THERE IS NO ONE RIGHTEOUS

Romans 2:17-3:20

Key Verse: 3:10,

“As it is written, there is no one righteous, not even one.”

In the previous passage, we learned that God’s standard of judgment is fair and reliable because he will judge based on the truth. God is rich in his kindness, forbearance and patience that he intended all sinners to repent and be saved. In today’s passage, Paul turns to the Jews who had strong self-righteousness due to the law and circumcision and he exposed their sins of hypocrisy and disobedience to the law. He concludes the passage that all men are under sin. May we ponder upon who the true Jews are and examine ourselves as sinners before God through this passage.

1.The law and circumcision did not make the Jews righteous (2:17-29)

Look at verse 17. **“Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God.”** Now Paul addresses to “the Jew”. The Hebrew word for law is “Torah”, the first five books of Moses. The law includes all the divine commands and precepts for regulating man’s moral and spiritual life. The law is the written code of their covenant with God. To Jewish people, the law was their way of life instructed by God. The Jews felt special because they were the only people chosen by God who had received the law as God’s revelation to them.

As a result, they were convinced that they were a guide for the spiritually blind, a light for the Gentiles in their darkness, instructor for them in their foolishness and teachers for them in their spiritual infancy. In fact, the Gentiles were ignorant spiritually groping in the darkness, worshiping idols and suffering from demons. Verse 20b says, **“because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth.”** The Jews’ confidence rested in having the law, “**the embodiment of knowledge and truth**.” The law is the compilation of God’s special revelation about Himself and the true knowledge of God. It is also the truth about mankind, the world and the way of salvation. The Jews were proud of possessing the divine law. But, Paul pointed out their hypocrisy by saying in verse 21a, **“You who teach others, do you not teach yourself?”** Although the Jews boasted of the law and taught others, they lived according to their sinful desires. What they taught and how they acted were so different.

*There is one story in Aesop’s fable regarding mother crab’s teaching her baby crab how to walk. As the baby crab tried to walk and it walked sideways. Then mother crab said, “Why do you walk sideways like that? you should always look forward and walk straight.” The little crab tried to walk straight again, but still walking sideways. The young crab replied, “Show me how, mom and I’ll follow your example.” The mother crab tried and tried to walk straight forward, but she could walk sideways only and she tripped and fell on her nose, she uttered, “what’s wrong with me?”*

Jesus revealed the sins of the teachers of the law and the Pharisees in Matthew 23:3-4, **“So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.** Jesus called them, “You hypocrites!” Paul listed three sins, stealing, adultery and robbing temples which were being committed among Jewish people. They dishonored God by breaking the law. When we do not teach ourselves, we cannot grow spiritually and end up as hypocrites. Before teaching others, we should examine ourselves, repent our sins and obey God’s word practically.

Verse 25 says, **“Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised.”** Circumcision began with Abraham as the sign of God’s covenant with Him. When Abraham was comfortably living as a noble father to his son Ishmael, God appeared to him and said, **“I am God Almighty, walk before me faithfully and be blameless.”** Abraham obeyed God’s command and circumcised himself and all males in his household as a symbol of his decision of faith. God commanded every male among Abraham’s descendants must be circumcised as his people. The Jews had confidence in the flesh due to circumcision.

Verses 28-29 read, **“A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God.”** Here, Paul explains who true Jews are in contrast to cultural Jews. The essence of being a true Jew is not something outward and physical, but inward and spiritual. A real Jew is not the physical descendants of Abraham but one who repents of their sins and are born again by the Spirit of God.

Deuteronomy 30:6 says, **“The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul and live.”** Circumcision of the heart is not done by human hands using flint or knife but the Lord our God by his Spirit. In verse 29, the word, “**Inwardly**” in Greek is “**in secret**.” True circumcision is in the heart inwardly, not in the flesh. It wins the approval of God rather than people. What matters to God is a deep, inward, secret work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. True Jews are conscious of God, seek His recognition and praise, and strive to please God. They cut away worldly desires, and human glory and honor. They love God and God’s people wholeheartedly.

For Christians, circumcision can be compared to baptism. Andy Shin received baptism ceremony in the presence of our church members last fall. It was like his spiritual birthday party encouraged by spiritual friends. Baptism is a vital milestone for one’s spiritual journey. However, the ceremony itself doesn’t change the baptized person inwardly, but labeled him as a Christian before public and his resolution to follow Jesus. People need to look forward to receiving the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The baptism ceremony has value only if we have faith in Jesus that leads to obedience. When God circumcise our heart through the blood of Jesus, we become real Jews. Now we Christians became true Jews through our repentance in God’s grace.

Lidia Singh was born as the youngest daughter of missionary Mateus and Rebeca Singh in Portugal. Since she was bullied by some of her classmates in elementary school, she became very shy and afraid of other’s thought of her. She complained to God for having placed her in a Christian family and sought carnal and filthy desires and perverse thoughts. However, she suffered from empty heart and big inferiority complex due to her appearance and much acne on her face. In the university, she was still reliant on friendship, going parties and listening to impure music. But through bible study and reflection writing, God worked little by little on her heart. At Encounter conference, she received a word of God in 1 King 19:11-12, **“The Lord said, ‘Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by. Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper.’”** She realized that the Lord was working in her life through His still and gentle whispering voice. She found out that God was by her side working invisibly in His way. She opened her eyes to see God, the Almighty Creator despite her being a proud and rebellious sinner. She received baptism last October embarking on a new life in Jesus. Yes, we belong to the family of God through the baptism of the Spirit, not just by physical belonging to Christian community or natural birth into a Christian family. May God bless all our church members born again and renewed by the Holy Spirit that we may become true children of God.

2.There is no one righteous, not even one.**’”** (3:1-20)

Look at verse 1, **“What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?** This is the 1st hypothetical question that Jews might raise regarding the advantages of Jews. Verse 2 says, **“Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.”** NKJV version says, “**The oracles of God**,” which refers to all God’s living words putting together. When God entrusted His very words to the Israelites, he had a world salvation plan. God wanted to raise Israel as a Bible teachers’ nation. The prophet, Isaiah saw God’s vision for Israel in Isaiah 2:3, **“Many peoples will come and say, come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths. The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”**

The 2nd hypothetical question is about God’s faithfulness. While the Jews had the privilege of having the law, they did not live up to God’s standard as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation and a light to the Gentiles. Verses 3-4a say **“What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God’s faithfulness?** **“Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar.”** Whether people remain faithful or not, God remains always faithful. God is always true to His word. He is faithful to his righteous character. Human failure and unrighteousness can never tarnish the truth of God and His words. Israel failed as a priestly nation and even rejected the promised Messiah crucifying him on the cross. God’s work seemed to have failed. But God picked up the rejected stone and placed it for corner stone for his salvation plan. God called the Gentiles to become his people as new Israelites and continued his salvation work. God’s work is not limited to men’s failure or success.

The third question is in verse 5, **“But if our unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us?” (I am using a human argument).** It is about men’s justification of sins. His answer is **“Certainly not! If that we so, how could God judge the world?”** Then people raise all kinds of bizarre questions.

Human beings are very good at justifying and excusing their sins. When people do not want to repent, they rationalize their sins or blame God, people and environment. People who think like this are irrational and will make any argument to keep on sinning. After silencing all the arguments of the Jews, Paul makes his final declaration about the condition of all human being. Verse 9 says, **“What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin.”** The word, “under” suggests that sin is over us. Sin reigns over us. Sin holds the human race imprisoned in guilt.

A theologian Karl Heim compared sin as a prison. *“Sin is like a prison which I always freely can enter in from outside with a key. But as soon as I come in, the door is locked and I cannot but be a prisoner who can’t run away.”* All human beings commit sin and become prisoners of sin who are powerless to escape.

Verse 10 says, **“As it is written, ‘There is no one righteous, not even one.’”** Not a single exception can be found to be righteous in the whole human race. This verdict describes what human beings are now and continue to be due to the power of sin. Sin is in our very being- it is in our nature. Some may be thinking, “I am still pretty good.” It may be good relatively, but not good enough before God. Psalm 51:5 says, **“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”** Then Paul lists the evidences of a guilty sinner one by one quoting bible verses in the Old Testament. These verses explain practically how sin affects human beings. In fact, sin affects every part of our being; our understanding, what we seek, what we do, our thoughts, throats, tongues, lips and mouths. Men only spew out the poison that is in their hearts. Their feet can only follow the way that leads to destruction. Due to sin people became selfish, greedy, arrogant, wicked, immoral, violent, deceptive and depraved.

As a result, **“ruin and misery mark the ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.**”(16-18) This describes the total depravity and inability of human beings in terms of doing good. Men are unable to do anything good to obtain salvation. Sinners are totally incapable of saving themselves. Look at verse 19. **“Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.”** The law is holy, righteous and good. But No one can meet this standard. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight. We become conscious of our sin through the law. ESV version says, “*since through the law comes knowledge of sin*.”

Yes, we realize our sins as we intently look at the law. It shows our spiritual reflection like mirror. But only looking at the law or possessing the law cannot change sinners. The whole world is under the power of sin and subject to God’s judgment. What a dire reality it is! At this final verse of this passage, we feel ourselves walking through the darkest valley. Men missionary’s bible study usually graceful and encouraging with many voluntary comments. But bible study last week was a bit quiet compared to other weeks. Then one of missionaries answered, “every mouth may be silenced because we are under the power of sin.” Yes, we could not but zip our mouth because we are all sinners.

Unless God provides another way, there is no hope for anyone. We look forward to freedom from sin. The conclusion of this passage is a bit gloomy. One gospel song “I’m free,” depicts one’s yearning for freedom from sin, ***“So long I had searched for life’s meaning, Enslaved by the world and my greed. Then the door of my prison was opened by love, for the ransom was paid, I am freed. I’m free from the fear of tomorrow, I’m free from the guilt of the past, for I’ve traded my shackles for a glorious song. I’m free, praise the Lord, free at last.”***But, praise God that in deed, he provided another way. This is what the gospel, the good news of Jesus is all about. We anticipate to know the gospel in the next chapters. May God continue to bless Romans’ study with life giving lessons and enable us to encounter Jesus who can rescue us from our prison.