

THE NEW TESTAMENT WORLD

PART 5: READING ROMANS IN ITS CULTURAL CONTEXT

"The idea that one can achieve an cultural theology is a fundamentalist fallacy."

-David Clark

CHARACTERISTICS OF EASTERN VALUES

- Past-time orientation
- Respect for hierarchy
- Interdependence
- Group orientation (collectivism)
- Face
- Modesty
- Harmony with others

WESTERN VALUE

- Present-Future orientation
- Critical of hierarchy and authority
- Independence
- Individualism
- Competition

HONOR-SHAME CULTURES

- Three distinguishing emphases
 - Tradition
 - Relationship
 - Hierarchy
- These factors shape a person's social status or "face."
- A major priority is securing recognition and respect from others
- Ancient Romans, for example, would steal a person's identity not for money but for honor.

HONOR AND SHAME RECKONED IN TWO WAYS:

- Achieved
- Ascribed
- Eastern people prioritize ascribed honor over achieved honor
- Western people prioritize achieved honor over ascribed honor

HONOR AND SHAME IN THE BIBLE

- Character and actions express these ideas as well as the words themselves
- Slow down when reading the Bible
- Metaphors matter
- Context determines meaning

"GLORY" IN ROMANS

- Not primarily "splendor" or the visible manifestation of God, but rather "glory" is associated with God's status and identity as king
- Humanity's glory is an "ascribed" honor
- Christ is the fulcrum for grasping the relationship between God's glory and humanity's glory. Christ is the one who "glorifies God"

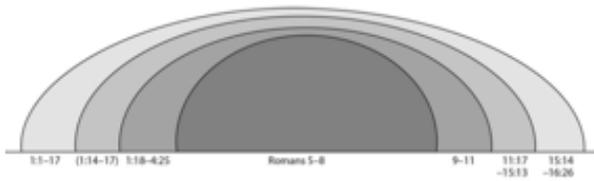
HUMANITY'S HONOR IS INTERWOVEN WITH GOD'S GLORY

- "Conformed to the image of his Son" - Romans 8:29)
- Genesis 1:26-28, Psalm 8:5
- Believers will be conformed to the image of the Son of God so that they might reign with Christ as image-bearing, servant kings reflecting God's kingship in the exercise of authority and responsibility for creation

PURPOSE OF ROMANS: PAUL SEEKING ASSISTANCE ON HIS WAY TO SPAIN

- Romans 1:5, 13-14; 15:18-28; 16:26
- Letter is both introductory and preparatory
- Paul anticipates a few interrelated problems that may hamper his efforts
- Social division is the primary challenge - "Greeks" vs. "Barbarians"
- Paul leads his readers to assume the perspective of Jews who use the word "Gentile" as a derogatory term
- Christ has eliminated such divisions, insiders and outsiders - anyone who gives allegiance to Christ belongs to God's people
- Paul rebukes Greco-Roman pride and Jews who exclude Gentiles - such exclusion dishonors God
- Paul helps Roman Christians see God's glory at stake in all they do

PAUL'S EMBEDDED ARGUMENTS



APPLICATION OF PAUL'S MESSAGE



PAUL AS A "SLAVE"

- Remarkable given that he had never visited this church (1:10)
- Begins by losing "face," confronts standard measures of honor and shame
- "Apostle" - a man under authority, not an ordinary slave.
- Few seek to be slaves but Paul understood the ascribed honor of being *this* king's slave

PAUL'S CULTURAL LOCATION

- His calling does not eradicate his identity as a Jew
- Reminders of his heritage (11:1, 13-14; 4:1, 12)
- But Paul does not see his identity as an autonomous individual whose identity is independent of others
- He recognizes that he is dependent on the church, where collective identity shapes the sense of mission
- He is urging the Roman church to not become an obstacle to outsiders

THE FRAME: ROMANS 1 & 15

- For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith" (1:16-17)
- For I tell you that Christ because a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles and sing to your name" (15:8-9)

SUMMARY STATEMENTS OF ROMANS

- Both passages highlight God's character (power, righteousness, truthfulness, mercy)
- Both illustrate how God's purpose was promised or revealed in the Old Testament
- Both highlight the scope of God's work—the gospel saves both Jew and Greek
- Paul is a servant unashamed of the gospel because it glorifies God
- Paul's purpose is practical - the church's missional ambition is undermined when believers use culture to define insiders and outsiders

CHRIST REORIENTS AND REDEFINES

- World is not divided into Jews/Gentiles, Greeks/ Barbarians, but into "slaves of sin" and "slaves of righteousness" (6:17-19)
- Romans 5-8 - the central part of Paul's argument - reorients human history around Christ
- Not a letter written to individual, but defines the collective identity of the church

DISHONORING GOD AND OURSELVES - ROMANS 1-3

- Romans 1:18-32 - "unrighteousness" defined in relation to God. God reveals his glory to humanity, but humanity's response invokes God's wrath
- God is the measure of righteousness - right and wrong are not culturally relative
- "Unrighteousness" dishonors God (1:21) - honor and shame
- Humanity's major problem - exchanging the truth of God for a lie - "changing glory" is the equivalent of "changing gods" (ref. Jeremiah 2:11-13)
- By forsaking God's glory, humans forfeit their own glory

THE RESULT OF UNRIGHTEOUSNESS: SHAME

- Shame is both the cause and consequence of God's wrath
- Western view: sin as legal violation (this passage nowhere mentions law)
- Eastern view: sin is dishonoring God and thus acting shamefully. We think of ourselves more highly than we ought.
- To win the approval of the world, people will lose face in the eyes of God and his people (1:29-31)

CHOOSING "FACE"

- People must choose which "face" they want
- 2:6-11 - honor-shame and sin-judgment
- 2:8 - Paul urges readers to choose honor
- Honor and shame are central to understanding "sin," which living in a way that does not honor God
- Humanity's lack of glory is the natural consequence of sin—not glorifying God

HONOR AND SHAME IN MODERN INTERPRETATION

- Fame-shame culture - few people try to earn God's favor through moral law keeping; they care more about winning praise and acceptance
- Previous generations worried about hell; today people fear the shame of exclusion
- 2:29 - what motives lie beneath our actions and words? People often do what they do because they want others' approval
- Whose approval do you seek?
- "When chasing a name, we are prone to stumble in shame."
- Gratitude is an effective strategy to combat idolatrous glory seeking

DISTINGUISHING "US" AND "THEM" - ROMANS 2-3

- Romans 2 - "works" and "law" -
- Paul's Jewish opponents - competition turns the law into a system of status acquisition, thus they regard Gentiles as shameful outcasts
- Now these Gentiles are being brought in, however -which would seem to imply to Jews that God is unrighteous

ROMANS 3

- v. 1-3 - captures the voice of Paul's Jewish opponents
- Psalm 51 and Romans 3 - God doesn't delight in works of the law, but rejoices in right hearts
- 3:23 - all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (have shamed God)
- And yet Christ saves God's face - because of the cross, all nations will see God's glory

ROMANS 4

- Because he reigns over the world, God requires allegiance of all nations
- This allegiance is the sort of faith by which God justifies his people
- Abraham as illustration - magnifies the glory of God, saving God's "face"
- faith credited as "righteousness" - Abraham as client shows faithfulness to God, honoring the patron
- Faith in the faithfulness of God - honor and loyalty; God's honor is central
- Righteousness is always relational!

THE GOSPEL AND JUSTIFICATION

- Western view - equates the gospel and justification; gospel is the message of *how* people get "saved"
- But justification is an *implication* of the gospel - concerns social identity as much as salvation - creates a new family

JUSTIFICATION, HONOR AND SHAME

- **Jesus is King over the world** - this is Paul's core message
- **Jesus is not only the king of the Jews, he is the king of the Gentiles** - authority over life and death
- **Both Jews and Gentiles are included among his people** - his identity determines the identity of everyone in the world
- **Gentiles thus do not have to become Jews** - God is not partial, Gentiles not excluded or shamed because of social distinctions

JUSTIFICATION, HONOR AND SHAME

- **Gentiles do not have to do works of the Mosaic law.** Circumcision renders Christ's kingdom into factions.
- **Gentiles are justified and ultimately saved by faith.** Law limits membership to Israel. 4:16 - "That's why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring."

ROMANS 5-8

- The hope of glory through shame
- We are saved for glory, not merely from punishment
- What we hope in determines our willingness to pay the cost of discipleship
- The promise of resurrection - true glory and honor and found in Christ, not in the absence of pain
- All creation groans for redemption, resurrection - vindication of God's honor, vindication of God's people

JUST A TASTE...

- Follow Paul's argument throughout
- Romans 12 - transformation - character of God's faithful people - collective - "do not think of yourself more highly than you ought"
- Glorify God through demonstrated faithfulness made possible and empowered by the faithfulness of Christ
