

Romans 3:9-20 - The Unrighteousness of all people

I'd like to say before I start that I've read a lot and used a lot of Ray C Stedman's sermons in this talk. Ray C Stedman was a minister at the Peninsula Bible Fellowship in Palo Alto, California. In fact the underlying theme of the talk is based on one of his sermons.

Modern living can be quite confusing can't it – we get information thrown at us from all directions – and we have to sift out what is good information and what isn't.

In these times the gospel comes under attack from all sides as well – with different forms modern thinking.

Truth is plural – (*I don't quite understand that one*) – always keep an open mind – (*that I can understand to a certain degree*) – and book shops are full of self help books telling us of the virtues of positive thinking...(*be more successful – be the person you always wanted to be – you can do anything as long as you put your mind to it*)

It's clear none of these authors who right books on positive thinking could have written, or perhaps even understand Romans chapter 3

Romans chapter 3 doesn't begin with positive thinking – it actually begins with the power of negative thinking.

It strips away all of the self-confidence of man in order that we might see ourselves as we really are...

Surely we have to be positive about our selves – don't we? Surely we have to push all the negative thoughts out of our heads and concentrate on the positive – (*this is how sports men and women are supposed to do it – no negative thoughts see your self winning – athletes that do this well are purported to be in the zone.*) we're told the difference between a successful sports man and an unsuccessful sports man is the way they think the winner first believes he can win!

Arnold Palmer had this plaque on his office wall: -

If you think you are beaten, you are.
If you think you dare not, you don't.
If you'd like to win but think you can't,
It's almost certain you won't.
Life's battles don't always go
To the stronger or faster man,
But sooner or later, the man who wins
Is the man who thinks he can.

(Positive thinking – that's what it's all about)

Surely this is right – this is the right sort of thinking for us in this day and age – if we want our lives to amount to anything!

Surely if we're positive about our selves – if we're happy and confident in our own self image – that's the way to go.

I've got a short quote here which was written in the supplement of the San Francisco Chronicle a while back. It represents this positive thinking school of thought – it's called "The Art of Being Yourself,"

“The art of being yourself at your best is the art of unfolding your personality into the man you want to be. By the grace of God you are what you are. Glory in your selfhood! Accept yourself, but go on from there. Champion the right to be yourself. Dare to be different and to set your own pattern. Live your own life and follow your own star. Respect yourself! You have the right to be here, and you have important work to do. Don't stand in your own shadow. Get your little self out of the way so that your big self can stride forward. Make the most of yourself by fanning the tiny spark of possibility within you into the flame of achievement. Create the kind of self you will be happy to live with all your life. Be gentle with yourself. Learn to love yourself, to forgive yourself; for only as we have the right attitude toward ourselves can we have the right attitude toward others.”

Now that sounds quite appealing doesn't it! It seems to make sense as well – think positively and every thing will look so much better.

But if we put the words of that quote next to Paul's words in Romans 3 (*and Paul is talking about each one of us here*)

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Paul says:

“There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away; they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”

Well that certainly isn't very encouraging is it!

But, you see, despite the popular appeal of the passage in the San Francisco Chronicle – there is one fatal flaw in it – it can't be done!

I mean – what does it mean for a start – *“Get your little self out of the way so that your big self can stride forward.”* ??? (any volunteers to do that for us this morning?) (Perhaps if you didn't sit in front of your self and you sat along side of your self then your little self wouldn't have to move so much to allow your big self to come through!)

This is – without putting to fine a point on it – nonsense. This kind of thinking sounds great – it sounds challenging but it is totally impractical because it can't be done.

You see we're not like that – Paul describes what we're like: -

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Our throats are open graves; our tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on our lips. Our mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”

This is us he's talking about – this is you and me!

That's what we're really like and no amount of positive thinking is going to change that! – We can deny it – we can extenuate the positive in our selves – and ignore the negative aspects – but – (and this will fly in the face of all those positive thinking gurus out there) – it will do us no good – in fact it will do us harm because if we can't

accept who we are – how can we accept who God is? – And if we can't accept who God really is then how can we have a proper relationship with him?

Now I have to say – I have nothing against positive thinking – it is a good attitude to have certainly helps our outlook – unless it becomes delusional – and it hides the truth of who we really are.

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Paul writes, this is what we are like in ***Verse 9 - 20***

What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes. 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. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin

Paul has done a lot of home work here – He's gone back through the Old Testament and gathered up verses from Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Isaiah, and brought them all together here.

I don't know if you're anything like me – put I think a lot of people might be – and read these verses and think – he can't be meaning me! I'm sure other people think it too: -

None is righteous, no, not one – *well he can't be including me!*

No one understands, no one seeks for God – *well I do surely.*

All have turned aside – *Ah! Not me – He can't be talking about me!*

But alas he is.

Now, in Verses 10-12 Paul show's us that in man's heart, there is often much religion, much seeking after *a* god, but not seeking for *the* God – with a capital "G."

Across this country this morning, there are thousands of churches packed with people like this congregation – and yet this indictment of Paul would include all of them.

Among all these people, in churches all around the world, there is none that seeks for God -- no, not one! Isn't that incredible? The natural heart of man is not really looking for God! He is looking for *a god* all the time – but he's not looking for the God.

This is why we have so many different religions around the world – the entire drive of religion around the world – is to find *a god* that man can worship, because man cannot live without a god, and every man *has* his god. This has never been clearer than if you look around this estate at the moment and at many of the cars passing in the street – even politicians have joined up – there's a flag flying over No 10 all in support of one of the gods of this age – Football.

How England do in the world cup will have a lot more to do with changes in peoples attitudes than any self help books...*(If England do well or even win the cup – there'll be cheering and dancing so much joy about the place – do you know that when England won the cup in 1966 productivity rocketed in the work place – there'll be a feeling of euphoria for weeks – months – their god has delivered!)*

Paul says – there is *not one* that really wants to discover God *unless* God draws that person to himself.

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That is what Jesus said: "*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day*". (John 6:44).

If you have hunger in your heart for God with a capital "G" – it is not because you want God – it's because *God wants you!* – *(This is certainly the most positive thing in this small passage of the bible)* – God wants you! – God is seeking you, and drawing you, to himself – that is what Paul brings out here. Man wants God, in a sense, but man wants to *use* him. Every effort to find God on the part of the natural man is tainted with the attitude that we want to bargain with God when we find him, we want

to accept him on our terms, but not on his terms – as our Lord. And that is what God must be -- *our Lord!*

You see, we want God at times -- when we are in trouble, when we are in danger, when we need comfort, from sorrow or heartache we want God, -- but we don't want him all the time. But, if God is God, he must be God all the time -- that is the whole point.

Now, Verses 13-17 are the results of man's rejection of God? And notice how up-to-date this is:

First of all it affects his talk:

Slide 5

(Verses: 13-14)

"Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."

When man refuses to bend his will to the will of God, it begins to affect his talk.

You can tell it in the tone of his voice, in the words he chooses, in his coarse blasphemous swearing – these words are often used in general conversation as punctuation.

So it is true what Jesus says,

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"For from within, out of men's hearts, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly." (Mark 7:21). This is man. It affects his talk.

Someone has said that if you want to prove this verse is true, go out on the street, go up to the first man you see and hit him in the mouth and see what comes out...

And it affects his walk: (*Verses: 15-17*)

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“Their feet are swift to shed blood: ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.”

Someone has suggested that this would be an apt verse to write above the doors of the United Nations building in New York: *“Their feet are swift to shed blood: ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.”*

It’s true? Here are the nations gathered together -- gathered to seek peace -- but the outcome of it is constant friction, and trouble, and disturbance, and heartache, and bloodshed, and misery – they do not know the way of peace.

The explanation for this is given in Verse 18 – one short sentence:

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“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

There is no understanding of God's being -- no concern for his opinion. If you like "man couldn't care less about what God thinks about him" -- and this is the root of the problems in society today.

So we come to this final indictment in Verses 19-20.

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“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. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”

Paul points out that even the Ten Commandments can't help us – what good does it do to have these laws – moral and ethical as they are – when all they do is simply point out how much we fail to keep them.

People often say, "I don't need Jesus – I lead a good life – I don't do anyone any harm I keep my self to my self. I agree with the Sermon on the Mount – it's good teaching –

I think the Ten Commandments are good – what’s wrong with that? – I lead a good life!

The obvious question is well do you live up to them?

It isn't enough to know what the Ten Commandments say – but do you do what they say?

The law is such – that if it’s not kept, it demands retribution. Whether it’s the Ten Commandments or the laws in this country – if they are broken there’s a penalty to pay. If you are caught speeding then you’re fined.

The Ten Commandments, as Paul points out are for only one purpose:

...through the law we become conscious of sin. (Verse 20)

As we measure ourselves alongside of the ten rules which God has given us, we realize that we fail to live up to them – and it only reveals how far short we are of them.

Now, if we stopped here (and this is where so many people stop in their understanding of the Christian message) we would have the most discouraging, depressing message. This *is* negative thinking, isn't it!

No wonder nobody wants it. If this is all there is, it leaves us with all our self-respect thrown away, our confidence shattered, and we have nothing left but our guilt. – And no amount of positive thinking is going to help us!

But, you see, if we stopped here, it would only be half the gospel, only half the story. Don't stop here! The other half is what makes it wonderful – God's answer to man's problem.

But sadly that’s another talk – next Sunday!