now at last I may find a way in the will of God to come to you. For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established—that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me (Romans 1:8-12).

Introduction

Last week, I mentioned that the elders in this church have two types of meetings. Though both are ministerial, one tends to focus on the business of the church while the other is a time of sharing and praying for the congregation. How should ministers pray? What should they have as a goal for those whom they serve?

Review

In quick review, the first word of Paul's introduction, both in Greek and English, is "first" as if to say that prior to all the correction in life and doctrine that he'll be addressing, he wants his readers to know how thankful he is to God for their faith—God being the giver of it. Paul thanks God "through Jesus Christ." All interaction with God is through a Mediator, who is Jesus Christ, our High Priest. Paul's intimate statement of God being "My (his) God" comes from Paul having righteousness that is not his own but from Christ.

Paul encourages the Christians in Rome that their faith is spoken of throughout the world, then calls God as his witness that he prays without ceasing for them—desiring to visit them in person. It might be worth mentioning that to pray without ceasing can mean a continual attitude of prayer, but more likely (since Paul appeared to have set specific times aside for prayer [see 2 Corinthians 12:8 and

Daniel 6:10] and may not have approached prayer as casually as we often do) a regular practice of prayer; e.g. to exercise without ceasing wouldn't mean that you don't sleep or eat—it simply means you never give up.

Also, Paul submits to the will of God in his prayer with the words **“somehow by the will of God.”** He recognized God's answers to his prayers are always superior to the prayers themselves and warmly embraces that.

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.” As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil (James 4:13-16).

Like a good child making a request of a wise parent, there should always be acknowledgment of the love and wisdom of the parent and a willingness to affectionately receive the answer. Paul will continue his introduction, but I thought it would behoove us to take a quick look at how this minister would pray for those under his care.

Prayers of Paul

In our prayer time, we find ourselves praying for the sick, as we should. But in 120 years from now (I'm pushing it out there for the sake of comfort) everyone prayed for and everyone praying will have left this world—even if those prayers are answered just as asked.

Paul's prayers are too numerous and intricate to examine in detail, but I thought we might just get a feel for his prayers with a cursory examination of three of them (to the Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians). I do think this will speak somewhat to our current passage since they will reveal how Paul might help define what it means to **“be established”** (v. 11). Paul's prayer for the Ephesians:

Therefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, do not cease to give thanks for you, making mention of you in my prayers: that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him, the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what *is* the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power which He worked in Christ when He raised Him from the dead and seated *Him* at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He put all *things* under His feet, and gave Him *to be* head over all *things* to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:15-22).

Clearly there is far too much here to be able to sift through it in detail, but it would appear that Paul's desire for these Christians is not so much for them to *have* something but to *know* things:

- A knowledge of God and the hope of His calling
- The riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints
- The exceeding greatness of His power toward us
- The knowledge of the power and authority of Christ.

Sometimes we're like children. We have homes, food, shelter, clothing, healthcare, the Wii and the Nintendo...but we really want the Xbox. When we don't get it we complain that we don't have *anything*. Parents pray their children will grow to understand and appreciate what they have and the sacrifices made to have it. Paul's prayer seems similar.

Paul's prayer for the Philippians:

I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete *it* until the day of Jesus Christ; just as it is right for me to think this of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as both in my chains and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel, you all are partakers with me of grace. For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ. And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which *are* by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God (Philippians 1:3-11).

This prayer does include references to their behavior. But even then it's a behavior generated by their knowledge of God—the God who began their work of faith and will complete it. Paul prays that their love may abound:

- In particular, that their love may abound in knowledge and discernment
- That their love may not be mere emotional gushing but a wise and discriminating love
- A love that can approve the things that are excellent and by contrast expose the opposite (Ephesians 5:11)

Finally, to the Colossians:

For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing *Him*, being

fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light. He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed *us* into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:9-14).

Again, we see in Paul's prayer for those under his care a combination of his prayer for things they should know alongside things they should do or be. Paul prays:

- That they be filled with the knowledge of God's will
- That they might have spiritual understanding
- In the light of this knowledge that they are to walk...to seek to live a life "pleasing" to God
- Be fruitful in every good work

Paul then goes back to the knowledge of God, as if an increased knowledge of God has a natural outpouring:

- Strengthened
- Patience
- Longsuffering with joy
- Thankfulness

All this with recognition our inheritance and what we have been delivered from and to, i.e. the power of darkness and into the kingdom of the Son of His love.

In short, it would appear that Paul is as much if not more concerned with the faithful knowing who they are over and above (but not in opposition to) what they do.

There is, no doubt, a **"here am I, send me"** (Isaiah 6:8) sentiment Christians should have. But before that and continually with that, there must be a **"who is God, who am I, and what has**

God done in His Son” that travels with the Christian in all of his ventures.

We think of the Apostles spending three years with Jesus before the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension—time of intense instruction before they were sent forth in their apostolic duty. We view them as strong and viable. But do we not think that, given the opportunity, they would drop everything—even in the midst of ministry—to sit at His feet and imbibe His words with even greater thirst than when they were fledglings?

But this glorious task of presenting Christ to give mankind the opportunity to sit at the feet of Christ has been given to Christ’s church. This was Paul’s passion—to know nothing among those to whom he sought to minister **“except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2)**. And this brings us back to our text.

For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift, so that you may be established—that is, that I may be encouraged together with you by the mutual faith both of you and me (Romans 1:11, 12).

To See You

I am the first to admit that the vast majority of my time, as a minister, is spent before some type of screen: studying for and writing sermons and messages, emailing, texting, etc. But at least a few times a week there is face-to-face interaction. I’m a bit concerned that seven out of ten people walking down the street are looking at their cell-phones. I wonder where young people’s comfort with texting over talking may lead. I am sure, like all things, there is a mixture of some good and some bad.

But Paul was not satisfied with a mere letter. Humans are designed to give and receive some type of personal or tactile interaction. I don’t think the “spiritual gift” Paul writes of was some uniquely apostolic miracle since he also mentions being on the receiving end of the encouragement as well.

Jumping to the very end of Romans, Paul will (numerous times) instruct the church in the social activity of greeting one another—the Greek word meaning to engage in hospitable recognition of another. Whether it is family, friends, or brothers and

sisters in Christ, there is no substitute for the intimacy and encouragement we find in someone's physical presence. Paul viewed this as necessary for them to be "established."

Established

What does it mean to be established? The word means to be strengthened or solidified. Jesus uses the word to describe the "**great gulf fixed**" between heaven and hell (Luke 16:26). And whatever it means Paul seems to think that the establishing, or strengthening, is something God does according to the gospel (Romans 16:25).

We might think that to be established or strengthened or solidified means to live a righteous and pious life and it certainly would include that, but what Paul prays and what Paul will labor throughout this entire epistle is the presentation of an unadulterated understanding of God, His grace, His fulfilled promise/covenant, man's sin and our desperate need for what only Christ can provide.

At a certain level it is a simple message—the simplicity of the Gospel. God is glorified by Jesus who came to save sinners. But it so easily becomes a muddled affair: *Should sinners keep on sinning? Isn't there something I can offer God to remove my sin? If so, what? If not, why bother not sinning? What about baptism? What about my continual battle with sin? What if I still feel guilty? What about God's promises to Israel? How should I respond to authority?* and on and on.

The gospel becomes like the home plate in a baseball game. All the action revolves around it until it gets so covered with dirt that no one can see it. Some Christians and some churches are content with that. They play the game without perceiving any need for home plate. But Paul, by the Spirit of God, is like the umpire who from time to time in the writing of these epistles pulls out his broom and brushes away the dust.

The Holy Spirit, through the Apostle Paul, wants us to be established. And our greatest enemy is deceit—the sin from which the other sins flow. "**Has God indeed said?**" worked well at the dawn of man to cast us into death, and it still works. The devil is a liar, Jesus taught, and the father of lies.

Last week in our question and answer time we discussed a statement made by a well-meaning Christian friend. In an effort to

place doctrine into a secondary category he asked “What is more important, what we are believing or what we are becoming?” As was pointed out, there is a false dichotomy in the question, but I hope we all appreciate what a dangerous notion this fellow is promoting. We will become what we believe and if we don’t know what we believe we have no idea what we should become or how we’ll get there.

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul writes of God’s will for the direction of His children.

And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting, but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ (Ephesians 4:11-15).

Again, too much here to go into detail; suffice it to say that all these offices (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers) have *instruction* as their prime directive. Notice also the enemy: unsound doctrine, trickery of men, cunning craftiness, deceitful plotting.

Someone recently shared what it feels like to interact with someone who has no regard for the truth. “It’s like playing chess with a pigeon,” they said, “no matter how good of a move you make they simply knock over all the pieces then strut around like they’ve won.” It can be a little frustrating and one can be tempted to either give up or actually start believing the pigeon. I think Paul is writing to keep them/us from believing the pigeon.

Mutual Encouragement

Paul doesn't desire to visit them merely to establish them but also to be encouraged by them. Paul may have been encouraged due to their being established—like a parent who rejoices when they see the maturity of the child blossom. Whatever the case may be, Paul, the great apostle, was not above being ministered to and encouraged by those who had less mature faith than himself.

It would appear that ministers have a responsibility to enjoy and be encouraged by their congregations and congregations have a responsibility to make this a somewhat easy task (Hebrews 13:17) **“till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).**

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Review the Apostle Paul's introduction. What points stand out to you and why?
2. How did Paul pray for the churches? What appeared to be a priority? Why do you suppose that is?
3. Paul wanted to go to Rome. Why? What difference does it make to see people in person?
4. Paul desired the Christians in Rome be "established." What does that mean and how is it accomplished?
5. Discuss the relationship between ministers and congregations. What should they both seek to be to one another?

Romans 1:13-15

A Debtor to All

May 6, 2012

Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles. I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise. So, as much as is in me, *I am* ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also (Romans 1:13-15).

Introduction

I will occasionally make a friendly, modest wager. The wager is generally on a sporting event and the stakes involve food and/or beverages. A couple of years ago I bet a friend a beverage that the Lakers would beat the Celtics. I won. We went double or nothing and I won again. He hasn't paid up yet. Now I'm fine with that because I can continually remind him that he lost that bet, that his team lost, and that he owes me. Sometimes he offers to settle and I'm always just 'too busy.'

I made a similar food bet with a couple of the members of our youth group on a volleyball match. This time I lost. It's been well over a year now since the bet and I haven't paid up either. And whereas I am sure they would accept the offer of payment, I can't help notice the pleasure which exudes from them every time they remind me that I am in their debt. I would not go so far as to say that it defines the relationship, but when the topic surfaces it is very clear that I owe them.

Review

The context of the three verses we're looking at this morning is that of a pastor who **"longs"** to visit a congregation (Romans 1:11). He wants to utilize the gifts that God has given him for the benefit of God's people in order that they might be **"established."**

What does it mean to be established? The word means to be strengthened or solidified. Jesus uses the word to describe the

“great gulf fixed” between heaven and hell (Luke 16:26). And whatever it means Paul seems to think that the establishing, or strengthening, is something God does according to the gospel (Romans 16:25).

We might think that to be established or strengthened or solidified means to live a righteous and pious life and it certainly would include that, but what Paul prays and what Paul will labor throughout this entire epistle is the presentation of an unadulterated understanding of God, His grace, His fulfilled promise/covenant, man’s sin and our desperate need for what only Christ can provide.

Christians should seek to live holy lives; the various levels that we fail in that endeavor can and will have dire consequences. I have lived long enough and ministered long enough in the same community to witness the failure of even the most stalwart Christian. So, the **“establishment”** and the **“encouragement”** Paul writes of in verses eleven and twelve must include, even prioritize, the graciousness of a merciful God in the gospel of Christ over and along with the call to holy living.

Perhaps this is why John, as an older apostle, writing toward the end of his ministry penned these words:

My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous (1 John 2:1).

Now to our text:

Now I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that I often planned to come to you (but was hindered until now), that I might have some fruit among you also, just as among the other Gentiles (Romans 1:13).

Hindered

Paul wanted to visit them but was hindered. Sometimes we are to engage in ministerial efforts that are not exactly what we had in mind, but providentially we recognize God’s hand. I know for me this was the case in my visit to China. To be honest, ministering in

China was not something to which I ever aspired. But there was a course of events that made it quite apparent to me and others that this was to happen.

Paul wanted the Christians in Rome to know that he wanted to visit them and had frequently planned to visit them. Paul was no reluctant minister. He wanted to be there and he wanted them to know that he wanted to be there. He didn't want them to view themselves as a burden to him. What a wonderful pastor!

I have to ask myself to what extent I share that ministerial sentiment. And as a Christian, who is called to minister to others, you must ask yourself that question as well. Are there people you're seeking to minister to and do they get the impression that this is something you're eager to do?

We were not told specifically at this point how he was hindered. It could have been by special guidance of the Holy Spirit, as we read in Acts (16:6-9). But it was likely due to other ministerial duties which took priority, as we read later in Romans. Paul's priority was to preach the gospel to those who had never been told. It is in that context that he writes:

This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while (Romans 15:22-24).

By God's providence we are sometimes hindered from doing the ministry we would like to do in order to engage in the ministry that we are called to do.

Paul was hindered from one priority because of another priority. These are the types of questions that come before those who seek to serve the Lord quite often. Again, I know for me, when I'm given the opportunity to minister in some capacity—whether a Bible study, a committee at presbytery, on the board of a relief organization, etc.—I must ask myself what I will give up in order to say 'yes'. Paul wasn't hindered because he was busy watching re-runs of Seinfeld.

Time is a valuable commodity God has given us and we should make good use of it to the glory of God and edification of our neighbor.

Fruit

In Paul's case he was concerned to "**have some fruit among**" them. What would that be? Fruit is produce. It is what is produced by a specific tree, vine or plant of some kind. The fruit does not determine the type of tree, vine or plant; rather, it reveals the particular phylum of the plant. The metaphor couldn't be more appropriate for the Christian faith.

We do not seek to construct apples in an effort to convince God that we are in fact an apple tree. Regeneration or being born again or finding peace with God is not the result of pinning apples to a dead piece of tumbleweed. Regeneration (being born again) is an act of God's grace which is evidenced by faith which produces true fruit.

Now, that fruit is such a necessary component to saving faith that the lack of it should be viewed as warning signs on a road to hell. In case it's unclear, the fruit involves an accurate understanding of the gospel along with seeking to lead a life of obedience—obedience to God's law—loving God and loving our neighbor. In chapter six Paul will elaborate. He will both inform us that the opposite of fruit is lawlessness and that the clear destination of this lawlessness is death.

I speak in human *terms* because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members *as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. What fruit did you have then in the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6:19-23).*

We should not read this passage as if one road merits (earns) life and the other merits death. If we viewed it that way all would merit death. It would appear that Paul had a concern for this church, and all churches, that they would believe the one true God and the true gospel, and evidence that belief with an effort to walk in obedience.

Self-examination in this area can be highly valuable, as is our loving, observing and correcting of each other when necessary (Galatians 6:1).

I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise (Romans 1:14).

Greeks, Barbarians, Wise and Unwise

Toward that end of producing fruit, Paul viewed himself as a debtor to all people—even people who might be frustrating to work with. Having been raised in a strictly Jewish culture, it was likely somewhat of a challenge for Paul to be the apostle to the gentiles (Romans 11:13); it certainly was for Peter (Galatians 2:12). But Paul doesn't mention merely gentiles or non-Jews (he certainly ministered to Jews as well), he mentions Greeks and barbarians—that would be those who operated within what might be considered the Greco-Roman culture and those who were outside of that culture—perhaps slaves or foreigners.

Paul also mentions the wise and the unwise. It might be of interest to note that the word “**unwise**” *anoia* (without the mind) does not mean simple or those lacking intellectual acuity. It rather refers to people who refuse to use their capacity for understanding—an unwillingness to use one's mental faculties in order to understand. One can't help but conclude that these might have been frustrating people for a person of Paul's intellect to work with.

Whether calculated and malicious I cannot say with certainty, but there are high profile personalities in our culture who have mastered the art of winning people's opinions that have little to do with sound argumentation. Whether politicians, movie-makers, motivational speakers or even clergy, we often find ourselves waiting for them to actually say something of content. Votes, tickets and

donations are not always the result of a sound presentation as much as it is the ability to appeal to passions.

There are two sculptures outside the Ronald Reagan building in Washington D.C. that represent justice and reason. The one heralding reason has the inscription:

*The voice of reason is more to be regarded than the bent of any present inclination.*¹⁵

Not to belabor the subject, but the point that I see in these words of Paul is that we have an obligation to bring the gospel to everyone. There are numerous ways this may play out in our actions, but here's the trick, we are called to minister to all to the extent that we view ourselves as owing it to them.

Paul understood himself to be entrusted with a stewardship (taking care of something that belongs to someone else).

For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship (1 Corinthians 9:16-17).

And even though Paul was an apostle and the Bible teaches of prophets, teachers, evangelists, elders, deacons and pastors I think it would be negligent for any of us to somehow exclude ourselves from the responsibility of that stewardship.

So, as much as is in me, *I am* ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also (Romans 1:15).

I am not sure how we all might respond to this challenge—to go through life with a sense that we are in debt to others and what we owe them is the gospel. But I think it would behoove us and honor Christ to seek to imitate Paul (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1) in this

¹⁵ Interestingly the one for justice reads: “Our liberty of worship is not a concession or a privilege but an inherent right.”

disposition. He writes that he's "**ready to preach.**" Some of your versions read "**eager to preach.**" R.H. Mounce observes:

Paul's sense of obligation to carry the message of Christ was not a burden. To the contrary, he was "eager to preach" to those who were in Rome. "Obligation to him who died produces obligation to those for whom he died."¹⁶

¹⁶ Mounce, R. H. (2001). *Vol. 27: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (70). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. The Apostle Paul desires that Christians be “established.” What does that mean and how is it achieved?
2. Discuss Paul’s disposition toward the Christians in Rome/
3. How do you think Paul was hindered from going to Rome? How does God hinder you and how do you respond to these hindrances?
4. What is “fruit” for the Christian and where does it come from?
5. Does fruit merit (earn) salvation? Is it necessary to salvation? Explain your answers.
6. In terms of the gospel, how did Paul define his relationship with all people?

Romans 1:16

Ashamed of the Gospel

May 13, 2012

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek (Romans 1:16).

Review

After his salutation, a great deal of Paul's introduction includes his affection for the church at Rome. He is thankful for their faith, he mentions them in his prayers without ceasing, he longs to see them to impart some spiritual gift that they might be established and that there might be mutual encouragement.

He wants the church to know that he had often planned to come to them but was hindered (likely due to other ministerial obligations). It was his desire that the church be fruitful. Paul viewed himself as a debtor to all men when it came to the gospel—as if he owed it to all men to herald the good news. He was eager to preach the gospel to those in Rome. Verse 15 is followed in verse 16 with the conjunction “for” informing us why Paul is eager to preach.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ (Romans 1:16a).

Ashamed of the Gospel

I have a distinct advantage when it comes to evangelism. It is inextricably linked to my profession. When someone asks what I do and I answer that I am a pastor, the topic is now on the table. I realize that it is not always quite so natural for most Christians to broach the subject. To force the topic of the gospel into a conversation can be awkward and unnatural. An ill-timed segue can make both people in the conversation feel like they're in the midst of a forced sales transaction rather a loving, ministerial dialogue.

When Christians mature and develop a well-orbed Christian life and world view these transitions become natural and almost inevitable. The loving, gracious, generous, wise Christian man or

woman will often be asked to render their opinion on a variety of subjects and why they think that way. Whether it's how you raise your children, why you exhibit such patience, why you're so respectful to adults, why you work so hard, why you vote the way you vote, why you love the way you love, etc. all leads back to what a person believes. All of this assumes some consistency between what we believe, how we behave and the decisions we make in life.

Sadly it is not uncommon for people to make a Christian profession of faith, similar to a current high-profile politician, and then in the same paragraph offer an opinion that is in direct contradiction to that profession. It is man's effort at serving two masters that inhibits the conversation to move toward the gospel and the glory of God. It would appear that for many people who profess faith, God has little to do with their daily decisions. The conversation then leads, not to Christ, but to tradition, psychology, sociology, cultural icons or some other secular phenomenon.

To reason to the glory of God for our decisions sounds plebian to many and it is here that we may be tempted to be ashamed.

In our current culture it is not so very difficult for a pastor to preach the gospel (although that seems to be changing); it is in fact expected. For Paul though, as a sort of trailblazer, preaching the gospel (often to pagans) was frequently greeted with mockery and contempt.

Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked. But others said, "We will hear you again about this" (Acts 17:32).

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (1 Corinthians 1:18).

But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:23).

It has been said that when it came to Paul and the gospel...

**...it had brought him neither ease nor comfort:
"Paul had been imprisoned in Philippi, chased out**

of Thessalonica, smuggled out of Beroea, laughed at in Athens. He had preached in Corinth where his message was foolishness to the Greeks and a stumbling-block to the Jews” (Barclay).¹⁷

It is in this backdrop that Paul declares that he is not ashamed of the gospel—*ashamed* meaning to feel shame or disgrace because of some particular event or activity (Romans 6:21). Paul is perhaps pondering the words of Jesus recorded in the gospel of Mark.

For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels (Mark 8:38).

Jesus, so to speak, draws a line in the sand with these words, realizing that the ways of man are so at odds with the ways of Christ that the temptation to be ashamed is inevitable. And though the follower of Christ will all his/her life struggle with sin and certain degrees of failure in following their Master, they will always seek to repent and, at very least, know who their Master is.

There may be the temporary carnal shame of belief in Christ in the midst of those who are wise and righteous in their own eyes, but there is the eternal shame of standing naked and guilty before a holy God. Therefore it is with great confidence that the psalmist writes:

In you, O Lord, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame! In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me, and save me! Be to me a rock of refuge, to which I may continually come; you have given the command to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress (Psalm 71:1-3).

The Christian must be prepared to be in the minority and we should not underestimate the influence of the majority in our lives. As a fourth-grader I recall being given a short quiz in school. The

¹⁷ Morris, L. (1988). *The Epistle to the Romans* (66–67). Grand Rapids, Mich.; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

teacher began reading the answers out loud and gave us the opportunity to correct our work. I had arrived at an answer in one question and the entire class had a different answer. I, of course, assumed I was wrong and the rest of the class correct (I was neither a confident nor competent student, I might add).

When the teacher asked if anyone had a different answer I was too embarrassed to offer my answer. I had, in fact, taken the opportunity to change it. As it just so happened my answer was the correct one. It dawned on me at that young age that it is possible for the entire class to be wrong. Paul did not overestimate the wisdom of his culture and neither should we.

Gospel

The gospel is the good news. It is the good news that there is a God in heaven who has not left men to their own devices. It is the good news that God has kept His promise to send a deliverer who, by His own blood, will effectually call, purchase, redeem, regenerate, forgive, adopt and sanctify fallen men—and the entirety of creation itself (Romans 8:21). It is the good news that Jesus came to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10).

Paul does not say that the gospel contains power, but that it is the power *dunamis* of God. It is God's dynamite. We often think of dynamite as being destructive, and it certainly can be. But it can also be used to put out fires and unearth precious metals. It is by the giving of the very message that the power of the message is, by the Spirit of God, applied to the hearts, ears, eyes and souls of sinful men.

Paul knew this all too well and did all he could to give the message in purity and then get out of the way.

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that

your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

Because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

Calvin taught:

But observe how much Paul ascribes to the ministry of the word, when he testifies that God thereby puts forth his power to save; for he speaks not here of any secret revelation, but of vocal preaching. It hence follows, that those as it were willfully despise the power of God, and drive away from them his delivering hand, who withdraw themselves from the hearing of the word.¹⁸

Charles Hodge affirms that same:

The gospel is then declared to be that through which God exercises his power.¹⁹

...for it is the power of God to salvation (Romans 1:16b).

To Salvation

It has been said that knowledge is power, and to a limited degree that may be true. But it isn't power to or toward salvation. There is only one thing that contains the power of God toward salvation and that is *the gospel of Christ*. And what is this salvation? We spoke of it briefly, but we can augment it further.

Salvation is deliverance—deliverance from guilt (Ephesians 1:7), pollution (Romans 6:6), slavery to sin (Romans 7:24), punishment and death (Ephesians 2:1-6). Salvation is also deliverance to righteousness (Romans 3:21-26), holiness (Romans

¹⁸ Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 1:16). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

¹⁹ Hodge on Romans, p.28.

6:1-4), freedom (Galatians 5:1), fellowship, love and everlasting life with God (Ephesians 2:1-13; Romans 5:5).

Salvation is deliverance from all the effects, curses and wrath of the fall and into the eternal blessed and peace with our Maker forever...**for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek (Romans 1:16c).**

For Believers

In one sense this deliverance is universal and in another sense it is not. When Paul mentions the Jews and also the Greeks in his context it would mean all men. The gospel was first preached to the Jews, then to the whole world—so in that sense it is universal.

But it might be said that this blessed salvation is extended to all men without distinction but not all without exception. It is **“for everyone who believes.”** And by this we should not draw the conclusion that salvation is a matter of man’s mere choice, as if God will damn men for simply failing to arrive at the proper conclusion given numerous viable options.

Two things (at least) we can say about belief:

One is that there is a moral imperative to believe. A failure to believe is not matter of choosing poorly due to a lack of knowledge, insight or wisdom. It is an act of rebellion.

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God (Hebrews 3:12).

A failure to believe is a failure to recognize a legitimate authority. A few months ago I made a right turn that, apparently, I should not have made. So some man pulled me over and started telling me things I had to do and not do. I guess I could have been tempted to ask “Who do you think you are?” or something like that. But I looked down and saw he had a big gun on his hip. So I guess I could have waited for the opportune moment and did some ninja moves on him and relieve him of his gun.

The story being what it is, I think either one of those responses could have been justified except for one thing—as I looked more closely I saw that the man had a big shiny badge. That changes

everything. The badge revealed to me, at least to a certain extent, that this man was a legitimate authority, and for me to disregard that authority would be wrong and would have consequences. Later in this chapter Paul will explain that all men, not only know there is a God, but know the true God but actively suppress that clear truth (Romans 1:18-21).

The second thing we can say is that belief, or faith, is itself a gift of God whereby He overcomes our natural rebellion. Perhaps the best definition, one we will conclude with this morning, is found in Question 72 of the Larger Westminster Catechism in answer to the question: ‘What is Justifying Faith?’

Justifying faith is a saving grace, (Heb. 10:39) wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit (2 Cor. 4:13, Eph. 1:17–19) and word of God, (Rom. 10:14–17) whereby he, being convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition, (Acts 2:37, Acts 16:30, John 16:8–9, Rom. 5:6, Eph. 2:1, Acts 4:12) not only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the gospel (Eph. 1:13), but received and rested upon Christ and his righteousness, therein held forth, for pardon of sin, (John 1:12, Acts 16:31, Acts 10:43) and for the accepting and accounting of his person righteous in the sight of God for salvation (Phil. 3:9, Acts 15:11).²⁰

²⁰ *The Westminster Larger Catechism : With Scripture Proofs.* 1996. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why was the Apostle Paul eager to preach the gospel?
2. Why do you suppose it is difficult to natural bring the gospel into conversations?
3. Have you ever been ashamed of the gospel? Why? What do you do?
4. Discuss the responses the Apostle Paul had to his gospel message.
5. What did Jesus teach about being ashamed of Him and His words? What are the consequences?
6. Where do we find refuge from shame?
7. Are you ever in the minority when it comes to you faith? How does that affect you?
8. What is the gospel?
9. Discuss and define salvation.
10. Is belief merely a matter of making a proper choice? Discuss belief: what it is, where it comes from, what it does.

Romans 1:17

From Faith to Faith

May 27, 2012

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “*The just shall live by faith*” (Romans 1:16, 17).

Introduction

There inevitably comes a time when children become aware of their own mortality. With that comes trepidation of what comes next—after this life. As we grow older that trepidation wanes, especially if we’re busy and living in a relatively safe environment. The natural discomfort human beings have with death may not resurface until they are elderly or unless they are living in a politically volatile/dangerous climate, where death happens to the young and old in plain sight with great regularity.

Perhaps that is one of the dangers of living in a safe environment. We tend to think that life will go on. It is this mentality Paul addresses in his letter to the church of the Thessalonians.

For when they say, “Peace and safety!” then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape (1 Thessalonians 5:3).

It would be almost irresponsible to approach the verse we’re looking at today without some reference to the great Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther. It might be suggested that Luther was indulging a “peace and safety...life will simply go on” mentality after receiving his Master’s degree. This changed in a heart-beat—as quick as lightning.

At the age of twenty-two He was heading for law school on July 2, 1505 when an actual bolt of lightning nearly shocked him right into eternity. Without hesitation, Luther developed what some might

call an unhealthy fear of death and judgment. But it was Luther's tortured soul that ignited the theological watershed leading to the Reformation. It was due to the Reformation that the light of the gospel once again began to race across Europe—and the world, and everyone one of us, has been made richer for it.

We generally associate Martin Luther with his pounding of the 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral—primarily addressing the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church, especially as it related to “indulgences” church members could pay to aid loved ones and family members out of purgatory (Luther himself had become a Roman Catholic Augustinian Monk); but all the turmoil surrounding Martin Luther flowed from his theological study and convictions—especially as it related to the verse before us.

Surrounded by the folly and darkness of the church did not dissuade Luther from his faith in Christ, but he did come to realize, first-hand, that man was incurably sinful, no matter what robes or collars they donned. Luther consequently was committed to *ad fontes*, a Latin expression meaning *to the source*, the source being the Scriptures. But it wasn't as if Luther found immediate comfort in his studies.

The majority of his Roman Catholic instructors and influences had interpreted the Bible in such a way that salvation was acquired via a combination of human works with God's grace; and if Luther was aware of anything it was his own sinfulness. It was said that he, as a monk, would spend hours in the confessional and would barely make it to his room before the guilt of his sin would overwhelm him and he would require yet another dose of penance (a punishment as a token of penitence for sin).

Even when Luther began to study the very passage before us, the influence of medieval theologians (we should never underestimate the influence of our instructors) could not allow him to see this passage for what it was. The phrase “**the righteousness of God**” terrified Luther. He called the phrase “a thunderbolt in my heart” because he knew himself to be unrighteous. It even made him angry (Luther was apparently a very passionate person).

Searching for peace in the fullness of the gospel in the New Testament Luther was yet again confronted with condemnation in the phrase “**the righteousness of God.**” “*I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners,*” Luther conveyed. “*Is it not*

enough, that God crushes us miserable sinners with His law, that He has to threaten us with punishment through the Gospel, too?"

But then, through great study upon the very verse we've read this morning and the illumination of the Holy Spirit, Luther rediscovered something: he rediscovered the grace of the gospel. His conclusion was that he felt *"altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates... I extolled my sweetest word with a love as great as the hatred with which I had before hated the word 'righteousness of God.'"*

It is with this history in mind (not to mention the Apostle Paul's own theological climate, which was similar to Luther's) that we examine this highly pivotal verse.

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "*The just shall live by faith*" (Romans 1:17).

The Righteousness of God

The "it" here is referring back to the gospel mentioned in verse 16. So, the "**righteousness of God**" is revealed in the gospel. This tormented Luther because he understood this to be a description of a righteous God in the face of sinful men, that mere knowledge is anything but good news. The Scriptures are not unclear when it comes to how a holy God does business with sinful men.

For behold, the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the whirlwind, to render his anger in fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For by fire will the Lord enter into judgment, and by his sword, with all flesh; and those slain by the Lord shall be many (Isaiah 66:15, 16).

That God is righteous is not, in itself, good news for sinful men. And we certainly shouldn't draw the conclusion that God, in order to demonstrate love and grace toward this dark and broken race of humanity, somehow tempered His own righteousness. In other words, we should not think of the gospel as God somehow lowering the standard necessary to stand in His presence—something many of

us do in order to obtain some psychological comfort in light of our own behavior.

We must recognize that the righteousness of God as a statement of an attribute of God certainly stands. It also stands that this God will judge the world in righteousness (Acts 17:31). But is that the message contained in the gospel? It would appear, according to Paul, that everybody already knows **“the righteous judgment of God” (Romans 1:32)**. But *this* **“righteousness of God”** is something **“revealed”** *apokalyptetai* in the gospel, **“revealed”** meaning it cannot be derived from the natural operation of human reason. It is not known by general revelation (that which is known by all). This revelation needs the gospel—the vocal, written, preached propositional, Spirited-inspired message that God has kept His covenant/promise to send a deliverer to (among other things) save sinners.

And the necessity of it being **“revealed,”** it can be strongly argued, is because the mercy of God is not necessary to His character. God is constrained by His own character/nature to judge, but He is not constrained by His character to forgive. God could have left sinners to their own devices and still remained the holy and righteous God that He is. Mercy is optional—it is God’s free decision—a doctrine we’ll see with clarity when we reach the ninth chapter of this epistle.

What then is the **“righteousness of God...revealed”** uniquely in the gospel? To put it simply, it is the righteousness which God Himself *gives* and *approves*. Perhaps similar to how we might say a person has the eyes of his mother. We’re not talking about the mother’s eyes in a direct sense but how the child’s eyes are a result (in a certain sense) of the mother’s eyes.

So the **“righteousness of God”** in this context (the context of the gospel) is a righteousness which comes from God. It is a righteousness apart from our ability to obey the law (Romans 3:21); it is **“the gift of righteousness” (Romans 5:17)**; it is a righteousness that is not our own (Romans 10:3). Paul writes of being found in Christ...

...not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Philippians 3:9).

It was this that Luther called the “alien righteousness” of another. The full weight of God’s wrath and condemnation falling upon His own beloved Son and the unblemished righteousness of the “**bright morning star**” (**Revelation 22:16**) freely given through God’s gracious instrument of faith.

From Faith to Faith

Toward the emphasis of faith, Paul utilizes the phrase “**from faith to faith**”, a somewhat difficult clause. Whereas it only means one thing, it has been understood differently by various expositors.

Some hold that *faith to faith* speaks of our progress, the first “faith” being saving faith but elementary, the second “faith” being the full grown faith to which Christians aspire. Others take it to mean the faith revealed in the Old Covenant as a similar foreshadow of the faith in the New Covenant. Another view is that the first “faith” is God’s faith, or faithfulness, and the second is the subsequent faith of those He saves.

But another possible interpretation, one that in my estimation best comports with the focus of Paul, is that it is faith *from beginning to end*; it is known by faith and received by faith and nowhere in that equation should man begin to place anything that comes from anywhere but the cross of Christ; or as Paul writes:

But the righteousness of faith speaks in this way, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down from above) or, “Who will descend into the abyss?” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith which we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame” (Romans 10:6-11).

The Just Shall Live by Faith

Paul completes his thought with a quotation from Habakkuk 2:4; the context of this verse was Habakkuk questioning how long God would endure the sinfulness of his fellow Israelites. God answers that He will judge them by raising up the vicious and bloodthirsty Chaldeans. The prophet is confused even further and asks God why He **“holds (His) tongue when the wicked devours a person more righteous than he” (Habakkuk 1:13)?**

God answers that He will then judge the Chaldeans for their pride and hellish desires (Habakkuk 2:5). It is in the midst of these sinful Israelites and bloodthirsty Chaldeans that God pronounces the only ones who will live through His judgments—**“But the just shall live by faith” (Habakkuk 2:4).**

Whether **“shall live”** means to *come to life* or *govern life* may be a topic worthy of discussion. But since true “justifying faith” is necessarily accompanied by faithfulness—since Christ as Savior is necessarily accompanied by Christ as Lord (though the distinction must ever be made that our souls might be at peace)—I will not labor the subject. I would prefer to appeal again to Luther’s thoughts on the matter:

The sum and substance of this letter is: to pull down, to pluck up, and to destroy all wisdom and righteousness of the flesh ... and to affirm and enlarge [prove to be large] the reality of sin, however unconscious we may be of its existence.²¹

The gospel is tailor-made to answer the problem of sin, so much so that Jesus simply explained that it was for the sinner, and no one else, that He came to call.

And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a

²¹ Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953-2001). *Vol. 12-13: New Testament Commentary : Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*. New Testament Commentary (62). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.' For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Matthew 9:11-13).

May these words resonate in our hearts as we turn to the Lord's Table this morning.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why do you suppose people lose their discomfort with death and judgment?
2. Discuss the issues surrounding Martin Luther: What tortured his soul? Where did he seek to find answers? What is meant by the Latin phrase *ad fontes*?
3. Is the “righteousness of God” good news or bad news for sinners? Explain.
4. What are the different ways people have understood the phrase “faith to faith”? How do you understand it? Explain/justify your answer.
5. What is the context of Paul’s quotation from Habakkuk and why do you suppose he uses it here?
6. What is understood by the words “shall live”?
7. For whom is the gospel made?

Romans 1:18

The Revealed Wrath

June 3, 2012

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen (Romans 1:18-25).

Introduction

Many years ago I was leading a Bible study where a young woman made the observation that she was surprised (in light of the convictions and directions we as a culture or nation had been embracing ethically and politically) that we had not yet been judged by God.

To this day there are two complaints I hear with great regularity from both Christians and non-Christians alike. Some criticize God for His austerity and wrath while others find fault in God for His inactivity in the course of human affairs. I'd like to respond to these criticisms in a moment, but we might consider asking ourselves just what we think the wrath of God (realizing it is a somewhat archaic term for most of us) might look like. Would you know the wrath of God if you saw it? We tend to think of earthquakes and lightning bolts. Whereas it may include natural

phenomena, it certainly isn't restricted to that. We might be surprised to read what the Apostle Paul includes in what the wrath of God looks like.

These above verses contain numerous proof-texts (verses in the Bible used to make a theological point) commonly used in forming a sound approach to both apologetics (a rational and reasonable defense of the faith) and evangelism (the proclaiming of the gospel). R.C. Sproul commented that he has likely spent more time on this passage than any other in Scripture.

There is a temptation, therefore, to launch into the many different themes and arguments for which these verses provide ample foundation. My goal over the next few weeks will be to neither ignore those themes and arguments nor allow them to wrench us from the context of this epistle. My priority, nonetheless, will be to attempt to address Paul's immediate concern in writing these things.

Toward that end (of knowing Paul's primary concern in this passage), we must notice a series of conjunctions "**for**" *gar* and "**therefore**" *dioti* tying all of Paul's words into a unified progression of thought. We should not think of these verses as isolated planets wandering through their own rotations and spinning on their own axes with no regard to the solar system as a whole.

Paul's progression of thought begins in verse 15 by explaining that he is eager to "**preach the gospel**" followed by the conjunctions:

- "*for*" he is not "ashamed of the gospel" (vs 16)
- "*for* in it the righteousness of God is revealed" (vs 17)
- "*for*" the wrath of God is revealed" (vs 18)
- "*therefore* (though it is translated *because*) what may be known of God is manifest in them" (vs 19)
- "*for* since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen" (vs 20)
- "*therefore* (also translated *because*) although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God" (vs 21)

In an attempt to reduce these conjunctions down to two major themes: 1) "*for*" the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel; and 2) "*for*" the wrath of God is revealed in the human behavior that we observe. Or perhaps we can say it this way: the righteousness which comes from God is revealed by special revelation (the

Scriptures—specifically the gospel) and the wrath of God is revealed by general revelation (by the world which we observe).

Paul is explaining what is happening in the world—the wrath of God being revealed. He also explains why—because of the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in that unrighteousness.

Paul will explain that the truth that all men suppress is the knowledge of God that all men have. Every person knows of the true God—conventionally referred to as “general revelation.” All men know this because God has shown it (“it” being the truth of the true God’s existence) to them and therefore it is manifest [clearly known] in them. This is not a matter of probability; it is certainty—so much so that men are **“without excuse” (Romans 1:20)**.

Paul will then begin to explain where this suppression of truth and knowledge of God leads. We will read of things like: futility of thought, foolish darkened hearts (vs 21), a profession of wisdom but actual folly (vs 22), and an exchange of the glory of the true and incorruptible God for that which is corruptible (vs 23).

We see another **“therefore”** in verse 24 with the terrifying explanation of God, essentially, letting sinful men have what they want and the consequential dishonoring of their own bodies along with the worshiping of the creature rather than the Creator (vs 24, 25).

This amazing testimony regarding the nature of man, or what we might call *biblical anthropology* (which will continue for some three chapters), is an explanation for why Paul is eager to preach the gospel. It is man’s only hope. Man is inflicted with the incurable disease of sin and all the medicine and every treatment which erupts from the dark caves of human ingenuity and innovation merely exacerbates the problem. Paul begins his explanation:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18).

The Wrath of God

In reference to the two complaints (God’s wrath or lethargy), there are two responses: God is very active in His wrath, and He is to be worshiped for it.

We tend to think of wrath, especially as it relates to the behavior of humans, as unbridled fury. In fact, the Greek word for wrath *orge* has been used in cultures to describe a blatant disregard for what is appropriate in pursuit of carnal desires. In that sense, the word is used to present God in a somewhat anthropomorphic way (as if God were a man). But, of course, God is not at the mercy of human or carnal passions. And in the Bible wrath can be defined as...**the settled and active opposition of God's holy nature to everything that is evil.**²²

It is for this reason that we should rejoice that God is wrathful against sin. People who object to God's holiness and wrath don't know what they're asking for. To live in a creation where there is no objective, settled and active opposition to evil would make all of the created order more akin to hell than utopia; indeed, the vast majority of human history has proven that point.

Of course the wrath of God creates its own problems—for, who can escape it? Amidst all the evil, we cry for justice only to come to the realization that justice is the last thing on earth we actually want. We ought to praise God for His intolerance of evil, but *what of our own evil?*

Here again we revert back to why the apostle is so eager to preach the gospel. For, even though it is not explicitly stated in this passage, clearly contained in the gospel is the message regarding where the wrath of God lands for those who trust in Christ.

Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He *was* wounded for our transgressions, *He was* bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace *was* upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:4-6).

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God,

²² Morris, L. (1988). *The Epistle to the Romans* (76). Grand Rapids, Mich.; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit (1 Peter 3:18).

Revealed

The teaching here is that the wrath of God is “**revealed.**” At the beginning it would appear that Paul is explaining why he is eager to preach the gospel—because of two things that are “revealed” *apokaluptetai*. The righteousness of God is “revealed” in the gospel. The wrath of God is also “revealed” in general revelation by the observation of human behavior.

In other words, the righteousness which comes by faith is revealed to those who hear the gospel preached (special revelation), but the wrath of God is seen by all who merely observe the human race. When the girl in the Bible study said she was surprised that we had not yet been judged, she spoke amiss.

Not to jump too far ahead of myself (for this will be addressed in a future message) but the judgment is God allowing sinful men to do what sinful men desire to do—God giving men up to the “**lusts of their hearts**” (**Romans 1:24**). The wrath of God is found in God letting people follow their own inclinations.²³

Ungodliness and Unrighteousness

Paul goes on to explain that the wrath of God is revealed against all “**Ungodliness and unrighteousness.**”

Ungodliness *asebeian* means a general lack of piety. It means to seek to live in a world as if there is no God. For many today this has become a noble quest. A friend recently explained to me his vision for a world where...

...politicians will be able to openly declare themselves to be non-believers and actually have a chance of being elected to a higher office. Someday far in the future,

²³ If I recall correctly, the girl in the Bible study was responding to the topic of abortion. One would be hard-pressed to imagine a greater judgment than the slaughter of a people’s innocent babies. Add to that the judgment of such seared consciences that we would fail to even recognize darkness by which we are surrounded.

intelligence, logic, and common sense will become the most important qualifications for leading a Country. As humans evolve, faith, religion, and the belief in Gods will fade over time, just as the belief in Santa Clause and the Easter Bunny fade as a child evolves.

It somehow escaped my friend's attention that the twentieth century hosted quite a line-up of fully evolved politicians who openly declared themselves unbelievers (Lenin, Stalin, Mao Tse-Tung, to name a few). These were "intelligent, logical, sensible" individuals who were responsible for the deaths of more innocent citizens than all the holy wars in history put together. Ungodliness is the foundation of unrighteousness and "unrighteousness" *adikia* does not merely mean evil but injustice as well.

Suppressed in Unrighteousness

Finally, Paul explains the root (at least from the perspective of human culpability) cause of this problem; it is the suppression of the truth in unrighteousness. Before I conclude, there is one thing of which I would like us all to be reminded—that this is Paul's explanation regarding his eagerness to preach the gospel. I mention this because we tend to view this (and rightfully so at some level) as a way we might view others. But this shouldn't be merely viewed as the team of "us and God" against the world. We must remember to include ourselves in this equation. Paul elsewhere reminds us:

And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others (Ephesians 2:1-3).

So, believer, this was you, and unbeliever, this is you. The universal consequence of sin is not that we are not surrounded by

truth and even know the truth (and by *truth* we are speaking of the essence of truth as it relates to the Triune living God); the problem is that we suppress the truth (suppress is “present active participle” which means it is something that we actively and consistently do).

The image Paul seems to be painting with this word *katechonton* would be the act of holding a spring down, or an inflated ball or raft under water. And the motive for this suppression is unrighteousness; it is a selfish sinful desire to remove the truth from the equation of our existence. This may sound like a remarkably negative testimony against the human race—and it is. It also provides an iron-clad indictment against the claims of innocence so regularly uttered and maintained by the lips of sinners.

But it also gives us cause for praise when we consider that it is this active rebellion against a holy God that that very God subdues and remits in the gospel of His Son. Can it possibly be said any better than the apostle himself in his completion of the above thought:

And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others. But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised *us* up together, and made *us* sit together in the heavenly *places* in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God

prepared beforehand that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:1-10).

It does not enter into the mind of man to walk in God's good works in any genuine sense until the **"But God"** of verse 4. It is the God who is **"rich in mercy"** and loves with **"great love"** that Paul writes of. It is the universal sinfulness, ungodliness and unrighteousness of man that serves to highlight the heart of the message, the message of the gospel as man's only hope.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Are you surprised God has not judged our nation/culture/church? Has He?
2. What do the conjunctions tell us about the passage we're examining? What are the two major themes?
3. What is 'wrath' and why should God be worshiped for His wrath?
4. Is the wrath of God seen in the cross? What does that mean to us?
5. What are the two things revealed in Romans 1:17, 18?
6. Define and discuss 'ungodliness' and 'unrighteousness.' What are the implications of these attributes?
7. What does the natural, sinful man do with the truth? Explain what this might look like.
8. How does all this affect your own understanding of your own faith?

Romans 1:19, 20

A Universal Epiphany

June 10, 2012

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen (Romans 1:18-25).

Introduction

In May of 2004 a book written by J. Budziszewski was published by Spence Publishing Company with this intriguing title: *What We Can't Not Know*. In his book, Budziszewski explores the foundation of “common moral sense—basic principles known to all men”—a timely topic in a culture that seems to have lost its ethical moorings. Have you ever stopped to consider what you can't not know? This may sound obvious, but I recall philosophy classes in college that succeeded in getting me to question the very fabric of my own existence. And I am not alone in this.

These types of questions have plagued philosophers for hundreds and thousands of years—pushing them to such statements, as with Rene Descartes, as *cogito ergo sum* “I think, therefore I am.” Or, in more recently the 1999 blockbuster, *The Matrix*, Morpheus states: “If real is what you can feel, smell, taste and see, then ‘real’ is

simply electrical signals interpreted by your brain.” Morpheus offers Neo a choice: If he takes the blue pill he wakes up in his bed and forgets about everything that happened and he can believe whatever he wants to believe. If he takes the red pill he stays in wonderland and Morpheus will show him how deep the rabbit-hole goes (the rabbit-hole being reality)—Morpheus explains that all he’s offering is the truth, nothing more. The movie was thought provoking. How do we know the things we know? Is there something that everybody knows and can’t help knowing?

It is the universal lack of ability/willingness to answer that question that undermines meaningful dialogue. We once thought we had common ground with our neighbor, largely because both we and our neighbors were raised in an evangelized, Judeo-Christian culture. But now that that is under attack, objective, moral, authoritative guidelines for human conduct float about like hot-air balloons in a stormy gale.

When my sister was in high school in the sixties, a teacher physically shoved her boyfriend for kissing her in the hallway. Later that same decade I was given a swat for not having my shirt tucked in. Today people would view that kind of behavior on the part of high school faculty as ancient and barbaric. A couple of years ago the same high school published a yearbook extolling the virtues of homosexuality with photos of high school students illustrating the beauty of intimacy in those relationships.

We currently live in a culture that would ‘more or less’ universally dismiss the legitimacy of corporal punishment administered by a faculty member and we have embraced the notion of amorous (virtually) without restriction. All this to say, “Just what is it we think we know and is there anything we can’t not know?” We may view the examples I’m giving as somewhat innocuous (although I am not sure they are), but there are other examples of human behavior knocking at the door of our society (some are well in the room) where innocent human lives are very much at risk.

I labor the issue to bring to our attentions that mankind’s inability to find agreement in the flood of ethics, politics, sociology and morality in general is rooted in a light given to us by God that we are continually seeking to snuff out.

Review

We are following a line of thought in the passage before us where the apostle is explaining why he is “eager” to “preach the gospel” (God’s promise to send a Deliverer to redeem men from their sins—vs 15). He has explained that he is not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the “**power of God to salvation for everyone who believes**” (vs 16). In the gospel sinners receive the righteousness which comes from God and this righteousness is apprehended through the instrument of faith (vs 17).

In verse 18 Paul launches into what amounts to be a great indictment against humanity. He explains that the “**wrath of God is revealed**” in the world in which we live. We tend to think of wrath as it relates to the Day of Judgment, but the Gospel of John informs us:

He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him (John 3:36).

The wrath of God is a present reality and can be observed in the darkness of human conduct—the apex of which is the rejection of truth itself as presented in the person of Jesus Christ. Paul writes of those...**who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved (2 Thessalonians 2:10).**

It is a refusal to love the truth and, as Paul writes in verse 18, a suppression of the truth due to unrighteousness, or, as Jesus taught:

And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed (John 3:19, 20).

Paul now continues to explain what all men can’t not know.

...because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them (Romans 1:19).

A Greater Court

There is a general sentiment that God is not quite fair in judging people simply because they couldn't figure out the correct religion. Ignorance can be a very useful excuse. But that particular sentiment is not applied when it comes to other, lesser things. If a person explained that they had never reached the conclusion in their own thoughts that it was wrong to burglarize a house the judge wouldn't buy it. If a person sought to excuse himself from guilt because he didn't grasp the notion that the truth was preferable to deception there would be a corporate and justified "Give me a break!"

But it can be argued that once God is removed from the equation of human decision making, burglary and deception become ethical options. The political, military and economic leaders of the Nazi party were put on trial and convicted in 1945 at Nuremberg. One of the many criticisms of those trials was the fact that these defendants were heeding the "highest authority" before them. Ethically, that is a difficult question to answer. If men choose to worship Hitler rather than Jesus the court becomes more ecclesiastical than criminal, and that adjudication will find no absolute verdict in any human court.

But there is a greater court of which Paul writes. It is a court where God presides over every human thought. It is the word of God who is **"a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart"** (Hebrews 4:12); it is God Himself who **"discerns my thoughts from afar"** (Psalm 139:2).

I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds (Jeremiah 17:10).

A Universal Epiphany

And what Paul is revealing to us is that the wrath of God is on men because they suppress the truth. The truth is *gnoston tou theou* 'the knowledge of God or the knowledge that there is a God.' The knowledge of God, Paul explains is manifest in them.

"Manifest" *phaneron* means "being evident so as to be readily known, *visible, clear, plainly to be seen, open, plain, evident,*

known.”²⁴ And we have this knowledge of God because **“God has shown it”** to us. The word Paul uses for **“shown it”** *ephanerosen* (which is aorist or past tense) means to cause to become visible, *reveal, expose publicly*. It is where we get the word ‘epiphany.’

When I would watch cartoons as a child one of the characters might have a great idea; this would be accompanied by a light going on over their head. There was a sudden realization. What we learn here is that God has granted mankind a universal epiphany. Every man knows of the true God. Paul then explains how this epiphany works.

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse (Romans 1:20).

Clearly Seen Invisibility

The order of the words in the verse in the Greek is a little different than the order in English. Paul begins by explaining that the invisible attributes of God, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen and understood by the things that God has made. By simple illustration, when I look at a work of art I know and understand that it was produced by an artist.

Notice the words Paul uses: **“clearly seen”** *nooumena* meaning to grasp or comprehend, *perceive, apprehend, understand, gain an insight into*.²⁵ **“understood”** *kathoratai* meaning to look down upon from a higher place, to behold, generally and figuratively to perceive, to see or know clearly. And, more specifically, what we know clearly is the “power” and “Godhood” of God. In other words, we get it! It is a self-evident truth. It has been said that:

God has stitched into the fabric of the human mind his existence and power, so that they are

²⁴ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3rd ed.) (1047). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 674.

instinctively recognized when one views the created world.²⁶

Known, Not Figured Out

And I might add that it is not a matter of discursive reasoning. I don't look at the beauty of a flower or a sunset and then enter into the mental exercise of drawing a final conclusion that there must have been a maker of these things. It is not something we figure out. It is something we *know*. It is something we can't not know.

Neither is Paul suggesting that knowledge of God's existence and power is the result of careful deduction and reasoning, so that the text can be used to encourage sophisticated rational argumentation as an apologetic for God's existence. Instead, this knowledge of God is a reality for all people, not simply for those who possess unusually logical minds.²⁷

Calvin explains:

By saying, that *God has made it manifest*, he means, that man was created to be a spectator of this formed world, and that eyes were given him, that he might, by looking on so beautiful a picture, be led up to the Author himself.²⁸

No Apologetics for Man

And if there is any doubt in terms of the certainty of this knowledge, Paul adds the words "without excuse" *anapologetous*. We read 'an' as the negative particle before this word *apologetous* we might bring out minds to the topic of apologetics which means to give a reasoned explanation or defense for the faith. We find ourselves

²⁶ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Vol. 6: Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (86). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 1:19). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

often in the business of defending God where Paul here writes that God has so manifested Himself to all men that they will crumble in the effort of defending themselves.

The Eagerness of Paul

It must be said that the general revelation that all men have of the existence of God is not (due to men's sin) redemptive. It is only condemning. It takes away any excuse.

This brings us back to why Paul is eager to preach the gospel. It is the heralding of a good, covenant making, covenant keeping God, who has kept His promise to send a Redeemer that provides man with his only hope of redemption. Information, education, innovation et al are wonderful things and should be pursued in all the various disciplines and vocations in life. But when it comes to where the greatest thinkers arrive apart from Christ, Paul writes:

Where *is* the wise? Where *is* the scribe? Where *is* the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe (1 Corinthians 1:20).

No human endeavor can aid in man's deliverance except Christ alone crucified and resurrected. This universal epiphany given to all men has been willfully suppressed and dismissed and the consequences of this have been revealed throughout the world. But God is a gracious God who subdues our naturally rebellious hearts with the light of Christ. And it is with our attention toward that that we now come to the Lord's Table.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Have you ever questioned how you know the things you know? Is there anything you ‘can’t not know’? Explain.
2. Does man’s lack of ability to explain how or why he knows things affect his ethics and guidelines for life? How?
3. How is the wrath of God currently on all men?
4. Is God fair in judging all men? Explain.
5. What is the universal epiphany given to all?
6. How do all men know there is a God, even though He is invisible?
7. Does man somehow figure out there is a God? How does your answer affect your interaction with those who do not believe?
8. Paul teaches that man has “no excuse.” What does this tell us about man’s knowledge of God?
9. Why does all this enforce Paul’s eagerness to preach the gospel?

Romans 1:21-23

A Foolish Exchange

July 1, 2012

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen (Romans 1:18-25).

Introduction

It has been said that when Harriet Beecher Stowe (the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) visited the White House, President Lincoln greeted her with the words, "The little woman who wrote the book that made this great war." Whether or not Lincoln actually said that is uncertain. But what is implied in that statement is that Stowe wrote a novel that forced the issue. The nation, especially its leaders, had to deal with the issue of slavery. There was power and prestige in the writing of a novel.

I was reminded of this legendary statement while visiting a friend who directs movies commenting on the increased number of independent films. He made the statement that in the 19th century people sought to leave their mark by writing the great American novel; now people are seeking to leave their mark by producing the great American movie.

In modern films we see history revised, people groups vilified or exonerated, value systems extolled or demeaned; and all of this done with lighting, music, camera angles and skillful (yet not necessarily profound) dialogue. All this to say that the method by which a society draws ethical, political, sociological, economic, familial, etc. conclusions becomes much more image-based as they live out their rejection of the true and living God.²⁹

I must say that this comes to mind when I see posters with artistic images of political candidates (similar to an Andy Warhol painting) where hope lies not in the propositions of the candidate but in the person of the candidate. When “that is the proper way in which a people are to be governed” is replaced by “that person is going to make sure we’re taken care of.” When we, as a people, or I, as a person begin to move in that direction, whether intentionally or unwittingly, it reveals that I have made an exchange—a very foolish exchange.

Review

In review, the Apostle Paul is explaining why he is “eager” to “preach the gospel” (Romans 1:15); the gospel is the “power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). In the gospel, sinners receive the “righteousness” which comes from God and this righteousness is apprehended through the instrument of “faith” (Romans 1:17), Christ being the object of that faith.

In Romans 1:18 Paul launches into a great indictment against humanity—that the “wrath of God is revealed” in the world in which we live—it is a present reality which can be observed in the darkness of human conduct. The great root of this problem is not that men do not have the truth, but that they “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”

Paul then begins to explain what all men can’t not know—there is a universal epiphany given to all and manifest in all; this

²⁹ None of this is to say that novels cannot proceed from idolatry or give evidence of the suppression of truth. Nor is it to say that the suppression of truth cannot produce sophisticated arguments—arguments that might sway and win the souls of our youth. But, as we shall see in verse 22, those who profess wisdom have, as their root, an undue worship or reverence for that which is created rather than the Creator.

universal epiphany is the *gnoston tou theou* ‘the knowledge of God or the knowledge that there is a God.’ This knowledge is so certain that it leaves all people **“without excuse” (Romans 1:20)**. Again, let us be reminded that this is why Paul is eager to preach the gospel, the gospel being man’s only hope.

In the verses before us Paul will further explain what the rejection of truth looks like and where it inevitably leads.

...because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened (Romans 1:21).

Glorification and Thankfulness

We spoke of this in detail earlier, so I won’t repeat what Paul assumes in the beginning of this verse, that all men know God. This is not a saving knowledge of God, but still a sure knowledge which had been revealed to them. In reference to man’s knowledge of God, Hodge explains that it...

...does not mean merely that they had the opportunity of knowing him, but that in the constitution of their own nature, and in the works of creation, they actually possessed an intelligible revelation of the Divine existence and perfections.³⁰

Now the appropriate response to God’s revelation of Himself would have been worship and thanksgiving. Responding to God in worship is the inevitable, reasonable and rational act of those who remotely perceive what God is: a Spirit, in and of Himself:

...infinite in being, (Exod. 3:14, Job 11:7–9) glory, (Acts 7:2) blessedness, (1 Tim. 6:15) and perfection; (Matt. 5:48) all-sufficient, (Gen. 17:1) eternal, (Ps. 90:2) unchangeable, (Mal. 3:6, James 1:17) incomprehensible, (1 Kings 8:27) every where present, (Ps. 139:1–13) almighty, (Rev. 4:8) knowing all things, (Heb. 4:13, Ps. 147:5) most wise,

³⁰ Hodge, Charles. Commentary of the Epistle to the Romans. P.38

(Rom. 16:27) most holy, (Isa. 6:3, Rev. 15:4) most just, (Deut. 32:4) most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth (Exod. 34:6).³¹

We, often without reservation, recognize the attributes of God as virtues to be extolled—love, honor, justice, wisdom, etc.—how much more is the source of all virtues to ascend to the pinnacle of our thoughts and hearts!

When eyes are fully opened, thankfulness would also appear on the list of man's reasonable response to God. For we owe God not merely all that we have but our very existence. Add to that God's willingness to reveal Himself to us and in us. Calvin remarks:

Nor is it without reason that he adds, *that they were not thankful*, for there is no one who is not indebted to him for numberless benefits: yea, even on this account alone, because he has been pleased to reveal himself to us, he has abundantly made us indebted to him.³²

So the proper and reasonable response to the knowledge of God would be to glorify Him as God and be thankful. But in the Apostle Paul's treatise of biblical anthropology (a biblical understanding of man) we see where the natural man inevitable goes.

The Inevitable Destination.

When the truth is rejected (the truth being most properly summed up in Christ Himself—John 14:6), there is an inevitable destination: **...but (they) became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened (Romans 1:21b)**. Apart from the light of Christ, all human thought is ultimately futile and all human hearts are foolish and darkened.

³¹ *The Westminster Larger Catechism : With Scripture Proofs*. 1996. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

³² Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 1:21). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Futility of thought means that man's ability to thoroughly or thoughtfully reason clearly is reduced to nonsense. This does not mean that people aren't smart, nor does it mean that the natural man does not have the capacity to figure things out in their own limited capacity. One who rejects Christ may discover a cure for cancer or navigate a spaceship to Jupiter, whereas some Christians can't figure out how to put on a band-aid or find Europe on a map.

I believe Paul's point is that the natural man who rejects the existence of God cannot give a rational explanation for the very virtues they often claim to undergird their progress. Why is it good for people to live rather than die? Why is truth preferable to lies? Why is work preferable to lethargy? Why is progress preferable to stagnation? In short, what is the meaning of life? Why do we exist? What is our purpose?

It is in the context of these types of questions that the able scientist is reduced to a mediocre philosopher. It is here that mankind becomes embarrassingly inept at giving any plausible explanation for anything at all. Calvin says it this way:

And thus their foolish mind, being involved in darkness, could understand nothing aright but was carried away headlong, in various ways, into errors and delusions. Their unrighteousness was this — they quickly choked by their own depravity the seed of right knowledge, before it grew up to ripeness.³³

Or, to explain it in the words of Jesus:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock (Matthew 7:24, 25).

³³ Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 1:21). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

At least in this illustration there may not be anything wrong with the house; it may be very well built. But if the foundation is not solid, the house will inevitably experience a great fall (Matthew 7:27).

Natural man, at his best, is subject to a foolish darkened heart and futility of thought. We need help. Help is found in the gospel. It is no wonder Paul was eager to preach it. But it is not as if the natural man is keenly aware of his need for this help. As we suppress the truth of God being God—as we seek to demote God—we correspondingly promote ourselves. Paul continues:

Professing to be wise, they became fools (Romans 1:22).

An Incredulous Profession

One of the great tragedies of the human existence is man's quest for wisdom apart from a God "**who alone is wise**" (Jude 25). It has been the source of untold hardship and oppression. And it was center-stage in the temptation which led to death.

So when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, that it *was* pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make *one* wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate (Genesis 3:6).

Eve ate and Adam ate and they did not receive the promised wisdom; but that reality has been apparently insufficient in halting man's profession of wisdom. Like the Scarecrow's response to Dorothy when she asked how he can talk if he hasn't got a brain. "I don't know," he answered, "But some people without brains do an awful lot of talking, don't they?"

The word "professing" means to speak about something with certainty. And what they are asserting with certainty is that they are "wise." I appreciate A.W. Tozer's definition of wisdom: "**Wisdom is to devise perfect ends by perfect means.**" In other words, wisdom knows exactly where it is to go and precisely the means to get there.

We live in a world of men in smocks, boldly professing wisdom (one can hardly help think of the university setting) to young, perhaps unprepared, malleable minds. A person who can manage to

Speak with authority needn't worry as much about content, unless the people to whom they speak have a healthy appreciation of the wisdom of God; or, as Paul wrote elsewhere:

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile" (1 Corinthians 3:18-20).

Williams G.T. Shedd gives his opinion of Paul's words:

The writer has in mind the great and perverse ingenuity with which the human intellect is employed, in inventing various schemes of pagan idolatry...Here, the darkening of the intellect is represented as the effect of the foolish and wicked speculation; the liar comes to believe his own lie.³⁴

Paul sums up this foolish exchange with these words:

and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things (Romans 1:23).

An Image Made Like Man

The idolatry in this verse may have been a combination of what had happened with the Israelites in the wilderness (Psalm 106:20; Jeremiah 2:11) and what was taking place in the current pantheon of the Roman Empire and widespread idolatry (especially Greece; Acts 17:22).

The exchange of which Paul writes didn't mean that they changed one thing into another but exchanged one thing for another. And interestingly enough the exchange is not God for man but for an

³⁴ A Critical and Doctrinal Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans. Williams G.T. Shedd. P. 23.

image like corruptible man. I have always found it a bit unnerving when the leaders of countries place human photos of themselves in conspicuous place for public consumption (for me I noticed this first with the Ayatollah Khomeini during the hostage crisis of 1979-80).

But the image of a man will always yield superior thoughts of that man than genuine interaction with the man himself. We think of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and the great images of these men in Washington D.C. They achieve almost god-like status in our imaginations. How disappointed we would likely be if we actually spent a week vacationing with any of these men.

Modern man comforts himself in his own superiority over those ancient idolaters who created images of birds, animals and snakes. We would never idolize these mere beasts! But here is the irony: in the evolutionary scheme which is embraced by the modern enlightened intellect, man is merely (perhaps) the highest animal. Then we put a photo of the highest animal on a poster surrounded by words of hope. If that does not yield some form of idolatry I am not sure what would.

Corruptible and Incorruptible

Paul explains that it is woven into the nature of sinful man to exchange the incorruptible for the corruptible. We put our hopes in a corruptible creation (whether images of men or beasts and the philosophies they promote). The word “corruptible” pertains to that which is “bound to disintegrate and die.”³⁵

“Incorruptible” on the other hand—the adjective he uses to describe the true God—describes a God who is not “subject to decay and death...a God who is imperishable and immortal.”³⁶ This is the foolish exchange that man has made.

In my many years as a Christian in a very innovative religious culture (and I don't say that necessary with admiration) I have heard and used many mottos and clichés, I have issued many retractions. But one I heard many years ago still stands.

³⁵ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Vol. 1: Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (266). New York: United Bible Societies.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 267.

He is no fool who exchanges what he cannot keep in order to gain that which he cannot lose.

Paul was eager to preach the gospel in order that men's eyes might be open to this truth. Man had exchanged his knowledge of, and glory in, the Creator for the creation. But in the gospel there is another exchange that is made. The glorious exchange of our sin imputed (transferred) to Christ and His righteousness imputed to those who believe. Let us turn our thoughts toward that now as we approach the Lord's Table.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Discuss the differences between images and propositions. Why is this significant?
2. Review Romans 1:15-20. What are we learning about the nature of man, what man knows, and why Paul is eager to preaching the gospel?
3. What should man's response to the knowledge of God be and why?
4. What is the inevitable destination when the truth of God is rejected?
5. Have you experienced a profession of wisdom by the world? Discuss that experience and how one might respond to it.
6. What is the foolish exchange that the natural man has made? Can you cite examples of this in the culture in which you live?
7. What exchange is presented to men in the gospel? Discuss how that exchange takes place.

Romans 1:24, 25

The Open Gate

July 15, 2012

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen (Romans 1:18-25).

Introduction

A photo was posted this week of a small dog running like mad. All four paws were high in the air. He looked as if he were flying eight inches above the ground. The camera angle caught the puppy straight on, and never has a dog more appeared to be smiling! He was on a path surrounded by nothing but trees and grass. But it was the caption that brought the photo to life. It read: Live Like Someone Left the Gate Open.

It is easy to appreciate the spirit behind that message. I recall the feeling of joy and freedom when I got my first car or when school was out for summer. The shackles are gone, the limits are extended and there is unrestrained freedom to explore! Yet anyone thoughtful person recognizes the potential danger.

After all, for those of us who have puppies or small children, we're very careful not to leave the gate open. And the securing of the

gate is not because we don't want them to enjoy life and not (primarily) because of what damage they may cause to others. It is rather the wise and loving effort of a parent or owner (of a pet) to be protective of those in their care.

As a child grows (especially in wisdom) they begin to appreciate that the constraints of their parents were something for which they should be grateful. For the gracious constraints of a loving parent are the very tool that kept the child free; and by *free* I mean from all the potential cages and entrapments to which young people are susceptible.

It is tempting for a child to think there is this big, great, fascinating world out there (because this, in many ways, is true) and their parents are stifling their ability to explore and enjoy it. But the experienced parent is conversant with this world and knows all too well its many cages. Imagine, if you will, bringing a fearless and inexperienced child to a zoo. Enthralled by the exhibits he wants to survey every cage, inside and out. The parents holds the child back (at times with an actual leash designed for children) lest the child become its own lunchtime performance.

All this to say that a certain level of restraint is necessary for the human good. More on that in a moment.

Review

In review, the Apostle Paul is explaining why he is “**eager**” to “**preach the gospel**” (**Romans 1:15**); the gospel is the “**power of God to salvation for everyone who believes**” (**Romans 1:16**). In the gospel sinners receive the “**righteousness**” which comes from God and this righteousness is apprehended through the instrument of “**faith**” (**Romans 1:17**), Christ being the object of that faith.

In Romans 1:18 Paul launches into a great indictment against humanity—that the “**wrath of God is revealed**” in the world in which we live—it is a present reality which can be observed in the darkness of human conduct. The great root of this problem is not that men do not have the truth, but that they “**suppress the truth in unrighteousness.**”

Paul then begins to explain what all men can't not know—the universal epiphany given to all and manifest in all—the knowledge of God or the knowledge that there is a God, a knowledge so certain that

it leaves all people **“without excuse” (Romans 1:20)**. This is why Paul is eager to preach the gospel, the gospel being man’s only hope.

In verses 21 through 23 we learned what the rejection of truth looks like and where it inevitably leads—a lack of willingness to glorify and be thankful to God followed futility of thought and darkened hearts—a futility and darkness accompanied by a profession of wisdom (Romans 1:21, 22). Finally, there is a foolish exchange—the exchange of a glorious incorruptible God for the image of a corruptible man (Romans 1:23).

We begin this morning’s message with a “therefore”; God’s response to what we’ve just reviewed.

Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves (Romans 1:24)

Do What You Want

The “therefore” which begins this verse is related to the previous verses where we are informed of man’s willful suppression of the truth, his lack of acknowledgment of the glory of God and gratitude along with the foolish exchange of the incorruptible for the corruptible. What does God therefore do? In short, He opens the gate.

He **“gave them up.”** The word *paredoken* means to “deliver over or up to the power of someone.”³⁷ Jesus uses this same word to describe being handed over to the judge and **“thrown into prison” (Matthew 5:25)**. In this case, that someone to whom we are handed over is ourselves. It is the awful feeling some parents have experienced, not with small children, but with older ones who simply but boldly refuse the counsel of wisdom. It is that feeling which might be accompanied by an open door and the words “Do what you want.”

I don’t know if I can think of a more fearful place for the soul of a person than Romans 1:24 (also 1:26). Although I believe Paul is writing of the general and universal nature of man, the knowledgeable

³⁷ Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

Israelite would be reminded of the exodus and their rebellion in the wilderness:

“But My people would not heed My voice, and Israel would *have* none of Me. So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, to walk in their own counsels. Oh, that My people would listen to Me, that Israel would walk in My ways! I would soon subdue their enemies, and turn My hand against their adversaries. The haters of the Lord would pretend submission to Him, but their fate would endure forever. He would have fed them also with the finest of wheat; and with honey from the rock I would have satisfied you” (Psalm 81:11-16).

Clearly here God portrays Himself as one who grieves over His covenant people who craved the satisfaction of the world rather than the finest of wheat and honey from the rock—items God would use to demonstrate the continued flow of His love and grace. As a minister, to see this behavior (the desire for autonomy—estrangement from God) in those who are young or old is a source of untold grief.

The True Cage

So if God were to remove His gracious constraint on the human soul, if He were to say “Do what you want”, what would that “freedom” look like? The 2nd and 3rd century Christian Tertullian coined the phrase, “Out of the frying pan, into the fire.” The 20th century American social writer, Eric Hoffer, added his own take, explaining, “We feel free when we escape - even if it be from the frying pan to the fire.”

In the sixties I thought I was expressing my own liberty and individuality by wearing huge bell-bottoms and paisley Nehru shirts. Later it dawned on me that I was very much enslaved to a very narrow (and somewhat short-lived) cultural phenomenon. So what is the true cage when a people liberate themselves from a loving, wise Triune God?

People are given up **“to uncleanness in the lusts of their hearts.”** “Uncleanness” is the Greek word *akatharsian*. Notice the

prefix *a-* and the root word *katharos*, which means pure, clean, undefiled, unpolluted. So, *akatharsian* means to be without purity. The word has clear religious connotations—one can hardly read a chapter in Leviticus without coming upon some injunction about being clean prior to interaction with God’s people.

Simply put, it appears Paul’s point here is that the human race, in their rejection of God, are left at the mercy of the lusts of their own hearts—hearts Paul has already defined as “**darkened**” (**Romans 1:21**). It should be added that “**lusts**” *epithymiais* means strong desire. In the Scriptures it is generally used in a negative sense and frequently addresses irregular and inordinate appetites.³⁸

I think this point needs to be made because the mind-shapers landscaping the modern roads of ethical acceptability have constructed the social mores that if the desire is strong enough and held by a large enough constituency, the only reasonable conclusion we can draw is that it must be decent. They will often appeal to God’s creative power to legitimize whatever the desire might be—“God made me this way!”

But this mindset rapidly crumbles when they are offended if their desire is compared to another prevailing desire. I illustrate my point with some portions of a thread I had a few years ago with a writer from *Wired* magazine who had requested to be removed from the distribution list of columns I wrote for a local newspaper. The dialogue went something like this:

Me:

I'll certainly respect your wishes. But since I enjoy the measured and rational approach you take toward your topics, I'd be interested to know what bothers you in my apologetic for biblical Christianity; either way I'll remove you from this list, whether you respond or not. Good Day.

Him:

The anti-gay bigotry is what "bothers" me. Thank you for removing me from your list.

³⁸ Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

Me:

Please indulge me because I would like to understand your point. Are you saying that if someone believes homosexuality or adultery or polyamorism, etc. is immoral, that it naturally follows that they're a bigot? What about NAMBLA (an organization seeking to lower the consent age to foster physical intimacy with young boys)?

Him:

You have a feeling of enormous confidence. But in long years of reporting, I've learned that being right does not correlate reliably with feeling right. And though you make an outward show of niceness and reasonableness, the assumptions you make are vicious. A simple statement that I abhor your anti-gay bigotry brought forth a cheap and ugly reply, linking homosexuality with child abuse. You can dress this up any way you like, make whatever little excuses and rhetorical maneuvers that might please you, but you've made yourself clear, and your message is ugly.

I must say that I found this conversation emotionally disturbing. Whether justified or not, it is difficult to be accused of being vicious, bigoted, cheap and ugly. But I was not seeking to take a cheap shot. I sincerely wanted to hear from a cultural icon; by what standard do you say 'yes' to one intense desire and say 'no' to another? The members of one people-group can just as easily assert that they are wired (excuse the pun) that way as the members of another group. It is a logical/ethical investigation by analogy and it really needs to be answered.

Of course (getting back to the text) the answer is given by Paul. In the rejection of God, the human race is governed by its own passions (feeling right) and the consequences continue **“to dishonor their bodies among themselves.”**

Dishonored Vessels

In chapter 9 (verse 21) Paul will write about people as “vessels” of “honor” and “dishonor.” We might think of a precious heirloom given by a special grandparent placed on the mantles of our fireplaces—a vessel which conjures up lofty thoughts and memories. Compare that to a vessel we might use to clean up after an animal. And the manifestation of this disgrace is visibly demonstrated in the way humans use their bodies—a topic Paul will address in greater detail in the verses ahead. Suffice it to say for now that that which should be a source of shame and embarrassment has shifted itself to center-stage with spotlight.

When God opens the gate, fear of punishment and remorse are the first ones out of the yard. W.G.T. Shedd explains:

The vices mentioned in the context, to which men were given over, were unaccompanied with either fear or remorse, and were pursued with a cynical and brazen shamelessness.³⁹

Charles Hodges called it:

A judicial abandonment...the punishment of sin is sin...as an avenger.⁴⁰

Paul then reemphasizes what he had already taught in verse 23.

...who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen (Romans 1:25).

Refuge of Lies

The thing about a lie (as has been briefly demonstrated above) is that it cannot survive an internal critique; it will inevitably collapse

³⁹ William G. T. Shedd. *A Critical Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*, p. 25.

⁴⁰ Charles Hodge. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, p 40.

on itself. One may say they don't believe in a God who is the source of all that is, whether material or immaterial—things concrete and things ethical—but it is altogether another matter to say it is *unreasonable* to believe in such a God. The matter becomes stickier when sinful man begins to realize that the only thing that separates him from other sinful men (sinful men that perhaps disgust him) is his own opinion—resulting in self-deification.

This is what happens when one exchanges the truth of God for the lie. The utter folly of this was addressed by Isaiah hundreds of years before the birth of Christ.

Because you have said, “We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we are in agreement. When the overflowing scourge passes through, it will not come to us, for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood we have hidden ourselves (Isaiah 28:15).

But the refuge of lies is a house of cards; and its walls offer a mere fantasy of protection. Somewhat graphic words in Jeremiah:

This is your lot, the portion of your measures from Me,” says the Lord, “because you have forgotten Me and trusted in falsehood. Therefore I will uncover your skirts over your face, that your shame may appear. I have seen your adulteries and your *lustful* neighings, the lewdness of your harlotry, your abominations on the hills in the fields. Woe to you, O Jerusalem! Will you still not be made clean” (Jeremiah 13:25-27)?

Three chapters later we read of a refuge which is sure and true.

O Lord, my strength and my fortress, my refuge in the day of affliction, the Gentiles shall come to You from the ends of the earth and say, “Surely our fathers have inherited lies, worthlessness and unprofitable *things*.” Will a man make gods for himself, which *are* not gods? “Therefore behold, I

will this once cause them to know, I will cause them to know My hand and My might; and they shall know that My name is the Lord” (Jeremiah 16:19-21).

A Doxology

Paul writes of “serving” and “worshiping” the creature rather than the creator. *Worship* and *serve* indicate inward reverence and outward service. He then pauses to offer this doxology “**who is blessed for ever! Amen.**”

By this doxology the apostle instinctively relieves the horror which the penning of such things excited within his breast; an example to such as are called to expose like dishonor done to the blessed God.⁴¹

Remembering the Theme

I would like to finish with this thought—for those of us who are comforted with the notion that Paul’s testimony vis-à-vis humanity affirms our own thoughts and validates our convictions—that is not the purpose of Romans. Let us not stray from the theme of this great epistle—an epistle about God and His faithfulness. Let us remember that Paul’s treatise on human nature leaves every last one of us “inexcusable” before His holy searching judgments.

Let us remember that Paul is explaining why he is eager to preach the gospel: His love for God—his disposition of indebtedness to all men—his heart’s desire and prayer that men might be saved. As he has imitated Christ, let us imitate him. And may our praise and worship of God be elevated as we ponder the great darkness from which we have all been delivered.

⁴¹ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 1:25). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Are there values in restrains? Can you give some examples?
2. How does God respond to man's willful suppression of the truth?
3. Is letting someone do what they want always good or always bad? How does this apply to God's response to mankind?
4. What are some of the true cages of man's quest for liberty from God?
5. According to Hodge, what is the punishment for sin? Explain.
6. What is meant by a "refuge of lies"? What is the danger here?
7. What should we always remember as we examine Paul's treatise on human nature?

Romans 1:26, 27

The Penalty

July 22, 2012

For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due (Romans 1:26, 27).

Introduction

As we embark upon the PG-13 portion of the chapter I am mindful of the Apostle Paul's exhortation:

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret (Ephesians 5:11, 12).

I may, therefore, speak in cryptic terms (using the word "lifestyle"), so that parents may afterward translate for their children as they deem fit. Suffice it to say that the behavior Paul highlights as the flagship of "**impurity**" and the "**dishonoring**" of the body (Romans 1:24) is currently slung at young and old in every conceivable venue imaginable in the panorama of western culture.

We should not, however, view ourselves as unique in this. The original audience of Paul would have had a very similar experience—the lifestyle accompanied the fall of Greece and Rome. R.H. Mounce observes:

...the Greco-Roman society of Paul's day tolerated (the lifestyle) homosexuality with considerable ease.⁴²

⁴² Mounce, R. H. (1995). *Vol. 27: Romans*. The New American Commentary (82). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

H. Rhys says that:

Aristophanes found (the lifestyle) homosexuality “sufficiently widespread in Athens to say in one of his comedies that the audience contained a clear majority of (those who engaged in the lifestyle) sodomites.”⁴³

Among some advocates it was viewed as superior to heterosexuality. Barclay notes that “fourteen out of the first fifteen Roman Emperors were (engaged in the lifestyle) homosexuals.”⁴⁴

M. Hunter quotes Suetonius’s remark that Julius Caesar was “every woman’s man and every man’s woman.”⁴⁵ (Cf. Plato’s *Symposium* and Plutarch’s *Lycurgus* on homosexuality in ancient times.⁴⁶)

All this to say, the cultural fracas surrounding this topic is nothing new. On the contrary the observance of the lifestyle in question affirms what the apostle is teaching in this passage—that it is the inevitable outcome of apostasy (the rejection of God).

Though a hot topic, I don’t intend to spend an undue amount of time addressing the lifestyle. I am hoping to remain true to the text and its primary message. But since it has become not merely a sociological/cultural/political battle but a matter of ecclesiastical concern (many churches having sanctioned the lifestyle), I think a few comments and observations are necessary.

First, over and against some modern expositors, the lifestyle is perspicuously unbiblical. The passage before us is not unclear on the matter and is not addressing some unacceptable variation of the lifestyle (as some insert without warrant) but indeed the lifestyle itself. And there are other passages that will affirm the same:

⁴³ Mounce, R. H. (1995). *Vol. 27: Romans*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ *The Epistle to the Romans*, TBC [London: SCM, 1955], 33.

⁴⁶ Mounce, R. H. (1995). *Vol. 27: Romans*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination (Leviticus 18:22).

If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination (Leviticus 20:13).

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice (the lifestyle) homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9, 10).

Paul also lists it among those who are unholy and profane...

...for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice (the lifestyle) homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted (1 Timothy 1:9-11).

The Scriptures are neither silent nor unclear on the matter. But this does bring up other questions. For example, I received this question after last week's message regarding the way people are born:

Question:

Hello sir, I had a couple questions regarding your sermon on Sunday. Listening to it, I became a bit confused as to your view of (the lifestyle) homosexuality. So, what precisely is your view? It goes without saying that way of living is wrong, but I wondered, do you think people can be born that way?

My answer:

Humanity is a fallen, sin-laden race and we are born with various desires and/or we may acquire various desires as we grow. **"Yet man is born into trouble, as the sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7).**

Some of these desires may be attached to our biological make-up, some may be psychological. My point is that ethics must transcend human desire since both our physical and psychological make-up are subject to the fall. In short, whether or not someone is born with strong (lifestyle) homosexual desires is moot. For example, if I am born with a strong (even overwhelming) desire to do violence, that desire must be overcome or somehow restrained. We certainly shouldn't redefine our ethics to accommodate our strong passions. That man **"comes forth from the womb speaking lies" (Ps. 58:3)** does not justify lying.

None of this means we should be insensitive to the difficulties and struggles people have with their desires. It also doesn't mean we should be unnecessarily mean or incendiary. Many of us have friends who we love and care about who engage in the lifestyle. One evening I managed to write a list of more than ten close friends engaging in the lifestyle that have died due to a disease commonly associated with it. More to the point, we don't establish ethics via human passions.

There is also a very common argument people make, asserting that it is just nobody's business what other people do, and there is essentially no harm that will befall a culture who sanctions the lifestyle. If I may take a few minutes to read a column I wrote on the subject in March of 2008 as a brief apologetic for what has come to be called a "traditional household":

Heated discussion in the State Supreme Court regarding the constitutionality of Proposition 22 (the one man, one woman marriage bill passed in 2000), reinvigorates the question: Why is the Christian right so concerned about what others do in private? And it's not merely (the lifestyle) homosexuality.

At the risk of sounding self-deprecating, I confess that Christendom is extremely narrow in painting the boundaries of amorous: no premarital, no extramarital, no incestuous, no pedophilia, no gay, no lesbian, no bisexual, no polyamorous, no trans-sexual, no bigamy or polygamy, no necrophilia, no bestiality, no prostitution. According to Christians, it's mom, dad, junior and sis. Departing from that is simply wrong and should not be sanctioned.

The Christian right opposes the type of liberty necessary for these multi-variegated sexual preferences to flourish and are, therefore, viewed as a bigoted lot. Our culture comforts itself by assigning them with a psychological disorder and then hoping they'll go away. But that doesn't seem to be happening. Are Christians truly bigots or are there good reasons for their narrow view of what should constitute a household?

Reasons to oppose divergent unions should not be founded upon ignorance, anger, hatred, self-righteousness, psychosis or simply because people think it's yucky. After twenty-five years of ministry, I've seen all these ugly dispositions in the church. It's carnal indignation and it's wrong. But there are good reasons for the exclusive 'mom and dad' criterion.

As a Christian, I believe the declaration of Scripture (which clearly addresses the subject in question) is sufficient to arrive at an ethical conclusion. But it is a mistake to think the ethics of Scripture are arbitrary—as if man would be happy if God would just leave him alone. No one knows man like God knows man. And no human counsel can elevate the soul and culture of man, like the wisdom found in God's word.

A biblical apologetic for the traditional household:

At creation God declared that one thing, and only one thing wasn't good—it wasn't good for man to be alone. Biblical anthropology suggests something

incomplete in a single gender. The simple nature of the case is that there are two genders. These two genders are interdependent, that is, they can't survive without each other. Men and women were engineered by God in such a way as to produce life. But these physical life-giving distinctions are not the end of it. Men and women are emotionally and psychologically distinct as well. Interests and temperament between the sexes is universally divergent. And regardless of what examples one uses to demonstrate gender distinctions, it is virtually impossible for any rational person to ignore that they exist.

One reason Christians push for the traditional family is due (or at least should be due) to the recognition of gender distinctions and how they work together augmenting the spiritual and psychological well-being of children and culture. A household which contains the necessary components to produce healthy, happy and well-balanced offspring is a household comprised of a mom and dad. To publicly promote a model which purposefully ignores or excludes this does harm to households and the societies which households produce—it therefore becomes a public affair. Prisons are (generally) not comprised of inmates raised by loving moms and dads.

And even if a couple is past the child bearing age, or doesn't intend to have (or adopt) children they still provide a model. An eighty-year-old couple who can no longer have children (even those who never had children) still convey to their culture the substance of what generates a healthy psyche. They are still the archetypal standard of an ideal home.

It is occasionally argued that this ideal may become impossible if a parent dies or leaves. But the mere assertion acknowledges that when this happens the ideal has been compromised. It is one thing to fall short of an ideal out of necessity or neglect, it is quite another matter to alter or abandon ideals altogether.

A final explanation, one that is less likely to be embraced by our increasingly apostate culture, is the picture given in Scripture of fathers, mothers, husbands and brides. God calls us to view Him as a Father with the father's attending roles of love, provision and protection. Jesus is compared to a groom who lays down His life for His bride, the church. It can easily be argued that human roles have, as their primary design, these pedagogical ends.

We can say these are private matters but they inevitably become public and work their way into the fabric of our corporate psyches. After all, if it were truly a private matter it wouldn't be at the State Supreme Court.

I realize this has been an extremely long introduction, but I'm seeking to anticipate and answer questions in advance; if there are more we can discuss them in the question and answer time afterward. Now, to a brief examination of the two verses in question.

For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature (Romans 1:26).

For This Reason

In many of these concepts we find Paul either repeating himself or emphasizing what he has already written so I won't labor re-explaining in detail. When Paul writes "**for this reason**" the reason is man's willful suppression of the truth of the knowledge of God and choice to serve and worship the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:18-25). What we see in Paul's message is the consequence of the rejection of absolute truth which is necessarily associated with an absolute source of truth who is God Himself.

Gave Them Up

Paul then uses the same word used in verse 24 explaining how God "**gave them up**" *paradoken* meaning to "deliver over or up to

the power of someone.”⁴⁷ Jesus uses the word to describe being handed over to the judge and **“thrown into prison” (Matthew 5:25)** In this case, that someone to whom we are handed over is ourselves. Paul then becomes more specific about what this looks like.

Vile Passions

Mankind is given over to **“vile passions”** or **“passions of dishonor”** *pathe atimias*: *Páthos* is the soul’s diseased condition out of which the various lusts spring as distinct from *Epithumía* which is the active lust or desire springing from the diseased soul.⁴⁸

What we’re talking about here is pure carnality—like animals governed by insatiable passions and instincts rather than principle and conviction. It is behavior that is offensive to God and destructive to man. So far from accommodating this behavior, the Scriptures teach that this behavior is to be put to death.

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion (*pathos*), evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry (Colossians 3:5).

The Exchange

We again see the word **“exchange”** *metellaxan*. We saw variations of this word in verse 23 where the glory of the **“incorruptible God”** is exchanged for **“an image made like corruptible man.”** In verse 25 we read how man **“exchanged the truth about God for a lie.”** We then read in verse 26 how the exchange of the treasures of our heart (who we serve and worship) consequently results in an exchange in **“natural relations for those that are contrary to nature.”**

Paul’s use of the word **“natural”** should not be taken too far—as if we can establish ethics by our observation of the natural world. The word **“natural”** *physiken* means be in according with the basic nature of things—akin to our word ‘normal.’

⁴⁷ Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Paul's point seems to be that when mankind suppresses and rejects the knowledge of the one true God—along with God's attending law which is just, holy and good—he will be turned over to a **“debased mind” (Romans 1:28)** and his own carnal passions—he will identify this as **“being filled with all unrighteousness” (Romans 1:29)**. For reasons not identified in the passage, the primary example of this unrighteousness is an inordinate and insatiable sexual appetite for one's own gender. This becomes the outward expression—the seal that the exchange has been made.

In many ways the lifestyle is a sin like any other—Paul will certainly complete this chapter with quite a long list—but in many ways it is unique. It is unique in how Sodom and Gomorrah provide an archetype example of a people ripe for judgment (Jude 7), but it is also unique in how aggressively it seeks sanction. One is hard-pressed to find an example of another sin which makes such demands—we see no ‘Adulterer's or Gossip Pride Day’ foisted upon the culture.

Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due (Romans 1:27).

Intense but Wrong

Paul now writes of men doing the same. Various reasons have been given as to why he mentions the women first and then the men, but all are merely guesses. The phrase **“burned in their lust”** is a way of expressing an intense, groping desire. One should not underestimate, or be insensitive to, how powerful this drive is and how natural it might feel for those involved. But again, having an intense desire does not mean a certain behavior is not, to use Paul's word, **“shameful”**. It is quite possible for us, as sinful people, to feel very right about very wrong things!

Due Penalty

What is meant when we read of **“receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due?”** There is a popular

misconception that Paul is addressing some type of STD. The below explanation is more likely:

Paul is not so much calling for a penalty as thinking of sexual perversion as itself a penalty (being a sinner is the punishment of sin!). This is sharply different from the general attitude among Greeks and Romans of the day, for they preferred this kind of love to heterosexual love.⁴⁹

W.G.T. Shedd explains it this way:

...the recompense is the gnawing unsatisfied lust itself, together with the dreadful physical and moral consequences of indecency.

Closing Thoughts

What we see in this passage is a highly accurate explanation of the world we observe—this explains things. We should not be surprised or think it strange (1 Peter 4:12). Finally, we must recognize that Paul’s motives here seem to be to establish a level playing field for all humanity, **“for there is no partiality with God” (Romans 2:11)**. Paul is **“eager to preach the gospel” (Romans 1:15)** recognizing that apart from the grace of God this is the lot of all men.

⁴⁹ Morris, L. (1988). *The Epistle to the Romans*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (93). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Is the promotion of homosexuality unique to the 20th and 21st centuries? What about the Apostle Paul's audience?
2. What does the prevalence of this lifestyle reveal about a culture?
3. Is homosexuality a biblically acceptable alternative? Why or why not?
4. Discuss the merits of the argument that people are born a certain proclivities.
5. Should people just mind their own business when it comes to the sanctioning of a homosexual lifestyle in a given culture?
6. For what reason does God give people up to vile passions?
7. To whom does God give people up? How does that unfold?
8. What are vile passions and what are we called to do with them?
9. Discuss the various exchanges Paul writes of in verses 23, 25 and 26. What is the final "seal", the indication the exchange has been made?
10. Is homosexuality similar or dissimilar to other sins? In what way?
11. If a person feels intensely strong about something, does that make it right?
12. What is the "due penalty" of the error of which Paul writes?
13. What seems to be Paul's motive in writing these things?

Romans 1:28-32

The Debased Mind—Part One

July 29, 2012

And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; *they are* whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1:28-32).

Introduction

In chapter six the Apostle Paul, having spent a couple of chapters discussing salvation by grace through faith (alone) will ask the rhetorical question:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound (Romans 6:1)?

He answers with another rhetorical question:

By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it (Romans 6:2)?

Dead to sin? My hair is dying; my eyesight and hearing are in critical condition; my jump is in the morgue; I don't know about you, but sin seems to be very much alive! Paul explains that being dead to sin is a conviction.

He explains our union with Christ—having been baptized “into his death” and into His “resurrection” (Romans 6:4, 5), “our old self,” having been “crucified” with him that we would no longer

be “**slaves to sin**” (Romans 6:6), we then see the imperative—this command:

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions (Romans 6:12).

Paul will push this further in chapter twelve where he call his readers, in light of the mercies of God to present their bodies **...as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Romans 12:1).**

Again, we see the sacrifice—a sacrifice dies. To put it in simple terms, if something is dead to you, you ignore it. You seek to live your life as if it isn't there. You don't visit it; you don't play with it; you don't respond to it. Not to get overly graphic, but if someone is dead there is nothing you can do to tempt them. You can't provoke them or present something to entice them. That is how we are to be toward sin.

I mention these things because it becomes all too simple to view Paul's description of humanity in these opening chapters as a profile of hypothetical humanity or humanity outside the church or Christendom. After all he is writing of those who suppress the truth. For Christians, that suppression of truth has been overcome by the grace of God.

But our day-to-day battle rages furiously. The battle of being acquitted before a holy God has been won for all those who are found in Christ, as Paul writes:

...not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith (Philippians 3:9).

But there is another battle that will not end until the Lord takes us home—the battle of not letting sin “**reign**” (Romans 6:12). So, even though the list of sins which Paul writes of in conclusion of this chapter is his description of fallen humanity, we should not think ourselves immune to the temptation of falling into these types of things.

I, therefore, thought it might be profitable to sift through the sinful conduct at the top of Paul's list—what these things are and why/how they are to be avoided. We might take a couple of weeks to do this. But first, let's take a look at the bookends Paul places on either end of these sins that he lists.

And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting (Romans 1:28).

...who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1:32).

The Natural Man

Paul is writing here not of the struggling Christian but of the person who lives in rejection of the truth and the God from whom the truth comes. Paul is writing of the natural man who has been given over to a debased mind—who practices evil and gives approval of others who practice evil.

It is this person who should fear for their very soul—it is a not-so-subtle form of self-deification (playing God), where the individual knows better than God. I find myself much more concerned for the strong and confident who boldly—often with a cavalier spirit—revel in sin than for the struggling sinner who grieves in their own weakness. Heaven forbid this heart be found in the church. It was found in the church at Corinth:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you (1 Corinthians 5:1, 2).

Even though Paul is writing about the world, we should seek to be savvy enough to see it in our church and in ourselves. As one

speaker at our family conference put it: *the ghost of Adam past; the sin in our own lives which still abides.*

Not Retaining God

Paul seems to be repeating in different words what he wrote in Romans 1:18, but instead of saying people suppress the truth, here he writes that they “**did not like to retain God in their knowledge.**” In other words, people do not view the knowledge they have of God (something everyone possesses) as worthwhile. God is not something we see, hear or feel; He is something we know. There is nothing we know with as much certainty and there is nothing we know that is of greater value. But, because of sin, we do not like it.

He restates what he wrote in verse 24 where God “**gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts**” with the statement that He “**gave them over to a debased mind.**” “Debased” pertains to not being in accordance with what is right.

Herein lies the great secret—belief in God, convictions driven by Scripture, are continually the object of public ridicule. But some objective, well-defined alternative is seldom, if ever, presented. People generally use hard to define, abstract principles that can be morphed if the occasion demands.

What Paul presents is the true alternative to God—the actual exchange. The individual, the household, the church, the nation and culture that does not “like to retain God in their knowledge” will be at the mercy of a “debased mind” whether corporate or individual.

The debased mind cannot help but gravitate to do things “**which are not fitting,**” things that are inappropriate. They are out there; they have an appeal, but they are like submerged icebergs waiting to shipwreck our lives.

In verse 32 Paul seals the inexcusability of man’s rejection of God and his consequential plummeting into moral darkness and confusion.

Notice that it is not the struggle with sin. The verse is not addressing man’s universal failure to live up to a standard—it’s the rejection of the standard. The verse is addressing what men know, how they don’t care about what they know, and how they are seeking to drag others down with them.

What Men Know

Along with the knowledge that there is a God comes the knowledge that God has “**righteous judgment(s).**” People will often betray their knowledge of God’s just judgments—this nagging awareness that certain things are wrong along with the notion of a reckoning. I recently received this post about a recently deceased person. I think it’s safe to say the person who wrote it is not likely a Christian. Edited a bit, he wrote:

I hope the scumbag piece of dirt chickenhawk predator suffered greatly, died alone and rots in Hell.

This may be a bit extreme, but Paul’s point seems to be that all people know there is a God; they know the human conduct that is an offense to God and that it deserves judgment; they don’t care; they make light of it in movies and sit-coms and want to drag as many people to hell with them as they possibly can.

To what extent people can deceive themselves into thinking good is evil and evil good is difficult to say. Is there a keen awareness in the minds/hearts of people that this (by “this” I mean verse 32) is taking place? The heart can get pretty callous. But it is still a human heart made in the image of God and somewhere, whether deep inside or right on the surface, people know there is a God and that His judgments are righteous. Yet they still engage in actions that are an affront to God. Paul mentions a few:

...being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; *they are* whisperers (Romans 1:29).

Filled With All Unrighteousness

Paul begins with a sweeping statement, informing us that when God is removed from the cup, only poison remains. Man is “**filled with all unrighteousness.**” The vessel is full of “**all**” or “**all manner**” (ESV) of unrighteousness. Clearly Paul’s list is not

exhaustive. Suffice it to say that there is no corner of the universe that is free from the effects of sin. Total depravity may not mean that people are as evil as they can possibly be, it does mean that every aspect of humanity has been so infected by sin that even the righteous deeds of man are as a filthy rag before God (Isaiah 64:6). Paul will pursue this more fully in chapter three.

Wickedness

Wickedness is also a somewhat general term with the implication of a motive forming from an evil spirit or intent. Wickedness relates to why you do what you're about to do. We are to do all things to the glory of God—even rest and relaxation. We should ever examine our motives. What motivates somebody is known only to that person and to God—and sometimes only God. I need to truly figure out why I did or am about to do anything.

Covetousness

Covetousness is a desire to have more than one's due. We see in the Tenth Commandment this is often motivated by what someone else has (neighbor's house, wife, servants, etc). Covetousness is distinct from jealousy (sometimes jealousy is appropriate—covetousness *never* is), which is a response to someone taking that which is yours; covetousness is a desire to have that which is not yours. The coveter creates the jealous.

Maliciousness

Maliciousness is similar to wickedness in that it is a word describing one's motivation—something known but to God (and maybe to the person). The malicious person desires to cause pain or hurt someone. I was recently speaking with an old friend—a very sweet man. But he is caught up in a legal battle with his neighbors that is bringing out a side in him of which he needs to be aware. He knows he needs to do what is right and, to a certain extent, legally strategic. But, as we seek to be wise and strategic, vindictiveness follows closely in our wake, just waiting to strike.

Malice is a subtle sin. It can surface in our theological discussions in the form of a “gotcha.” It’s been said of Jesus that He became angry but never malicious. To the natural man, malice becomes an acceptable disposition and, according to Paul, the natural man encourages others to be malicious as well; but for the Christian, malice is something to which we must be dead.

A Place for our Failures

We will continue our examination of these behaviors next time, but I would like to conclude with two thoughts: One—let us recognize that Jesus never committed one infraction regarding any of these sins—never one in thought, word or deed was Jesus malicious when face to face with an environment where all humanity would and have failed. Our understanding of Jesus, the righteous One, should be elevated as we ponder His pure and holy conduct.

Second, let us also recognize that at various levels, we have all failed in each and every sin of which Paul will write, but the good news is that the righteousness of Christ is freely given to all who, by grace through faith, call upon His name. Let us consider the righteousness of Christ and the graciousness of God’s grace as we prepare our hearts for the Lord’s Supper.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Explain what it means to be dead to sin.
2. In one respect our battle is won, in another it continues. Explain.
3. How does the natural man engage (perhaps unwittingly) in self-deification?
4. Explain what Paul meant when he wrote that man “did not like to retain God in their knowledge.”
5. Define “debased.”
6. What is the alternative to the knowledge of God?
7. What do all men know?
8. Discuss how far unrighteousness reaches.
9. Define the following and how one might contend with these sins: wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness.
10. What do we learn about Jesus when we examine a list of sins like this?
11. In light of human failure to avoid these sins, what is the good news?

Romans 1:28-32

The Debased Mind—Part Two

August 5, 2012

And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; *they are* whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1:28-32).

Introduction

In an interview with the Baptist Press posted July 2nd, Dan Cathy, the CEO and president of the popular fast food chain Chick-fil-A, was engaged with the statement:

Some have opposed the company's support of the traditional family.

He responded:

Well, guilty as charged. We are very much supportive of the family – the biblical definition of the family unit. We are a family-owned business, a family-led business, and we are married to our first wives. We give God thanks for that. We operate as a family business ... our restaurants are typically led by families – some are single. We want to do anything we possibly can to strengthen families. We are very much committed to that. We intend to stay the course. We know that it might not be popular with everyone, but

thank the Lord, we live in a country where we can share our values and operate on biblical principles.

The national hue and cry against this statement serves well to illustrate the Apostle Paul's point in the passage before us. Young people are protesting the opening of these restaurants in their communities and some politicians have gone so far as to say they do not want to see any of these businesses open in their communities.

A casual perusing of the internet regarding this topic yields an exposé of our culture's sentiment regarding the issue. One is required to flip through a number of pages before the statement finds an advocate.

Although the turnout at Wednesday's support of Chick-Fil-A may indicate that the media (social or otherwise), with its commandeering of web pages and other outlets catapulting their minority report to the fore, may not provide an accurate diagnosis of America's heart.

Be that as it may, a free exchange of ideas, love, tolerance, acceptance, constitutional freedoms and all the other undefined abstract words so popularly bantered about have been neatly locked away. Cathy is simply not allowed to have that opinion and continue to function as an industrious businessman.

My point in highlighting this event is not, at least here, that we might jump into action as political activists (I'm all for political activism—please don't interpret this as an endorsement of cultural lethargy or insignificance). But for now, let this serve as a cloudless, front-of-the-classroom, sociological specimen of human nature—especially as it relates to the first chapter of Romans.

I am speaking of the debased mind of which Paul writes in verse 28. According to the Apostle Paul, the love affair cultures adopt with gender confusion is the consequence of choosing not to retain God in their knowledge. The debased mind reveals itself as debased by the engagement in **“those things which are not fitting” (Romans 1:28)**. “Not fitting” seems a mild expression, but N.T. Wright expounds on the meaning of the phrase:

Paul's view of sin, once more, is not that it is the breaking of arbitrary divine rules but that it is

subhuman or nonhuman behavior, deeds that are unfitting for humans to perform.⁵⁰

Paul makes three remarkable statements at the end of the chapter. I am inclined to think the closing remark, perhaps more than anything on this list, underscores the natural man's hostility toward the things of God. The statements are:

- People know that sinfulness deserves the righteous judgment of God
- People practice sinful behavior in a brazen disregard of that judgment
- People approve of others doing the same

Of the third infraction, Charles Hodge wrote:

This is the lowest point of degradation. To sin, even in the heat of passion, is evil; but to delight in the sins of others, shows that men are of set purpose and fixed preference, wicked.⁵¹

Wickedness arrives quite early in the list of sins highlighted by the Apostle Paul which serve to reveal where men go when they have relieved themselves of the burden of a loving, wise and righteous Creator:

...being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; *they are* whisperers (Romans 1:29).

Filled With All Unrighteousness

Paul begins with a sweeping statement, informing us that when God is removed from the cup, only poison remains. Man is **“filled with all unrighteousness.”** The vessel is full of **“all”** or **“all manner”** (ESV) of unrighteousness. Clearly Paul's list is not exhaustive. Suffice it to say that there is no corner of the universe

⁵⁰ N. T. Wright (*New Interpreters Bible—Romans*) p. 434.

⁵¹ Charles Hodge (Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans). p. 44.

that is free from the effects of sin. Total depravity may not mean that people are as evil as they can possibly be, but it does mean that every aspect of humanity has been so infected by sin that even the righteous deeds of man are as a filthy rag before God (Isaiah 64:6). Paul will pursue this more fully in chapter three.

Wickedness

Wickedness is also a somewhat general term with the implication of a motive forming from an evil spirit or intent. Wickedness relates to why we do what we're about to do. We are to do all things to the glory of God. We should ever examine our motives. What motivates somebody, by the way, is known only to that person and to God—and sometimes only to God.

Interesting, the play entitled *Wicked* was a play revealing that the wicked witch from the Wizard of Oz was indeed not wicked at all—I think she was an animal activist. In reality, just the opposite in true; wickedness is a universal plague even among those who are most righteous. We need to thoughtfully examine why we do the things we do.

Covetousness

Covetousness is the first sin that leads to every other sin. It is a desire to have more than one's due. We see in the Tenth Commandment this is often motivated by what someone else has (neighbor's house, wife, servants, etc). Covetousness is distinct from jealousy (sometimes jealousy is appropriate—covetousness *never* is), which is a response to someone taking that which is yours; covetousness is a desire to have that which is not yours. The coveter creates the jealous.

The seed that grows the monstrous vine of coveting is the seed of discontent. It germinates from the daily disposition that God is not giving us all that He should. Discontent is crafty. It tells you that God is holding back—there is more for you if you can manage to disregard the counsel of God.

Then the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of

it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4, 5).

Maliciousness

Maliciousness is similar to wickedness in that it is a word describing one’s motivation—again, something known but to God (and maybe to the person). The malicious person desires to cause pain or hurt someone. I was recently speaking with an old friend—a very sweet man. But he is caught up in a legal battle with his neighbors that is bringing out a side in him of which he needs to be aware. He knows he needs to do what is right and, to a certain extent, legally strategic. But, as we seek to be wise and strategic, vindictiveness follows closely in our wake, just waiting to strike.

Malice is a subtle sin. It can surface in our theological discussions in the form of a “gotcha.” It’s been said of Jesus that He became angry but never malicious. To the natural man, malice becomes an acceptable disposition and, according to Paul, the natural man encourages others to be malicious as well; but for the Christian, malice is something to which we must be dead.

A Place for our Failures

We will continue our examination of these behaviors next time, but I would like to conclude with two thoughts: One—let us recognize that Jesus never committed one infraction regarding any of these sins—never one in thought, word or deed was Jesus wicked, covetous or malicious when face to face with an environment where all humanity would, and did, fail. Our understanding of the righteousness of Jesus should be elevated as we ponder His pure and holy conduct.

Recognizing also that at various levels we have all failed in each and every sin of which Paul will write, but the good news is that the righteousness of Christ is freely given to all who, by grace through faith, call upon His name. Paul is still in a line of thought where he is explaining why he is eager to preach the gospel—the good news that God has kept His promise to send a Deliverer to rescue man from sin and darkness. Let us consider the righteousness of Christ and the

graciousness of God's grace as we prepare our hearts for the Lord's Supper.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. How can a culture's disposition toward the things of God help illustrate Paul's point in this passage?
2. What does it mean when people engage in that which is not fitting?
3. What are the three statements we see in verse 32 about the natural man?
4. What does it mean that people are "filled with all unrighteousness"?
5. Can you see wickedness? Explain.
6. What causes covetousness? How can this be avoided?
7. How is maliciousness a subtle sin?
8. What do we learn about ourselves from the list Paul gives? What do we learn of Christ? Where can we go with our failures?

Romans 1:28-32

The Debased Mind—Part Three

August 12, 2012

And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; *they are* whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1:28-32).

Review and Observations

In quick review we see “**Paul a Bondservant**” (Romans 1:1) holding the office of apostle—an office that ended with the last witnesses of the resurrected Christ.

- **There are no more apostles in the sense that the Apostle Paul was one.**

Paul was set apart for the gospel of God promised in the Old Testament Scriptures—a message from the beginning of history.

- **There is no religion older than the Christian faith.**

The message pertained to God’s “**Son Jesus Christ our Lord**” (Romans 1:3) who was born of the “**seed of David according to the flesh and declared to be the Son of God according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead**” (Romans 1:3, 4).

- **Jesus is fully God and fully man, fulfilling all the promises of the Messiah—of the redemption of the world.**

Paul received grace and apostleship for “obedience of the faith for the sake of his name among all the nations” (Romans 1:5).

- **The call to faith should not merely be viewed as an invitation but as a moral obligation to yield to a legitimate and benevolent authority and there is no territory (whether geographical, institutional or philosophical) outside of His holy jurisdiction.**

The salutation then moves to the introduction where Paul informs his readers how thankful he is to God for their faith.

- **Faith is not our gift to God, but rather a gift *from* God.**

Paul thanks God “through Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:8).

- **All interaction with God is through a Mediator, who is Jesus Christ, our High Priest. To approach God apart from Christ will find only judgment.**

Paul wanted to utilize the gifts that God has given him for the benefit of God’s people in order that they might be “established” (Romans 1:11).

- **Paul labors to achieve this through instruction concerning God, His grace, His fulfilled promise/covenant, man’s sin and desperate need for what only Christ can provide.**

Paul then explains that he views himself as a “debtor” (Romans 1:14) to all men—to preach the gospel.

- **Because of the grace of God extended to him, he feels he has a moral obligation to bring the good news of the gospel to others.**

Paul is “eager” to “preach” and is “not ashamed of the gospel” (Romans 1:15), for it is “power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16).

- **In the gospel sinners receive the righteousness which comes from God and this righteousness is apprehended through the instrument of “faith” (Romans 1:17).**

Paul then begins to explain why he is eager to preach the gospel. In verse 18 Paul launches into what amounts to be a great indictment against humanity.

- **The “wrath of God is revealed” (Romans 1:18) in the world in which we live in the observation of human conduct—the apex of which is the suppression and rejection of truth itself as presented in the person of Jesus Christ.**

Paul explains what all men can’t not know—the universal epiphany given to all and manifest in all—which is the knowledge of God or the knowledge that there is a God.

- **The knowledge of the true God is so certain that it leaves all people “without excuse” (Romans 1:20).**

In verses 21 through 23 we learned what the rejection of truth looks like and where it inevitably leads—

- **The natural man has a lack of willingness to “glorify” and be “thankful” to God followed by futility of thought and darkened hearts—a futility and darkness accompanied by a profession of wisdom (Romans 1:21, 22).**

Finally, there is the foolish exchange—the exchange of a glorious incorruptible God for the image of a “**corruptible man**” (Romans 1:23).

- **The outward behavior used by Paul to demonstrate that the above exchange has been made is the “exchange” of the**

“natural” desires of amorous for lusts for one’s own gender—a behavior which Paul refers to as “shameful” (Romans 1:27).

In verse 28 Paul seems to repeat what he wrote in Romans 1:18; but instead of saying people suppress the truth, here he writes that they **“did not like to retain God in their knowledge.”**

- **People, according to their nature, do not view the knowledge of God (something everyone possesses) as worthwhile.**

He also restates what he wrote in verse 24 where God **“gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts”** with the statement that he **“gave them over to a debased mind.”**

- **“Debased” *adokimon* pertaining to that which is:...undiscerning, not distinguishing, void of judgment...a reprobate abominable mind, a mind to be abhorred by God and man.⁵²**

Paul will conclude in verse 32 with an assessment of the debased mind with three observations:

- People know that sinfulness deserves the righteous judgment of God.
- People practice sinful behavior in a brazen disregard of that judgment.
- People approve of others doing the same.

We are in the midst of examining this non-exhaustive list of the attributes of a debased mind. There are a number of reasons why this study can be sanctifying:

- That we might be aware of, and avoid these attributes when we see them surface in our own lives.

⁵² Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

- That we might gain a loftier appreciation of the holiness of God and the righteousness of Christ, who never once transgressed—the true Lamb without blemish.
- That, (perhaps more in context) that we might appreciate the fallen nature of man and his need for the grace of God found in the gospel alone.

We continue now (in the midst of verse 29) with our current assignment, which is to have an accurate grasp of these fatal flaws found in the nature of man and the mess it creates in the world. The first portion of verse 29, which we covered last week, conveyed general terms of unrighteousness. Paul proceeds with more specific terms—beginning with the word “full” *mestous*, indicating that the sin of man leaves him utterly incapacitated to do that which is truly good apart from the grace of God.

...full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful (Romans 1:29).

Envy

Envy *phthonou* is that feeling of displeasure produced by the joy, happiness or prosperity of another. Similar to covetousness, its seed is discontent flowing from a disposition that God is holding back—the deepest root being that of pride and the natural bent that we deserve more. In light of Paul’s pedigree and hardships (2 Corinthians 11:21-33), one never gets the impression that he felt he deserved better.

Envy does not discriminate. It is something with which the silver medalist must wrestle. It is something with which the gold medalist from the previous Olympics must contend. Envy is a harsh taskmaster, and left unchecked it produces the next item on the list. Envy governed the Israelites when they preferred to release Barabbas instead of Jesus (Matthew 27:17, 18).

Murder

Murder *phonou* is that infraction with which the natural man comforts himself because he has somehow managed to avoid killing someone. Jesus, of course, taught of a God who judges the heart with the words:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire (Matthew 5:21, 22).

There comes a time when the anger and inner contempt man has for man surfaces in the outward civil crime of murder—a world that has forsaken God and the gift of His grace in Christ is a world that will find itself embroiled in a romance with death. We read in Proverbs these astonishing words:

For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favor from the Lord, but he who fails to find me injures himself; all who hate me love death (Proverbs 8:35, 36).

The natural man, out of self-interest, may hold this instinct at bay for a time, but a godless world is a world in love with death. It is no wonder Paul was eager to preach the gospel.

Strife

To live in a world dictated by envy and murder can produce nothing but “**strife**” *eridos*. Strife is that discord that inevitably accompanies the human condition. It is that combat embodied in our relationships with others and our struggles within our very bosoms. Strife is what makes the news. But it is also a universal plague.

Simply put, when there is no peace with God, there is no peace at all—with others or within our very hearts.

It is in the backdrop of man's condition of strife that Jesus, numerous times, offers the antonym of victory and peace. Perhaps it was Paul's experience of having been "**caught up**" into heaven (2 Corinthians 12:2) that gave him an increased appreciation of human strife leading him to refer to the gospel as the "**gospel of peace**" (Ephesians 6:15).

Deceit

Characteristics such as envy, murder and strife have the necessary accompaniment of "**deceit**" *dolou*. But deceit is not the same as lying. The word refers to bait. It includes things like guile and fraud. Whether we're the victims or perpetrators (likely a bit of both) deceit is something by which we find ourselves surrounded.

Like bait, you can't see the hook until it's stuck in your mouth. When man rejects the truth found in Christ, he becomes an easy victim of deceit. Do you know a lie when you hear one? Can you see the hook (falsehood) beneath the bait? The bait may be an undefined term such as *love, tolerance, discrimination, generosity, compassion* and the *following of one's heart*—hiding the hook of lust, perversion, folly, theft, guilt manipulation and carnality. The bait may be a soft look, a gentle voice or a well written song.

Jesus says we are to be "**wise as serpents and innocent as doves**" (Matthew 10:16). It is a short trip from being the one deceived to be the one deceiving. Paul is teaching that man, in his rejection of God, is at the mercy of deception. He has lost any genuine quest for truth before it begins. Read in Proverbs:

**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight
(Proverbs 9:10).**

Sometimes we mistakenly think that God is found at the end of a wise and insightful journey, where the Scriptures teach that the journey cannot begin without the fear of the Lord.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Are there apostles today in the same sense that the Apostle Paul was an apostle? Why or why not?
2. Are there religions older than Christianity? Explain your answer.
3. Is Jesus man or God? Why is this an important question?
4. Is the call to faith merely an invitation? If not, what is it and why?
5. From where does faith come?
6. What is a mediator and why must man approach God through a Mediator, who is Christ?
7. How does Paul seek to “establish” his readers?
8. What moral obligation does Paul feel toward all men?
9. What do sinners receive in the gospel?
10. Where do we see the wrath of God revealed in the world?
11. To what extent do all people know there is a God?
12. Discuss the attributes of the natural man’s response to God.
13. What is the outward behavior Paul uses to show that man has exchanged the truth of God for a lie?
14. Define “debased.”
15. What are three attributes of the debased mind?
16. Define and discuss envy, murder, strife, and deceit.

Romans 1:28-32

The Debased Mind—Parts 4 & 5

August 26, 2012 & September 2, 2012

And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; *they are* whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1:28-32).

Introduction

As we come to the end of Paul's ignominious (shameful) list of human vices let us be reminded that Paul is not merely engaging in moralizing—as if he's fed up with the behavior of his contemporaries and is letting them “have it” via a run-on sentence depicting their corruptions. More to the context, this is Paul's treatise on biblical anthropology (the nature of man) and man's desperate need for what only Christ can provide—to be rescued/ransomed from ourselves, the world, the enemy of our souls and the judgment of a Holy God. This speaks strongly to why Paul is “**ready/eager to preach the gospel**” (Romans 1:15).

But this does not mean that we should view this list as hypothetical. As if it is merely there to inform us of what heaven might look like or to entertain some detached view of ethics, leading us to exhale “Wouldn't it be nice if I wasn't this way, but, oh well it is what it is.” We should recognize attributes in ourselves that are an offense to God and, therefore, a violation of all that can be defined as good with any legitimate authority. Then we should make war against those attributes—a lifetime occupation.

We should not think it a small endeavor to seek to be a better person. As an individual, husband, father, pastor I want to be a better

person; I want my family to be better people and I desire that those under my influence and authority as an elder seek to be good people. This list and others like it found in Scripture should aid in at least two things—1) A clear marker of what constitutes appropriate human conduct; and 2) an irresistible current propelling us to the buoy of Christ and His cross, which God promises will hold us above the waves of His judgment.

To those who have not yet called upon the name of Christ, it is my prayer that this list would illuminate your soul to this need. To those who have known the Lord many years—the prayer is the same.

Evil-Mindedness *kakoetheias* (similar to malice)

Paul continues his list, writing of how a rejection of the knowledge of God inevitably leads to “**evil-mindedness.**” Evil minded people aren’t always twiddling their moustaches. They may have very warm smiles and pleasant voices. Evil-mindedness is a defect in man’s character that leads him to a conscious and intentional effort to be hurtful of others. But it is more than that.

The evil-minded person takes everything with an evil connotation—as if every person in every act has an angle—to be overly suspicious—to view every action in the worse possible light. The evil-minded man has an evil nature and continually suspects others of evil as well.

It is the opposite of Paul’s definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13:7 where love “**believes all things**” meaning, according to some, that we seek to take the best and kindest view of all men and circumstances, as long as it is possible to do so. The evil-minded person always thinks others are seeking a dark construction on the event because that is what they would do. Thinking the worst in people aids in them living down to those expectations.

This is not to suggest that we should seek to be lacking in the qualities of wisdom and discernment—we should, as Jesus taught, be “**wise as serpents**” (**Matthew 10:16**). Living in a world plagued by sin, and being sinners ourselves, it is easy to become jaded, but we should avoid entertaining a disposition of darkness in ourselves and continual suspicion of others.

Whisperers *psithyristes* and Backbiters *katalalous*

We then read of “**whisperers**” and “**backbiters.**” The whisperer is someone who gossips, slanders or spreads rumors in secret; the backbiter does the same but with more volume. These sins of the tongue are the source of untold harm in and out of the church. James writes of the tongue:

So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell (James 3:5, 6).

We have within ourselves a very unhealthy desire to say and hear ‘dirt’ on others.

So many issues in life revolve around saying the wrong thing, saying it to the wrong people or saying it the wrong way. We comfort ourselves with phrases like “I said it to his face” or “It’s because I’m concerned.” The real question is not whether you’re concerned or even if it’s true. The real question, the one we should ask before we say anything, is: “Is what I’m about to say edifying to others and honoring to God?”

Interesting that for “whisperer” Paul uses a word found in the Septuagint in Ecclesiastes.

If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer (Ecclesiastes 10:11).

Juicy dialogue catches people ears and attention. The speaker needs to think twice and the listener may offer the question: “Why do I need to hear this?”

Haters of God *theostygeis*

Paul then writes of “**haters of God.**” Seems like a pretty strong term and most people, even unbelievers, would not designate

themselves as haters of God; although the hatred of God has come to be in vogue. In a 1985 movie entitled *Agnes of God*, Jane Fonda offers the provocative line to a young nun that it is entirely acceptable to “hate God.” Since then, I have heard the sentiment uttered by those who either don’t like the ethics of God (often misrepresented ethics) or the calamities that befall them in their lives.

The godless man, like a spoiled child, resents and detests the boundaries established by a wise and loving parent. He also has repugnance for God and God’s audacity to be the one true God—loathing God’s providence and judgments over human events. They see no wisdom in the words of William Penn, who wrote: “Men must be governed by God or they will be ruled by tyrants.” Or, as the Scriptures declare:

Know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other (Deuteronomy 4:39).

Do we not see something beyond mere academic displeasure in the words of the famous atheist Richard Dawkins when he writes of the God in whom he doesn’t believe?

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

The next three words, “violent, proud, boasters” concern themselves with some aspect of pride.

Violent hybristas, Proud hyperephanous, Boasters alazonas

How does violence attach to pride? You’ll notice the Greek word is etymologically related to the English word “hubris.” It means to have a lofty sense of superiority...

...out of which the insolent person treats all others as beneath him. It is the pride that is totally unaware of its limitations and “goes before a fall”.⁵³

The word is used in the Septuagint in Proverbs 6:17 at the top of a list of sins which the Lord hates—a proud or haughty look. We see this type of abuse displayed in children who take pleasure in hurting their inferiors. It is an ugly trait that doesn't altogether disappear with maturity—it just becomes well-hidden and more destructive. We might be reminded at this juncture that merely *thinking* these things is a sin before God.

The “**proud**” *hyperephanous* nurtures a level contempt for everyone except oneself. When it comes to ethics they fail to critique their own work. Mary, the mother of Jesus, sang of this in the first chapter of Luke:

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts (Luke 1:51).

James, on the other hand, presents the biblical axiom:

Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6).

In a similar vein we see the “**boaster**” *alazonas*. This word is derived from a word meaning ‘wandering’ and likely refers to a sort of traveling merchant making sensational claims that cannot be substantiated. The victim finds himself stolen from with a product that can neither heal nor work while the wandering boaster has moved on.

Biblical Christianity is, without doubt, the most highly critiqued system of thought in the history of mankind, yet the Bible continues to be the best-seller and there is no legitimate refutation of this most ‘non-wandering, rock-like message.’ At the same time, mankind continually finds himself surrounded by wandering boasters

⁵³ Morris, L. (1988). *The Epistle to the Romans*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (97–98). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

who demand allegiance from their followers while offering no solid evidence for their audacious claims of what they think might make this world a so-called better place.

Inventors of Evil Things *epheuretas kakon*

With the knowledge of God sufficiently suppressed, as Paul has suggested, man becomes avant-garde in his ungodliness; he invents evil. At the most extreme we may think of the highly intellectual and clever tyrant or despot who has managed to elevate himself to the pinnacle of human power over the bodies of citizens of which he has innovatively disposed.

At a perhaps more subtle level we see religion itself, rather than being built on the rock of God's word and Christ's cross, being an ingenious attempt of man to cater to other men and their felt needs.

We then see an attribute sneak into this list that almost seems out of place—“**Disobedient to parents.**”

Disobedient to Parents *goneusin apeitheis*

Our societal wholesale disregard for the Fifth Commandment tends to make this appear unfit for such a nefarious list. But a lack of willingness to honor and obey parents (as a God-given authority) becomes the germ which leads to the abandonment of respect for authority in general—the darkness of this is augmented when one comes to recognize the sovereignty of God in establishing authority—an issue Paul will address in detail in chapters twelve and thirteen.

This is not to say that parents cannot err or engage in great evil. To the extent that a parent, or any authority, seeks to lead those under their care into clear obstructions of the counsel of God (revealed in Scripture), they must be dismissed and obedience to the higher authority (God and the Scriptures) should take precedent.

Nonetheless, there is nothing more disturbing to view in a child than a brazen disregard for the honor and authority of their parents. And far from being inappropriate for such a wicked list of sins, we might view this as one of the greatest evils in the entire chapter.

Undiscerning *asynetous*, Untrustworthy *asynthetous*, Unloving *astorgous*, Unmerciful *aneleemonas*

We finish with four adjectives, each commencing with the prefix ‘a’ corresponding in English to ‘un’ (“unforgiving” omitted in most manuscripts). The English Standard Version translates it thus: **“foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.”**

Undiscerning *asynetous* means lacking insight or understanding. This does not mean that the natural man is stupid. It means that the man who has suppressed the truth of the knowledge of God can give no plausible explanation for the world he observes. He has rejected the source of ethics and can therefore give no substantial basis for what is right in a moral sense or why morality should be pursued at all.

And it is not merely morals; the natural man has jettisoned the source of logic, science, art, economics, sociology and every other discipline in the created order. And it goes deeper. It has been said:

Paul calls unredeemed man’s heart *asúnetos* (undiscerning), because of its inability to conclude from the observable creation that there must be a Creator.⁵⁴

There is a great deal of dialogue regarding the inferior ethics of the Christian faith because the ethics are motivated by fear of judgment rather than man’s inherent desire to do that which is right. Not only is this a false caricature of the motives of Christianity, it fails to recognize that when men becoming undiscerning in their ethics and their view of the world in general, they necessarily become **“untrustworthy” *asynthetous***.

The word simply means that a person cannot be trusted to keep their word—the word is often related to covenant breaking. This may sound unduly harsh since we all know unbelievers who are perhaps more trustworthy than the person that is sitting next to us in church. Yet one need merely look at the institution of marriage to find the epidemic faithlessness to vows manifested in the monumentally high divorce rate. Simply put, it is difficult enough to

⁵⁴ Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

do what is right when we know exactly what it is. But when man cannot discern what is right, it is impossible to expect faithfulness.

Bottom-line, there is only one true Promise-Keeper who knew the truth impeccably and performed the truth flawlessly, Jesus Christ the righteous.

Paul's use of the word "**unloving**" *astorgous* carries with it a unique category of being unloving—as it relates primarily to love within a family. I won't say a great deal here but this: The way a person treats their siblings (or other family members) will, more than anything else, reveal the way they'll treat their spouse. It's relatively easy to be viewed as loving to people you seldom see (or you're infatuated with); it's those who you are with on a regular basis that test the true mettle of your love.

Paul concludes with an attribute that, according to Jesus, is simply a non-negotiable when it comes to the fruit of a redeemed heart—"Unmerciful" *aneleemonas*.

It is no easy parable that ends in the words of Christ:

'And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart (Matthew 18:33-35).

The ESV translates this word *Ruthless*. If Christians are to understand one thing it is that they operate in a field of mercy—both giving and (at a much greater level) receiving it. There is no place for the ruthless man in the kingdom of God. One might argue that the entire list crescendos with this final, damnable attribute of a merciless heart. Woe to the man who finds himself in this condition. See in Proverbs the fantasy of mercy apart from the knowledge of God: "**the mercy of the wicked is cruel**" (Proverbs 12:10).

Earlier, we addressed the astonishing nature of verse 32. So I will say little of it other than to quote John Calvin's profound observation:

...that men left nothing undone for the purpose of giving unbridled liberty to their sinful propensities;

for having taken away all distinction between good and evil, they approved in themselves and in others those things which they knew displeased God, and would be condemned by his righteous judgment. For it is the summit of all evils, when the sinner is so void of shame, that he is pleased with his own vices, and will not bear them to be reproved, and also cherishes them in others by his consent and approbation. This desperate wickedness is thus described in Scripture: “*They boast when they do evil*” (Proverbs 2:14).

Calvin will go on to explain that if there remains some shame in our own sin, our condition is “**healable.**” Of course the healing comes from the Master Physician whose blood was shed for the remission of sin. Let us faithfully focus our hearts in that direction as we come to the Lord’s Table.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What are some reasons the Apostle Paul might write the list found in the end of chapter one?
2. What are some attributes of “evil-mindedness”?
3. What are some helpful rules that can help us govern our speech?
4. Have you noticed a hatred for God in the world? What does it look like?
5. Paul uses three words that concern themselves with pride. Define them and note the distinctions. How do we contend with these vices?
6. What are some ways you’ve seen people invent evil things?
7. Do you think “disobedient to parents” should be on this list? Explain why or why not.
8. Paul culminates his list with four power adjectives—how does *undiscerning* relate to *untrustworthy*?
9. Discuss Paul’s unique use of the word “unloving”. What can we learn about someone by observing their relationship with their family?
10. “Unmerciful” was said to be a non-negotiable for a Christian. Why do you suppose Jesus placed such a high priority on mercy?
11. John Calvin said that if shame of sin remains, sinful man is still “healable”. From what does man need healing and how does that healing come? Has it come to you?

Romans 2:1-5

You Who Judge

September 9, 2012

Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things. And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance? But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God (Romans 2:1-5).

Introduction

In the 1980s I was leading a Bible study in Manhattan Beach. Seeking to encourage evangelism (to tell others of the salvation found in Christ) I made a statement I thought to be obvious—that none of us want anyone to go to hell. In response to this statement a teenage girl made the most astonishing comment: “I want Raymond Buckey to go to hell.”

Raymond Buckey was the defendant in one of the longest and most expensive trials in American history. Not to get into details, he was accused of some awful crimes—one of which involved the sibling of the girl who spoke up in the Bible study.⁵⁵ I remember being rather shocked by the comment. The air in the room became thick; it was a very intense and emotional moment.

It has been my observation that the church often lives under the fantasy that we enjoy, embrace and seek to imitate the Jesus who reclines **“with tax collectors and sinners” (Matthew 9:10)**, but we have our limits. And it is not until we begin to touch that skin-

⁵⁵ After over five years of trials and five years in jail, Buckey was acquitted of all charges.

crawling limit—until we can look across the aisle at that vile person who makes us want to leave the room—that we can truly begin to appreciate these words of Paul:

Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things (Romans 2:1).

Inexcusable

Similar to what we read in Romans 1:20 regarding man's inexcusable rejection of the knowledge of God, Paul begins this chapter talking about something else which carries universal inexcusability.

I have found that in seeking to resolve conflicts, either with my own children or others, that the parties involved can almost always offer some plausible excuse for their behavior. *"Jr. hit me!" "Well, she kicked me!" "It was an accident!" "Then why were you smiling?" "That wasn't a smile!"* etc. Forming a 'certain' conclusion then becomes difficult. Excuses find a level of legitimacy. But in our morning's topic, there is no excuse! Then Paul starts talking to somebody.

You...Who Judge

"O man, whoever you are" is Paul's way of entering into style of communication known as a diatribe. Unlike today's use of the word, the diatribal style consisted of a dialogue with an imaginary opponent, anticipating and answering the objections to one's argument, like talking to an empty chair.

The inexcusable person of whom Paul writes is the one **"who judge(s)"**. There may not be an admonition in Scripture more enjoyed and less understood by humanity than those passages which denounce being judgmental. I recall an ethical/political dialogue I had with a co-educator at a school where we both taught. The issue in question required making some sort of moral judgment on the subject. She was quick to the text: "Like the Bible says, judge not."

These are not only the words of Paul, but of Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount: **"Judge not, that you be not judged"**

(Matthew 7:1). Everyone loves the idea of not being judged or being judgmental and, perhaps unwittingly, snap rapidly to the holster to judge people who are judgmental! If it's wrong to judge, we should allow others to be judgmental without criticism.

Of course the admonitions in Scripture against being judgmental do not mean that we should neglect to address sinful behavior when we see it in others or in ourselves for that matter. Confronting sinful behavior is a noble and necessary Christian virtue (Galatians 2:11). A close observation of this passage reveals that it is not so much the judging that renders the person (in the chair) guilty. **"They condemn"** themselves, the verse explains, because they **"practice the same things."**

We just spent the last few weeks going over a pretty nasty list of human attributes. Perhaps there was a "yeah, let those sinners have it!" attitude lurking in the nooks and crannies of our church's pews; I can only speculate. But I think there is little doubt that chapter two was a rude awakening for many of Paul's readers who did not likely include themselves among those desperate transgressors of chapter one. These are the vile people; the skin crawling sinners who are clearly objects of God's wrath. Yet it is with apostolic insight that Paul levels the playing field with the words **"for you who judge practice the same things."**

Is this to say that all human behavior is exactly the same? That no one is more or less moral or ethical than anyone else? Certainly not! Otherwise Paul would require the church to sin when they evaluate the conduct required for a Christian to enter the office of elder or deacon (1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). So what do we make of this judgment talk?

In summary, the judgment of which Paul (and, I believe, Jesus) speak, is not a judgment merely addressing whether or not a person's behavior is sinful, but is rather addressing whether or not that particular level of sin disqualifies them from the hope of salvation. In other words, as Paul writes, the judgment is the judgment of condemnation.

To put it another way, Paul is conveying the truth that if their method of obtaining salvation lies in successful human moral conduct, they are all condemned—including the ones doing the condemning! They have created a standard of salvation in which they themselves fail! Paul's point is bolstered beyond dispute with the

next verse where he uses the words **“But we know”** which amounts to “since we all agree” followed by something that should be obvious to anyone.

But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things (Romans 2:2).

According to Truth

I recall walking into church for the first time (at least since I was a small child) as a teenager and feeling very much like I didn't belong. People knew what to do in the service; they knew what to wear; they were old friends; strong families; multi-generational connections (kids greeting their grandparents); certain acceptable and unacceptable language, topics and humor.

As awkward as I felt it probably didn't approach how many Christians in the early church felt with the gentile-Jewish distinction. John the Baptist was dealing with this thirty years earlier, instructing his Jewish listeners that their relationship to Abraham meant nothing when it came to true peace with God (Matthew 3:9).

Yet there was still a lingering disposition nurtured by the Israelite believer that their ethnicity, inclusion in the covenant, circumcision and law-keeping were the basis for their salvation. Perhaps this can be applied to people today who think their peace with God is tied to their church membership, baptism and obedience (all good things, by the way—and things that, at some level, should be subject to the judgment of the church—Matthew 18:17).

But the judgment of God is **“according to truth.”** And this is Paul's way of leveling out the playing field—**“for there is no partiality with God” (Romans 2:11).** Simply put, there is no a person who walks into any church, anywhere, anytime who needs Jesus any less (or any *more*) than anyone else! When Paul writes that God judges according to truth he is saying that God knows our hearts. And at some level, every last single one of us falls into that ugly list found at the end of the previous chapter.

Here, Paul decimates those who nurture even the remotest sense of superiority over others. It can hardly be said better than these words of Calvin:

...the mask of feigned sanctity will not prevent him (God) from visiting secret wickedness with judgment...And then only are hypocrites awakened, when they are told that God will take an account, not only of their disguised righteousness, but also of their secret motives and feelings. ⁵⁶

God surely uses His church, His word, elders, deacons, and sacraments as a means by which He saves and sanctifies. But from man's perspective this is all according to observation—even at times requiring witnesses (Matthew 18:16). But the judgment which ends in true condemnation or salvation is according to truth, a truth to which only God has infallible access. This leads to the powerfully rhetorical question:

And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God (Romans 2:3)?

No Escape

“Do you think”...do you imagine, given this true evaluation, that somehow you will be escape the judgment? **“Escape”** means exemption rather than acquittal—as if others will be judged while you don't even enter the courtroom.

Perhaps we can put it this way: All men have a sense of right and wrong (though darkened and perverted by sin) and believe that evil deeds should be condemned—as with the young girl who desired hell for Ray Buckley. The problem is, the moment we believe that evil should be condemned we have buried an axe in the bottom of our own boat.

They are then extremely besotted, who think that they can escape the judgment of God, though they allow not others to escape their own judgment. ⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 2:2). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

But Paul is addressing a community of people who, by outward call, observation and even declaration of God Himself, appear to the apple of God’s eye (Zechariah 2:8; Romans 3:2; 9:1-5). God has been very good to them, forbearing and patient.

Perhaps you feel that way. God has blessed you—food, family, godly counsel, health. It is very common for people who have obtained a level of peace or success to be thankful to God. That may even draw the conclusion that this peace and success is a testimony that God is happy with them. Paul seems to offer a different goal:

Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance (Romans 2:4)?

Accepted As I Am?

The goodness of God referred to here is not the attribute of God but the action of God—likely referring to Israel’s favored status among the nations in the Old Covenant. But I think there is a universal misunderstanding and, therefore, failed application in regard to God being **“merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exodus 34:6).**⁵⁸

The misunderstanding and failed application is that since God has been good to me, He accepts me as I am. Here is yet another monstrous lie where the world half interprets the Scriptures. That Jesus supped with sinners and tax-gatherers in no way implies that He accepted and endorsed them as they were. The world seems to forget the **“your faith has saved you” (Luke 7:47) “go and sin no more” (John 5:14; 8:11)** portion of these accounts.

The Lord doesn’t accept people as they are (He can’t even look at them—Habakkuk 1:13). He *calls people as they are* and then redeems and transforms them into new creatures (2 Corinthians 5:17). The providential goodness of God toward a person is not an endorsement of that person’s condition but is designed to lead men, as it were by the hand, to repentance—to faith in Christ as Savior and Lord—as the giver of the gift of heaven itself.

⁵⁸ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. 2001 (Ex 34:6). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

But because the man in the chair operates as if peace with God is found through his own righteous deeds, Paul conveys the inevitable consequence:

But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God (Romans 2:5).

Treasure of Wrath

Their outward display of piety does not hide their hard heart from God—on the Day of Judgment it will be revealed for what it is. And rather than storing up treasures in heaven (Matthew 6:20) they are treasuring up wrath. As William G. T. Shedd explains:

The wrath accumulates, like waters at a dam, by being held back by the divine (forbearance and longsuffering).⁵⁹

It was the cup of this divine wrath that Jesus drank for sinners (Matthew 20:22; Revelation 14:10). When we go to the Lord's Table and drink from the cup of the New Covenant in His blood, we are proclaiming our inability to stand in judgment and our need for a holy and righteous Advocate to interpose His precious blood for our peace with God.

⁵⁹ W. G. T. Shedd, Commentary on Romans. P. 38

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Have you ever met, or heard of, anyone who you think deserves to go to hell?
2. Are there types of people who you feel uncomfortable with in church? Be honest. Explain.
3. What behavior, according to Paul, is inexcusable?
4. Who is Paul speaking to in this chapter?
5. When we are called to abstain from being judgmental, does that mean we should ignore sinful behavior in people?
6. Explain how the judgmental people actually condemn themselves.
7. How does Paul level the playing field of those who attend church?
8. How is God's judgment different than man or the church's judgment? Does this mean the church's judgment means nothing?
9. How does our own sense of condemnation of evil hold us culpable before God?
10. Do God's goodness, patience and forbearance toward people mean that He is happy with them the way they are? Explain.
11. How does one go about storing up treasure in heaven rather than treasuring up wrath?

Romans 2:6-11

According to His Deeds? Part One

September 16, 2012

...who “will render to each one according to his deeds”: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God (Romans 2:6-11).

Introduction

As a young Christian I asked many questions about what constitutes appropriate Christian behavior. I also recall, as a youth pastor, hearing these types of questions with great regularity. The question would often be couched in the terms unveiling certain temptations or desires in the person’s life. They were “What can I get away with” questions; “How far can you go?” questions; “How close to the cliff can I play before God flicks me over?” kind of questions.

Being human, these types of questions are understandable, but they are not the kind of questions a parent or a pastor really wants to hear. As a coach I didn’t hear these types of questions. Players wouldn’t ask me how poorly they would be allowed to play before I would kick them off the team or how many wrong things or fundamentals flaws I would allow as a coach. They, for the most part, wanted to know the correct way to do things. They didn’t ask how many wrong things they could do but rather, *what is the right way to do it?* This was, perhaps, because they were motivated. They wanted to be on the team or they wanted to start or they wanted to win.

This issue of what constitutes and should motivate appropriate human behavior has been a source of controversy and turmoil in the church from the very beginning—and not merely in the church. Motivation for appropriate behavior is controversial in many of life’s arenas. An armed and highly visible militia certainly would affect

behavior of the citizenry; a hot tempered, volatile father would affect the behavior of a household; chair-throwing coaches affect the behavior of their athletic teams. And though there might be a place for it, there is a general feeling that the fire-breathing autocrat is not the preferable method to ensure motivation for good behavior—at least not the type of good behavior that comes from the heart.

Of course, the message formed by the church in its understanding of the Scriptures has much more at stake than winning games, ensuring peaceful households or societies—heaven and hell hang in the balance. What constitutes appropriate behavior, but more on point with the context of this passage, what motivates people to engage in appropriate behavior becomes the hot topic and there are few passages in the Bible more at the center of the storm than the one presently before us.

Paul will write of two types of people who engage in two types of behavior leading to two opposite destinations. This morning we will discuss the behavior and the consequences of that behavior. Then next week we will discuss how appropriate it is to utilize these two examples as a motivational force in our lives. In other words, it's one thing to say “here is the standard,” it's quite another thing to say “here are the rewards or consequences of meeting or not meeting the standard.”

Paul writes of the “**day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God...**” who “*will render to each one according to his deeds*” (Romans 2:6).

A Day of Judgment

The word “**render**” *apodosei* means “To give or to do something necessary in fulfillment of an obligation or expectation.”⁶⁰ In other words, God has an obligation to render judgment. The obvious question then is, *to whom could God possibly have an obligation?* The answer is to Himself—His own nature. When God says that He will in no way acquit the guilty (Exodus 34:7; Numbers 14:18), He must not acquit the guilty in order to stay true to who He is.

⁶⁰ Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

To enter into eternity with a God who ignores sin would make heaven more akin to hell and God more akin to the devil—like living in a household with a father who takes no interest in the behavior of his children as they torment one another for all eternity. Evil will not go unchecked. There will be a day of reckoning.

And according to this verse, the reckoning (judgment) will be according to man’s “**deeds**” or “**works**” *erga*. In other words, human performance will be judged. This concept would not have been new to Paul’s readers.

If you say, “Behold, we did not know this,” does not he who weighs the heart perceive it? Does not he who keeps watch over your soul know it, and will he not repay man according to his work (Proverbs 24:12)?

and that to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love. For you will render to a man according to his work (Psalm 62:12).

So it is works that regulate the judgment of God—not your profession of faith; not your ethnicity; not your church membership—but works.⁶¹ Paul then summarizes what these works look like by discussing two groups of people in a literary form called a chiasm—an *a-b-b-a* structure.

In verse 7 he writes of the works of those who gain eternal life; in verse 8 he will write of the works of those who will receive God’s indignation and wrath; in verse 9 he writes of the wrath itself then in verse 10 he goes back to describe of the glory, honor and peace of those referenced in verse 7.

...eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on

⁶¹ Profession of faith and church membership, since they are themselves works, would be included in the judgment but would themselves be insufficient to pass muster in the bar of God’s judgment.

every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God (Romans 2:7-11).

Patient Continuance

The deeds or works of which Paul writes to obtain eternal life include **“patient continuance in doing good...seek(ing) glory, honor and immortality.”**

This is the person who has signed up for the long haul. It is **“patient continuance.”** Regardless of what misery and apparent misfortune befalls them, they never say their faith is not working for them. Along with Job they proclaim, **“Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him” (Job 13:15).** This man knows the refining work of God: **“But He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10).**

Glory, Honor, Immortality

Over and above the comforts of this world, this person seeks heavenly **“glory.”** The word *doxan* primarily refers to an opinion or estimation. They are seeking the splendor of heaven and high esteem in the eyes of God. Nothing is of greater value to this person than to hear **“Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21)** from the lips of God.

It is heavenly **“honor”** *timen*—a celestial rank dignity—that over-rules and overcomes all worldly pleasures and desires. They know this life is so very brief and so they their heart and hopes on **“immortality”** *aphtharsian*—the eternal state which is not subject to decay or corruption.

For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal *must* put on immortality. So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.”

“O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?” (1 Corinthians 15:53-55)

Along with Paul, this person says **“For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).**

Self-Seeking

He then describes the other person; the person who is not seeking the glory, honor and immortality of heaven, but the **“self-seeking”** *eritheia* person. Interestingly enough, this term was used in a way many of us would understand “before NT times...where it denoted a self-seeking pursuit of political office by unfair means.”⁶² This person has their own agenda and it takes precedent over all things.

Obedient to Unrighteousness

For this reason Paul writes that they do not **“obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness”** *adikia*—a synonym for injustice. They would use their own heart as the supreme measure of what is good, right and honorable, not entertaining for a second that the human heart is **“deceitful above all things and desperately sick” (Jeremiah 17:9).**

Indignation and Wrath—Tribulation and Anguish

These people find themselves on the receiving end of God’s **“indignation and wrath.”** These are actually very emotional terms: **“Indignation”** *thymos* means an intense expression of the inner self, frequently expressed as *passion*.⁶³ **“Wrath”** *orge* is the state of relatively strong displeasure, with a focus on the emotional aspect, *anger*.⁶⁴

⁶² Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000). *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (3rd ed.) (392). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 461.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 720.

Paul finishes his thought in verse nine with by continuing to express what the self-seeking man will be called to endure for all eternity—“**tribulation and anguish.**”

“**Tribulation**” *thlipsis* means to afflict, crush, press and break.⁶⁵ “**Anguish**” *stenochoria* has in view the distress which arises from the tribulation.⁶⁶ In other words, no one will be brave under this tribulation.

Of these very strong and emotionally charged words, Calvin writes:

...for we never fear God’s judgment as we ought, except it be set as it were by a lively description before our eyes; nor do we really burn with desire for future life, except when roused by strong incentives (*multis flabellis incitati* — incited by many fans).⁶⁷

Peace

Paul completes his chiasm with a reference back to the one seeking eternal life. They will obtain the heavenly glory and honor they desire and they will have “**peace**” in every way imaginable—with God, with others and in their own hearts. It doesn’t matter if you’re a Jew or a gentile—“**There is no partiality with God.**” This is the promise “**to everyone who works (present tense—*working*) what is good.**”

Going back to the introduction, we might ask ourselves if we are now sufficiently motivated to do good works. And just how high has God, speaking here through Paul, placed the bar? In other words, how patient in my continuance of doing good must I be? With how much vigor must I seek glory, honor and immortality? If heaven comes to all who “**work(s) what is good**” how good must I be and how much work does it take? Or is this even the correct way to approach the issue?

⁶⁵ Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin’s Commentaries (Ro 2:8). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

People have come up with a wide variety of answers to these questions—especially as it relates to this passage. We will discuss them next time.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What is a common question Christians ask about appropriate conduct? What should they ask?
2. What are the different ways people use to come up with what constitutes appropriate behavior? What are different types of motivation to ensure that behavior?
3. Why must God judge sin? What regulates God's judgment?
4. What is a chiasm and how does Paul use one in this passage?
5. Describe the person who exercises patient continuance in doing good. What is important to that person? What do they seek?
6. Contrast the person above with the "self-seeking" person. What are the most notable distinctions?
7. What does it mean to have "peace"?

Romans 2:6-11

According to His Deeds? Part Two

September 23, 2012

...who “will render to each one according to his deeds”: eternal life to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality; but to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness—indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek; but glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God (Romans 2:6-11).

Review

Last week we observed how Paul writes of two types of people engaged in two types of behavior. On the Day of “**Judgment**” (Romans 2:5), when God “**will render to each one according to his deeds**” (Romans 2:6), these two types of people will have strikingly distinct destinies.

The one type of person, through “**patient continuance in doing good,**” seeks “**glory, honor and immortality.**” This type of person “**works what is good**” and will receive “**peace**” and “**eternal life**”

The other type of person is “**self-seeking.**” They do not “**obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness.**” This other man of which Paul writes is a man who “**does evil.**” Paul informs his readers that this man will suffer the “**indignation and wrath**” of God.

We looked in detail at the attributes of these two types of people last week and, I hope, we would all make the effort, with all of our heart, souls mind and strength (Mark 12:30), to be the person who seeks the glory, honor and peace of heaven. As the author of Hebrews writes:

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).

Hanging in the Balance

The real question for this morning is not (so much) what the behavior *is*, nor where the behavior *leads*. The question for this morning is *what is hanging in the balance?* Last week I mentioned that motivation for appropriate behavior is, and always has been, a hot topic in the church (and everywhere else, for that matter) and there are few passages in the Bible more at the center of the storm than the one presently before us.

Keeping in mind that Paul wouldn't be writing this letter if there wasn't problem in the church gathering at Rome. He clearly thinks the believers in Rome, whose faith he has extolled (Romans 1:8) need a change in their thoughts and behavior. At least at some level, they are thinking and behaving in a manner inconsistent with a man **“who works what is good” (Romans 2:10)**. Let us be reminded that it is the man who **“works what is good”** that has **“eternal life” (Romans 2:7)**.

In light of this, should we draw the conclusion that Paul is telling the Christians at the church in Rome (or any church, for that matter) that if they don't master this area then they're destined for hell? Is the motivation provided by the apostle here—a motivation given to professing Christians—a hanging of the threat of hell if they continue to fail in this particular area (or any other area, for that matter)?

Should professing Christians be delivered from the arrogance (as some have put it) of presuming they'll go to heaven even though they have fallen short in the area of righteousness and holiness? Would we get more out of human performance if we lived under the constant threat of exile to perdition or the extended purification of purgatorial flames?

Perhaps you can begin to see why this passage ignites such debate! Just this week I found myself challenged via an internet thread suggesting that the only two verses in the Bible that contain the phrase **“faith alone”** are James 2:17 and 24 where James writes that **“faith alone without works is dead”** and **“a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.”** This coming from a person who identifies himself only as *By Faith But Not By Faith Alone*, most likely is a Roman Catholic since they're generally the ones who do not like the expression *Faith Alone*.

What, then, does the Apostle Paul mean by these words? Who are the two people in this passage? What are they doing? What do they get? What have they earned? Which one am I? Which one are you? Since one goes to heaven and the other goes to hell, this might be something worth figuring out!

Let's take a couple of minutes and look at some possible conclusions drawn by various theologians:

A Contradiction

Some believe Paul has been caught in a contradiction. And the contradiction is not merely with Jesus or Peter or John, but with himself. Only one chapter later Paul will give his conclusion to his current line of reasoning when he writes: **“Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law” (Romans 3:28).**

There are some who don't have a problem with supposed contradictions in the Bible. They think God's knowledge is so distinct from our knowledge that the two can't be properly compared. Some will say that God is above logic as we know it and it may very well be that parallel lines, for example, intersect in heaven. This may sound honoring to God...if we don't think about it too deeply.

Yet this kind of thinking elevates the natural world to a place where standards are created. When we say we're not going to subject God to our standard, it necessarily follows that we think we have an autonomous standard that we have ourselves created. Simply put, the precise reason parallel lines don't intersect on earth is because they don't intersect in heaven (or more specifically, in the mind of God)!

To grant that God may contradict Himself is to grant that when He says *believe and be saved*, He may really mean (in His secret thinking) *believe and be damned*! We're utterly dependent on God being truthful—a God who declares Himself to be the Truth itself. But if truth cannot be defined or ascertained, then that statement (God being Truth) is meaningless. In light of this, the position that Paul is contradicting himself must, therefore, be rejected.

Obey and Be Saved

Some understand this passage to teach that justification (being acquitted before the bar of God's judgment) is obtained by observing the law. Some may argue that this obedience to the law is itself by the grace of God (grace at various levels depending upon how much they believe the fall actually affected man's ability to do good); some may argue that it is all upon man to succeed in righteousness. Either way, the works must be sufficient prior to entering glory.

Of course this begs the question, *how sufficient is sufficient?* How good does my patient continuance in doing good have to be to tip the bar of God's judgment in my favor? I don't know if there is a truly godly person on earth who, at the end of the day, would think they satisfied God's holy standard. Most people, along with the Psalmist, would cry: **"If you O Lord should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand" (Psalm 130:3)?** The implied answer, of course is *no one!*

It is often asked, then, why does Jesus mention works in His instruction of the final judgment with the separation of the sheep and goats, where the sheep are declared blessed by the Father because of their good works and the goats cursed due to their indifference (Matthew 25:31-46).

But even here the good works don't appear to be good works in general but are a demonstration of their response to Jesus Himself (since Jesus thoroughly identifies Himself with His "brothers") who were fed, clothed, visited, etc. (Matthew 25:40). And the neglect is a neglect of Jesus also. It might also be argued that the blessedness of the sheep is the cause of the good works not the result of the good works. In other words, there is nothing in that passage which indicates that the good works (whether by grace or not) merited entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

Purgatory

Still others might argue that complete and total refinement either on earth or in purgatory is a necessary precondition for entrance into heaven. So, this would make the threat not a threat of hell but of an extended stay in purgatory which motivates holy living.

We don't have time to address purgatory in its entirety, suffice it to say a few things: 1). It is very difficult to find the doctrine of purgatory anywhere in Scripture. For the Christian it would appear that the Bible teaches that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). 2). It would appear that Jesus teaches there is a chasm fixed between heaven and Hades that cannot be crossed (Luke 16:26). 3). When a justly condemned criminal sought entrance into the kingdom of heaven from Jesus, Jesus assured him that entrance into paradise would happen that day. Some mistakenly argue that paradise isn't heaven. But the promise of Christ isn't merely paradise, it is that *he would be with Him in paradise*—was Jesus in purgatory?? 4). If a complete purging of sin in purgatory is necessary, sinners would be there forever because our sin deserves the infinite wrath of God.

The notion of man somehow coming up with enough good works to escape God's judgment, whether by human effort, grace or purgatory, is a far-fetched notion. And none of this is yet addressing the sufficiency of the atoning work of Christ on the cross and the imputed righteousness which fully satisfies God's justice. There may be more ways of looking at this passage. But I think there are two that are at least reasonable.

Hypothetical View

One potential way of understanding Paul in this passage, which avoids a contradiction and works-based righteousness, is to understand Paul as speaking hypothetically. According to this view, the first man in Paul's example doesn't actually exist (except for Jesus, of course). Paul is merely laying the groundwork for what he will be teaching in the next few chapters (judgment, faith, federal headship, etc.). According to Charles Hodge, Paul...

...is not here teaching the method of justification, but is laying down those general principles of justice, according to which irrespective of the gospel, all men are to be judged. He is expounding the law, not the gospel.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ Charles Hodge, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. Page 50.

That perfect person we read of in verses seven and ten is not sitting next to you in church. The only person who lives up to that standard is Christ Himself and we are dependent upon His success for our peace. We should not be looking at one another's obedience to commandments asking who will ascend into heaven or descend into the abyss based upon our level of success (Romans 10:5-7)—both views make the work of Christ of no avail.

Evidence View

There is one last way to understand the words of Paul here that comports well with the biblical teaching of the grace of the gospel. It can be called the *evidence view*. It should not come as a surprise that Paul did not shrink back from teaching the necessity of works for entrance into the kingdom of God:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

What is Paul suggesting by a passage like this? Is he saying that if I, as a Christian, still struggle with greed, or have a single episode where I fail in the greed department, that I will not enter heaven? I think not. It would appear that Paul, along with James, is explaining that a person who genuinely trusts in Christ as Savior will at the same time necessarily trust in Christ as Lord.

Paul is not teaching perfectionism here. Notice verse eleven where “**sanctified**” and “**justified**” are in the passive voice—meaning it is something that happened *to* them. He, like Jesus, is teaching that no one can serve two masters. He is teaching against hypocrisy. He is teaching that a saving faith is an active faith. A

person cannot define himself as a Christian and also as a playboy or thief and expect to enter heaven.

If we were to apply the evidence view to the passage under question, we would not understand the first person (the person going to heaven) as hypothetical or sinless. They would be a person who has faith in Christ and Christ alone for their peace with God. But the same Spirit who granted them faith in Christ is also causing them to walk in God's statutes (Ezekiel 36:27).

This person perseveres in faith and doing good (though marked with failure and repentance); they seek and desire glory, honor and immortality (don't all Christians?); and they do good works (are we not all called to good works? See Ephesians 2:10).

So I submit that if Paul is writing of justifying works in this passage, the only answer is the hypothetical view—otherwise heaven is going to be pretty empty! But if Paul is writing in terms of the evidence view, it is obvious that he is writing against antinomianism (a view of Christianity which disregards the need to walk in God's law) and mere externalism (where your entrance into heaven is based upon your ethnicity or your inclusion in a community of professing believers).

Either way, it is the clear teaching of Scripture that, given the nature of man, our only hope is that Jesus went to a cross to die for sinners. And those for whom Christ died are those who give evidence of that reality by seeking to faithfully follow Him. And the motivation for this obedience is not to somehow earn the favor of God. It is a Spirit-given gratitude for heaven itself along with an awareness of the wisdom of God's holy counsel that motivates, or moves, Christians to follow the One who is infinite in wisdom and mercy.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Who are the two people in this passage? What are their differences?
2. Why do you suppose this passage is so controversial?
3. Why should we reject the notion that Paul is contradicting himself?
4. Is Paul teaching that a person can earn salvation by obedience? Why? Why not?
5. Discuss the merits or weaknesses of purgatory.
6. What is the hypothetical view? Does this seem solid to you? Why? Why not?
7. What is the evidence view? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

Romans 2:12-16

Work of the Law in the Heart

September 30, 2012

For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law *are* just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their* thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*) in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel (Romans 2:12-16).

For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (Romans 2:12).

The Righteous Guru

So very much can, and has already been, said and written on this passage that it is difficult to zero in on how it is to be preached. There is general consent that verse twelve holds all men without excuse—that whether or not you were raised in the church (in this case the Old Covenant church of Israel) or outside the church—all men are without excuse in their sin and disdain for God and His righteous counsel (Romans 1:18-21).

Years ago a friend told me of his complaint against Christianity. The problem lies, he explained, in the notion that a hermit/guru living in a tree in the rain forest who never harmed a single soul or had a foul thought would, apart from Christ, be condemned to hell. My friend had conjured in his mind this perfect person—this heavenly earth-man who had never done evil—and my friend could not reconcile how a just God would condemn such a person for simply not following Jesus.

At first blush the scenario causes one to pause. But upon further examination it becomes apparent that his mythical narrative is

fraught with error and false suppositions. For one, condemnation is not the consequence of refusing to follow or believe in Jesus—condemnation is the consequence of sin. Rejecting Jesus is to refuse one's only hope of rescue from sin.

He made the false supposition that a sinless man would not go to heaven. A sinless man needs no savior. Indeed, it is true that the announcement of the gospel did not come until Adam sinned. But the primary error made by this story is the notion of the sinless man. The man who thinks he is sinless, according to John, deceives himself and the truth is not him (1 John 1:8).

If sinfulness is an attribute of all men (as the Bible proclaims from cover to cover) then it is an error to assume someone else to be sinless (excepting Jesus, of course). Furthermore, so deep and undeniable is this truth (the truth of all men being indwelt and corrupted by sin) that Jesus announces that He did not come for those who deny this self-evident truth.

And when Jesus heard it, he said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17).

Verse twelve explains this universal inexcusability. Whether one is raised with a Bible in their hand (or more likely in the case of the first century Jew—hearing it read in the synagogue) or with no written code whatsoever, there is not a man who does not sin and there is no man who is truly seeking the God against whom he sins.

The entire human race would shake their collective fist against their Maker—against the only source of truth and wisdom. There is no person pining away for a God who, in His celestial indifference, is somehow ignoring his plea for holiness—no bushman, no mountain priest. If we learn anything from the opening chapters of Romans, it is the desperate case of all humanity.

...for not the hearers of the law *are* just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified (Romans 2:13).

Who Will Be Justified?

It is here that the passage gets trickier—especially if we agree with the definition of “just” and “justified,” given by so many fine teachers, of a forensic declaration of acquittal:

To be just before God, and to be justified, are the same thing. They are both forensic expressions, and indicate the state rather than the character of those to whom they refer.⁶⁹

I should also point out that both δίκαιοι (*dikaioi*, righteous) and δικαιωθήσονται (*dikaiōthēsontai*, shall be declared righteous) are forensic in this verse.⁷⁰ (‘Righteous’ and ‘declared righteous’ being “just” and “justified”.)

In other words, the word “just” does not tell us about the character of the person but about the verdict of the Judge. We discussed this last week so I’ll not spend a great deal of time here. If you recall we observed two types of people in the previous passage—those who did good and those who obey unrighteousness.

Having eliminated untenable explanations, we concluded that Paul was either (in his description of the righteous person) merely giving a hypothetical (not entirely unlike my friend’s righteous hermit/guru—although without the false assumptions) or Paul was teaching of the evidence of righteous deeds that necessarily accompany (at some level) the truly faithful.

What must be rejected is the idea that men merit acquittal from the searching eyes of a Holy God who **“will judge the secrets of men”** by virtue of their law-keeping; or, as Calvin explains:

That if righteousness be sought from the law, the law must be fulfilled; for the righteousness of the law consists in the perfection of works. They who pervert this passage for the purpose of building up

⁶⁹ Charles Hodge, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans. Page 54

⁷⁰ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Vol. 6: Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (119). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

justification by works, deserve most fully to be laughed at even by children.⁷¹

Calvin may sound testy here, but we must understand that he lived in an era when there was widespread ecclesiastical abuse of a doctrine that proclaimed salvation via personal piety, holiness and financial offerings—and many of those proclaiming that doctrine living lives devoid of any holiness whatsoever!⁷²

Be that as it may, we should not understand Paul’s words here to be in conflict with his own words in the very next chapter, where he writes:

Where *is* boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law (Romans 3:27, 28).

Simply put, we are not acquitted by God by virtue of our works—that the worker is justified does not necessarily mean the work justifies him. Paul continues:

(...for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their* thoughts accusing or else excusing *them*) in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel (Romans 2:14-16).

Natural Law?

There is some debate as to who these gentiles are “**who do not have the law**” but “**by nature do the things in the law**” and somehow becoming a “**law unto themselves.**” Some believe these are gentile Christians in the church; others believe Paul is writing

⁷¹ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin’s Commentaries (Ro 2:13). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

⁷² The observation of Luther leading to the Reformation.

about non-Jewish humanity in general. There are good arguments for both. But there are some conclusions people tend to draw from this passage that I think are unwarranted.

For one, whether the gentiles are Christians or not, it would be a mistake to assume that this **“law to themselves”** creates a sufficient codification of ethical or moral conduct—as if man, because he is made in the image of God can, apart from the written revelation of God (the Bible), arrive at specific, accurate, godly, ethical conclusions and decisions. At whatever level this thing called ‘natural law’ is derived from ‘general revelation’ and human nature (or the *imago dei*), it is, because of sin, very flawed.

One need merely look at the gentile Christian in the Scriptures to see how this method falters. These people, according to Paul, **“show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves *their thoughts accusing or else excusing them.*”** But when it came to eating meat sacrificed to idols, Paul writes that **“their conscience, (was) being weak, (and) is defiled” (1 Corinthians 8:7—parenthesis mine).** In short, when it comes to ethics, our conscience, operating independently from Scripture, can be trusted only so far.

I, therefore, think it is a mistake to draw the conclusion that natural man, apart from Christ and His law, can create industrious, lasting societies of mutual equity—even if motivated by some primal survival instinct. If history has shown us anything, it has shown us that men, left to their own accord will eventually devour themselves and grow ripe for God’s holy judgment. This is evidenced by so many eras recorded in Scripture, including Noah, Sodom, and Moses’ prophetic anticipation of Israel’s deliverance from Egypt which would coincide with **“the iniquity of the Amorites”** reaching its **“fullness” (Genesis 15:16).** We can delude ourselves into thinking that modern man, because of his appropriation of natural law, will not suffer the fate of the Amorites—but here we overestimate ourselves.

So what is Paul’s point here? What can we safely derive from this notion of the **“works of the law written”** on the hearts of man? It would appear that Paul is describing, in a very general and flawed sense, man’s knowledge of right and wrong. As Calvin explains:

Nor can we conclude from this passage, that there is in men a *full* knowledge of the law, but that there

are only some seeds of what is right implanted in their nature, evidenced by such acts as these.⁷³

Mere Externalism

Again, what is Paul's point in writing these words? Perhaps Paul is writing of the hypothetical natural man who does good unto justification—a simple laying down of the rules of God's just judgments. But as a pastor who had concern for the souls under his care, it appears he noticed something else in that church that needed to be addressed. T.R. Schreiner observes:

It is crucial to understand that Paul's aim is to show the Jews that possession of the law is not inherently salvific and constitutes no advantage over the Gentiles.⁷⁴

As a young Christian, full of enthusiasm and perhaps too large a dose of anti-establishmentarianism, I remember being very committed to churches which emphasized a personal/individual faith in Christ—perhaps to the exclusion of the necessary corporate relationship we are called to have as the body of Christ.

Nonetheless, Paul (especially in the next section, verses 17-29) will sound out those who have all the outward accoutrements of religion but appear to function with uncircumcised hearts. It might be easy here to pick on Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholics in their high liturgies which, it would appear at some level, encourage this kind of externalism, as if their peace with God is found in their church membership and its many rituals.

But we (especially as we have become a second and third generation church) should not think ourselves immune to this. We have membership vows, sacraments, sermons and Bibles—but do we have hearts of faith toward Christ and love toward God and our neighbor? Do we think our religion is covered by that which is

⁷³ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 2:15). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

⁷⁴ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Vol. 6: Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (118). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

merely external—things others can see? Later in this chapter Paul will seek to dismantle the notion of seeking comfort in the external:

For he is not a Jew who *is one* outwardly, nor *is* circumcision that which *is* outward in the flesh; but *he is* a Jew who *is one* inwardly; and circumcision *is that* of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise *is not* from men but from God (Romans 2:28, 29).

Given Much—Good or Bad?

Being a member in good standing of a Christian church is not inherently salvific. It is a sign that we have been given much by God—which can be a good or bad thing:

And that servant who knew his master’s will, and did not prepare *himself* or do according to his will, shall be beaten with many *stripes*. But he who did not know, yet committed things deserving of stripes, shall be beaten with few. For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required; and to whom much has been committed, of him they will ask the more (Luke 12:47, 48).

In light of these things, I can understand the little debate over the portion of our church service where sinners are pardoned by virtue of their confession of sin and faith in Christ. Some think it is just too easy—telling people their sins are forgiven. Others don’t like the word often used during the pardon, saying that we should have faith in “sincerity” thus adding the burden of some level of sincerity.

This tension seems unavoidable. One need merely observe Jesus when a woman, who was described merely as a sinner, fell at His feet and wept—and how she received the wonderful pardon: **“Your sins are forgiven...Your faith has saved you; go in peace” (Luke 7:48, 50).** Jesus could have said what He said elsewhere: **“For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20).** He could have said what He said to the

rich young ruler: **“If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21).**

Jesus says all these things within the boundaries of the gospel—He wasn’t offering conflicting messages. But He knew the heart of the woman; He knew the heart of the Pharisees and of the rich young ruler. We, of course do not know the hearts of others. Now perhaps Paul in all of this is merely writing of a hypothetical person. Or perhaps he is seeking to put his readers to the test—that they might consider whether or not they, by faith in Christ, have circumcised hearts—and therefore seek to do the things of the law—not in an effort to merit justification before God—but as the necessary fruit of saving faith.

Secret Things

Let us take to heart that it is not the outward things that Paul writes of on the Day of Judgment but the **“secret things.”** Schreiner writes:

The accusing and defending work of the conscience in the present will reach its consummation, full validity, and clarification on the day of judgment, when God will judge the secrets of all.⁷⁵

Paul writes elsewhere:

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God (1 Corinthians 4:5).

Calvin concludes:

⁷⁵ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Vol. 6: Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (125). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

When we hear this, let it come to our minds, that we are warned that if we wish to be really approved by our Judge, we must strive for sincerity of heart.⁷⁶

So it is neither works-righteousness nor a level of sincerity which procures salvation—as Paul will later write: **“It is God who justifies” (Romans 8:33)**. When Paul writes, **“Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity” (Ephesians 6:24)**, he is not writing of a *level* as much as of a *type*—not a quantity but a *quality of love*—it is a God-given incorruptible, unceasing and immortal love—though checkered with human failure, it is nonetheless a love which flows from a circumcised heart.

⁷⁶ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin’s Commentaries (Ro 2:16). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Discuss the idea of a perfectly righteous guru/hermit and if such a person would go to heaven apart from Christ.
2. How does verse 12 explain the universal inexcusability of man?
3. What does “just” and/or “justified” mean? How is one justified? If the doers of the law are justified, does it follow that they are justified by the doing?
4. Define and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of “natural law”.
5. Compare, contrast and explain how external things relate to the issues of the heart.
6. What are the difficulties associated with the declaration of pardon for sinners?
7. How should we respond to the knowledge that God will judge “the secret things”?

Romans 3:1-4

The Faithfulness of God

October 28, 2012

What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God. For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar. As it is written: “*That You may be justified in Your words, and may overcome when You are judged*” (Romans 3:1-4).

Introduction

As I was driving a group of children to a Bible-based youth program, I overheard them practicing the Bible verses they had memorized. It is very cute and precious to hear very young children quote Scripture and pray. And we can be confident that the things they learn at a very young age stick with them (Proverbs 22:6).

Having not been raised in the church I have often found myself at a distinct disadvantage when it came to the stories in the Bible—especially the Old Testament stories, which tend to grab a child’s attention. As a new convert surrounded by those who had been in the church since birth, I was a bit embarrassed by my lack of knowledge of Adam, Noah, Samson, Moses, David, Daniel and so on.

And yet, I must say (hopefully without sounding unduly critical) that the knowledge of these Old Testament stories didn’t always appear to yield what one might call a *credible profession of faith*. As a teenager heading into the church, I found myself against quite a flow of traffic of other teenagers heading out.

We head into chapter three of Romans having read of the apostle’s dismissal of the value of circumcision (what might be considered a sign of inclusion in the church of the Old Covenant) in chapter two. We can’t overestimate how shocking that might have sounded to the Jewish Christian who was seeking to import, it would appear, too much of his Jewish-ness (misguided Jewish-ness at that) into the New Covenant.

In a modern context it might have sounded as if someone were to say to us that our baptisms, our participation in the Lord's Supper, our prayers, worship, reading of Scripture, and hearing of God's love, pardon and benediction really don't amount to much! This kind of statement might be shocking to our ears, and I hope it would be. Yet it is possible that the church can still maintain the outward form of religious observance—even a form according to God's design—and be empty of saving faith. In light of these things, the Jewish Christian might be wondering if there was any advantage at all of being an Israelite the way a modern church attender might wonder if there was any advantage at all to being raised in the church.

This is where Paul begins chapter three.

What advantage then has the Jew, or what is the profit of circumcision? Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God (Romans 3:1, 2).

Where's the Advantage?

What then, was the advantage of being a Jew or being raised in the church? Paul indicates that there was an advantage—**“much in every way.”** **“Chiefly”** *protos* (firstly) **“because to them were committed the oracles (*ta logia*) of God.”** The oracles of God mean the declarations of God—the historical manifestations of God's word.

If a person desired to access the fountain of heavenly wisdom and grace in the Old Covenant, they went to Israel—the tabernacle, the holy hill (Psalm 15:1), the prophets, the sacrifices, etc. It was Israel and only Israel that had the message of redemption. The rest of the world lay under the sway of the wicked one (1 John 5:19). Sometimes I fear that our little ones don't recognize what a **“dry and thirsty land”** this world can be (Ezekiel 19:13). We are foolish to think we can extricate ourselves from the church and still drink from a fountain of true wisdom—to somehow find ourselves nourished by our secular surroundings.

Not to deviate too far, but perhaps this is one advantage of our increasingly apostate culture. When we live in a nation that is predominantly Christian (and don't misunderstand me—I think every nation should be—see Psalm 2:10-12) we may think that the source of true wisdom and redemption might be found in government or

culture. I think our current state of political affairs has given us a healthy heave-ho of such folly.

Families, societies, cultures and nations will thrive when they warm themselves on the hearth of God's oracles. This was the great advantage that Israel had. And yet our Savior was born into a world with Scriptures, priests and temple, all of which had neglected **"justice and mercy and faith" (Matthew 23:23)** and were **"full of extortion and self-indulgence" (Matthew 23:25)**, turning His Father's house into a **"den of thieves" (Matthew 21:13)**.

So there is an advantage, but not everyone takes it. Some will turn their back to the warmth and light of the fire. And because of this, God Himself becomes the target of accusation.

For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect? Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar. As it is written: "That You may be justified in Your words, and may overcome when You are judged" (Romans 3:3-4).

Is God Not Faithful?

I was at the beach to play a little volleyball and a member of our church was excited to have me engage a friend of his with the gospel. Clearly, they had already had a great deal of dialogue and both were well dug into their positions. With a slight hint of frustration the man conveyed to us both, "You can only forgive so much"—clearly an allusion to all the evil done by the church throughout the ages.

Realizing the limitations of our current situation, for the man was clearly looking for an exit, I merely asked him, "Why forgive at all?" He gave me a puzzled look which I hoped would lead to future discussions. We can talk of this in Q&A if you're interested in what I was getting at. But for now the question is before us: *Is the rebellion of God's covenant people an indictment against God?*

If a person sits here as a baptized member of the church—a covenant child or adult—but secretly mocks in his hearts or maintains a sentiment of indifference, is the faithfulness of God in question? Even more, if those within some form of the outward visible

manifestation of the kingdom of heaven (i.e. the church) should behave in an egregious, faithless manner, should we conclude that God has not kept His promise?

We come to church and hear of God's love for us, His mercy extended to us, His grace upon us. But if we should die and go to hell (because not all members of the visible church are necessarily members of the invisible church, that is, not all church members are necessarily regenerate), should we assume that God has failed to keep His promise?

Not so easily observed in English translations is the root word used by Paul three times in this verse—twice referring to men and once to God—a word that has been translated either “**believe**” or “**faith**.”

For what if some did not believe (*epistesan*—disbelief)? Will their unbelief (*apistia*-lack of belief) make the faithfulness (*pistis*-faithfulness) of God without effect?

Paul seems to be playing the faithfulness of God against the faithlessness of man. There is too much to address at this time, but suffice it to say that God had made some glorious promises of what would happen in and to the world via the descendants of Abraham—a group of people Paul calls “**the circumcision**” (Romans 4:9).

I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Genesis 12:2, 3).

And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:5, 6).

And the sign of inclusion of these great blessings was circumcision (Genesis 17:10), which Paul had now somewhat dismissed with the words:

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love (Galatians 5:6).

Do you see the problem? God had told this group of people that they would receive untold blessings and now it would appear that the vast majority of them were enemies of Christ (John 1:11). There was only a remnant (Romans 11:5) who were faithful and, quite frankly, this remnant, so far from being blessed, were still under the curse (Romans 10:1). I hasten to add, this is no mere history lesson; this can apply still today to anyone in this or any church who continues in the sin of unbelief (Hebrews 3:12). Let us take to heart the warning from the writer of Hebrews:

Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope (Hebrews 3:5, 6).

Notice the "if" adverbial, conditional conjunction. The problem was not, is not and never will be God's faithfulness. The promises of God are sure. But the objects of God's eternal promises are those who by grace through faith call upon Christ. We need to be careful who we blame.

Those who fail in marriage are often quick to blame the institution of marriage as if it's a flawed concept. And those who seek to acquit themselves before a holy God find great comfort (at least temporarily) in blaming God for His many shortcomings in handling the plight of this wreckage we call humanity.

Those in the church might blame Him for His lack of care and those outside the church might blame Him for the mess called the church. But, my friends, the problems (and there are many of them) are not due to some flaw or imperfection that we might seek to detect

in God or the means by which He chooses to interact with a sinful world.

Paul answers his own rhetorical question with one of the most thunderous verses in all of Scripture.

Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar (Romans 3:4a).

God versus the Human Race

At the risk of irreverence (since Gary Larson, having drawn a picture of God for his comic strip, betrays his theological liberalism) I must say that the Far Side comic strip of God on Jeopardy is humorous and accurate. It shows the host behind the mic, God and the other contestant with their scores on the podium 1065 to 0. The caption reads, “Yes! That’s right! The answer is ‘Wisconsin’! Another 50 points for God, and...uh-oh, looks like Norman, our current champion, hasn’t even scored yet.” It’s funny because it’s true.

It’s startling how comfortable we have become at putting God in the dock—measuring His eternal ethics and infinite faithfulness via the yardstick of our creaturely “enlightenment.” The verse specifically has to do with God’s covenant faithfulness against man’s faithlessness, but it can, I believe, be safely applied to everything. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s brilliant detective Sherlock Holmes famously said, “Once you eliminate the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth.”

I hasten to say that there is nothing improbable about the existence of God or the oracles which proceed from His word; nonetheless, you get the point. Paul is saying that the *impossible* is that God would somehow fall short in the area of truth—so even if the entire world were to line up on the other side of the aisle...uh-oh, *our current champion hasn’t scored yet*. Paul then brings forward a very remarkable passage to strengthen his point.

As it is written: “That You may be justified in Your words, and may overcome when You are judged” (Romans 3:4b).

A Judged and Justified God

The “you” in this verse is referring to God. It is remarkable that God would be judged and that He somehow needs to be “justified,” which here means to render a favorable verdict. Apparently the inclination to judge God is nothing new. This reference used by Paul is taken from Psalm 51 where David records his own response to a confrontation by Nathan the Prophet regarding his great sin with Bathsheba—keeping in mind that David, along with Moses, would have been held in very high esteem among those who were the objects of Paul’s correction.

In light of his sin, David calls upon the “**mercy**” and “**lovingkindness**” of God. He beseeches God to “**blot**” out his “**transgressions**” and “**wash**” him from his “**sin.**” David acknowledged his “**transgressions**” and sin against God and that he had done evil in God’s sight, then he records the words later used by Paul: “**That You may be found just when You speak, and blameless when You judge**” (Psalm 51:4).

David knew that his behavior had given occasion for “**the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme**” (2 Samuel 12:14), that it was an embarrassment. But David also acknowledged that the problem was with him, not God. In fact, it would be God’s just judgment of him that would extol God—so God took opportunity to declare His righteousness by exposing the unrighteousness of David.

This brings me back to my friend at the beach. What my friend’s friend didn’t understand was that the moment he said you can only forgive so much, he was calling upon something or someone (that he, no doubt, could not identify) greater than himself by which human conduct should be evaluated. And who would that be, if not God?

One final point: When David was confronted with his most heinous sin, he did not seek comfort or take solace in his circumcision or in being a covenant child (again, not that there wasn’t great value in these things). David called upon God to “**purge**” him “**with hyssop.**” Hyssop was a plant they would dip in blood and sprinkle on things and people that they might be cleansed (Numbers 19:18). And of course, like all the sacrifices, the blood points to the blood of Christ.

Whether it is the sacrifices of the Old Covenant or the sacraments of the New, if our minds are not swept to the Christ of the cross, whose blood was shed for the remission of sins, our religious observances are meaningless—or even worse, they become a judgment against us. But if these things are done in faith (not to jump too far ahead) then not only is God vindicated in His judgments, we are justified—acquitted—before His holy bar of judgment.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Was there any advantage to being Jewish when Paul was writing this letter? Is there any advantage to being raised in the church?
2. If one is raised in the church, does it mean they are truly saved?
3. How did people access God's wisdom and grace in the Old Covenant? In the New Covenant?
4. God made promises to Israel in the Old Testament, yet some Israelites did not receive those promises. Did God not keep His promise? Explain.
5. The writer of Hebrews issues a warning in Hebrews 3:5, 6. What is the warning and how should it be heeded?
6. In what ways do we see people blaming God? What is Paul's answer to this accusation?
7. Can you think of examples where the world is against God? Who do you suppose is right and why?
8. Discuss Paul's quote from David's psalm. Why do you think he uses that quote?
9. What did David seek for his comfort and forgiveness? What do you seek?

Romans 3:5-8

Is God Unjust

November 11, 2012

But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? *Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? (I speak as a man.) Certainly not! For then how will God judge the world? For if the truth of God has increased through my lie to His glory, why am I also still judged as a sinner? And why not say, “Let us do evil that good may come?”—as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say. Their condemnation is just (Romans 3:5-8).*

Review

Let us review the situation. God had made a promise to a community of people (Israel) and instituted a sign of that promise (circumcision), which was to be administered to those people (Genesis 17:10). Paul now writes that that sign doesn't count for anything **“but only faith working through love” (Galatians 5:6)**. Those people perhaps responded to Paul by questioning the faithfulness of God.

They wanted to know if there was any advantage at all of being part of that community—the people of God's promise. Paul assured them that there was—to them were committed the **“oracles of God” (Romans 3:2)**, that is, the declarations of God—the historical manifestations of God's word: **“the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises” (Romans 9:4)**.

But these oracles would only be a testimony against them apart from faith in the One to whom all these oracles point, who is Christ (Romans 10:4). If an individual is among a community of people who are told the truth, that individual is all the more accountable before God if they refuse to embrace it.

But instead of believing/repenting, it would appear that these people were seeking to accuse God. We must understand the logic (limited and perverted as it is) of their reasoning. They understood themselves to be God's family—it would be like a father whose

children bear his very name telling his children that they are not his after all! In human terms (Paul does, after all, use the phrase “**I speak as a man.**”) this would be an indictment against any father.

But in an effort to illustrate the ties that bind the family of God, Jesus does not so much redefine but clarifies. When told that His mother and brothers were seeking to speak with Him, Jesus replies:

“Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (Matthew 12:48-50).

In a strict sense, in a real regenerative sense, one is not born into the family of God but reborn into the family of God (John 3:7). And the status of inclusion among the true family of God should give our hearts pause:

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God (1 John 3:1).

As joyous and remarkable as it is to enjoy the birth of a baby, it pales in comparison to the rebirth of a lost soul.

Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:10).

But rather than repenting, receiving Christ, believing in His name and being given the right or authority to be called a child of God (John 1:12), they refuse to let go of their sense of entitlement and instead finagle yet another way to excuse their own behavior.

We discussed last time how Paul quotes Psalm 51 in an effort to explain how David’s sin was not an indictment against God but against David. David knew that his behavior had given occasion for **“the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme” (2 Samuel 12:14)**—that it

was an embarrassment. But David also acknowledged that the problem was with him, not God.

In fact, it would be God's just judgment of him that would extol God—so God took the opportunity to declare His righteousness by exposing the unrighteousness of David. The acknowledgement that a person has done something wrong means that we know that something is right. And if this is true in any authoritative sense, there must be a source of what is right. And how can that source be anything or anyone but God?

Still, rather than merely embracing what they knew to be true—for God has revealed Himself to and in the heart of every man (Romans 1:18, 19)—they continue in their theological chicanery.

But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unjust who inflicts wrath? (I speak as a man.) Certainly not! For then how will God judge the world? For if the truth of God has increased through my lie to His glory, why am I also still judged as a sinner? And *why* not say, “Let us do evil that good may come”?—as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say. Their condemnation is just (Romans 3:5-8).

Truth Increased Through a Lie

The twisted reasoning goes like this:

- Even though we are faithless sinners, clearly we are God's people—that is our non-negotiable presupposition.
- We have now learned that God is glorified via our sinfulness. That explains a lot.
- Since it is the chief end of man and God that God be glorified, God would be unjust to inflict wrath upon us. We're doing just what He wants when we sin.
- Since God's truth is increased (made more manifest) through my lying life, how can I be blamed?
- As a matter of fact, I should do more evil so God will look even better!

Paul gives two rather brief responses to this brand of theology which seeks to justify sin and faithlessness. One is the rhetorical question: *In light of this perverted reasoning (that it is good to sin), “how will God judge the world?”* Paul’s presupposition is a little different than theirs. He assumes God will judge sinners. His other response brings the crosshairs of God’s judgment into focus. The people who are teaching this—*“their condemnation is just.”*

Not to jump too far ahead, but broadly speaking it must be noted that God will not be mocked.

Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life (Galatians 6:7, 8).

Men will manufacture creative theologies that mitigate, ignore or justify their sin and faithlessness. They may fool other men, but God will not be fooled.

Sin will be judged—sinners will be judged. Inclusion in a covenant community is of no salvific value apart from faith in the God of that covenant.

God is Glorified

One final point that I think bears a little examination. What everyone seemed to accurately understand here (though drawing wrong conclusions) is that God is glorified even through the sin of man. We just had an election. Some people were happy with the results, others were sad, others cried themselves to sleep.

What I’m about to point out here should in no way be construed as to encourage apathy or lethargy on the part of those who zealously contend for their political convictions. Faithful Christians have a responsibility to bring God’s word to bear in every venue of life. But when Joseph was sold into slavery or Daniel’s entire nation found themselves in captivity, they continued to recognize that their

God was the reigning King (Daniel 4:35). And we shouldn't understand this as if that King is on vacation.⁷⁷

Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable (Isaiah 40:28).

Some might be holding their breath for four years, in hopes that God will do something good in the next election—and in a certain sense that is understandable. I don't mean to be overly political here—this can apply to any evil, trial or difficulty we may be facing—we just want it over so that we can begin to glorify God and enjoy Him again. But like the Israelite that Paul was addressing, we have too small a view of God.

The glory of God and His love for His children is not held at bay by evil or calamity. It is God's calamity.

I form light and create darkness, I make well-being and create calamity, I am the Lord, who does all these things (Isaiah 45:7).

What I'm suggesting is not merely using men's sin to glorify Himself the way people seek to make the best of a bad situation. No; though not the author of sin, God has ordained even the sinful choices of wicked men for His own glory. And He does this while holding men, as moral agents, culpable. It is basically stated in the Psalms:

Surely the wrath of man shall praise you (Psalm 76:10).

It is specifically stated to the wicked Pharaoh (which Paul will later reference—Romans 9:17):

But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth (Exodus 9:16).

⁷⁷ Some parables may present God as if He is in a faraway country, but that is more to address His return in special judgments, e.g. "The Day of the Lord." In a providential sense, every day is the day of the Lord.

And to the ungodly kingdom of Assyria who God used as an instrument of His own indignation, even though they had no intention of serving God:

Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger and the staff in whose hand is My indignation. I will send him against an ungodly nation, and against the people of My wrath I will give him charge, to seize the spoil, to take the prey, and to tread them down like the mire of the streets. Yet he does not mean so, nor does his heart think so; but *it is* in his heart to destroy, and cut off not a few nations.

We then read of the arrogant king's self-assessment.

For he says, '*Are* not my princes altogether kings? *Is* not Calno like Carchemish? *Is* not Hamath like Arpad? *Is* not Samaria like Damascus? As my hand has found the kingdoms of the idols, whose carved images excelled those of Jerusalem and Samaria, as I have done to Samaria and her idols, shall I not do also to Jerusalem and her idols?'" Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Lord has performed all His work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, *that He will say*, "I will punish the fruit of the arrogant heart of the king of Assyria, and the glory of his haughty looks." For he says: "By the strength of my hand I have done *it*, and by my wisdom, for I am prudent; also I have removed the boundaries of the people, and have robbed their treasuries; so I have put down the inhabitants like a valiant *man*. My hand has found like a nest the riches of the people, and as one gathers eggs *that are* left, I have gathered all the earth; and there was no one who moved *his* wing, nor opened *his* mouth with even a peep."

Then we return to how God sees the most powerful king on earth at the time.

Shall the ax boast itself against him who chops with it? Or shall the saw exalt itself against him who saws with it? As if a rod could wield *itself* against those who lift it up, or as if a staff could lift up, *as if it were not wood* (Isaiah 10:5-15)!

And the list continues: Herod, Pilate, the gentiles, Israel.

...for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place (Acts 4:27, 28).

There are all sorts of ways men want to justify God before other men when it comes to the truth of these statements. Those with whom Paul contended sought to present a god who would ignore sin and faithlessness because God can use it to His own glory. Or today, in a society of self-confidence, where self-esteem has escalated itself into virtue rather than vice, it is common for men to seek to shorten the arm of God (Numbers 11:23) through creative definitions of human will that can in no way account for the passages (and the numerous others like them) that we just read.

But if we return to Paul's point, it would appear he is exalting God alone. The whole world is a drop in the bucket; it is dust. If the entire world were faithless it would in no way impugn or diminish the faithfulness and glory of God. So, if I can put it in crass terms, will we hitch the wagon of our eternal hopes in wisdom, philosophy and innovation of man? Or will we, like Paul count it all...

...as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith (Philippians 3:8, 9).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Review the context of this passage. What is the value of circumcision? What is the danger of circumcision? How were some of Paul's readers responding to his message?
2. Discuss the twisted reasoning found in verses 5-8. How does Paul respond to this reasoning?
3. Is God less glorified when evil things happen? Explain your answer.
4. Does it sometimes feel like God is absent? Is He?
5. To what extent is God in control of evil events? Do you find this comforting or distressing? Explain.
6. What do you suppose Paul's point is in this passage?

Romans 3:9-20

Total Depravity (complete)

November 18, 2012

What then? Are we better *than they*? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written: “*There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one.*”

“*Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit;*”

“*The poison of asps is under their lips;*”

“*Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.*”

“*Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known.*”

“*There is no fear of God before their eyes.*”

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:9-20).⁷⁸

Introduction

While eaves-dropping on a conversation between a seminary professor and a student, I was a bit struck by the professor’s argument against the Reformed Doctrines of Grace, i.e. Calvinism. It was Total Depravity in particular for which the professor had distaste (at least in this chapter of the conversation) and he referenced, in his critique of Total Depravity, the very chapter under our examination.

The professor didn’t offer any concrete refutation of this passage (at least not at this time); he merely sighed, “It’s all about Romans 3”. It appeared as if he thought Calvinists spent all their devotional energy meditating on a misunderstanding of the third

⁷⁸ *The New King James Version*. 1982 (Ro 3:9–20). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

chapter of Romans—conveying a message, presumably, found nowhere else in Scripture.

Of course, Romans 3 is a compilation of Old Testament Scriptures which Paul is using to demonstrate to those conversant with the Scriptures (his Jewish readers) that they had missed an obvious message. It might be worth pointing out that the Old Testament passages Paul quotes to underscore the depravity of man also contain references to the salvation God will provide (Psalm 14:7; 53:6) finding its ultimate consummation in Christ Himself. Man's sin and God's grace is the message of Scripture from cover to cover.

It might also be worth pointing out that Paul offers a crescendo of man's universally depraved condition. He begins with a general statement of man's unrighteousness then moves to poisonous lips, culminating with a swiftness to shed blood. So it is not as if man's unwillingness to seek after God is merely some sort of inert sinfulness. The nature of man is such that his silent unbelief will eventually manifest itself in open and destructive rebellion against God and others. Calvin explains:

For as the best bond of mutual concord among us is the knowledge of God, (as he is the common Father of all, he wonderfully unites us, and without him there is nothing but disunion,) so inhumanity commonly follows where there is ignorance of God, as every one, when he despises others, loves and seeks his own good.⁷⁹

But it is not my purpose here to launch into a series on the cultural decimation which will inevitably follow the rejection of the grace of God in Christ. I would prefer to follow Paul's reasoning (at least as I understand it) as he proclaims the badness of the bad news in order that we might more fully comprehend the goodness of the Good News.

It's not as if those who embrace Total Depravity as an accurate assessment of human nature have some macabre, morbid, gothic fascination with sin. It is more, I would hope, that it is an increased appreciation for the power of Christ to rescue us from the

⁷⁹ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 3:12). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

danger of the abyss that we would otherwise be more than willing to jump in.

So, verses nine through twenty need to be studied with our head on a swivel to verses twenty-one and twenty-two:

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe (Romans 3:21, 22).

Years ago one of my children was in an automobile accident. When I was notified by phone of what happened, the first words conveyed to me were, “She is alright, but your daughter was in an accident,” lest there be even a moment when my heart would sink with fear.

Yet, in order for verses twenty-one and twenty-two (and the rest of Romans for that matter) to be fully appreciated, we must seek to fully grasp the axe Paul is putting to the tree of human ability. And since Total Depravity is a doctrine that, in our current culture, has found almost utter rejection among non-Christians and Christians alike, I think it necessary for me to address what Total Depravity is (and is not); what the objections are and what some answers might be to those objections.

All under Sin

In the verses before us this morning we learn that all are **“under sin.”** When it comes to some human attribute—whether the attribute be pedigree, ethnicity, ethical maturity or humility, sin has its foot on the neck of mankind to the extent that no group of people or individual person should think they are better or better off than anyone else when it comes to attaining peace with God. Paul answers his own rhetorical question **“Are we better than they?”** with the phrase **“Not at all”**, perhaps to avoid misunderstanding. Notice also how he includes himself by asking the question in the first person plural.

Paul then proceeds to make his argument from Scripture (Psalm 14; 53; Ecclesiastes 7:20). His opening observation about human nature is that there is **“no one righteous, not one.”** There is a

universal censure against the human race. And one consequence of this rebellious condition is that **“there is none who understands.”** This doesn’t mean that the natural man understands nothing at all. He understands that if he sticks his hand in boiling oil it will burn or even that if he combines certain chemicals it may heal. But he doesn’t understand the substance or essence of reality; and he certainly doesn’t understand how one might find peace with the God who made him.

In fact he has **“turned aside”** from that God—implying an active rebellion and in the final analysis he has become **“unprofitable”** in terms of what is truly of value. Finally, man, left to his own devices, will simply not do **“good.”** As Paul will later write:

But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe (Galatians 3:22).

Total Depravity

Since the Scriptures **“imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe”** it might behoove us at this juncture to embark upon a proper understanding of Total Depravity. My plan is to chip away at this over the next few weeks as we explain the passage before us. It has been suggested that a proper understanding of Total Depravity will logically (not to mention biblically) necessitate the remaining four principle categories of the well-known TULIP acronym for Calvinism. I don’t intend to go that far in this study. But I hope we will quickly see how important this subject is.

A proper comprehension of the nature of man is as important to understanding salvation as a proper comprehension of the disease is essential to finding the cure. Our understanding of what man can and cannot accomplish according to his own nature will inform how he is approached in terms of religion.

If we can safely draw the conclusion that the human psyche/emotions are still capable of a love for God, then emotional pleas will be preferable and effective; the lighting in the church and a good sound system become even more important.

If we can accurately draw the conclusion that the human mind/will is capable (given sufficient data) of believing godly premises and drawing godly conclusions, then evidences for the existence of God and the cross of Christ become increasingly critical. This of course leaves our conclusions at bay until science has completed all its investigations and has properly arrived at its final and undeniable (or at least probable) truth; this may take a while.

We all know that men make choices. The limits (or lack thereof) of one's ability to make godly choices will inevitably determine how he is approached with the message of salvation. A definition of Total Depravity:

Total Depravity Is/Is Not

Total Depravity relates to sin nature and the effects of the fall. It does not mean man is as evil as he can possibly be; he is not the devil. We are not speaking of abject or absolute depravity.

Total Depravity does mean that evil pervades every faculty of the soul. The whole of man's being (body, soul, mind, will) is affected by sin; so much so that he cannot/will not take one step toward heaven. Total Depravity is not so much intensive but extensive. The natural man can do no spiritual good.

The man who walks in the flesh is still wholly under the control of his fallen nature, the world and Satan. Though the natural man may not behave as poorly as he possibly can all the time, his rejection of Christ makes even his best works reprehensible before God for there is no sense in which his works are designed for the pleasure or obedience of God; his loyalties lie with another god.

A spouse may dress nicely, put on make-up, perfume, cologne, etc. so that they are very pleasing to the eye. They may appear outwardly beautiful to their wife/husband. But if it is found that they are dressing to please another, then we view the behavior as a tribute to infidelity.

The Scriptures and Human Nature

Does the Bible teach Total Depravity as defined above? Some general statements about the sinful nature of man are found in the following passages:

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man *was* great in the earth, and *that* every intent of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually (Genesis 6:5).

And the LORD smelled a soothing aroma. Then the LORD said in His heart, “I will never again curse the ground for man’s sake, although the imagination of man’s heart *is* evil from his youth (Genesis 8:21).

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me (Psalm 51:5).

The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies (Psalm 58:3).

But we are all like an unclean *thing* and all our righteousnesses *are* like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6).

The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked; who can know it (Jeremiah 17:9)?

Many of these passages are well-known to all. And there is a generally agreement, even among non-Calvinists, that man has a sin nature. But the extent of that sin nature becomes the lynch-pin of our understanding of the doctrines of grace. The Calvinist will assert that anti-Calvinists underestimate the effects of the fall on the will of man.

I. Able to Respond

We must then ask if fallen man is capable of a positive response to God. Has God left any of this in the hands of man? Many anti-Calvinists will even agree that God works first, but that He can be resisted. The question then is how much help does fallen man need before God finally leaves him to his own power or decision-making ability? As anti-Calvinist Laurence Vance aptly states,

...the heart of the matter is whether man has the free will to respond to the word of God and the Holy Spirit *without* being the subject of Unconditional Election and Irresistible Grace.⁸⁰

Another anti-Calvinist, George Bryson, states that God provides a way for the lost to “**avail themselves of** His Grace.”⁸¹ And finally there is the assertion of Norman Geisler that God “**will do everything within His loving power to save all He can.**” So what is the extent of God’s power?

Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save (Isaiah 59:1).

And if certain men don’t resist the Spirit of God the question must be asked, why? Why do some yield and others resist? What are these independent antecedent forces which determine a destiny of heaven or hell? If God’s grace does not irresistibly win the heart of fallen man, what does? A good upbringing? Fate? Luck? If a proper understanding of sin nature does not reveal that men are completely impotent to act or react to God and His promptings, what is the watershed lying in the soul, or will, of man that grants Him this ability to choose wisely (whether the choice is for God or anything else)? Seldom does one find anti-Calvinists willing to answer that question. It might be of interest here to consider some alternatives.

⁸⁰ Vance, p. 200.

⁸¹ Bryson, p. 72.

a. The Fatalism⁸² of the Materialist, Atheist

First, the materialist atheist, along the lines of Thomas Hobbes, believes that we are all merely matter in motion—molecules falling through space. They have great respect for the laws of physics—except, of course, for their insistence that from eternity past there somehow existed the materials for a potential explosion. The problem is multiplied when upon the realization that the laws of physics state that a stationery object will remain stationery until acted upon by an outside force. This potential explosion⁸³ should never have happened.

All of the sudden on a Thursday at 2:30 in the afternoon the laws of physics were violated (sounds like a miracle to me) and this material exploded. This, of course, leads to fatalism, for how can we go in any direction other than the one we been blown into by causal forces? There is no free will at all in the view of the materialist. We have no more freedom to choose this or that than an avalanche as the freedom to choose to rumble down the side of the mountain.

b. The Fatalism of Libertarian Free Will

Second, we have the theist who believes that God has chosen not to tamper with the will of man. This is known as *Libertarian Free Will*. This, they say, is God's way of respecting man. Of course I would much rather God disrespect me than for me to spend eternity in hell. Be that as it may, this differs little from the atheist/materialist, resulting in fatalism. One still must give an account for those independent antecedent causes which yield faith in some and rebellion in others.

And if it is not God who subdues the will of rebellious man, then what is? Since God created the world *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), presumably with a perfect notion of what would take place in His world, can God's providence be subtracted from the antecedent causes? In other words, even in this scenario, did not God put in motion those events which would inevitably lead to the rebel seeing,

⁸² The belief that events are determined by an impersonal fate and cannot be changed by human beings.

⁸³ Not to mention no explanation for where the objects came from in the first place.

or not seeing, the error of his way? It doesn't take too much ciphering to see that this view does not protect free will either.

It also doesn't take too much ciphering to recognize that in both these somewhat naturalistic views, it does not make sense to hold men accountable for their actions. We see this lived out in today's naturalistic legislative climate where people are being granted immunity because it can be shown that their crime was the inevitable result of their past.

c. The Unmoved Mover

Strong thinkers, capable of calculating an infinite regress⁸⁴ of their positions, are valuable resources when it comes to examining these types of subjects. One such strong thinker is J.P. Moreland. The conclusion he draws, however, is chilling.

Libertarians agree that event-event causation is the correct way to account for normal events in the natural world, like bricks breaking glasses. But when it comes to the free acts of persons, the person, as a substance and an agent directly produces the effect. Persons are agents and, as such, in free acts they either cause their acts for the sake of reasons (called agent causation) or their acts are simply uncaused events they spontaneously do by exercising their powers for the sake of reasons (called a noncausal theory of agency). Either way, persons are seen as first causes, unmoved movers who have the power to exercise the ability to act as the ultimate originators of their actions. It is the I, the self that acts; not a state in the self that causes a moving of some kind. Libertarians claim that their view makes sense of the difference between actions (expressed by the active voice, e.g., Jones raised his hand to vote) and mere happenings (expressed by the passive voice, e.g., a raising of the hand was

⁸⁴ An examination of where a certain proposition will inevitably lead us.

caused by a desiring to vote, which was caused by x, ...).⁸⁵

This is unsettling when one considers that the “unmoved mover” was Aristotle’s definition of God. When your infinite regress lands man’s will as being that which has been philosophically and historically defined as divine, you may wish to change your premise.

d. Numerous Arminians

There are numerous forms of Arminianism (Foreknowledge, Molinism, Pelagianism, etc.), but they all run into the same problem in terms of establishing a first cause.

e. The True First Cause

What we shall find is that the Calvinistic notion of the sovereignty of God and the will of man is the notion which grants both the greatest freedom to man, as well as culpability to man. This will be covered in greater detail later.

For now let us recognize that according to Scripture, there are no independent antecedent forces or causes operating outside the realm of God’s providence. In the most ultimate sense it is God and God alone who...

...has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him (Acts 17:26, 27).

II. The Inability of Man.

Furthermore the Scriptures bombard the notion that man, who has a sinful nature, is capable of a proper response to God.

⁸⁵ <http://afterall.net/index.php/papers/490579>

Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? *Then* may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil (Jeremiah 13:23)?

The implied answer to this question is ‘no’. One drop of poison makes the entire glass deadly. A bad tree can only produce bad fruit. Of course, the anti-Calvinist will now have to argue that there is nothing inherently ‘good’ about choosing God. We will address this momentarily.

Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin” (John 8:34).

Is Jesus using a poor metaphor? What makes a slave a slave other than his lack of freedom to operate outside the boundaries of his slavery? Whoever commits sin (everybody) is a slave of sin. Again, one must argue that unbelief is not a sin. For if unbelief is a sin then one can only operate within the boundaries of unbelief.

As it is written: “*There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God*” (Romans 3:10, 11).

We see here that one of the effects of the fall is a lacking of willingness to seek after God. Paul reveals the lack of ability of the natural man later in Romans where he writes,

Because the carnal mind *is* enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Romans 8:7, 8).

Finally, Jesus, speaking of whom He will raise up on the last day (a clear reference to salvation despite many objections by anti-Calvinists), gives yet another commentary on man’s lack of ability.

Jesus therefore answered and said to them, “Do not murmur among yourselves. No one can

come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:43, 44).

III. The Instrument of Faith

A critical question when it comes to Calvinism is the source of faith. From where do we get faith? Faith (in Christ), according to the Calvinist, is the instrument through which God grants justification. The granting of faith, according to Calvinism, is inextricably related to the cross. Faith is not something we add to the cross; it is something we get from the cross. I don't come to the cross with a faith produced from my own bowels. I am rather drawn to the cross with a faith granted by the very same cross. I don't climb Jacob's ladder; Jacob's ladder comes from heaven to me. From beginning to end the glory for my salvation belongs to Christ.

IV. Morally Neutral Faith?

It is a great error to view faith as something morally neutral. If faith is not a free gift from God, then it is the greatest work a man can possibly do. To the anti-Calvinist, faith must be understood as man's obedience to the First Commandment. The anti-Calvinist must argue that man, by virtue of his semi-fallen state, still has enough ability to obey and believe the First Commandment unto salvation.

It may be shocking to view faith as a work, but for the anti-Calvinist faith is the premiere work, it is the saving work; it is the added touch to the cross without which the cross would be utterly meaningless and impotent to save. To the anti-Calvinist faith must be a work because faithlessness, so far from being some neutral frame of mind, is clearly a sin.

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God (Hebrews 3:12).

The wages of sin (including the sin of unbelief) is death. Paul writes of this spiritual death.

And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1).

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses (Colossians 2:13).

The amount of rhetoric which seeks to wrench this verse (and its attending passage) from its intended instruction on people being spiritually dead (i.e. dead to God) is difficult to accept. How much help does the dead person need to be made alive? This may be a good place to deal with anti-Calvinistic illustrations.

a. The Injured Person

The anti-Calvinist often compares the sinner to an injured person who sees their need and simply cries for help; seems humble⁸⁶ enough. Until we realize that the injured person sees their need arising out of their own sinful state as an offense to God. But of course the unbeliever does not believe (in God), so why this sudden awareness of injury and need? Who opened their eyes to see this? And if the injury is death, there will be no cry for help.

b. The Drowning Person

In this scenario we are told that the gospel is like throwing the drowning person a life-saver. But of course, first you must realize you're drowning (representing a sinner in need of a Savior). How have you become aware of this while lying in a pool of death surrounded by other dead bodies? Why do you think you're drowning? And the inventor of this illustration must be unfamiliar with water safety for it is quite difficult to hang onto a life-saver amidst the overwhelming swells. It is especially difficult to hold on if you're already dead.

⁸⁶ Of course humility is a great virtue.

c. The Present

Another popular illustration is that of the gospel being a present that is given to you but is of no advantage to you until you open it. Depending upon the wrapping material some presents can be quite difficult to open; again, especially if you're dead. But is it true that the gift is of no advantage to me until I open it? Is not the gift mine? Do I not own it? Is it not part of my estate? To use a more biblical term, are not the contents of the gift imputed (credited to my account) to me? If, therefore, the gift is the gospel, and I die without opening it, will not the final accounting show that it belonged to me whether I opened it or not? And if God sees it as something on my ledger, will it not be accounted to me for righteousness? This illustration, of course, ignores the Calvinistic assertion that because of God's efficacious grace, the present is always opened.

d. The Pardon

We are then given the image of the criminal facing the death penalty. The governor grants a pardon but the criminal must receive it in order to avoid the execution. This again, assumes the criminal even knows he's a criminal and is under a death sentence. This assumes he recognizes the authority of the one giving the pardon. But even further, if the governor grants a pardon, it would be murderous to execute the man; he's been pardoned. The executioner has no more right to kill the man than he has to kill any man on the street who, for some strange reason, wishes to die.

V. The Strongest Inclination

One last thought regarding man's ability. It is asserted that God does His part but leaves the final decision to man—one man says yes, the other says no. But I believe the wheels come off the theological cart when one ponders a somewhat tautological (needlessly repetitive) statement made by Jonathon Edwards to the effect *that each man must follow his strongest inclination at the moment.*

The implications of such a statement are overwhelming. For it is not a matter of fallen man merely making a decision for Christ the

way we might choose chocolate over strawberry. It is fallen man making a decision for Christ which regards Christ above any and all other decisions in his life. The anti-Calvinist must argue that fallen man's strongest inclination is to follow Christ. And the anti-Calvinist must argue that it is fallen man's continued strongest inclination to follow Christ all his life.

One must then argue that the great martyr's strongest inclination was to choose Christ over life itself. The anti-Calvinist must argue that this inclination, this ability, was found in the nature of the sinner rather than in the power of God. Hopefully we all see that this assigns to the nature of man a virtue foreign to the descriptions offered by the Holy Text.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Review the context of this passage. What is the value of circumcision? What is the danger of circumcision? How were some of Paul's readers responding to his message?
2. Discuss the twisted reasoning found in verses 5-8. How does Paul respond to this reasoning?

Romans 3:9-20

Total Depravity – Part I

November 18, 2012

What then? Are we better *than they*? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written: “*There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one.*”

“*Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit;*”

“*The poison of asps is under their lips;*”

“*Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.*”

“*Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known.*”

“*There is no fear of God before their eyes.*”

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:9-20).⁸⁷

Introduction

Whilst eaves-dropping on a conversation between a seminary professor and a student, I was a bit struck by the professor’s argument against the Reformed Doctrines of Grace, i.e. Calvinism. It was Total Depravity in particular for which the professor had distaste (at least in this chapter of the conversation) and he referenced, in his critique of Total Depravity, the very chapter under our examination.

The professor didn’t offer any concrete refutation of this passage (at least not at this time); he merely sighed, “It’s all about Romans 3.” It appeared as if he thought Calvinists spent all their devotional energy meditating on a misunderstanding of the third

⁸⁷ *The New King James Version*. 1982 (Ro 3:9–20). Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

chapter of Romans—embracing and conveying a message, presumably, found nowhere else in Scripture.

Of course Romans 3 is a compilation of Old Testament Scriptures which Paul is using to demonstrate to those conversant with the Scriptures (his Jewish readers in particular), that they had missed an obvious message. It might be worth pointing out that the Old Testament passages Paul quotes to underscore the depravity of man also contain references to the salvation God will provide (Psalm 14:7; 53:6) finding its ultimate consummation in Christ Himself. Man's sin and God's grace is the message of Scripture from cover to cover.

It might also be worth pointing out that Paul offers a crescendo of man's universally depraved condition. He begins with a general statement of man's unrighteousness then moves to poisonous lips, culminating with a swiftness to shed blood. So it is not as if man's unwillingness to seek after God is merely some sort of inert sinfulness. The nature of man is such that his silent unbelief will eventually manifest itself in open and destructive rebellion against God and others. Calvin explains:

For as the best bond of mutual concord among us is the knowledge of God, (as he is the common Father of all, he wonderfully unites us, and without him there is nothing but disunion,) so inhumanity commonly follows where there is ignorance of God, as every one, when he despises others, loves and seeks his own good.⁸⁸

But it is not my purpose here to launch into a series on the cultural decimation which will inevitably follow the rejection of the grace of God in Christ. I would prefer to follow Paul's reasoning (at least as I understand it) as he proclaims the badness of the bad news in order that we might more fully comprehend the goodness of the Good News.

It's not as if those who embrace Total Depravity as an accurate assessment of human nature have some macabre, morbid, gothic fascination with sin. It is more, I would hope, that it is an

⁸⁸ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 3:12). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

increased appreciation for the power of Christ to rescue us from the danger of the abyss that we would otherwise be more than willing to jump in.

So, verses nine through twenty need to be studied with our head on a swivel to verses twenty-one and twenty-two:

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe (Romans 3:21, 22).

Years ago one of my children was in an automobile accident. When I was notified by phone of what happened, the first words conveyed to me were, “She is alright, but your daughter was in an accident,” lest there be even a moment when my heart would sink with fear.

Yet, in order for verses 21 and 22 (and the rest of Romans for that matter) to be fully appreciated, we must seek to fully grasp the axe Paul is putting to the tree of human ability. And since Total Depravity is a doctrine that, in our current culture, has found almost utter rejection among non-Christians and Christians alike, I think it necessary for me to address what Total Depravity is (and is not); what the objections are and what some answers might be to those objections—all that we might more appreciate **“the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe.”**

All under Sin

In the verses before us this morning we learn that all are **“under sin.”** When it comes to some human attribute—whether the attribute be pedigree, ethnicity, ethical maturity or humility, sin has its foot on the neck of mankind to the extent that no group of people or individual person should think they are better or better off than anyone else when it comes to attaining peace with God. Paul answers his own rhetorical question **“Are we better than they?”** with the phrase **“Not at all”**, perhaps to avoid misunderstanding. Notice also how he includes himself by asking the question in the first person plural.

Paul then proceeds to make his argument from Scripture (Psalm 14; 53; Ecclesiastes 7:20). His opening observation about human nature is that there is **“no one righteous, not one.”** There is a universal censure against the human race. And one consequence of this rebellious condition is that **“there is none who understands.”** This doesn’t mean that the natural man understands nothing at all. He understands that if he sticks his hand in boiling oil it will burn or even that if he combines certain chemicals it may heal. But he doesn’t understand the substance or essence of reality; and he certainly doesn’t understand how one might find peace with the God who made him.

In fact he has **“turned aside”** from that God—implying an active rebellion and in the final analysis he has become **“unprofitable”** in terms of what is truly of value. Finally, man, left to his own devices, will simply not do **“good.”** As Paul will later write:

But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe (Galatians 3:22).

Total Depravity

Since the Scriptures **“imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe”** it might behoove us at this juncture to embark upon a proper understanding of Total Depravity. My plan is to chip away at this over the next few weeks as we explain the passage before us. It has been suggested that a proper understanding of Total Depravity will logically (not to mention biblically) necessitate the remaining four principle categories of the well-known TULIP acronym for Calvinism. I don’t intend to go that far in this study. But I hope we will quickly see how important this subject is.

A proper comprehension of the nature of man is as important to understanding salvation as a proper comprehension of the disease is essential to finding the cure. Our understanding of what man can and cannot accomplish according to his own nature will inform how he is approached in terms of religion.

If we can safely draw the conclusion that the human psyche/emotions are still capable of a love for God, then emotional pleas will be preferable and effective; the lighting in the church and a good sound system become even more important.

If we can accurately draw the conclusion that the human mind/will is capable (given sufficient data) of believing godly premises and drawing godly conclusions, then evidences for the existence of God and the cross of Christ become increasingly critical. This of course leaves our conclusions at bay until science has completed all its investigations and has properly arrived at its final and undeniable (or at least probable) truth; this may take a while.

We all know that men make choices. The limits (or lack thereof) of one's ability to make godly choices will inevitably determine how he is approached with the message of salvation. A definition of Total Depravity:

Total Depravity Is/Is Not

What is Total Depravity? Total depravity relates to sin nature and the effects of the fall. It does not mean man is as evil as he can possibly be; he is not the devil. We are not speaking of abject or absolute depravity.

Total Depravity does mean that evil pervades every faculty of the soul. The whole of man's being (body, soul, mind, will) is affected by sin; so much so that he cannot/will not take one step toward heaven. Total Depravity is not so much intensive but extensive. The natural man can do no spiritual good.

The man who walks in the flesh is still wholly under the control of his fallen nature, the world and Satan. Though the natural man may not behave as poorly as he possibly can all the time, his rejection of Christ makes even his best works reprehensible before God for there is no sense in which his works are designed for the pleasure or obedience of God; his loyalties lie with another god.

A spouse may dress nicely, put on make-up, perfume, cologne, etc. so that they are very pleasing to the eye. They may appear

outwardly beautiful to their wife/husband. But if it is found that they are dressing to please another, then we view the behavior as a tribute to infidelity.

The Scriptures and Human Nature

Does the Bible teach Total Depravity as defined above? Some general statements about the sinful nature of man are found in the following passages:

Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man *was* great in the earth, and *that* every intent of the thoughts of his heart *was* only evil continually (Genesis 6:5).

And the LORD smelled a soothing aroma. Then the LORD said in His heart, “I will never again curse the ground for man’s sake, although the imagination of man’s heart *is* evil from his youth (Genesis 8:21).

Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me (Psalm 51:5).

The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies (Psalm 58:3).

But we are all like an unclean *thing* and all our righteousnesses *are* like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6).

The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked; who can know it (Jeremiah 17:9)?

Many of these passages are well-known to all. And there is a generally agreement, even among non-Calvinists, that man has a sin nature. But the extent of that sin nature becomes the lynch-pin of our

understanding of the doctrines of grace. The Calvinist will assert that anti-Calvinists underestimate the effects of the fall on the will of man.

I. Able to Respond

We must then ask if fallen man is capable of a positive response to God. Has God left any of this in the hands of man? Many anti-Calvinists will even agree that God works first; but that He can be resisted. The question then is how much help does fallen man need before God finally leaves him to his own power or decision-making ability? As anti-Calvinist Laurence Vance aptly states,

...the heart of the matter is whether man has the free will to respond to the word of God and the Holy Spirit *without* being the subject of Unconditional Election and Irresistible Grace.⁸⁹

Another anti-Calvinist, George Bryson, states that God provides a way for the lost to “**avail themselves of**” of His Grace.⁹⁰ And finally there is the assertion of Norman Geisler that God “**will do everything within His loving power to save all He can.**” So what is the extent of God’s power?

Behold, the Lord’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save (Isaiah 59:1).

And if certain men don’t resist the Spirit of God the question must be asked, why? Why do some yield and others resist? What are these independent antecedent forces which determine a destiny of heaven or hell? If God’s grace does not irresistibly win the heart of fallen man, what does? A good upbringing? Fate? Luck? If a proper understanding of sin nature does not reveal that men are completely impotent to act or react to God and His promptings, what is the watershed lying in the soul, or will, of man that grants Him this ability to choose wisely (whether the choice is for God or anything else)? These are some questions we will pursue in our next meeting.

⁸⁹ Vance, p. 200.

⁹⁰ Bryson, p. 72.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. In general, what does Romans 3:9-20 appear to be about?
2. Discuss the “crescendo” Paul uses to describe human nature.
3. Why should we study Total Depravity? What should we always be aware of as we study Total Depravity?
4. What does it mean that all are “under sin”?
5. How will our understanding of human nature affect the way we present the gospel?
6. Define *Total Depravity*—what it is and what it is not.
7. Discuss man’s ability to respond to the gospel.

Romans 3:9-20

Total Depravity – Part II

November 25, 2012

What then? Are we better *than they*? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written: “*There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one.*”

“*Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit;*”

“*The poison of asps is under their lips;*”

“*Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.*”

“*Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known.*”

“*There is no fear of God before their eyes.*”

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:9-20).

Introduction

We finished last time asking the questions:

- Why is it that certain people do not resist the Spirit of God?
- Why do some yield and others resist?
- What are these independent antecedent forces which determine a destiny of heaven or hell?
- If God’s grace does not irresistibly win the heart of fallen man, what does? Is it a good upbringing? Is it fate? Is it luck?
- If a proper understanding of sin nature does not reveal that men are completely impotent to act or react to God and His promptings, what is the watershed laying in the soul or will of man that grants Him this ability to choose wisely?

Review

Romans 3:10-18 is a compilation of Old Testament Scriptures, which Paul is using to demonstrate to those conversant with the Scriptures (his Jewish readers in particular) that they had missed an obvious message concerning the depravity of man—a depravity that crescendos from indifference to God to deceitful lips (no doubt to justify/rationalize that indifference), culminating with a swiftness to shed blood. The nature of man is as such that his silent unbelief will eventually manifest itself in open and destructive rebellion against God and others.

Paul appears here to be proclaiming the badness of the bad news in order that we might more fully comprehend and appreciate the goodness of the Good News. We must know from what we have been rescued—the devil, the world and our own flesh—the third in this case being Paul’s focus.

Verses nine through 20 need to be studied in light of verses 21 and 22, which teach of **“the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ.”**

Paul taught in verses nine and ten that all are **“under sin”** and **“No one (is) righteous, not one...there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God.”** We didn’t speak a great deal on the statement that there is **“none who seeks after God”** but it is a bit of a shocking statement. Not to overstate the issue, but in our current sub-series on Total Depravity, we’ve drawn the reasonable conclusion that our understanding of human nature will determine in large part our ministerial approach.

We are told here that no one seeks after God, yet many churches build their entire ministerial system upon the notion of seekers—seeker-centered or seeker-sensitive churches. Not that churches should ignore or be insensitive to visitors, but it often goes beyond mere sensitivity to someone who may not completely grasp the message or event of church.⁹¹ That methodology makes a false assumption about the nature of the visitor and that false assumption often influences church itself.

Not only is there no true seeker, Paul informs us that all have **“turned aside”** from the very God we mistakenly assume people seek and therefore have become **“unprofitable”** in terms of what is truly

⁹¹ There is a difference between seeker-centered and user-friendly.

of value. Finally, man, left to his own devices, will simply not do **“good.”** As Paul will later write, the Scriptures **“imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (Galatians 3:22).**

Being **“imprisoned under sin”** (I think it is safe to say) is synonymous with Total Depravity. This appears to be Paul’s point in this chapter (if not the first three chapters of Romans), so we are currently chipping away at the very unpopular, yet critical, notion of Total Depravity. But first, let us look at verses 13 and 14 as they testify of the verbal consequences of turning away from the knowledge of God.

“Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit”; “The poison of asps is under their lips”; “Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness” (Romans 3:13, 14).

Open Tombs...Poisonous Lips

The particular tomb of the human throat is not a sealed tomb but an open one—beckoning for more inhabitants to join them in that chamber of death. This reference is from Psalm 5:

For there is no truth in their mouth; their inmost self is destruction; their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue (Psalm 5:9).

The particular method the Psalmist refers to here is flattery—which probably accomplishes much more than we are willing to admit. This open grave may look more like a party in your honor than a tomb, yet when the door shuts behind you it contains the horrors of hell. Paul then calls on Psalm 140:

They make their tongue sharp as a serpent’s, and under their lips is the venom of asps (Psalm 140:3).

One is tempted here to launch into the numerous ways meaningless dialogue pervades our current culture—from movie scripts to political debates. Suffice it to say, people can be slick in

their verbal discourse and the bite of an asp does much less damage than the venom once it enters the system. So far from being bit by serpents, Christ calls us to be as wise as serpents and yet as innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16). Jesus also taught that out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks (Matthew 12:34). We need to be careful that we are not influenced by the serpent's tongue, for if we are, we most assuredly will reproduce that venom in our hearts and words.

Paul writes that the mouth of the man, left to his own devices, is **“full of cursing and bitterness.”** “Cursing” *aras* means to wish evil against and “bitterness” *pikrias* means to resent or hate. By contrast, Proverbs teaches:

The lips of the righteous feed many, but fools die for lack of sense (Proverbs 10:21).

And the apex of that contrast will be presented by Paul in a later verse where Paul will again quote from the Old Testament (Isaiah 52:7):

How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things (Romans 10:15)!

Total Depravity Continued

This brings us back to our study of Total Depravity—recognizing that God has determined what words, what message, are to be used to break the heart of man and redeem this fallen creature. As mentioned last time, a proper comprehension of the nature of man is as important to understanding salvation as a proper comprehension of the disease is essential to finding the cure. Our understanding of what man can and cannot accomplish according to his own nature will inform how he is approached in terms of religion. This makes a definition of Total Depravity essential to ministerial faithfulness.

In our last meeting we defined Total Depravity—it is not that man is as evil as he can be, but rather that sin pervades every faculty of the soul. The whole of man's being (body, soul, mind, will) is affected by sin, so much so he cannot/will not take one step toward

heaven. The natural man can do no spiritual good. We gave numerous passages to demonstrate that biblically incontrovertible fact. Of course, those Christians (non-Christians as well) who resist a Reformed understanding of Total Depravity have those passages in their Bibles as well. But, as mentioned last time, they arrive elsewhere in their understanding of human nature, especially as it relates to man's ability to respond to God. Along with this there is, of course, enormous disagreement on the nature of God as well—as pointed out in the following quotations:

Anti-Calvinist Laurence Vance aptly states,

...the heart of the matter is whether man has the free will to respond to the word of God and the Holy Spirit *without* being the subject of Unconditional Election and Irresistible Grace.⁹²

Another anti-Calvinist, George Bryson, states that God provides a way for the lost to “**avail themselves of**” of His Grace.”⁹³ And finally, Norman Geisler teaches that God “**will do everything within His loving power to save all He can.**”

Vance implies that it is free will to respond to God; Bryson suggests that man must avail themselves of God's grace; Geisler teaches that God does everything He can. What is clear in all of these views (and the many variations thereof) is that man, and not God, is the final determiner of his own destiny.

I would like to conclude this morning's treatment of Total Depravity with a brief examination of some of the options given in answer to the final question in our introduction:

- If a proper understanding of sin nature does not reveal that men are completely impotent to act or react to God and His promptings, what is the watershed laying in the soul or will of man that grants Him this ability to choose wisely?

Seldom does one find anti-Calvinists willing to answer that question. It might be of interest here to consider some alternatives.

⁹² Vance, p. 200.

⁹³ Bryson, p. 72.

Fatalism⁹⁴ of the Materialist, Atheist

Our first option is one that would cause most Christians to recoil—yet it becomes, in one way or another, the *de facto* conclusion of many within the church.

This option is the fatalism that accompanies materialist atheism. Along the lines of Thomas Hobbes, fatalistic, materialistic atheism proposes that we are all merely matter in motion—molecules falling through space. They have great respect for the laws of physics—except, of course, for their insistence that from eternity past there somehow existed the materials for a potential explosion. The problem is multiplied with the particular law of physics which states that a stationery object will remain stationery *until acted upon by an outside force*. This potential explosion should never have happened.⁹⁵

All of the sudden on a Thursday at 2:30 in the afternoon the laws of physics were violated (sounds like a miracle to me) and this material exploded. This, of course, leads to fatalism, for how can we go in any direction other than the one we been blown into by these initial causal forces? There is no free will at all in the view of the materialist. We have no more freedom to choose this or that than an avalanche has the freedom to choose to rumble down the side of the mountain.

The Fatalism of Libertarian Free Will

Second, we have the theist who believes that God has chosen not to tamper with the will of man. This is known as *Libertarian Free Will*. This, they say, is God's way of respecting man. Of course I would much rather God disrespect me than for me to spend eternity in hell. Be that as it may, this differs little from the atheist/materialist, resulting in fatalism. One still must give an account for those independent antecedent causes which yield faith in some and rebellion in others.

And if it is not God who subdues the will of rebellious man, then what is? Since God created the world *ex nihilo* (out of nothing), presumably with a perfect notion of what would take place in His

⁹⁴ The belief that events are determined by an impersonal fate and cannot be changed by human beings.

⁹⁵ Not to mention no explanation for where the objects came from in the first place.

world, can God's providence be subtracted from the antecedent causes? In other words, even in this scenario, did not God put in motion those events which would inevitably lead to the rebel seeing, or not seeing, the error of his way? It doesn't take too much ciphering to see that this view does not protect free will either.

It also doesn't take too much ciphering to recognize that in both these somewhat naturalistic views, it does not make sense to hold men accountable for their actions. We see this lived out in today's naturalistic legislative climate where people are being granted immunity because it can be shown that their crime was the inevitable result of their past.

The Unmoved Mover

Strong thinkers, capable of calculating the necessary infinite regress⁹⁶ of their positions, are valuable resources when it comes to examining these types of subjects. One such strong thinker is J.P. Moreland. The conclusion he draws, however, is chilling.

Libertarians agree that event-event causation is the correct way to account for normal events in the natural world, like bricks breaking glasses. But when it comes to the free acts of persons, the person, as a substance and an agent directly produces the effect. Persons are agents and, as such, in free acts they either cause their acts for the sake of reasons (called agent causation) or their acts are simply uncaused events they spontaneously do by exercising their powers for the sake of reasons (called a noncausal theory of agency). Either way, persons are seen as first causes, unmoved movers who have the power to exercise the ability to act as the ultimate originators of their actions. It is the I, the self that acts; not a state in the self that causes a moving of some kind. Libertarians claim that their view makes sense of the difference between actions (expressed by the active voice, e.g., Jones raised his hand to vote) and mere happenings (expressed by

⁹⁶ An examination of where a certain proposition will inevitably lead us.

the passive voice, e.g., a raising of the hand was caused by a desiring to vote, which was caused by x, ...).⁹⁷

This is unsettling when one considers that the “unmoved mover” was Aristotle’s definition of God. When your infinite regress lands man’s will as being that which has been philosophically and historically defined as divine, you may wish to change your premise. We haven’t time to engage all the options. There are numerous forms of Arminianism (Foreknowledge, Molinism, Pelagianism, etc.), but they all run into the same problem in terms of establishing a first cause.

What is the true first cause of man’s redemption? In light of man’s nature, what will Paul (and the rest of Scripture, for that matter) describe as the ultimate source of our hope? And in light of that, what will Scripture prescribe as the means by which that hope is accessed? These we will discuss as we continue next time.

⁹⁷ <http://afterall.net/index.php/papers/490579>
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Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Review Romans 3:10-18. What was the obvious message Paul's readers had missed? How are we to understand the nature of man? Why is it important to understand the badness of the bad news? What are some other observations made?
2. How can lips be like an open tomb?
3. What kind of poison is found under the lips of sinful people?
4. Compare the lips of sinfulness versus the beautiful feet of which Paul writes.
5. Review what has been said about what Total Depravity is/is not.
6. You've read some quotes from Christian writers who don't believe in Total Depravity as defined by the reformers. What are the merits or weaknesses of their position?
7. What is fatalism and how can it be seen in varying forms of "free will"?
8. Discuss the will of man as the "unmoved mover".

Romans 3:9-20

Total Depravity – Part III

January 6, 2013

What then? Are we better *than they*? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written: “*There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one.*”

“*Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit;*”

“*The poison of asps is under their lips;*”

“*Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.*”

“*Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known.*”

“*There is no fear of God before their eyes.*”

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:9-20).

Review

In Romans 3:10-18 the Apostle Paul provides a series of Old Testament Scriptures to demonstrate to those conversant with the Scriptures (his Jewish readers in particular) that they had missed an obvious message concerning the depravity of man—a depravity that crescendos from indifference to God to deceitful lips (no doubt to justify/rationalize that indifference), culminating with a swiftness to shed blood. The nature of man is such that his silent unbelief will eventually manifest itself in open and destructive rebellion against God and others.

Why might the Scriptures contain such an indictment against the human race? Paul appears here to be proclaiming the badness of the bad news in order that we might more fully comprehend and appreciate the goodness of the Good News. We must know from

what we have been rescued—the devil, the world and our own flesh—the third in this case being Paul’s focus. In order for our hearts to turn to that which is capable, it helps for us to know of that which is incapable—especially as it relates to redemption.

Romans 3:9-20 needs to be studied in light of verses 21 and 22 which teach of **“the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ.”**

Paul taught in verses 9 and 10 that all are **“under sin”** and **“No one (is) righteous, not one...there is none who understands.”** He also made the shocking statement that there is **“none who seeks after God.”** Not to overstate the issue, but in our current sub-series on Total Depravity, it seems reasonable to conclude that our understanding of human nature plays a significant role in a wide variety of issues: Our ministerial approach; our own humility before man and God; the elevation of our worship of God for, as John Newton wrote, having “saved a wretch like me.”

We are informed that no one seeks after God, yet many churches build their entire ministerial system (both in worship and theology) upon the notion of seekers—seeker-centered or seeker-sensitive churches. Not that churches should ignore or be insensitive to visitors, but it often goes beyond mere sensitivity to a visitor. When a methodology makes a false assumption about the nature of the man it will often make false assumptions about church or Christianity itself.

We see a message in many churches and para-church organizations that assumes an ability or willingness on the part of the natural man that is at odds with what Paul presents here. It is safe to say that many of our interpersonal issues with our neighbors and family (which so often flow from a sense of entitlement) stem from an unwillingness to be honest and grateful about what we deserve and have been delivered from as sinners. Our very approach to worship and what it should consist of and look like will be severely altered based upon our understanding of human nature as we interact with a holy God.

Not only is there no true seeker, Paul informs us that all have **“turned aside”** from the very God we mistakenly assume people seek and therefore have become **“unprofitable”** in terms of what is truly of value. Man, left to his own devices, simply will not do **“good.”** As Paul later writes, the Scriptures (that is, the message of the

Scriptures) **“imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (Galatians 3:22).**

I think it is safe to say that being **“imprisoned under sin”** is synonymous with Total Depravity. This appears to be Paul’s point in this chapter (if not the first three chapters of Romans), so we are currently chipping away at the very unpopular, yet critical, notion of Total Depravity. Again, Paul, in this crescendo of man’s depravity, moves from silent indifference to the verbal consequences of turning away from the knowledge of God. This is seen in verses 13 and 14 where he compares man’s throat to an open tomb; tongues that practice deceit; poison under the lips and mouths full of cursing and bitterness.

Therefore, what is to be expected from the natural man is not merely silent rebellion. As men live out their depraved estate, they will seek to justify their thoughts and deeds through the means of deceit. They will also viciously castigate the things of God and those who believe in those things; this is a practice, sadly, observed with great regularity in the apostate culture in which we live.

Christians should not be discouraged when they find themselves surrounded by this behavior. Also, and perhaps more importantly, we should not allow ourselves to be persuaded by the deceit but rather:

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful (Hebrews 10:23).

Paul will later present the great contrast to the deceitful lips, where he will again quote from the Old Testament (Isaiah 52:7):

How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things (Romans 10:15)!

But Paul is not through. The silent indifference which escalates to deceit climbs yet another wrung on the ladder of darkness.

“Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Romans 3:15-17).

Swift to Shed Blood

This quotation from Isaiah 59:7 has a full and stunning context. Along with feet running to evil and swiftness to shed blood (verse 7), the passage in Isaiah speaks of the absence of justice (verses 8, 9); the multiplication of our transgressions, the knowledge of our own iniquity and how it testifies against us in the denying of the Lord and the turning back from following our God (verses 12, 13); how truth stumbles in the public squares and that uprightness cannot enter (verse 14); that he who departs from evil makes himself a prey—in other words, it is going to be very difficult to do the right thing (verse 15).

How many throughout the course of history have seen this played out in severe detail? Yet even in the Old Testament passage, some 700 years before the birth of Christ, we see the gospel, we see Christ!

Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey. The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede; then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him. He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak. According to their deeds, so will he repay, wrath to his adversaries, repayment to his enemies; to the coastlands he will render repayment. So they shall fear the name of the LORD from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun; for he will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the LORD drives. “And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression,” declares the LORD. “As for Me,”

says the Lord, “this is My covenant with them: My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your descendants’ descendants,” says the Lord, “from this time and forevermore” (Isaiah 59:15-21).

Both in the Old and New Testaments the testimony of man’s sinfulness is accompanied by the testimony of God’s faithfulness, justice and mercy. The only ones who will stand in judgment are the ones who, by faith, find themselves united to and hidden in the Judge Himself.

By concise definition, Paul is teaching that human beings, left to their own devices, will become murderous with the slightest provocation—respect for human life becomes meaningless or miniscule. By **“destruction and misery”** *syntrimma* and *talaiporia* he is not referring to a personal or emotional experience of unhappiness (though it may certainly include that) but to a desire to inflict others. And when we read **“the way of peace they have no known,”** Thomas Schreiner explains that it...

...is not a comment on the anxiety and turbulence dwelling in their hearts. Rather, the violent and savage behavior of human beings.⁹⁸

Schreiner continues in his explanation of man’s lack of fear of God:

No Fear of God

Sin is fundamentally theological in nature, but it has terrible sociological consequences. The barbarity of human beings to one another is

⁹⁸ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Vol. 6: Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (166–167). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

ultimately explicable by a rejection of God and the failure to fear and honor him.⁹⁹

Paul writes that man has no “**fear of God before his eyes.**” This virtue of the fear of God, this analysis of human nature, is often scoffed at by those raised within the comfortable borders of a nation such as ours, founded on strong biblical principles—a people who have experienced unprecedented military peace and prosperity. But it is folly to conclude that human peace (with God or each other) can be found or maintained through the vehicle of human virtue or innovation.

There is common criticism against those who would seek to live a life pleasing to God. People are fond of quoting Einstein, who apparently said something to the effect:

If people are good only because they fear punishment, and hope for reward, then we are a sorry lot indeed.

First, this is not an accurate assessment of Christianity (perhaps it was influenced more by Einstein’s Jewish heritage). Christians seek to do good because they have escaped punishment by the grace of God, not in order to secure it. And their hope is not a wish the way one might hope for good weather or to win the lottery. It is a sure expectation of heavenly peace founded on the promise of God through the cross of Christ.

That being said, what people fail to realize is that when man seeks to remove God from the equation of his existence, ‘good’ itself loses definition and the human race will find itself oppressed by the despots who have decided the fear of God, and goodness defined by God, is an outdated concept. I use “despot” only to make a point. It can apply to any person who operates as if they are the sole and final ethical authority in any relationship. Charles Hodge aptly states:

They act as if there were no God, no Being to whom they are responsible for their conduct, and who has

⁹⁹ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Vol. 6: Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (167). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

the purpose and power to punish them for their iniquity.¹⁰⁰

And before our minds begin to swing to those who we feel fall into this category, let us keep in mind that the indictment is against the entire human race—pushing us to recognize that our only deliverance is found in Christ.

Total Depravity

I don't intend to recap our entire series on Total Depravity. Suffice it to say that the concept of Total Depravity means that the whole of man's being (body, soul, mind, will) is affected by sin to the degree that he cannot and, in fact, will not seek to take one step toward true heaven. The natural man can do no spiritual good.

We spoke of the more popular view pervasive in our culture which teaches that man is capable, according to his nature, of availing Himself of God's grace or that God **“will do everything within His loving power to save all He can.”** What we inevitably hear in contemporary gospel presentations is that God makes an offer then puts His hands gently and passively behind His back, waiting for man to make the right decision.

And whereas the call to believe is certainly to be issued, it is also true that man has a moral responsibility to believe in and obey the God who made him. The notion of God being passive at any time and in any way when it comes to salvation is contrary to the power of the cross and to the nature of man as taught in this passage.

The Scriptures bombard us with the notion that man, who has a sinful nature, is incapable of a proper response to God.

Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? *Then* may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil (Jeremiah 13:23)?

The implied answer to this question is 'no'. One drop of poison makes the entire glass deadly. A bad tree can only produce bad fruit.

¹⁰⁰ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 80.

Jesus answered them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin” (John 8:34).

Is Jesus using a poor metaphor? What makes a slave a slave other than his lack of freedom to operate outside the boundaries of his slavery? Whoever commits sin (everybody) is a slave of sin. Again, one must argue that unbelief is not a sin. For if unbelief is a sin then one can only operate within the boundaries of unbelief.

The Instrument of Faith

Therefore, a critical question when it comes to Calvinism is the source of belief or saving faith. From where do we get faith? Faith (in Christ), according to the Calvinist, is the instrument through which God grants justification. The granting of faith, according to Calvinism, is inextricably related to the cross. Faith is not something we bring to or add to the cross; it is something we get from the cross. I don't come to the cross with a faith produced from my own nature. I am rather drawn to the cross with a faith granted by the very same cross. From beginning to end the glory for my salvation belongs to Christ.

It is a great error to view faith as something morally neutral. If faith is not a free gift from God, then it is the greatest work a man can possibly do. To those who are opposed to the reformed doctrines of grace, faith must be understood as man's obedience to the First Commandment. They must argue that man, by virtue of his semi-fallen state, still has enough ability to obey and believe the First Commandment unto salvation.

It may be shocking to view faith as a work, but for those who reject Total Depravity faith is the premiere work, it is the saving work; it is the added touch to the cross without which the cross would be utterly meaningless and impotent to save. Faith, accordingly, but unthinkably, must be a work because faithlessness, so far from being some neutral frame of mind, is clearly a sin.

Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God (Hebrews 3:12).

The wages of sin (including the sin of unbelief) is death. Paul writes of this spiritual death.

And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1).

And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses (Colossians 2:13).

How much help does the dead person need to be made alive? And it is here that those who reject Total Depravity, perhaps unwittingly, form illustrations which may be heartfelt but misguided in their evangelistic efforts.

The Injured Person

The anti-Calvinist often compares the sinner to an injured person who sees their need and simply cries for help; seems humble¹⁰¹ enough. Until we realize that the injured person sees their need arising out of their own sinful state as an offense to God. But of course the unbeliever does not believe (in God), so why this sudden awareness of injury and need? Who opened their eyes to see this? And if the injury is death, there will be no cry for help.

The Drowning Person

In this scenario we are told that the gospel is like throwing the drowning person a life-saver. But of course, first you must realize you're drowning (representing a sinner in need of a Savior). How have you become aware of this while lying in a pool of death surrounded by other dead bodies? Why do you think you're drowning? And the inventor of this illustration is must be unfamiliar with water safety for it is quite difficult to hang onto a life-saver amidst the overwhelming swells. It is especially difficult to hold on if you're already dead.

¹⁰¹ Of course humility is a great virtue.

The Present

Another popular illustration is that of the gospel being a present that is given to you but is of no advantage to you until you open it. Depending upon the wrapping material some presents can be quite difficult to open; again, especially if you're dead. But is it true that the gift is of no advantage to me until I open it? Is not the gift mine? Do I not own it? Is it not part of my estate? To use a more biblical term, are not the contents of the gift imputed (credited to my account) to me? If, therefore, the gift is the gospel, and I die without opening it, will not the final accounting show that it belongs to me whether I opened it or not? And if God sees it as something on my ledger, will it not be accounted to me for righteousness? This illustration, of course, ignores the Calvinistic assertion that because of God's efficacious grace, the present is always opened.

The Pardon

We are then given the image of the criminal facing the death penalty. The governor grants a pardon but the criminal must receive it in order to avoid the execution. This, again, assumes the criminal even knows he's a criminal and is under a death sentence. This assumes he recognizes the authority of the one giving the pardon. But even further, if the governor grants a pardon, it would be murderous to execute the man; he's been pardoned. The executioner has no more right to kill the man than he has to kill any man on the street who, for some strange reason, wishes to die.

The Strongest Inclination

One last thought regarding man's ability. It is asserted that God does His part but leaves the final decision to man—one man says yes, the other says no. But I believe the wheels come off the theological cart when one ponders a somewhat tautological (needlessly repetitive) statement made by Jonathon Edwards to the effect *that each man must follow his strongest inclination at the moment.*

The implications of such a statement are overwhelming. For it is not a matter of fallen man merely making a decision for Christ the

way we might choose chocolate over strawberry. It is fallen man making a decision for Christ which regards Christ above any and all other decisions in his life. The anti-Calvinist must argue that fallen man's strongest inclination is to follow Christ. And the anti-Calvinist must argue that it is fallen man's continued strongest inclination to follow Christ all his life.

One must then argue that the great martyr's strongest inclination was to choose Christ over life itself. The anti-Calvinist must argue that this inclination, this ability, was found in the nature of the sinner rather than in the power of God. It certainly appears that this assigns to the nature of man a virtue foreign to the descriptions offered by the Holy Text.

I address these popular views not to unnecessarily attack other professing Christians with whom I might have a minor disagreement. I think a proper understanding of our nature is critical to our ministerial efforts, our sanctification and our proper worship of God. Calvin profoundly comments:

What, then? There is no doubt but that the character of men is described in those words, in order that we may see what man is when left to himself; for Scripture testifies that all men are in this state, who are not regenerated by the grace of God. The condition of the saints would be nothing better, were not this depravity corrected in them: and that they may still remember that they differ nothing from others by nature, they do find in the relics of their flesh (by which they are always encompassed) the seeds of those evils, which would constantly produce fruits, were they not prevented by being mortified; and for this mortification they are indebted to God's mercy and not to their own nature.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 3:18). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Review the context of this passage. What appears to be Paul's point in verses 10-18? Discuss human nature. Why is this information important?
2. Paul writes that the natural man is swift to shed blood. Read the passage from which he quotes in the Old Testament (Isaiah 59:7-20) and discuss your observations. Do you see these human attributes in today's culture? Where is the gospel in that passage?
3. Will man's silent rebellion against God remain silent? What will it end up looking like?
4. Is the fear of God a good thing? Do Christians obey God because of fear of punishment or hope of reward? Explain.
5. What happens to notions like "goodness" when man seeks to remove God from the equation of his existence?
6. Define Total Depravity. What is it? What is it not?
7. Is man, according to his own nature, capable of a positive response to God? Explain and use Scripture to support your answer.
8. Is faith a work?
9. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the common scenarios used to present the gospel.
10. Is it necessary that each man must follow his strongest inclination at the moment? What are the implications of such a statement?

Romans 3:21-26

The Acropolis of the Christian Faith – Part I

January 20, 2013

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth *as* a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:21-26).

Introduction

A 19th century German theologian by the name of Hermann Olshausen referred to the passage before us as the “Acropolis of the Christian faith”—the Acropolis being that ancient citadel above the city of Athens containing buildings of monumental significance, including the Parthenon. One might think of it as a sort of fortress.

If Olshausen is correct (and one would be hard-pressed to find a theologian who would disagree) then we would be forced to conclude that for the church to allow the message found in this passage to be corrupted or shrink into insignificance or obscurity puts the church in danger of losing its salt (Matthew 5:13) or having its lampstand removed entirely (Revelation 2:5).

The thought forces me to examine how far I allow myself to stray from the centrality of the Christian message. It should encourage us all to listen with a discerning ear to the Christian teachers which have gained prominence in our current age. How long would we listen before we heard some exposition of these powerful yet gracious words of the apostle?

Paul’s apparent diatribe regarding the sinful estate of man found in the words leading up to this passage might be thought of as a tilling of the heart in preparation for these words and the Old

Testament examples that will follow in the chapters to come. He has spent the bulk of three chapters cutting us off at the knees (or explaining the depth of our true affliction) that we might learn how to actually walk upright. It would appear that sin has so affected us that we cannot even properly ascertain our problem and, therefore, have little appreciation for the solution. But the Master Physician (Matthew 9:12), having graciously informed us of our true disease, now sets forth the only cure.

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets (Romans 3:21).

The Righteousness of God

“But now” designates a temporal shift. Something has now happened. Even the secular world recognizes this as the turning point in history. Redemptive history, prior to the birth of Christ, looked forward to this and we look back. Paul calls us to fix our eyes upon the revelation of the **“righteousness of God.”**

There is some debate as to what Paul means, at least here, by the **“righteousness of God.”** Some would argue that it primarily refers to the righteousness found in the character of God Himself—this is certainly not a far-fetched idea. But I choose to agree with Hodge, who explains this to be...

...the righteousness of which God is the author, which comes from him, which he gives, and which consequently is acceptable in his sight.¹⁰³

In the prior verse (Romans 3:20) Paul had explained how through the **“deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight.”** How then will sinful men find themselves pardoned before a holy God? Assuming we recognize this as our greatest dilemma!

In this verse alone we learn at least two things: First, it (the pardon of God) is **“apart from the law.”** In other words, it is not by human effort. Even if sinful men were inclined to seek after God (something Paul has already taught doesn't happen) all that man could offer God is his own sin. Second, we will learn that **“the Law and**

¹⁰³ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Romans*. P. 88
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the Prophets” gave witness to this message. Jesus did not come to establish some new religion. The Law and the Prophets, which is understood to refer to the whole of the Old Testament, chronicles the message of the redemption found in Christ from the beginning of history.

This both answers the naysayers who critique and dismiss the Christian faith as a sort of Johnny-come-lately religion without the historical chops of older systems and it also, more importantly, opens the Old Testament as a book about Christ. Sometimes it is the Old Testament over the New that reveals the flesh upon the bones of the work of Christ. As a simple example, all four gospels give a very brief description of the crucifixion—usually simply the words “and they crucified Him.” But Psalm 22 provides more information on that event than we might be comfortable with.

Paul continues to emphasize “**the righteousness of God**” in the following verse.

...even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference (Romans 3:22).

An Indiscriminate Gift

It is a great and recurring theme of the Apostle Paul (both in his message and his own peace) that he was found in Christ...

...not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith (Philippians 3:9b).

As we shall see, this righteousness is an indiscriminate gift. When Paul writes that there is “**no difference**” he is harkening back to his prior lesson on the universal sinfulness of man. The Christian faith is tailor-made for sinners. The Westminster Confessions says it severely, comfortably and beautifully:

As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.¹⁰⁴

The Gift of Faith

And how is this great comfort made mine? It has been explained:

That the righteousness of God which is revealed in the gospel is to be attained by faith, not by works, not by birth, not by any external rite, not by union with any visible Church, but simply and only by believing on Christ, receiving and resting upon him.¹⁰⁵

Some might say that it does discriminate—it is given to those who believe. The argument would be sensible if belief itself was not part of the gift or was at least the instrument God provides to deliver the gift.

Faith is not a vacuum constructed by man by which we seek to reach heaven in order to inhale and apprehend Christ and the blessings of eternal bliss; it is rather a hose provided by God with which he effectively douses us from the slumber of our spiritual death with the truth of His word that we might perceive our sin and come to know from whence our deliverance comes—which is Christ alone.

The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold (Psalm 18:2).

The rock is Christ (1 Corinthians 10:3) and we are called to believe:

¹⁰⁴ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. XV, 4. 1996. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

¹⁰⁵ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Romans*. P. 90

Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for if you do not believe that I am *He*, you will die in your sins (John 8:24).

Justifying Faith

What is a good definition of Justifying Faith? The Westminster Catechism gives a good one. Notice at the beginning that it is a saving grace.

Justifying faith is a saving grace, (Heb. 10:39) wrought in the heart of a sinner by the Spirit (2 Cor. 4:13, Eph. 1:17–19) and word of God, (Rom. 10:14–17) whereby he, being convinced of his sin and misery, and of the disability in himself and all other creatures to recover him out of his lost condition, (Acts 2:37, Acts 16:30, John 16:8–9, Rom. 5:6, Eph. 2:1, Acts 4:12) not only assenteth to the truth of the promise of the gospel, (Eph. 1:13) but received and rested upon Christ and his righteousness, therein held forth, for pardon of sin, (John 1:12, Acts 16:31, Acts 10:43) and for the accepting and accounting of his person righteous in the sight of God for salvation. (Phil. 3:9, Acts 15:11)¹⁰⁶

And why is this so vital—so critical?

...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

God's Opinion

There is no “have” in the original. This verse literally reads “**for all sinned**” which could be a reference to the sin of Adam—that the human race is cursed via the sin of Adam. But before we feel some exoneration, since we are not Adam, and therefore mistakenly

¹⁰⁶ *The Westminster Larger Catechism: With Scripture Proofs.* Question 72. 1996. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

conclude that that would be a sufficient argument before a holy God, let us recognize that:

Every sin, both original and actual, being a transgression of the righteous law of God, and contrary thereunto, (1 John 3:4) doth in its own nature, bring guilt upon the sinner, (Rom. 2:15, Rom. 3:9, 19) whereby he is bound over to the wrath of God, (Eph. 2:3) and curse of the law, (Gal. 3:10) and so made subject to death, (Rom. 6:23) with all miseries spiritual, (Eph. 4:18) temporal, (Rom. 8:20, Lam. 3:39) and eternal. (Matt. 25:41, 2 Thess. 1:9)¹⁰⁷

And what does it mean to fall short of the glory of God? It mustn't be understood as falling short that we way might barely miss at horseshoes. To fall short means to fail—the way we might fall short of shooting an arrow to the moon. And when we think of the glory of God our thoughts might be drawn to Mount Sinai and the glory of the Lord resting there (Exodus 24:16) and how even the touching of the mountain incurred death (Exodus 19:12). To approach God with our own obedience, our own righteousness, means only judgment.

But the glory of God also means the approval of God. We see this in the way Jesus uses the word in the Gospel of John:

...for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God (John 12:43).

It is a great human expedition to be, as Calvin taught, summoned **“from the applause of a human court to the tribunal of heaven.”**¹⁰⁸ Sometimes I think I'm utterly delivered from the desire to find or feed off of the approval of men, and then other times, God will work in such a providential way as to horrifyingly reveal that I

¹⁰⁷ *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. VI, 6. 1996. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

¹⁰⁸ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 3:22). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

care more about what people think than I ought. It might be wise to utilize events like those as a way to recognize at a microscopic level, what it might be like to find the disapproval of God.

...being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:24).

Free Yet Paid

At first glance, this verse appears to be at conflict with itself. How does being justified “**freely,**” or as the ESV translates “**as a gift**” correspond with “redemption” which usually (though not always) includes a ransom or a payment? Simply put, it’s free for us, but that does not mean there is no cost. As we sing our next hymn, let us begin to prepare our hearts for the Lord’s Supper and what we might “remember” by a contemplation of the payment provided and of which those elements are signs and seals:

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace (Ephesians 1:7).

For *there is* one God and one Mediator between God and men, *the* Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time (1 Timothy 2:5, 6).

...knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, *like* silver or gold, from your aimless conduct *received* by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot (1 Peter 1:18, 19).

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why do you think the Apostle Paul was so pointed about the depravity of man (pages 2, 3)?
2. What is meant by the phrase, “the righteousness of God” (pages 3)?
3. What are at least two things we learn in verse 21 (pages 3, 4)?
4. In what respect is the righteousness of God an indiscriminate gift (pages 4, 5)?
5. What is/is not faith? Discuss the catechism’s definition of faith. Look up the given references (pages 5, 6).
6. What does it mean to “fall short of the glory of God: (pages 6, 7)?
7. If justification is a free gift, how is it also a paid ransom (pages 7, 8)?

Romans 3:21-26

The Acropolis of the Christian Faith – Part II

February 3, 2013

But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth *as* a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:21-26).

Introduction

I seldom watch television. A new show has hit my very long list of shows not to watch—a show with a Christian character. He is a simplistic, naïve hillbilly who, they hint, has the same in-laws as he does blood relatives. In a certain episode they had him singing a worship song, rejoicing how all the people who were born before Jesus went to hell. Clearly the writers of this show were not interested in a detailed analysis of the extent of the atoning work of Christ.

One would hope that a moderately intellectual culture might perceive the error of this criticism of the power of the cross of Christ to save, even those who predate the incarnation. Yet at a recent memorial service I was approached by a woman who respectfully but sternly asked me how people went to heaven before Jesus—prior to the birth, death, resurrection and ascension.

I don't think it is a stretch to suggest that the primary purpose of human history (what theologians might call redemptive history) prior to the birth of Christ was to give instruction in anticipation of the most gracious, holy, magnificent, passionate and powerful event to invade that history. The question of the significance of religion, even the true religion, prior to Christ (meaning His incarnation) is not

an altogether illegitimate question. “What value is our religion,” they might have asked, “if it is Christ alone who saves?” And what does it mean that God “passed over the sins that were previously committed? And all to what end?” We might ask ourselves similar questions: What value are our religious observations as we gather for church? Why do we view certain elements of worship as so valuable and even necessary? What is the message—the news from heaven that God would have us hear? Does it get our attention? Are we even interested?

Review

This is part two of our examination of this passage which has been hailed the “Acropolis of the Christian faith” and the central message of the Scriptures. In verse 21 Paul calls his readers to fix their eyes on the revelation of the **“righteousness of God.”**

...the righteousness of which God is the author, which comes from him, which he gives, and which consequently is acceptable in his sight.¹⁰⁹

It is a righteousness that is **“apart from the law.”** In other words, it is not by human effort, yet it is revealed in **“the Law and the Prophets.”** That is, it is the message found in the Old Testament. The means by which this righteousness is accessed is *faith*, according to verse 22. When it comes to standing righteous or pardoned before a Holy God, Paul tells us, there is **“no difference”** among men. The need is universal and there is a single answer—Jesus Christ the righteous.

The righteousness of God which is revealed in the gospel is to be attained by faith, not by works, not by birth, not by any external rite, not by union with any visible Church, but simply and only by believing on Christ, receiving and resting upon him.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on Romans*. P. 88

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

“For” as Paul will continue **“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23)**. No man can approach the holy mountain of God’s glorious law and live (Exodus 19:12; 20:19).

But the glory of God also means the approval of God. We see this in the way Jesus uses the word in the Gospel of John:

...for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God (John 12:43).

Sinners are **“justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24)**.

Justification (the pardon of God) is gracious—a free gift—but that does not mean there is no cost.

In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace (Ephesians 1:7).

Paul continues:

...whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed (Romans 3:25).

God Set Forth

May it ever be remembered, in all of our religious wrangling and jockeying for position, that it is God who **“set forth”** the answer.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved (John 3:16, 17).

It is God who “gave.” It is God who “set forth” the answer. And the answer set forth is “**Christ Jesus**” as a “**propitiation**” *hilasterion*. Propitiation is a big and tricky word. Simply put, it means to appease the wrath. Religions in general, and even certain branches of Christianity, provide ample models and suggestions of how man can mollify what they perceive to be an angry, stingy God. This God, it is subtly suggested, requires sufficient sacrifice, wisdom, discipline and any other number of human virtues to get Him on our side and paying off. Some might even think, “Sure I’m saved, but what about the rest of my life—my needs, wants, heartaches and difficulties?”

But it is not as if God is some sort of one trick pony—the deity of my justification but sadly lacking in the provision of my daily bread! In my life I may have a doctor, a lawyer, a butcher and a trainer and they each have their own expertise. We may view God as excellent in His given trade but coming up short in certain arenas of my life and culture that have clearly fallen into disrepair. Paul will address this childlike shortsightedness later in Romans where he writes:

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things (Romans 8:31)?

But in order for the child to know he/she has the riches of the household (the “**all things**”), he/she must first know that he/she has the favor of the Father. And how can sinful men know this? Two errors are prevalent: It is common for men take God’s fatherly love for granted or to suppose that God has no interest in us at all. The Old Testament God appeared highly occupied with revealing to men the depth of their sin and the severity of His justice and the method of peace.

Day of Atonement

The most important day in the Old Covenant religious calendar was “The Day of Atonement” *Yom Kippur*. This was a day

that the high priest entered the Holy of Holies to atone for the sins of all Israel. It was a very dangerous, detailed and complex ceremony. The priest would engage in certain behaviors and wear certain garments to demonstrate his own repentance. He would offer a bull calf as a sin offering for himself and other priests. He would enter the Holy of Holies with a censer of live coals from the altar of incense and begin to sprinkle the blood of the offering on, most notably, the “**mercy seat**” (Leviticus 16).

The mercy seat was the lid of the Ark of the Covenant over which there were golden cherubim. God declared Himself to be enthroned there. It was there that God would meet His people.

And you shall put the mercy seat on the top of the ark, and in the ark you shall put the testimony that I shall give you. There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel (Exodus 25:21, 22).

Prior to Jesus, in a world full of darkness, there was one nation through whom God would bring His oracles, His testimony, His commandment—that nation was Israel; and in that nation there was one temple/tabernacle to which God would call His people; and in that temple/tabernacle there was one room (the Holy of Holies) where God would speak in a unique and special way; and in that room there was one small place where He would “**meet**” His people.

God would meet us between the two cherubim, with their wings overshadowing the mercy seat—the lid of the Ark which served as a container for the law (what God commands) and the manna (what God provides) and the rod of Aaron (as a sign for rebels) (Exodus 16:33; 25:16; Numbers 17:10). Perhaps another way to categorize the contents of the Ark would be to observe: 1. The prophetic word of God in His testimony; 2. the priestly work of God in the manna; 3. the kingly work of God in the staff.

The Mercy Seat

These are those things the Father would **“set forth”** in His Son as our Prophet, Priest and King. So it should be of no surprise in this dialogue that the word Paul uses to describe what the Father has accomplished in His Son—**propitiation** *hilasterion*—is the same word translated in the Septuagint as **“mercy seat.”** It is in Christ that we meet the Father. Christ is the Prophet, Christ is the Priest (and also the manna) and Christ is the King. The great human dilemma of sin and death is healed in Christ. And lest we think of Christ as our Advocate and the Father as reluctant, we are reminded that it is the Father who **“set forth”** the Son.

Someone might ask: *why does Jesus need to be all that?* Why can't God simply (as is proposed in virtually every brand of religion) forgive and move on, the way *we* are called to forgive others?

Passed Over but Not Winking at Sin

But God is not a winker at sin. He is not like so many courts in the land that **“clear the guilty”** (Exodus 34:7). God is a just God. The manna does not displace the commandments; they are both in the Ark—anticipating the fulfillment in Christ. It would appear at some level that God was ignoring sin. But Paul explains that God **“in His forbearance...passed over the sins that were previously committed.”**

In other words, prior to Christ, there was a debt that had not yet been paid, but God was unwilling to foreclose on the human race. God had made a promise—an oath that He swore by His own name (Hebrews 6:13-20)—a promise He knew He would keep; that promise was kept when He **“set forth”** His Son. God has now demonstrated **“His righteousness.”** He is not a God who ignores the sins of sinners but **“set forth”** His Son to die for the sins of sinners. And in this He is both a gracious, merciful God and a holy and just God.

Paul then explains that God has done all this:

...to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26).

Just and Justifier

In Christ, God reconciles the justice of God with the demands of the law in such a way that can be seen nowhere else and by no one else. Maybe it doesn't seem like a big deal in a world where religion is packaged like a product designed entirely to massage the knots in the consumer's neck. And certainly there will come a time when the knots of human sorrow will be displaced by the joy of eternal union with Christ for those who believe—for **“the one who has faith in Jesus.”**

But we might wish to consider, if we are willing to think a little deeper, that (just perhaps) the purpose of this life is for God to demonstrate He is both the **“just and the justifier.”** Could it be that the whole purpose of this fallen existence is for God to create a venue to display His own justice?

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. Why do you suppose this passage is called “The Acropolis of the Christian Faith”?
2. What does it mean to have a righteousness that is “apart from the law”?
3. Define “the glory of God.”
4. How is one “justified”? What does this mean?
5. Who “set forth” the answer to man’s dilemma? What is the answer? What are some of the various answers we see proposed in this world?
6. How can one know they have the Fatherly favor of God?
7. What does the Day of Atonement tell us about the work of Christ?
8. How does the “mercy seat” extend our thoughts to Christ?
9. God “passed over” the sins previously committed. Does this mean He ignored those sins? Explain.
10. How is God both “just and justifier”? Why is this significant?

Romans 3:27-31

The Law of Faith

February 10, 2013

Where *is* boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. Or *is He* the God of the Jews only? *Is He* not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since *there is* one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law (Romans 3:27-31).

Introduction

Parents are generally very careful to avoid showing favoritism to their children. This is well-advised since the notion that you may not be the favored child can easily breed rebellion. It is somewhat shocking that Jacob (referred to below as Israel) did not exercise such wisdom.

Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he *was* the son of his old age. Also he made him a tunic of *many* colors. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him (Genesis 37:3, 4).

We see, at least in some sense, that the entire story of the atrocious behavior of Joseph's brothers (the conspiring to kill him, then to sell him into slavery, the lying to their father, etc.) begins with the knowledge that none of them were the favorite of the father. The father loved Joseph more and Joseph was the recipient of a beautiful coat that daily reminded the brothers that they were lacking—understudies in the drama produced by their father's heart.

The passage we are studying this morning is thick with doctrine, and in our brief time we will unpack what we can. But I think it would be a great error for us to ignore the Apostle Paul's

pastoral concern for those who would read his words (and that includes us). It would be an even greater error to miss how this message, while deflating to the pride of man, is correspondingly glorifying to the power and grace of God in the cross of Christ. As Calvin wrote:

...it was necessary that the Holy Spirit should loudly thunder, in order to lay prostrate our loftiness.¹¹¹

It has also been said:

It is a fundamental requisite of all true religion that it tend to humble the sinner and exalt God; and every system which breeds self-righteousness, or cherishes boasting, bears falsehood on its face.¹¹²

I think it is no stretch to suggest that all Christian comfort and all Christian conduct find their genesis in the message of this passage. If we, like Joseph's brothers, are not confident of the loving Fatherhood of God, we cannot be confident to find peace that the one who **"did not spare His own Son"** will, along with that sacrifice, **"freely give us all things."** (Romans 8:32). The great peace (so often at odds with our flesh) of knowing that even the talons of darkness which so often seek to scratch away at our comfort cannot work independently of the sovereign power of our heavenly Father.

When Paul pleaded three times that the harassing messenger of Satan (whatever that might have been) would leave him, the answer he received from God was: **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"** (2 Corinthians 12:9). Paul knew that even the devil was a tool in the hand of God to keep him humble (2 Corinthians 12:7). Perhaps Paul was hoping there would be an easier way to achieve said humility.

¹¹¹ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 3:27). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

¹¹² Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 3:31). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

But when we speak of the sufficiency of God’s grace (if we are to comprehend the magnitude of God’s grace) it is as if the Father is saying to Paul, “You have my favor—the favor of the one true living Almighty God in whose hands Satan is a puppet and the nations like a drop from a bucket (Isaiah 40:15)—and that is more than adequate for the task.”

And it is in light of this deep and unsearchable mercy—this pardoned and favored status in which all who trust in Christ can rest—that Paul will later call us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1). It is in light of the passage before us that the Christian has both the great comfort as well as the highest call.

The doctrine contained in this passage was also a source of great controversy for our brothers and sisters in ages past. The doctrine which delivers all who believe from the frustrated and secondary status of Joseph’s brothers and makes them one with Joseph as a favored body (Joseph being a *type* of Christ) was a doctrine which threatened the power of certain clergy and power mongers. It is a doctrine for which we must fight. It was said of the Reformation:

To make good this doctrine, and reseat it in the faith and affection of the Church, was worth all the bloody struggles that it cost our fathers, and it will be the wisdom and safety, the life and vigor of the churches, to “stand fast in this liberty wherewith Christ hath made them free, and not be again entangled”—in the very least degree—“with the yoke of bondage” (Ga 5:1).¹¹³

Where *is* boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith (Romans 3:27).

¹¹³ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 3:31). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Where Then the Brag?

In light of everything Paul has been teaching, he now makes an obvious statement in the form of a question: **“Where is boasting then?”**

In light of the universal sinfulness of man, in light of the universal need for a righteousness that comes from God by faith in Christ, in light of God being both just and justifier of sinners who trust in Christ, in light of the witness of the Law and Prophets (the Scriptures) regarding these matters, Paul asks, **“Where then the brag?”** How can any glory or boast or put confidence in the flesh?

For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh (Philippians 3:3).

The word used by Paul, **“boasting”** *kauchesis*, carries the idea of either boasting or glorying in something, but here it means the congratulations of self. It is not that one is merely called not to boast (that is certainly true) but it is that there is no legitimate way one can boast. Paul answers his own question with the emphatic statement: **“It is excluded.”** *exekleisthe*. It is closed out. The idea of being “shut out.” The door to think kind of thinking is shut!

And what is the operating principle by which this door is shut? Could the door of boasting be shut if man were justified (pardoned of God) by the law of works—by anything originating from the self or even found in the self? Certainly not! The door of boasting is shut when we realize that the principle applied is the **“law of faith,”** a God-given gracious faith. For if faith is generated from the will of man, the door of boasting re-opens. The Lord says it nicely in Jeremiah:

Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and

righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD (Jeremiah 9:23, 24).

The law of faith works in such a way as to jettison what C.S. Lewis called “the great sin,” *pride*. Paul then draws the conclusion—the banner which hangs over the Reformation:

Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law (Romans 3:28)

Faith Alone

There has been speculation as to what Paul means by “**deeds of the law.**” Is it the ceremonial law? The law which distinguished Jew from gentile? The moral law? I tend to think, based upon the chapters leading up to this statement, that Paul has the moral law in mind. Be that as it may, whether he is speaking of ceremonies, laws which insulated Israel from the gentile nations or the Ten Commandments, it is safe to say that peace with God comes through faith in Christ and through faith in Christ alone—a notion anathematized by the Roman Catholics during the Reformation.

Prior to a Reformation Day celebration I was besieged by an individual with a web-page entitled, “*By Faith, but Not by Faith Alone.*” His argument is that the phrase “faith alone” for justification only is imposed upon the Scriptures by those who are overly influenced by the Reformers. But in the passage before us it looks more like a necessary inference. Justification is by “**faith apart from the deeds of the law.**” Paul eliminates the works of man from the equation and we are, therefore, left with faith alone.

So obvious was this conclusion that some translations actually state the necessary conclusion “by faith *alone*...” This would include Luther, but also predated Luther in the Nuremberg Bible of 1483 and the Italian Bibles of Geneva and Venice in 1476 and 1538, respectively. They perhaps took a bit too much liberty with the translation, but the point is taken. If the boasting is shut out and the full benefits of being a child of God is to be appreciated then the only true introspection is not introspection at all but a fixing of our eyes outside of ourselves and upon Jesus, the author and finisher of faith (Hebrews 12:2). If we continually examine our deeds as a means by

which we find the favor of God, we can draw no other conclusion than that of being one of Joseph's insecure, bitter, angry and envious brothers.

Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since *there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith (Romans 3:29, 30).*

God of Jews—God of Gentiles

Many believe that Paul's reference to "one God" is looking back to the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4—perhaps the single most significant phrase among the Jews—"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." There is little doubt that there was a struggle, even among Jewish Christians, to view the gentiles as:

...aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:12).

But Paul brings the redefinition:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:13).

So, in a very tight context, Paul is writing against the natural ethnic division that was seeking to tear the church asunder. There is a oneness to the body of Christ which must be acknowledged and pursued. It is a unity that flows from being like-minded—having the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16)—regardless of the necessary division that might cause (1 Corinthians 11:19).

And there is a brotherhood which recognizes that there is "**no difference**" when it comes to sinful men needing the blood of Christ. This may speak, at some level, to churches that pursue and cater to an isolated cross-section of culture—a singles church, a rock church, a family church, etc. It would be difficult to find cultures more distinct

than the Jewish/Gentile culture of Paul's day. They probably both would have preferred their own church. It is not always an easy task, but the true church is a church that transcends these secondary (and often petty) things.

But why does Paul write that the Jew is justified **by** *ek* faith whereas the Gentile is justified **through** *dia* faith? People offer guesses. It could simply be a 'tongue-in-cheek' way for Paul to note their paltry grumbling, as if saying: *You want a distinction? Here's one!*

Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law (Romans 3:31).

Establish the Law

There are a few possibilities Paul has in mind when he writes that it is through faith that the law is established. He could be referring (as he has for three chapters) to the work of the law in condemning sinners—it certainly does that. He could also be repeating what he had said earlier, that faith in Christ established what was written in the Law and the Prophets, i.e. the Old Testament—faith in Christ has always been the message! He also might be anticipating that antinomian spirit that so often rears its ugly head in the body of Christ. I just recently spoke to a pastor who knew another pastor who viewed the law as abrogated to the extent that he felt perfectly justified marrying multiple wives. Paul would suffer no such folly. The law of God is established as reflecting the moral will of God, a will that every Christian is called to walk in—an argument that we will see him make in detail when we get to chapter 6.

But as we move to our hymn, and prepare for the Lord's Table, let us rejoice in the knowledge that it is by faith alone in Christ alone that we enjoy the favor of a Father whose mercies are the deepest well and whose grace is supremely sufficient. His is the God who calls us His children not because He esteems our station in life as impressive before His holy gaze, but because He has simply chosen to love us and grant us hearts that would seek to love Him in return.

Questions for Study and Meditation

1. What was one thing that caused Joseph's brothers to behave so poorly and how does that speak to Christians in general?
2. Explain how a passage like this is the genesis of Christian comfort and conduct.
3. Why should Christians fight for the message found in this passage?
4. How does Paul's message eliminate boasting?
5. Discuss the law of faith and the law of works as it relates to boasting. In what should Christians boast?
6. Is "faith alone" a proper way to understand how a person is justified (pardoned) before God? Does this mean Christians can totally disregard the law of God?
7. From what does the unity of the church flow?
8. How does faith "establish the law"?

