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A HOCKEY PUCK JUST WON’T WORK

Romans 3:21-31

PBS once aired a documentary Titled *GI Jews: Jewish Americans In World War II* that related the history of the half million American Jews that served in the armed forces in that war. One segment focused on a story told by Sergeant Lester Tanner. He was part of a large group of soldiers who were captured during the Battle of the Bulge late in 1944. The Germans took the 1275 of them to a prisoner of war camp called Stalag IX A. Tanner said they had heard the Nazis were murdering Jews and because of that the officers encouraged him and other Jews to ditch their dog tags that identified them as Jewish. The Nazis announced at one point that all Jewish POWs were required to line up in front of the barracks the next morning, and if they didn’t, they’d be shot. Master Sergeant Roddie Edmonds, a Protestant from Tennessee was in charge of the American POWs. He informed the Germans that all of them would line up the next morning. Sure enough, all of them were lined up. Major Siegmann, the German commander was angry, but Roddie said to him, “We’re all Jews here.” Siegmann said, “You can’t all be Jews.” But Sergeant Edmonds stood firm. Now furious, the Nazi major took out his Luger pistol, pointed it at Roddie’s forehead and said, “You will order the Jewish soldiers to step forward or I will shoot you right now.” Edmonds replied, “Major, you can shoot me, but if you do, you’ll have to shoot all of us. But we know who you are. This war is almost over. If you shoot any of us you will be a war criminal.” At that point the major turned around and stomped back to his barracks. Tanner said Edmonds saved the lives of the nearly 200 Jewish men in the unit that day, and they have never forgotten the extraordinary risk he took to protect them.

What an amazing story of one man putting himself at risk to save many others. It is a stirring story, but there is one of far more significance, a story of astounding courage, sacrifice and dramatic rescue. And we are the ones who were rescued. How do you think you would feel about someone who put his own life in grave danger I. Order to save you? How would you feel if the worst you could imagine happened to that person, but he did save you? We have seen in Romans that all of us human beings were in a desperate situation and there was no way we could save ourselves from it. But a rescue has been provided, and that rescue can and should have enormous impact on our lives. Let’s look at Romans 3:21-31. There are quite a few powerful theological concepts packed into these verses. But to grasp the message of the passage we need to look at 3 key ideas today.

ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALL SHORT OF THE GLORY OF GOD

Verse 23 is a summary of all that Paul has said in the previous 2 plus chapters. Here he says the summation is we have all sinned. We all fail to come close to having the glory of God, meaning the awesomeness that God designed us to have. This is the crucial point we must accept if we are ever to solve the problem of the human condition. People throughout history have tried to understand and fix the human problem. Anyone who looks at how people live, what they experience and how they behave toward each other can see that there is a problem. Paul is about to give us the solution, but to accept the solution, we first must admit the problem. All of us, every single person, is not what we should be. A skeptic might say, “Yeah, yeah, sin. You religious people are obsessed with the idea. But that is archaic thinking. We live in more enlightened times and sin is irrelevant to us.” Back that truck up, Chester. Closing our eyes to something we don’t want to think about is not a very smart strategy for life. Plugging your ears and singing, “La, la, la, I can’t hear you” is usually a sign of having a mind closed to an inconvenient truth. Paul has made a strong case that sin is very much alive and it has deadly effects in us. We ignore that at our peril. But what is this sin thing and why should I care? Sin is simply departure from good. When you depart from good, you have evil, and that is very much alive in every human. Has there ever been a moment when something you thought, said or did was somewhat less than perfectly good? I know there have been many, and that means sin is present in you. I say this not to shame anyone. It is true of all of us. It is important to understand the implications of this reality. There are 4 powerful effects of sin that I want to point out today.

*First, it separates us from God*.

The New Living Translation of Isaiah 59:2 says, “It’s your sins that have cut you off from God.” That is a problem. In Romans 11:36 Paul wrote of God, “For from him and through him and for him are all things.” God has created us for himself. He has created us to live in relationship with him. Human beings have a built in need to be connected to God. We don’t choose it, it’s just there. Even for those who deny it or don’t want it, that need is there, like it or not. If there is something we need to be whole and healthy, but we don’t have it, what is going to happen? We will feel it. We will never feel whole. We will know something is wrong, something is missing.

Knowing God is a key piece of the puzzle of life. Life without God will not make sense in the end. We will end up always looking for something because we sense that something important is missing. We will find life ultimately to be empty, meaningless, chaotic, lonely, frustrating, tragic and hopeless.

*Second, it produces disastrous effects on us and our interactions with others.*

If we are not connected to God and worshiping him as the central focus of life, then we will be left with only serving ourselves. That eventually will be done at the expense of others, plus it ends up being the emptiest pursuit imaginable.

Laurie and I were at the beach while on vacation. Laurie had one of her favorite things, an air mattress, on the beach next to her. She loves to float in the ocean water on those things. At one point an unusually strong breeze suddenly kicked up. It was brisk enough that it flipped Laurie’s air mattress up and blew it a few feet down the beach. There was a teenage girl lying there and the mattress bumped into her. Laurie went over to the girl and in her gracious, joyful way, apologized. She laughed and said, “Thank you for stopping my mattress.” The young girl was fine, but her mother, who was next to her, proved to be a humorless and cranky person. She was quite miffed that Laurie had caused this terrible thing happen to her daughter. Why being bumped into by an air mattress clearly could have ruined their entire day. Then, as she was scolding Laurie, she said something that astounded me. “It’s just a good thing it wasn’t a surfboard.”

Um, excuse me, but if it had been a surfboard do you really think a bit of breeze would have picked it up and blown it down the beach? It was an idiotic thing to say. What should have been a non event became the opportunity for an unpleasant interaction. What was going on there? Why are people like that at times? This is the kind of thing that happens when people fall short of the glory of God. Sadly, it happens billions of times a day among humans, every single day.

*Third, as we saw last week, it means we will never find what we all are desperate to obtain, and that is to be declared righteous.*

We saw that comes down to one of our biggest needs. It has directly to do with a sense of worth, and we cannot thrive, really we cannot even survive without that. But sin puts us in that situation where we never get it.

*Fourth, we end up condemned, separated from God forever*.

The ultimate reality for every human being is death. It is an ominous, implacable enemy that haunts us and makes a mockery of everything we do. It is the final tragedy that guarantees our lives mean nothing but sadness and sorrow in the end.

We need hope beyond the grave. But separated from God, there is no such hope. Physicist, author and professor at MIT, Alan Lightman, found himself considering some ultimate realities on the day of his daughter’s wedding. He remembered her as a little girl, her smile missing a tooth, and now she was 30 and he was escorting her down the aisle for her wedding. He wrote, “Despite all the richness of the physical world… the majestic architecture of atoms, the rhythm of the tides, the luminescence of the galaxies, nature is missing something even more exquisite and grand. Some immortal substance, which lies hidden from view…Perhaps this immortal thing that we wish for exists beyond time and space. Perhaps it is God. I cannot believe that nature could be so amiss…I am being sentimental. Perhaps I could accept the fact that in a few short years, my atoms will be scattered in wind and soil, my mind and thoughts gone, my ‘I-ness’ dissolved in an infinite cavern of nothingness. But I cannot accept that fate even though I believe it to be true. I cannot force my mind to go to that dark place.”

Do you hear the ache and the longing in those words? Don’t you want to say to that man, “Maybe you should listen to your own mind. It doesn’t want to go to that dark place because it knows it is not right.” In Ephesians 2:12 Paul wrote of people being, “without hope and without God in this world.” Being without hope is believing one is going to that dark place, even though something inside cries at in anguish that this cannot possibly be true.

This issue of sinning and falling short of the glory of God is a devastating problem, and we desperately need a solution. But there is a dilemma. What is the answer? Isn’t there a happy ending? The Bible tells a terrific story. Every good story must have a central conflict, a problem of galactic importance with possibly devastating consequences. The story needs a hero who rescues, who wins the conflict. It turns out that the Bible’s story is all about the hero who rescues us.

GOD IS JUST AND THE JUSTIFIER

This passage tells us that God has come up with a radical solution for the human problem, one no human being would have devised. God was faced with a conundrum. We can see it in verse 26. Speaking of God’s solution, Paul wrote, “He did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.” The conundrum is that God wanted to justify people, to declare them righteous, of worth, accepted by him, but they are not righteous. It would not be just and fair for him to declare people righteous when they in fact are not. Is he supposed to just pretend or lie about it?

The conundrum exists because God is just. If he were not just, if he were not fair, if he did not deal with evil, he would not be good. If God was powerful but not good and just there is no way we could ever love him and worship him. We would cower before him and might obey him out of abject terror of him, but we would never love him or worship him. The good news for us is that God’s essential nature is to be good, and to be good he must punish evil.

By definition, evil is destructive. That’s why we call it evil. It is malevolent, it brings pain, sorrow, death and destruction everywhere it goes. The problem is, we have already seen that all of us have sinned, we have departed from the good, which means we are evil. That makes human beings kind of like cancer cells loose in the universe. Suppose that you are diagnosed with cancer, and it is clear that if it is left unchecked it will do its evil and destroy you. And suppose that you meet with a doctor who has a treatment that is 100% effective in curing that cancer. But the doctor, for whatever reason, refuses to give you that treatment. Would you consider that person to be a good doctor? There is evil inside your body, a thing that will destroy you, and this doctor has the ability to deal with the evil, but refuses to do so. Wouldn’t you consider that to be evil? To be good the doctor must destroy cancer. To be good, God must destroy evil.

So here we are, destructive cancer cells loose in God’s universe wreaking havoc everywhere we go, destroying his beautiful creation and other cells around us. To be good God must deal with our evil. That is the just, fair, right, good thing to do. But God loves us, and wants to have a relationship with us. He wants to accept us, to justify us. How can he do that and still be just?

Typical human ideas generally run in two directions. One is that God must incentivize humans to motivate them to do better. He must show us the carrot and the stick, the reward for being righteous and the penalty for not being true, unstained good. That’s a system we understand. So God, knowing how humans think, gave us a system like that in order to show us that it doesn’t work because evil is planted so deeply within us that we can never root it out.

The other direction people go is to say, “Well God is love, so can’t he just love and accept everyone?” Last week Laurie helped take care of our grandson, Wesley, one day. Wesley is a delightful little boy. But he has some less than stellar moments. Wesley was having a tough day. He was just contrary. His common response to everything Laurie suggested was, “No, no no.” She wanted to get him out of his pajamas and into some clothes before lunch time. “No, no, no.” She tried the old parental trick of offering a choice, “Do you want your airplane shirt or your truck shirt?” Neither. He wanted to wear his jammies. At that point Laurie had to just suck it up and get through it. She began the clothes changing process even though Wesley was not signing on. This resulted in a huge meltdown, complete with crocodile tears. All this was considerably less than endearing. And it changed nothing. Despite his contrary and sometimes unpleasant behavior and attitudes that day, Laurie loved him. She still dotes on him and delights in him. If we can do that for our grandchildren surely God can do that for those he created in his image, right?

There is a problem with that idea. It ignores that problem of justice, of dealing with real evil. To be just, to be good, to be loving, God must deal with evil and seek to eradicate it. That’s true even as he loves people. So God had a divine plan that would enable him to deal with evil, to punish it as justice demands, but would allow him to justify his fallen, evil-infected people. That’s what we see in verses 24-25. “All are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood, to be received by faith.”

Ancient Jews understood the sacrifice of atonement. The Greek term Paul used there was one used of the “mercy seat.” That was the top of the ark of the covenant. Remember what the ark looked like in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*? That was a good picture of it. When sacrifices were made for the people of Israel the high priest would sprinkle the blood of the sacrificial animal on the mercy seat, the top of the ark. That symbolized that something dire, something deadly had to happen to make up for the evil in us. It had to be atoned for, and the required atonement was death. God warned the first humans that the day they disobeyed him, thus choosing evil, they would die. That was the only way God could justly deal with evil. Take the piece off the board. Yeah,those evil Nazis in *Raiders* deserved to get zapped like that. So do we, but Jesus essentially stood in front of us and got zapped so we don’t have to.

Clearly it is not fair for an innocent animal to die to pay for our evil. But the image was that there would be a death that would satisfy the demands of justice. Incredibly, God took on that horrible role himself. He came into this world in the form of Jesus Christ, and he died in our place. He took our punishment. But how could the death of one person be sufficient for all of the evil of all of the human race through millenia of history? There is only one way that could work. How much sin, how much evil exists in billions of people over many thousands of years, when evil touches every single thing every one of them does? That number approaches infinity. The only way the math works, then, is if an infinite person dies in the place of the human beings. And that is exactly what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Can God really do that and be just? What about the real evil that still exists in us? The good news is that evil has been punished, all of it, forever. And because we are now forgiven and can be accepted, God has promised to change our hearts, to begin the process of removing the evil. That process begins here in this world, but it will not be finished in our lifetimes. But God has promised that at the end of this age, when we see Jesus Christ, we will be just like him. The evil will be gone forever.

WE CAN ONLY BE DECLARED RIGHTEOUS BY FAITH

What do we have to do about our problem? How do we get that which we need so badly, to be reconnected to God, to be declared righteous, which we so badly need, to be given the gift of eternal life? Verse 22 says, “This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” Verse 28 says, “We maintain that a person is justified (declared righteous) by faith apart from the works of the law.” Literally he says this is by faith apart from works of law. Any law. Whatever we think the standard we have to measure up to is, we will never meet it. We can never solve the problem by trying harder and being better. The roots of the problem are way to deep in us for that.

So God has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. He has made it possible for us to be forgiven, to have our debt paid, to be declared righteous because Jesus has taken the just punishment for our evil upon himself. It has all been punished. The debt is paid in full. There are now two options for us. The first is that we can pay it ourselves. We can choose to live with all the devastation that comes from that, from all the effects of the evil in our lives, to never be connected to God, to never know we are free, declared righteous before him, to never have hope. The second possibility is to accept the Jesus option. Choose to let what he has done for us be the payment of the debt.

That seems like a no-brainer, doesn’t it? Is there some catch? Is there some fine print somewhere? Hidden in font so small it is unreadable is pages of legal jargon that, if you could wade through it, you’d find that this is actually a terrible deal that you want no part of. Is this a seeming easy way out, but it actually turns out it’s horribly difficult? No, there’s no catch. Here’s what God says. The way you activate the Jesus option is by faith. You believe what Jesus has done is enough. This option, Paul said, is available to all who believe in Jesus. Notice he said in verse 24 that we are justified freely by his grace. Freely is an important word. The root of that Greek term is “to give.” It means “as a gift.” What do you do to get a gift? You don’t work for it. You don’t earn it. If it’s a true gift, you just accept it. That’s what we do to choose the Jesus option. We believe it, and by faith we simply accept what God is offering us.

Faith, believing what God has done for us in Jesus, is the trigger. Faith is a big deal to God. Hebrews 11:6 says, “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” The foundation of the whole thing is faith. We can see this even in the way things work in this world. The writer of Hebrews says anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists. That’s true, and it’s not always that easy. Yes, we can deduce easily from looking at creation that an intelligent and awesomely powerful Creator surely must exist. But if he’s there, why doesn’t he show himself? It almost feels like he’s playing hide and seek. He’s hiding and we have to seek, but we never see him. Why would God operate that way?

I believe it is because he wants us to have faith. He wants us to believe he’s there even when we can’t hear him, see him, touch him. Faith seems to be the key thing with him. But that raises the obvious question of why? Why does God make faith the key to the whole deal? There are several reasons, but I will just give one today.

Having faith is something any human can do. In fact, we can’t live without having faith. We do it continually. I exercise faith every night when I go to bed that at some point I will wake up. There’s reason to believe that, because it has always happened before. Every time I’ve gone to sleep I’ve awakened later. However, that doesn’t mean it will always happen. I had an uncle who laid down to rest one day, went to sleep, and never woke up. His life was over. I’ve heard of many others that have done the same. Imagine what it would be like if you didn’t have faith that you would wake up when you are going to bed. It would be terrifying. You’d be so tired, you’d be desperately in need of rest, your eyelids would be heavy, you’d feel yourself drifting off, and then you’d shake yourself in terror. If you go to sleep you might never wake up! To be able to sleep when we are tired, to be able to just drift off, we must have faith that we will wake up. I’ve always thought that child’s bed time prayer is a problem. “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep, and if I should die before I wake.” Wait, what? I’m praying that when I’m about to sleep? If that’s a possibility there’s no way I’m going to sleep. We exercise that faith that we will wake up every night of our lives, without it we would always fight sleep.

I exercise faith that when the bank says my pay has been deposited in my account, that it is actually there. The bank sends me a statement that says I have so many dollars in my account, but why should I believe them? They could just be printing a bunch of lies. There is no real, tangible evidence that money is there. In fact, all that exists is a bunch of ones and zeroes in a computer somewhere. Yet, in faith, I trust the bank and believe that my money is there.

We exercise faith in so many ways. It is not a difficult thing to do. It is a normal and constant part of life. We often do it without a thought. I can’t make myself truly righteous. I can’t root out the evil that has infected my soul and remove every trace of it so that I am truly good. That’s the problem Paul has been taking pains to point out. No, I can’t make myself pure good, truly righteous, but I can believe. I can have faith. I prove it over and over. It is one thing I can do. I do it every day of my life.

Let’s be clear that having faith only has value in relation to its object. In other words, God isn’t saying that simply the act of having faith is the virtue that makes us truly righteous, no matter what the object of our faith is. If someone believes that a hockey puck is in control of the universe and that hockey puck is going to save him or her, that faith is not virtuous. It’s just dumb.

One day last week Laurie went to the grocery store. She planned to make a dish for dinner that required Fritos, so among other things she was going to buy some Fritos. She had faith that she would be able to do that because the store always has Fritos. Guess what. Covid reared its ugly head. Somehow that stupid disease has caused all the systems in our society to operate like a car going down the road with a flat tire. They’re limping along at best. They didn’t have Fritos. How could they be out of Fritos? Every time we’ve been to the grocery store in the past they have Fritos coming out of their ears. It was reasonable for Laurie to put her faith in the store. But faith is only as good as its object. In that case, putting her faith in that particular store proved to be unfortunate.

It is not just having faith that matters. It is having faith that God has solved our problem, made it possible for us to be declared righteous, to be accepted by him, to have eternal life, because of what Jesus has done for us and now offers us as a gift. By faith we accept that gift. We can do that, because faith is one thing we can do.

IMPLICATIONS

In all the world there is no other alternative for dealing with the human condition. Every other proposed solution will either not deal with the problem, will be impossible, or will require that God not be just. There is no other sacrifice. We are left with the choice to either accept our just punishment ourselves, or accept by faith that Jesus has taken all of it on himself and our debt is paid.

The obvious thing to do is put our faith in Jesus and accept this priceless, unimaginable gift. How should that affect us? Paul will discuss that at some length later in Romans, but today I will point out a few obvious affects it should have.

It should produce relief and joy. A few years ago I had been dealing with some issues that led to a doctor telling me something I absolutely didn’t want to hear. No one wants to hear it. “We need to do a biopsy.” When doctors do a biopsy they are not looking for evidence that you are exceptionally healthy and very fortunate. We need to do a biopsy to understand what makes you so studly and good looking. Do you think anyone ever hears that? Neither do I. Our reaction to, “we need to do a biopsy” is always, “Uh oh.” Biopsy is not good news. When I got that bad news I made a mistake. I looked up my symptoms on the Internet. What a curse the Internet can be. It was obvious from what I read that I had what no one wants, the thing they look for when they do a biopsy. I knew what the result of the test was going to be. I went through the test, which was as much fun as having someone pull your fingernails out with pliers. Then I had to wait a couple of days for the results to come back. I expected a nurse to call me and deliver the bad news. It wasn’t a nurse. The doctor called, which immediately made me think this was going to be really bad. I braced myself, then the doctor said, “Your test was negative, Mr. Myatt. Good news, there’s no serious problem.”

It felt like he had lifted an 80 pound pack off my back. What a relief. I felt positively giddy. Suddenly that day just seemed like an incredibly good day. The rest of the day no matter what came up, I just felt happy. I was joyful. Good news when there is the possibility of some really bad news has that effect.

That is the kind of effect the message of these verses should have on us. Do you realize what good news this is? We’ve sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. With that came separation from him, lots of negative impacts on us and our relationships, the inability to ever be declared righteous and experience a true sense of worth, and a total absence of hope for eternity. And we could not fix the problem, no matter how hard we tried. God has solved the problem for us! The bad news has been obliterated by good news. If we truly grasp how impossibly good the news of what God has done for us actually is, we will be positively giddy about it. We encounter hardships, losses, disappointments in life, but in the middle of all of it we have something so good it should be a constant source of joy.

It should humble us. Won’t this message tend to make people smug and proud because they have something that others want, but don’t have? Paul answers that question in verse 27. “Where then is boasting? It is excluded.” He goes on to say it is excluded because it is not by works of law. In other words, we don’t deserve it. We get it by faith as a gift. Does it make you proud when someone gives you a gift that you absolutely do not deserve? No, it humbles you. You are very much aware that it is far beyond anything you deserve. So it humbles you. It makes us the most humble of all, because we know what we truly have earned, and we know the horrendous price that was paid so that we don’t have to get what we deserve.

Finally, it should fill our hearts with gratitude and love for God every single day.

Paul ends this chapter with one question. “Do we then nullify the law by this faith?” That’s a good question. It sure seems like God done just that. “Yeah, that Law thing just didn’t work, so I’ve abandoned that whole project. Now I have a new plan that’s totally different.” But Paul says a surprising thing. He says, “No, that’s not it at all. In fact, by this new covenant we uphold the law.” It doesn’t seem like it, does it? But he will proceed to show us that’s true in the next chapter.