

Leave Us Alone To Do What We're Good At

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[0 : 00] Well, I have a certain anxiety that I'm going to get into trouble today, and so I'd jump in a pool and then not be able to get out. So any of you who are really wise and intelligent and think as we come towards the end that you could ask the question by which I would be rescued, feel free to ask it.

I'll try and make sure that there's room for you to do it. Now, the passage, the title for today, it's not very appropriate, so don't pay too much attention to it.

Times have changed since I thought of that, and my thinking about this has changed too. What I want to do is talk about we and they.

Now, this is not numerically the way it is. This is just the way we think of it. You know, we think of there is the big we and then there's the insignificant they over there.

And that comes up as soon as you start to read the passage. What shall we conclude then? Now, who are the we? Well, Paul obviously was a Jew.

[1 : 26] I mean, he's probably one of the, well, the most outstanding Jews that ever lived. And it was ingrained in him.

It was his tradition. It was his faith. It was his upbringing. It was his family. It was his education. It was the clothes he wore, the food he ate. Everything said that we are the Jews.

So he's saying we. And then he says, are we any better? And then he concludes, not at all.

We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are under sin. Now, the thing that makes for the big we, and I want you to think about the we you belong to.

I don't know which we you belong to, but there surely is a we that applies to your life. For the Jews, it was that they had the covenant with Abraham.

[2 : 40] They were the children of Abraham. They were the elect of God. And they had the oracles of God. So that defines a we they were talking about.

We who have this covenant, who have this blood in our veins, who have this oracle from God, who have the election of God. This intrigued me.

Did that intrigue you? I wondered if that was them. There's another we for you. So it's, that's how they regarded themselves as the we.

But Paul says of them that they are under, how does it say it? Under sin. Now, if you look through the epistle to the Romans, what Paul means when he says that they're under sin is that they are prisoners of it.

They are in the cell. The door is shut and locked within the building that is shut and locked. The guards are in place.

[3 : 48] They are prisoners and powerless over the power by which they are held prisoners. So one of the ways he describes them is that they are prisoners of sin.

They are under sin. They are held accountable for their sin. In chapter 7, he says they are a slave of their sin.

And he said this being under sin is the universal condition of our lives. All of us. All of us, without exception.

That's where we are. So, you look at the we you belong to. Now, Paul is using here, the we's are the Jews, as opposed to the Gentiles.

The Gentiles have already been disposed of, and nobody, you know what I mean, nobody's saying anything good about them. But the question is that, you know, that we all live in this kind of world.

[4 : 56] And these are the people we talk to, these are the people we associate with, these are the people we derive our identity from, and the rest tend to be this insignificant minority over here that we don't ever run into serious contact with.

So, what are the we groups? Well, I think in our society, and this is where I'm going to get into trouble, so be ready for it.

In our society, we homosexuals, we lesbians, we environmentalists, we Baptists, I just wanted to get the balance.

We with AIDS, we who are protagonists of animal rights, we feminists, we Anglicans, we Pentecostals, we pro-abortionists, we pro-choice, we regard ourselves because of our particular insight, our particular commitment, our particular self-understanding, we have formed ourselves into a group of the illuminated, the elected, the people that are in touch with the oracle from which divine truth comes.

We are that group. And the rest of the people that don't understand us are the insignificant people that are out there.

[6 : 35] So, Paul takes them all on and makes them aware that every time they say we, they are defining the fact that for somebody else, they are they.

But for them, every we is somebody else's they, if you get what I mean. And so, that's how, I mean, you can't avoid using it.

So, in the passage, all the we's are, Paul says, under sin, the predominant reality of their lives.

But he says, no one comes outside of this. If you look at the emphasis he places there, he says, no one, not even one, no one, no one, all, no one, not even one.

This is totally inclusive. This business of being a slave of sin, under the power of sin, a prisoner of sin, accountable for sin.

[7 : 49] He says that's universal. That's everywhere. And that belongs and applies to everybody. There is no exception. And that's the condition of our humanity.

Well, the difficulty, you see, that Paul sees here is that as soon as you get a glimpse of the good, you are confronted by the reality of the evil.

You know, so that for you to say, we Christians, for lots of other people, it is those Christians. Because they see the latent evil in the group that defines itself in that way. So, as soon as you identify yourself as being somebody who's above, superior, elect, covenanted, or having the oracle, so to speak, the ultimate wisdom, you come under condemnation by others who happen to have a different set of barriers that define them or borders that define who they are.

So, what I think happens here, though, and this is where, I mean, I'm using this illustration and I don't want to mess you up when you're thinking about it, but, you see, I think it's possible that in every we group there is the grounds for the condemnation of everybody who belongs to that group.

[9 : 45] In other words, as soon as you say, I am an environmentalist, you may define yourself, but at the same time you condemn yourself because you belong to a society, a culture, a tradition, a history of people who have violated the rules and laws of environmentalism so that the same thing that you exalt yourself with provides the grounds of your condemnation.

That's the point that Paul is making about the Jews. You think, we Jews have all the answers, but all we have is the knowledge that we are condemned like everybody else.

The thing is, they only know it in a kind of vague way. We have it written down. And so, Paul is saying to them, the very fact of you're saying we are the people, you are submitting to the reality of your own condemnation.

And that's, can I tell you, this is, this has to do with the Aboriginal people of Australia and their relationship to nature.

I mean, it's not very flattering for them, but it looks like it's true. Almost all the trees in Australia are highly fire resistant because fire has been one of the main means of hunting for centuries and centuries and centuries.

[11 : 32] They lit the bush on fire, the animals came out and they killed them. And so, they have that, so that, you know, that's not a, you have the condemnation as well as the affirmation of the we group, whatever the we group is.

Now, the we group always affirms itself and says, we are superior in some essential way. But Paul says, no matter who you are, you in fact come under the condemnation, which, which is universal.

And the very fact of your claiming to know something is only like the problem that Paul says. I know what it is to do good, but I don't do it because there's another reality in my life.

And, and so that's, that's what he moves on to. And then he goes on to that here and describes it in some detail. Now look at what he says in terms of, he takes, he takes the elect people, the people under the covenant, the people with the blood of Abraham in their veins, and he says to them, okay, what does your oracle say about you?

And he says, it's not, I'm not saying this to you. I'm not condemning you. It is the oracle by which you consider yourself to be defined as an elect people that condemns you.

[13 : 02] And he tells them how. He says the reality of us in our condition is that there is, and then he goes into that long catalog that I think is in four verses.

No one is righteous, no one understands, no one seeks God. Their throats are an open grave, their tongues lie, their words poison, they use their, you know, when the thing that is inside them comes out, it comes out as cursing and bitterness.

Violence is so close. I mean, we live in a, what we like to think of as a highly civilized society, but violence is very close to the surface.

And when you see something happen in East Africa, those people are not different, essentially, from us. Now, they haven't got, perhaps, the built-in restraints in their society.

But, Paul says, there is no grounds to distinguish yourself even from them because violence for all of us is close at hand.

[14 : 21] And most of us can be reduced to violence fairly quickly in the right circumstances and sometimes by the right person. I won't go into that. ruin and misery are, is what our life, what we live with.

Peace is largely unknown and unknowable. It's inconceivable. It just wouldn't work.

I mean, the logic of it just isn't there. I mean, you can get people to make pleas for it. but, but, but, the reality of it is, is virtually unknown to people.

And, the other word for peace is salvation. It's, as far as our human condition is concerned, it's unknown. God is not part of the plan.

That's how the, how the description ends up. Now, Paul says, these are the symptoms of the universal reality in which we are all under its control or under its power.

[15 : 34] This is it. Now, you can, you can say, well, there are, there are people who seek God, there are people who are righteous, there are people who speak the truth, and so on, and so on, and so on.

But, but, Paul says, this is the testimony of your own oracle, of which you pride yourself to be the possessor and the stewards of the oracles of God.

And, this is the evidence that I am bringing against you as a community, as a people, as a we group, to say that built right into your oracles are the reality of your condemnation.

Well, the great advantage of this now is, I mean, I think there's an enormous advantage to this argument. It's a huge liberating reality.

And that is that all of us, without exception, have a common human bond. And that is that we are under the power of sin.

[16 : 40] So that gives us enormous sympathy for one another. We may be able to make little distinctions in terms of wealth and power and prestige and breeding and all that between one another.

We may be able to make ethnic differences between one another. We may have the highly educated and the less educated and the ignorant. We may have the highly civilized and the uncivilized.

We can make a million distinctions to set one person apart from another. But you see, the glory of what Paul has done here is to say, but in the essential matter of your relationship to God, you are all under condemnation without exception.

and he, I mean, this is the argument that he's developing and it's what he says is, is the reality of our lives.

So that the great human issue is how is the power of sin to be broken?

[17 : 57] How are we to break out of this prison in which we are held? How are we to be set free from the slavery we are under?

What are we to say to defend ourselves from the reality of the sin which besets us? How do we do it? I mean, that, you see, we think that it's hard to go and talk to people about the gospel.

But part of the gospel is right here that you and I, friends, no matter what your ethnic background or my ethnic background, whatever your education or my education, whatever your economic status or my economic status might be, the great reality of our lives is that we are under sin. And by get left to ourselves, none of us seek God. None of us are righteous. none of us understand. None of us, I mean, none of us can open our mouths without betraying our hearts, so to speak. I mean, because it's such a difficult thing to do. I mean, we, it's, I mean, there's a lot of emphasis in the Bible, as you know, between the fact that when a person opens his mouth and speaks, you see into his heart.

[19 : 29] Because the flattery or the deception or whatever it may be, it's, it's coming out and it's very, very difficult to find any relationship in which you can speak the truth to somebody.

people. We're always trying to take into our understanding, our calculation, what they're going to hear. And so, it doesn't come out.

And that's why Paul says that one of the universal experiences of humankind is detectable as soon as they open their mouths. And it doesn't take much to provoke them to find.

So that all those things, that is the great human bond. And it doesn't matter what your ethnic or religious background is. The reality of sin goes right across the board.

And once you can come to some agreement about that, then you can move on to say, well, what's to happen? Is this a council of despair and hopelessness?

[20 : 35] But you see what Paul does with it. He says, if you look there, 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.

And what in effect he does is to say that when this charge is brought against us, we stand as it were before our judge with nothing to say in our own defense.

there is, we have nothing to say. It's interesting, isn't it, that Jesus stood before Pilate and said nothing. Probably for quite the opposite reason.

But he didn't say anything. And Paul is seeking to establish this reality as being the universal reality of humankind.

And that is when we stand before the ultimate good, the ultimate reality of love, we have nothing to say. Nothing whatever to say.

[21 : 48] And that's the position that we've been put in. And that's the position from which life begins. once you have espoused a cause to know the good, whatever that cause may be, in that cause you will find the grounds of your own just condemnation.

and the recognition that those who know that, you don't know, the environmentalists, and I don't want to pick on them, but the environmentalists can't point at anybody without including themselves in the condemnation they bring.

That's not how we behave humanly. We set, invariably, no matter what our cause is, we lift ourselves up above the common herd and say, you guys got to smarten up.

Thinking that we've set up a viable we-they relationship. And you can't do it, Paul says. It is impossible to do it. So that becomes the end of the argument.

I wish that verse 20 was included in this sheet, which reads like this, therefore, no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law.

[23 : 17] Rather, through the law, we become conscious of sin. And so as soon as we set ourselves up as those who are ready to apply the law to others, we condemn ourselves.

We become conscious of our own failure. Now, you see, what that means is, and I think where we get into real trouble in our churches is that the whole of our world looks at us in our Christian congregation, whatever that may be, as a we group who have forgotten conveniently about the reality of their own just condemnation before God and see themselves really as the instruments by which God is going to reveal his condemnation to them guys there, to those people there, rather than standing with them and accepting with them the reality of God's just condemnation.

We've got to come back next week. you see, where it breaks down is this.

I mean, where, I don't think it breaks down, but I have enormous respect for that, and I think I've told you this before, but I have enormous respect for Alcoholics Anonymous, which says, my name is Harry, and I am an alcoholic.

What we need to learn, in a sense, from that particular technique, is that when we introduce ourselves to one another, we say, my name is Harry, and I am justly under the condemnation of

God.

[25 : 12] That's what we need to be able to say. That's the reality we must never lose touch with, because that's the reality that binds us to the rest of humanity.

Once we forget that, we cut ourselves off from the rest of humanity. We have nothing to say to them, just as they may cut themselves off from us, by some similar technique.

I mean, in an alcoholic's meeting, you're not allowed to do that. And as those who read Paul's letter to the Romans, we're not allowed to stand up and say, I am righteous, and I understand, and I see God, and my mouth is full of love and life and vitality, and violence, I am, whatever you do with violence, you get rid of it, and all those things, you can't do that.

The thing you have to do is, on the basis of Paul's argument in this passage, is say, I, Harry, justly condemned by God with nothing to say in my own defense.

That's the place I've come to. You know how they work with alcoholics, you know, and I always love that brilliant statement they make that says, if you want to drink, that's your business.

[26 : 48] If you want to stop, that's ours, you know, and in the same way for us. If you want to go on in your we versus they kind of life, that's your business.

But when you discover the reality of your own just condemnation, because you are under the power of sin, you are a slave of sin, you are accountable for sin, then there can be some relationship, some basis on which we can talk together, and we can understand what it is that we are in that situation.

You see, the way classically that the whole thing is summed up is to say simply this, we are totally dependent on the mercy of God, and in fact we are.

And that will be the subject of my next address. Do you have any questions? Anybody help me with this? Because I hope I haven't skewed you too badly with it. Well, Martin Luther said that any Christian should at least have the epistle of the Romans memorized.

I don't know if you want to take that on, but certainly that's it. Let me pray for us. our God, we thank you very much for your gifts to us, and most of all, for the tremendously liberating reality of knowing that we are utterly dependent on your grace and mercy.

[28 : 49] Help us never to escape from that reality in our lives. And that we have in that a bond which makes us have good reason to love one another because of the way you have loved us.

To love one another, not in our perfection or in our aspirations, but to love one another in the deep needs that we both have. We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Thank you.