

Free From Slavery

Message 3

Sin Everywhere

Romans 2:1-3:20 (Read 2:1-16)

Introduction

One of the most primitive of human impulses is the demand for fairness. From earliest infancy a child will instantly become indignant and loudly demand redress if a sibling gets a piece of candy and he doesn't, or if a playmate takes more turns than her "fair share" – and this never changes. Doesn't your blood boil when you are waiting in an interminable line of traffic and someone cuts in front of you? And why is the current debate over economic policy so rancorous? Isn't it because there is a deep-rooted anger that some Americans may get a better deal than others? Why is this? Of all the problems and wrongs that confront us, why do we get so worked up about fairness? I suggest it's because it involves not one sin, but two. Unfairness is the intersection of injustice and selfishness. We can tolerate a little injustice, especially if it doesn't affect us directly, and we can accept the vicissitudes of fate – but when we suffer and others prosper at our expense, we become intractably hostile. And nowhere is our wrath against unfairness more unrelenting than when God is at fault.

Paul began his discussion of the human condition in chapter 1 verse 18 with these chilling words, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven..." and he concluded in verse 32 by declaring that "those who practice such things are deserving of death." Do not be deceived. All the fury of almighty God burns against sinners. They will not escape from the God whom they have angered. Now everyone who hears this must ask himself, "Have I angered God, or am I righteous? Will I escape God's wrath?" And as you think further you must wonder, what about others? What about those of different religions? What about those who haven't heard about Jesus? Will they die? And if so, isn't God being monstrously unfair? How can He justly condemn poor people who don't know the gospel, yet do the best they can in spite of that handicap? Ultimately, the question is this: "Can we trust God to be fair in His judgment of people?"

Good Gentiles Have Sinned

Last week we saw Paul trace the inexorable slide of humanity deeper and deeper into sin – grosser and more perverse sin – until human society becomes unbearably wicked. What started as a simple refusal to thank and worship God ended in a terminally sick society deserving death. But no doubt some of you, as you heard Paul's description of human sin, thought, "He's right on target, but not for everyone. That sure doesn't describe me!" And no doubt there were people in Paul's day who had the same reaction. They thought, "Wait a minute! I don't kill, or steal, or fornicate. In fact, I honor my parents, help others, and strive for virtue. Paul's warning plainly doesn't apply to me at all." The Roman philosopher Seneca is an example of such a good Gentile. He lived in Paul's time, and as F. F. Bruce has noted,

...he exposed hypocrisy, he preached the equality of all human beings, he acknowledged the pervasive character of evil...he practiced and inculcated daily self-examination, he ridiculed vulgar idolatry...¹

Such a man might understandably object to Paul's sweeping condemnation of all humanity. To condemn everyone when some have lived good lives certainly is not fair. Paul replies by adopting a literary form common in his day – the diatribe – in which he allows a hypothetical person to pose a question and then proceeds to provide the answer. Paul acknowledges the validity of this question and proceeds to

¹ Quoted in John Stott, *Romans* (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL;) pp. 80-99.

answer. His answer might meet your question, too.

Paul wastes no time getting to the point. In verse 3 he declares that a good Gentile is condemned also because he commits the same sins he criticizes in others. Now on the surface this seems to beg the question. The good Gentile says he doesn't sin like his neighbors, but Paul says he does. Frankly, Paul seems to be engaging in juvenile name-calling. You say you're good and I say you aren't. What kind of argument is that? Essentially I am calling you a liar. How will that persuade anyone?

We must bear in mind that this letter packs some very profound concepts into a very small space. Paul often sketches out his argument and leaves the details for us to fill in. Surely Paul is not saying that the good Gentiles engage in the very exact same behavior as the flagrantly wicked. What he *is* saying is that there is no *sort* of sin of which anyone can say he is free. All people share in all the types of sin, but we do it in different ways. Some become angry and proceed to kill their opponents. Others hide their anger and express it in more subtle ways. But Jesus said anger is breaking the sixth commandment. Some lust after their neighbor and commit adultery. Others just lust, but Jesus said that lust is breaking the seventh commandment. Some people perjure themselves to escape jail, and others tell little white lies, all breaking the eighth commandment. Some tell vicious lies, and others gossip, breaking the ninth commandment. Some covet your stuff and bankrupt you to get it, while others conceal their lust for your things, both breaking the tenth commandment.

You see, it's true there are some who live generally moral lives. We don't deny that some non-Christians are exemplary citizens. But they sin, too. Furthermore, in all sorts of subtle ways they commit the *same* sins that criminals and the notoriously wicked commit. So this not only makes them sinners, it makes them the worst sort of sinners – hypocrites! Chapter 1 concluded by describing the gross sinners who “not only do the same [sins] but also approve of them who practice them.” (v. 32) But at least the gross sinners are honest. The so-called moral Gentiles are low-down liars. They would condemn their neighbors and exonerate themselves although both are equally guilty! To them Paul says, “do you think...that you will escape the judgment of God?...You are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God...”

Do you think you're a pretty good person? Do you think you're better than criminals and sinners? You wicked hypocrite! Stop deceiving yourself and lying to us. Examine your heart. Recognize the wickedness that resides there. God's anger justifiably burns against you. One day He will judge the world, and you will not escape Him then.

Judgment of Works

But wait! Read on. Doesn't Paul say a few verses later that God gives eternal life to those who do good? Ah, a ray of hope in a most distressing situation! This answers our question about those who have not received God's word. Will God wipe them out simply because they never heard His law? Absolutely not! If they patiently continue to do good, God will grant them eternal life. God is thoroughly fair. Verse 11 says explicitly that God doesn't give anyone special treatment. All people are equal before His bar of justice.

But how will God judge those who do not have the scripture? If He doesn't hold it against them that they don't have access to the scripture and the laws in it, what will be the basis for either clearing them or finding them guilty? Verses 12 to 16 explain that God will judge everyone according to the level of his knowledge. Those who have heard the scripture will be judged by the moral standards found there. Those who have not heard the scripture will be judged by their own law. Paul refers to this as the “law written in their hearts” (v. 15). All people naturally recognize certain basic laws. Now, this idea is decisively reviled

today, but without basis. Sociologists and anthropologists assert that all cultures are different, and have widely different moral standards – and this is true, as far as it goes. Some cultures are famous for tolerating deception, approving of fornication, and even permitting killing of human beings. How then can we say there is a moral standard common to all people? Because there is! Although cultures define these things differently, every culture approves honesty, sexual propriety, and preservation of human life. Even cannibalistic cultures condemn killing within the tribe. Even American culture, which approves most forms of sexual behavior, condemns coercive sex and pedophilia. Every culture recognizes that there is some moral standard for how you treat your parents, protection of human life, sexual behavior, and telling the truth. Every culture implicitly recognizes the validity of the ten commandments, although they distort them.

How could this be the case? Isn't it far-fetched to think that all cultures have a common moral base? No, for all cultures are made up of people made in the image of God. Remember we said last week that the image of God involves divine characteristics? Part of the divine aspect of God's image is an implicit sense of morality. To be human is to be like God in some degree, and this is inevitably reflected in the moral codes of human cultures.

So now do you see how fair God is? Anyone anywhere who lives a good life will receive eternal life. And God even judges your goodness by your own standard. You don't need to have the scripture. God will not expect you to know what you never heard. All He expects is that you live up to the morality of the laws you understand, even if they are distortions of His perfect law. Can you ask for anything else? Isn't God good!

Surely God is good, but that is no help to you – for you aren't. You see, we already showed that everyone fails, even by his own moral standard. True, all who persist in doing good will get eternal life – but no one does. Many people do acts of kindness, but that's not enough. Did you catch the detail in verse 7? God requires that we do good *continually*. Not just some days. Not just on Sunday. Not all week except Saturday night. Not to everyone but that troublesome competitor. Not all your life except that once. Not just in acts which others observe, but deep in your heart. When God says those who do good will receive eternal life, He means it – but He means a thoroughly good life – not a partly good life.

Is God fair? Absolutely! Verse 2 tells us that He is just, and verse 11 tells us that he treats everyone the same. Is this good news? Sort of. It's better than the alternative, but it doesn't mean we will escape His anger. Alone with God, we all are doomed.

The Jews Have Sinned

But now another individual enters Paul's literary stage – the Jew. Here is a man who *does* have God's law. And that's not all. He also has God's covenant and the sign of circumcision. The Jews worked day and night to keep God's law. And God pledged to them in His covenant to make them His own people forever. Furthermore, circumcision was the sign that the Jews were God's special people. It was inconceivable that God would condemn the Jews.

But Paul immediately sweeps away any such notion. As with the good Gentiles, he points out that the Jews broke the laws they claimed to keep. Jesus said the same thing. One of the most frequent refrains in Jesus' teaching was the hypocrisy of the Jews. They claimed to keep the law, but in fact they twisted the law to suit their evil desires. They allowed a man to dedicate his possessions to the temple – what we today would call a living trust – and thus prevent him from using his wealth to care for his aging parents. (Mark 7:9-13) They carefully counted out the leaves of their garden herbs to tithe to the temple, but refused to show compassion on those who didn't have enough to eat. (Matt. 23:23) The Jews had an appearance of

goodness, but under the surface they were morally rotten. In fact, it wasn't so far under the surface. Paul asserts here that "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." Even the pagans could see that the Jews were corrupt, and they were disgusted at God because of it.

Paul moves briskly on and disabuses the Jews of the notion that circumcision will save them from God's wrath. This should have been obvious. All through the Old Testament God kept telling the Jews that He required a circumcised heart, as well as circumcised flesh – but they didn't listen then. You know the Jews who died in the wilderness? They were circumcised. Remember the Jews who were defeated and enslaved again and again in the period of the judges? And the Jews that were killed, raped, and exiled to Babylon? They were circumcised. But their hearts were evil. In the book of Deuteronomy Moses exhorted the Jews saying,

And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD and His statutes which I command you today for your good? (Deut. 10:12-13)

He concluded a few verses later, "therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer." (Deut. 10:16) Paul is not inventing a new doctrine here. He is just reviving the teaching of the prophets all through history. And the Jews in his day, like their fathers, eventually would be swept away in God's anger if they relied on circumcision to save them.

All Have Sinned

So far Paul has shown that the gross, perverted sinners are under God's judgment. Furthermore, the good Gentiles are no better. They aren't flagrant sinners – they're hypocrites. Finally, we see that even the Jews are under God's wrath. What's the big difference between the three? None! God is angry with all alike. All alike deserve death, and all alike will justly die, for all alike have broken God's laws. God is perfectly fair, but sadly that's no help to us. All alike are fairly condemned to death.

Paul brings this dismal discourse to a conclusion with a collage of quotations from the psalms and prophets.

*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.*

Romans 3:10-18

Is this crystal clear? None. No one. Not one single person anywhere has ever lived a good life according to God's standard. In fact, our goodness is disgusting to God. When we try to do good, we are revolting. We stink like rotten bodies. We are as evil as looters, arsonists, and rapists. Isaiah said all our goodness is like bloody menstrual rags. (Isaiah 64:6) At our *best*, God finds our goodness repulsive.

Conclusion

So Paul concludes in verse 20 that no one will escape a guilty sentence from the fair judge of all mankind. This is not a pretty picture. He says, "by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight." The phrase "deeds of the law" means things done by human effort. On your own, face to face with God, you have no hope. You don't have a sin problem, you have a sin catastrophe! You are doomed.

If this is the case, what shall we do? If all human effort is useless, shall we abandon all hope and kill ourselves, or recklessly live for the moment? No, for there is a glimmer of hope in this verse. Paul sets us up for the wonderful news of a goodness *apart* from human effort – a radically different kind of goodness – a goodness that can be ours, but not by doing good. This will be our topic next week.

Meanwhile, there are two ways we must respond to this passage. First is the question of whether you believe it. It is true? Are you a sinner? On your own, are you odious in God's sight? Are all your attempts to do good utter failures in God's sight – or is Paul lying to us? And of course it's not Paul speaking here, but God speaking *through* Paul. So what will it be, do you believe God, or is He lying to you? If this passage is true, then you need to own up to it. You need to admit that your own actions are unacceptable to God. You need to admit that the perfect goodness He requires is not found in you. Our first response to this passage must be confession and repentance to almighty, holy God that we have mortally offended Him.

This passage is very sobering. If you are here tonight as a Christian, you should be troubled afresh at how awful sin is. If you are here tonight as an unbeliever, this should scare the pants off you. You are in a heap of trouble and you desperately need help – *now*! See me after the meeting, or talk to someone else here about how to escape God's anger.

Our second response to this passage should be deep concern for our unbelieving friends. If this passage is true, they have a horrible future before them. How can you live with yourself if you do nothing to help your friends escape God's anger and death sentence? We aren't all called to be evangelists, but we all should do what we can when we have opportunity to help our family, friends, and associates to seek salvation from their sin. May God help us to love others by conveying this message to all we encounter.

C. David Green
Lehigh University
January 28, 2003