

"...THAT SAVED A WRETCH LIKE ME"

by Steve Zeisler

In the spring of 1970 I watched a Stanford professor incite a crowd to riot. The rioters caused much damage to the university and to the research people were doing there. I remember thinking at the time how easy it was to foment frenzy and aggression.

The typical response, as on that occasion, is to fight fire with fire. Rioting students were opposed by well armoured police tactical squadrons, capable of greater violence than the rioters themselves. Both riots and armed response to them occur in a vacuum of mature leadership.

The person who can quell the loud and aggressive behavior without having to resort to aggression himself has real authority.

In a schoolroom the class clown can stir up the kids to throw spitballs, make noise and create other problems. The mature and authoritative teacher can stop the problems without having to scream at the top of her lungs. The person who can bring about stillness and create a willingness to listen is someone with authority indeed.

EVERY MOUTH CLOSED

Romans 3:19 says,

"Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law that every mouth may be closed and the world may become accountable to God...."

Every who encounters the truth of God (Paul calls it the Law) must finally stop talking and be still. Every mouth must be silenced before the authoritative message of God's word. Paul makes us realize that all our efforts to compete, to defend ourselves, to find extenuating circumstances, must finally give way to quiet so that we can hear something very important from the mouth of the living God.

How can we be stilled in order to hear? Let's go back to verse 9:

What then [what conclusion shall we make]? Are we better than they? No, not at all, for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin....

In verse Paul is wrapping up an argument that he's been making in the first 2 1/2 chapters of the book, where he indicts the whole human race. He wants those who hear his message to conclude that everyone has a terrible problem.

First, he indicts the self-identified rebel, the one who shakes his fist at God and says, "I will be the lord in my own universe." The rebel pounding on his chest and insisting on his preeminence is very noisy.

Next we encounter the moral person who recoils from the rebel and points a finger of judgment at every person but himself. Paul says to that person, "You who judge others, you do the same thing." Judging others, finding fault, finger-pointing, and denouncing other people and their problems, create a great deal of noise.

Paul identifies the third group that we spoke of last week (first century Jews, but also Bible-believing Christians today) as those who were well instructed in the things of God—his thoughts, his commandments, human history, the future—and are willing to apply the truth rigorously to other people. We tell them how to live their

lives and promote what we know to be their best interests. Again, it is a very noisy business to teach others, And Paul asks the penetrating question, "You who teach others, do you teach yourself?" So we come to verse 9: "Are we better than they?"

Who does he mean by we? Some commentators say Paul is speaking of himself as a Jew, meaning, are we Jews better than they? But he has already clearly denied that the Jews have any advantage in pleasing God. I think he's once again trying to put the mirror up in front of anyone who will hear his words, and is referring to enthusiastic believers like the Christians in Rome. Paul is saying, am I myself and are you Roman Christians putting ourselves about having to look for the problem in our own hearts? Are we better? No! We have already taught, he said, we have already charged, he says, that both Jews and Greeks (this means all humanity) are under sin.

AS IT IS WRITTEN

If you and I are honest with ourselves, we will realize that we engage in thoughts, behaviors and attitudes that are an offense to God and hurtful to other people. Something about us that is inherently wrong. We cannot stop ourselves and we cannot fix it by ourselves. That's what Paul means: We have already charged that everyone is under sin. Verses 10-18:

...as it is written

"There is none righteous, not even one;
There is none who understands,
There is none who seeks for God.
All have turned aside, and together they have become useless.
There is none who does good,
there is not even one.

"Their throat is an open grave.
With their tongues they keep deceiving,"
"The poison of asps is under their lips;"
"Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness;"
"Their feet are swift to shed blood.
Destruction and misery are in their paths,
And the path of peace they have not known.
"There is no fear of God before their eyes."

Paul draws from the Old Testament in quoting these phrases, most of them from Psalms, to reinforce his charge that everyone is under sin and to reiterate that is the word of God that indicts us. There are three points made in this string of quotations. First, Paul says in verse 10, if you were to observe someone's life, either your own or someone else's, and if all of its hidden areas were made plain, you would discover that there is no one who is righteous.

Second, in verse 11 we read that there is no one who is willing or able to see the purposes of God, or to understand the mysteries of humanity; no one is wise.

And third, there is not even anyone who seeks for God. Despite all the effort expended on religious quests, deep down nobody wants to find God because of the painful self-discovery that will result.

Verse 12 summarizes:

All have turned aside, together they have become useless....
The last phrase in verse 12 then starts another section:
There is none who does good....

We don't find a single life that is what it ought to be, but what about individual acts? Aren't there people who occasionally do wonderful deeds? The answer is no. If you take into account motives, and all that proceeds and follows a particular deed, you don't even find good actions. There's nobody who does good. Now he

speaks both of feet and speech, actions and words. Verses 13-14:

'Their throat is an open grave,
with their tongues they keep deceiving,'
'The poison of asps is under their lips;'
'Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness....

What is on the inside is even more rotten than we think. In our speech we blaspheme God, curse, hurt and tear at other people. What we say sullies the name of God. The Bible clearly recognizes the ability of humans to do wrong in their speech. The things we say have very great power to cause hurt.

Verses 15-18:

'Their feet are swift to shed blood.
Destruction and misery are in their paths.
The path of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.
Bloodshed is not a mistake or accident. Their feet are swift to shed blood.

The last two phrases deserve attention. First, they don't know peace in their own heart, in their relationships. And secondly, they don't revere the living God. They have neither peace nor respect for God.

Many people interpret these verses as stylized poetry or have an interest only in how Paul used the Old Testament; they distance themselves from its message. But it is very hard to hear this and agree with it totally without wanting to raise an objection: "Wait a minute, no, that can't possibly be. Don't say no one. I mean some people do good things once in awhile. I myself have been a pretty good guy on numerous occasions." We immediately desire to bring up our good works and efforts: "I seek God, I care about him, I read the Bible, and I'm brokenhearted when people get hurt. I know I do things that aren't right but I have a good side too."

Or, we say, "Yes, I am an absolutely miserable wretch, but it's not my fault. A lot of people treat me badly and that's why I am the way I am." We may compare ourselves favorably with others: "Sure, everybody is in the same boat, but those people are in the cargo hold. They're a lot worse than I am." We have to claim extenuating circumstances.

Amid all this plea bargaining we must re-read verse 19:

Now we know that whatever the Law says, [Law here means the Old Testament] it speaks to those who are under the Law, [that is, who need to be judged by what God says], that every mouth may be closed and all the world become accountable to God....

NO MORE NOISE

The purpose of these indictments is to forbid our saying, "Yes, but..." It's a terrible list that is supposed to stop us from talking: no more description of ourselves, no more bringing up our good works, no more distancing ourselves from other horrible people-no more! It's time to listen. There must be silence, because God has something very important to say. He has wonderful news, but he cannot tell us about it if we keep insisting on showing the ribbons we have won in moral competition with others.

That's what he means in verse 20:

...because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight....

Attempts at self-justification are noise. Works of the Law, no matter how extraordinary they are, will not make us right in God's sight.

for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

God's righteous standards make us perceive the disease. The apostle says, "Sit there and be quiet." Let me just read you a quotation about noise, for a minute before we get to hear what comes next, having been silenced:

In *The Screwtape Letters*, written from the perspective of hell, C.S. Lewis tells about how a senior devil, Screwtape, gives to a junior devil on how to tempt this poor soul on earth.

Music and silence how I detest them both! How thankful we should be that ever since our Father entered hell-though longer ago than humans reckoning in light years could express-no square inch of infernal space.. has been surrendered to either of those abominable forces. but all has been occupied by Noise-Noise,the grand dynamism, the audible expression of all that is exultant, ruthless and virile...We will make the whole universe a noise in the end. We have already made great strides in this direction as regards the Earth. The melodies and silences of Heaven will be shouted down in the end.

In heaven there is music and silence-music that praises God and silence that listens long enough to learn what needs to be learned. But hell is always filled with noise-the demanding, the insistent, the ruthless. And most of us are very noisy inside. We are always focused on ourselves, looking for ways to promote ourselves, bandage our wounded egos, and measure ourselves against others. And when we are quiet, every mouth shut, what will God say?

Verses 21-26:

But now, apart from the Law, the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation [sacrifice of atonement], in his blood through faith. This was to demonstrate his righteousness, because in the forbearance of God, He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be the just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

This is a wonderful announcement: The righteousness of God is made plain apart from the Law. It is witnessed to by the Law and the Prophets; that is, they hinted at or pointed to this righteousness of God. But it comes to us, not by means of our activity, but as a gift. The righteousness of God is well-being, worth, becoming everything you and I ought to have been. God made us in his image, to display his character. He made us for joy, to lve the rest of his creation, to enjoy deep and honest fellowship with one another. He made us to be valuabel in his sight and ours. That's what righteousness is. God is going to give this righteousness is. God is going to give this righteousness, this worth, this well-being, to us as a gift. It doesnt' come through our noisy accomplishments, it comes as we quietly listen, and receive his gift.

JUSTICE AND JUSTIFICATION

Verse 26 suggests a problem that God had in giving this gift. How could he himself remain pure, holy, committed to truth, and unbending in righteousness, just and the justifier of those who ahve faith, making us as he is, without banishing our sin? How could he himself be entirely holy and invite us into his presence without doing something about our unrighteous? Could he ignore our blasphemy? Could he just excuse it as if it were not real?

If that were the case, then he doesn't take us seriously. Our free-will choices would have been rendered ridiculous. But he remains holy and yet makes us just, and right by allowing his Son to suffer the penalty we should pay, placing on Jesus the rejection and the judgment that we deserve. On that basis, he can make a free-gift offer to us. Verse 24:

...[We are] justified as a gift, or freely by his grace, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus....

Being right with God, finding life-building worth, becoming who we were intended to be, is a gift from God with no noisy contribution by us. When we finally stop speaking of ourselves, we can let him give us righteousness itself.

The end of verse 22 through 23, act to silence the voices that won't find merit in some groups of people distinguished from others:

...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe (you'd expect verse 24 to follow on 'being justified as a gift,' but he reminds them,) there is no distinction for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God...

Righteousness is offered to all because all are guilty of sin. Either everyone is either going to get this gift or else nobody gets anything. It is a gift freely given because of what Jesus did on the cross for us.

Three terms are used in these verses: a legal term, a religious term, and a commercial term.

The legal term is justification. What that means is this: that we have been examined in honest court, found guilty and rightly condemned and sentenced. Justification answers the charge against us, cancels the indictment, and sets the prisoner free. We are justified because somebody else received the punishment we deserved. We are free to walk out with no indictment against us, not having to answer the questions about what we have done, what we have thought, and the hurts we've inflicted. We are justified.

The religious term, propitiation is translated in the NIV as sacrifice of atonement. It was used in the Old Testament of the animal sacrifices in the temple. Ritually cleansed by the blood of animals people were able to walk into the presence of God spiritually purified. We are able to live our lives as uncondemned people, set free from defilement, cleansed from that which would cut us off from God, because of Jesus' death on our behalf-his shed blood, not the blood of animals.

The commercial term used is the word redemption. In slave markets, people who had been in chains, not free to act as they wanted to, having to do what their masters demanded, were redeemed and given their freedom. Jesus' death on the cross also frees us from our slavery to hateful actions and thoughts. We are redeemed from the evil to which we were chained.

Paul returns to the problem of talking too much in verse 27:

Where then is boasting?
Who gets to be impressed with himself now?
Who gets to promote himself or herself?

It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith.

Receiving the gift of God comes by expressing thanks to the One who offers the gift. Faith is saying thank you, agreeing that we need what we did not have, being genuinely grateful to God from the heart. That is how we activate by faith the gift that he offers. Who is going to boast about that? Verses 29-31:

...is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one. Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the law.

Think for a moment of what you are being offered. Stop inventing reasons to be at the center of the discussion.

Is there boasting? Is every mouth closed?

When we are ready to hear God's voice, he will speak to us about the cross of Christ. He will offer us life itself.

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