

Romans Summary
Week 5, Wednesday October 12, 2016
Romans 3:1-20

Having concluded the last section with the conviction that one is a Jew who is one 'in the secret,' not 'in the open' or in the flesh. The natural question Paul's hypothetical questioner raises is "what is the advantage of the Jew?" Paul answers emphatically, great in every respect. Israel's advantage, to begin with, is that they have been given the oracles of God.

When one is given an oracle it is for another. The master will send the slave or servant to the shrine where the deity will use an intermediary to convey their words. That servant then returns to the master with that oracle — the word if for another. In the same way Israel was given the word of God which formed her as a people, yet was also designed for the whole world. In short, Israel has the vocation to be a light to the nations.

However, as has already been concluded Israel has not fulfilled her vocation, so does that mean that God is unjust? No. The question is just sharpened: how will God be just (he needs to punish sin impartially) and justifier (he has determined to solve the problem of sin through his people)? Paul's affirmation is that God is able to judge justly. He does this by quoting Psalm 51:4 which goes on to affirm the new heart and the gift of the Spirit to the penitent.

The questioner raises a second question, if God is the one bringing accusation that makes him one of the parties at law, if he is also the judge, how can he be expected to judge fairly? Paul doesn't fully answer, but affirms God is the judge who will justly judge the world not the one bringing accusation.

Again, the question is posed from the truth vs. lie angle. If my lie led to God's glory why am I being judged as a sinner? Paul doesn't answer this here either. Instead he reports that there are those who put this logic in his mouth. He says, these are a clear example of people who are justly condemned. Any logic which can say let us do evil so good may come is perverted.

So, the Jew has an advantage, which doesn't leave room for a special claim on God. Thus the question are the Jews in a better position in an absolute sense? The answer is no, not at all. Paul has already affirmed that both Jew and Gentile are under sin. Sin is now seen as a personified power which has taken all humanity under its power. Paul brings in Torah to speak to Israel. The scriptures quoted outline very clearly how Israel is equal to the pagan nations.

The conclusion is that the Torah is brought into the Law court metaphor as a witness. This witness has spoken so that every mouth is closed — there is no defence left to Jew or Gentile. The whole world stands before God guilty. The reason for this is that the things of the law which define ethnic Israel as such cannot justify them, because through the Torah come the knowledge of sin. Torah acts to condemn Israel leaving her with no defence.

“The Line Between Good and Evil” reflection and discussion questions:

1. Is there a discourse in Canada framed in 'good' vs. 'evil' terms?
2. Is there (or has there been) a situation where you have placed yourself and your allies on the good side and the opposing party on the bad?
3. Where can you see your life in the grip of impulses more powerful than your wish to do good?

4. Why is it important that we say 'we' and 'I' as we make confession in the worship service?
5. Why is it important for us to know that in being disarmed we are not disempowered?