

Ministry of Grace Church

Romans 3:1-8 - Sermon Notes



Background

In this part of his letter to the Christians in Rome, the Apostle Paul is teaching one of the most important Christian doctrines, Justification by Faith. In the first chapter, he explained that the Gentiles are sinners and that they are guilty before God without excuse. In the second chapter he made just as clear a case against the Jews, showing that they, too, were guilty before God without excuse. Even though many of the early Christians were converted Jews, Paul states without a doubt that when it comes to being righteous before God, the Jews had no advantage over the Gentiles. He points out specifically that both Jews and Gentiles are guilty of sin. Because there is none righteous, neither group is deserving of salvation. Do you see that? None of us **deserves** salvation. According to Paul, God doesn't judge any of us to be righteous based on our actions or our deeds, but on a single deed of Jesus Christ. That's Justification – God declaring a person to be righteous.

These Jewish Christians in Rome had been raised on the Scriptures. Many of them had large portions committed to memory. They loved to hear the scriptures being read. Because of this, they felt privileged, and qualified to teach the Scriptures to others. And they were very proud of the fact that they were the guardians of God's Word. However, in the previous chapter, Paul made it very clear that hearing God's Word and teaching God's Word were not what was important to God. He expected them to learn from His Word and to live out what is taught in it.

You see, the real evidence of Judaism is their internal attitude, not their outward physical or ancestral indicators. Now, Paul is about to get into the specifics of his discourse on justification by faith. First, however, he needs to answer some objections that might be made against what he has already said about Jews.

Jews have historically considered themselves spiritually superior because they were the keepers of God's word in the *Tanakh* (our Old Testament). It consists of the *Torah* (the five books of Moses), the *Neviym* (the prophets), and the *Ketuvim* (the writings). The Jews also believed themselves to be special because, through Abraham, their circumcision was a sign of the covenant that God made with them. The Jewish people could show in the Scriptures that God considered them to be special, and different from all others:

Blessed are you, O Israel; Who is like you, a people saved by Yahweh, Who is the shield of your help And the sword of your majesty! ... (Deuteronomy 33:29a)

The Scriptures also referred to the Jews as a people who had been set apart for a special purpose in God's eternal plan:

and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exodus 19:6)

As a result, the early Christians, who were predominantly converted Jews, believed themselves to be better than even their unsaved fellow countrymen. Paul is not trying to tell these Jewish Christians that their heritage and faith in God are wrong. Instead, he says that there is something more important than being God's chosen people and living by the commandments and precepts in His Word. That supremely important thing is "justification." This doctrine says that a person is righteous, that is, without sin. Paul stated very clearly that justification before God is not a result of obeying a set of laws, or by performing a bloody ceremonial practice.

At this point a Jewish Christian might well reply, "But, if the Gentiles can attain righteousness apart from being a Jew and apart from circumcision, is there any real benefit to being a Jew or being circumcised?" They might also ask, "And, since there are so many Jews who didn't believe, does that mean that God has failed His people by not saving all of them?" To this, Paul immediately replies, "No way!" One of Paul's key positions is that God is glorified by saving sinners who don't deserve to be saved. Let me repeat that so that you all hear it clearly, God is glorified by saving sinners who don't deserve to be saved. But that, in turn, produces more questions regarding our sin - which appears to increase God's glory.

In anticipation of all these objections, Paul now asks a series of rhetorical questions to address these very objections and answers them convincingly. A rhetorical question is one that doesn't expect an answer. It is asked just to make a point.

Romans 3:1-2

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.

The first anticipated objection that Paul addresses is this.

Rhetorical Question #1: "Is there any real advantage in being a Jew?"

And Paul answers his own rhetorical question by saying, "Yes, there most certainly is!" The primary advantage of being a Jew is the fact that the Jews have been entrusted with the oracles of God. In other words, the Jewish people have been given the very words of God for safe keeping, the *Tanakh*.

Notice Paul does not say that the Jews were the only people that God communicated with. After all, there are a number of non-Jews to whom God communicated directly (like Adam & Eve, Noah, and Job, for instance). But the only written utterances of God (at the time that Paul was writing this epistle) were contained in the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. This made the Jews the keepers of God's revelation to mankind, an honor not to be taken too lightly.

One unmistakable advantage of this is something that has been alluded to in previous verses. Most of the converts to Christianity in the early church were Jews. Because they had the sacred writings at their disposal, they already knew more about God and His dealings with mankind. They also knew about the Messiah who was to come and save the Jews (and Gentiles). As a result, when Paul and others preached the gospel to them, it was easier for them to understand the significance of His death on the cross.

Today we Christians have a more complete version of the sacred writings of God than the Jews of Paul's day. Let us not lose sight of the fact that these "Oracles of God" have been entrusted to our care!

Romans 3:3-4

What then? If some did not believe, does their unbelief abolish the faithfulness of God? May it never be! Rather, let God be true and every man a liar, as it is written, "That you may be justified in your words, and overcome when you are judged."

Here, now, is the next question that a Jewish Christian might have asked Paul.

Rhetorical Question #2: Since there were so many Jews who did not believe in Jesus the Messiah when He came, does that mean that God is not faithful in saving His special people (the Jews)?

Paul's simple, emphatic answer is, "No way!" Greek, *mē genoito!*

He then enforces what he just said by declaring, "God is true, and every man a liar;" and he follows that with a quote from the Psalms. This particular Psalm was written in response to God's judgment that David received through Nathan the prophet. David had lusted after Bathsheba, the wife of a man in his army and had committed adultery with her. When David discovered that she was pregnant, he had her husband placed in the most dangerous part of the battle where he was killed. Afterward, David took Bathsheba as his wife.

In his own heart David did not see anything wrong with this. But God did not allow David's sin to go unnoticed. He sent the prophet Nathan to confront David. In response, David humbled himself before God. He recognized that God is righteous and truthful, and he (David) is a liar and a sinner.

**Against You, You only, I have sinned
And done what is evil in Your sight, So that
You are justified when You speak
And pure when You judge. (Psalms 51:4)**

Just like Paul in the current passage, David did not dare call into question God's truthfulness or His righteousness. God is righteous, and He always does what is right and true. Therefore, if some of the Jews who had been entrusted with the Holy Writings did not believe and were ultimately judged and condemned by God, then that was the true and

righteous thing to do. No one can blame God for condemning those who do not believe, because He is righteous!

There may be some who would ask the question that each one of us must wrestle with: “How can God extend His grace to some and send others to Hell? That’s just not right.” According to Paul, it is right because God is righteous. He always does what is right!

Romans 3:5-6

But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is the God who inflicts wrath unrighteous? (I am speaking in human terms.) May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world?

Paul has just stated two rhetorical questions that would be objections by Jews to his current discourse. The Jewish Christians in Rome would have been following his logic to this point. They might well concede that some (even many) Jews had not believed. They would also concede that God was true to his promises and His character, thereby judging sin. As a result of this, the character of God, as a just being, would shine brightly.

The next objection might be:

Rhetorical Question #3: But if our unrighteousness shows the worthiness of God’s righteousness, what can we say? Is God unrighteous who inflicts His wrath against unrighteousness?

Obviously, we can’t condemn God for displaying His righteous wrath against sin. That is the very character of God. He is holy and just. He abhors sin and must judge it because He always does what is right. Therefore, Paul responds again with, No way!

And we Christians also know from the New Testament writings that one day He will judge all sin and will condemn all sinners to the lake of fire. But we also know that we who have humbled ourselves before God, who have recognized our own unrighteousness, and who have accepted the sacrifice of Jesus as payment for our sins, will not receive this judgment. Instead, because of our faith, we have already been declared as righteous.

Paul will talk more about this righteousness which has been credited to us later in this chapter. He will even show that such righteousness is ours through faith:

even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; (Romans 3:22)

Remember that God is holy, meaning that He is set apart from sin and sinfulness. It is part of who He is. God cannot do wrong because of His holiness. That’s why Jesus, although He was a man, was also completely God, therefore He could not commit a sin, which is also why He was able to sacrifice His life for us – the sinless One for the sinners.

Romans 3:7-8

But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner? And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), “Let us do evil that good may come”? Their condemnation is just.

Now, please understand, these past few verses and the ones to follow comprise a passage of scripture that is very difficult to understand. Based on what Paul has already said, a person might then argue, “So, Paul is saying that God is glorified by man’s sin.” So, God

would be glorified more if I sin more? In order to address this question, Paul asks it as another rhetorical question.

Rhetorical Question #4: If God receives glory for judging my lie as a sin, then my sin isn't so bad, is it?

The argument could be stated like this: "Hey, Paul, if God receives glory for judging my sin, then my sin must be OK!"

The fallacy of this argument is that the act of sin does not glorify God any more than someone committing murder glorifies the court system. It is the fact that God judges the act of sin just as He said He would (God is shown to be true to His word) that glorifies Him. In the same manner, punishing a murderer glorifies the court system because the court has fulfilled its stated purpose and responsibility.

Some might claim that in the current verse Paul is confessing to being a liar because he says, "if through my lie ..." However, you will recall back in verse four he said:

... let God be true and every man a liar ...

That is to say, there is no one who tells the truth all the time, except God. Therefore, every man is a liar. And, if every man is a liar, then that includes Paul.

In effect, what Paul was saying back in verse 4 is, "God is true! And every man is a liar. Therefore, man cannot nullify the faithfulness of God." It is the fact that God is true, i.e. He always does just what He said He would do, that brings glory to Him, not our sinfulness.

Also, God's truth is what separates Christians from the rest of mankind. In John's gospel he related the prayer that Jesus prayed for his disciples after the Last Supper. In that prayer Jesus said:

"Sanctify them by the truth; Your word is truth. (John 17:17)

Since the Father always answers the prayers of the Son, we have been set apart ... from sin to God (that's what "sanctify" means). Believing the gospel message is what sets us apart because that message is truth.

In other words, God is not glorified when someone commits sin; God is glorified when He judges sin. It is His act of judgment, in keeping with who He is, that brings Him glory. However, in the first century, many opponents of Christianity had perverted his teaching on this subject. They claimed that Paul and the other Apostles were teaching that we all ought to sin greatly so that God would be greatly glorified. After all, as Paul surely had stated before and will later proclaim in this epistle:

... but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, (Romans 5:20b)

Paul taught that God, in the salvation of people, would be glorified in proportion to the depth and pollution of the guilt which was forgiven. This is true, but how easy it is to misrepresent this as teaching that people ought to sin in order to promote God's glory! You see, those who attacked Paul's teaching declared that Paul taught we ought to sin to bring glory to God. He counters that argument right here by openly exposing the falsehood of what others say about his doctrine.

So What?

Once again, we need to take what Paul was saying to these Jewish Christians of the first century church and apply it to our own lives.

Sooner or later each one of us has to face the question: Am I good enough for God to let me into heaven? There are many people who, when asked this question, will say, “Of course, I’ve done the best I can. What more can God expect of anyone?” But “the best I can” isn’t good enough, because heaven is reserved only for those who are perfect. Since none of us is perfect, none of us deserves heaven. God has entrusted us with the Holy Bible. If we ignore it, we’re lost. If we read it and believe that Jesus died to pay for our sins, then God declares us to be perfect.

We are no better than any unsaved person living around us today. We are sinners just like they are. We are guilty and deserve the same eternal torment that they will receive. The only difference between us and them is that the blood of Christ has been applied to our account. Our debt has been paid! Praise be to God for His mercy and grace!

Oh, that we all would recognize the righteousness of our Holy God and the utter wretchedness of our own sins.

When we realize that we are sinners and that God is a righteous God who must judge sin, we recognize that we are deserving of God’s judgment and wrath. But thanks to the blood of Christ! When we confess our sin, God cleanses us of all unrighteousness. Praise God!

Every man, woman, and child will stand before the Judge one day. Only those who are as righteous as Jesus Christ will be spared from the Lake of Fire. A little later in this letter Paul will declare that none of us is righteous except through faith in Christ.

Once again, we are brought face to face with how holy our God is and how sinful we are. You know, I find it absolutely amazing that a Holy God who judges sin manages to find a way for sinners like us to avoid His judgment. He sent His Son to sacrifice His perfect life so that my sins and yours could be forgiven. How great is His love and how marvelous is His grace!

I don’t know about you, but I am as grateful as I am unworthy! And that’s the truth!

We are all sinners, so when our lives are compared to the perfect life that Christ lived, we will all be found to be guilty sinners and it will be shown that our righteousness is like filthy rags. For the past few verses Paul’s teaching has been “God will judge every sin of every man.” Those sins will either be judged at the cross and declared as fully paid for, or they will be judged at the Great White Throne where the sinners will be declared guilty, and the punishment for them will be eternity in the lake of fire.

Where will your sins be judged?

Let’s pray.