

Romans Summary
Week 4, Wednesday September 28, 2016
Romans 2:17-29

Paul now brings out explicitly what he has been hinting at so far in his letter; namely, that the issue of sinful humanity is not just a pagan problem. He turns his attention to “the Jew”. Again, it’s important to remember that Paul is dialoguing with a hypothetical person or opponent and now that person take the shape of a Jewish person who has not come to faith in the Messiah. More, it is a collective of the Jewish nation as a whole apart from Jesus. In short, he pictures ethnic Israel.

Israel has the law and celebrates (boasts) in God, more because of this possession they know God’s will and can know the morally correct choices because of the Law (Torah which they have by nature as Jews). Even more, they understand their vocation which being given the Torah places on them: to be a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness, a corrector and teacher. That is, Israel has been called to be a light to the nations and she has been given Torah to do so.

Paul has a high view of Torah (rightly), calling it the embodiment of knowledge and truth (there’s nothing wrong in Torah in all of this). The problem is that Israel has failed in her vocation to be light to the nations. While she is attempting to teach others she is failing to uphold Torah herself. There is theft and adultery in Israel (again speaking of the people historically and generally, not every Jewish person). Worse, Jews were known for stealing from pagan temples, the logic being that idols are nonexistent therefore what has been given to them belongs to no one so is free for the taking. The result though is instead of the reputation of being light to the nations, pagans understood the Jewish people as temple robbers. The quote is appropriate, the name of God is blasphemed.

But, as with all of Paul’s quotes, there is more than just a fitting word. Paul is bringing in a whole line of thought by quoting Isaiah (52:5) and Ezekiel (36:22). Any Jewish person of Paul’s day would agree with Israel’s failure in this area and would agree that is what brought Israel into exile. With these quotes Paul is pointing out that in Isaiah the situation has gotten to the point where it is time for God to act and in Ezekiel the solution to the Israel problem is a new heart and spirit which will enable Israel to fulfill her vocation.

Paul now begins to speak of circumcision asserting the truth that circumcision is only the mark of covenant faithfulness if accompanied by keeping Torah. Of course he has already asserted that Israel has not kept Torah. Therefore what was a mark of covenant membership (circumcision) has become a mark of non-membership, i.e. those who bear the mark of circumcision are marked out as non-covenant members.

He then raises what he began to speak of in 2:14-16. A Gentile people who by nature do not have the Torah and have not grown hearing the Torah, but are in fact doing the things required by Torah; that is, Gentile Christians. This Gentile (collective again) does not have circumcision, but because he/she keeps the Torah his/her non-marking becomes the mark of covenant membership. Even worse, won’t this Gentile who has covenant membership marked out in their lack of physical marking judge those who do not have covenant membership marked out by their physical marking? Yes they will because the doers of Torah have the capacity to judge correctly (in line with God) as stated in 2:18.

Paul's conclusion is that the person who truly deserves the name "Jew" is the one who is so secretly rather than openly (inward vs. outward). With this turn to general speech Paul emphasizes that this is not simply a Jew/Gentile divide. Rather, it is a open/secret divide since Paul and other Jewish people have in fact heard and responded to the gospel. So, even though they seemed to have abandoned their historic beliefs and customs, they are in fact worthy of the name "Jew". Further, the presence of this new heart/spirit person demonstrates God has fulfilled his covenant promises through Christ and the Spirit; i.e. God has been righteous.

"There is No Distinction" reflection and discussion questions:

1. What is Sin vs. sins?
2. Why would the doctrine of original sin be good news?
3. What are you guilty of? Why is it good to ponder that?