

## A Tree, a Tatoo and a Piece of Paper

### Romans 2:17-3:8

A couple of weeks ago Kirk mentioned how he wished that we had read ahead before determining the preaching order. And now it's my turn to express the same sentiment. Because every woman wants to preach to a group of men about circumcision. So, now that we've got that awkward moment out of the way, let's begin.

To recap the Apostle Paul is been writing to the Christians meeting in house churches throughout Rome. Paul hasn't yet been to Rome but he's not exactly a stranger to the Roman Christians. Because Rome is the centre of the world at this time and because Paul has played such an influential role in the growth and spread of the gospel through his visits and his letters, the Christians in Rome would have been quite familiar with him. And so they would have received his letter with great interest and anticipation. Once they have the formalities out of the way, Paul introduces one of the grand themes of his letter: "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." And although Paul begins with the theme of righteousness, what follows is Paul's pictorial of the current state of affairs: unrighteous human behavior and he does not leave it to our imaginations: idolatry, sexual impurity, lust, gossip, slander, God haters, insolent, arrogant, boastful, senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless, even disobedient to their parents, wickedness, evil, greed – every word he can think of, a veritable thesaurus listing on total depravity, or sin. All throughout his sad commentary on human behavior, Paul is talking about "them." For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. For although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of God for images...therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts...they exchanged the truth of God for a lie," and so on. And so far, the church goers are nodding their heads, like Paul is preaching to the choir because those church goers are in full agreement about how shameful and sinful are all of them, those unrighteous outside the church and they are feeling pretty smug, self assured and confident until...until Paul turns to his attention to address the church goers themselves, the very ones to whom the letter is addressed, those who might have found themselves falling into self righteous judgment, reminding them that God alone is righteous and it is God's alone to judge.

But Paul doesn't stop there. He has one more group to address on the topic of righteousness: the Jews. Let's clarify what the word Jew means and where it came from. The word comes from the name Judah. Judah was one of the 12 sons of Jacob, as in Jacob and Esau. Jacob and his family moved to Egypt during the time of the famine when his son Joseph, the one with the famous techni-coloured dreamcoat, saved them from starvation. Those 12 sons, and their father Jacob, who was given the name Israel by God, remained in Egypt and grew their

families there until they were taken into slavery and then, freed from the tyranny of Pharaoh by God through Moses. It was then that they crossed the Red Sea and camped at Mount Sinai where they were given the gift of the law. Years later they were given the gift of the land which had been promised to them, the land known as Israel, after their forefather Jacob. It wasn't until after the time of King Solomon that the kingdom of Israel was divided into the northern kingdom called Israel and the southern kingdom known as Judah. Centuries later both kingdoms had been over taken by oppressors. Judah fell to Babylon. And when the people were freed from exile and allowed to return to Jerusalem or to the surrounding lands that they referred to themselves as Jews or former inhabitants of Judah. In fact, if you remember the story of Queen Esther, Mordecai, Esther's cousin, is the first person referred to as a Jew. So initially, the term referred to someone from a specific region or territory but it came also to refer to their religious beliefs and traditions. It's important that we take care with this interpretation because we don't want to ever lend our voices to those who objectify or hate or discriminate or malign anyone of Jewish heritage. Paul is not turning his attention to the Jews because he hates the Jews. He is not saying that there is anything wrong with being Jewish. Paul himself was Jewish. And because he is Jewish by birth, he understands the particular challenge for the Jews before God. And not only that, though he is called to be an apostle to gentiles or non-Jews, it is only natural that he have a soft spot for, an affinity to his own people. Like I would for Cape Bretoners, for example. But don't be mistaken; Paul is no softie. In fact, he cuts right to the heart of the matter. And I do not mean that as a cruel pun for what Paul says next and neither does he.

On the subject of self-righteousness, Paul knows the Jews are particularly vulnerable. They are, after all the chosen children of God. So we might forgive them for thinking that this gave them special privileges. And indeed there were privileges: God made them a people, a nation, he called them His beloved and He gave them a land and he gave them the law, a structured way of life which could enable them to live in relationship with their God. And he gave them a way of physically setting themselves apart from all other peoples through circumcision – it would be a part of their identity. . But here's the problem. Some Jews, many Jews had stopped observing the law as a means of bringing them into closer relationship to God and started observing the law because the law gave them moral superiority. Strictly obeying the law made them feel better than everyone else. And circumcision, it was a sign that they belonged to the club. Eight days after they were born, they were ushered into an exclusive membership. And it had become a point of great pride. They so wrongly assumed that their relationship with God was secured simply by receiving the gifts He had given them. But as Paul Achtemeier explains, "Simply belonging to the chosen people is not enough, says {the Apostle} Paul. True chosenness , true Jewishness is not a matter of outward marks or appearances; it is a matter of inner reality, a reality perceived not by other people but by God."<sup>1</sup> Paul goes on to explain that it is not the outward sign of circumcision that would save them, only a circumcision of their hearts, that it was the state of their hearts toward God that would save them. Achtemeier again sums it up this way "It is what one does, not what one has

that is important.” Or John Piper puts it another way when he says “. . . a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, the real circumcision is a matter of the heart – it is spiritual not literal.”<sup>ii</sup>

Let me tell you a story. We were lost but we didn't know it, yet. Driving to the cottage in PEI, taking shortcuts across narrow rural roads, local roads which cut through farm properties - fields of potatoes on either side for as long as the eye could see. Though we had driven this route many, many times, rather than trusting what we knew, we decided to plunk the address into the GPS and see where that took us. It was dark and we found ourselves taking some turns that seemed unfamiliar. Still, we trusted the GPS and felt absolutely certain we would arrive at our intended destination. Until we came to the end of the dirt road we were now on, literally right in the middle of a corn field, stalks of corn closing in around us. We were lost but because we had put all of our trust into the GPS instead of trusting what we knew to be true, we didn't even know it.

In these verses, Paul is addressing Jews and even more specifically those Jewish Christians in the churches in Rome, who are lost and they don't even know it. They too have put all their faith in the road map to save them, rather than putting their trust in the one who drew the map.

And it is easy for us, in hindsight, to see how wrong this is, how misguided they were, but let's not wag our fingers too quickly. Because the Jews aren't the only ones who fall into the trap of the idolatry of religion. Or to put it another way, even “Christians” need the gospel. You aren't a Christian because you put up a Christmas tree. You aren't a Christian because you wear a cross around your neck or get one tattooed on the inside of your wrist. And you aren't a Christian because you have a baptismal certificate that says you were baptized when you were just a few months old or baptized when you were a ripe old age of 10 or 16 or 40. How many of us know people who go to church because its what they do on Sunday mornings; because its what their parents taught them to do. Maybe you are one. But I want you to know, the Apostle Paul wants you to know that going to church doesn't make you right with God. In fact, it's the opposite. When you get right with God, when you give yourself fully to Jesus, you go to church because you want to worship Him with other people who know and love Him. You are a Christian not because of anything you do outwardly but only because inwardly, the Holy Spirit has given you a change of heart. Still, sometimes we forget. It's the gospel that is the power of God for salvation – it is through the death and resurrection of Jesus that we are saved – not a Christmas tree, a tattoo or a piece of paper or any of the other many signs or symbols or rituals we use to define us as members of the club.

I have a friend – there is no question about his commitment to Christ. I always respected his commitment and the way that he allowed that commitment to shape his life: to take Sunday as a Sabbath day of rest and do no work. And his quiet times? Never missed a day reading his Bible, spending time meditating on it, and much time in prayer. His devotional life was admirable and many did in fact admire it. But what we didn't know was that his devotional life, his Sabbath observance had become, for him, a matter a pride. Reading the Bible was now less about listening for God than it was being able to put another tick on his calendar - 756 days without missing one or to increase the length of time spent – 2.5hours in bible reading and prayer. And not outwardly: it

wasn't at all that he was going around bragging about what he was doing. But it became so that instead of it being life giving it became about law following, pride growing. Isn't it funny, let me rephrase that, isn't it sad that even reading your bible and praying can become dead acts when we lose sight of their purpose - to bring us closer to God. They become dead acts of religion when we use them to make us feel like we are good people. When we do it for the sake of doing it because it is what we do and it makes us feel better than everyone else, then it is dead and so is our faith and what we are doing is following Christianity instead of following Christ. We are doing good for the sake of our own goodness rather than doing good because of the good Jesus has done for us. In the end, we are no good without Jesus. So, stay humble – don't think more highly of yourself than you ought. Paul will tell the Romans this in a few more chapters. He knows us so well; knows our tendency to let pride blind us, become the rope that trips us up. Stay humble. There is nothing, nothing you can do that is good enough to save you. Only Jesus is good enough. So let our hearts be cut open and let this be the sign that only he can see that we are His.

---

<sup>i</sup> Paul Actemeier, Interpretation: Romans.

<sup>ii</sup> John Piper, The Effect of Hypocrisy: Part 1 <http://www.desiringgod.org/scripture/romans/2/messages>