

Dead & Alive – Romans, Part 1

500 years ago, Martin Luther was a German monk who had been taught that God required him to live a righteous life in order to be saved. And so he had grown to hate God, for first requiring of him what he could not do, and then for leaving him to fail: “Although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner ... therefore I did not love a righteous and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him.”

Then he came across these words in the book of Romans: “The just shall live by faith.” That changed everything for Luther, who simply said, “I broke through.” It was Romans that lit the fire in his heart that began the Protestant Reformation and literally changed the history of the western world. Romans is one of the most revolutionary books of all time.

And rightfully so, because Romans was written by a great revolutionary named the Apostle Paul. He’s writing during one of his missionary journeys, probably during a stop in Corinth, and he’s writing to a group of Christians in Rome, the most powerful city of the ancient world at that time. He has not yet been to Rome, and he only knows a handful of these people. He started many churches during his ministry, but not this one. The best we can determine is that some Roman Jews were present at the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:5) more than 25 years prior to Paul’s writing, and they took the gospel back to Rome and started the church.

Paul doesn’t know all the issues of this church, but he doesn’t need to. He writes about THE answer to every problem – the GOSPEL.

Paul identifies himself as a SERVANT (“doulos” – literally “slave”) of Jesus Christ, and only then mentions his calling as an APOSTLE (“apostolos” – “sent one”). He is separated from everything else in his life for the GOSPEL (“euangeloi” – literally “good herald”). The GOSPEL (60X in Paul’s epistles) isn’t advice to be followed; it is good news about what has happened, and a DECLARATION of how we are to respond.

The gospel is a WHO, not a WHAT. The gospel is about JESUS, not about us. We only get to experience salvation because of what HE has done. And He could only provide it because He was both MAN (“made of the seed of David according to the flesh”) and GOD (“declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the resurrection from the dead”).

So how are we to respond to this good news? Through “OBEDIENCE to the faith” (1:5). If we truly have faith in God, we will OBEY His Word. As Martin Luther put it, “We are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.” True faith always brings about grateful, joyful obedience.

Paul thanks God for the FAMOUS FAITH of this church (“your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world”), he tells them that he prays for them “without ceasing,” and he tells them how much he wants to come and visit them so they can be “established.” Because even in a great church, there is always room to grow in our faith! EVERYONE NEEDS THE GOSPEL – people INSIDE the church and those still OUTSIDE the church. That’s why Paul says that he is a DEBTOR (1:14) to everyone!

If you lend me \$1000, then I am in debt to you until I pay it back. But there’s another sense of being a DEBTOR here. If someone else gives me \$1000 to pass on to you, then I am in debt to you until I give you that gift. That is why Paul is a DEBTOR – because if we have been GIVEN the gospel, then we OWE people the gospel!

It is possible to be “ashamed of the gospel” (1:16) instead of eager to share it. The word translated “ashamed” can also mean “offended.”

How is the gospel offensive?

- The gospel insults us by telling us that our salvation is free and undeserved. We are such spiritual failures that the only way to gain salvation is for it to be a complete gift. This offends moral and religious people who think their decency gives them an advantage.
- The gospel is also really insulting by telling us that Jesus died for us. It tells us that we are so wicked and vile that only the death of the Son of God could save us. This offends the modern, popular belief in the innate goodness of humanity.
- The gospel, by telling us that trying to be good and spiritual isn’t enough, thereby insists that no “good” person will be saved, but only those who come to God through Jesus. This offends the modern notion that any nice person anywhere can find God “in his own way.”
- The gospel tells us that our salvation was accomplished by Jesus’ suffering and serving, and that following him means to suffer and serve with him. This offends people who want salvation to be an easy and comfortable life, and those wanting their lives to be “safe.”

But Paul is NOT ASHAMED of the gospel – because it is the “power of God” (1:16). The gospel doesn’t just talk about power, or bring power, or have power – the gospel IS power to change lives! But it only works for “everyone that believeth.” You have to respond through “OBEDIENCE to the faith” (1:5). Don’t try to figure it out, just TRY IT OUT!

The gospel gives us something we could never obtain on our own – “the righteousness of God” (1:17). Righteousness is a POSITIONAL word – it means to have a right standing, with no liabilities or debts owed to the other person. You are now acceptable to the other party because your record no longer has anything on it to jeopardize the relationship!

It is important to realize how much Jesus actually did for us at Calvary. **Forgiveness – having our slate “wiped clean” – is only HALF of the gospel message!** Salvation is not just receiving a pardon and being released from death row in a prison. Then we would be free, but left on our own to try and fix our problems through our own efforts. But in the gospel, we discover that Jesus has taken us off death row and then given us a Medal of Honor! We are received and welcomed as heroes, as though we had accomplished extraordinary deeds. We have literally received to our account “the righteousness of God.”

The gospel will always cause offense because it reveals in us a need that we cannot meet! It offends people who know they can never live up to God’s standards – and it offends people who think they already have! NOBODY can save themselves – that’s why the JUST (those receiving – not meriting – God’s righteousness) shall live by FAITH (1:17). And why does God do it this way? **Because the Giver gets the Glory!**

Paul will spend the next couple of chapters showing us why we need God to GIVE us righteousness – why we cannot earn, deserve, or attain it ourselves. It will present us with a dark picture of humanity, and a frightening picture of God’s WRATH. **But if you don’t understand or believe in the wrath of God, the gospel will not move you.**

CHAPTER ONE: WE ARE “DEAD IN CARNALITY.”

God’s wrath is a present reality – it is not revealed in the future, it “is revealed” right now (1:18). What makes God angry is ungodliness (our vertical relationship with Him) and unrighteousness (our horizontal relationships with others). Humanity constantly breaks the two greatest commandments – to love God and to love others (Mark 12:29-31).

But how can God hold someone accountable for not knowing and obeying a God they have never heard of? Paul anticipates this objection, and answers that EVERYONE KNOWS that there is a Creator (if they are honest), and so everyone is WITHOUT EXCUSE (1:20).

What happens when people refuse to acknowledge God? **We do not stop worshipping – we simply change the object of our worship!** We were created to worship the Creator, so if we reject Him we WILL worship and serve something else. It will become our bottom line, the thing we cannot live without, the thing that defines and validates us.

Because God created the world “very good” (Genesis 1:31), all created things have good in them. We are right to find them admirable and enjoy them. The problem comes when we give any created thing the affection that only God deserves and has the right to demand.

The human heart loves to make a GOOD thing into a GOD thing. But from God’s perspective, this is the behavior of “fools” (1:22).

In verse 24, we discover how God’s wrath is being revealed in the present – God’s judgment on ungodliness and unrighteousness is to GIVE US WHAT WE WANT!

The word LUSTS is “epithumia,” literally “over-desire.” It is a longing that ends up controlling us. The main problem of our heart is not so much desires for bad things, but our “over-desires” for good things – our turning of good things into God things, making them objects of worship. The WORST thing that can happen to us is that we are given what our hearts over-desire. To get what we want is not the “blessing” of God upon us – it is actually the WRATH of God upon us! God simply allows us to walk through the door we have chosen instead of putting Him first.

When an idol takes the place of God in our lives, we will do ANYTHING – no matter how destructive to ourselves or others – just to have it.

As our world continues its slide into sin, Romans 1:26-27 has become one of the more controversial passages in Scripture. But Paul is not singling out homosexuality as the “worst sin,” he is simply saying it is a perfect example of how God has, in His wrath, given humans over to their “over-desires,” to experience the consequences. “Vile affections” (1:26) is “para phusin” and literally means “against nature” – homosexuality is a violation of the created nature God gave us. But ALL sexual immorality is sinful (1:24), and Paul is about to give us a long list of other sins that are just as evil in God’s sight (1:29-31).

“Reprobate mind” literally means “REJECTED.” It is a mind that refuses to obey God, with a perverted moral sense and full of its own speculations on what is right and wrong. Therefore, God must reject it.

We are DEAD IN CARNALITY. This is what theologians call the doctrine of total depravity – while not everything we do is always completely sinful, nothing we do is every completely untouched by sin. So the summary statement here is that we are actually “haters of God” – we don’t want Him to interfere in our lives, because WE want to be God!

Verse 32 is certainly a commentary on our world today – people not only do these things, but “have pleasure in them that do them.” Our media is the best example of this – we support others’ right to sin against God, and we are entertained by their wickedness.

“That’s right, Paul! They are so wicked, and I am not like them!”

CHAPTER TWO: WE ARE “DEAD IN HYPOCRISY.”

Religious people agree totally with Paul in chapter one, and that’s why 2:1 comes as a bucket of cold water. It is a brilliant turnaround:

Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things.

No one truly lives up to their own standards – and certainly no one could ever live up to God’s standards! To “judge” in this verse doesn’t mean we shouldn’t recognize or condemn sin, because the Bible tells us to “judge all things” (1 Corinthians 2:15). Here, the emphasis is on the one who “judges another” – to believe that OTHERS are worthy of God’s judgment while YOU are not, to pass judgment on someone for an attitude or action that you secretly allow in your own life. Paul says, “You are only condemning yourself!”

When I stand before God at the final Judgment, the counsel for the prosecution will be ME! Decades ago, theologian Francis Schaeffer called this the “Invisible Tape Recorder.” It records the things we say about others, about how they ought to live. At the Judgment, God will simply play the tape and judge you on the basis of your own words! Paul says, “Do you really think that you will escape the judgment of God?!”

In chapter one, we see people who are DEAD IN CARNALITY. But in chapter two, we see people who are DEAD IN HYPOCRISY.

A self-righteous person is rejecting God just as much as an unrighteous person! They acknowledge God’s existence, but His commandments don’t really impact their lives. Their good works are their salvation, they are their own savior, and they deserve the glory for themselves!

Romans 1 & 2 are setting before us the same two people that Jesus does in his parable about the two sons (Luke 15:11-32). There is a younger brother who is dead in carnality, but there is also an elder brother who is dead in hypocrisy! He’s obedient and compliant on the surface, he keeps all the rules, but he is also alienated from his father.

If we think we can save ourselves, we reject the truth as much as if we think we do not need to be saved at all. Much of the rest of chapter two is addressed specifically to the Jews, who were so very proud that they were keeping the law, while the sinful Gentiles were not. But the same principle applies to us today. Are there sins that you condemn in others, but are tempted to excuse in your own life? Is there any hypocrisy in your relationship with God? Are you REAL, or just RELIGIOUS?