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WHY PEOPLE WEAR RIPPED JEANS

Romans 3:1-20

INTRODUCTION

Back in 2009 a German researcher named Jan Souman led a study that produced a fascinating result. He and his team took subjects to open fields, blinded folded them and instructed them to walk forward in a straight line. Some managed to keep going straight for 10 or 20 steps, while a few were able to go 50 or even 100 in a straight line. However, eventually they began turning. They finally ended up circling back to their starting point. This was not true of a few, or of many of them, or even most of them. It happened with all of them, every single one.

The weird thing is that they had no idea. They were certain they were walking in a straight line the entire time. Some would veer to the left, some to the right, but they all would curve around back toward their point of origin. The researchers tried to figure out why this was so. They checked to see if it correlated with either being right handed or left handed, but it did not. They wondered if being right brain or left brain dominant influenced which way they turned, but again it did not. They even thought perhaps it was because people often have one leg slightly longer than the other. But they measured for that and tried gluing rubber soles to the bottom of one shoe to compensate for it. Dr. Souman said, “It didn’t make any difference at all. There still is no definitive explanation for this phenomenon.”

When I read about that it made me think that perhaps there is a message in this for us. We can’t walk a straight line physically, but could it be that we metaphorically can’t walk a straight line either? Today we are going to look at a passage that says our moral and spiritual ability to walk a straight line is worse than our ability to do it physically. That might be just an interesting factoid, except it has some very large implications for how we live. Let’s look at Romans 3:1-20.

EXPOSITION

GOD IS TRUSTWORTHY

1. By the end of Romans 2 Paul made a powerful case showing that there is something wrong with all humans. All fail to honor God and end up being badly flawed. This, he said, meant we are all in the same boat, whether Jew or Gentile, religious or non-religious.
2. But what about the Jews being God’s chosen people, and what about God’s Law and his eternal truth in his revealed Word, truth that he said would never perish? What Paul had said in chapter 2 makes it seem like all that made no difference at all. Did being Jewish mean nothing after all, and were all the Hebrew scriptures pointless?
3. For ancient Jews what Paul has said would be a little like if a group of leading scientists made an announcement that after extensive study and experimentation they have determined that, in fact, contrary to previous theories, the world is flat and the sun revolves around the earth. We’d all say, “No, that’s not true.” So might many have reacted to Paul’s words.
4. Paul’s answer is first that Jews have had a huge advantage. They have had God’s truth. They knew far more about the one true God than others, who were running around worshiping idols and animals. They know that God is one, that he is all powerful, that he is good, holy, loving, wise and just, and other people didn’t know that. So that’s huge.
5. But Paul goes on to say the problem was not with God’s system, but with the people. They were the ones who were unfaithful. But their unfaithfulness doesn’t mean God can’t be faithful. He is faithful to his word. It still stands. Paul is going to reveal that they misunderstood the real meaning of God’s system when it was all there for them to see. He is still faithful to its real meaning.
6. Some objected, “Hey, if we messed up, but God still keeps his promise that just makes him look better. So why would he judge us for making him look better?” Paul’s answer to that is, “That’s just dumb. By that reasoning God could never judge anyone, and if God never judges anyone that means he doesn’t judge evil, which makes him evil.”
7. These questions were of concern to first century Jewish people, but they don’t interest most of us much. But there is an important message in these disputations for us. That message is that God is faithful. He can be trusted. We can trust his word, his promises and his character. In the end, everything we believe is dependent upon that faithfulness.

WE ARE ALL FATALLY FLAWED

1. Verse 9 asks, “What shall we conclude then?” In these verses Paul sums up the message of all that he has said in this letter up to this point. He quotes a number of Old Testament passages, mostly Psalms, that all have a theme that is stated in verses 10-11. “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.” Verse 12 says, “They have together become worthless, there is no one who does good, not even one.”
2. “Well there’s a message I really want to hear,” says absolutely no one. We are all worthless? That’s harsh. In my freshman year of high school I tried out for the basketball team. This was back in a day when our high school had 4 basketball teams, a varsity, junior varsity, a “C” team and a “D” team, which was essentially a freshman team. For some reason I labored under the delusion that I was good enough to make that freshman team. After all, doesn’t every basketball team need short, not especially adept players who are not lightning quick and also don’t understand the game all that well? I faithfully went to practices and gave it my all. This went on every day for several weeks. But I began to notice by the end of that first week that here were a number of us that during several drills would be told to just stand on the sidelines. When we had scrimmages, we wouldn’t get to participate. The coach paid zero attention to us in that group. The message began to sink in that we had no value to the coach. We were worthless and were just taking up space. By the time cut day came along, when the coach was going to cut people from the team, I had a pretty good idea how that was going to go for me. When you are worthless you should not be surprised to be cast aside, tossed out, and I was. Thus ended my high school basketball career.
3. It felt bad to be worthless. It was miserable. That’s a message that is devastating to the human soul. It’s one thing to be worthless as an athlete, it is something immeasurably worse to be worthless as a person. If you are worthless, you are trash, deserving to be thrown away. Nothing crushes our souls like being worthless, and yet that is what Paul says is true of every one of us before God.
4. Paul says our mouths are full of cursing and bitterness, that we are violent, swift to shed blood and that ruin and misery mark our ways. This seems overly graphic and harsh, but this is poetic. Paul isn’t literally saying every individual is vicious, cruel, violent and deceitful. Poetry uses imagery to create a feeling. Paul’s aim here is to help us to feel how far off from God’s ideal we are, how worthless and deserving of condemnation we are.
5. Some might object that this is excessively negative and untrue because we aren’t that bad. In verse 12 he said, “There is no one who does good, not even one.” That’s just not true. I know some very good people who do good things. Paul was not saying that’s untrue. He meant no one is truly good in the sense that God is good, and that’s the standard. I will discuss that in a bit. Are people really not good, not righteous?
6. In 1991 two hikers in the Italian Alps stumbled on a corpse. It proved to be quite a find. When it was tested it was found that the corpse was 5,300 years old. It is the oldest intact corpse ever found. Forensic investigation revealed that this person, whom they nicknamed Otzi the Iceman, had been a shepherd. It also showed that he had been shot in the back with an arrow. The oldest known human corpse had been murdered. Go back 5,000 years and you find people killing people. Yeah, it’s a problem. It has always been a problem. How long did it take before the first murder in history took place? One generation.
7. We need to define what we mean by good. Remember the old *Calvin and Hobbes* comic strip? In one of those, little Calvin and his stuffed tiger, Hobbes, are hurtling down a snow covered slope on a sled. Calvin says to Hobbes, “I’m getting nervous about Christmas.” Hobbes answers, “You’re worried you haven’t been good?” Calvin says, “That’s just the question. It’s all relative. What’s Santa’s definition? How good do you have to be to qualify as good? I haven’t killed anybody. That’s good, right? I haven’t committed any felonies, I haven’t started any wars. Wouldn’t you say that’s pretty good? Wouldn’t you say I should get lots of presents?” Hobbes says, “But maybe good is more than the absence of bad.” Calvin replies, “See, that’s what worries me.”
8. The real question isn’t what’s Santa’s definition of good, but what’s God’s definition. How good do you have to be to qualify as good? To be truly good as Paul used it here means to have no evil. Suppose you go to an Italian restaurant and order some of your favorite pasta. You dig in when it is delivered, and it is delicious. And then after 4 bites you come across a hair in the pasta. What do you do? My guess is you are done eating that pasta. How much hair does it take to ruin the pasta? Just one. How much evil in a person does it take to ruin the good? It’s the same. Just one. I dare say we all have more than one. If there’s one bit of evil in something or someone, it’s not good.
9. That’s a problem for us because we all know that down at our core we are all driven by self. It turns out that is the source of true evil. It is the cause of all of the problems of the human race. We all have that passion for self that rules everything else, and it touches everything we do. There is something twisted inside all of us that taints even the good things that we do, and pollutes them with at least a little bit of evil. That means that even the good things we do are actually not true good. That’s why Isaiah 64:6 says, “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.” Isaiah says the best things we do are like nasty rags.
10. Alain de Botton is a well known British writer who is an atheist. Though certainly not a Christian he says he loves the concept of original sin. He says it is obvious that all of us are broken and need forgiveness. “By broken I mean ‘not quite right.’ That’s why the concept of original sin seems so plausible and applicable, because it basically says, ‘when you meet someone new…just assume that something major has gone wrong here.’ Treat everybody you meet as though they were laboring under some really big problem. That’s the starting point.” He is saying he thinks Paul is right. There’s something major wrong with all of us.
11. The problem is much bigger than individual sins some Christians seem to want to talk about so often. The issue is that brokenness of sin within us. Even if we talk about individual sins, the news is not good. A number of years ago *People* magazine did a survey and created what they called a “Sindex.” It was an index of sins. It had people list what they thought were sins and rank how bad various sins are. It yielded some interesting results. Parking in a handicapped spot you are not entitled to, ranked very high. Cutting in line in front of others was ranked as worse than divorce! But the result that caught my eye was the people surveyed said that on average they commit 4.64 sins a month! You can bet the number is much higher than that, but even that is a lot of sins. That’s more than one piece of hair in the pasta.
12. Unfortunately there’s a lot of hair in the pasta. Dan Ariely, professor of psychology and behavioral economics at Duke University, did an experiment in which he and his team went to college campuses and told students they would pay them for every math puzzle they could solve in 5 minutes. At the end of the 5 minutes they had the students score their own papers, then take them to the back of the room and put them into shredders. Then they would be given money for the number of correct puzzles. Only there was a catch. The shredders didn’t actually shred the papers. The researchers would check them to see if the students actually solved the number of puzzles they claimed. They tested 30,000 people. They found that on average the students reported solving 6 puzzles, when in fact they solved 4. We all think of ourselves as basically honest, that test showed that on average people cheat. Yeah, but that’s no big deal, right? The cheaters combined to steal $36,000!
13. Writer Jennifer Weiner had an article in the *New York Times* a few years back about what she saw happen to her 97 year old grandmother. She moved into a new retirement home. She found that a clique of “sweet little old ladies” refused to let her have a place at their table, rejected her attempts to join their bridge group and generally made her feel excluded and unwelcome. The article was titled “Mean Girls In The Retirement Home.” Weiner called this a perennial expression of human nature. She said, “Whether you’re brawling on the playground or battling over the best seats in chair-ercize, bad behavior is constant.” She said bullies are everywhere.
14. A person might say, “Why did Paul make such a point of this? He spent almost 3 chapters pounding away saying humans are bad. And why are you making such an issue of this? Isn’t this overly negative?
15. Let’s start with the question of why Paul made such an emphasis on the problematic human nature. Why pound on it at such length? According to experts in rehabilitation, what is the first step to recovery? It is admitting you have a problem. If you don’t think you have a problem, then you don’t need a solution. Early last year I found that some of my pants had gotten tight. In fact, I had a couple of pairs of pants that I could not wear any more. Clearly, I had a problem. Laurie was shrinking my clothes in the laundry. I needed a solution, likely a discussion with Laurie about being more careful with my clothes. Um, yeah, about that. I had a physical exam at the doctor and they started by putting me on a scale. They also had a problem because the scale showed someone else’s weight. The number that came up was way too high. At that point I had to admit I had a problem. I was literally getting too big for my britches. I knew at that point I had to do something about the problem. I have, but I never would have done anything until I admitted I had a problem.
16. Paul has a solution for our problem. But it was a radical, unheard of, brand new, difficult to understand solution. It wasn’t difficult to understand because it was so complex, but because it is so foreign to how we usually think. It would require a radical change in thinking. In order for people to be willing to accept such a radical new idea they had to be faced with how serious their problem was and with the fact that there is no other solution.
17. There is a second aspect to why Paul emphasized this message so. A number of years ago I struggled with a lot of pain from tennis elbow. This went on for several years and I tried everything I could think of to alleviate it, but nothing helped. Finally, my doctor sent me to a specialist and he ordered an MRI on my elbow. The test showed that I and my family doctor had been misdiagnosing the problem. I didn’t have tennis elbow at all. I had a badly torn tendon in my arm, and nothing was going to fix that except surgery. We had to understand what the real problem was in order to fix it. I had been trying treatments for my elbow that could never heal it because they did not address the real problem.
18. There are people who say that humans are basically good and that it is only the systems we have that cause the problem. There is a fatal flaw in that logic. The flaw is that no matter what system you put people in, the same problems keep cropping up. You need to ask what the common denominator is. It is the people. It is not the systems that corrupt the people, it is the people that corrupt the systems. No amount of system change or education is going to fix the human condition because that doesn’t address the problem. If you can ease some symptoms that way, that’s good, but it is not the answer that we all need in the long run.

So now we understand the real problem, what does it do to us, beside the obvious that we’ve already discussed?

OUR FLAWS KEEP US FROM ONE OF OUR BIGGEST NEEDS

1. Verse 20 is enormously important. There are two phrases that are critical in that verse. One is “declared righteous” and the other is “works of law.” These two phrases speak of what every person so badly needs, and how we get it. First, let’s think about “declared righteous.” All of us want that more than we can imagine.
2. This is hard for most people to believe. Who lies awake at night concerned about righteousness? No one, right? We are concerned with our safety and security, we care deeply about being loved, we long for acceptance and approval from others, we dream of success, we want money. We have lots of things we care about, but righteousness doesn’t make that list, or if it does, it is way down near the bottom. Though we are often not aware of it, we are all desperate for righteousness. Our desire for it is a driving force every day and it impacts much of what we think, do and feel.
3. I know, I’m going to have to convince you of that one. In order to make that case I have to begin by explaining the roots of the idea of righteousness. Laurie and I have watched *The Mandalorian*, a Disney television series that is yet another offspring of *Star Wars*. The central character is from a planet called Mandalor, and his culture has a very strong and rigid ethic. A phrase his kind use a lot is “this is the way,” which means this is the rule for our people, this is what we must do. It means there is a custom, there is a right thing to do. The Greek word translated “righteousness” has its earliest roots in the idea of a way, a custom, a rule for living. It came to stand for a law in a society. One, then, is deemed to be righteous when one is living consistent with “the way.” To not be living according to the way is to be worthy of rejection, or to be worthless.
4. Still not seeing it, Rick. Okay, hang on. In his book, *From Guilt To Glory*, the late Ray Stedman wrote, “In this part of Romans, righteousness does not directly touch on behavior…the real meaning underlying this word is found in the word ‘worth.’” When we are declared righteous, we are shown to be accepted, approved, loved, valued. It means we have worth. It is hard to overstate how crucial that is to us. Christian counselor Dr. Larry Crabb wrote, “People have one basic personal need. The most basic need is a sense of personal worth, an acceptance of oneself as a whole real person.” In other words, to ever be at peace, to ever be happy, we must have a sense of worth, which means we have to be declared righteous.
5. But what is the connection between righteousness and worth? It goes back to “this is the way.” Every human being has a sense that there is a way, a law, a standard by which one is measured. And if one fails to measure up to that standard, then one is declared not righteous, thus is worthless, which is absolutely devastating to us. We can’t handle it.
6. We should note that the term translated “declared righteous” sometimes is translated “justified.” When you are justified you are deemed to have met the standard, you have measured up. How badly do we feel like we need to justify ourselves? People do cartwheels in their attempts to justify themselves. Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson wrote a revealing book titled, *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me*). In it they show that self-justification is nearly irresistible for all humans. We are all desperate to justify ourselves. This is so true, they say, that, “Most people, when directly confronted with proof they are wrong, do not change their point of view or course of action but justify it even more tenaciously.”
7. When you are misunderstood, when you are falsely accused or mischaracterized, what do you feel? There is an immediate surge of desire to set the record straight, to justify yourself. We all feel that. Oddly, as I was thinking about this passage an incident from a long time ago popped into my head. I have no idea why. This happened when our daughter, Carissa, graduated from college. We all went up for her graduation and stayed in a motel that was a few miles away from her school. Laurie, Toby, my mother, our niece, Michelle and Laurie’s parents all came for the event. We were surprised when we checked into the motel that apparently the area it was in was more than a little sketchy. We got this impression because the office was like a fortress. To check in you had to speak to a clerk through a glass barrier. He had to make sure you were legitimate guests before he would buzz the door to unlock it and let you into the office. The clerk that night was a man from India. Laurie’s dad had made the reservation so when we got there I told the clerk we had a reservation. I told him it might be under the name “Bingham.” He looked at his computer and then said in his Indian accent, “Bingham David?” I said yes. So he unlocked the door and let Laurie and me in. As we were checking in Laurie’s mom and dad arrived at the door. I opened it to let them in, and the clerk freaked out. In a panicked voice he said, “I told you not to open the door.” He hadn’t told me not to open the door. And besides, I was quite confident Laurie’s parents were not going to rob him. Instantly I felt the need to say, “You never said anything about opening the door, plus these are my in-laws.” I wanted to justify myself because he had accused me of doing something wrong. He was saying, “This is not the way.” Our reaction to that is to defend ourselves, justify ourselves, maybe even go on the offensive to prove it is the other person who is in the wrong. I decided it wasn’t worth it to argue the point with the guy so I let it go. Every time we feel the need to justify ourselves it is because we need so badly to be declared righteous!
8. Everyone has a sense of “the way.” We all have some laws, probably a lot of them, standards to which we feel like we have to measure up. In Paul’s case it was the Law of Moses. But there may be as many laws as there are people. It could be our own conscience. It could be some standard of success in the eyes of the world. It could be simply doing whatever we think we need to do in order to gain the approval of people.
9. Laurie has a pair of jeans that I just don’t understand. They are ripped and have holes in them. She bought them that way! She paid for damaged pants, and she paid a lot. Those jeans caused me to recall a time when I was a kid and I fell and tore my jeans. I did that a lot actually. My mom patched my jeans so I wouldn’t go around in ripped jeans. I was a bit self-conscious about those jeans, because you could see where the patch was, and that was not cool. If I had only known, I could have been a trend-setter and worn the jeans ripped long before it was a thing.
10. How did wearing jeans with holes in them become a thing? It used to be embarrassing. But in the 80’s rock musicians began wearing them as a sign of rebellion, of rejection of the status quo, the so-called “establishment.” This caught on. So now the idea is people express their rebellion against the establishment, by going along with the established fad. In other words, they think they rebel by essentially joining the establishment.
11. But it’s why that became popular that is key here. It became popular because it was deemed to be “cool.” Understand this, “cool” is a standard. It is a way of seeking to be declared righteous. If you are cool, then you are worthwhile, you are righteous. If you are not cool, then you are worthless.
12. That brings us to the phrase “works of law.” For Paul, it was a specific law, the Law of Moses that Jewish people revered so deeply. Paul had believed that he was declared righteous by keeping that Law. He said he used to think he was faultless before that Law. His point in these verses is that it doesn’t work, because no one can actually keep the true intent of that Law. All they could do was make it look like they were keeping the Law while actually violating it. Paul had learned that approach to being declared righteous does not work.
13. But there is something in verse 20 that our translation masks that actually makes a larger point. In verse 19 Paul had said, “Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law.” But in verse 20 he made a grammatical change to state a larger principle. He says, “No one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by works of law.” Not, *the* law, just law in general. In other words, no one will ever be declared righteous, no one will ever become a person of worth, by keeping a law, any law. Whether one’s law is a religious law, or a law of success or the law of being cool, no one will never be declared righteous. One will always sense that they are never quite enough, never approved, never fully worthwhile.
14. The singer, Madonna, had a law by which she sought to be declared righteous. It was the law of success and fame. She wanted to become somebody. In an interview she said, “Even though I’ve become somebody, I still have to prove that I’m somebody. My struggle has never ended and it probably never will.” She doesn’t know it, but she’s trying to be declared righteous, to be approved. And she will never get there by being somebody.
15. Taylor Swift said of herself and other performers, “We’re people who get into this line of work because we wanted people to like us…We liked the sound of people clapping because it made us forget how much we feel like we’re not good enough.” She’s trying to prove that she’s good enough. She’s trying to be declared righteous, and she is seeking it by the law of approval from people. It will never work, We will never be declared righteous by works of law, any law.

IMPLICATIONS

RECOGNIZE THAT YOU WILL SEEK TO BE DECLARED RIGHTEOUS

Needing a sense of worth is as built in to us and as necessary as our physical need for food and water. What happens if you don’t eat for an extended period of time? You get hungry. We have to eat, and when we are deprived of food our need for it begins to take over everything else. The same is true of our need for a sense of worth. We have no more choice in our need for it than we do in our need for food. We will pursue it. We will try to be declared righteous by measuring up to some law or set of laws. The important thing to recognize is that we will seek it, no matter what. We cannot decide not to care about it. We can only decide how we go about it. You need to not only understand that you seek to be declared righteous, but that every person you know does the same thing. Many of the most puzzling things people do are driven by their desire to be declared righteous.

UNDERSTAND HOW YOU SEEK WORTH

It is helpful to see what we are doing when seeking to be declared righteous. What are ways we try to do that? What law are we using as a standard to meet so we can be declared righteous We all have some typical approaches that are based on the standards or the laws that we have in our minds.

Some people have religious laws. We think we are righteous because we have walked the right spiritual path or adhered to the right spiritual truth. The most common is God will weigh my deeds, good and bad, and if the good outweighs the bad, then I am approved.

Most people have moral laws, like I should not intentionally hurt people, I should tell the truth, and so on.

Some people have intellectual laws, meaning that they are righteous because they are smart, or they have to be right.

We all have relational laws, basically thinking that we will be declared righteous because people like us or approve of us.

There are what I would call laws of the pack. Being cool is a classic. I am approved because I wear the right clothes, have the right look, do the right things, and so on.

There are achievement laws that say I have worth because of what I can do.

Our efforts to measure up put us on a performance basis, meaning we will never be able to be at peace. We will focus on outward things because we know inside we’re not truly righteous. People become a threat to us, we have to prove something to them.

REALIZE IT WILL NEVER WORK

In verse 20 Paul said “no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by works of law.” The words, “in God’s sight” are crucial. We think what we most need is to be declared righteous by other people and by ourselves. But there is a most curious thing about us. No matter how hard we try, whatever standards we are trying to meet, no matter how well we do, it is never enough. We never arrive and we can never rest. Why is that?

It is because we need to be declared righteous by God. He is the ultimate Judge, the final decider of righteousness. My junior year in high school I found myself in my usual spot, being on the baseball team, but being that seemingly worthless scrub who never played. Right near the end of the season the starter at my position was injured, out for the remaining games. The coach had to put me in. Those last few games I shocked him, because I played really well. I even surprised myself. When the season ended the coach had a final meeting with the team and in front of them all said, “Myatt, I need to apologize to you. I think I had my best hitter sitting on the bench all year.” Well that felt really good. Next year, different coach, and I was back on the bench. Again I never played. I actually got in a couple of blowout games and did even better than I had the year before. At one point my previous coach happened to come in our locker room as we were getting ready for a game. He said, “Myatt, what’s the guy playing ahead of you hitting?” I said, “Not sure, Coach, but I think it’s around .240.” He said, “What are you hitting, Myatt.” “Uh, well, I’m really not playing much, Coach, but I’m batting 1.000.” He said, “Why aren’t you playing, Myatt?” All I could say was, “Well, it’s not up to me, Coach.” I had impressed him. I was declared baseball righteous by him, but I hadn’t impressed my coach that year. I wasn’t declared righteous by the only one who mattered. We need to be declared righteous by the one who matters, anything else might feel briefly good, but will leave us hungry.

So how do we get God’s stamp of approval? If we can’t measure up, if nothing we do will ever be enough, how can we be declared righteous? Paul’s efforts up to this point have been aimed at getting us to the place where we are asking that question. In the next verses that we will look at next week, he tells us, and it is a huge relief to find out we can be declared righteous. But it involves a radical idea.