

I have been in several small group discussions in recent weeks where the text under discussion was Romans 1:18ff. In this passage the apostle Paul is beginning his description of the good news of Jesus Christ with the bad news of human sin. His goal from Romans 1:18-3:20 is to show the solidarity of the human race as sinners, regardless of race, religion, gender, age or any other aspect of human diversity. His argument is that every single human being without exception prefers creation to the Creator. All humans have at the core of our being a belief that God himself is not worthy of our attention but rather that gods of our making who will give us what we want are to be preferred.

As a result of our “exchanging the glory of God for images” and our “worshipping and serving created things rather than the Creator” and our not thinking that God was worthy of our attention, God has given us over to “shameful lusts,” “the sinful desires of our hearts” and “a depraved mind to do what ought not to be done.” Three times in 1:24-32 we are told, “God gave them over.” God’s judgment on human disdain for himself is to give us over to our own wicked desires. God does not do the evil. Rather he gives men and women over to the evil that is resident in all of us and therefore we perform acts of evil. Paul lists over 15 particular kinds of sins that are the fruit of God giving us over to our own lusts.

God could restrain evil if he wanted to do so and in fact, the implication of this language is that God is restraining evil. If God took his hand of restraint off from us anarchy would reign over the face of the entire globe. Every place would be like Rwanda or Bosnia or Stalinist Russia or Baghdad or Virginia Tech last Monday morning. Human beings are not as bad as they could be because God has not fully removed his hand of restraint (Romans 13:1-5, 2 Thess. 2:7).

Therefore, when we observe the kind of evil we witnessed last Monday at Virginia Tech or almost daily in Iraq we should recognize two things. First, we should recognize ourselves in this evil. We are part of this race “whose feet are swift to shed blood,” whose ways are marked by “ruin and misery,” who do not know “the way of peace.” Seung-hui Cho is not some monster that is vastly different from us. We know by personal experience the emotions that he expressed. We’ve been full of envy and jealousy. We’ve felt unjustly treated. We’ve been full of rage at others. Second, we must understand why we have not done what he did. The only reason we have not acted on our rage as he acted is because God has graciously restrained us. He has done this through our parents, through giving us a healthy conscience and a healthy brain, through loving friends, through rules and laws, through adequate resources, through fear of punishment and shame and many other ways.

Therefore, while we must be horrified by this evil we must also be humbled by it. There needs to be in us, as Christians who know what is going on in the world, a collective groaning and mourning over the evil of which we are a part. This is not to say that we are guilty of doing what this enraged young man did. He is guilty. No one made him do this. He wanted to slaughter and he did so. However, we are to recognize our solidarity with all humanity in our common rebellion against our Creator and mourn over it and repent of our many sins (Luke 13:1-4). We must go to the only one who can both gain forgiveness for us and conquer the lusts that fill our hearts, the Lord Jesus Christ. We must join our voices to the multitudes of believers who have gone before us in crying out: “I cried out to God for help; I cried out to God to hear me. When I was in distress, I sought the Lord; at night I stretched out untiring hands and my soul refused to be comforted... Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again? Has his unflinching love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time? Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has he in anger withheld his compassion?” (Psalm 77:1-2, 7-9).

Our hearts are to be filled with desperation. We cannot be indifferent to these great acts of wickedness. There really is no help to be found among men. We are the problem. We desperately need a Savior who is also a conquering King. We need God to give us the courage to be involved in his world as one of the means of his restraining influence. We are to be salt and light. We are to do good to all men, especially to the household of believers. We have the only solution to the evil that is in us and thus in this world and we must communicate that solution, by word and deed to this dark and dying world: the person of Jesus and his saving work.

Mourning, praying and acting with you,