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Introduction

I grew up in a family with four children. I had a brother Keith who was about 6 years older than me, a brother Peter who was just 15 months younger than me, and a sister Elizabeth who was 6 years younger than me. Keith was so much older than me that he and I lived more or less separate lives, and the same was true of my sister Elizabeth. But my brother Peter was another story! For the most part we got on well, and had many adventures together, but we also had many quarrels and fights. I remember one good fight we had because he was doing something I thought was wrong, and I told him to stop it and of course he didn't do so, so I got really mad at him. So why do I tell you this? I do so because our quarrels and our fights tell us something about human nature; they tell us that we all have a sense of right and wrong, or a moral code, built into our natures. The Oxford professor C. S. Lewis began his broadcast talks during the Second World War with these words:

Everyone has heard people quarrelling. ...I believe we can learn something very important from listening to the kind of things they say. They say things like this: "How'd you like it if anyone did the same to you?"—"That's my seat, I was there first"—"Leave him alone, he isn't doing you any harm"—"Why should you shove in first?"—"Give me a bit of your orange, I gave you a bit of mine"—"Come on, you promised." People say things like that every day, educated people as well as uneducated, and children as well as grown-ups. Now what interests me about all these remarks is that the man who makes them is not merely saying that the other man's behaviour does not happen to please him. He is appealing to some kind of standard of behaviour which he expects the other man to know about. And the other man very seldom replies: "To hell with your standard." Nearly always he tries to make out that what he has been doing does not really go against the standard, or that if it does there is some special excuse. He pretends there is some special reason in this particular case why the person who took the seat first should not keep it, or that things were quite different when he was given the bit of orange, or that something has turned up which lets him off keeping his promise. It looks, in fact, very much as if both parties had in mind some kind of Law or Rule of fair play or decent behaviour or morality or whatever you like to call it, about which they really agreed. And they have. If they had not, they might, of course, fight like animals, but they could not quarrel in the human sense of the word. Quarrelling means trying to show that the other man is in the wrong. And there would be no sense in trying to do that unless you and he had some sort of agreement as to what Right and Wrong are; just as there would be no sense in saying that a footballer had committed a foul unless there was some agreement about the rules of football.

So how did this knowledge of right and wrong come to be in our natures? The answer lies in today's sermon passage from the book of Romans, but before we get there we need to remind ourselves of the background.

Paul's letter to the Romans begins with Paul summarizing the gospel in a nutshell, and then speaking about his longing to visit Rome. He ends this introductory section with a ringing affirmation of his faith:

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Rom 1:16-17

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

As an aside, I can still remember the English preacher John Stott talking about these verses in a Bible teaching at Cambridge when I was a student there, and he said something like "Paul would only have written 'I am not ashamed of the gospel' if at some point in his life he had been tempted to be ashamed of the gospel". These words gave me a new insight into Paul's courage, and were an encouragement to me and I am sure to many others too.

Paul then goes on in the second half of chapter 1 to speak of God's wrath against "all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness", and lays out the case that "men are without excuse"

In chapter 2 Paul then goes on to point out that it is not only the openly wicked who are under God's judgment, but the moralist, who thinks that he or she is better than the people Paul describes in chapter 1, is also in trouble with God. As Jim Krouscas put it two weeks ago, the moralist refuses to admit his or her need of God, and the outcome of self-righteous moralism is hell.

So now we come to Paul's teaching in the second half of Romans 2, where he goes on to include the Jews in his survey of man without God, but where he also begins to let us see that there is hope beyond the judgement and despair that are the logical outcomes of man without God. I have titled this message "How to be approved by God"

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We pick up Romans 2:11, where Paul now mentions the law for the first time. In this context, the law refers to the whole of the law given through Moses; the 10 commandments but also all the ritual laws about feasts and sacrifices and the Sabbath and so on.

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Rom 2:11-29

11 For God does not show favoritism. 12 All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin under the law will be judged by the law. 13 For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. 14(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, 15 since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) 16 This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

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Prayer

So what do we make of this teaching? There are four major truths taught here

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1. God does not show favoritism.

This is a no-brainer, since it is an exact quotation of verse 11. But the context is important; Paul has been talking in the previous verses about the moralist, about the person who considers himself or herself to be superior to others, and he has just begun to compare the Jew and the non-Jew, or Gentile. And in the present section he continues this comparison, and says in effect that there is no difference: "For it is not those who hear the law (the Jews) who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law (both Jews and Gentiles) who will be declared righteous. So yes, the Jews were and are God's chosen people, but God loves all men and women and God will judge all men and women.

John 3:16-17 is still true

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

So if you are here this morning thinking that God has somehow overlooked you or forsaken you, think again. God does not show favoritism, and He loves you as much now as He has ever done. "God does not show favoritism."

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2. We all have God's law written on our hearts.

14-15a When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, *since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts.*

This is really important for our understanding of human nature and of God's justice. Scripture is telling us that God has put His law in each person's heart. We all, in other words, have a knowledge of right and wrong, of truth and untruth, of good and evil. C. S. Lewis, in the passage we began with, argues from the existence of this

knowledge of right and wrong to the fact of a God who put this knowledge in our hearts. Paul argues the reverse, and says in effect that since God exists He has placed this knowledge of right and wrong in our hearts. Now anyone who reads the newspaper or who observes what is going on in the world can easily see that this knowledge of right and wrong has been suppressed in many people; that is why Paul writes in Rom 1:18 “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness”

But this truth should encourage us to view others not just as neighbors or colleagues or classmates, but as men and women who have some measure of the knowledge of God within them, through this knowledge of right and wrong, this knowledge of the requirements of the law. That obnoxious co-worker is made in the image of God and has the knowledge of God within him, however little it shows. That gossipy neighbor who loves to tell you what is wrong with her neighbors, and is probably telling them what is wrong with you, is also made in the image of God and has the knowledge of God within her. There are no such beings as “ordinary mortals”; everyone one we know is God-created and has the knowledge of God within her or him, and will one day stand at the judgment seat of Christ.

And this same truth should encourage us to share the truth of the good news about Jesus, because deep down in everyone’s heart is this knowledge of good and evil. In some cases their hearts will be completely seared by sin or deluded by some false teaching, but in other cases their hearts will be acknowledge their need of forgiveness and the grace of God.

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3. Only those who obey the law will be declared righteous

13 For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is *those who obey the law who will be declared righteous*. 14(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, 15 since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.)

This is a key part of Paul’s argument, but what exactly does he mean by it? Is he saying that we can earn God’s favor simply by following the law, whether that means the 10 commandments or something more complex like the whole Jewish law? But this cannot be what Paul means, since he wrote in Eph 2:8-9 “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. But he then goes on to say Eph 2:10 “For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” So it seems to me that what Paul is saying in Romans is the same as he is saying in Ephesians, and the same thing he says in verse 7 “To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.” But who are those who persist in doing good; who are those who obey the law; who are those who do the good works which God prepared in advance for them to do? Surely they are only *those have been saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ*. So we are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone, but will automatically result obedience to the law and in other good works.

So where does that leave the Gentiles who “do by nature things required by the law”? I speak only tentatively here, because this is a hotly debated question. I can only make two statements of truth:

1. If any such Gentiles are brought into God’s kingdom, it will only be because in some way Christ’s sacrifice has been applied to them in some way.
2. God is a just God, and His ways are not only just and right, but will be seen to be right at the last judgment.

And that brings us to the final point of this section

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4. There is going to be a judgment

16 This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares. What is “this” that Paul is talking about? We need to read verse 16 after verse 13, without the parenthesis of verses 14-15. It now reads as follows:

13 For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.16 This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares. So the judgment Paul is talking about here is God's judgment of the righteous, and this judgment will be "through Jesus Christ", who will judge with perfect justice.

John Piper writes of this truth "Now ponder this very seriously. There is coming a final day of judgment. We will all give an account of ourselves to God. Faith in Christ as our righteousness will be our only hope for acceptance with God. This is the essence and heart of the gospel. Christ lived for us, Christ died for us, Christ rose for us, Christ reigns for us, Christ intercedes for us, Christ will come for us, and Christ our advocate will be our final judge. Faith in him is key to assurance and life. But beware: faith that produces no hope, faith that produces no love, faith that produces no obedience is no saving faith. Embrace Christ today as the One who forgives our sins and the One who empowers our obedience."

We now turn to the second part of our passage

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Rom 2:17-29

17 Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; 18 if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; 19 if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, 20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— 21 you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? 22 You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? 24 As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

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25 Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. 26 If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? 27 The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

28 A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. 29 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. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.

We begin with a sidebar. In this passage Paul is taking his Jewish brethren to task and calling them out for their failure to live up to the essence of their faith. But we must never take this as an excuse for anti-Semitism; for antagonism towards Jewish people. Sadly the Jews have too often been persecuted and killed just for being Jews. We all know of Hitler's attempt to exterminate the Jews in Europe, but he is only one of many who have persecuted them. As Christians we are called to love the Jews, remembering that our Saviour is a Jew.

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5. Being religious is not good enough

In verses 17-24 Paul is taking his fellow Jews to task for their actual or potential hypocrisy. What is a hypocrite and how is he or she different from a Christian who sins? The basic difference is that a Christian who sins admits and repents of the sin, and seeks God's forgiveness and grace to avoid that sin in the future. The hypocrite, on the other hand, sins but does not seek forgiveness, and instead seeks to appear good and holy to others. Hypocrisy is appearing to be one thing while actually being and doing the opposite. Hypocrisy is not of course limited to Jews and Christians; a search on the internet quickly finds examples of this in various news reports:

- The fire station that burned down because it had not installed smoke detectors. The fire chief said "It's a wake-up call; it's hypocritical of us to extol the virtues of fire and smoke alarms and not have them."
- The Lowe's store that did not pass a building code inspection
- The driving instructor arrested for drunk driving
- The advertisement for a proofreading service that had a typographical error.

Paul takes the Jews to task for the hypocrisy of failing to live up to their profession of belief “you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?” But these questions were directed at a specific situation almost 2000 years ago. What might Paul have written if he were addressing the evangelical church in America today? Perhaps something like this

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So you call yourself a Christian, and rely on the Bible, and boast in God, knowing God’s will and discerning what really matters because you’ve received Biblical instruction, being confident in your own ability to be a guide to the blind and a light to those in darkness, an educator of the foolish and teacher of the childish, having in the Bible the embodiment of knowledge and truth. Then let me ask you this: Will someone teach others but not also teach themselves? Will you preach or teach “Do not steal” and then cheat on your income taxes? Will you say “You shall not commit adultery” while you have affairs or view pornography? If you reject the idols of Hollywood or show business, do you instead worship money or the Hokies? The one who boasts in the Bible while trampling on the Bible’s teaching dishonors God. As the Bible itself says, “Because of you God’s name is despised by many Americans.”

Paul in the original text is condemning hypocrisy by Jews, and is following in the steps of Jesus who denounced the religious leaders of His day as hypocrites for saying one thing and doing another. But sadly Christians, or perhaps we should say so-called Christians, can also be guilty of hypocrisy, and non-believers are quick to pounce on any real or suspected hypocrisies. This is a particular danger for high-profile Christian leaders, but it is an equal-opportunity sin. Let us all be watchful and pray that we do not fall into this sin!

6. Going through religious rituals is not enough

Paul writes about circumcision, the physical operation that marked every male as a Jew. He states:

25 Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. 26 If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? 27 The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.

We can rephrase this passage too

Being a Christian and being baptized has value if you put into practice what Jesus taught. But if you disobey his teaching, your belief becomes unbelief. And so if those who are not Christians do the very things that Jesus taught, will not their lack of belief in him be reckoned as belief? The one who is not a Christian and does what Jesus commanded will condemn you who – even though you call yourself a Christian and have the Bible – disobey what is taught therein.

So again Paul warns that our outward actions must match our religious activity. And baptism especially has value to the believer, marking his or her public profession of faith in our Lord and his or her obedience to our Lord’s commands. But even baptism, important as it is in the life of the believer, is not going to help if you go on to disobey our Lord and bring dishonor to his name.

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7. Jesus Christ alone is enough

28 A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. 29 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. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.

And how does this circumcision of the heart take place? We can go back to chapter 1 for the answer:

Rom 1:16-17

16 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. 17 For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

The real message of this passage may be summed up in one simple sentence: Being a Jew is not a matter of racial heritage or religious ritual, but is instead a matter of the heart. It is a matter of living by faith in God and His son Jesus Christ.

And the same thing is true for the Christian: Being a Christian is not a matter of racial heritage or religious ritual, but is instead a matter of the heart. Five simple words sum it up: Faith alone in Christ alone.

We can now take a step back and survey the scope of Paul's arguments. In chapter 1 he starts with those who live outside any recognition of God's law and who suppress the truth by their wickedness. In chapter 2 he begins with the moralist, and shows how such a person is under God's judgment. He then moves onto the Jew, and shows how the Jew is also under judgment. He is carefully and inexorably moving towards his final conclusion in chapter 3:23 "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God", before he can go on to the glorious next verse "and are justified freely through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ." What a glorious gospel, and what a marvelous Saviour we have!

Prayer

Our Father, we pray that if anyone here today is resting upon empty ceremonies, fancy moral standing, or decent or good living for their righteousness that they will see the hopelessness of such justification before you, the God of reality, the God of truth. We pray that they will receive the gift that you so freely offer in Jesus Christ our Lord. He alone can change us. He alone can set us free. He alone can instruct us, guide us, and make us into the men and women you want us to be. He accepts us on that basis, and for that we give grateful thanks. In his name, Amen.