

Sermons through

Romans

Dishonoring God

Romans 2:17-24

With Study Questions

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10/14/2012

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Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, ¹⁸ and know *His* will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, ¹⁹ and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law. ²¹ You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? ²² You who say, “Do not commit adultery,” do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? ²⁴ For “*the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,*” as it is written (Romans 2:17-24).

Introduction

Having been in the ministry for most of my Christian life, I have forgotten what it is like to jockey for position in the church—to somehow arrive at a point where you feel legit! Perhaps you’re new to the faith or new to the church and still feel like you’re on the bubble—like the entire church is made up of a conclave of tight-knit mature Christian parents and you’re the only semi-incorrigible child.

The flipside of this is to develop an unhealthy sense of comfort or belonging. This is not to say that the church should promote discomfort—I like to think of the church as a magnificent hospital where those who have become aware of their fatal wounds rejoice together that their wounds are not fatal after all (Mark 2:17). The healing is sure and eternal and in this we should all find boundless consolation.

But an unhealthy sense of comfort arises in the hospital when the doctors fail to recognize that they too have the disease—that they are in as much need of healing as the brand new patient. The doctors in my analogy are the instructors (in the case of the text before us, the Jewish Christians at the church in Rome). But that doesn’t mean that this mentality hasn’t

continued in the church throughout the ages (Paul will later warn the gentile Christians in this church not to fall into a similar trap—Romans 11:19-21). Developing strata in the church is an ancient and virtually universal problem. And one of the ways this Christian caste system materializes is when in the instructor/student relationship, or in the case of our current illustration the doctor/patient relationship, the doctors fail to recognize that there is only one true physician.

It is to the doctors that Paul writes:

Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, ¹⁸ and know *His* will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, ¹⁹ and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law (Romans 2:17-20).

A Light to the Nations

It must be said at the get-go that Paul is addressing what amounts to be a somewhat appropriate role that these more learned Jewish-Christian members of the church were pursuing. The Savior would come out of Israel and the Israelites would be the first to believe. The Christian Jew (we realize when we read the Bible, other than Luke, we are reading words written by Christian Jews) who would be the first to herald the Good News. There was a sense in which Israel would provide a **“light to the nations”**:

I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, ⁷ to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness (Isaiah 42:6, 7).

Indeed He says, 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant To raise up the tribes of Jacob, And to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, That You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth' (Isaiah 49:6).

But the **“light”** would not be the nation of Israel per se but Jesus, whose seed was preserved through the nation (Romans 9:29). Jesus taught:

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life (John 8:12).

Interestingly enough, Jesus taught that His followers would also be **“the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14)**. But this is only true, it can be argued, to the extent that His followers faithfully follow and accurately proclaim Him. The light does not, so to speak, originate in us; it reflects off of us. Jesus is the light. And it would appear that Paul feared that this church was losing that focus.

Law and Boasting

Again, Paul brings forth a list of admirable attributes. They rested **“on the law.”** In other words, they weren't appealing to an outside source. Their document of authority was the law of God. Their **“boast”** was in God. To boast in the Lord does not mean to brag about being a Christian. We boast about the things we trust and admire. For the sinner seeking peace with God, his only valid source of admiration or trust is the Lord. Boasting in the Lord eliminates the competition in our own hearts—things like wisdom, power and riches:

Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches,

²⁴ but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord (Jeremiah 9:23, 24).

In Paul's explanation of how God has called those who were not wise, powerful or noble according to the world's standards, he explains the reason...

...so that no human being might boast in the presence of God...so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord (1 Corinthians 1:29, 31).

Approving Excellence

Paul writes of the knowledge of the will of God and the approval of things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law. The world is lost in a morass of darkness. It is a knowledge which flows from the special revelation of God, i.e. the Bible, that man finds ability to know the will of God and approve the things that are excellent.

Men so often render their opinions of goodness and beauty, righteousness and excellence; our opinions are the opinions of dust. To truly and accurately approve that which is excellent requires an insight known only to God, an insight which He graciously reveals on the pages of Scripture.

Form of Knowledge

Paul refers to the Scriptures as **"the form of knowledge and truth in the law."** What is meant by the **"form of knowledge?"** It has been explained as...

...not being left, as the heathen are, to vague conjecture on divine things, but favored with definite and precise information from heaven.¹

Perhaps some of you saw a post I made this week regarding Protestants no longer being the majority in America.

According to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, the United States, for the first time in history, does not have a Protestant majority. Some may view this as a trivial statistic, others may rejoice. Here is my question:

Since the unique dynamic of Protestantism is *Sola Scriptura* (that the Scriptures provide the sole infallible, inerrant and authoritative message from God to man), who or what will now fill that vacuum? Will it be the state, the church, a mob or perhaps a new king? Are William Penn's words prophetic anticipation?

"Men must be governed by God, or they will be ruled by tyrants"

Is Lex Rex (the law is king) on the chopping block? For whether the law flows from a collective, a church, a mob or a man the law can no longer be king if it is the mere eruption of some foggy form of royal absolutism. If, according to the above statistic, the Scriptures are out, who's the new sheriff (please be specific)?

God has not left men without access to His own heavenly mind. We have in very concrete, propositional, accessible language the knowledge of the truth. We can choose to ignore it. My simple question was, if we do choose to ignore it, whose truth will replace it?

But merely having access to the truth—even in the church, apparently, is insufficient. Paul is writing to those with the

¹ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 2:20). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Scriptures in hand—those with impressive religious pedigree—who are confident that they **“guide”**, **“instruct”** and **“teach”** their fellow church member. Yet he is about to lower the proverbial boom!

You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? ²² You who say, “Do not commit adultery,” do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? ²⁴ For “*the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you,*” as it is written (Romans 2:21-24).

Dishonoring God

What we see here are some not-so-subtle accusations. Paul provides a short list of offenses that, at some level, the instructors are guilty of—and they are guilty of the very offenses that they are teaching against: stealing, adultery and robbing temples (probably not an exhaustive list). And the offenses cause the name of God to be blasphemed. In other words, their behavior is giving God a bad name! Calvin taught:

Thus the Jews were so learned in the law that they could pass judgment on the conduct of others, but were not careful to regulate their life according to that judgment. ²

The hammer that Paul brings to the table here is reminiscent of Psalm 50:16-18:

But to the wicked God says: “What *right* have you to declare My statutes, Or take My covenant in

² Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin’s Commentaries (Ro 2:18). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

your mouth, ¹⁷ Seeing you hate instruction And cast My words behind you? ¹⁸ When you saw a thief, you consented with him, And have been a partaker with adulterers (Psalm 50:16-18).

I recall years ago, when I was a youth pastor, I had a Christian teacher come to speak to our youth group from the high school where most of our kids were from. He was a science teacher and an older man. When he observed who was in the youth group, he was noticeably surprised (no doubt, that some of these students actually went to church). I found his next words quite interesting. He told the students that he would prefer that many of them not let others know they were Christians; he then explained why: In so many words he told them that their behavior would be an embarrassment to God. The air in the room became thick.

The idea of God's name being blasphemed or profaned due to the behavior of the Israelites was not uncommon (2 Samuel 12:14; Isaiah 52:5; Ezekiel 36:22). One can imagine at the public reading of Romans in this first century church, the air in the room might have become a bit thick.

Pure Light

But what, in particular, is Paul writing about? Are we to conclude that all of the Jewish Christians at that church had been engaging in theft, adultery and the robbing of temples? In the sense that all men are sinful—even if their sins are sins of thought, this would be true—the very thoughts of theft, adultery or looting a temple would render a verdict of guilty before a God who **“will judge the secret of men by Jesus Christ” (Romans 2:16)**. But, of course, such sins would not be unique to the Jewish Christian leaders; Paul could easily bring that indictment against the whole church or all of humanity (which he has and will do in the first three chapters of this very epistle).

No, what Paul seems to be vanquishing here is the notion that the Jewish Christians in that church had obtained some unique superiority by virtue of being Jewish—the doctors didn't realize that they were just as sick as the patients. There were

some advantage to being a Jew which Paul will address at the beginning of the next chapter, but there was and is no advantage when it comes to the approval of God's judgment—it is here where there is no partiality with God—all are under sin (Romans 2:11, 12).

This will become more apparent in the next section where Paul will launch into his instruction on the circumcision of the heart (Romans 2:25-29). It could very well be that Paul's mentioning of stealing, adultery and looting may be a reference to Israel's history. One need not read too far into the Old Testament before we read of atrocities committed by the nation of Israel—revealing to us, in a very vivid and often graphic manner, that they were anything but the light of the world.

In the passages we read earlier (Isaiah 42:6, 7; 29:6) we should not draw the conclusion that the nation of Israel is the light of the world. Those are Messianic texts anticipating Christ being the light of the world. It becomes quite clear if we read in context:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. ²He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; ³a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. ⁴He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law. ⁵Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, ⁷to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the

**prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison
those who sit in darkness (Isaiah 42:1-7).**

The words here clearly referring to Christ! In the strictest sense, Israel is not the light of the world—nor is the church³, but Christ. This is why I found it a bit unnerving when a friend a colleague in radio, who had a non-Christian Israelite on his talk-show, utterly complied with this man's assertion that the nation of Israel was the light of the world. My friend has a view of Scripture that still views, even the unbelieving Israelite in a place of God's special favor and, therefore, thought it inappropriate to (even if done in a gentle and respectful way) to correct such a statement.

As I have said many times, Paul is leveling the playing field in these first three chapters of Romans. There is not a man, woman or child of any ethnicity or heritage or level of righteousness who needs Christ one whit less than any other. The church must be careful never to allow a legacy, regardless of how prestigious it might appear, to muddy up the waters of God's grace.

The name of God has been blasphemed because of Israel, because of the church and because of the behavior of those who bear His name—but Jesus has never brought reproach upon the name of His Father. The heart of our proclamation and the focus of our hearts must ever be upon Christ and Christ alone.

Questions for Study

1. Have you ever felt uncomfortable in church? Why (page 2)?
2. How is the church similar to a hospital (page 2)?
3. What are some ways strata can develop in a church (page 3)?

³ It could be said that Israel was the light of the world to the extent that it held the seed and anticipated the coming of the light. It can also be said that the church is the light of the world to the extent that it proclaims that the light has come.

4. Who are what is the light of the world (pages 3, 4)?
5. What does it mean to “boast in the Lord” (pages 4, 5)?
6. Explain what is meant by the phrase “form of knowledge” (pages 5, 6).
7. How do Christians contribute to the blaspheming of the name of God (pages 6, 7)?
8. What does Paul appear to be vanquishing in verses 21-24 (page 8)?
9. What types of things can begin to compete with Jesus as the one true source of light (page 9)?