

BaptistWay: Appearance vs. obedience

September 3, 2015

- *The BaptistWay lesson for Sept. 20 focuses on Romans 2:1-29.*

This lengthy passage, which extends from what was discussed in chapter 1, offers quite a bit of material for discussion. The Apostle Paul, usually labeled the prime advocate of justification by grace through faith—not works—insists actions make a difference. Indeed, he quotes the Old Testament to declare God will give everyone what they deserve based on their deeds (v. 6).

However, lest we think only bad behavior is possible, Paul writes, “To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life” (v. 7), and “It is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous” (v. 13). Linking our actions to our eternal destiny is unsettling, but it is an important reminder that what we do matters. Thus, even the grace that comes through Jesus requires faithful response and transformed living in order to be doers of the word (James 1:22).

The law and circumcision

Several verses in this passage discuss one’s heart in relation to the law and the outward sign of circumcision. All Hebrew males were circumcised to signify their participation in God’s covenant with Israel. In other words, circumcision meant someone was part of the people of God. In this passage, Paul states Gentiles who obey the law are “a law for themselves They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts” (v. 15).

At first glance, this may appear to be a critique of the Jewish law, as though the emergence of Jesus has nullified the law. However, the idea that the

law is written on the heart actually comes from Jeremiah 31, where the promise of a new covenant is made—a covenant that will last because the same constraints will be established within the people (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

The conclusion of Romans 2 states outward circumcision is not what matters. Instead, true circumcision is “of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code” (v. 29). While it is likely Paul is addressing possible tensions between Jewish and non-Jewish groups within the Roman church, he does not abolish Jewish practice or external gestures. Rather, he relativizes their meaning so one does not think the performance is the final word.

Outward signs and actions

We should remember Christianity also consists of outward signs and actions—baptism, the Lord’s Supper/communion, fellowship. These gestures are not empty rituals; they are full of vitality derived from the inward—both personal and corporate—transformation occurring. That is why Paul’s critique of the Jewish Christians in Rome quotes from the Old Testament: “Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer” (Deuteronomy 10:16). In doing so, Paul reminds the Roman Christians that heart-circumcision marks one’s status as a member of the body of Christ. Indeed, God does not show favoritism (v. 11).

As has been mentioned, Paul may be dealing with some potential friction between the Jewish and Gentile groups within the Roman church. Paul reminds the Jewish Christians previous knowledge of the law is not the end of the line. Living rightly in witness to the character of God is the appropriate goal of the law. He strongly suggests hypocrisy among the people of God always will sour outsiders’ view of God (v. 24).

In our context, this might force us to consider how the brokenness of Christ’s body affects the witness of the church. That is, when Christians of various denominational and confessional groups continue to live apart,

even while they speak, sing and pray as though they fully share in the family of faith, how does that impact non-Christians, who see such divisions and see no need to consider the truth, love and unity of the gospel? In Paul's words, we might ask: How is God blasphemed among outsiders because of the actions of the church?

Pride

One final thematic emphasis within this passage involves pride. Romans 2 opens with a discussion of judging others. Paul is adamant that pointing to others' faults—such as the sins described in chapter 1—while also committing sin is deceitful. We might hear an echo of Jesus telling people to remove the plank from their own eye before attempting to help take out the speck in their friend's eye (Matthew 7:1-5).

Later in this passage, Paul uses similar language to discuss teaching, noting a teacher—"a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children" (vv. 19-20)—should not merely teach others to obey the law; he or she should follow it as well. By linking judging and teaching, Paul has offered insight into the nature of pride and hypocrisy: Each resides in an unwillingness to learn. That is, when we imagine we have learned all there is to know, we pridefully exercise our knowledge over others. We fail to recognize the ways in which we can know more, do more, love more and in the process, live according to the gospel more faithfully. Let us embrace a learning posture as we strive to follow Jesus.