

Armagh Baptist Church – Sunday 4th February 2012

Studies in the Book of Romans

What is the Gospel? – No.3

(Romans 2:1-29)

“The Problem with you is Pride!”

Introduction

Last Sunday night we asked the question:

Has God got any right to be angry with us?

We first of all looked at the godless pagan type of person, and saw that the problem with such people is obviously sin - blatant, open, rebellious sin - agnosticism, idolatry, immorality and atheism. Those are some of the reasons why God is angry with them.

But what about the rest of us, those of us who think we haven't stooped so low - are we alright then? Is God angry with us too, and if so why?

Well in Romans 1:16 Paul said his Gospel was for the Jew first and also for the Gentile - for two types of people. No self-respecting Jew would ever have lived in the way Paul described in ch.1. But that was how the majority of gentile pagan people were living in the 1st Century - a bit like the ungodly of today. But what about the Jewish type of people that Paul's Gospel is also for? i.e. The upright, good-living, religious type of person. Are they good enough the way they are? Or are they sinners too? That's what we're going to look at tonight in ch.2 - **The Respectable Religious person**, as opposed to the Godless pagan that we looked at last time.

Such people are a bit like the Pharisee in ***The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector*** in Luke ch.18. The one who thought he was alright the way he was. But these people are also like the Elder brother in the story of the prodigal son. We're talking about people who think they are good- living, religious and respectable, and if anybody is going to get into heaven, then they think they should be at the top of the queue!

A. The Parable of the Two Sons (Luke ch.15)

Jesus told a story one day about a Father who had two sons – The Prodigal son was fed up with the rules of the house, so he took his father's inheritance, and he headed off to the far country, where he squandered his wealth on riotous living. He lived it up for a while. He indulged in all sorts of sinful activity, until the money ran out, and he had no friends left. Sin brought him so low, that he ended up feeding pigs. He was so hungry that he felt like eating what the pigs were eating.

Now, no Jew would go within a mile of pigs, and he certainly wouldn't tend them or eat what they ate – they were unclean. So maybe the prodigal son represents the Gentile sinner – the godless pagan, living life without any regard for God (as we saw in Romans ch.1).

But there was another son in that story - the one who stayed at home by his father's side all the time, the one who apparently never did anything wrong. Who kept the house rules, and never rebelled. Who does he represent? Well I believe he represents the Jew, the religious person, the good living person. The one who didn't do much with his life, but he certainly didn't do much wrong.

You remember in Jesus' story when the prodigal came home, he admitted to his father what he had done wrong. The father forgave him, and restored him to his place as a son in his house, and celebrated with a great party, because this son of his who was lost was now found, he was dead, but was now alive again – It's a picture of a rebellious sinner coming home to God the Father, being welcomed with open arms and freely forgiven!

But what did the older brother do at this point? He came in and saw the great party that was in full swing, saw this sinful wayward brother of his getting all the attention, and all the best treatment - and we're told he was absolutely livid! Why?

Because all along he had done everything that his father ever asked of him. He had never rebelled, he had kept his nose clean, and yet here was this young rebel home, and now he was getting all the best treatment!

You find in his reaction, the religious, good living person's response to the Gospel: *"I'm alright the way I am. I've worked hard and earned my favours with God. I'm not a rebel sinner, so if I'm not getting into Heaven, then nobody deserves to! I'm far better than all the rest!"*

But what you have there, in such a heart – is **pride** and **envy**. You see sin is far more than outward actions. Sin is what goes on in our hearts as well. And a lot of religious, good living people would do well to remember that!

I believe that in Romans ch.2 that's exactly the kind of person that Paul now comes to deal with. He's shown "the Gentile Rebel" or "the godless pagan" his sin in ch.1; now he's going to show "the Religious Jew" or the respectable person" their sin in ch.2. So if you didn't see yourself in the mirror of ch.1, you might just see yourself now in ch.2.

B. The Respectable Religious Person (Romans ch.2)

I want you to notice the main points that Paul raises against the religious Jew:

1. Their judgmental attitude (vs.1-4)

By the time we get to v.17 in this chapter we will realise that Paul is addressing the Jews of his day, but it is legitimate for us to take these principles and apply them to outwardly religious, respectable people who are still rejecting the Gospel today.

The first thing that Paul points out to them, in their lives, that is worthy of God's judgement and condemnation, is their own judgmental attitude that they

show towards other people. They have a very condescending attitude to everybody, just like the Pharisee in Luke 18 who prayed:

“God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector.”

You can just see him looking down his nose at everybody else as he prays. The Jews were notorious for this. But many respectable church goers are like that today too.

Paul says in Romans 2:1, that we have no excuse if we pass judgement on someone else, because at whatever point we judge them we are actually condemning ourselves. Because whether we can see it, or realise it, we do the very same things. We need to remember that for every finger we point at someone else, there are three pointing back at us!

God is the only one who stands in a position where he can judge truly, fairly and impartially, because He is the only one whose judgement is not tainted by sin in the first place (v.2-3). If we spend our time judging other people, instead of taking the time to judge ourselves and examine our own hearts, then we are showing contempt for God’s kindness, tolerance and patience that he is showing towards us. He is actually giving us room and time to repent of our own sins, but because we can only see the sins of others, we are blind to our own need to repent of anything at all (v.4). - Their judgemental attitude.

2. Their self-righteous attitude (vs.5-11)

In v.6 Paul is quoting from Psalm 62:12

“God will give to each person according to what he has done.”

He says that those who are able to persistently or consistently do good, they will receive eternal life. But the problem was that these self-righteous Jews, and many good living people today, think that they can consistently do good all the time. They understand vs.6-7 as if they have been able to keep that standard! That’s how blind they are to their own short-comings. But they would need to take a look at another Psalm that Paul will quote in Romans ch.3:10...

“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.” (Psalm 14:1-3)

They are like many people today who pluck their favourite proof texts out of obscure passages of Scripture to give them false comfort, when it is clearly obvious that if we take the teaching of the Bible as a whole, that there is no one who is perfect, there is no one who is perfectly good all of the time. We all have our moments when we slip, in thought, word or deed. But even if we only ever sinned once in our life time that would be enough to keep us out of the perfection of Heaven. As you can see in Revelation 21 with regard to heaven:

“Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.” (Revelation 21:27)

So these Jews, and religious people today, would need to get rid of their self-righteous, condescending attitudes and realise they are no different, *'for all of us have sinned'* and fall short of the perfect standard – the glory of God. As v.11 says, God does not show favouritism to Jews over against Gentiles, or to religious people, over against total pagans. He sees us all the same – as sinners who need His salvation. – (Judgemental and self-righteous attitudes).

3. Their pride in knowing God's Word, but they weren't doing it? **(vs.12-13)**

The point Paul is making in this section is that in fact the Jews would be judged even more severely than the Gentiles, because the Jews had God's Law – God's revealed Word all along. So they were without excuse.

The Gentiles could at least claim in their defence that they never had God's Word, they never had the Law, so how could they know what was right and what was wrong. How were they supposed to know what sin was?

The Jews didn't have that excuse. And religious church-goers today don't have that excuse. Anybody who goes to church has at least heard God's Word being read, even if it is not always explained or preached on correctly.

Any religious person today should have heard enough, to know that they are sinners in God's sight. But the problem is, maybe they hear God's Word, but they never apply it to their own heart? Are they always so busy applying it to the person sitting next to them, that they never take it to themselves? Maybe they need to listen to what James said in James 1:22,

*"Do not merely **listen** to the word, and so deceive yourselves.
Do what it says."*

Or as Paul puts it here in Romans 2:13,

*"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."*

Here too they were going wrong. They so emphasised the outward keeping of the law that they had lost sight of the fact that the Law of God was supposed to go much deeper. That was something else that Paul pointed out to them:

4. Their emphasis on externals (vs.14-16)

The Jews proudly thought that they kept the outward requirements of the Law of God, but Paul here points out that sometimes Gentiles who never had the Law showed them up. Because deep down in their consciences Paul says, they do know right from wrong. He talks about their **hearts**, their **consciences** and their **thoughts** in v.15, and then he says in v.16,

*"This will take place on the day when God will judge **men's secrets**
through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares."*

Religious people are making a big mistake when they think that they are good enough for heaven because they don't outwardly do anything terribly wrong. Here Paul is saying that...

*"Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."
(1 Samuel 16:7).*

But then of course those who put too much emphasis on outward things usually do end up being hypocritical, and that's the next thing Paul highlights:

5. Their Hypocrisy (vs.17-24)

Here in v.17 Paul makes it clear that he has been addressing "the Jew" in this chapter. They relied on the law, but they "*bragged*" about their relationship to God. Well if you're bragging about it, that means you are taking personal credit for it – something you can never do when it comes to salvation, or getting right with God. It's all of God; all of grace; it's not down to us at all!

But apart from that, what Paul says about the Jew is all true in vs.18-20, and then he hits his punch-line in v.21,

***"You, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself?"
"You who preach against stealing, do you steal? etc, etc..."***

In other words the problem with the Jews was that they weren't even able to practice what they preached. In fact "*God's name was [being] blasphemed among the Gentiles because of them!*" (v.24). So they hadn't always been perfect law-keepers themselves. Add to that what Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount about murder, adultery, and idolatry all beginning as sins of the heart before they were physically carried out, and you see how Paul is undermining the Jews proud trust in outward law-keeping as their means of salvation and acceptance before God. It just wasn't good enough! And so finally he comes to the greatest pit-fall of all:

6. Their trust in external religious symbols, not inner spiritual reality (vs.25-29)

The Jews trusted in the external religious rite of circumcision as a sign that they were truly right with God. But Paul points out here that it doesn't matter what your religion, or your church, does to you outwardly, it can never change you inwardly, and that's what really counts with God. That's what we need!

Just as they shouldn't trust in circumcision, so we shouldn't trust in baptism, or communion, to make us right with God. Someone has said, "*Baptism might make you wetter, but it can't make you any better!*" - Only God can bring about an inner change in our hearts, that's why all the credit goes to him (v.29).

So having taken the feet from under **religious type people** in ch.2, just as much as he pulled the carpet from under the **godless pagans** of ch.1, Paul will get to the conclusion of his argument in ch.3:1-20 - Notice his key point:

Romans 3:22b-23 – 'There is no difference: for ALL have sinned...'

That's why we need to trust in Jesus, who died for our sins, and so be saved!