

Sermon for Sunday, October 18, 2009

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PROBLEM SOLVED

Romans 3:19-24

1. God is just - Romans 3:1-8

It's human nature to make excuses. I was five minutes late because... I ate the last cookie because... But it's casual and quick for small things. The bigger the problem, the bigger the rationale.

In Romans 1-3, the gospel is shown as the solution to the problem of human sin. But people are slow to take the cure if they deny the problem. People don't take the medicine if they doubt that they have the disease. Children and dogs are toughest because they don't get the concept. So Paul explains why people need the gospel: We sin against God: We neither glorify God nor give him thanks. Indeed we suppress the evidence for God's existence (1:18-23). And we sin against our fellow man: We are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless; insolent, arrogant and boastful (1:28-32).

For most of Romans 2 and 3, Paul answers the excuses people make.

- I'm on God's side in this; I agree that sin is reprehensible and that God should judge sin. Paul: But when you do the same things you judge, you call for judgment on yourself! (2:1-3).
- Judgment? But I thought God is patient and merciful. God has to forgive us; that's his job. Paul: God forgives if you repent (2:4-5).
- But what about **all the pagans**? How can God judge the world when so many people don't have the Bible? But the existence of God is written in nature and basic morality is written on the heart (2:6-16).
- But I'm a religious person, a member of Israel, the church. But, "A man is not a Jew [or Christian] if he is only one outwardly." Knowledge of the law is worthless if a man simply breaks it. The true believer [Jew or Christian] believes inwardly (2:17-29).

This prompts another challenge. If true faith is inward, Paul, there is no advantage for the person who grew up as Jew or Christian! Paul: But there is! We have the very words of God. We have a covenant with God; we know God's miracles, we have the signs of the covenant – circumcision and Passover in the Old Testament, baptism and communion in the New Testament. These things constitute a real but awesome advantage. If we're first in privilege we are also first in judgment. Instructed by the law, judged by the law. We stand close to the divine power, which is a real but dangerous privilege. Some lack faith and so miss the offered privileges. I talk to people who blame God for that. They say, "I would believe in God if he made His existence more obvious, if He gave more proof and answered all my objections. It's God's fault that I don't believe. The burden of proof falls on Him".

Human skepticism doesn't change reality. God remains faithful. If someone believes, they find the benefits. If they lack the faith to claim the promises, the benefit evaporates. But whose fault is that? (3:1-3).

Some people want to put God on the defensive, but do you really want to take God to court? Would you really say, "He didn't meet my standards"? If anyone should question God, Paul says "let God be true and every man a liar" If a man should take God to court, he will surely be vindicated (3:4).

Paul mentions a final objection: "If our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly" how can God object or punish me? How can He bring "His wrath on us?" Our sins made Him look good – by offering such a clear contrast. "If my falsehood dramatizes God's truthfulness and so increases His

glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" (3:7). If my sin highlights His holiness, mercy, and grace, if my sins advance God's honor, how can He punish me?

Why not say, "Let us do evil that good may result"? If I should sin boldly, God's grace will shine. Paul doesn't even bother to answer. Eventually it's clear that some people are simply making excuses. Anyone who reasons this way deserves to be condemned.

Paul can think of no more objections, so he concludes: both Jews and Gentiles are all under sin... No one is righteous, not one (3:9-10 English Standard Version).

2. No one is righteous (Romans 3:9-18)

"No one is righteous. No one understands. No one seeks God." That is, no one is just. None can stand as a righteous man before God. Some will object here, too: Surely there are good people in the world. Paul said as much in Romans 2: Pagans can observe the law that is written on their hearts. But not perfectly and total obedience is the topic now.

Mother Theresa, Billy Graham, and Martin Luther King were the most admired people in America in 2000. But in interviews, all three freely confessed their sinfulness.

Does no one seek God? Again people will object. Everyone knows people who have gone on religious quest, examining various religions, reading the Bible. But it's true in two ways. First, many religions are atheistic: Buddhists, Naturalists, communists, Stoics, and Deists are essentially atheists. They seek a good life, then extinction. Hindus seek animal deities who have no virtue, no transcendence, and offer no hope. Animists and ancestor worshipers seek powers of the age – strength in nature or great man. None seeks the transcendent Lord.

Moreover, no one seeks the true God unless God first seeks him. People do seek religion or spirituality on their own. They think of faith as an aid, a bit of assistance in life's difficult journey. Life is basically under control and religion or "church" will make it a little better: it's a place to find moral friends, do community service, and find help at pivotal times: birth, marriage, death. For many people "God" is an aid to a good life. So, are they truly seeking God? No.

Of course, the Bible says some people do seek God. They seek his guidance (Exodus 33:7). His people seek him after wandering. (2 Chronicles 15:12-13). The Bible says the Lord will not forsake those who seek him (Psalm 9:10). Indeed, God commands us to seek him (27:8). "No one seeks" means no one truly seeks unless God prompts us to seek Him truly. He seeks us, therefore we seek Him.

Specific sins (3:13-17)

As much as sinfulness is on Paul's mind, he believes we also need to recognize and confess particular sins. He mentions two: the most common – sins of speech – and the most serious – sins of violence.

James says if anyone could tame his tongue, he would be "a perfect man." But the tongue "is a fire, a world of evil... no man can tame the tongue" (3:1-8). Paul says it is an open grave: there is both inner corruption and a deadly effect. It is, moreover, deceitful and poisonous, full of curses and bitterness.

Humanity is guilty of common sins, sins of speech, and of dreadful sins, acts of violence. We besiege cities – the agony. We shed blood. "Ruin and misery mark their ways." We don't know how to make peace. Consider the "peace process" for Israel and its neighbors. Colin Powell knew Yiddish, still... The process is now decades old and peace is more distant than ever. We are often better at making war than making peace (3:15-17).

"There is no fear of God before their eyes" (3:18). The eyes see and direct the steps, but sinners leave God out of their plans. This is practical atheism. But there is a fear/reverence of God that drives out other

fears. Psalm 86 says, "Give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name. I will praise you, O Lord, with all my heart; I'll glorify your name forever. For great is your love toward me."

There is a foolish fearlessness that leads to greater fears. And there is an affectionate reverence that ends many fears. The gospel ends the dread of God.

3. Mankind is silent (Romans 3:19-20)

It's time for Paul to draw conclusions. Everyone is under the law – either the law of God in Scripture or the law of God written on the heart. The whole world is accountable. There are no more excuses; we fall silent.

All sin with the mouth, all at least think violent thoughts. No one is righteous. We are silenced and accountable before God. We are – or should be – conscious of sin. Again we ought to be aware of our sins. Every society makes it easy to commit certain sins. We are prone to them, but must see them.

For centuries, it was easy for Chinese men to mistreat their wives. Chinese women were subjugated to men in virtually every way. Wealthy men took multiple wives plus concubines to demonstrate their status. Women were supposed to keep house, know nothing else, and agree with their husbands in every way. Their saying was "If your husband is a chicken submit to the chicken. If he is a dog, submit to the dog".

Consider the custom of foot binding - breaking and wrapping women's feet to make them small. This could only arise in a culture that reduced women to the ornaments of men. If a woman's family could manage to restrict her feet so that they were four inches long, she would barely be able to walk. That would demonstrate a family's wealth. See, the wife cannot work. But she has servants. And it controlled women. If they could barely walk, how could they be independent, how could they resist a husband in any way?

Foot binding was a great evil: terribly painful. It impaired women for life. But almost no one saw it at the time. We wonder: Are we missing our sins?

It's easier to be conscious of some sins: brutality, lying. Sadly, I've learned that humans are capable of blindness to just about every sin. If we lie, curse at people, even if we beat them, we learn to accept ourselves. Unless we challenge the bully or critic, the bully or critic eventually thinks their behavior is normal.

Whole societies can become blind to some sins. Take greed and materialism. The current recession lets us reconsider our attitudes. Some of us are learning to be content with whatever we have, but Jesus knows it's easy to be blind to our greed. That's why he says, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." (Luke 12:13-21).

A double warning: It's easy to see self-indulgence or greed in others and miss it in ourselves. A mature pastor with decades in large churches said, "I can't recall anyone ever coming to me and saying, 'I spend too much on myself. I think my greedy lust for money is harming me and the people around me.'¹ Like most sins, greed hides itself. We should pray to God, "Put your fear before my eyes. Show me my sin, teach me to repent and forgive me".

Romans 3:20-25 is too rich for one week. But let's focus on the vital part: When we admit our problem with sin, we can receive God's solution for sin. Stop making excuses, be silent before God, the judge. Admit your sin and guilt. When we know we deserve condemnation, God can solve the problem.

4. God is gracious (Romans 3:21-24)

¹ " Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, page 52

"A righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." (3:21). That is, God is the source of a righteousness He bestows on us, so that we are righteous in His sight. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by His grace."

Moses agrees: "Abraham believed the Lord and He counted it to Him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6). The prophet Habakkuk says, "The righteous shall live by his faith." (Habakkuk 2:4).

This is justification by faith. Our Catechism says, "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardons all our sins, and accepts us as righteous in His sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone." Paul says, "A person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ" (Galatians 2:16, English Standard Version).

There is a great illustration of this from church history. John Wesley, who founded the Methodist Church, went to Oxford Seminary and then became a minister of the Church of England where he served about ten years. Later, he became a missionary to the colony of Georgia.²

Wesley was largely a failure in ministry though he was, we would think, very pious. He got up at four a.m. and prayed and read the Bible for two hours. Then he went to prisons and hospitals to minister to the neediest people. He taught, prayed, and helped others until late at night. But he was also self-righteous and foolish. His mission work in Georgia went so badly that the governor ordered him to return to England.

On his way to America, there was a great storm at sea. Waves broke over the deck and wind shredded the sails until the little ship seemed ready to sink. Wesley, lacking assurance of his salvation, was terrified that he was going to die. Despite all his efforts, death was a frightening question mark. On the other side of the ship, a group of Moravians sang hymns. Wesley walked over and asked them how they could sing when they might die that very night. They replied, "If this ship goes down, we will go up to be with the Lord forever."

Wesley wondered, "How could they know that? What more have they done than I have done?" You hear it. He knew Jesus was Savior of the world, but had Jesus saved him? Sadly, he trusted his works, his righteousness. Whenever we trust our deeds, doubt is inescapable. Is it enough?

Wesley added, "I came to convert the heathen, but who shall convert me?" Wesley worked fruitlessly in Georgia and returned to England in disgrace. He went to London and found his way to an informal service where he heard a man reading an old sermon (250 years old) by Martin Luther. Luther said: genuine faith trusts Christ alone for salvation, apart from works.

At last Wesley realized he had relied on his works, not on Christ alone. He wrote in his journal. "About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

Wesley needed the doctrine of justification by faith. Perhaps you do too. If someone hopes to get right with God and asks, "What more can I do?" they will never rest until they hear the gospel of justification by faith. We can't climb up to heaven, but the Lord can lift us up to heaven. Our sin alienates us from God, but God's grace and Jesus' faithfulness unite us to him. Not our works.

² Latourette, *History of Christianity*, 1975, pages 2:1023-5

In God's court, anyone who believes in Christ Jesus is "justified by faith apart from works of the law" from the moment of faith (3:28). In fact, "By works of the law, no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." (3:20).

When we trust in Christ as Lord and Savior, our sin is laid on him and His righteousness is imputed to us. So we are justified by faith alone. We add nothing – no works - in order to earn or gain God's favor.

When Gentiles come to faith and enter the church, they do so apart from the laws about circumcision, food, and association that separated Jews from other people. In general, while trying to keep the laws of Jesus and Moses, we cannot earn entry into the kingdom. No spiritual athlete can enter heaven by his achievement – not even if we wake up at four, pray, and head out to feed the poor.

Of course, we still strive to follow the Lord, do good and love others. But that is a result and demonstration of our salvation, not a condition for attaining it. Still, a healthy fruit tree does bear fruit, and a healthy believer shows his new nature. True faith demonstrates its vitality by its works. Someone said:

“That I *say* I have faith cannot possibly free me from sin, guilt, and punishment. How could something I *say* be my deliverance? Not that I *say* I have faith, but that I *exercise* faith, that saves me, situates me in God's peace, brings me God's grace, and is my righteousness before God.... If faith gave me merely words, then it would be of use... to say I have faith. But that is a sinister thought. Is that all I am, a thinker and talker? God has given me life, and that means he has planted a will in me that must act, with unalterable necessity. Service to God is action. I thank God that I can act as one who trusts...” Adolf Schlatter in *Encountering the New Testament*, page 357.

Justification is by Christ alone. Our salvation is through Christ alone. I pause because the word salvation is used many ways. We hear that Bernanke, Paulson and Geithner "saved" America's financial system. Pitchers save baseball games.

I read of two men who saved several lives. During World War II, Japan's occupying forces imprisoned, tortured or executed Chinese who showed signs of rebellion. A man named Yang somehow became an executioner for the Japanese. His conscience tormented him. A doctor offered a plan. First, do the Chinese witness every execution? No. They stay to the end for notorious rebels, but they often come briefly, then leave. Good. Second, are bodies buried systematically? No. In that case, the doctor said, there is a way to save some lives – including the life of my nephew. There is a way to deprive men of air and render them unconscious – apparently dead. After they pass out, dump them in the cart used for bodies. The attendant will wheel the body out, dump it in an open pit and leave. Some men will wait nearby. When the "executed" man awakens, they will lead him to a safe house. We say that the doctor and the executioner saved these lives. And in a way they did, but it's a pale reflection of the work of Christ.

He wasn't motivated by guilty torment or love for a family member. He had no need, no selfish motive. No, "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." He was rich, but didn't stay rich. He became poor, so that we would become rich, now and always.

What then? First, God calls each of us to believe in Christ Jesus. Second, he invites each of us to rest in Christ, to find calm and rest.

Believe the implications of the gospel. Stop self-doubt. Believe that Jesus' death on the cross completely exhausted and eliminated God's judgment of your sin.

But you must ask yourself who you are. Are you like Wesley, furiously trying to find certainty through good works? Trying to find security through achievement? Are you like Zaccheus, the man who knew how to repent? Do you know your weakness? Are you willing to trust in another or do you want to trust and save self?

If you do know the gospel of justification, you must plan to share the message. You should be praying for someone, looking for a sensible time.

No more fear of death or judgment. If we believe, the Lord will never treat us as our sins deserve nor reward us "according to my iniquities" No, he treated Jesus according to our sins and forgot all our iniquities. Jesus declared us righteous in the sight of God. Beyond that, he calls us His children, His brothers, His friends. We are dear to the heart of God. Because of Jesus, we can say without hesitation, humbly, but boldly, great is the love of God toward me, even me! Give us hearts and lips to praise your name always.