

All Age Talk: February 7th 2016: Romans 2:1-3:8

Not Saved By A Written Code

What kind of person do you think gets to heaven? Think about that for a moment and try and put a picture of that person in your head. What would they look like? How would they behave? How could you tell them apart from someone who wasn't going to get to heaven?

Perhaps you're thinking of someone like Gary Lineker. Hard working, clean, tidy, respectable, never sent off in his career. Or perhaps it's someone like Mother Theresa; someone who spends their life serving others, generous and kind hearted.

However we answer that question I guess we are also thinking about people who won't be getting in. Perhaps they are easy to imagine because they make the headline news every evening. We might call that kind of person a Wicked Wayne – although, just like the other characters we will meet today, they can, of course, be of both sexes. Wicked Wayne is the kind of person you would hate to have living next door. He's arrogant, rude and violent, self-centred, selfish and greedy. His regular parties are loud and raucous and debauched with no holds barred. There's far too much drink and lots of drugs- just a free for all and Wicked Wayne is indulging himself with all he can get with no thought for the consequences. Wicked Wayne hates the God of the Bible, despises people and seems to go out of his way to ignore and break every law he can think of. Wicked Wayne epitomises the kind of behaviour we have been thinking about over the last two weeks.

Maybe you've met someone a bit like Wayne, maybe you live next to him now, and when we start talking about God being angry with people who ignore him and break his rules it's very often people like Wicked Wayne who come to mind.

But in the passage today Paul wants to introduce us to two more kinds of people who are in just as much trouble. We've heard about them in that reading from Romans chapters 2 and 3 but to help us think about them a little more closely I'm going to give them names: I'm going to call them Moral Marge and Religious Ronnie.

From the outside they both look pretty smart, but everything is not as good as it seems – and God is certainly not pleased with them. And, unless things change, then just like Wicked Wayne they won't be going to heaven. So as we get to know them the question we need to keep in mind is whether actually we are just like them.

So as you turn back to page 1129 in your Bibles, let's start with Moral Marge.

The first thing we notice about Moral Marge in verse 2 is that she's got a very active pointing finger – a finger she loves to point at other people – particularly at people like Wicked Wayne. Moral Marge loves to think that she is better than others - and on the surface she looks it. She's smart, respectable and nice. She's probably a member of neighbourhood watch and spends her free time helping out with various charities. She'd fit in very well in most WIs and on the Parish Council. She may even pop along to church on occasions, just to be seen, although that's not really her thing. But despite her appearances and reputation, everything is not as good as it seems.

You see Moral Marge is a hypocrite- she wears a mask. That's what verse 3 is all about. Moral Marge pretends to be perfect and good, and her neighbours and friends and family are most often taken in, but deep down, deep down in her heart there is something rotten. Moral Marge might not be violent, but she hates lots of people. She might not commit adultery but she has lots of lustful thoughts. She might not steal but she's very jealous. She might not hate God but she ignores him and rejects his rightful rules over her life. So deep down she is just as rotten as Wicked Wayne. And that's not all because Moral Marge has a stubborn heart.

Take a look down at verse 5. You see if Wicked Wayne was ever sober he would admit that he doesn't keep God's laws – but not Moral Marge. She has a hard heart. She can't see that there is anything wrong in her at all so she would never think of asking for God's forgiveness because she doesn't think she needs it: What's more... she wears moral earmuffs.

Verses 14 and 15 make it pretty clear that although people like Moral Marge aren't very religious and may not know God's commands, they do have a God-given conscience to guide them. But despite her moral compass being pretty well tuned there are plenty of times when Moral Marge ignores even her own inner voice and does things that she herself believes are wrong.

And what's even more serious is that she's even chosen to ignore the truth about God which is clearly seen in creation, we see that in verse 8. And so the final bit of the jigsaw of her moral yet condemned lifestyle is her lack of faith. Like Victor Meldrew, she simple doesn't believe it. Moral Marge's biggest problem is the fact that she has rejected the truth about God in creation and rejected the good news about Jesus and the rescue only He can offer.

And that's Paul's point. Moral Marges think that they can earn their way to heaven by being good enough for God but they can't. None of us can. That's why Jesus came to be our saviour and not just our teacher. And that's why good Moral Marge seems on the outside, and how ever good she is in comparison to the Wicked Wayne's of this world Moral Marge isn't heading to Heaven, but facing an eternity of trouble and distress.

But Moral Marge isn't the only person Paul wants to warn us away from: there are also problems for Religious Reggie. Now when Paul speaks about Religious Reggie in verses 17 to 28 he is talking about religious Jews, but the points Paul makes apply just as well to the kind of people who very often come to church. So bearing that in mind, let's see how Paul describes him, and just like Moral Marge at first it all looks great.

The first thing that we see about Religious Reggie is that he is loud and proud about his faith. Ask him and he'll tell you without any hint of embarrassment that he is a Christian. He's not worried about people mocking him and laughing when he tells them he goes to church. Verse 17 says that Religious Reggies boast about God.

What's more according to verses 17 and 18 Religious Reggie knows what God says in the Bible. He's probably memorised dozens of verses and knows the order of the 10 Commandments. What's more he is convinced that they are right. Religious Reggie isn't a casual believer; he's really fervent and committed.

So much so that, he not only realises that other people need to know God's truth for themselves, he actively tells them. So verses 19 to 21. Reggie believes, as the Bible teaches, that God's word is absolutely true and trustworthy

so it can be a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish and something that children and adults should know about. And of course since he is so fervent, Religious Reggie has been through all the right ceremonies. We see that in verses 29 and following. For the Jews this would have meant circumcision, but for the Christian we're talking about baptism and, in the Church of England, confirmation as well. Religious Reggie has been through it all – he's got the badge and he's got the T-shirt and a signed certificate from the Bishop!

Now as Paul says at the start of chapter 3, these things are all great and I don't want to dismiss these things at all- in fact I wish everyone who comes to church was like this! To know what the Bible teaches is fantastic and to have been baptised and to have received the sign of God's promise of forgiveness to all who ask is a wonderful thing. What's more, Religious Reggie is quite right to be open about his faith and to want to share it with others – that's the job of every Christian. But Religious Reggie has two problems and the first is that even Religious Reggie doesn't live up to what he believes.

In verses 21-24 we can see that although Reggie knows God's commands off by heart even he doesn't keep them. He's great at teaching them to others but he fails to live by them himself. In fact, so many 'Religious Reggie's' don't just break God's laws a little bit, they fail big time! And as a result of their sin and failures people start to think badly of God- and that's a terrible thing. And so the first big point Paul is making here is this: however accurate our moral compass or however deep our knowledge of God's Laws might be, they can only do us good if we keep them every moment of every day.

Imagine being stopped by the police on the A1M. You were travelling at 120 mph in a car without an MOT and no insurance. Your tyres were bald and you'd had 4 glasses of wine shortly before starting the trip. In the course of the conversation the policeman asks if you know the speed limit for a motorway and the laws about MOTs, insurance and the drink drive limits. You say you do, and you trot out chapter and verse, reciting the law in great detail. Would your knowledge of the law do you any good in that situation? Of course not! It isn't knowing the law that makes the difference, it's keeping it!

But just like Moral Marge Reggie's biggest problem isn't his failures. Deep down Religious Reggie thinks that by doing all these religious things he can make God love him and earn his way to heaven. Underneath he's just like Moral Marge trying to get to heaven by his own efforts! But Reggie's own efforts cannot atone for the wickedness and sin in his life. That's why Jesus came to be the sacrifice for our sin, not just a religious leader.

And so the big point Paul is making here is this: however accurate our moral compass or however deep our knowledge of God's Laws might be, they can only do us good if we keep them every moment of every day. But since however good we are no one, neither Moral Marges nor Religious Reggies, lives up to their own standards let alone God's standards we can't ever be moral enough to earn our way into Heaven. Neither can we be religious enough to earn our way into Heaven. We cannot be saved by keeping the written code, whether in our own hearts or from the scriptures.

So what hope do we have? Is there no way out? Are we all lost forever with no hope of heaven?

No! There is hope and we find it explained in the pages of the Bible. That's why Paul says that the Jews had a great advantage, because they were brought up knowing not just God's perfect commands but also his glorious promises of forgiveness and salvation.

The gospel that Paul mentions in verse 16 isn't just a message about the day when God will judge people's secrets and reveal what are really like, it's about the way that, through Jesus, we can know for certain that God loves us, forgives us, accepts us and will welcome us into heaven. The word gospel means good news and that's what it is. And not just good news, but the best news!

You see what we cannot do for ourselves God did for us by coming to earth in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived the perfect life we can never live so that when he died on the cross he did so as a sin offering so that sinful people like you and me who can never live up to God's perfect standards can be forgiven and know that our eternal future is in Heaven. If it was up to our own efforts we would never be sure we'd done enough, but because the hope of Heaven is a gift of God to those who come in repentance and faith and put their trust in Jesus we don't just have a vague hope of Heaven, we can have the certain hope of heaven.

So what kind of person goes to Heaven? It isn't someone good like Moral Marge or someone very churchy like Religious Reggie. The person who goes to heaven is one who recognises that deep down in the core of their being they are actually more like Wicked Wayne: a sinner who needs a saviour.

Only once we recognise our desperate need of a saviour will we come to Jesus and ask for his forgiveness. And only once we have done that can we begin, with the help of God's Holy Spirit to live in a way that does please God. Because it does matter how we live. Verses 3 to 8 in chapter 3 make that abundantly clear. We should seek to live moral and holy lives like Moral Marge, and like Religious Reggie we should spend time in God's Word and in church and tell people about Jesus because they do need to hear. But we must start our walk of faith and continue our walk of faith with our hope of Heaven firmly and securely grounded in Jesus and his death on the cross in our place, and not in ourselves or our good moral or religious works.

So I don't know who you are most like: Wicked Wayne, Moral Marge or Religious Reggie - but the warning of Paul here is that we can only find hope and the certainty of Heaven in Jesus Christ. Let's make sure we do. Amen.