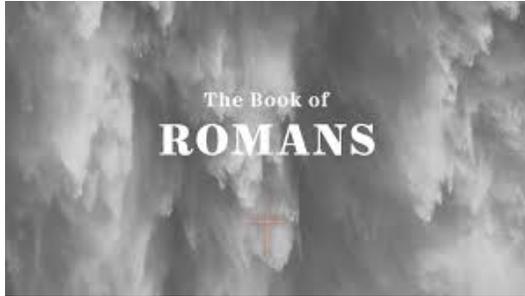


Religion-What's It Good For?

Romans 3:1-21

Romans #6

Weekend of March 7-8, 2020



Introduction

In Romans, Paul lays out his case for 'why the gospel'. He starts in Romans 1 by showing that all of mankind has a problem—a deep inner rebellion that corrupts every one of our relationships.

When he gets to chapter 2 he anticipates an objection from religious people, particularly religious Jews, who say, **“Yeah, those Gentiles (pagans) are some messed up people, but not us. We were raised on religion. We’ve got the Word of God,**

the heroes of the faith, the Temple. We’re different.”

So, Paul takes an entire chapter to show that religion doesn't really remedy our problem. In fact, in many ways, it makes the problem worse.

Now, a lot of times people get confused when church people like Paul rail on religion. They say, **“But isn't Christianity a religion? Isn't church stuff by definition 'religious'? So why you hatin' on religion?”**

It's because, and this is crucial, Paul draws an a distinction between religion and the gospel. **The gospel, the message that God saved us by dying for us and rising again, is the power of God unto salvation.**

Religion is a man-made substitute. And far from fixing the problem of our sinfulness-- which at its core is a sense of pride, rebellion and independence from God--religion caters to those things and makes them worse.

As we press into chapter 3, Paul hears in his head another objection raised by his Jewish readers. He pictures the Jews standing there with their Hebrew Bibles saying, **“Wait a minute. You are saying that all this is worthless? But wasn't this book written by God? If it's from God, how then can it be of no value? Are you saying that all those stories of Abraham and Moses and David and Queen Esther were of no benefit and that we should unhitch ourselves from them?”**

the way we might say it today... **You're telling me that growing up in church, and making sure my kids are learning the Bible--maybe even sending them to a Christian school-- -- that's all worthless, maybe even harmful?”** Let's dive in...

Bible Study

“Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.” Romans 3:1-2

God himself inspired these stories word for word—but their purpose (and this is key) was to point Israel to their need for Jesus, not equip them with some strategy or technique that would remove their need for him.

All the things that God gave--the stories, the rituals--they were all designed--not to give you something to master that would earn your place before God--but to bring you to the place where you would cry out, **"I have no hope of ever being restored to you apart from your grace."** **The rituals drive you not up with pride in your accomplishments, but down with humility in your need.** Look at what Paul says next...

"What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, "That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged." Romans 3:3-4

Paul imagines the Jewish religious person saying, **"if the law was supposed to lead us to Jesus, hasn't God failed since, you know, so many Jews haven't believed the gospel?"** "Absolutely not," Paul says "Even though Israel (in large part) failed to believe, God still kept his promise to bring salvation.

In fact, God took Israel's unbelief and has turned that into an opportunity for Gentile salvation! He took Israel's faithlessness (vs. 3) and used it as a way to show even greater faithfulness on his part!" He continues...

But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world? But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just. Romans 3:5-8

"Well then," they say (vs. 5), if Israel's rebellion led to Gentile salvation, and that was all part of God's plan, how can God still be mad at the Jews? Didn't they just play their part?" Paul's answer, **vv. 6–7: That's a stupid objection. God will judge each person for their own unbelief and rebellion.** How God's sovereignty works through human choices to accomplish God's purposes is indeed a mystery, but God still holds us each accountable for our own choices. Look at how he ends this section...

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. Romans 3:9-11

Righteousness here refers to our legal standing before God. Sin has ruined our legal standing before God. When everything is known about who we are, none of us is going to be in a good place. This includes the most righteous people who have ever lived--Moses, Abraham, Daniel, Esther, Job, Billy Graham, YOUR GRANDMA, Mother Teresa--whoever it is in your book.

Just think about it: How would you feel if you had a little monitor on the side of your head so that people could read what your thoughts were at any given moment? The day is coming when all of our records will be fully revealed and that won't be a good day for anyone. There is none righteous, not even one.

Look at what Paul says...no one understands, no one seeks for God. Now, at this point, you might say, "Wait, wait. Surely Paul goes too far. No one seeks God? I know people who aren't Christians and don't go to church who are sincerely searching for the truth. And what about

people from other religions? I know some very sincere Muslims who are really passionate about knowing God.” Paul isn’t saying that no one seeks spiritual things or that one wants to connect to the supernatural.

He is saying, “No one, prompted by their own decision, acting in their own ability, wants to find God—at least, not the true version of him. People may seek God to get blessings from him, or they may seek a reshaped God who conforms to their needs, prejudices and serves their agendas, but that’s different than seeking the true God for his own sake. Look at verse 12...

All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” Romans 3:12

This, (which by the way is a quote from Isa 53 and Psalm 53) is the essence of sin: we have all turned away from God’s truth and each of us has sought our own way. We preferred our way to God’s. He then says that no one does good, no not one. What does that mean?

The Bible only considers a deed good if it is pure in both form and in motive. If we do good deeds to try to bolster our self-image or reputation, or try to earn our standing before God, those are inherently selfish deeds, even if on the surface they are good. A deed is only good in God’s eyes if it is motivated purely by love for God and others with no self-interest at all.

Apart from faith even our good deeds aren’t good, is that in light of our biggest sin—which was replacing God’s authority in our lives with our own—good things we do don’t seem that good.

There is none good, not even one. You say, “But Oprah said I was beautiful, special and precious?” Yes, you are. And that’s part of the paradox of the human race. You are a beautiful person made in the image of God, but you have been ruined by sin. Look at these next verses that I think you’ll be hard-pressed to find on a Hallmark card...

... they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.” “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” Romans 3:13-14

Now, look at your neighbor and say, he’s talking to you. The place our corruption most reveals itself is probably in our words. Jesus said this, also: Our words, uttered in private, are the best indicators of what is going on in our hearts. Our words carry about the stench of death. Jesus said that by our words alone we would be condemned. Look at these next verses...

“Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.” Romans 3:15-17

You’re like, “OK, finally one that doesn’t apply to me. I mean, I’ve never been part of a murder troupe.” The point is that we all have a natural reaction to get violent when people get in the way of what we want.

As long as we have what we want, we’re peaceable. But let someone else get what we want--let them get the promotion, or the recognition, or the boyfriend we feel like we deserve; let their kids get the honors we want for our kid, and we don’t respond with excitement for them and contentment in the blessings we have and trust in God’s good

plan for us. We struggle with hating them, even wishing harm on them. Our ears perk up when we hear somebody criticizing them. Look at verse 18...

“There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Romans 3:18

This kind of sums it all up. We don't recognize God's size, goodness or importance in our lives. Saying, “There is no fear of God before their eyes” means that God and his authority are just not that big of a deal to us. Us, our needs, our desires, our agenda--that's the big deal to us, what is most important to us and dominates our thinking.

Paul has just given us a description of our heart... He closes out this section with these words...

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. Romans 3:19-20

The purpose of the law, Paul said, was not to correct sin, but reveal sin. It was supposed to function like a mirror that reveals to us how sinful we are. By looking into it, we see what the shape of what our heart should be and what it isn't.

That's what Paul means, “**Knowledge of sin comes through the law.**” The law shows me how messed up and spiritually rotten my heart is. God wants us to be--created us to be--so naturally righteous, in our hearts, that we wouldn't need a law to do what is right. We'd instinctively do it. I don't need a law to do the things I love. You never have to command me to eat dessert. Or take a nap. Or kiss my wife. I love to do those things--no law required.

The law is only required where my heart wants to go the wrong direction. I want us to look at verse 21 as a preview of next week...

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— Romans 3:21

We're not going to be made righteous by doing anything. We're going to be made righteous by believing the news--the announcement--that Jesus kept the law in our place, living the life we were supposed to live and dying the death we were condemned to die in our place.

And, to the Jews he says: **This was attested by the Law and the Prophets.** This is not something new I'm introducing. It was what God was trying to say throughout the whole Old Testament.

Application

It was what God was saying through.....the story of Abraham when God commanded him to sacrifice his son Isaac but at the last minute he provided a lamb caught in the thicket who would take his place...It was what God was saying through the Passover...It was what God was saying to Israel in the wilderness when, after he had sent in poisonous snakes because of their sin... and he told Moses to lift up a serpent so they would be healed. **This is what Jesus would be.**

It was what he was picturing through Moses when he told him to strike the rock with his staff so that water would gush forth from the rock to slake his people's thirst as they wandered in the wilderness of sin. **Jesus was the rock struck with the rod of God's wrath so that the water of life would come to us in the wilderness of sin.**

We saw it pictured in the stories of David--like when David ran out to fight Goliath all alone while Israel stayed on the sideline. **That was a picture of Jesus running out to face true giant in our lives--sin and death--all alone as we stood powerless on the sideline to defeat him.**

We saw it in Hosea, the ever-faithful husband loving his ever unfaithful bride.

Literally every page of your Hebrew Bible foretells this coming Savior. The law was given to us both to show us our need of him and to give us a preview of him. The law is a mirror of our sinfulness and shadow of the Savior to come.