

Lenten Devotional March 10, 2023

Scripture

Romans 2:25-3:18

25 Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. 26 So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 27 Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. 28 For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. 29 Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart — it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

*3:1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? 2 Much, in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. 3 What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? 4 By no means! Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true, as it is written,
“So that you may be justified in your words,
and prevail in your judging.”*

5 But if our injustice serves to confirm the justice of God, what should we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) 6 By no means! For then how could God judge the world? 7 But if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? 8 And why not say (as some people slander us by saying that we say), “Let us do evil so that good may come”? Their condemnation is deserved!

9 What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, 10 as it is written:

“There is no one who is righteous, not even one;

*11 there is no one who has understanding,
there is no one who seeks God.*

*12 All have turned aside, together they have become worthless;
there is no one who shows kindness,
there is not even one.”*

*13 “Their throats are opened graves;
they use their tongues to deceive.”*

“The venom of vipers is under their lips.”

14 “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”

15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

16 ruin and misery are in their paths,

17 and the way of peace they have not known.”

18 “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Devotional

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I've often felt like Paul gets himself a little too worked up in the second chapter of Romans. Really? No one is righteous? *Everyone* is a liar?

But during Lent it is appropriate—and even good—to step back and consider how it is that all humanity are under “the power of sin” (3:10). For in our hyper-connected world, we can no longer claim ignorance with regard to the ways our buying, selling, and everyday life harms others. Awareness of such destruction might soften its impact—I might burn less gasoline or become vegan—but it fails to make the world and my place in it right.

Of course, we know where this story is heading. God’s grace proves sufficient where our achievements fail. But during Lent, it is okay to just camp out a bit with Paul’s honesty. The truth is, we live in a world of immense beauty and catastrophic loss; we are sustained by God’s grace and yet often live with a numbing sense of moral ambivalence. These things are not easily harmonized, nor should they be. For as Ed Simon has said: “Acknowledging the presence of selfishness, cruelty, greed, rage, intolerance, and, in a word, sin . . . is that which makes the existence of good all the more obvious. Even if sometimes good only exists as a dim shaft of blurred light in our dark cell.” Paul’s honesty here is also his hope: the “dim shaft of blurred light” that is incarnation and resurrection.

Prayer

From Psalm 22

But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek him shall praise the LORD.
May your hearts live forever!

Amen.