

What's gone wrong with the human race?

Lesson 2

If the question were posed to you, “what’s wrong with the human race,” how would you answer? Some people would volunteer, “Nothing is wrong.” What we see when we feel that something is wrong, are but little glitches in the upward spiral of progress. Some say if there is a problem, science will find an answer. Others would be more cynical. They would answer that the human race is hopelessly mired in a slough of violence, selfishness and destruction. What is the scriptural response? Are our evil deeds the problem or is it deeper than that?

Warning: as you plunge into this lesson you will see that you and I are a mirror of all that’s wrong with the human race.

Studying

Read Romans 1:18-32

Take a separate piece of paper and write out your answer to the questions:

1. If Romans 1:17 is God’s answer to the dilemma of the human race, what is the problem (vs. 18)?
 2. Think of the word “righteousness.”
 - What does that word mean in the general culture today?
 - Write down what that word means to you.
 - What does that word mean in Scripture?
 3. What do verses 22-25 tell us always happens to human beings who reject the worship of the true God?
 4. What do you understand by the phrase “the wrath of God?” (Vs. 18) How is giving people over to evil deeds (vs. 24, 26, 28) a part of the wrath of God?
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Reading

Read the following article entitled “Our Quest for Righteousness” and write your annotations in the margin.

Our Quest for Righteousness

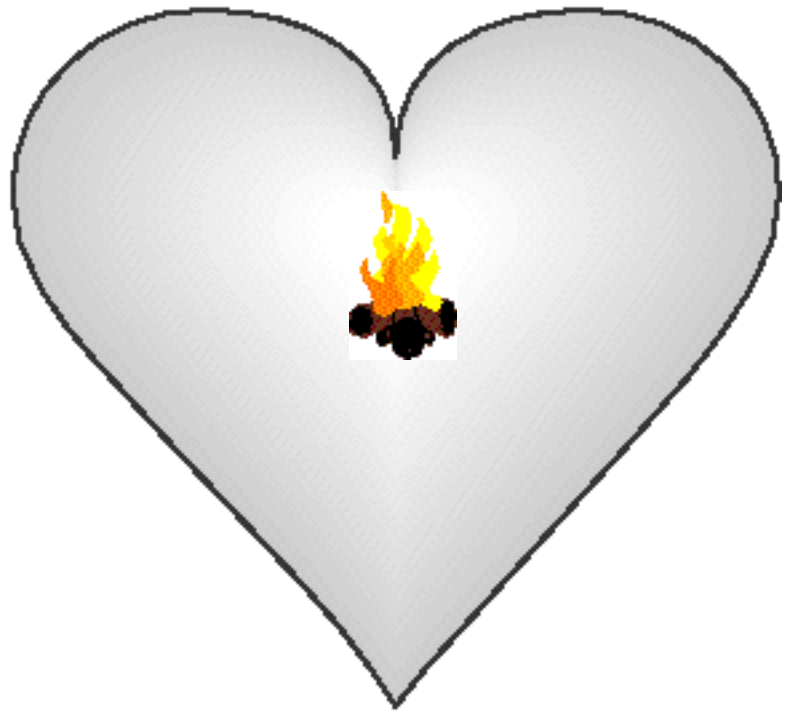
By Paul Thompson

Our hearts are described in Scripture as on fire (Jer. 20:7-9). There is a deep burning in our souls. It's an intense longing to be warmed by love and acceptance. If the fire were to go out, we could not bear the cold in our hearts. So, very early on in our lives we discover ways to fuel this inner fire. We set out on a journey to make ourselves acceptable.

All of life is based on measurement. The first thing the doctor did after we came slithering out of our mother's womb was to weight and measure us. I am told that in modern hospitals doctors have ten point measuring scales to determine an infant's health. Within minutes after birth an infant is classified and given a grade. This grading system pursues him in one way or another throughout life.

As a child, he finds that society has set up certain standards he must meet. He must obey his parents. He can't talk with his mouth full. He must respect his elders. Based upon performance he is classified as either good or bad.

At school he is obligated to take an intelligence test. At the end of each grading period, he brings home a report card. It doesn't take long for him to learn that he is smart, average or stupid. On the playground he learns that he is slower or faster than his peers. If he is fast and coordinated, he is given a place on the ball team. If he is clumsy and slow, he sits despised on the bench. As he grows older he is given a battery of personality tests. He is introverted or extroverted, aggressive or passive, well adjusted or problematic. Perhaps most important of all is appearance. Is he tall or short, handsome or ugly, fat or thin? It's the handsome boys and the beautiful girls that seem to have the advantages.



It is inevitable in this atmosphere of measurement to ask the burning question: AM I ACCEPTABLE? Men and women may ask this question in different ways. The question many women ask goes something like this, "Am I lovely? Do others want me?" The question many men ask is, "Do I have what it takes? Am I adequate?"

As men and women we want desperately to be liked, approved and accepted. But we are never sure if we are. Always within us lingers the unsettling doubt of our unacceptability. We may show ourselves competent in one area and do everything to bolster our strengths to cover our weaknesses, yet we all live with the nagging uncertainty that we will be discovered.

In Romans 1, Paul sets out to explain this phenomenon. He says in verse 18, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and unrighteousness of men.” Paul uses two words to indict mankind: godlessness and unrighteousness.

Unrighteousness means that mankind just doesn’t make it in God’s eyes. He is unacceptable. He doesn’t come up to God’s standards. Let’s say you want to buy a house. You don’t have the money to buy it and need a loan. The first thing to be done in order to obtain a loan is a credit check; that is, the bank will have to survey all your credit history, your past record of payments or lack of payments. If you have a record that you have paid your bills on time, you are “righteous.” You have a right relationship with your creditors. You are acceptable. You measure up.

Many people have problems looking at themselves in a mirror. They see so many imperfections and the mirror tells no lies. Do you take pleasure from hearing yourself speak on a tape recording or seeing yourself in a video? Do you enjoy looking at a candid picture of yourself? Why are we so often embarrassed? Why do we work so hard to make ourselves look nice? The struggle for righteousness is not obsolete.

When Adam and Eve decided to be their own masters and walk away from God, something happened to the whole human race. We all lost our “credit rating.” Adam and Eve saw themselves naked and were ashamed. They realized that they had lost their original acceptability. They became unacceptable at a very profound level and they knew it.

Everybody since that tragic fall in Eden is born with this sense. It is universal. At some very profound level we all feel unacceptable and we must find a way to make ourselves better. Besides our own intrinsic sense of unacceptability, early experiences in our family, in school and society have a lot to do with how loud that sense rings in our ears.

Princess Diana of England was raised in the very best environment the British Empire could provide. She had the very best upbringing. Her parents were loving. She attended the very best schools. She lived in the very best neighborhood. She was endowed with a beautiful body. She had an effusive personality. She was beautiful, charming, smart and rich. She had it all! Then she managed to nag the most eligible bachelor in England: the future king. She had a fairy tale wedding which the press labeled “the wedding of the century.”

Six months into their marriage, Prince Philip puts his hand around her waist and feeling a little flab, says in a joking manner, “My dear, getting a little chubby, aren't you?” That offhanded remark triggered Diana’s long and lonely plunge into anorexia. For all her attributes and advantages and attainments, she still felt unacceptable.

It’s intrinsic to the human race. It’s like an incessant fire that burns in our bones. Everybody struggles with it. It’s the search for righteousness.

Paul is careful to give us the root cause, the source of our burning. He says it stems from “ungodliness.” Ungodliness means living our lives as if there were no God. Man does not want God around. Man is at enmity with God and therefore shuns a relationship with Him. Sin is not merely a series of wrong actions. Sin is walking away from God, not wanting God to interfere with our lives.

Following verse 18, Paul gives us a profound anatomy of sin. In verse 21 he says, “For though they knew God, they neither glorified him nor gave thanks to him.” This is Paul’s explanation of

“ungodliness.” Our root problem is our unwillingness to glorify God, that is, to make God central to our lives.

As a consequence we choose created things as “gods.” In order to fill the acceptability gap, we invent our own gods in order to find acceptability; to find things, persons or activities we live for and worship in order to calm the burning in our souls. We fuel the fire with our own righteousness.

The logical outcome, says Paul, is that life becomes distorted by a life lie. At the base of all our life’s choices, our emotional structure and our personality is a false system centered on an idol that we think will bring us acceptability. We have, as Paul puts it, “exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (vs. 25). We are looking to something besides God to be our savior, our righteousness, something that makes us acceptable.

Having fixed our hope on an idol, (someone we hold onto or something we must do to be acceptable) we become slaves. Life becomes a knot of bondage we cannot untangle. No one is actually free; for whatever we give ourselves to, in order to win our acceptability, becomes our master. Every human being, therefore, is in a covenant service to a lord which works its will out through our bodies.

Our ungodliness, which moves us to unrighteousness, Paul says (vs. 18), is the source of the “wrath of God.” This does not mean that God is capricious or holds some pent up emotional or arbitrary anger towards us. No. This means that our sin is an utter offense to God. God is offended by our unrighteousness and the way we suppress and distort the truth to justify ourselves.

This is what we need saving from in the end. This is our ultimate problem: God’s final wrath that separates us from him and casts us into our desperate search for righteousness. If you ask the book of Romans, what do we need to be saved from, the answer comes back: from sin, from guilt, from disunity and bad relationships, from destructive habits and harmful ways, from our own futile search to create our own acceptability. But mainly the answer is: We need to be saved from God’s wrath. Our ultimate problem, though very few in and out of the church today see this truth, is that we are sinners in the hands of an infinite, omnipotent, holy God.

Reflecting

In your small group, discuss the result of your study of the scripture lesson, the reading, and interact with the following questions.

1. A Brazilian psychiatrist answers the question, “what’s wrong with the human race” with a medical term. He says our basic human disorder is “theomania – the desire to be God...the desire to be the playwright instead of the action in the drama.” How does this analysis square with Paul’s indictment of “ungodliness” in verse 18?
2. Read and discuss the following definition of sin by J.I. Packer. “Scripture diagnoses sin as a universal deformity of human nature, found at every point in every person...This

moral deformity is dynamic: sin stands revealed as an energy of irrational, negative, and rebellious reaction to God's call and command, a spirit of fighting God in order to play God. The root of sin is pride and enmity against God."

3. Share with your group your own struggles for acceptability. Think through what might be a chief strategy you use in order to make yourself acceptable to others. (For men it might be what they do. For women it might concern relationships). How have you tried to make yourself acceptable to God?

4. Read verse Romans 1:17. Discuss together the gospel's answer to acceptability. What is it? How is it attained?

5. How does your view of "acceptability" affect your prayer life? Spend a few minutes as a group in conversational prayer.

Applying

Optional – to do this project will entail an extra week

Meditation Project

Project No 2

Three disciplines are important to Christian growth: Bible study, prayer, and meditation. I used to think and practice only two: Bible study and prayer. It was not until I came to realize the importance of meditation that Bible study and prayer became meaningful in my life. Meditation is important because it's the discipline of getting the truth out of the intellect and into the heart.

Meditation is a cross between Bible study and prayer. Meditation is a blending of prayer with Bible study. Most of us first study our Bible, and then move to prayer. But the prayer is detached from the Bible you just studied. Meditation is praying the truth deeply into your soul until it catches fire. By fire I mean, until it makes all sorts of personal connections so it shapes your thinking, moves your feelings and changes your actions. Meditation is working out the truth personally.

The closest analogy to meditating is the way a person eagerly reads a love letter. You tear it open and you weigh every word. You never simply say, "I know that" but "what does it mean?" You aren't reading it quickly just for information; you are looking for feelings, for what lies beneath what is said. Most importantly, you want the letter to sink in and form you.

Augustine saw meditation as "the soul's ascent into God" and having three parts: "retentio," "contemplatio," and "dilectio." I will review these briefly.

"Retentio" means holding the truths of Scripture centrally in one's mind. This means studying and concentrating on a passage of Scripture simply to understand it. When doing this, don't get bogged down in the details. Take a paragraph, for instance, and read it for its central impact. I

find it helpful to summarize by writing out a passage or paragraph's meaning in a sentence or phrase.

“Contemplatio” means gazing at God through this truth. The purpose of contemplatio is to move from an objective, analytical view of things to a personal, dealing with God as he has revealed himself in that passage. It is to deal with God directly, to stretch every nerve actually to see him with the heart, to adore, to marvel, to rest in or to be troubled by, to be humbled by him. It's one thing to work on a diamond, cutting and polishing it; it's another to stand back and let it take your breath away. Here are some questions that might help your meditation:

- What does this tell me about God; what does it reveal about him?
 - How can I praise him for and through this?
 - How can I humble myself before him for and through this?
 - If he is really like this, how does this particular truth affect how I love him today?
 - What wrong behavior, harmful emotions, false attitudes result when forget he is like this?
 - Does my life demonstrate that I am remembering and acting out of this?
- Lord, what are you trying to tell me about you and why do you want me to know it now, today?

“Dilectio” means delighting and relishing the God you are looking at. You begin to actually praise and confess and aspire toward him on the basis of the digested and meditated truth. When you begin to move from mere reading scripture to meditation, you begin to experience God. Sometimes it is mild, sometimes strong, and sometimes it is very dry. Whenever you are meditating and you find new ideas coming to you, write them down and move to direct praising, confessing and delighting. This is, as Luther once said, “the Holy Spirit preaching to you.”

This week:

- Read the above short description of meditation several times until the ideas begin to crystallize in your mind.
- Every day select a Scripture, perhaps a Psalm to begin with, and write down one or two of the main thoughts you have derived from your reading.
- Begin the process of meditation, using the questions listed above (under “contemplatio”).
- Share with the group your struggles as well as the positive results of your meditation. Listen and learn from one another. Perhaps if you have difficulty with time or discipline, ask the group, how can we be accountable to each other?