

Sermon – 13/04/2008 pm

Children of Wrath

Study Text: Ephesians 2:3

I wonder what will be the headlines tomorrow. Let me take a guess. Another sporting star will found to be on drugs, or to have bashed someone in a drunken rage, or to be visiting a prostitute. Sometimes it is said that they have reached rock bottom and are seeking help or taking counselling – which means they will not be in the headlines for a while.

As we turn to the word of God and look at the newspapers, and this world, from God's perspective we see that not just sports stars, but those who write this stuff and those who read it are all alike at rock bottom. Ever since Adam disobeyed God mankind has been at rock bottom. All have been given over by God to the lusts of the flesh and to a depraved mind. Man chose to exchange to truth of God for the lie and to worship the creation rather than the creator – who is blessed forever, Amen (Romans 1:25).

In this letter Paul is reminding Ephesian believers what they were like before God in his grace saved them. They were dead in their sin; they were walking in darkness and in slavery to the devil. They were Gentiles who had not heard the word of God, although they did have the witness of Gods power and deity in the creation. Paul was a Jew and so had the law. But the law was powerless to change the sinful nature which he was born with. He could no more please God than the Gentiles. So in verse three he includes himself among all who lived according to the flesh. *Among whom we all once conducted ourselves* (2:3).

Living by Lust

Evolutionists look upon man as another animal – although at the same time they claim he is evolving into a higher form. They see man a driven by natural instincts. Freud reduced man to such a being. He sought to explain all human behaviour in terms of drives or instincts. The predominant drive in his view is sex. Although many of his ideas are now discredited the ideas linger – they were not new anyway. We see frequent references to a gene for homosexuality, and also excuses for immoral behaviour being given in terms of our 'hard wiring'.

What Freud called drives the Bible calls lusts. God is love and made man to be loving also. But when man sinned against God love became lust. Some time ago I saw a bumper sticker saying just that – lust not love. Sin corrupted our very nature or very being. Man can study and analyse his own psyche all he likes but the truth remains. The only diagnosis is corruption because of sin. Thankfully we have more than a diagnosis – we have the treatment outlined in the Bible.

Paul has not yet come to the glorious grace of God by which our hearts are changed. He is making sure we know what our condition was before this grace came. He reminds the Ephesians of how they once lived. He does this again in chapter 4 – you should no longer walk as the rest of the Gentiles (4:17) – and in chapter 5 – you were once in darkness but now you are light in the Lord (5:8).

All who are still dead in their sins walk in the lust of the flesh and of the mind (2:3)? Lust is a powerful word. It is avoided in modern translations. Lust is like a powerful drive, a drive emanating from the flesh – in some ways Freud was right. Lust comes to the fore when God gives men and women up. Therefore God gave them up to uncleanness in the lusts of their hearts to dishonour their bodies among themselves (Romans 1:24).

The lusts of the flesh are related to the lusts of the mind. When the mind is corrupt external laws have only limited power to control behaviour. Evil desires come from the heart. When such desires are conceived, they give birth to sin (James 1:15). God is not to blame for sin. The law is not to blame for sin. Some think that if there were no laws then there would be no sin and therefore no guilt. How foolish. Lawlessness brings harm to everyone.

The law is just and good wrote Paul. The problem is not the law it is me. It is my own sinful heart. In *fact the good that I will to do I do not do, but the evil I will not to do, that I practice* is what the apostle wrote. *O wretched man that I am who will deliver me from this body of death* (Romans 7:19, 24). What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh God did in sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh (Romans 8:3).

When we were dead in our sin, when we walked to please the world, the flesh and the devil our conduct was abominable. We walked in futility, we lived only for self, and we lived only to satisfy the craving of our flesh. Our god was our belly (Philippians 3:19). Do you know people whose god is their belly? It is hard to avoid such lust these days.

In the hills of Orissa in India you will find a primitive tribe called the Bondo's. They live by hunting and gathering. When they cook up their catch the men sit down to eat. If one man thinks another is getting more than his fair share it is not uncommon for him to stab that man to death. Killing for food, lying for food, living to eat, drunkenness and drugs are symptoms of such greed, such lust of the flesh.

Being past feeling they have given themselves over to lewdness, to work all uncleanness with greediness (4:19). Fornication or sexual immorality, filthiness and foolish talk, covetousness and greediness are all symptoms of this lust of the flesh. They all amount to idolatry and put us under the judgment of God.

Children of Wrath

Paul concludes his description of the unregenerate person declaring that we were *by nature children of wrath* (2:3). The wrath of God came upon Adam when he sinned, and it remains upon all who reject his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (John 3:36). The wrath of God is not uncontrolled rage as some imagine. God's wrath is just; it is 'the manifestation of indignation based on justice'. 'It is the other side of God's love' (M. Lloyd-Jones).

The wrath of God is neither understood nor accepted by many people. God is love they say thinking this means he accepts all people and whatever they do. 'God hates sin but loves the sinner' is a popular but meaningless saying. Sin is part of our being. We are born in sin; we are by nature sinners and so by nature objects of wrath.

The wrath of God is not only found in the Old Testament as some think. John the Baptist preached the wrath of God. He warned people of the coming wrath of God, exhorting them to repent and be baptised. Jesus similarly preached repent and believe in gospel (Mark 1:15). He

declared that God's wrath remains on those who do not believe (John 3:36). And so Paul continued to preach that God's wrath is upon sinners. *Let no one deceive you with empty words for because of these things (idolatry) the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience (5:6).*

What does it mean for a person to be saved by Jesus? As a Christian do you know what you are saved from? You might say I am saved from sin and death – and you would be right. But fundamentally you have been saved from the coming wrath of God. *Having been justified by his (Jesus') blood we shall be saved from wrath through him (Romans 5:9).* Being under the wrath of God means to come under God's judgment. We are born under wrath and remain so unless and until God in his grace saves us.

Just as we are born dead so we are born under divine condemnation. 'Whosoever believes in Jesus shall not perish but have everlasting life' is how the great gospel verse reads. Clearly whosoever does not believe in Jesus will perish and will not have everlasting life.

Modern man pays little regard to sin. Looking to man rather than to God he declares everyone sins so what's the big deal. He is told not to feel guilty because everyone does it. Modern day evangelism plays down the wrath of God because it is 'unpleasant'. The emphasis is upon the love of God. 'God loves you so do the right thing and come to him'. 'Come to Jesus and be saved' – and the careful listener will ask 'saved from what'?

Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus is the lamb who silently went to the cross as the sacrifice for our sins. Jesus is the lamb who upon the throne in heaven. Jesus is the lamb whose wrath will one day be revealed in this world (Revelation 6:16).

God is indeed loving but you will not appreciate his love if you do not first know his hatred of sin. You will not understand his grace if you do not know the wrath of God upon 'the sons of disobedience'. Rather than make excuses for our sin, rather than trying to tell ourselves that God will not really punish set let us take sin seriously. We must understand that God is holy and just, that his wrath remains upon all who do not believe in Jesus. We must proclaim this truth as an essential part of the gospel message just as we find the apostle Paul doing in this passage.

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon