

Why it All Matters

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Date: 22 April 2018

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[0:00] Okay, this morning, just for a short time, this morning we're going to turn to Romans chapter 3, and we're going to read from verse 9 to verse 20.

For those who are visiting with us today, either from Haddington or maybe elsewhere, if you're on holiday, it's great to have you. We are doing a short study in... well, it's not really that short, it's probably going to be pretty long, but we're only doing at the moment the first five chapters up to the summer, so we've been doing it in a fair amount of detail.

And thus far, it's great to see so many people here because up till now it's been really bad news the whole time. We've been hammering everyone with the message from the early passage.

And I think it's important to remember that this would have been read as a winner originally. Probably wouldn't have been broken up into the kind of minute sections that we were looking at.

It's slightly false, it's slightly inaccurate at one level. Not inaccurate, it's not the word, but it wouldn't have been...

[1:10] It's good to take it all in one as well. So read it all in one as well, because then you get the right balance of everything. But I hope what we've tried to do is we've tried to draw in the themes, even when we're just looking at one little section.

So we're really coming to it, and I'm gutted the way it's worked out. I don't know why it happened this way, but Cori's getting the really good stuff next week. I've got a really tough stuff again today, and that's happened so often.

And of course, last week, poor Thomas had a nightmare passage to preach from as well. But this is Romans chapter 3, and we're going to read from verse 9 to 20.

Please bear in mind that it's the... What we come to now is actually the climax of Paul's argument before he explodes into the great good news of Jesus Christ in the gospel, as Thomas was saying last night.

It's kind of the bad news of the first three and a half chapters leads to the great message, draws us to the great message of Jesus. So Romans chapter 3 from verse 9, what then are we Jews better off?

[2:15] No, not at all, for we have already charged that all both Jews and Greeks are under sin as it is written. No one is righteous, no, not one.

We've taken that from the psalm that we were singing. No one understands, no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless. No one does good, not even one.

Their throat is an open grave. They use their tongues to deceive, the venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness, their feet are swift to shed blood, and their paths are ruin and misery, and the ways, the way of peace they have not known.

There is no fear of God before their eyes. Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law so that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world may be held accountable to God, for by works of the law no human being will be justified in this sight, since through the law comes knowledge or conviction of sin.

So the title of the sermon this morning is Why All Matters? Why all that we have done already today leading to this point?

[3:35] Why the work that we're engaged in in planting churches? Why what we seek to do is a congregation here in prayer? Why we long for and are moved when we hear about people who have moved and come from darkness into light?

Why does it all matter? It's hugely important and actually this passage summarizes and brings us to the point to remind us exactly why it all matters, why it's also significant.

And in my estimation, this coming week matters more in the life of the church than any other time of the year. This coming week is the most significant thing we do because of what it's saying and because of what it's pointing to and because of the activity we're engaged in during this week as believers.

And I think the answer for that and the reason behind it being so important is in this section of Romans which we're going to glimpse at for a few moments this morning.

As I said, in this passage, God through Paul is concluding his argument. His argument that is bringing everyone to the point of saying that they need a Savior, that they need Jesus Christ.

[4:55] He's bringing that to us, it's a climax and it's strong, uncompromising, kind of brutal language in many ways that he comes to this point.

It's hugely blunt and it's meant to be shocking. You're not meant to fall asleep reading this and I hope you're not going to fall asleep listening about this passage as well.

And I hope you'll not daydream as we look at this passage because it's hugely significant in the light of who God is and why he's trying to tell us.

It is meant to be shocking. He is setting the scene for the good news. He's setting the scene for action and for understanding that we hope and pray will transform our lives.

And if you've been a Christian for 50 years, it shouldn't be any different than if you're someone who's just looking and thinking and considering Christianity. Now, for example, I'm going to bring a very shocking illustration.

[5:56] If I were to say today, if I were to get in touch with the Scotsman or the Daily Record or the radio or the television and complain bitterly that abortion is the destruction of life in the womb, a holocaust of death, to many that would be a shocking statement in the world in which we live, it would be hugely uncomfortable for people to consider and to deal with.

I would undoubtedly be vilified and hated because the whole of that activity has been sanitized and justified. But if I were to cry out for the life of the child, what would it take to move society towards life rather than death as a solution?

What would it take? I'm not sure. But it would be a jolt, wouldn't it? It would be a hugely blunt instrument to use.

And yet with the right motives, we hope that it would be effective. Well, in many ways, this is God's jolt here. It's what He's saying because He wants people to recognize things as He sees them.

He wants us to look at ourselves in the light of His revelation of Himself, not just by comparing us to one another and not just by seeing things as they are in our own lives.

[7:25] As our Creator, He wants us to see His laws. But He wants us to see them as laws of love, as relational laws.

He wants us to see our own hearts. He wants us to consider the chaos of human life on this planet. He wants us to take note of the reign of death that there is.

It's uncomfortable. I know. I know I'd much rather speak about daffodils today. But He wants us to understand and know and be conscious of the brokenness, the pain, the tears, the sorrow, the sin, the rebellion, the separation that is in the world in which we live.

And He wants us to understand who He is so that we will come to that point of looking at and seeing the good news of great joy, which is Jesus Christ.

Otherwise we just put Him in the bin, don't we? Otherwise we just relegate Him to the edges of our existence and occasionally pat Him on the head when it suits for us.

[8 : 34] It's interesting, a long time ago there was a famous correspondence in the Times under the subject, I'm sorry, I never have any original illustrations, I'm useless at that.

But anyway, you'll have heard this a hundred times. What is wrong with the world today was the question that was the subject under correspondence and the best letter of all was the shortest and it read, Dear Sir, I am, yours faithfully, G.K.

And in a sense, that is really what God is wanting us to come to the point of recognizing and seeing in His Word that actually the problem isn't out there, it isn't with everybody else, it isn't in some kind of cosmic aspirin that can be brought to bear, but it's first relational.

Yes, there are other issues and there are huge cosmic issues, but primarily God wants us to see the relational issues, doesn't He? The laws of love that we have broken between Me and Him and between Me and the person who is My neighbour.

And so this passage in all its bluntness and starkness is saying, what God is and Paul through, God through Paul is, is every single person needs redemption.

[9 : 54] That's what He's saying. That is the premise of this section that everything has been leading up to. It's disputed, it's cast aside.

We reconstitute it in our own consideration, but He's saying, by, on His laws of love, on His relational laws, remember these Ten Commandments, are relational laws, laws of love.

It's saying, love the Lord your God and love your neighbour as yourself. It says, these have been cast aside. They've been broken, they've been dissipated and they've been destroyed.

As we examine ourselves in the light of who God is and what God says, so what He says and what He keeps saying and what He keeps repeating ad nauseam in this section is there is no one righteous.

There's no one. There's no one who's perfect. There's no one who meets God's standard. There's no one who is in clean and open and pure relationship with Him.

[10 : 58] We've been banished from His presence and we choose not to love Him in the way that He demands of us as His creation. We're tearing at God and we're tearing at one another.

That's the world we live in. Our standards might be pretty good compared with other people. There might be a lot of goodness that we engage in, but we know what wells up within us and we know that from us the shadow of life is draining.

The dark reality of death is around us. What Paul and Stark brutal terms is exposing here is our dysfunctional born condition before the living God because he wants to take us on a journey to Jesus.

So there's a couple of things, very briefly, and I can't go into this in great detail today, but there's two areas, isn't there? In this section there's antipathy towards God in the human race and there's inexplicable behavior towards one another.

There's this antipathy towards God, 11 and 12 speaks about it, and then 17 and 18, with Paul and his religious and phariseic background bringing lots of quotes from the Psalms, some of which we sung because that was the way that he was used to reasoning, taking Scripture and reconstituting it as part of the argument, taking the Old Testament and using it to expose the argument that he's bringing.

[12:35] And he's basically saying no one, no one, naturally, no one in and of their own strength, in and of their own steam ever reaches for God.

No one, no one ever, ever, ever, no one ever does that. No one chooses to reach out for God. No one loves God in and of their own steam.

No one understands God in their own intelligence. No one, he says, is good by God's perfect standard. No one, he keeps saying it, he keeps repeating it.

It's a repetitive argument he's using it. And do we get that? What do we get that in the sense of being judgmental and damning people?

I mean, do we get it? That it's a level playing field. No one. You know, no one is righteous. We don't sit here righteous, and we don't sit here in judgment in any way.

[13:38] We are in this condition together by nature, without Christ, without the gospel. It's a level playing field. There is no place in our lives for pride and a careless or unprayerful attitude towards others, is there?

This is part of what he's saying that naturally, and you know it, well, I certainly know it in my own heart, in my own sinful nature, there's an antipathy towards God.

It's not natural for me to worship Him, to awe and reverentially fear and respect and obey Him. It doesn't come naturally.

There's that sinful rebellion against Him, and God is just reminding us that no one will naturally choose. He says it's not just that we have a condition which, you know, just if we take three steps in a certain direction, we'll be fine again.

He's not saying it's just a little fine tuning or a little bit of medicine. He's saying we're dead spiritually by nature. We're born in that condition, and we live and choose that condition.

[14:50] We simply don't choose God naturally on our own. No one is naturally righteous. No one is naturally perfect before God.

And He makes that argument strongly from Scripture from the Old Testament. And then He goes on to speak about the way we behave with one another. It's interesting, He talks about God, and then He talks about people, the attitude to people.

And it matches the two tables of the Law as it were, loving God, which we fail to do properly, and loving one another, which is in many ways easier for us to understand about each other.

And He uses our language, our tongues, and He uses our behavior, our feet, where we walk, the violence of what we choose to do.

And it's blunt and strong language. When you look at it, you say, well, I'm not like that. And I'm sure that's true. We don't feel like that.

[15:45] That's our... We are yet, we do know that our language separates us from one another, don't we? We know how sharp our tongues can be, how quickly we can condemn and vilify and oppose and praise ourselves in our own condition.

We know that, don't we? We know we have that capacity within us to tear down one another by what we say, particularly what we say about them, rather than maybe what we will say to them, we're suspicious.

And there can be, may not be physical violence, but there can be a great anger and injustice and misery in the humanity that we are part of, where there is and can be such selfishness, such little regard for one another.

We miss out. There is no peace with God or with one another, and there is no worship ultimately for God and a love for our neighbors that is free from imperfection and selfishness and pride.

And I know that there's great love within society, and I know there's great sophistication as we become more and more advanced. But we do recognize these things, even by our own admission, we recognize them in our lives.

[17:04] And Paul wants us, God wants us to come to that place where we say, what's the problem with the world? I am.

That's very much the theme of what he's saying. And that brings us to his devastating climax. And I'm so glad that I am doing a bit of ice to Jesus here. I'm working into this passage.

What is still to come? I'm stealing Chody's thunder from next week. I don't see why he should have all the good part of Romans to deal with here, which is coming up and which is so exciting and which is so good and which is so helpful for us in our lives, especially when we understand who we are and especially when we've come today heavily burdened, weeping, broken, struggling, doubting, questioning, hurt, and failed.

So I don't want anyone to think that the Jesus part of the message is kind of some soft sopping or some unrealistic spiritualizing of our needs.

Everything, Paul is, God is taking this argument so seriously. He wants us to subsume everything, draw everything into the reality of who we are and the mess that we're often in and the struggles we have to understand the climax of what he's coming to.

[18:39] The law, the law of God, you greatly misunderstand the law of God if you think the law of God is there so that we can obey it and earn God's favor.

That is not the purpose of God's law. If you're sitting comfortably today and saying, I do my very best to fulfill the law of God and I know that when I die, I'll go with him and I'll say, I did my best and you can't possibly throw me out for doing my best and trying to love you and love my neighbor.

It's not there to do that. It's not there for us to look and compare our ability to fulfill it and see how others are failing it. What is it there to do?

It's there to expose that we can't meet His standard. That's the whole point. He says, for the works of the law in verse 20, no human being will be justified in His sight since through the law comes knowledge or conscience of sin.

That's the whole point of it. It is there to expose that we don't love God like we should. And it's there to expose that we certainly don't love our wives, our husbands, our children, our neighbors, our friends, our enemies perfectly.

[19:54] And therefore you throw up your hands and you say, is there any hope? Is there any hope in this council of despair? Is there any peace? Can anyone do right?

Are you just beating us up with a stick here? Well, actually, and I'm very careful in saying this, Paul of course was wrong.

He was right as he reflects on humanity as fallen. But there is one, isn't there? And that's what he's coming to. He's not really wrong.

He's bringing us towards that argument. There is one. There is one who is righteous. There was one who is righteous.

There is one who understands. There is one who sought out God and who loved God with his whole heart and soul and being who never turned aside.

[20:55] There is one who is worthy and who absolutely did good, perfectly good in his life, who never spoke deceptively, who never spoke with hateful venom or curses and bitterness towards his fellow human being, who never chose and ran towards uncontrolled violence, who never brought sinful misery or ruin into anyone's experience.

Never. But he loved everyone that he came into contact with, fully and wholly, who was the perfect example of the kind of person that God wants in relationship with him as a human being, Jesus Christ.

He's the one, isn't he? He's the righteous one. He stood at the end of his life and God, the Father, could say, yep, you're righteous. I love you.

I love being in relationship with you. I love the way you treat your neighbors. It's absolutely perfect. It's exactly what I intended to be. Yet I damn you.

I damn you to death on a cross and I damn you to face the powers of hell and I damn you to face my wrath. I damn you to drink that cup that all humanity should be drinking.

[22:22] And I can't explain that love. I have no words for it. I just can't make it clear. I don't even understand it for myself that God, the Father and His triune being would agree with God, the Son and the Holy Spirit to go to such lengths for a people that just stick their fingers up at him and have no interest in him.

Who can understand such love? And when we believe and trust in Jesus Christ, even when we don't understand the one who died in our place, the one who's taken our death and taken our rebellion and our sin, our death is defeated.

And we move from death to life. That's the message of the gospel and the resurrection power of all that that means. It doesn't mean that we skip along in the daffodils and that life is easy.

It doesn't mean that we're free from the battles and struggles and the curse of this world in which we live. But it does mean that He promises to give us life and He promises never to leave us and He promises to take us through and He promises there's something far better for us in our lives.

Of course, there's a battle, but we do it not in our own strength. So I conclude with what I started with.

[23:46] That's why it all matters, you know? That's why this week of prayer matters. That's why you should clear your diaries this week and put the first thing on your diary as prayer if it's not already there.

Why? Because it doesn't matter as religious people and maybe not Christians. It doesn't matter how good we feel about ourselves.

God says, there's no one righteous and I am the only righteous one and I cover you. And Corey will go into that next week. I will cover you in my righteousness.

The law is not there for us to try and keep to please God. It's there to say we can't keep it so that we will come to Christ and in Christ seek to live that way.

There's no one righteous, you know? That's why prayer is so important for us. That's why these three friends lists, I ask and plead with you to persevere in.

[24:52] Four years is maybe quite quick for someone to come to faith. Don't give up. Keep praying for them. Keep sharing with them. Keep telling them about Jesus. Keep on doing these things in as gentle and as loving and as gracious and as true and honest way you can.

Why does this week matter? Because only Jesus Christ can make our dry bones live. Only Jesus Christ can breathe, through prayer, can breathe life into anyone who by nature and all of us were there would never seek out God.

You never, I never sought out God in my own strength. It was because God was working in me and because people were praying for me.

That's why prayer is the bedrock of Haddington work, of Esk Valley, of Cornerstone, of St. Columbus, of our own personal lives, and it's the place we go to with all our questions and our cries and our lack of knowledge and our confusion and our difficulty.

That's the key, isn't it? That's where we turn. It's not saying we go because we've got the answers or we go because life is easy. We go there because we have nowhere else to turn.

[26 : 12] We can't rely on our intellect and on our bank balance and on our relative goodness. And I simply ask that you make this week a real week of prayer.

And pray like never before. If you can come together all the better, there have been wonderfully encouraging times that we've spent together. What do if you can make room and time for prayer and find that... I said this many years ago and I don't know if there's any truth in this whatsoever, but I'm going to say it again anyway.

I think it's something like if you do something for 17 days in a row, it becomes a habit. Is that right? I think it was 17. Might be less than that. So if you pray like passionately, either with people or on your own, 17 days in a row, essentially it will just come into your consciousness.

It will be something you do every day. Just think of the habits that you have. They reflect the priorities very often of our lives, don't they? So please just make this a special, festival time of prayer in the hope that it will inspire and encourage you to make prayer the bedrock of your life.

Because what is prayer? It is where the curtain has been ripped in two and where we have access to our Father who loves us more than we can ever grasp or know.

[27 : 41] John 15 verse 5 says, apart from Christ we can do nothing. As a leader in the church and Ali will feel this and I know he said that and Martha mentioned it and it's the same for Neil and for Tom.

We just feel we can't do anything and we can't do anything apart from Christ. And we are holding on to his coattails at best.

But then he goes on to say in Matthew 19, 26, with God, all things are possible. So we believe in the impossible and we hope to take risks because we believe God will take us and enable us to grow more and see many, many people in this city coming to faith in Christ and in its environs.

Amen. Let's bow our heads and pray. Father God, we ask and pray that we would understand that the glory is yours and that we need you and that you love us and that we are your children.

And we pray that many folk, many people, especially those that each of us are burdened for that we will not stop praying for them and pleading with you to bring them to a saving knowledge of Jesus and all that that means, the moving from death to life, the seeing things that we have never seen before, the trusting in the darkest times and the knowledge that Jesus has us.

[29 : 04] He's got our back. He'll hold us. He'll keep us. He'll show us one day the battles we've faced and He'll see and take us through to a hugely glorious life of loving relationship with Him and with one another that is beyond our imagination.

So help us to hang in there and help us to be strong and help us to worship you and keep mainly in the main things.

Help us to focus on who you are and we thank you for who you are. Bless us as we sing together in response to your word. May it just fill our souls and may it just fill us with joy to be able to praise in this way, even when we feel that we are struggling and battling.

May it be refreshing and renewing and may we know that we do something that links us with heaven itself, with the angelic choirs who praise you and who adore you.

So help us to be praying in Jesus' name. Amen.