

FULL MIND, EMPTY HEART

By Steve Zeisler

Our nation is having difficulty naming an attorney general, the chief legal officer of the nation who teaches and upholds the law and applies it rigorously to the body politic. This year, with heightened scrutiny, we are requiring that the attorney general actually obey the law. Asking people who judge others to obey the law themselves is a very important concept, especially for Christians. Those of us who have grown up with knowledge of God and the Bible can too easily enjoy information apart from obedience.

In the second chapter of Romans Paul asks a penetrating question: "You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?" The first and second chapters of Romans are a detailed and profound indictment of human sin. Paul unmasks our attempts to avoid discovering our own sin, and he is a master at closing the loopholes we create for ourselves. Let's read Romans 2:17-21:

But if you bear the name 'Jew,' and rely upon the Law, and boast in God, and know His will, and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself?

You who bear the name Jew, (Paul will later use the term circumcision to identify the same group) have assumed a role of moral leadership. Does the teaching apply to the teachers?

DO WE TEACH OURSELVES

Conservative evangelicals today are in a position similar to that of the Jews of the first century. What made Jews distinctive then is similar to what makes people in this church and with our outlook distinctive.

The Jews of Paul's day boasted of friendship with God. Yahweh had been the victor over his rivals in the Old Testament. God had delivered his people from Egypt and had given the land of Canaan to his own, driving out foreign gods. As the Jews traveled throughout the Roman empire, they would encounter foolish, polytheistic religions and be reminded of the superiority of their insights. They boasted of their knowledge of the one true God and they took his truths seriously. They listened to the teachings of Scripture, relied upon it, studied it, and discovered its deep insights.

We are similar to the first-century Jews. Bible-believing evangelicals are distinctive in that we speak easily of a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It is familiar and comfortable language to us.

We also boast of our love of the Bible, and glory in our knowledge and our commitment to study, learn and apply it. So, as we listen carefully to Paul pointing out characteristic weaknesses of the Jews, we discover these weaknesses are characteristic of us, too.

Let's review for a moment chapter 1, verse 32, where Paul speaks with horror of the descent of humanity into gross and violent sin, saying "...those who practice such things are worthy of death, [yet] they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them." There is an out-in-the-open, clearly-understood, commitment to sin and approval of anyone who will join in the sinning---"I don't care what God thinks, I will do what I want to do."

Immediately defenses go up, and people join Paul in recoiling from such terrible folks. So Paul says in chapter 2, verse 1, "Therefore you are without excuse, every man of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge

another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things." One way we prevent discovery of our inadequacy is to condemn other people: "Oh, those terrible people; those awful crime bosses, pornographers, drug dealers." We find people that we can condemn, and we imagine our sins are reduced in the process.

A second way we try to avoid self-discovery is by becoming teachers. We join the in-crowd who approve essential things and think like God. Moving beyond condemnation we offer to apply our insights to others-to guide and direct them.

Now Paul asks a hard question: "You teach others, but do you teach yourselves? You who are willing to offer God's truth everywhere else outside the circle, what about you? Do you ask hard questions of yourself? Do you make application to your own heart?" Look at the attempts of the in-crowd (the religious Jews in Paul's day and the Bible-believing Christians in ours) to apply the truth to others. Verses 19 and 20:

...[you] are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature...."

GUIDANCE AND INSTRUCTION

From the security of knowing that we are God's spokesmen on earth, we offer to guide the poor blind folks of the world who don't know what they're doing. We take them by the hand and offer to steer them in the right direction and fix their lives for them. Then we say, "I'll even shine the light into your darkness so that you're no longer blind. You can become like me." And we offer them not just guidance, but greater insight and help in discovering who they are and how they should change.

We do the same thing with the uninformed. We are first a corrector of the foolish. We march into people's lives and straighten them out and tell them what to do. We not only correct them, but become their instructor, and teach them finally to think our thoughts and become more like us.

We minister enthusiastically to people who are outside the circle. But the difficulty is that we've gone from being hearers to being teachers without having ever been learners. Paul is not denying that the first-century Jews knew God, knew the truth, and approved everything that was essential. But they had never used their knowledge to examine and humble themselves. So Paul asks a series of hard questions. Verses 20-24:

...having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth, you, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one should not steal, do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you," just as it is written.

Most of us are not obvious thieves. We haven't reached in to the cash drawer when the grocery clerk turned his back and grabbed a stack of twenties. We haven't taken a knife and demanded someone's wallet or robbed a bank. In that sense, we can say about theft, "I preach not to steal and I don't steal."

But how rigorous are we in application of biblical standards to ourselves? Those who have influence find special perks and access to funds close at hand. The attorney general designates don't break big laws: "it's just that I have to have someone to care for my child. Of course it's against the law, but I have to do something." In dozens of subtle ways we tilt circumstances to our financial advantage-at someone's expense.

Believing people make exceptions for themselves in sexual matters as well. When you are alone on a trip, are you the same person that you are at home? How much voyeurism enters into hearing other people's sordid tales and watching TV soap operas and vicariously living out other people's sexual adventures? How much fantasizing do you permit yourself? Jesus said that we can practice adultery in our thoughts as well as our actions. Do we attempt to rigorously hold other people to a standard, to hate what is done in Hollywood, in the

schools, next door, and yet rarely ask hard questions of ourselves?

Abhorring idols and robbing temples means driving a hard bargain with sinful organizations. Paul castigates those who know that money is being made from temple prostitutes and other wicked enterprises, but trade with them and get top dollar for it.

In the last couple of weeks I have taught two different seminars in two different retreat settings. At our men's retreat, Ed Woodhall and I gave a seminar on parenting teens. Yesterday at the college retreat my wife, Leslie, and I gave a seminar on Christian marriage. I have read many books and have a wealth of information and many incisive Bible verses about parenting teens, but I would much rather teach about parenting teens than to actually take up that task. I would much rather give seminars instructing you to have a wonderful marriage than to work at having a wonderful marriage myself, being forced to face my inadequacies. I have preached at great length on prayer; I would much rather preach about prayer than pray.

There are many subjects where I would rather claim the name of God and offer his truth to other people and urge them to take it very seriously than to have to live with the implications in my own life.

People reject Christ because of the way his followers behave. It was true of the first-century Romans and Greeks who ridiculed the God of the Jews because of their hypocrisy. Many people today ignore the gospel because of the behavior of believers, either because of the moral failure of prominent leaders, or because of the way ordinary people like we treat our neighbors. The name of the Lord is blasphemed.

IS RELIGION ADVANTAGEOUS?

Beginning with verse 25 and going on into chapter 3, Paul answers the unspoken charge, "Are people who take God and the Bible seriously, completely wasting their time?" Paul says, "No, ultimately it is a very great advantage to live among those who teach truth, but the advantage needs to be understood for what it is." Verses 25-29:

For indeed circumcision is of value, if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. If therefore the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? And will not he who is physically uncircumcised, if he keeps the Law, will he not judge you who though having the letter of the Law and circumcision are a transgressor of the Law? For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. 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.

It is an advantage to have been given religious background if your heart is in it. Circumcision is valuable if you have been willing to be changed inwardly; to receive praise from God and not from men who can see only the outside.

But it is not an advantage if nothing happens inwardly. Paul says there are people who don't have any advantages, who grow up not knowing the Bible, who never heard any clear systematic declaration of the nature of God, yet who respond to him from the heart. They have the reality and will stand in judgment of those who have greater knowledge without faith. They will ask, "Why didn't you believe? Having been given so much, how could you, have cared so little?"

One of my favorite stories to read our children each Christmas is called *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, by Barbara Robinson. It is the story of a very ordinary church in a small town. Every year the Christmas pageant is exactly the same: the same people run it, and the same kids play the same roles. Alice Wendelken is always Mary because she looks the most like Mary, with golden curly hair and a beatific smile. Only this year the Herdman family, a pack of wild kids---Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie and Gladys---whose single mother has long ago given up trying to raise them, hear that food is being given away at the Christmas pageant practice. These kids who smoke, swear, bully, steal, and vandalize---who are feared by everyone, and are the

neediest kids in town show up en masse, and decide they want to be in the pageant.

Then remarkable things start happening to them; they become interested in the story they had never heard before. Imogene bullies her way into the role of Mary and is fascinated by the baby: "Who is this baby anyway, and how come nobody ever told me this before?"

Leroy, one of the boys, is a Wise Man and wants to bring a real gift. The only gift he has is a ham from a charity food basket his family received. So he marches down the aisle, not with gold or frankincense or myrrh, but with a large ham, because he wants to give Jesus something that really matters.

Too many regular church people had stopped caring about the meaning of the baby's birth. It was those people on the outside who had never heard the Christmas story before who fall in love with it.

GOD DOESN'T CHANGE

The question remains---is there no advantage to a spiritual heritage?

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.

Being a Jew meant that you were entrusted as a steward with the insight of the heart of God-the oracles, words, teachings, and wisdom of God. Familiarity with these truths is both an honor and a benefit. Verses 3 and 4:

What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? May it never be! Rather, let God be found true though every man be found a liar, as it is written,

"That Thou mightest be justified in Thy words,
And mightest prevail when Thou art judged."

Will the unfaithfulness, sinful behavior and defiance of God's people sully the name of God? We have grown up knowing that God's greatness is beyond our ability to ruin it. We have the oracles of God and the solid assurance that he doesn't change even when his people fail. In the history of the Jews, every generation would break the covenants of God, but he was not brought low by their bad choices.

Verses 5-8:

But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.) May it never be! For otherwise how will God judge the world? But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner? And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say), "Let us do evil that good may come"? Their condemnation is just.

This argument says, "Let's suppose my sin and darkness allows God to show more mercy, and he comes out looking better. Will he, in that process, begin to wink at sin, because it magnifies his mercy?"

Paul recoils, "May it never be!" God's purity and his commitment to righteousness will not change. Even though he can turn unrighteousness into glory, he will never traffic in unrighteousness. To the question, "Is there no advantage to being a Jew?" Paul answers, "Yes, there is a tremendous advantage. You've grown up knowing the Bible. The words, oracles, wisdom and love of God have been freely available to you. His commitment to righteousness is undiminished. It is a great advantage to be familiar with the people of God whose lives have been changed, and to know the love of God that is preached and taught, but it is still not

enough by itself. We must apply it to our hearts."

I have been privileged all my life to have lived in the home of women who are culinary artists. My wife is a marvelous cook and so is my mother. I remember many times coming into either home when the air was filled with great smells. My mouth would start to water and I knew I was going to have a delicious meal. I am privileged to know about tantalizing and healthy food-some in the world do not. But I still have to eat the meal. Paul is saying that it is not enough just to be aware of the wonderful truths of God. We still have to apply them to ourselves.

In conclusion, notice how Paul uses a series of pronouns in these opening chapters of Romans. In Romans 1:32 he says they not only do the same but encourage others to act wickedly. They have a problem. In 2:1, you are without excuse, every one of you who condemns others because you do the same thing - from third person to second person. In 3:5 he says "But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say?" Now he's speaking in the first person plural. From they to you to us. And finally in 3:7, "But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner?" He intends for the indictment to become more and more pointed. They are terrible, you are terrible, we have a problem, I have a problem.

It is painful to discover how great our need is and to see how unhelpful the sources to which we turn for help are. Our condemnation of others does not make us any better off in the eyes of God. It doesn't do any good to have all the outward symbols of religion, to be able to instruct other people, if our spiritual disease is not cured. But cure is readily available to us.

Let us be determined not to let all the advantages we have been given keep us from genuine repentance and faith.

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Steve Zeisler
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