

Romans 1:18-2:16 - A Heart Problem (Part 1)

During the week, try to take notice of the news headlines. It's a pretty normal week if you found examples of violence, corruption, & greed. So what exactly is wrong with the world? Perhaps we need to be more environmentally sensitive, or more economically responsible. Maybe we just need more freedom to do what we like. Everyone is trying to make the world a better place, but no-one seems to address the core issues.

In this section of Romans, Paul systematically works through the main categories of humanity and points out what the problem is. Ultimately, everyone needs a change of heart.

Background Briefing: Jews & Gentiles

Over the years we have divided our society into 'the haves' & 'the have-nots', or perhaps white collar & blue collar workers, or 'Coasties' & 'bushies'. Generally, our own social distinctions and barriers are just a pale shadow of the huge wall dividing first century Jews and Gentiles.

The Jews saw themselves as 'God's chosen people' - and they were. Through the ages, God had worked among the Israelites (Jews) in a special way, and he had singled them out to be "a light to the gentiles." Mind you, it was meant to be the sort of light that attracted people in. The Jews, though, were more interested in keeping people out. They had become proud & arrogant; they constructed elaborate rules and rituals to make sure they weren't "defiled" by the "Gentiles."

In fact, the word GENTILE simply meant "the nations", or "the ethnics." It was a blanket term that referred to everyone who was non-Jewish. And that's exactly the way the Jews saw the world - "us", and "everyone else" - and even though they were a small minority group in the city of Rome, they were careful to maintain their strict policies of separatism. This attitude even carried over into the first century church - Christian Jews were slow to realise the implications of the gospel! They were strict, and keen to keep the Old Testament Law; whereas Gentile Christians (probably the majority)

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looked at them as “has beens” and were arrogant about their freedom to ignore Jewish laws.

In making his point, Paul starts out with the gentiles. (The Jewish Christians in the Roman Church probably enjoyed this bit!)

THE GENTILES' HEART PROBLEM

Read through Romans 1:18-32

1. Even though the gentiles didn't have the scriptures to guide them, what did they KNOW about God? (1:19, 32)

2. What have they done with their knowledge of God?

3. What has God done with them?

4. What part have their “hearts” played in all of this? (Note the verses that mention “the heart”.)

5. In what ways does this passage remind you of Australia today

...and what radical point does this passage make about people who say "I don't believe in God"?

How does this help us approach people like that with the gospel?

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Notice, Paul doesn't go back to the OT Law to make his point here. He goes right back to the start – creation itself. Deep down, everyone in the world is aware of the creator God, but because of the desires of the hearts, they suppress that knowledge. It's a HEART PROBLEM. People wilfully ignore God so as not to inconvenience their chosen lifestyle. So, God gives them over to their own desires and things are in a mess!

Jewish readers would readily agree. That's what they've been saying all along. God's creation has been perverted all around them. People have failed to recognize their creator, and have failed to live in the created man-woman order. And that's just one of the symptoms – there's lying, cheating, and even ... disobedience to parents! That's the kind of world we live in.

So does that mean the Jews can pat themselves on the back? After all they're the ones who have got God's law. They know right from wrong perfectly well. Take a look at what Paul says at the start of chapter 2:1-5 (read for yourself)

- a. Note first of all that these words are addressed to Jews who have the law.
- b. Describe their behaviour according to verse 1. What would you call someone like this?
- c. According to verses 2 to 5 what will their fate be, and why?

Keep reading from Romans 2:6-16. In essence, it's about the difference between KNOWING RIGHT and DOING RIGHT.

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In verses 6 to 11, the Jew thinks “knowing the law” is what gets you right with God, & that the Gentiles who don’t have the law are a lost cause. Ultimately, says Paul, God’s not impressed with what you know about the Jewish law... or by your self-righteous judgemental attitude... he’s interested in what you actually do! You’ll need to be a truly righteous person to escape his judgement. You’ll need to be a person who has patiently kept doing right, rather than a self seeking person who has not obeyed the truth. And surprisingly, the Gentiles are eligible!

a. What is the point being made by verses 9 to 11?

b. What mistake have the Jews made according to verse 13?

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A Summary & Overview – The “Heart” in Romans 1 to 5

Rom 1:21 For even though they knew God, they did not honour Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

Rom 1:24 Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonoured among them. `

Rom 2:5 But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,

Rom 2:15 in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them,

Rom 2:29 But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God.

Rom 5:5 and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Can you trace the logic of what is being said about “the heart” in each of these verses?

Getting Personal

It seems that Paul isn't just talking in the abstract here. He's addressing very real issues in the church. Jewish Christians are criticising Gentile Christians, & saying they can't possibly be counted as righteous because they don't observe the requirements of the law. Paul is saying to the Jewish Christians, “watch it -sometimes you don't either”.

More than that, even without the law, Gentile Christians are now starting to act like the law is written in their hearts. How about that! (Note Ezekiel 36 & Jeremiah 31) That's exactly what you'd expect to happen if the Spirit is at work!