

June 2, 2019
Everyone's Secret Thoughts
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Romans 2:12-24

¹² All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. ¹³ For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. ¹⁴ When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. ¹⁵ They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them ¹⁶ on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

¹⁷ But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God ¹⁸ and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, ¹⁹ and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰ a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, ²¹ you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? ²⁴ For, as it is written, "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you."

In preaching Romans, the idea is to bring you and me into awareness of our sameness to the church to whom Paul wrote. To us, "normal" means white, Christian, unquestioning our assumptions about everything. Part of childhood for me was the assumption that kids were a special class in that, even in really scary places like Vietnam, kids were safe. No one ever said this, it was just one of those things I figured out. I was always figuring things out when I was little. I am struggling to find the language for this, found only in socio-political-economic – not theological – writing. Yet it is here – in Romans. Wrapped in some ancient culture bindings. I beg your patience and your feedback as we proceed together.

Literally no one in Bedford, Indiana in 1969 would have called my mother a race activist. You remember the song "*Jesus loves the little children, All the children of the world, Red and yellow, black and white, They are precious in his sight....*" I knew that we were white people. I knew what black people were, because I'd seen them on TV. But I couldn't figure out *red and yellow*. So I asked my mother. But she would not say *red people are the Indians and yellow people are Chinese*. ("Chinese" meant Asian. Oriental actually.)

I don't remember what she said, exactly, only that afterward I still didn't know who the red and yellow ones were. It was probably something like, "*Oh Annie, it's just a Sunday School song about how Jesus loves all kids the same. Now go play.*" From which I gathered in my child brain that kids were all safe. Nothing bad happened to kids.

Colors aren't people, except in our language. And yet, the colors we assign to people have everything to do with what happens to them. May was a bad month to be a brown kid in U.S. custody. Another brown kid died in a detention camp at the border. A brown kid died in a motel on Walnut Street this past week, of starvation. He weighed 50 pounds. Nobody in this town had eyes on that little boy until he was dead. His siblings are now with strangers and his parents are in jail.

It is truly offensive to hear kids referred to by color. And yet, color is the religious language chosen by our culture to speak of the universal love of God. The revision of the song goes how? "*Jesus loves the little children, All the children of the world. Every color, Every race, all are covered by His grace.*" I hope you are not sick of coming to church and hearing about race. Friends, we haven't even gotten started. Race is going to be nipping our heels every step we take through the book of Romans.

The white American church got away with 400 years of not talking about it. But not on my watch, tiny as my watch is. What's amazing is that the white American church has gotten away with ignoring race while preaching and reading a text positively soaked in it. To say *we don't see race* is to say we have not read our Bibles. That does not have to be.

I have a clergy friend who was horsing around at church youth group when she was a young teenager. Some boys were chasing her and she ran through a plate glass window. Her legs and arms and face got the worst of it. She had hours and hours of surgery. Hundreds of stitches. She's older than me, and still sometimes a splinter of glass will work its way through the surface of her skin. Race is likewise embedded in us, in our life together. It might work its own way out; but we must do the surgery, in our lives together as a church and as a country.

We will, as Paul says in Romans 2 verse 12, *perish; cease to be a church; cease to be a nation*. We may still breathe, of course, but breathe some other kind of air – the air tinged with the wrath of God poured down on the people of whom God has finally had enough. By the way, I didn't have a bad week. I'm not in a bad mood. It is just that my assignment is this "Wrath of God" text in Romans and I have declined skipping it, while not knowing how to preach it.

God loves us, and we don't need a book of laws to know so, Paul says in Romans 1:20 (CEV):

God's eternal power and character cannot be seen. But from the beginning of creation, God has shown what these are like by all he has made. That's why those people don't have any excuse. They know about God, but they don't honor him or even thank him. Their thoughts are useless, and their stupid minds are in the dark. They claim to be wise, but they are fools.

The other side of divine love is wrath – divine hatred. It's hard to hear. Not fun to say either. But what does it mean to say “God loves us,” if God doesn't care what happens to us? I have to believe God hates children being murdered – by fathers and by prison guards. If God doesn't hate the evil that happens to children, what trust do I have in God's love for me and mine?

Maybe God is only disappointed. Whatever. I want a little more than that. I want the power of God exercised in love AGAINST child suffering to be as huge and overwhelming as God's love displayed in a rainbow or a waterfall. I want God to sigh with the same satisfaction when kids are well and happy as God sighed at the end of each day of creation. Creation as it was meant to be: rainbows, waterfalls and safe kids. Creation right and just, except for where we've wrecked it, sinned against creation, sinned against the creator, invoked the wrath of God.

Beginning in Romans 1:18, Paul goes on a two-chapter explanation of why we all deserve to perish. Early on he mentions homosexual acts by men and women. Paul was not a fan of what he saw in his day. Nor would I have been. Sex for sex's sake, no matter who you're with, is not what it's meant for. Sex nourishes a relationship the way food nourishes the body. Both are gifts of God easily abused. *He called it unnatural, though.* He did. You know what else was *unnatural* then? Bathing regularly. Shaving your legs and armpits. Living past age 45.

I don't want to skip this or get hung up here either. Just to point out, again, that the two verses that mention sex are in no bigger font than the five in which he lists all sorts of indecent things people do. Romans 1:29-32:

They are evil, wicked, and greedy, as well as mean in every possible way. They want what others have, and they murder, argue, cheat, and are hard to get along with. They gossip, say cruel things about others, and hate God. They are proud, conceited, and boastful, always thinking up new ways to do evil. These people don't respect their parents. They are stupid, unreliable, and don't have any love or pity for others. They know God has said that anyone who acts this way deserves to die. But they keep on doing evil things, and they even encourage others to do them.

That's page one of Paul's case for the wrath of God, all of which his audience probably appreciated, assuming Paul was talking about the same sorry folks they knew in their

town too. They weren't wrong – just thinking too small. They assumed Paul was ONLY talking about their neighbors.

Verse 12, where Greg began reading, continues the same thread begun in verse 1 of chapter 2: the hypocrisy of religious people. (Paul calls them Jews, which for us is both religious, nationalist, and ethnic. In application to ourselves and our own prejudices, this is why I keep calling us *white, American Christians*.) All these first eleven verses are so good, especially in the Contemporary English Translation – I really want you to hear them:

*Some of you accuse others of doing wrong. But there is no excuse for what you do. When you judge others, you condemn yourselves, because you are guilty of doing the very same things. We know that God is right to judge everyone who behaves in this way. Do you really think God won't punish you, when you behave exactly like the people you accuse? You surely don't think much of God's wonderful goodness or of his patience and willingness to put up with you. Don't you know that the reason God is good to you is because he wants you to turn to him? But you are stubborn and refuse to turn to God. So you are making things even worse for yourselves on that day when he will show how angry he is and will judge the world with fairness. God will reward each of us **for what we have done**. He will give eternal life to everyone who has patiently done what is good in the hope of receiving glory, honor, and life that lasts forever.*

But he will show how angry and furious he can be with every selfish person who rejects the truth and wants to do evil. All who are wicked will be punished with trouble and suffering. It doesn't matter if they are white-American-Christians – or not. But all who do right will be rewarded with glory, honor, and peace, whether they are white-American-Christians – or not. God doesn't have any favorites!

Don't you love that? I love that! But I also know it got those folks' backs up, the same way our backs go up when we feel put on the spot for what is true about us but doesn't seem like it should be our fault. Was it those religious peoples' fault their religion had taught them to be so prejudiced? If we decide No, what does that matter? If we decide Yes, what does THAT matter?

What matters NOW is will we do right, now that we know what IS right? Which is the heart of today's text: Gentiles who don't have the law (by "law" Paul is talking about Torah, five books of the 1st Testament) and yet are able to keep the law – the heart of it, the justice of it – while Jews who have the law (the books themselves, read and taught) do not keep it. Having – or sometimes Paul will say *knowing* the law – is neither here nor there; does not please God; does not make one *right with God*. There's that word

“righteousness,” which is also *justice*. Knowing the law does not put us right with creation which, by design, is just.

Brand new thoughts are hard, friends. Believing all your life that the world is one way and then discovering it is another – whew, that's really hard. It will get up inside every part of reality and probably never stop infiltrating. That's me when I realized how steeped in racist thinking, feeling, seeing, talking, believing I am. How the privilege that was once invisible to me is absolutely everywhere – in every word I speak from this pulpit, and the way we've read the Bible, just as Paul's Jewish contemporaries had read their Bible – even the ones who'd come to know Jesus – in such a way that reinforces our own worldview, in which we are not extremely privileged but, rather, extremely blessed. And the rub of the entire letter to the Romans is, *y'all are gonna have to get over that*.

In verses 17-24, Paul expounds upon his brothers' and sisters' hypocrisy. The very things they preach ought not to be done are the very things they themselves do. Some things never change apparently. And in verse 25 he opens the topic of circumcision – a continuing argument in Paul's ministry, a particular point of the Law which some of his Jewish believers get especially wound up about. No more than half, of course. You get the joke, right? The circumcision argument is a joke in the way it's supposed to be about inclusion and yet excludes half the people concerned. Must Gentile men become Jewish in order to become Christian? Must gay people become straight to be Christian? Must non-western Christians dress like Westerners for church in their own countries? These have been real questions since the time when Paul wrote to the Romans.

Two modern cases: The Claxons, Southern Baptist missionaries who were members here some years ago, told me about the conversations they had in the 1950's in Nigeria, when African families joined their churches and women wore skirts and necklaces and headscarves. Of course, ALL the American male ministers wished the women would also wear blouses. Some insisted that it was the Christian thing to do. Others, Neville included, were reluctant to insist – feeling like insisting on a blouse was the same as insisting on circumcision. However, some of the people they served circumcised little girls – also a cultural tradition. The missionaries also thought this through and decided they would interfere, as respectfully as they could, but with the mission of ending the practice. Emma told me it was very slow and difficult work.

Do you see how followers of Jesus might come to the two conclusions that welcoming topless women to church AND interfering in a child-rearing practice are both exercises in equality among believers? Where the Bible says nothing about either, specifically? Each generation and location of the church will have its own set of conditions in which to work out Paul's teaching. Our ancestors in the faith can be helpful. Some of them in what NOT to do, others in what TO do. Always, always, always – we are squeezing and tweezing at the privilege and prejudice embedded within us and among us, resisting the gravitational pull to pretend we are fine.

The end of verse 16 slays me. Here's 15 and 16 (NRSV):

They who have no religion show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

We can pretend as much as we need. We may fool others. We may fool ourselves. But the Lord knows exactly what's going on in here (heart) and here (head). God knows that we know what God requires of us. And if we could only see that doing what the Lord requires of us is THE answer to absolutely everything that is wrong in the world.... The law, as Jesus said it in Luke 10:27: "Love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind – and love your neighbor as yourself." And my favorite, Micah 6:8. "The Lord has shown you, you humans, what is expected of you: to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with God."

No doubt it is a lot. No doubt the world won't care. But I still believe it is everything, friends. Positively everything.

Would you pray with me?