

## Getting It Backwards

Romans 3:1-20

February 20, 2011

We have watched over the last several weeks as Paul has worked through the beginning of his explanation of the gospel. As he has sought to demonstrate that the gospel alone is God's power unto salvation, he has shown that we all stand equally under God's wrath because of our sin. Last week we saw that the Jews were in no better standing than the Gentiles, just as those who attend church and claim the title "Christian" today have no better position than those who want nothing to do with the church. It is all about the condition of your heart and whether or not the Holy Spirit has changed your life. The law that the Jews expected to save them did no such thing, just as the things we expect will save us are useless. We are saved by the renewing power of the Holy Spirit, or we are not saved at all.

With this, we move into the next part of Paul's argument. He is still arguing against his imaginary opponent as he sets before us the main arguments and misconceptions people had against his teaching. These arguments are still used today by those who either do not understand what Paul is saying or who try to twist it.

Paul begins this morning's passage by asking, if Jews and Gentiles stand alike condemned before God, and knowing what God wants isn't enough, is there any advantage in knowing? Is there an advantage in being a Jew? Paul argues that there is. Indeed, not only is it good to have the law, it is much better. As Paul starts to unpack why it is better to be a Jew or in the church he

writes, "*First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God.*" (v.1)

The benefit that comes from being connected with the people of God, first and foremost, is that God's people have God's **words**. God has revealed Himself over the ages. He has shown Himself to the prophets who wrote about their experiences. He has given them His words to write down. He has told His people time and again what He wants of them and how they are to live. In all of this God has shown us His heart and the importance of His holiness, power, wrath, and love. The clearest example of God's will and heart are seen in Jesus as God the Son walked the earth in human flesh, and even now sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven interceding for those who are His own. It is a privileged place to be to have the very words of God—to be able to study them and learn what He wants us to know. That is the treasure we have in the Bible. It is God's message to us, without error and carrying the authority of God. That is the advantage that the Jews had, and which the church shares.

What are we to say about the hypocrites, then? What about those who know what to do and what God expects of them, and yet don't do it? What about those who would be part of the people of God, and yet don't have **faith**? Paul asks, and answers, "*Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar.*" (vv.3,4) We cannot judge God by the failings of His people. The lack of faith and obedience among those who claim to be the people of God tells us about the depth of the problem of sin, not about any failing in God. Even if everybody that ever

claimed to be a follower of God turns out to be a liar, this does not change Who God is or make Him untrue. God is still faithful. He always will be. It is humanity that is both unfaithful, and who misinterprets God's promises and then calls God a liar. Along with God's words we must have faith and the knowledge that God alone is completely faithful.

To make this point, Paul quoted a couple of Psalms. There, as well as throughout the Old Testament, God and His judgements are declared right and just. There is no unrighteousness in Him. His judgements always prevail. There is no error in Him. He is never wrong.

Yet we argue from our limited understanding and sinful positions as if somehow we can question God or stand in judgement over Him. We easily convince ourselves that our way of understanding things is better than God's. We see this today in the argument that a loving God would never send anybody to hell. To phrase the issue as Paul did, "*[W]hat shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us?*" (v.5) As Paul points out, this is an argument from a completely human perspective. There are those who say that either everybody is going to heaven or there is something wrong with God. For them, to say that God is loving mean that He must be required to accept sin and unholiness into His presence. Paul points out that this is going much too far. "*Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?*" (v.6) God is loving. He acts in loving ways. It is part of His nature, but it is not the sum total of His nature. He is also the judge of the world. He will judge and condemn all sin.

Yet we also argue that, since our sin shows God's glory more clearly, why would He condemn sin in us? Indeed, Paul points out that people were already actually saying he taught, "*Let us do evil that good may result.*" (v.8) Paul never took this position, and he states his agreement with the condemnation of anybody who would teach this position or lie and say he did. While God is fully capable of taking the evil in the world and using it for good, we cannot create **good** by willfully engaging in evil behavior. God does not want us to sin so that His glory shines brighter. God wants to remove our sin so that His glory can shine through us. Anything that mars His glory in us works against His plan. Paul will go into this in more detail in chapter six.

For now, we need to look at the conclusion he drew from the benefit the people of God have in having God's word. First he asked if having that benefit makes us, as Jews or as the church, any better? The answer is a clear, "No." We are all alike under condemnation because of our sin. Just having God's word or calling ourselves His people does not make us better.

In case we have missed this point, Paul goes again to the Old Testament to back it up. Drawing mostly from the Psalms, but also from Israel's history and the prophets, Paul points out that the Jewish scriptures make it clear that everybody sins and there is no one, not even one, who is righteous or seeks God.

Looking at the descriptions the scriptures gave of God's people over the centuries, it is clear that the sins that existed in the Gentile world also existed in the Jewish community. They were worthless to God. They did not do good, but instead did whatever they wanted.

Their throats and mouths brought death and pain instead of healing and life. They spoke with poison lips. They cursed and were full of bitterness. They sought to injure others and they left a trail of misery in their wake. They did not seek peace. They did not respect God.

While it is tempting to look in the past and condemn the Jews for these failings, we have to admit we find them in the church today, even in ourselves at times. We are too often useless to God. We all know people in the church who are full of bitterness or who seek to stir up dissension and strife instead of working for peace. If we are honest, we will admit that there are times when we are the ones guilty of behaving in these ways. Our hearts are not always right. God would be well within His rights to judge us as **unfit** to be in His presence.

It seems obvious that the law was written for the people to whom it is given. We often forget, however, that having the Bible makes us responsible for believing it and doing what it says. If we are found in violation of the written word of God we all have laying around our houses, then the Bible will not be a defense when we stand before God's judgement. As Jesus asked, "*Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?*" (Luke 6:46) Paul has reminded us again that, to the extent our salvation depends on us, we are in a hopeless situation. Every mouth is silenced before God. The whole world is accountable to Him. The law and trying our best to do good does not declare us righteous before God. Knowing what to do only makes us more aware of how far we fall short.

This is how we still get it backwards. When people finally get the message that our behavior can only separate us from God they still argue that it doesn't matter any more. If we are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus' death and resurrection on our behalf, then, the argument goes, what we do is irrelevant. This draws the wrong conclusions, though. What we do does matter, not in order to make us righteous, but because God has declared us righteous. God's commands serve to show us how sinful we are. They do not justify us when we think we are following them.

Talk with the people in the world. If you ask them why they think they are going to heaven, or what the requirements to get to heaven are, they will tell you that they are trying their best, or that they do more good than harm. Even without reference to the Bible the world is trying to work its way to God.

The problem is that God cannot accept anything less than **perfection**. Once you have messed up, you have messed up, and no amount of good can erase the evil you did. To say that God should accept you because you think you are doing more good than bad is to get it backwards. God cannot accept anybody who is guilty of any sin. Period. He is holy. He is righteous. He is glorious. Sin cannot stand before Him, and everybody is drenched in sin. There must be another way.

That way, as we will see next week, is the gospel of which Paul said he is not ashamed. It is the way we have mentioned here already this morning. It goes through the cross of Jesus Christ where we are washed clean from our sins, the guilt is taken away, and we are given new hearts out of which to live. We are not

declared righteous in God's sight by obeying the law, but we can be declared righteous in His sight. That righteousness is available to us as a gift for those who believe. In the coming weeks Paul is going to outline this clearly, even as he continues to caution us to not get it backwards. Because righteousness is God's gift does not mean that we are free to follow our sinful desires. It does mean that we are free to follow God's will and His way which we could never do without His grace and mercy.