

Sermons through

Romans

The Sin of Indifference

Romans 9:1-3

With Study Questions

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I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, ²that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. ³For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh (Romans 9:1-3).

Introduction

I recently engaged in a formal debate, one of the texts for which was the ninth chapter of Romans. Afterward a fellow – a Christian fellow – found me in the hallway, put his finger in my chest and told me “You better watch yourself!” I mention this that we might recognize we are entering into a somewhat controversial portion of Paul’s grand epistle.

As we transition into chapter 9 (really 9-11) it almost appears the Apostle Paul abruptly changes the subject. It is no hard argument to say that Romans 8 is one of the most comforting chapters in all of Holy Scripture. We are yanked now from the warmth of the Romans 8 campfire to the Romans 9 trial by fire.

Paul engages now in the topics you don’t want the camp speaker addressing. The trouble-makers can engage in these topics over coffee after the rest of the campers have gone to bed. The sovereignty of God, predestination, reprobation, the place of Israel in prophecy – the dream team of controversy and division.

Let me state at the get-go that I don’t think Romans 9-11 is primarily a systematic on the sovereignty of God, predestination or Israel in prophecy. I agree with Schreiner:

At the forefront of Paul’s thinking is God’s faithfulness to his promises. ¹

Might I suggest that the thematic verse (half of a verse) for Romans 9-11 is Romans 9:6a **“But it is not that the word of God has taken no effect.”**

¹ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 472). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

What we see in Romans 9-11 is not an abrupt change in topic but an explanation – an apologetic for the comfort found chapter 8. Paul will demonstrate that God is a promise-making promise-keeping God. There was confusion as to who are the objects of God’s covenant promises. Was it Israel or the church? Had God welched?

Israel was promised the Holy Spirit (Ezekiel 36:26-27) but in Romans 8:4 this promise is fulfilled in the church. Israel had been promised a future resurrection (Ezekiel 37) but Paul tells the church God, who raised Christ will give life to your mortal bodies (Romans 8:10-11). Israel was God’s son (Exodus 4:22) now believers in Christ are sons and daughters (Romans 8:14-17). An inheritance was promised to Israel (Isaiah 60) but now the believer in the “joint heir” with Christ (Romans 8:17). Israel was God’s chosen people (Amos 3:2) but Paul aims this blessed designation to those who have faith in Christ (Roman 8:29-30). God had promised never to forsake Israel (Deuteronomy 31:6) but it is the church – the believer who can have the assurance that nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:39). Romans 9-11 is Paul’s treatise on the faithfulness of God. And all those sub-topics (sovereignty, election, prophecy) that Paul offers in this excursion become the mortar on which our comfort and God’s honor and glory are built – topics we will seek to grasp in the weeks and months to come. But for now, just verses 1-3.

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, ²that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. ³For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh (Romans 9:1-3).

The Sin of Indifference

In the ninth chapter of Ezekiel we observe a very unsettling example of God’s justice. With all the sensationalism revolving around the mark of the beast (placed on hands and foreheads), we seldom see a reference to the mark recorded in this passage.

Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub on which it rested to the threshold of the house. And he called to the man clothed in linen, who had the writing

case at his waist. ⁴ And the Lord said to him, "Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in it." ⁵ And to the others he said in my hearing, "Pass through the city after him, and strike. Your eye shall not spare, and you shall show no pity. ⁶ Kill old men outright, young men and maidens, little children and women, but touch no one on whom is the mark. And begin at my sanctuary." So they began with the elders who were before the house. ⁷ Then he said to them, "Defile the house, and fill the courts with the slain. Go out." So they went out and struck in the city. ⁸ And while they were striking, and I was left alone, I fell upon my face, and cried, "Ah, Lord God! Will you destroy all the remnant of Israel in the outpouring of your wrath on Jerusalem?" ⁹ Then he said to me, "The guilt of the house of Israel and Judah is exceedingly great. The land is full of blood, and the city full of injustice. For they say, 'The Lord has forsaken the land, and the Lord does not see.' ¹⁰ As for me, my eye will not spare, nor will I have pity; I will bring their deeds upon their heads." ¹¹ And behold, the man clothed in linen, with the writing case at his waist, brought back word, saying, "I have done as you commanded me" (Ezekiel 9:3-11).

In verse 4 there is a mark put on the foreheads of those who **"sigh and groan over all the abominations"** committed in Jerusalem. Those who exhibited that compassion and sorrow for the lost will receive the mark and escape the judgment.

It would be an unwarranted conclusion to say they merited clemency from God by their ability to sigh and groan. It would be more accurate to say that their grief was the natural outpouring of eyes, ears and hearts quickened by the grace of God. For those who have truly called upon the name of the Lord, indifference to the plight of the lost is not an option. It is so easy for Christians, and the churches they form, to fall into a niche of social comfort and exclusivity.

Years ago I spent quite a bit of time at a little beach village called Piha, in New Zealand. It was on the Tasman Sea and the currents were

dangerous; many people would drown. I became friends with the lifeguards who were almost all hard working volunteers. It was an enjoyable and effective group of lifesavers. They loved their job and did it well. Consequently, they had deep and abiding love and fellowship with each other.

A few years later I heard a little parable comparing a life saving station to a church:

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a crude little life saving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea, and with no thought for themselves went out day and night tirelessly searching for those who were lost. Some of those who were saved and various others in the surrounding area wanted to become associated with the station and gave of their time, money, and effort to support its work. New boats were bought and new crews trained. The little lifesaving station grew.

Some of the members of the lifesaving station were unhappy that the building was so crude and poorly equipped. They felt that a more comfortable place should be provided as the first refuge of those saved from the sea. They replaced the emergency cots with beds and put better furniture in the enlarged building.

Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members, and they decorated it beautifully because they used it as a sort of club. Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on life-saving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. The lifesaving motif still prevailed in the club's decorations, and there was a liturgical lifeboat in the room where the club's initiations were held. About this time a large ship wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet, and half-drowned people. They were dirty and sick. The beautiful new club was in chaos. So the property committee immediately had a shower house built

outside the club where victims of shipwrecks could be cleaned up before coming inside.

At the next meeting, there was a split among the club membership. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities as being unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted upon life saving as their primary purpose and pointed out that they were still called a life saving station. But they were finally voted down and told that if they wanted to save the lives of all the various kinds of people who were shipwrecked in those waters, they could begin their own lifesaving station. So they did.

As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It evolved into a club, and yet another lifesaving station was founded. History continued to repeat itself, and if you visit that seacoast today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs along that shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown.

The Christian has been given the great responsibility of caring about the souls of others.

But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet, and the people are not warned, and the sword comes and takes *any* person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at the watchman's hand.' ⁷ "So you, son of man: I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; therefore you shall hear a word from My mouth and warn them for Me. ⁸ "When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked *man*, you shall surely die!' and you do not speak to warn the wicked from his way, that wicked *man* shall die in his iniquity; but his blood I will require at your hand. ⁹ "Nevertheless if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul" (Ezekiel 33:6-9).

Indifference is a sin.

The Protestant Problem

There is also the flipside of this. Dr. Greg Bahnsen spoke of going to Russia and a discussion he had with a Russian Orthodox Priest. The priest spoke of “The Protestant Problem”. The Protestant Problem is just the opposite of the Lifesaving Station Problem. The Protestant Problem unfolds when a person hears the gospel and joyfully responds. They attend church and are excited about worshiping God and in their young enthusiasm they invite others who invited other and so forth. So what’s the problem?

There is either no, or very limited, interest in true piety, in-depth study, hard teachings – the weightier matters (they like chapter 8 but not so much chapter 9). You might say that the lifesaving station is full of unbridled and uninformed enthusiasm. There is a shipwreck and everybody jumps in the water only to find themselves overtaken by the current. Ill-equipped for the task the station itself needs to be rescued.

The Apostle Paul, though admittedly a sinful man (1 Timothy 1:15), did not fall into either of these categories. He was neither dispassionate nor ignorant. But apparently not everyone believed he had their best interests at heart. Why else would he begin this chapter by calling his own conscience before the tribunal of God?

I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit (Romans 9:1)

The Christian Conflict

Here we see the common Christian conflict. By any outward observation, Paul was viewed as an enemy to his Jewish brothers. Their reaction to him was similar to their reaction to Jesus:

And Festus said, “King Agrippa and all who are present with us, you see this man about whom the whole Jewish people petitioned me, both in Jerusalem and here, shouting that he ought not to live any longer (Acts 25:24).”

This is where the lifesaving story loses analogous value. For even though the people you seek to save might, in a panic, try to drown their rescuers, it is generally not premeditated and conspiratorial.

I recall when I first came to faith as a teenager thinking people would be happy for me. Some were — many were not. I recall thinking people would appreciate my concern for their souls when I would tell them about Jesus. Some were — others were quite offended. As time went on I found that seeking to live out the faith was like signing up for the military during a war. And the war is a war with many fronts.

There is conflict with the world, with the family, with an apostate church (the Apostle's conflict here), with pagan religions, unidentified (and sometime unidentifiable) philosophies, ideologies and so many **"lofty opinion(s) raised against the knowledge of God" (2 Corinthians 10:5)**. Of course, with this comes the internal conflict with our own sin and ignorance.

And here is where it gets very tricky.

There is a great, great temptation to be offended when your effort to love and minister to others is spurned. This weakness in the human heart is, little doubt, the reason we read in Proverbs:

Better is open rebuke than hidden love. ⁶ Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy (Proverbs 27:5, 6).

Let a righteous man strike me — it is a kindness; let him rebuke me — it is oil for my head; let my head not refuse it (Psalm 141:5).

It's one of those passages we love until it applies to us. The Apostle Paul found himself sharing in the sufferings of Christ. You wonder if he took comfort in the Psalm:

In return for my love they accuse me, but I give myself to prayer. ⁵ So they reward me evil for good, and hatred for my love (Psalm 109:4, 5).

As we launch into this chapter (really three chapters) so rich in content – so weighty in theology – let us be careful to enter into our study with an eye on the Apostles' heart. Toward those who sought his life, who had the opinion that he **"ought not to live any longer"** (Acts 25:24), he writes:

that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. ³ For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh (Romans 9:2-3).

Brethren and Countrymen According to the Flesh

As we shall see in the weeks to come, there is more to this than Paul's friendships – he grieves an over an entire apostate religious community. But we shouldn't exclude the humanity of Paul's outburst of sorrow. These are his **"brethren"** *adelphon* **"countrymen"** *syngenon*. That he depicts them as brethren and countrymen according to the flesh may lead our thinking in a couple of directions.

He may be emphasizing that they are not brothers in the faith – a designation reserved for those who have faith (Galatians 3:7). He may be appealing to the life of tight community with his fellow Israelites and the great sorrow of seeing them in such darkness. I see no logical reason why both can't be inferred.

What kind of maturity must he have had to look past their slanders – to allow such love to be cultivated in his heart that he would grieve for them the way a loving parent might grieve over their own recalcitrant child.

Accursed from Christ

There is no stronger verbiage available for the apostle when he wishes **"that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren"**. It is, no doubt, hyperbolic language. He had just written of how nothing can

separate us from the love of God in Christ (Romans 8:39). But like Moses, he loved God and he loved others.

So Moses returned to the Lord and said, “Alas, this people has sinned a great sin. They have made for themselves gods of gold. ³² But now, if you will forgive their sin – but if not, please blot me out of your book that you have written (Exodus 32:31, 32).

There are some great and glorious teachings in the chapters upon which we will now embark. But let us ever be reminded how the apostle begins his message – not as a professor at a chalk board, but as a pastor whose grief and sorrow for the lost – even the lost who sought to inflict him – were driving influences in his heart and life. As the Psalmist wrote:

My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law (Psalm 119:136).

Questions for Study

1. Give a brief synopsis of the Apostle Paul's main theme in chapters 9-11. Why does he engage in these theological topics (pages 2, 3)?
2. How should a Christian respond to the plight of the lost (pages 4, 5)?
3. What is the sin of indifference (pages 4, 5)?
4. Discuss how churches can be healthy and unhealthy lifesaving stations (pages 4-6).
5. What is the "Protestant Problem" (page 7)?
6. What is the "Christian conflict"? What are the various fronts of this conflict (pages 7-9)?
7. Discuss the Apostle Paul's disposition toward his brothers and countrymen according to the flesh. Can you think of anyone you feel that way about (pages 9-10)?