

Romans 3:9-26 – The Whole Human Race is.....?

Introduction

So, before we look at today's passage from Romans 3, let's just look back at what Rev. Paul brought to us last week.

In Chapter 2, we heard about both Jews and Gentiles were seen to be sitting on the high moral ground, pointing their finger at everyone else together with other people's behaviour. They don't look in the mirror as it were and check out their own behaviour. But they won't escape God's punishment.

In Chapter 2: vv 17 – 29, the Apostle Paul tackles the Jews who are self-confident and think that by being in possession of God's law and circumcision, that is enough without actually being faithful to God!

Paul concludes that they, and indeed even us in today's world, need to have a spiritual circumcision, a circumcision of the heart.

Main Idea:

God saves (or specifically justifies) repenting and believing sinners through the person and work of Jesus Christ alone; therefore, we must confess our sin, we must abandon any hope of contributing to our justification through obedience, and that we must believe or have faith in Jesus as our only hope in life and death.

Sermon

1. Historic Continuity

Some have argued that Martin Luther and the other reformers were teaching and promoting something new. And, in one sense, this is not wrong. The Protestant Reformation happened during a time when almost everyone in Christendom did not believe or know the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ.

But the doctrine of justification was not new to Christianity in the 1500s. As a matter of fact, it goes as far back as the second century (40-60 years after the death of the last Apostle),.

The disciple wrote, "[For a long time, God] permitted us to be borne along by unruly impulses, being drawn away by the desire of pleasure and various lusts. This was not that He at all delighted in our sins, but that He simply endured them.

“But when our wickedness had reached its height... [because of] the one love of God... [He] did not regard us with hatred, nor thrust us away... but showed great [patience with us], and... He Himself took on... the burden of our [sins], He gave His own Son as a ransom for us, the holy One for transgressors, the blameless One for the wicked, the righteous One for the unrighteous, the incorruptible One for the corruptible, the immortal One for them that are mortal.”

The disciple went on, “[W]hat other thing was capable of covering our sins than His righteousness? By what other one was it possible that we, the wicked and ungodly, could be justified, [but] by the only Son of God?”

Finally, he said, “[God] therefore desired to lead us to trust in His kindness.”

Friends, here is a Christian from a generation or two after the Apostles who not only understands the doctrine of justification through faith or trust in Christ alone, but he glories in it! There is an ocean of time between us, but Christians today share a common faith with the Christians of long ago that Jesus is the righteous one who justifies the unrighteous... those who simply trust Him for it.

This doctrine of justification by faith alone is not new. It was largely rediscovered during the time of the Protestant Reformation, and all true Christians have been believing this glorious gospel of Christ as the perfect substitute for sinners since the very beginning.

In fact, the reformers of the sixteenth century taught and preached the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone from the Bible. They believed this was (first and foremost) a biblical doctrine, and that’s why they were willing to stand against all of Christendom in order to believe and preach it.

There were many notable reformers, but none wrote quite like Martin Luther, and none seemed to articulate the doctrine of justification quite so vividly as Luther. And he asked and answered the same question we are after today.

He said, “By what means shall I become righteous and acceptable to God?”^[iv] “The gospel answers,” he said, “it is necessary that [you] hear Christ, and repose [yourself] wholly on Him [i.e., trust in Him alone], denying [yourself] and distrusting [your] own strength... It is faith that justifies [you],” said Luther, “the Lord [forgives] all [your] sins by the mediation of Christ His Son, in whom [your] faith believes and trusts... Wherefore nothing is required unto justification but to hear Jesus Christ our Savior, and to believe in Him.”

2. None Righteous (v9-18)

It seems to me that there are three parts to our passage today:

(1) in v9-18, we see a summary diagnosis of all humanity;

(2) in v19-20, we see the function of God's law for sinners;

(3) in v21-26, we see the glorious explanation of how God can be simultaneously just and the justifier of repenting and believing sinners.

These three parts or sections describe three truth-claims that all culminate in the implied conclusions: (1) that we should confess that we are utterly sinful, (2) that we should abandon any hope of earning or contributing to our justification by obeying God's laws, and (3) that we should believe or have faith in Jesus as our only hope in life and death.

That is where we're going, and let's start with the first part, v9-18... a summary diagnosis of all humanity... and (trigger warning) it's really bad news.

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in Rome, and he began by describing the wilful and active unrighteousness of every person in a fallen world.

The second half of Romans 1 is a description of all the descendants of Adam and Eve (from creation all the way to today). Since sin entered the cosmos, every person born under the sun is marred by or twisted by or corrupted by sin. We naturally "suppress the truth" about God (Rom. 1:18). We look at creation around us, we consider the design of our own bodies and minds, and we observe the power and wisdom of God in all of it, but we deny God the honor due His name (Rom. 1:21). In this wretched estate, we are ruled by our "lusts" and "passions" (Rom. 1:24, 26). We are "consumed" by our sinful desires, even to such a degree that we would deny nature itself in order to pursue what we want (Rom. 1:26-27).

Then in Romans 2, Paul turns his attention to first-century Jewish people. Today, all kinds of ethnicities across the planet have access to the Scriptures (to the Bible). But back in Paul's day, the only people in the whole world who had received God's revelation of Himself (as just judge and as gracious savior) were those who were the descendants of Abraham. They had "the law" of God (Rom. 2:17). They had the covenants of Abraham and Moses and David. They had been "entrusted with the oracles [or "sayings" or "words"] of God" (Rom. 3:2).

And that is why Paul asks the question he does at the beginning of our text today, "What then? Are we Jews any better off?" (v9). "No," he says, "not at all" (v9). Having the law of God, having the righteous instructions of God, this is not sufficient to save anyone (which we will get into more in v19-20). But Paul's first explanation as to why all people (i.e., "Jews and the Greeks") are in a bad situation is because of their "sin" (v9).

What does this mean to be "under sin" (v9)?

Well, Paul describes this situation by citing and alluding to several OT passages that speak of the sinfulness of natural, unregenerate, fallen humanity. When we come

into this world, until or unless God does something for us and in us, what are we like? Here it is:

From Psalm 14:1-3 and Psalm 53:1-3, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless [i.e., not useful for any good thing]; no one does good not even one” (v10-12). This is not saying that you and I don’t naturally do anything that is relatively good. It is saying that we do not do anything that is truly good. Even the good we might do is tainted by bad motives, selfish ambitions, or false pretences.

Drawing from Isaiah’s prophetic word of judgment (in Isaiah 59:7-8), Paul says, “Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known” (v15-17). Not only do we naturally use our words to hurt and wound and destroy those around us, but we also have within us a propensity to follow these words with brutal actions.

And in a summary statement of this whole diagnosis, Paul alludes to Psalm 36:1, saying, “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (v18). In other words, natural humanity loves sin, chases sin, cherishes sin, and suppresses that feeling of guilt, imagining that there is never going to be a day when he or she will stand before God and have to give an account. We don’t fear God; we don’t remember that His eyes never close; and we dismiss those thoughts of coming judgment as though our present distractions can simply make it go away.

At this point, we might pause and take an assessment of our own lives. We are not as sinful as we could be... we could certainly be worse. But, if we’re honest, we must confess that we are utterly sinful. We do not naturally seek for God; we do not naturally aim for genuine righteousness; and we do not naturally use our words and actions to build others up, to honour the dignity and humanity of others around us, or to make ourselves useful for serving God and serving others.

Sin is not just the stuff we sometimes do or don’t do; sin is the corrupt and wicked posture of our hearts and minds. We love some of the very things God hates. And we naturally despise some of the stuff that God values most highly.

Friends, the bad news of the gospel is very bad. Any manifestation of sin in our lives (past or present) is a symptom of our deeply rooted disease. We are “under sin” (v9), and this means that sin affects everything about us. This must be our starting point if we are to hear any sort of good news in the gospel message.

3. The Law Condemns (v19-20)

The good news is surely coming, and it is the best news of all time. But before we get to that third part of our passage (v21-26), we must consider yet one more feature of the bad news. It gets worse before it gets better.

This second section or part of Paul's explanation here focuses on the "law" of God. And in order for us to understand the logical progression here, we must understand that God's law is not inherently an impossible or unreasonable standard of holiness. It is not as though God has created humanity and then vindictively commanded us to jump an impossible distance.

Rather, God's law was revealed in order to teach us what He is like, and in order to show us how we ought to live (rightly and successfully) in God's world. It is a fact that we (because we are sinners) fall short of God's good and right law, but that is not due to any deficiency or flaw or injustice in God's law. God's law is good, but we are bad. As sons and daughters of Adam, we walk as our father did.

But when we look in the mirror of God's law, and when we see ourselves for what we really are... when we are judged, not by comparisons with other sinners, but by God's standard of holiness and righteousness... "every mouth is stopped" (v19). We realize that we are not good at all, but actually we are "accountable to God" for all manner of wicked thoughts, words and deeds. Through our awareness of God's law "comes the knowledge of [our] sin" (v20).

This part of our passage speaks directly to those of us who are prone to some kind of legalism. It also demolishes any idea that what I really need is to "do better" or "be better." If you give me a list of rules, some standard for good living, then it will not be long at all before I fall short of it... because I am utterly sinful.

Jesus summarized the first three commands of God's law by saying, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). And none of us has ever loved God with all of our anything! We haven't truly and purely loved God for 3 seconds during our entire lives! On our best days, even if we are Christians (spiritually alive and renewed by God's indwelling Spirit), our love for God is mixed with love for sin, love for self, and love for the things of this world.

Friends, we must abandon any hope that we might have of earning or contributing to our justification before God by obeying His law. We are utterly sinful, and God's law (good as it is) only shows us just how bad our sin disease is.

4. Just and Justifier (v21-26)

When (and only when) we come to grips with these realities (that we are utterly sinful, and that God's law only condemns us) are we ready to hear the good news at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The gospel is all about "righteousness" – God's own "righteousness" (v25-26) and the "righteousness" that God demands of guilty sinners like us (v21-22).

Righteousness is a Bible word and a legal word that refers to justice, law-obeying,

and moral uprightness. God is perfectly just and morally upright, and He demands that anyone who comes near to Him be the same.

God cannot abide unrighteousness. God does not look the other way when He sees injustice. He does not usually punish sin immediately, but God does not approve of any disobedience or failure to keep His law. He keeps it perfectly, and He requires that all creation do so as well... and He will make this requirement clear enough for all to see when we all stand in His court on the final day.

It may come as a surprise to some of us that a question the Bible never asks or even seems to imply is “Why would God ever send a person to hell?” The answer (from the Bible’s perspective) is obvious. God condemns sinners because they are sinners. Those who rebel against God’s good law... those who live in God’s world but deny Him the glory and honor and gratitude He deserves... those ones deserve nothing but God’s hatred and wrath.

The Bible never wonders why God might punish any or all sinners, but the Bible does ask and answer the question, “How could God ever forgive and even bless unrighteous sinners?!” If God is a just judge, and if good judges execute judgment (which is the definition of a good judge), then how can God ever say of a guilty defendant “not guilty!”?

That’s what Paul is getting at in v25-26. He says, “in his divine forbearance [God] passed over former sins” (v25). Here the Bible is grappling with the fact that God promised that sin equals death (Gen. 2:17). And yet, sinners have continued to live in God’s world for thousands of years (at least for a time). Even more than that, God promises (in both the Old and New Testaments) that some sinners will escape death entirely (not necessarily physical death, but ultimate death or judgment from God on the last day). But how can this be?!

But how?!

Again, we are reminded of the universal condemnation of all people everywhere... in v23, “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (v23), but sinners are “justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (v24). In other words, the way that sinners are “justified” or declared “not guilty” and even “righteous” in God’s sight is by or because of the “grace” of God that is accessible “through” the “redemption” or redeeming act which Jesus performed on behalf of sinners who believe or have faith in Him (v24).

But this still doesn’t answer the question. How can God grant such a gift to guilty sinners without becoming an unjust judge who doesn’t punish sin?

Verse 25 says, “God put [Jesus Christ] forward as a propitiation,” which was a work Christ performed “by his blood” (v25). The word “propitiation” means to satisfy or to

appease the requirement of justice. Because we come into this world as sinners, and because we have sinned against God and others every day of our lives, God's justice requires that we suffer under the wrath-filled condemnation that we deserve. But this passage tells us that God sent His own Son, who took on the nature of humanity, to suffer as a substitute in the place of sinners.

The whole Bible speaks to this climactic display of God's love for sinners in Christ Jesus. Just after the first sin, God Himself killed an animal and made clothes for Adam and Eve with its skin in order to cover their nakedness. When God made a covenant with Abraham, various animals were torn in two, in order to show that death was necessary for any sinner to enjoy God's blessings. And when God revealed Himself further to the people of Israel, God established an entire sacrificial system to be operated by priests who were set apart for this holy duty of offering daily sacrifices which would remind the people that their blessings from God were only possible through the shedding of blood.

5. Conclusion

We read about this practice and the rigmarole that the priest had to go through in Leviticus 16: 1 – 16.

But in the New Covenant, in the apex of God's plan of redemption, it is not an animal that is laid daily upon the altar of sacrifice... dead animals could never take away the guilt of rebel sinners. Instead, it was the unique Son of God (Jesus Christ) who willingly laid Himself down to be crucified. Here is the concept of atonement, the forgiving or pardoning of sin through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ

Jesus suffered and died, not because of His own sin, but because of the sin of those He came to save. Upon the cross of Christ there hung both priest and sacrifice, both mediator and propitiating offering. When Christ died, the penalty of death was carried out, and God made the way for Him to stand both as just judge and justifying saviour.

So, what do you think the extra words in the Title of today's address should be.....The whole human race is sinful, unrighteous.

Amen to that!