

4. None, not even one

Romans 2:17-3:20

Introduction

At one time or another, we probably all have been too confident in ourselves. We might have thought that we would be right handling something all by ourselves when it would have been better to have involved others. We may have bit off more than we could chew. Have you ever been overconfident?

In this section of Romans Paul address the overconfident Jew who had a misplaced confidence in his or her possession of the Law. Please read 2:17 to 3:20 to discover what this overconfidence looked like and why it was wrong.

Jewish false confidence

At the end of chapter 2 the apostle has described Jewish overconfidence in the Law. He has provided us his reason for why such confidence is false and deceptive. Please read 2:17-29 to learn what was wrong with relying on the Law.

1. What was the overconfident Jew like? How does Paul describe them (2:18-20)?

2. What criticism did the apostle level at those Jews who were relying on the law and were boasting in God (2:21-24)?

3. For the Jew circumcision was an outward sign that they bore in their bodies, which identified them as God's covenant people. Why was this sign of little value to them (2:25-29)?

Think about it

The Jews believed that they were in a privileged position because they had been given the Law and circumcision. They thought their possession of these things marked them out as God's holy people and almost guaranteed them salvation from the judgement of God. While Paul doesn't deny the privilege they had been given, he makes it very clear that the self-righteous Jew misunderstood the nature of this privilege¹.

What will happen to those who have the Law and circumcision but don't keep the law?

¹ Paul explains what the law achieves for those who have it in Romans 3:20.

The outward sign was not the ultimate test of who the real Jews were². Who were the real Jews? Where do you think we find these real Jews?

Just having and knowing the Law was not enough to overcome the problem of human sin. What is it that Paul suggest needs to be done and who needs to it (see also Jer. 31:31-34 and Ezek. 36:26-27)?

Many Jewish people wrongly put their confidence in these two external physical things (circumcision and the law). As a result, they thought that they were God's people when in fact they weren't. What things today do people mistakenly put their confidence in when they ought not to?

The advantage of the Jew

In the previous section Paul has made clear that it is not the mere possession of the Law that makes a person a Jew inwardly. But is there an advantage in being a Jew outwardly and having the law? The apostle here says that there has been. Please read 3:1-8 to find out what that advantage has been.

² See also OT passages like Deut. 10:16 and Jer. 4:4.

4. What were the advantages of being Jewish (3:2-4)³?

5. What does Paul say to the Jew who argues that they should not be condemned because their sinfulness only highlighted God's faithfulness and thus brings glory to God (3:5-8)?

Think about it

To be entrusted with the words of God was a great privilege for the people of God. We today have also been entrusted with his words and share in this privilege.

What do we learn about God from the story of God's dealings with people of Israel?

How is understanding this helpful for us?

³ Douglas Moo suggests that in verse 2 it seems as though Paul was going to begin a list of privileges, but he became side traced and didn't complete the list in this first part of his letter. The list of privileges we re completed later in his letter in chapter 9:3-5 (see New Bible Commentary page 1126)

None righteous

In the 3:9-20 we arrive at the apostle' conclusion. Paul argued that the Jews were no better off than the Gentiles. Please read these verses to find out why, despite all their privileges, the Jews were in the same predicament as the Gentiles.

6. What do the Jews have in common with the Gentiles?

7. Paul quotes several OT passages (Ps 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Eccl 7:20; Ps 5:9; Ps 140:3; Ps 10:7; Isa 59:7,8; Ps 36:1) to describe the extent of the problem that people have with sin (10-18). How extensive is the problem?

8. Paul made it clear to the Jew that having the law does not exempt them from judgment. What role does the law then play?

Think about it

The law is good. There is nothing wrong with the law, but it just can't save you. No one will be declared right with God by observing the law. The law doesn't have the power to change our hearts so that we might keep it. The law rather highlights

our need of salvation. How does it do this?

What basic problem do all people have? Why are all our deeds evil?

Why does the law take away all our boasting and bragging?

How do you think this view of things ought to affect the way we view and treat other others?

How should it affect the way that we approach God?

Conclusion

The Jews were privileged to have been entrusted with the very words of God. God had revealed to them much more of himself than he had to the Gentiles. They had the promises of God. Yet when it came to God's judgment, they were no better off. The apostle concluded, "Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin".

Think about it

Many Jews found this assessment of their condition hard to accept. Do you think people today also find it hard to accept? Please explain why you think they do or don't.

What happens when people do accept this assessment?

Going Further

1. Memory verse. Please consider either learning Romans 3:10-12 or else if you prefer something a little shorter, Romans 3:23. Both these verses describe the universality of sin and would be good verses to know and share with others.

2. In preparation for the next study please read Romans 3:21-31 to understand how the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel.

3. In the passage we will study next week Paul will explain that Christ has been presented as a sacrifice of atonement. In preparation for the next study please also read Leviticus 16 which describes the sacrifices that were made on the Day of Atonement to cleanse people from their sin.