

Week VIII

Romans 2:25-3:20

25 Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. 26 So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? 27 The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

28 A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. 29 No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.

3:1 What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? 2 Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.

3 What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? 4 Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written:

"So that you may be proved right when you speak
and prevail when you judge."

5 But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) 6 Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? 7 Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" 8 Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—"Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is just!

9 What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. 10 As it is written:

“There is no one righteous, not even one;

11 there is no one who understands;
there is no one who seeks God.

12 All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
not even one.”

13 “Their throats are open graves;
their tongues practice deceit.”

“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”

14 “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”

15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

16 ruin and misery mark their ways,

17 and the way of peace they do not know.”

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

19 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. 20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

The main point that we want to emphasize from the first section of this passage (2:25-29) is that it is an expansion on the idea from earlier in the chapter that God does not show favoritism. Whether a person has been circumcised as a Jew is not what determines their status with God.

Circumcision functioned as an identifier of inclusion in the community of the people of God. It was similar to baptism in this sense. Like baptism, it was a ritual act that signified membership in the believing community. The similarity is especially seen in churches that practice infant baptism. In both cases the person baptized or

circumcised is not really involved in the decision and the fact that someone is circumcised or baptized says something about their family heritage rather than about their own faith. Also, in both cases the act is often done by parents who lack a robust faith themselves, but circumcise or baptize because it is an expected part of their social community.

God does not count these kinds of religious rituals as having significance in his evaluation of people.

“A person is not a Jew [is not among the true people of God] who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision [or baptism] merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew [among the true people of God] who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.”

So, whether a person has been circumcised or baptized physically is not what is important to God. He wants people whose hearts are committed to him and who demonstrate that by following his law. The religious heritage of a person will not cause God to look on them more approvingly. God does not show favoritism.

Obviously this does not mean that we should not be baptized. It means that baptism that is not accompanied by faith in God and obedience to his word is not meaningful to God.

The first verses of chapter three then address an obvious question, if Jewish circumcision does not give one favor with God, then is there any advantage to being Jewish? In other words, if God does not show favoritism toward the Jews, then do they have any advantage? Or, does a heritage of belonging to a culture that knows and follows God give people an advantage in their religious life?

The answer is a strong affirmative. Of course there is an advantage in being a Jew. Jews have the Bible as their guide to all things spiritual. The importance of having access to an authoritative revelation from God about himself and ourselves and the world and how we should relate to God and the history of God’s dealings with people cannot be overstated. And not just access to such a scripture, but being a part of a community that honors that scripture is an advantage that is “Much in every way!”

Paul does not specify any other advantages to Jewish heritage in this chapter, but in other parts of the Bible more is said on this. But it really amounts to privileged access to the knowledge of God. Through their cultural heritage, their religious practices, and the Scripture Jews have had a huge advantage over people of other cultures in their knowledge of God.

In what ways has your own background been an advantage and a disadvantage for you in your knowledge of God?



In the next section Paul suggests and rejects some objections to his explanation of God's grace in salvation. Some had apparently suggested, probably in order to mock Paul's gospel of grace, that if God is glorified by forgiving our sins then we ought to just sin a lot so that God could receive more glory. This is one kind of "abuse of God's grace" that people have suggested. Sometimes this is suggested as a kind of argument against the gospel of grace, sometimes it is more subtle and is actually what people about God, sin, and forgiveness.

One version of this is to say something like, “My sins are not my fault. It is all part of God’s plan that people will sin and he will make a way to forgive us. Since this was God’s plan since the beginning how can it be my fault that I have done what God always knew that I would do?”

Another version of this is to say something like, “My sins are not really a big deal because there has already been a full payment made to cover them. I have a kind of ‘blank check’ to get forgiveness whenever I need it, so it is not very important for me to avoid sin. Whenever I need to be forgiven, I just say a quick prayer and it’s all taken care of.”

While there is some truth in these lines of thought, all of these kinds of excuses for sin are a misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the nature of sin and forgiveness. People want to justify their sin and so we come up with all kinds of ways to make it so that we don’t need to control ourselves and fight temptation, but they all fail. As Paul says here about those who distort the gospel, “Their condemnation is just!”

The next section is a kind of summary conclusion/climax of much of the argument of Romans thus far. Paul quotes several biblical passages that emphasize the point that all people are sinful. No one can make a legitimate claim to be “a good person” since we have all sinned against God. The Bible is not saying that every one of these phrases describes every individual person, but that these descriptions are true of mankind as a whole. And the summary statements in verse ten and eleven are true of us all, “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.”

In the epistle of James chapter two this idea of universal sinfulness is explained this way:

8 If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right. 9 But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. 10 For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. 11 For he who said, “You shall not commit adultery,” also said, “You shall not murder.” If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

This description of God's standard for sin and righteousness puts to rest all claims of being "not too bad of a sinner." While there is a sense in which some sins are worse than others (for instance murder is worse than favoritism), in another sense it only takes one sin to make you guilty of breaking the law.

This kind of reasoning is obvious to us when we think about it in terms of our modern legal system. If a defendant claimed, "Yes, I robbed that house, but I didn't burn it down." Or "I assaulted that man, but I did not assault four other people that I walked by that day." No court would declare that person innocent because they only broke one or a few laws while obeying other laws.

In the same way God considers us sinners if we break one law, even if we manage to avoid other sins. And of course those of us who are honest with ourselves know that we have sinned many times and in many ways, even if we have successfully resisted some temptations.

Another passage that plainly states the truth of universal sinfulness is from the epistle of 1 John.

1:8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us. 2:1 My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. 2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

What does this passage tell us about our sinfulness and how we should deal with that fact?



Our passage this week ends with a grim conclusion:

19 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. 20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

Every mouth is silenced. No one is left with any excuse or claim of innocence. Having access to God's law has only served to make us aware that we have failed to live up to God's standard. If this were the end of the story the Bible would be a depressing book. But while our section for this week ends in despair, hope rises in next week's section.

Week IX

Romans 3:21-26

21 But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. 22 This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 25 God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— 26 he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Up to this point in the argument of Romans there are a lot of people who are in basic agreement with the major premises. But this is where a lot of people get off the bus. This is where people no longer track with what the Bible is teaching. Many people are right with the Bible up to this point. They are even with us when we say that there is such a thing as sin and that all of us fall short of perfection.

We have common sayings like, “nobody’s perfect” “to err is human” “we all make mistakes”. So, most people are right there with the Bible when it says that no one is without sin and that they themselves are not without sin. They might not agree with the Bible on a definition of sin, but even by their own definitions, people know that they have done wrong.

Where we find widespread disagreement is on how serious a thing that is. There are three basic ways that people come down on this issue.

First, there are those who dismiss the whole idea of sin and God’s judgement. Some don’t believe in God at all, or they might believe in these things, but they dismiss their importance. When the bible offers these people salvation they don’t see the need. They don’t believe that there is anything to be saved from.

The way these people see things it's like they are grilling in their back yard and you come to them with an InReach emergency satellite communication device and say you need to push the sos button so that the Alaska National Guard will send a helicopter to rescue you! They look at you like you are crazy. Um, no. No need to be rescued. Yes, I'm not perfect, but that's not a problem that I need to be rescued from.



People in this category, if they believe in God and judgement, and many of them claim to, it is a pretty lenient judgement that they'll have no trouble passing without the need for a savior. Their philosophy is that good people go to heaven, and the standard for goodness is somewhere around the level where only drug dealers, terrorists, and child molesters don't make it. But it's not something that they give a lot of thought to.

The second category of responses to the biblical teaching that we are all sinful includes all the people who recognize their faults and their need to do something about it. They experience guilt for the things that they have done wrong. They desire to do better, to be better people. And they turn to a system of morality and personal effort to deal with the problem. Most of the time this includes some form of religious practice. They go to the temple, or the mosque, or in our culture they go to church, and they try their best to live good moral lives and stop being selfish. They try hard to follow the golden rule, "do to others and you would have them do to you." They try to "love the Lord your God with all your heart soul mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself."

These people know that they are out in the wilderness and that they have a problem. But the solution to their problem is to work hard and get themselves out of it. Calling in the rescue chopper is a bit extreme when all that is really needed is just to tough it out and fix the problem. Their practice of religion gives them a topo map, some duck tape, a first aid kit, and a leatherman, and they are good to go. Nothing happening here that they can't handle themselves with some spiritual guidance from their scriptures.

This is where most of the religious people in the world are. They recognize that they have failed to live up to God's standard. And they think that by practicing religion and trying hard to be a good person they can deal with it.

This category includes many people who are in church on Sundays singing songs to Jesus and who don't really understand their need for Jesus. In this category are the Christians who think that what they need Jesus for is just to give them a fresh start. Jesus forgives our sins and erases all the bad that we have done so that we can stop sinning and start doing good and the good that we do from that point on makes us acceptable to God.

Their philosophy is that good people go to heaven, and in order to be good enough we need to work hard. The standard for goodness is high. Only those who pray, read their scriptures, give to the poor, and try hard to live according to the golden rule get in.

These two approaches to sin, to either dismiss the problem and not worry about it, or to think that we can take care of it ourselves by following a moral system or a religious system, both fall short of the biblical understanding of the gravity of our sin and the desperateness of our situation.

The bible teaches that our problem is very serious. Every mouth is silenced and the whole world is held accountable to God. A couple of chapters back in Romans Paul put it like this:

Romans 1:18

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth

But most of us don't like to think of ourselves as deserving of the wrath of God. We don't think that we are in that category of the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth. That's talking about evil people like Osama Bin Laden and the Hutu people in Rwanda who killed eight hundred of thousand Tutsis during the 1994 genocide. And maybe the people who voted for the other party in the last election.

That's who the wrath of God is revealed against, not me. I'm a nice guy. I pay my taxes, I mow my lawn, I go to church, I give to the church. My own faults are not

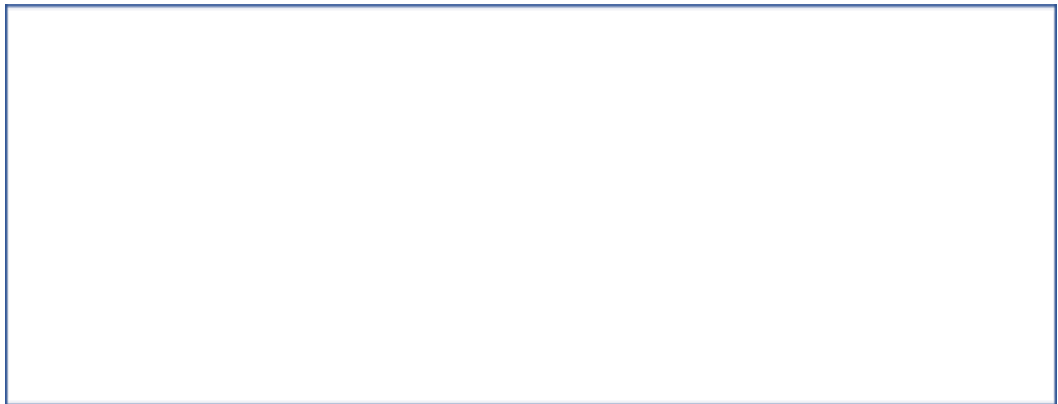
that big of a deal. Yeah, I'm not perfect, but nobody's perfect, to err is human, it's not that big of a problem. I can fix this; I just need the bible to tell me how.

But the bible doesn't tell us how we can fix it. The bible tells us that we can't fix it. The bible tells us that good people don't go to heaven, because there are no good people.

And that is why our passage this week is the best news imaginable. God has made a way for us to be saved from our sin apart from our moral performance. It is not dependent on our avoiding sin or on our performing good deeds.

What this means is that God knew that we were in trouble and needed to be rescued. And he knew that a system of "good people go to heaven by following the rules" would not work. And so he made a way to pay the price for our sin himself so that we could be saved from judgement completely apart from our efforts to keep the rules.

Why is it so important to understand that our salvation is independent of our sins or good works?



He did that through the death of Jesus on the cross. In other words, by "presenting him as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood." When Jesus died

for our sins it was a complete and total payment. There is nothing left for us to pay. That's why it says that we receive it freely by his grace. Grace means getting something that we do not deserve. God does not give us what we deserve. He gives us grace and it's free. And by that free gift of grace we are declared righteous in God's sight. We are rescued from the punishment that our sins deserve.

But many of us good religious people have a hard time really pushing the sos button and giving up completely on working it all out ourselves. Because to push that button is to admit that not only have we failed to be good enough, but also that we know that we will never succeed at being good enough. To call on Jesus to save us is to admit our spiritual and moral weakness. And so we keep trying to stop sinning, to do good, to be worthy.

Why is it so hard for us to give up on rescuing ourselves?



A bit further on in Romans chapter seven Paul describes his own experience of trying hard to live up to God's law like this:

I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.

. . . For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. . . . in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in me . . . making me a prisoner of the law of sin . . .

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?

That is the cry of a man who has tried his very hardest to be good and just can’t do it. That is a man who has assessed his situation, realized that there is no way he is getting out of it on his own and is ready to press the sos and call in the National Guard to rescue him.

“Who will rescue me?” His answer is in verse 25:

Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

We are not left in frustration trying to follow the rules to save ourselves, failing, vowing to try harder next time, failing again. We have been rescued from our slavery to rule following by Jesus’ sacrifice for us.

Here are the next verses in Romans 8:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death.

For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.

It could not be accomplished by the law, that is, following the rules, being a good person, loving God with all your heart soul mind and loving your neighbor, etc. That law could never accomplish it; why not? because there was a weak link in the system: us and our sinfulness. And so we could never remove the condemnation due to us for

our sins. But God did it for us. He sent his own Son, Jesus, to be the sacrifice to pay the price for our sins.

So, what is left for us to do to be saved from the consequences of our sins? Push the sos button. Stop trying to save yourself and call on Jesus to save you. Give up on making yourself worthy of God's love. Realize the depth of your problem, and your inability to solve it; then call on the grace of God.

Below is a sample of a "confession" that is read together as part of the worship service in some churches. It contains a great summary of the kind of attitude that we should have toward God in order to be saved from our sins. This kind of confession honestly prayed to God is how we push the sos button and call for Jesus to save us.

Confession

Most holy and merciful Father,
I confess to you,
that I have sinned against you
by what I have done
and by what I have left undone
I have not loved you
with my whole heart and mind and strength.
I have not fully loved my neighbors as myself.
I have not always had in me the mind of Christ.
You alone know how often I have grieved you
by wasting your gifts, by wandering from your ways.
Forgive me, I pray you, most merciful Father;
and free Me from my sin.
Renew in me the grace and strength of your Holy Spirit,
for the sake of Jesus Christ your Son my Savior. Amen.

How would you explain the need for salvation and Jesus' provision of salvation to someone who does fits into one of the first two responses to sin described above? (Either "my sin is not a big problem" or "I can fix the problem myself?")

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