

The Law and the Lawbreakers

Scripture Text: Romans 2:12-29

Introduction

Through our tour through Paul's letter to the Romans, we have read about the power of the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ, for salvation to everyone who believes — to the Jew first and then to the Gentile. Starting with chapter one verse eighteen, we have come to a section that exposes our terrible condition. I say terrible, because if we truly grasp the *seriousness* of our condition, we would either be on our knees begging for God's forgiveness or be completely and humbly thankful for the grace He has given us. Last week, we read that those who refuse to repent "store up wrath" for themselves. Each time they refuse God in favor of sin, they save a little more of God's wrath for the day of judgement. It is not God Who is saving His wrath for these people, it is they who store up wrath for themselves. But God is patient in order to give us time to repent and turn to Him in faith. He wants people to come to Him.

The truth is — people offend God. This is not like when a child disobeys a parent and is disciplined for it. If we were to speak strictly about how people act towards one another, that is one thing. We expect a certain behavior from each another. When that does not happen, there may be consequences. We have human laws which provide for an orderly society. There is the law, there are those who keep the law, and there are those who break the law. Some people seem to break man's law all the time. It is like there are destined to be lawbreakers. You see them repeatedly in jail or in the courtroom. There was a scene in the 1980's movie *Robocop* where a man had been brought into a police station and told the police sergeant, "I'm what you call a repeat offender. I repeat, I will offend again!" Some people are repeat offenders. There are good citizens who for the most part obey the law and stay out of trouble. It is not so with God's law, though.

All Who Sin Face the Same Consequence

When it comes to God's law, everyone is a lawbreaker and everyone is a repeat offender. Our offense to God is also far more than the child who disobeys his parents or the person who breaks human laws. Our degree of blame is exponentially greater when we offend God, not because of the particular offense we have done, but because of the One we offend. God is so great and so holy that any sin is an affront to Him. Paul wrote about the general blame of all humanity in chapter one and then focused primarily about the sins of the Jewish people in chapter two. At the end of the passage last week, Paul laid out a key principal regarding God's justice.

Romans 2:9–11 ⁹ *There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek,* ¹⁰ *but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.* ¹¹ *For God shows no partiality.*

The key principal here is that God is fair. God does not show favorites. All people, Jew and Gentile, are under the same condition of sin and under the same penalty for sin. All people, whether they are a Jewish or Gentile, will face God's wrath. Paul acknowledged that both types of people, Jew and Gentile, sin and both types will face consequences for that sin. He wrote that those who sin and know the law will be judged by the law and those who sin but do not know God's law will perish. Some object to the idea of God judging others who did not have the opportunity to know God's requirements. How could God justly judge people who had no chance to know the law of God? I have heard that ignorance of the law is no excuse. But God does something different here. He does not say that. God revealed another criteria for those who did not know the law.

God is not unfair. God will judge people based upon the amount of knowledge they have. If they have the law, they will be judged according to the law. If they do not have the law they will not be judged based on the Mosaic Law. Paul seemed to refer to another "law" — a law imprinted upon people's hearts. God is the Creator of all so it stands to reason that there might be something ingrained in each human being — a moral code. The prophet Jeremiah foresaw something similar in regard to the new covenant that God will make with His people.

Jeremiah 31:33 *For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

What Paul seems to mean is that there is a law that is ingrained in each person by virtue of being made in the image of God. Every human being has some moral sense by which he is able to distinguish right and wrong. Some call this the "natural law." The Gentiles by their conduct showed that a law was written on their hearts. Paul was not saying that God's specific revelation to Israel through Moses was naturally known by the Gentiles. He was saying that in a broad sense what was expected of all people was not hidden from those who did not have the special revelation given to Israel. Due to sin, we will all perish with or without the law. God's wrath is meted out impartially, to everyone who sins. Likewise, God's grace is provided impartially, to everyone who believes.

Romans 1:16 *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*

Knowing the Law is Not Enough

The Jewish people were a people chosen by God to be His people. They were given the very words of God, the requirements for living a righteous life. They were chosen to be the nation through which the Savior of mankind would come. The Jews were uniquely privileged to represent God to the world. If any people could know the mind of God and faithfully live in accordance with God's revealed will, it was the Jewish people. Many concluded that because the Jews possessed God's Law and were chosen as His people, they were guaranteed entrance into the kingdom of God. However, their

privileges were not enough to secure their place in the kingdom of God. Paul reminded them that some had failed to practice the law they proclaimed.

Romans 2:21–23 ²¹ *You...who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal?* ²² *You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?* ²³ *You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.*

The Jews had prided themselves on teaching others the law of God, but had forgotten to teach themselves. They rightly preached the precepts of the law — do not steal, do not commit adultery, do not touch pagan idols — but some had failed to follow the very law they so zealously promoted in others. Possession and knowledge of God’s law had clearly not prevented at least some Jewish people from breaking the law. *Knowing the law does not equate to obeying the law.* Tell the police officer that you knew the speed limit but chose to not obey it. Obedience is better than mere knowledge. This is similar to what James wrote regarding being “doers of the Word.” (James 1:22) It does no good to read God’s Word or to hear God’s Word if we do not respond with action to God’s Word. We are privileged to have the very Word of God where we can read God’s words and know His requirements for our lives. Having God’s Word or even knowing God’s Word is not the same as obeying God’s Word. We ought to “do” the Word, not merely hear the Word. Paul then made a very painful statement.

Romans 2:24 *The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.*

Thousands of people have been turned off from the Church or the Christian faith by the conduct of hypocritical Christians. These might be the ones who profess to believe in Jesus Christ, who have their names on the church roll, who faithfully give to the church, but who do not live Christ exalting lives. For them, church is about controlling things, maybe a status or something expected for them to do. For these people, there is no real life changing faith. To bear the name of God, though, is a sacred trust. To violate that trust has severe repercussions for both those who violate that trust and for those whose spiritual growth is harmed by their actions. We need to be aware of the damage we do to the Church and to the name of Jesus Christ when we act like unbelievers. How many people have left the Church because of something you have done? How many people have not had a chance to receive salvation through Jesus Christ because of you? This is a serious issue — literally a matter of life or death.

On the other hand, some people expect church members to be perfect when the one absolute prerequisite for joining the Church is the admission that one is not perfect. It should not surprise anyone to see Christians sin. R. C. Sproul wrote, “The only organization I know which demands that you be a sinner in order to join it, is the Christian church.” We must accept that we are sinners before we can receive the Savior and join His Church. While that is the requirement for joining, God does not leave us that way when we receive Jesus Christ. I am not saying that we become perfect when we trust in Christ for salvation, but from that point forward we are being saved and made into the image of Christ. There will be fruit of righteousness in a genuine believer.

Being a Child of God is a Matter of the Heart

In the last part of this passage, Paul mentioned yet another situation where some Jewish people of his day thought they were automatically granted access to heaven. Circumcision, the sacred rite which was the sign of the Old Testament covenant, was required of all Jewish males for entrance into the covenant. Among some in Israel, circumcision was believed to be all it took to be right with God. One rabbi wrote that Abraham himself sits before the gates of hell and does not allow any circumcised Israelite to enter there. Paul argued, however, that those who violate the law are considered uncircumcised before God. Basically, Paul was saying that just because you have the mark of the covenant with God that designates you as belonging to His Jewish people, if you disobey the law, it is as if you are not under the covenant promise. On the flip side, if the Gentiles who are not physically circumcised but obey the law, they will be treated as ones under the covenant promises of God.

We have a similar confusion in the Church today where some people believe that baptism automatically guarantees salvation. Some believe that having your name on the church roll guarantees one's place in Heaven. These are symbols of your faith in Christ. True righteousness is a matter of the heart. True righteousness is the work of the Holy Spirit. The law does not transform anyone. It is the convicting work of the Holy Spirit, true repentance of our hard hearts, and being enabled by the Spirit to live a new life that transforms us. Paul referred to an "inward circumcision" performed by the Spirit that is accomplished when our hard heart is removed, and a new birth causes our new heart to come alive to the things of God. To the Galatians, Paul made this point clear:

Galatians 6:1 *For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.*

What matters is being made into a new creature through the blood of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. We escape the wrath of God by faith in Jesus, not by trying to follow the requirements of the law. If your heart is not right with God, no amount of ritual observance will supply the true righteousness God requires. Only faith in Christ and the working of the Holy Spirit in your life will make you righteous.

Conclusion

In closing, we see in this passage that God's wrath is upon us. Paul makes it abundantly clear that all humans, Jew and Gentile alike, are sinners in the hands of an angry God. While God has given us His law to show us the requirements for righteousness, obeying His law is not within our ability without the Spirit. Obedience is a matter of the Spirit. Are you trying to work out your salvation by your own ability? Are you trying to do what God requires of you by your own strength? Stop! The only thing which matters is being a new creation through faith in Jesus Christ. While God's wrath is upon all mankind, His salvation is also made available to all people, Jew and Gentile alike. Paul wrote earlier that the Gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. Believe in the power of the Gospel. Trust in Jesus Christ. Amen!