

God Has No Grandchildren

Romans 2:17-29

February 13, 2011

Last week we saw as Paul took a world divided and redefined the division. The division he addressed was between those who have the law and those who don't. He then changed the division to be between those who obey God through faith, and those who don't. His point was, it does not matter what you have been taught. If you obey the law God will declare you righteous. If you do not know the law, but obey it, you are better off than the person who has the law memorized but doesn't keep it.

This week Paul continues his argument. While Paul is still arguing against an imaginary opponent, he now identifies that opponent as a Jew. He also identifies the mindset with which he is wanting to deal. Look at the first several verses with me again.

“Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself?” (vv.17-21)

The Jews relied on **knowing** the law and bragged about their relationship with God as His chosen people. They knew His will and approved the right way to live because He had told them. They had His revelation and the record of His interaction with His people over thousands of years. Because of this, they have come to see themselves as guides for the spiritually blind, God's light in a dark world, instructors of the foolish, and teachers for spiritual infants. There is a sense in which they were right, God had given them His law so they could be these things, but they had moved the emphasis from God's faithfulness to themselves. They were not to brag about their relationship with God. They were to share it. They were supposed to lead people into the same understanding they had. They were to be obedient and to teach others to be obedient, and from obedience would come God's blessings. Instead, they sought to keep the blessing for themselves, and never really did live up to the obedience part. Paul pointed out that if they were to teach others, maybe they ought to get it right first themselves.

Last week we read as Paul accused his readers of faulting in others the very things of which they were guilty. This week Paul gets specific about it. Those who preached against stealing stole. Those who condemned adultery committed adultery. Those who hated idolatry robbed temples, hardly showing themselves to be paragons of virtue. Those who bragged about the law brought dishonor on God by not obeying it. It was a very real problem. It led Paul to quote a prophet who had dealt with the problem in his own day. Ezekiel 36:22 says, *“Therefore say to the house of Israel, ‘This*

is what the Sovereign LORD says: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am going to do these things, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you have gone.” Peter pointed out that this will happen again. In 2 Peter 2:2 it is written, “Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute.”

This has always been a problem with God’s people, so we should not be surprised that it is still a problem today. In every age there are those who point to integrity problems with God’s people and say, “I want no part of that.” The church is supposed to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth. Like the Jews, we are supposed to have a special relationship with God into which we invite those around us. Also like the Jews, we often do not live up to God’s plan.

It is true that the church is comprised of sinners who have been saved by God’s grace, but we are called to be something other than **sinners**. If we have been declared righteous by the forgiveness of God offered through the shed blood of Jesus Christ, then we ought to live like it. We need to stop the sinful patterns of the world and live different lives. Sometimes we don’t because we don’t want to look weird or odd to the world. Yet, we are called to be weird. Sometimes we just have a really hard time letting go of sinful habits, yet Jesus died to break the power of sin in our lives. If it still reigns over us it is because we have allowed it to do so. Sometimes we just love our sin more than we love God. When this is the case, we have to wonder if Jesus has captured our hearts at all since we are still in our sins.

The church cannot look like the **world** or we will have no place to which to call people. We must get our acts together, and get together, or our message will be discredited and God’s name will continue to be blasphemed on account of us. We must commit to living holy lives and to helping one another achieve this goal. We cannot do it alone. If we truly love one another and share our lives with each other so that the Holy Spirit can work in and through us, then we cannot fail.

The Jews wanted to rely on the symbols they had that they were in covenant with God. Chief among these things was circumcision. Paul reminds his opponent that circumcision symbolized a covenant that had expectations of the circumcised. Not only were they to receive the mark of the covenant, they were also to live in obedience to the law. According to Paul obedience to the law makes circumcision valid. As with last week, however, obedience is the more important factor when it comes to discerning who is in God’s favor. If people who are not in the covenant keep it better than those who are, who is God more likely to consider to be His people? If you know the covenant and yet do not keep it as well as someone who does not know it, isn’t that other person more in the covenant than you? So we are left with the situation in which the one who is not circumcised yet obeys the law, will stand in judgement over the one who is circumcised yet is disobedient.

In case we have missed it, Paul makes his case one more time. *“A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit,*

not by the written code.” (vv.28,29) Being Jewish in the true sense had much more to do with the inward state of the heart and the relationship of the life with God than it did with the condition of the body. The person whose heart is right with God, and whose body reflects that righteousness will receive God’s praise.

The Jews thought they were saved by virtue of the fact that they were Jews. They were descendants of Abraham, circumcised in the flesh and possessors of the law. They believed this to be enough. As we have seen, however, it was not enough to have the law, they needed to obey it. What is expected of the church? Are we saved simply by being part of a congregation and attending services occasionally? Is admitting that Jesus died for sin and submitting to baptism enough? After all, baptism is the initiation rite of the church just as circumcision was the initiation rite into Judaism. Once we are baptized and part of a local congregation are we then good? We are if the baptism reflects God’s work in us and there is a corresponding change in our behavior.

The key here is God’s **grace**. Under the law obedience was key. We are no longer under the law, and so salvation is no longer dependant on perfect obedience. It is now dependant on God’s forgiveness offered to us by His grace and through the shed blood of Jesus Christ on the cross. This will be Paul’s point next week. Over the last couple of weeks he has shown us how both Jews and Gentiles fall hopelessly short of God’s requirements. The Gentiles don’t have God’s law, nor do they want to obey it. They are just given over to their sinful passions. The Jews have the law, but believed having it to be enough and so they did the same things the Gentiles did.

Today in the church we have people who want to say that, since salvation is provided by God who loves us even though we sin, it does not matter if we sin, we are still okay. Paul will address this head-on next week, but we need to say this morning, that it is not true. If we are saved by God’s grace, that is not a reason to sin. It is a reason to not sin so that we do not make light of Jesus’ sacrifice for us. What is expected of God’s people? That we act like God’s people and not like the world around us. God’s grace not only changed our eternal destiny, it also changes our hearts and lives here and now. If we are going to heaven we will also have a strong **desire** to live obedient lives and the power to do it.

So, how do we come to be part of God’s people? Those who belong to the people of God are those who have the inward working of the Holy Spirit, not those who are members of some organization or another, and certainly not those who simply say they belong. When Nicodemus came to Jesus and asked Him about eternal life, Jesus told him *“I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”* (John 3:3) **Baptism** and church membership count for nothing if a person is not made right with God by the inward working of the Holy Spirit. Baptism of the heart, by the Holy Spirit, is the determining factor, not whether or not your body got wet or your name is written on a list somewhere. In the end there is only one membership roll that matters—the Lamb’s Book of Life.

The Jews thought they were okay because they were children of Abraham, who was God’s friend. Many people today believe they are okay because they were

raised in the church and know the songs and stories. They know all the right things to say, but the question remains, do they know God or just about Him? We do not get into heaven on the basis of our parent's relationship with God. It does not matter for our eternal destiny how holy they were or how well they knew the Bible. God does not have **grandchildren**. It is each of our relationships with God—the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives—that will determine our fate. I can't believe for you or for my children, though I can certainly pray for you and them. Each person's relationship with God is their own. We are called to help, strengthen, encourage, and support one another. But we cannot strengthen that which is not there.

In light of Paul's teaching over the last few weeks of our abominable condition and the need we have for the gospel, I invite you to examine yourself. Look at your heart. Look at your life—not what you want to be true about it, but your actual behavior and the things you do when you are alone. Is there evidence there that the Holy Spirit is working in you. Are you more obedient now than you were a month ago? Are you closer to Jesus than you were two years ago? Do you look more like Him in your responses? Are you more loving and forgiving? Do you know you have been forgiven?

If you answer these questions, "No," then listen for His voice this morning to see if He is speaking to you and calling you into relationship with Him now. Maybe you were baptized years ago. Maybe you need to renew your walk with Him and need a fresh baptism by His Spirit. Listen for what He wants to do and let Him have His way in you.