

So we are back into Romans again, and you may be thinking to yourselves this is all very gloomy stuff so far. But I think I previously said that in order for us to understand how blessed we are, we need to understand the chasm that exists between us and God which shows the extent by which God's love through Jesus Christ is willing to go for each one of us. So in these opening chapters, Paul is trying to help the Romans understand just how profound the sin problem is and why there is such a need for humanity to be rescued from its ultimate destruction. So bear with us a little while longer. And please remember that Paul's writing to the Romans is not easy to understand – it was actually the apostle Peter who said this about Paul, "He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). So if one apostle finds it hard to understand what another Apostle writes, then don't panic if you also find it hard. This has been probably the hardest passage I've had to study in a long time.

So what I'd like you to think about today is the difference between things that are real and authentic and those things that are fake, or simply less superior. I can remember early in our married life, Alison and I had just moved into our house in Garvagh. What I hadn't realised about the house was at this time of the year when all the trees lose their leaves it creates an almighty mess that needs cleared up. Now I didn't really want to buy a good leaf blower so I can remember going into a particular shop that sold random things, and there I found a leaf blower at such a bargain. The brand name was unrecognisable, but I thought who cares, this will do well, it looks quite good. So, I got it home and started to use it. The first thing that became a frustration was that it was electric, so I needed an extra long extension reel to get around the garden, and then secondly, I realised that the power of the blower was rather feeble. All this was setting me up for what would soon come. It was on its third outing that this rather feeble excuse for a blower gave up the ghost and died on me. It was at this point I realised that you get what you pay for. Whilst on the outside of the box this leaf blower looked the bee's knees, it was poor quality and rather fake.

You know there's a danger that people who say they follow Jesus can on the inside be rather fake and not authentic. They say like many will, oh I believe in God, but what do they mean by that? How much depth is there behind the statement? You see it's one thing to say something on the outside but it's a different thing altogether about what it says in the inside. What we have seen so far in our reading of Romans is Paul challenging his readers about God's response to fake, unauthentic Christians. And what we saw last time was Paul turning directly to the Jews and saying that they are using their outward religious practices to actually suppress the truth of the gospel - that it's a fake practice.

There's a real difference between a true follower of Jesus and one who says it on the outside. Let's not think that just because someone lives a good life that they have an authentic relationship with God.

You see the Word of God is essential to a Christian truly knowing God. It's usually a good sign of knowing whether someone wants to know more about their creator, if they have his book open in front of them, and they're willing to apply it to their lives no matter what it says. But unfortunately, so many churches today have tried to make this book align to whatever they want. If you read something in this book and you suppress the truth to believe what you want to believe, then you're not worshipping God, you are worshipping a fake God. If all you think is that Jesus loves me this I know, and that will get you to heaven, then you've not read Romans. And so, in our text today Paul knows that his writings are going to stir up lots of questions – he is a member of God's chosen people, the Jews, but now is he saying that all that they have been following as tradition is worth nothing if their heart hasn't been changed? So, Paul knows he's going to have to answer questions about whether there has been any advantage given to God's chosen people. And so we see him

giving what is known as a diatribe – he’s trying to answer the questions before they actually are brought to him.

So he starts with answering the question about what advantage there is (verse 1), in being a Jew. In other words, can the Law save us? For his readers they know there’s an advantage in being a Jew over a Gentile, and Paul will affirm them by saying that the good news is that they have been the stewards of God’s word. And through this word they could know and grow in their relationship with God. And so, the Jew had that advantage. We also know that the Jews were God’s chosen people as we read in Deuteronomy 7 that God chose them and made a covenant with them. So, Paul is saying that there is an advantage with being a Jew.

But it’s important to recognise that in all of this, the scriptures given to these people could not save them unless they did something about themselves – circumcision, good works was part of their important tradition but now without Christ it’s worthless. It’s exactly the same with us – we have the privilege of the scriptures in front of us, available in our pews.

However, you’ve got to do something with it, don’t you? So here’s a little illustration to help. Many of you today have great looking hair. But all of us will have a bad hair day at some stage. I especially get bad hair days when I let my hair grow long. I know after I’ve showered and arranged my hair for the day that I’m just not going to be happy with it. When you look in the mirror, and you know it’s going to be one of those days, the mirror can’t do anything to help you. And that’s what the word of God is. It’s a mirror into our lives, showing that we are sinners, but it can’t help the situation. We have got to respond. When it comes to the bad hair, some people disguise it by putting a hat on. And that’s what good works try to do. It’s a cover up for our true condition. But it doesn’t change what’s going on inside. So the Law can’t make you right, you’ve got to do something about it. And that’s where Christ comes in, because when we read God’s word in the light of what Christ has done then it should make us respond.

Unless you care about the things of God, enough to do something about it, nothing’s going to change. You’ve got to start living these truths for yourself, start practicing the message, proclaiming the scriptures into your community, otherwise all this is is just a ritualistic practice. And so the first question – what’s the advantage of being a Jew is that you have the word of God. Folks, read the word of God, discover new things that God has for you. Don’t you all want to have him speak to you by his Spirit, to shape your future, where you have issues in life that need his comfort and his direction for the decisions you have to make? Don’t you want that affirmed every day?

Second question, verse 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’.

If the Jews don’t respond to the Gospel, will God therefore reject the Jews? And Paul says definitely not. God made a promise to his people in the book of Exodus where he would deliver them out of Egypt – he would redeem them through the shedding of the blood of the lamb. You see God’s not done with Israel. He has a plan for them, and he will bring them to himself – even though the people rejected Christ as messiah, God is going to come through on his end of the deal. So, as we look right now at what’s happening in Israel, remember that God is not done with them. God will be faithful to his promises.

So the third question, in verse 5 is this – If our sin demonstrates how righteous God is in comparison, well then how can God judge us? So, Paul is saying this, if by me sinning God gets to demonstrate that he is righteous and merciful, why would God be upset with me for allowing him the opportunity to do that? Well obviously, we shouldn’t think that it’s ok to go against God’s will in order that the goodness of God comes out more; that’s a nonsense. Paul is saying that the Gospel of grace is not a licence to sin. This in fact is a cheap

interpretation of grace, to think that just because God loves us no matter our sin, that it's ok to keep disobeying him again and again. The gospel of grace through Jesus does not give any of us the opportunity to live a life that is in rebellion to God. That's like saying that you can turn up to church on Sunday doing the Christian thing, and then go back to your normal everyday life Monday to Saturday. We can't live our lives for Christ in whatever way we want. No we have got to live a life that pleases God that demonstrates our love for God and our love for others. You know, as a Church I long to reach more and more people in our community with the love of God, to see lives turn to him, but the one thing that generally makes it a challenge is getting people to do things. When I ask people to step up, I don't do it because it's a nice thing that we can be doing. I do it because it's important for the growth of the Kingdom in our community, and therefore it can be very disheartening when people don't sign up. We can't say that it's ok, because at the end of the day God will see it all good despite our failing or apathy. That again is a fake Christianity.

So this is how Paul addresses the issues that he expects the Jewish leaders to raise. And now he goes on to talk about 4 problems that all humanity suffers. This is from verse 9 – 18. So Paul is demonstrating that we are all sinners in need of a saviour. He starts to string together all these Old Testament scriptures. He says that whether we are Jew or Gentile, none of us are righteous. And then he goes on to name parts of the body in his words – in other words from head-to-toe mankind is separated from God due to our sinful nature. Let's look at these:

Words – they reveal our hearts verse 13 & 14 – “their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit”. Do you remember when we studied James a number of years ago in his writings, he said this, “the tongue is a fire that cannot be restrained” (James 3:16). Sometimes there are things I am so ashamed of what I have said – it reflects the darkness that is in my heart, and I'm sure no one else here is any different. But what comes out of our mouths can't be put back in. In today's culture all the texts, all the tweets, all the documents that are stored on the cloud, everything is retained. Even more so by God – Jesus said in Matthew 12:36, “everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken”. We have got to be not only careful with what we say but also how we say it. Too often my words are out far quicker than my mind has had a chance to decide whether it's wise for them to be said. I'm sure I'm not the only one that's like that – it's the nature of our fallenness.

So that's words, and then Paul goes on to talk about our **works** – verse 15 ‘their feet are swift to shed blood’. Our works can sometimes reveal anger or hate or destruction. We've all hurt others and we've probably all been hurt by others. Our words reveal that we need a saviour.

And then Paul in verse 17 talks about the way that we **go** - “the way of peace they do not know.” Isn't that the problem with humanity today – so many people are so ignorant about the future of their lives. They live for the moment. They gather up all that they think will make them happy, they search for meaning, but ultimately there's never peace in their hearts. People don't realise it but we are so lost without a saviour to guide us. Jesus comforted his disciples who seemed lost when they realised, he was leaving them when he said “I am the way, I am the Truth, I am the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”

That's the problem with the human heart. Our words reveal that our hearts are not right with God. Our works reveal that our hearts are not right with God. And the way to God is concealed unless we realise that Jesus is the only way.

So now we finish on verse 19 & 20. “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world

held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin". So what does that mean - well it means that the purpose of the law, the purpose of God's word is to convict us of our sin so that we realise that we need a saviour. None of us can be declared right with God, nor can we declare at the end of our lives that because we went to church, because we were confirmed, because we paid in, because we supported the church that we are right with God. If all we think this faith is about is to know of God, then folks you've been taught a fake Gospel.

So, what next, well I'm going to give you an insight where hopefully Andy will pick up in 2 weeks at verse 21. It starts with these words "But now". Paul has spent the first 3 chapters explaining this - if you're a good person living a moral life, if you're a religious person, and even if you've no interest in anything other than a good time, then all of us are guilty before God, but Paul say '**but now**'. But now what? But now Jesus. You see every one of us deep down knows that we are great sinners. But what we are going to discover is how greater a saviour Jesus is. The answer to humanity's problems is Jesus. Following him truly is nothing fake, it's genuine, and unlike my leaf blower will never disappoint. My invite to all of you today is simple but yet requires true commitment – follow Jesus.