

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 49

Romans – Part Two Bad News and Good News Chapters 1:18-3:21

I. BACKGROUND

Last week, we summarized the conditions in Rome that most likely led Paul to write this letter. The Jews, who probably started the Roman church after Pentecost, had freshly returned to Rome after a period of exile under the rule of Caesar Claudius. While the Jewish church founders were gone, the Gentile Christians had control over the church. With the return of the Jews, the natural issues for the church would have included: whether the church was itself a Jewish institution, which allowed Gentiles' inclusion; whether the Jews should reassume control; what it meant for the Jews to be the chosen people after the institution of the church; and, how the Jews and Gentiles should interrelate.

On these issues, like all others we see, Paul went to the cross of Christ for his answers. In the gospel of Jesus' dying and resurrecting on our behalf, Paul found his answers to life's and faith's questions. In Romans, we see Paul applying the death and resurrection of Christ, the "gospel," to the church. Paul discusses how each of us stands before God. In so doing, Paul puts the church aright, with clarity on these questions and the issues they faced.

This lesson, we will look at the next section of Paul's thought, 1:18–3:20. Because 3:21 adds good news and a solution to the problems set out in 1:18–3:20, we will briefly include 3:21 in our lesson today.

II. THE TEXT

Last week, we left off the introductory section with Paul announcing a central theme within this book. That theme was the power of God to save believers through the death and resurrection of Christ (1:16-17). This theme is central because in Romans, Paul answers the perplexing human question: How can a sinful man be righteous before a holy God? Starting with verse 18, however, Paul takes a step back from answering the question.

For Paul, before the question of God's righteousness becomes ripe for study, we need to understand the need of mankind for righteousness FROM God. In other words, as long as we believe we can achieve righteousness on our own, we are never going to accept the righteousness from God. Only when we perceive our desperate need for His righteousness will we embrace it.

Paul then commences with some serious accountability, probing the ability of mankind to save itself. Paul will deal with Gentiles who had no Old Testament law to guide them. Paul will deal with Jews who had the law. Paul will set out God's principles of judgment, his standards of righteousness, and Paul will tell us what we would need for our righteousness before God.

A. *Condemnation of the Gentiles (1:18-1:32)*

In 1:18, Paul commences to explain God's wrath upon the godlessness and wickedness of humanity. Some might wonder if God would visit his wrath upon those who had no understanding of his deity and glory. Those who live in godless wickedness have no excuses before the Lord. Paul says that no man, whether confronted in life with the scriptures or not, has any excuse for wickedness.

Creation itself calls out for the presence of a Creator. No one may fairly look at themselves and not have some awareness that there is a powerful divinity at work. Whether one ever knows to call him "Jehovah," "Yahweh," or even "God," is irrelevant to every human's awareness that there must be something greater and more powerful than them at work in the marvelous universe (1:18-20).

Mankind's approach to this awareness of God was not one of honoring him or thanking him for his greatness and work. Shunning God and his light heightened darkness and futility in men's hearts and minds, not that mankind realized this effect! Mankind thought itself oh so wise, though growing more foolish each day. Rather than living aware of God's glory, mankind created their own gods, images of people or animals. People reduced any concept of the divine into an image of man, rather than seeking to discern the image of the divine (1:21-23).

Paul says that as a result of this attitude and approach to humanity, God “gave them [humanity] over” to three different things. The term “gave them over” is a legal term Paul borrows from the courts. Paul uses the term in the sense that God as a judge pronounced sentence upon those guilty. The three different times Paul notes this judicial decree are:

1. God “gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies” (1:21). Once people exchanged the glorious truth of divine God, even if only discernable in nature and within each of us, lives were no longer moving toward truth. People exchanged truth for a lie and began “worshipping” – read that as “valuing” – things that are made (other people, experiences, etc.) rather than valuing the One who made all things (1:24-25).
2. “Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts” (1:26). Here, Paul speaks of women and men having “unnatural relations” or homosexual unions that were not God’s design for humanity. This perversion, Paul notes, carried its own penalty to those involved (1:26-27).
3. Finally, Paul notes that, “since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not be done” (1:28). Paul then lists such activities rather fully. He enumerates “every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity...envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice...gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (1:29-31). Paul recognized that under God’s righteous decree, death comes to those who do such things as well as those who approve such things (1:32-33).

Paul set out a clear condemnation of the Gentiles who, though never having had the benefit of God’s revelation in the scriptures, were still without excuse or hope for salvation and righteousness based upon their own lives. Paul then takes a moment to explain God’s principles of judgment.

B. *God's Principles of Judgment (2:1-16)*

After Paul lays out the graphic sinfulness of the Gentiles, we can surmise that the Jews, who had returned to the church, might have some sense of smugness about themselves. After all, they had not been idolaters exchanging God's image for the pagan temples in Rome or elsewhere. They had been reared understanding the Ten Commandments! They knew they were to have no graven image, nor worship any idols. This smugness, however, would be short lived as Paul moved into a discussion of how God's principles of judgment work.

Paul warns that the idol worshipping Gentiles are not the only ones without excuses before God. The Jews who sat in judgment over those Gentiles were just as guilty! Why? Because they did the same things! Go back over Paul's list. While it may have started with sexual impurity and lusts, it did not stop there. Right along with depravity and murder are envy, gossip, boastful, and other sins everyone commits. Paul sets out sinful shoes that any honest person must lay claim to wearing, not once, but many times in life (2:1-4).

Because of the sinfulness all share, Paul takes the Jews to task for judging anyone else's sinful condition. Those judging have stubborn and unrepentant hearts that do not recognize their own sins. God's wrath stores up for these holier-than-thou types just as much as for the pagan sinners (2:5).

Why? Because of God's principles of judgment! Paul sets those out in two categories:

Those Getting Eternal Life	Those Getting Wrath
People who persistently (read always!) do good, seek God's glory, and honor.	Those who are self-seeking, reject truth, and follow evil.

Now this passage (2:7-11) can be misunderstood if taken out of context. Were one so bold (and deceived) as to believe him constantly good and never evil or self-seeking, one might consider this an affirmation of salvation based upon works. In fact, that seem to have been the case of the rich young ruler who approached Jesus asking what HE (the ruler) could do to inherit eternal life. Jesus responded that the ruler needed merely to live a perfect life (follow the law). The ruler thought he had already done so, and Jesus had to point the ruler to an area where the ruler was woefully deficient, namely loving his neighbor as himself. Jesus told the ruler to go sell everything he had and give it to the poor. The ruler went away sorrowful because he was ruled by his possessions (Mark 10:17-31).

But Paul is not teaching a salvation based upon our own goodness. Paul is driving home a point that God as a righteous judge delivers a righteous judgment. Without purity, one cannot hope to live eternally with God. Yet, Paul trumpets the fact that no man will live with such purity, whether Jew or Gentile! Lest the readers miss the point, Paul is not finished! Over and over again, he will make sure everyone understands the depth of the problem!

As Paul continues this point, he begins transitioning toward a more direct assault upon any claim of self-righteousness the Jews might assume. Paul notes all who sin without the law are condemned, recognizing that much of the law is in their hearts even without having heard the Hebrew scriptures. Similarly, however, the Jews with their scriptures are equally condemned for their failure to live righteously. Hearing or reading scripture does not make one holy! It is the doing or failing to do that brings judgment (1:12-16).

C. Condemnation of the Jews (2:17 – 3:8).

Paul's movement to addressing the Jews comes full force in 2:17. Paul writes, "Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God..." (2:17). To the Jews, Paul is incredibly blunt and challenging. He calls out those Jews who considered themselves superior because of their knowledge and history of God's law, who considered themselves a guide for the blind, a light for those in darkness, an instructor of foolish folks, and a teacher of infants. Paul asks them, why do they not teach themselves? In fact, they are guilty of lawbreaking themselves. They may not be worshipping in pagan temples, or stealing, or committing adultery, but they are no less violating the law.

The Jews were big on circumcision of the body, but missed the circumcision of the heart! How could they have read through Paul's earlier listing of Gentile sins and not found themselves guilty of many of the same? People are real good at distinguishing between big sins and lesser sins. But, all sins separate us from our righteous God who can know no sin. That is the judge who must have righteousness in his judgment, for indeed righteousness is inherent in his character. And, that character cannot change. He is whole, complete, and perfect (2:25-29).

So, what advantage was there in being a Jew if not some bragging rights? Some special slot in God's kingdom? Some inherent merit just based on your relatives? A great advantage! For it was the Jewish people that God entrusted with his very words, with scripture itself! (3:1-2).

Similarly, whether Jews were faithful to God or not, God himself was faithful – faithful in his promises and faithful in his judgments. The Jews' lack of faith, just like the Jews lack of righteousness, only heightened the faithfulness and righteousness of God! Here, Paul notes that some adversaries twisted this teaching of Paul into a conclusion that we should sin and increase our unrighteousness to make God look even better. Paul says such folks and reasoning is justly condemned (3:3-8).

D. The Condemnation of All (3:9-20)

If Paul is right that Gentiles are without excuse for their sin, the Gentiles' sin itself shows their rejection of God and his judgment, the Jews are also without righteousness (even compared to the Gentiles), God's principles of judgment are such that sin cannot co-exist with God, and sin is under wrath and judgment, then where does that leave humanity? Before Paul answers that question in 3:21, Paul makes one last effort to affirm that no one believes themselves standing before God based upon their own merit or works.

So, Paul exclaims that Gentiles and Jews are not in separate boats from an eternal perspective with God. They share a common position. “Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin” (3:9). Paul goes to the Old Testament both to explain and to support his position.¹ From Psalm 14, Paul brings forth the truth that:

There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.

From Psalm 5, and other Old Testament passages, Paul explains that humanity from its mouth to its feet, from what it says and what it does, fearlessly distances us from God and his peace. There is absolutely NO ONE who will be declared righteous in his sight by their own lives (3:10-20).

If the story (or the class!) ended there, then the news would be most solemn and bad. But, Paul does not end the lesson there, nor did God. Instead, Paul moves to the gospel as man’s standing before God. In anticipation of next week, we read the key verse for this period of the letter:

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe! (3:21-22)

This is not man’s righteousness in the sense that it comes from man, his actions, or deeds. This is a righteousness from God himself; a judgment of righteousness from the judge. This is a righteousness we will examine in great detail next week!

¹ Paul does not quote the Old Testament scriptures the way we think of quoting. It is not always a word for word recitation of the exact wording in the Old Testament. Why? Probably several reasons. First, Paul is not obligated to live up to English manners of writing! The writing of the first century did not use quotation marks. It was typical and normal to write in a summary fashion, or to write emphasizing certain words or even just ideas inherent in the text. Although we frequently read the text beginning, “As it is written...,” the thrust of those words is more along the lines of, “this is part of what was meant in the Old Testament where it spoke of...” So here, Paul is not quoting the Old Testament as we think of quotations. Rather, Paul is explaining the thrust of various Old Testament passages that support his point to the Romans.

III. POINTS FOR HOME

1. No matter who; no matter what: We are sinners before God.
2. God alone is the Judge of His eternity.
3. God will not change.
4. We need God to give us righteousness.