

“Without casting blame and without acknowledging responsibility”

3 What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? ² Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.

³ What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God’s faithfulness? ⁴ Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written:

“So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.”⁵ But if our unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) ⁶ Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? ⁷ Someone might argue, “If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?” ⁸ Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—“Let us do evil that good may result”? Their condemnation is just! (Romans 3:1-8)

Let’s say that there is a plate of fresh sushi in front of you. What order would you eat in? Would you eat the cucumber roll first and the sea urchin last? Or will you eat the sea urchin first and the cucumber roll last?

I am the type of person to save my favorite food for last. I would like to have sea urchin as the finale of the meal and savor the after taste as I leave the table.

I sometimes hear this phrase. I have bad news and good news. Do you prefer to hear the bad news first? Or would you rather hear the good news first? I thought about it, and thought that if I heard the bad news last, it would leave a bitter aftertaste. Personally I would rather hear the bad news first and hear the good news that cancels out the bad.

In Romans, Paul writes in the order of the latter. He writes the bad news first, then the good news after. In today’s verses, Paul first touches on the problems of our hearts and points our thoughts towards the light.

Do you remember what I talked about last week? Towards his fellow Jews, Paul criticized their insincere attitude in following the law, and told them that they do not know the true intention and meaning of the law. The law we have inherited for several generations was fulfilled by Jesus Christ. There, we have a new covenant before us. There is a light-Jesus Christ, that has been given to us. This is what Paul wrote.

Paul speaks the truth to the Jewish people without fear. He does not speak in a way that avoids the hard truths, but instead Paul points out things the people do not want to hear. Why? This is because Paul truly cares for his fellow Jewish people. Paul understands the risks of the things he talks about, and despite this, he boldly digs into these topics in his letter. Paul resolved to write this letter understanding the dangers he imposes on himself.

We are not to forget that Paul himself was Jewish. Paul is pointing out and saying, “is this not wrong?” in front of his own people. Paul also knew of the response he would receive from these people. Since he was Jewish himself, he can understand the feelings of his companions. This is why Paul posed questions and answered them with objections in mind.

In these verses, there is a word Japanese people are not very familiar with. It is called circumcision. There are many rituals around the world and many are still performed today. Some cultures require people to get tattoos when reaching a certain age, or piercing their ears, and these are tools for different identities. The ritual of the Israeli people was circumcision, and it was an important attribute to make a distinction between the Israeli people and other ethnic groups. Circumcision was proof that a person was a part of God’s people, and it was something God looked for, and a Jewish boy would be circumcised on the 8th day after their birth.

Circumcision is first mentioned in Genesis 17. These are the words to Abraham who received God’s calling at age 75.

⁹Then God said to Abraham, “As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come. ¹⁰This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you (Genesis 17:9-11)

It was life threatening for a man of old age to receive circumcision without the hygienical medical preparation in the present. However, Abraham received circumcision and from that day forward, Jewish lineages have carried the tradition of circumcision of a boy on the 8th day. However, as years past, people began to feel contentment in the act of circumcision. The idea that people are allowed to do whatever they want solely because they are circumcised began to spread like an epidemic, and their hearts strayed away from God. People are always this way, and run to easy formalities that do not require a sincere heart.

Paul identifies this and writes in Romans 2:25,²⁵ Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised

September 3, 2017 “Without casting blame and without acknowledging responsibility” (Romans 2:25). Paul is saying that if you are circumcised and follow the law it is good, but if you are breaking the law because of complacency from circumcision, your circumcision is meaningless.

And by saying these things, Paul knew that there would be an objection saying “If our circumcision is meaningless, there is nothing that distinguishes us Jews from the gentiles”.

Paul writes in the opening that there is something that the Jewish people have that the gentiles do not. God gave us his words, and we have a law that we are to follow.

In the beginning of the Bible it is written that God created the heavens and the earth. If a God like this desires a relationship—a deep involvement—with eventually all people in existence, what means will he go about to accomplish this? I am not God, and I cannot possibly know God’s will, but if I am to imagine with this small head, I imagine that God will start his involvement with one nation.

And those chosen people, the bible says are the Jews. And Paul says that the difference between the Jewish people and the gentiles is that God gave the law to the Jewish people.

To this the Jewish people argue, “God chose us from among many nations and gave us the law. But we could not follow the law. The fault lies in God who chose this method, and this proves his unfaithfulness”. But Paul writes in verse 4, “Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar”.

People will always try to have the last word. What is being said here is a far-fetched excuse. It is true that God gave us the law. However, if we were not able to follow the law, and blame God, we are shifting our responsibility and are blind to our own shortcomings. This is something that is familiar.

In Genesis 3 there is an article about Adam and Eve. They picked and ate a fruit from the Garden of Eden that was forbidden by God. According to the Bible, the snake spoke to Eve; Eve ate the fruit first, and then gave it to Adam who also ate the fruit.

When God asks about this Adam responds by saying, ¹² The man said, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it.”¹³ Then the LORD God said to the woman, “What is this you have done?” The woman said, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” (Genesis 3:12-13)

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There is no difference between the arguments Paul writes about, and these words by Adam. They both put the blame on God. What we have to bear in mind is that we also carry this nature.

It is important to find the cause of the problem. That is the clue to the solution. In this process we should not try to find ways to shift the responsibility, but find where the true responsibility lies. When we try to find the person responsible for the problem, we are quick to find ways to avoid the responsibility ourselves. Our nature causes us to favor conclusions that disassociate us from the problem, and conclusions that make us victims of the problem. These are like an instinct to us, and it is our nature to cast the blame on others. Shifting responsibility is claiming that we are completely unrelated to the problem, and that others are at fault.

There are many unsolved problems that are left alone because of this shifting of responsibilities to others.

Adam said to God, “The woman you put here with me”! We not only cast the responsibility on other people, but God. And Paul says to this, ⁴Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. (Romans 3:4).

“Why this result? I tried so hard. I can’t trust God”. But God is not a tool to make our dreams come true. “I wanted this to happen, this to be done that way, but instead this happened, God doesn’t exist”! But God isn’t a handyman who answers all your wishes.

“Today I went to the mall but couldn’t find a parking space. I prayed really hard but God didn’t listen. He doesn’t exist.” Is this an extreme statement? No, we tend to blame trivial problems on God.

If Paul was here and heard these complaints, he would probably hit the table and shout, “Not at all”! Please remember, God is not a valet parking attendant. The reason there is no parking space may be because it was the weekend, or there was a big sale on that day. It is we who choose to go to the mall because we want to, and it is not God’s fault that there is no parking space. That is the reality that we-who wanted to come to the mall, are to accept. Without accepting this responsibility ourselves, we lack an element for a healthy relationship with God.

Do you claim to be a Christian and find yourself wandering in this realm of complaints? Perhaps, there may be people whose Christian life may end by repeating this lifestyle.

Everyone runs into problems. We have to identify the cause and find a solution that is in line with it. We have to remember in our hearts that problems like these can be solved today. It is

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quite simple if we look directly into the problem and avoid casting blame. By understanding that we are to some degree a cause of the problem, we can begin solving the problem.

If you think about it, if Adam and Eve did not blame God or the snake, and instead confessed that they were wrong, God would have forgiven them. They would not have had to flee the garden. Their negligence of casting the blame on others and shifting responsibility still casts a shadow on humanity today. If we continue to blame people and the environment, our life will be no more than that. We will live a life without self-reflection, and will never take responsibility for our life.

When we walk with God, if we do not feel any responsibility for ourselves, we cannot draw close to God. This is because there is no true repentance in that attitude. Later in verse 10 it says, “There is not a righteous person, not a single one”. We are to admit to this, have our hearts broken by God and repent. Because as the Bible promises over and over, God will surely be with our broken hearts.

The argument that people probably had is as follows. “The truth that God judges the Jews who were unfaithful is a proof of God’s absolute existence. That means that my unfaithfulness is the best opportunity to exhibit God’s faithfulness. If that is the case, why am I called a sinner? My sin is great because it allows for God’s goodness to be revealed! I may have done evil, but the result is nothing but goodness.

The reasoning is this. “God chose us. But we chosen people did not obey God and sinned against him. But this sin shows God’s righteousness, so our sin is useful to God. We are to commit evil for God to be good”.

Earlier I talked about our tendency to shift responsibility on others. Here our defiant nature is shown. We have a “so-what attitude”. When people have their sins pointed out, they admit to it but say, “Then I will commit evil for the sake of God’s goodness”.

Earlier I talked about how Adam and Eve blamed and shifted the responsibility for their sin. Their eldest son Cain kills his brother Abel. When this is revealed to God, God asks Cain, “where is your brother Abel”? Cain answers, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper”? From the parents who cast blame upon others, is born a son who not only doesn’t repent, but acts in defiance towards God. And we have also have this heart.

Our defiance is shown in our way of thinking. For example we may think, “Since the bible says all our sins can be forgiven, I will continue to sin and repent right before I die”. Or “If I am thoroughly overcome by evil, when God forgives me my joy would increase as well”.

We carry these kind of thoughts as well, as we constantly cast the blame of our problems on others, come to conclusions that are beneficial to us, and at times act in defiance to God. When we are defiant and have a “so what attitude”, we are missing any recognition of our sins. Would the omniscient and omnipotent God overlook this kind of shallow strategy?

God indeed gives us a blank paper when we are born. We are allowed to take a pen and write out our own lives on that paper. Without thinking about it too much, we draw various things on that paper and have lived to today. We are the ones who grip the pen. God gives us that freedom. How can a conscience crime to stain the paper with intention, so that God can clean it later be valid in front of him?

We have to reflect on ourselves and accept this fact, and we look up to God. If we truly look into ourselves, we will find the incomprehensible darkness in our heart. Just like it says in verse 9 of Romans chapter 3, “We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin”.

The Bible says that we are all under sin. The word “under” used here means something that is “under authority”, and “under control” in Greek. In other words, we are completely dominated. There is a power above us that controls us, and we live under it.

But Paul says this, ²¹ But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²² This righteousness is given through faith in^[h] Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement,^[i] through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished— (Romans 3:21-25)

God gave us Jesus Christ, and by his blood, we have an offer for redemption. And God allowed for us to receive this through faith.

I watched a movie called “End of Spear”. This movie is based on a true story about an incident that happened to a missionary’s family in Ecuador about 50 years ago.

At that time in Ecuador, there was a tribe who slaughtered people with spears. They lived as if on the brink of death everyday. They had a “kill or be killed” mentality. A few missionaries tried to come in contact with the tribe, but without resisting, they were killed with spears. The children and wives of the missionaries were left without their husbands/fathers. They were supposed to have had to live the rest of their life with hatred, but they do not leave the land,

September 3, 2017 “Without casting blame and without acknowledging responsibility” and instead they join the tribe and evangelize to them. These families work earnestly in their mission and live the rest of their lives within the tribe. In that movie, one of the tribe members says this.

“Waengongi has a son. He was speared but he didn’t spear back. So the people spearing him would one day live well.” Waengongi means God in the tribe’s language.

Killing someone with a spear was an aspect of daily life for the tribe. They lived as if there was no other way to live. However, Waengongi and his son, something they have never heard before, was revealed to them.

You may have noticed. This story is based on Isaiah chapter 53, verse 5 in the Bible. The missionaries in this area must have always told them about this verse.

“But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed.”

The days of slaughtering people with spears were over because of the spearing of Waengongi’s son. In the same way, our struggles under sin end because of the one who suffered in our place.

Blaming responsibilities, acting in defiance with a careless attitude. There is no solution in these. We are to stand in front of the cross. If we stand there, our hearts will be illuminated by light. We may be able to force and cast blame on others for our responsibilities or give up in caring about our actions. But these things do not work in front of the cross of Jesus. There we come to a realization. That we are healed by the wounds of the man on the cross. That we are facing the first parts to the solution of our problems. The Bible has a message that tells the bad news first, and saves the good news for last. Let us pray.

Translated by Kou Okura