One of my favorite print cartoons was a strip called Calvin & Hobbes. Calvin is a little grade-school boy and Hobbes is his stuffed tiger who comes alive in the cartoon when no one else is around. This week I finally found one I had been looking for many years on how to write a book – a self-help book to be exact. Hobbes, the stuffed tiger that comes alive, walks up to Calvin who sitting outside by a tree and says, “Whatcha doing?” Calvin replies, “Getting rich!” “Really?”

“Yep, I’m writing a self-help book! There’s a huge market for this stuff. First, you convince people there something wrong with them. That’s easy because advertising has already conditioned people to feel insecure about their weight, looks, social status, sex appeal, and so on. Next, you convince them that the problem is not their fault and that their victims of larger forces. That’s easy, because it’s what people believe anyways. Nobody wants to be responsible for his own situation. Finally, you convince them that with your expert advice and encouragement, they can conquer their problem and be happy!”

So Hobbes comments, “Ingenious, what problem will you help people solve?” “Their addiction to self-help books! My book is called, ‘shut up and stop whining: how to do something with your lives besides think about yourself.”' Hobbes replies, “You should probably wait for the advance before you buy anything.” Of course, Calvin’s thoughts are elsewhere, “the trouble is… If my program works, I won’t be able to write a sequel.”

We have a seemingly endless amount of advice, books, shows, networks, counseling methods, philosophies, even religions which are offering advice on how the world works and what will make life better. As Christians, we have chosen to get the big picture of life, what’s important, what problems there are, and the way we should live for an abundant life from the revelation of the Creator God Himself. God has revealed Himself and His ways most clearly through Jesus Christ which is seen in the Bible. The Bible is God’s Word to us and for us. So we have been looking at Romans chapters 1 to 3 for some much-needed perspective on our world today.

One of the difficulties, is that these chapters focus so much on sin - doing what we shouldn’t do, not doing what we should do, elevating what we shouldn’t and ignoring or rebelling against what we should elevate. When you focus on sin a lot it can be very disheartening and discouraging. And yet God is showing us these things for our own good, the good of those around us and the good of God’s work in this world. That’s why we started with 2 weeks just focused on the gospel or good news of Jesus. It doesn’t matter how discouraged we get about sin, Jesus offers good news to a broken, rebellious and hurting world, because of His death on the cross to pay the penalty of our sin and His bodily resurrection from the dead to confirm all His words.
There is a 2nd encouragement we are given in the beginning of chapter 1 that we may have forgotten about by this time. The apostle Paul, the writer of this letter under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, thinks very highly of those he is writing to. READ Rom 1:8. At the end of the letter he reaffirms strong positives in their lives. “I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another.” (Romans 15:14) So everything that has been written since Romans 1:18 has not been an indictment against the churches in Rome. It has been a picture of all people. The literary form being used is a hypothetical conversation between Paul and another person. This is confirmed linguistically by the little pronoun “you”. All of the “you”s in Romans 1:1-17 are plural – they speak to all of those in the Roman churches. But all of the “you”s since Romans 1:18 have been singular except Romans 2:24 which is a quote from the OT. This is to a single person – actually several from different backgrounds, but only one at a time. Seeing the real nature and depth of sin helps us see the challenges around us, and in us, much more accurately. Let’s quickly summarize some helpful items we have seen so far.

PROPOSITION: An over-emphasis on what a Christian knows about or does for God can actually lead us away from God.

I. Understanding sin helps us more rightly see the challenges around us (quick review)

A. The desire to do selfish or sinful actions is behind much unbelief
   The desire to do selfish or sinful actions is behind much unbelief. There is more intentionality in unbelief than we will admit, including our own.

B. More education will not solve all world or relational problems
   God has given clear messages to people through creation, the natural world around us and moral thinking in us. But many of these have been ignored. In addition, when God is not rightly glorified or given thanks for what He has given us that leads to our thinking becoming futile, hearts becoming hardened and choosing foolish actions in life while claiming they are wise. So more education will not solve ALL world or relational problems because a lack of information is not the main problem.

C. People wrongly elevate created things over the true God and His ways
   Humans wrongly elevate created things over the true God and His ways. When people put making money, gaining possessions, having comfort, being liked or noticed above God’s ways then we have either placed ourselves or these idols in God’s place in our lives.

D. When everything seems to getting worse, God is at work
   It is unwise to go by our feelings, especially the intensity of them, as we all have (1) God-given desires which are ONLY to be used in certain circumstances, (2) we all have desires which God never wants us to act on and (3) we all have desires that come from our corrupted mind/thinking which harm others. When we continue to insist on going our own way, there comes a point where God releases us from His constraints so we can do what we want, when we want and how we want. When everything around us seems to be getting morally or spiritually worse, God is not absent but He is
going to the next level of action so the people, cultures, or institutions have a genuine chance to repent.

E. God seeks to move us to repentance first through good/grace before pain
   We all have wayward thoughts, actions and emotions in us. Repentance frees us to receive more of God’s grace and mercy. Amazingly God seeks to move us to repentance first through good (and His freely given grace) long before pain.

F. When we judge (condemn) others, that same criteria is used on us
   It is easy when we see things getting worse around us or we are gaining more knowledge or good spiritual habits to judge or condemn others, but God wants us to remember that the same criteria we use to judge or condemn others will be used on us.

G. People are judged by God by their actions and what they do know
   What of those who have never heard? People are judged by God by their actions and what they DO know, not what they don’t know. We have good news that can help anyone in God’s love for us seen in Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins and His bodily resurrection from the dead. No greater kindness can be shown to a person than introducing them to Jesus.

II. Beware over-confidence in what one knows spiritually

   Romans 2:17-24
   READ Romans 2:1. Last week we noted that these words apply to Jewish people as well as moral non-Jews. Now the focus turns just to the Jews of that day – or Christians today. There is an overconfidence that can come from what one knows or does spiritually – and this can actually lead us away from God. *We can wrongly think we have “religious privilege”* – that God will treat us different because of what we know or do spiritually. Romans 2:17-24 focuses on our perceived spiritual knowledge. Look at the end of v 18 – “because you instructed by the law” – that’s very similar to the end of v 20 – “because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth.” So the common feature behind v 17-24 is what one knows spiritually from God. READ v 17-18. These are definite benefits and calls by God. Let’s name them and see their equivalent in Christianity.

   A. Privileges Christians have which can be wrongly relied on
   Rom 2:17-18
   (Jeremiah 9:23-24; Deuteronomy 4:7-8)

     • “If you call yourself a Jew” (you is singular) – that was a great privilege since God said He specially choose the Jewish people. God has called us as Christians & adopted us into His family through Jesus Christ. We are God’s kids – that’s special
     • “If you rely on the law” – it was wise for the Jewish people to see the law, the Torah, the Old Testament as God’s revealed truth to them. For Christians today it is wise when we see the Bible as the revealed Word of God to us.
     • “If you boast in God” – “Boasting in God” is not only something God is OK with, but He encourages us in it! As Jeremiah 9:23-24 says, ‘This is what the LORD says: “Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boasts of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the
LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight”, declares the LORD’

- “If you know God’s will” – knowledge of God’s ways comes from the Bible, both Old and New Testaments. It is an incredible privilege to have been entrusted with God’s word.
- “If you approve of what is superior” – superior according to the Bible – If we agree that the Bible truths are truth that is a great privilege.

As Moses reminded Israel on the plains of Moab: ‘What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?’ (Deut 4:7-8). Here in Romans 2:17-18, these six things were wonderful privileges. But as wonderful as they are, they can actually blind us so we misuse them.

B. Benefits you think you bring which can wrongly magnified

Let’s continue. READ v 19-20. In 2:19–20 are some of the benefits & positive helps we can bring to others around us through our knowledge of God & His ways through the Bible.

- We can be a guide for the (spiritually) blind – We can help people who really don’t know where they are going in life because they are blind to God’s truth.
- We can be a light for those in the dark – We can bring clarity to those who are confused - and - understanding to those who have muddled thinking because they don’t know God or His truths
- We can be an instructor of the foolish (moral foolishness) – Remember “foolish” in the Bible is not intellectual, it is moral. We can show people who are headed towards unnecessary pain because of their foolish actions a very different way to go.
- We can be a teacher of little children – And we can help those who know very little about God, the Bible, or Jesus. We can help new Christians become established in their faith, grow in their love and have solid hope in a broken world!

The six privileges God gives us through the Bible, the 4 ways we can genuinely help other people with the truths of the Bible – these are all incredible! They are special!!

C. Hypocrisy dishonors God - Arrogant presumption is ugly hypocrisy

Unfortunatley, they can also be misused. They can cause us to think we are better than others just because we have this special knowledge. They can cause us to think we are more necessary or more important to God than we are. And they can cause us to miss our own failings and thus take for granted God’s wonderful forgiveness, mercy and undeserved grace. READ Rom 2:21-24.
Compared to others around us, our knowledge of the true God and His ways are far beyond the average American, especially in our age of Biblical illiteracy. But focusing on that comparison (us to others around us) can lead to sinful pride and thinking we have special “religious privilege” so God is going to just overlook, or minimize, or ignore, any short-comings we have. Here we are given some additional penetrating but healing questions similar to last week. These are good analysis for all of us. They are meant to humble us in a godly way and put our focus back on our obeying Jesus in our thoughts, attitudes and actions. Praise God that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and offers His righteousness to any who will surrender their lives to Jesus, repent of their sins and start actions that will please the Lord. Those actions are not perfection! If we don’t recognize this danger of spiritual knowledge, we can take on an attitude of prideful presumption, religious privilege, self-righteousness, and self-centeredness. The wonderful knowledge of spiritual things is worthless unless we act on it.

Jesus’ famous Sermon on the Mount says this same thing. Near the end Jesus says these sobering words in Matthew 7:21-23: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” In fancy theological terms, their right beliefs reflect orthodoxy (right doctrine), but their living does not reflect orthopraxy (right practice).

III. Beware over-emphasis in what one does spiritually

Now there were some spiritually motivated actions the Jewish people took that they were very proud of – too proud of to be more accurate. It is important that we do not overemphasize outward faith-driven actions. We can be tempted to depend on the physical action instead of the spiritual reality that the outward action represents. READ Rom 2:25.

A. Faith practices undermined without obedience

(Ezekiel 33:30–32)
The ritual of circumcision was a wonderful thing. God wanted all true Jewish men to have it done. When originally given to Abraham, circumcision was a public demonstration, or testimony, of one’s commitment to God then later one’s family dedicating their child to the true God. Yet that circumcision, that outward physical faith practice, will not justify a person before God. Circumcision was of great value if one understood and lived its intended significance. However, if its meaning was disregarded, it was as meaningless as a wedding ring on an adulterer’s finger. As Christians there are a number of very valuable faith practices that God calls us to: regular gathering together with others for praise, worship, and Bible teaching, baptism, being a part of a local church, communion, making an outward profession of faith, giving generously, fasting, having a regular quiet time with God are just some. Those actions are made worthless if we don’t also obey God—now this isn’t a perfect obedience of God, but that actual regular faith actions are done. While God CALLS us
to do these actions in obedience, be careful putting your trust in those actions. They are worthless without obedience.

This is not new, listen to the words of God to the prophet Ezekiel in Ezekiel 33:30-32.

“As for you, son of man, your people are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, ‘Come and hear the message that has come from the LORD.’ My people come to you, as they usually do, and sit before you to hear your words, but they do not put them into practice. Their mouths speak of love, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice.” God is never fooled by our outward actions when our heart doesn’t match that.

B. God’s way is open to all

If disobedience on the part of Jewish people means their circumcision is regarded as uncircumcision, then obedience to the law on the part of Gentile people will mean that their uncircumcision will be regarded by God as circumcision. READ v 26-27. God’s way is open to all. “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” WHOEVER! By the way, the picture here is not so much Gentiles acting as judges but rather being witnesses for the prosecution. Their obedience to the law will constitute the ‘evidence of what the Jew ought to have been and could have been’.

C. Assurance when faith practices are spiritual & outward

READ v 28-29a. Genuine circumcision is not just the physical action itself. Rather, a genuine Jew is one inwardly and true circumcision is … of the heart and by the Spirit. As we see in the gospels, some Jews followed the Law’s regulation outwardly, but their hearts were not right with God. A circumcised heart is one that is “separated” from the world & dedicated to God. The same is true for the Christian – our outward baptism is a sign of the baptism of the Holy Spirit which happens at the time of our true conversion. Our public profession of faith is an outward sign of putting our genuine faith in Jesus alone. Our church membership is an outward sign of our commitment to the Body of Christ & working together under the leadership of Jesus. There is an assurance that comes when our outward faith practices mirror our inner faith beliefs.

D. Who do we seek to please? Others or God

Finally we read in the last part of v 29, “Such a person’s praise is not from other people, but from God.” We can do outward faith practices so other people will notice. Paul implies that those who brag about the law and put their confidence in being circumcised physically, are seeking praise from other people, rather than God. They are actually showing that their hearts have not been circumcised by the Spirit. In a similar way we want to regularly ask ourselves as Christians, who are we really seeking to please – those who notice around us or God alone. If other peoples’
• You sang songs of praise earlier, because you believe there is a great God who is worthy of our praise and thanks.
• You shared the “amen” to our prayer, because you believe God is active in our world today.
• You followed along in the service & cooperated, because you believe you personally are not the center of the Universe – everything doesn’t have to go as you want, but you know God loves His children to work together.
• You paid attention to this challenge from the Bible, because you believe the Bible is God’s word to us.
• Soon you will take part in communion because you believe Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty of your sins and rose bodily from the grave to prove it.
• And you have taken (or will take) time today to speak with other people who may have different ethnic origins, different political views, different education levels, different interests and are in different stages of life than you are, simply because they are also a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Our actions are based on our true beliefs and our true beliefs are seen in our choices and actions. Keep these two warning signals active in your life. First, if we aren’t doing the clear faith actions God calls us to, do we really believe God’s ways are best? Second, if we think we are better than others or we think outward actions alone are sufficient, have we really repented of our sins, surrendered our lives to Jesus and received God’s undeserved grace? Remember, Paul has the highest praise for those in the Roman churches and they still needed the reminders of when we get “off track”. We would do well to apply those things to ourselves also.