

Tuesday Evening Bible Study at Tokyo Baptist Church
Paul's Letter to the Romans – Chapter 3, Verses 27-31
Notes from Tuesday August 31, 2010
Last Revised on September 5, 2010

Songs

Opening Prayer

Introduction

In this class, for those of you who are new, we are studying the Letter of Paul to the Romans.

Notes for all previous classes have been posted on the class web site, for your review.

Last week our reading took us up to Verse 26 of Chapter 3.

Before we read on, I will review a little.

Review

The first 15 1/2 verses of Chapter 1 are **introductory**, but they tell us important things.

They tell us we are reading a letter written by the Apostle Paul to **Christians** living in a city that Paul had never visited.

There are two important points here: First, it is important to bear constantly in mind that Paul is **not** writing to **un**believers. This is not, in other words, an evangelistic tract intended to convert unbelievers to faith in Christ. It is, rather, catechism: a document intended to teach believers more about the content of their faith.

Second, the fact that Paul is writing to believers in a place where he has never been, explains why he does **not** say much about issues and problems particular to Rome. He's never been there! So this document, Paul's Letter to the Romans, addresses the issues of **Christians generally**

Or what amounts to the same thing: this letter addresses the issues of all **kinds** of Christians. Paul says (1:14) he is "...under obligation both to Greeks and Barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish." One theme that runs throughout this letter is that "God shows no partiality. (2:11)

Nevertheless in addressing the Christians in Rome, from the very beginning and throughout this entire letter, Paul does seem very much mindful of the fact that some of these Christians are Jews and some are gentiles.

Christ Jesus came in fulfillment of promises and prophecies made **first** to the Jews.

The gospel is, Paul says in the latter half of verse 16, “the power of God for salvation to **everyone** who believes [but he adds] to the **Jew** first and [then] **also to the Greek.**”

The gospel of Jesus Christ which is the salvation of all men, without distinction, is nevertheless the culmination of the history of a peculiar people, the Jews, whom God chose to bear his name.

This aspect of our faith, its Jewish root, is never far from Paul’s mind in what follows.

In this gospel, Paul tells us in verse 17, “...**the righteousness of God is revealed.**”

and seemingly in explanation of this statement, he tells us, in verse 18, that “... **the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...**”

I understand these two verses, 17 and 18, to be taken together: the Gospel is **simultaneously** the revelation of Gods wrath against all **ungodliness** and **unrighteousness** of men and of God’s **own** righteousness which also imparts to those men who believe in his son.

The gospel is the final solution to all of the problems posed in the Old Testament; it reveals how God ultimately deals with the unrighteousness and ungodliness of man.

This unrighteousness and ungodliness of man is examined in Verses 18 - 32 of Chapter 1.

We are, I think, supposed to see **ourselves** accurately described therein and all men from Adam until now, excluding only Christ.

But Paul imagines that some men may read these verses and see others, but not themselves, described there.

So he turns at the start of Chapter 2 and begins a diatribe directed against such people, against “those who judge” and this basically continues throughout all of Chapter 2.

In the beginning of Chapter 2 he seems to have in view everyone who judges anyone, and this certainly includes all of us. Part of the ungodliness and unrighteousness of man is that we all tend to excuse ourselves and to judge others.

But by the end of Chapter 2 Paul seems to be focused on those among his Christian readers who are circumcised Jews, and who may be judging other Christians, those who are not circumcised.

Throughout Chapter 2, one fundamental point is being advanced, it seems to me: God finally cares only about what is true **inwardly** and he cares nothing about mere external appearances.

Various applications of this point are touched on in Chapter 2, finally including the point that

circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter (v. 29).

If that is true, Paul asks, then is there any advantage to being a Jew, and does literal outward circumcision have any value?

This is the question that begins Chapter 3.

As I suggested last week, this question can be understood on two levels

If the question is understood to be about their role in “salvation history” then we can only answer, in a loud voice, and emphatically, that the advantage of being a Jew and the value of circumcision is very great indeed.

God himself chose the Jews and brought them into a special covenantal relationship with himself, which was symbolized by circumcision and other rites and ceremonies which God Himself instituted.

And the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God, including the Law and the Prophets and finally even including the Son of God Himself. What could be of greater value than all of this?

That is the sense of verses 1 and 2 of Chapter 3 and much else in this letter.

It is true that such incredible advantages did not prevent God’s chosen people, individually or corporately from rejecting God, time and time again, to the point where one could reasonably ask if there were effectively any advantage at all of being Jewish.

But verses 3 and 4 of Chapter 3 basically assert, it seems to me, that the advantages which God bestows upon his people are not diminished by the failures of his people to capitalize on them.

Our failures are **our** failures, which God justly condemns and, yet, God’s just condemnation of our sins cannot stop God from achieving his purposes, which are to bless whom he will bless!

That God is able to overcome our evil and bring good from it, is reason to glorify God.

But this is no excuse for our sin --- which is the point of verses 5-8.

In summary of verses 1-8 of Chapter 3, God really has blessed the Jews in a real and extraordinary way, despite their unfaithfulness and, through them, the rest of the world.

“What then?” Paul asks in the first part of Verse 9 of Chapter 3, “Are we Jews any better off?”

He proceeds to answer himself in the second part of that verse: “No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin,”

 Despite the very real blessings which have been poured out on the Jews, they are no better off than the rest of us, because they, like us, are all under sin.

 To prove his point, Paul goes to the Holy Scripture.

 Verses 10 through 18 of Romans Chapter 3 contain a very carefully selected and beautifully interwoven series of quotations, mostly from the Psalms but also from Isaiah and Proverbs.

 The point is that the Jews have always known that the point that Paul is making here is true, namely that no one, not even the Jews, and not even King David is righteous before God.

 If anything, having the law, as the Jews did, makes them less righteous, because it gives them a more perfect knowledge of their own sin!

 This is the point which Paul makes in verses 19 and 20 of Chapter 3.

 The law is a light shining on the rottenness of man and the perfection of God.

 The Jews were blessed by being asked to carry the light, and through them all men have also been blessed.

 But just because they were carrying the light, it did not make them any less sinful.

 But with the coming of Christ, a new and brighter light is shining, and the old lights are put away. (Calvin)

 Let's just reread that magnificent passage that we began to study last week.

The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 3, Verses 21 -26

Will someone please read verses 21-26 in Japanese

 Thank you. Now will someone please read those verses in English.

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

22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:

23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

The law has indeed manifested the righteousness of God and, also, the sinfulness of all men.

The law and the prophets (our Old Testament) looks hopefully beyond itself for salvation, for the day when God somehow redeems his people, forgives their sins, and gives them a new heart.

but now, Paul says, this salvation has been manifested.

The sins which the law so clearly showed, are forgiven, as a free gift from God.

Free to us, but not free to God, who has, in accordance with his eternal plan and purpose, put forward Christ to die in our place, as a payment for our sin.

This is the payment which God prepared and now puts forward for all the sins which he passed over before the coming of Christ,

So that now that Christ has come, we see that God is just, and that he is the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

We are sinners who deserve to die, just like everyone else, but for those who believe in Jesus, God has prepared not death but eternal life.

This is the gospel.

Let's read on

The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Chapter 3, Verses 27-31

Will someone please read verses 27-31 in Japanese

Thank you. Now will someone please read those verses in English.

27 Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.

28 For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

29 Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes,

of Gentiles also,

30 since God is one---who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

31 Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Thank you.

Everything that has gone before in this letter, works against boasting in human status, worth, or achievement.

We are all totally depraved.

Even the Jews who were truly and specially blessed by God are no exception.

Even the best among the Jews, notably King David, are no exception.

So the question raised in Verse 27 is no surprise and is, in some sense, easy to answer.

It reads:

(Verse 27)

Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.

All human boasting has been excluded, once and for all, by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which Gospel is, by the way, the culmination and summary, the goal and purpose, of the history of Israel.

That much is clear.

The internal logic of Verse 27 is understood differently by different readers.

One way to understand it, is by understanding the word “law” here to mean a general rule or principle.

On this reading Paul would be asking what is the general rule or principle by which our boasting is excluded: works or faith?

To which he answers “faith.”

Another way to read Verse 27, is to understand the word law to mean Holy Scripture (i.e. our Old Testament).

With this understanding, which I believe to be the correct one, Paul is asking what the Jewish Scripture really teaches.

If we read Scripture as being about works, as if works were the thing that could save us, then we would be prone to boast in our own works, and prone to judge the works of ourselves and others, and if we happened to be very religious people (such as the Jewish Christians in Rome) then we would be at risk of missing the gospel altogether.

But if we read Scripture as being about faith, that is trust in the faithfulness of God despite the wickedness of man, and especially despite the wickedness of God's chosen people, then even if, and especially if we are Jews we will not be inclined to boast and we will see that the Law was always about the gospel, always pointing forward to a gospel that excludes all human boasting.

Verse 28 reads

(Verse 28)

For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

This is a central tenant of the Christian faith: "We hold that one is ..."

It is also a central tenant of the Faith of Israel properly understood.

Obedying the law is important to both Christian and Jews.

But legal obedience can never justify us, can never make us righteous before God.

Jews and Christians have always know this in their better moments.

We all forget this very often.

(Verse 29)

Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also,

No Jew in Paul's day would ever have suggested that God was the God of the Jews only.

Jews have always understood that God created everything, that he is the only God, and that he is the God of all men.

If it were possible to be justified by works of the Law,

God would not have sent the law only to the Jews.

Because God does not show partiality.

It stands to reason, then, that God will justify all men in the same way, without exception,

The one way, Paul proclaims, is faith.

Verse 30 reads:

(Verse 30)

since God is one---who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

The different prepositions used here: “the circumcised **by** faith” and “the uncircumcised **through** faith,” are probably used just for stylistic variation and not to communicate that there is any real difference in the way in which faith saves the circumcised and the uncircumcised.

If there is a difference, then I suppose it could only be that the object of the faith by which everyone is saved was revealed first and most clearly in Israel and then later to the Gentiles, but in the end the light of Christ shines equally brightly for all.

Verse 31 reads:

(Verse 31)

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

This verse is clear, I think, in view of the foregoing exposition.

This faith --- that is faith in the faithfulness of God as ultimately revealed in Christ --- is precisely what the law, that is Old Testament scripture, has been talking about all along.

The goal and purpose of the law is found in Christ and in those who come to him in faith

How could that overthrow the law?!

If someone should say that the gospel overthrows the law, this would only mean that they had incorrectly understood the law as being a means of justification before God, a means of salvation.

This is simply a misunderstanding of Scripture, Paul means to say.

It is perhaps only fair to point out that Paul himself misunderstood the Scripture in exactly this way before he came to faith in Christ.

It is therefore not surprising that he continues moving in this direction in what follows.

That is he continues to help his readers see how the Gospel and the Law are one.

OK. Let's read on.

(n.b. on this night the class continued reading into Chapter 4; please refer to the notes from Chapter 4)