

Study 2

A Heart Problem for All Humanity...

Romans 1:18-3:20

Boy, what a long study!

The reason we're covering such a long passage is that it's all about one key idea. It's worth preparing before your group! Before your group starts, agree on a finishing time, and just do as much as you can.

During the week, try to take notice of the news headlines. Usually, there's plenty more bad news than good news - make a note of some of the bad news that catches your attention...

Are there examples of violence, corruption, greed, perversion and dishonesty? If so, it's a pretty normal week. So what exactly is wrong with the world? Different people will give different answers. Perhaps we need to be more environmentally sensitive, or more economically responsible. Maybe we need to increase the Family Income Supplement, maybe we need to get rid of it? Maybe we just need more freedom to do what we like? Everyone is trying to make the world a better place, but no-one seems to address the core issues. In this section of Romans, Paul systematically works through the main categories of humanity and points out what the problem is. Ultimately, everyone needs a *change of heart*.

Background Briefing:- Jews and Gentiles

These days we may tend to divide our own society into "the haves" and "the have-nots", or perhaps white collar and blue collar workers or "Queenslanders" and "the rest." Generally, we're pretty easy going about it. But our own social distinctions and barriers are just a pale shadow of the huge wall dividing first century Jews and Gentiles. The Jews saw themselves as "God's chosen people" - and indeed they were. Through the ages, God had worked among the Israelites (Jews) in a special way. In the words of the Old Testament, he had singled them out to be "a light to the gentiles."

Mind you, it was meant to be the sort of light that attracted people in - the Jews, though, were more interested in keeping people out. They had become proud and arrogant; they constructed elaborate rules and rituals to make sure they weren't "defiled" by the "Gentiles." In fact, the word GENTILE simply meant "the nations", or "the ethnics." It was a blanket term that referred to everyone who was non-Jewish.

And that's exactly the way the Jews saw the world - "us", and "everyone else" - and even though they were a small minority group in the city of Rome, they were careful to maintain their strict policies of separatism. This attitude even carried over into the first century church - Christian Jews were slow to realise the implications of the gospel! They were strict, and keen to keep the Old Testament Law; whereas Gentile Christians (probably the majority) looked at them as "has beens" and were arrogant about their freedom to ignore Jewish laws.

THE GENTILES' HEART PROBLEM

In making his point, Paul starts out with the gentiles. (The Jewish Christians in the Roman Church probably enjoyed this bit!)

Read through Romans 1:18-32.

1. Even though the gentiles didn't have the scriptures to guide them, what did they KNOW about God? (1:19, 32)
2. What have they done with their knowledge of God?
3. What has God done with them?
4. What part have their "hearts" play in all of this? (Note the verses that mention "the heart".)
5. In what ways does this passage remind you of Australia today?

Sidelight..

What radical point does this passage make about people who say "*I don't believe in God*"? How does this help us approach people like that with the gospel?

Notice, Paul doesn't go back to the Jewish Old Testament Law to make his point here. He goes right back to the start – creation itself. Deep down, everyone in the world is aware of the creator God, but because of the desires of the hearts, they suppress that knowledge. It's a HEART PROBLEM. People wilfully ignore God so as not to inconvenience their chosen lifestyle. So, God gives them over to their own desires - and things are in a mess!

B. So Pat Yourself on the Back if You're Jewish?

Jewish readers would readily agree. That's what they've been saying all along. God's creation has been perverted all around them. People have failed to recognize their creator, and have failed to live in the created man-woman order. And that's just one of the symptoms – there's lying, cheating, and even ... disobedience to parents! That's the kind of world we live in.

So does that mean the Jews can pat themselves on the back? After all – they're the ones who have got God's law. They know right from wrong perfectly well. Take a look at what Paul says at the start of chapter 2...

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1Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. 2We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who do such things. 3Do you suppose, O man--you who judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself--that you will escape the judgment of God? 4Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? **5But because of your hard and impenitent heart** you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

- a. Note first of all that these words are addressed to Jews who *have the law*.
- b. Describe their behaviour according to verse 1. What would you call someone like this?
- c. c. According to verse 2 to 5 (above), what will their fate be, and why? What is the *source* of their problem? (There's a hint in bold type!)

Keep reading in your bible from Romans 2:6-16. In essence, it's about the difference between KNOWING RIGHT and DOING RIGHT.

In verses 6 to 11, the arrogant Jew thinks "knowing the law" is what gets you right with God, and that the Gentiles who don't have the law are a lost cause. Ultimately, says Paul, God's not impressed with what you know about the Jewish law... or by your self-righteous judgemental attitude... he's interested in what you actually do! You'll need to be a **truly righteous** person to escape his judgement. You'll need to be a person who has patiently kept doing right, rather than a self seeking person who has not obeyed the truth. And surprisingly, the Gentiles are eligible!

- a. What is the point being made by verses 9 to 11?
- b. What mistake have the Jews made according to verse 13?

A Summary – The “Heart” in Romans 1 to 5

- Rom 1:21** For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish **heart** was darkened.
- Rom 1:24** Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their **hearts** to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them.
- Rom 2:5** But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant **heart** you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,
- Rom 2:15** in that they show the work of the Law written in their **hearts**, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them,
- Rom 2:29** 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.
- Rom 5:5** and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our **hearts** through the Holy **Spirit** who was given to us.

Can you trace the logic of what is being said about “the heart” in each of these verses?

Getting Personal

It seems that Paul isn't just talking in the abstract here. He's addressing very real issues in the Roman church. Jewish Christians are criticising Gentile Christians, and saying they can't *possibly* be counted as righteous because they don't observe the requirements of the law. Paul is saying to the Jewish Christians, watch it - **sometimes you don't either**. More than that, even without the law, Gentile Christians are now starting to act like the law is written in their hearts. How about that! (Remember Ezekiel 36 and Jeremiah 31 from our previous studies on the Spirit? That's exactly what you'd expect to happen if the Spirit is at work!)

Read 2:17-29.

- a. What have the Jews done?

- b. Who is the true Jew?

D. The Problem with Everyone

Comment: Paul is working towards the conclusion of this section. Sure, he says, there are some advantages in being Jewish - after all, it was the Jews who were entrusted with the Scriptures, the very words of God. (Read 3:1-8.) The problem isn't so much with God's promises - it's with the unfaithfulness of the Jewish people. People may come up with all sorts of excuses, or reasons why it's unfair of God to blame us for our sin (35-7), but the fact is, our hearts lead us in exactly the direction we want to go. Jew and Gentile alike, we're sinful - and we deserve God's judgement. And yet as

we're going to see, God treats us far better than we deserve.

14. Read Paul's summary in chapter 3 verses 9 to 20. What is his conclusion about sin?

15. What is his conclusion about the LAW? (ie the Old Testament scriptures?)

What should the law do for the people of Israel?

What is the problem with the world? WE ARE! We're sinful. Doesn't matter whether you're a Jew, or whether you're in prison for a crime or whether you've never even had a parking ticket – our hearts lead us away from God our Creator. The fact is, every man, woman and child needs to hear the gospel that Paul introduced back in chapter 1. We all need to hear about Jesus, and accept the forgiveness he offers. Paul will speak more about this in the next section.

Is there any room in our Christian fellowship for smugness, or feelings of superiority? Why?

Do you agree with Paul's assessment of human nature? What can we do about it?