

Romans 3:1-20

As we approach the third chapter of Romans, we must keep in mind that the Jews imagined themselves to be clothed with a righteousness that was actually nonexistent.

Paul's argument in Chapter 2 was devastating! It really did leave his religious kinsmen naked. His teaching that there was no fundamental difference between Jews and Gentiles in terms of being under the wrath and judgement of God even though they were God's chosen people seemed to call into question God's covenant, his promises and his character. How will Paul respond to the supposed objections?

Paul's method of handling these objections takes the form of a *'diatribe'*, a literary convention well known in the ancient world in which a teacher would set up a dialogue with his critics or students, first posing and then answering their objections be they real or imagined. We see this displayed in 3:1-8

I. Paul Answers Supposed Objections Romans 3:1-8

A. Objection 1: Paul's teaching undermines God's covenant 3:1-2

Both Paul and his critics agree that God chose Israel out of all the nations, made a covenant with them and gave them circumcision as a sign of that covenant. But if all Jews are guilty before God and these things do not protect Jews from judgement (2:17-29) what advantage is there in being a Jew?

Answer: Much in every way starts Paul in v. 2. First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God (2). This is the most important advantage but Paul will list others later in chapter 9:4-5. It seems clear that these 'words of God' are not just God's commandments or promises, but the whole Old Testament Scripture which contains them and which was committed to Israel's care. What a privilege to have been given the written word of God. Yet despite that they failed to believe God and walk in his ways.

B. Objection 2: Paul's teaching nullifies God's faithfulness 3:3-4

The play on words relating to *pistis* (*faith or faithfulness*) is more obvious in the Greek sentence than in the English. It might be rendered as follows: *'If some to whom God's promises were entrusted (episteuthēsan, 2) did not respond to them in trust (ēpistēsan, 3a), will their lack of trust (apistia) destroy God's trustworthiness (pistis, 3b)?'* If God's people are unfaithful, does that necessarily mean that he is?

Answer: *'May it never be'* is simply not strong enough. The Greek is *me genoito* which shows up again in vs. 6 along with a number of other times in Romans (6:2, 15). The word *genoito* comes from root *ginomai* meaning to *"come into existence, to happen"*. With the negative *me* the meaning is *"not to come into existence, not happen"*. We might say something like: *"absolutely, positively under no circumstances is that true."*

God's faithfulness is a priori – a given. God is always true, no matter how much man falls short. Paul then uses the Scripture that God has given them to prove his point. He quotes David's repentant words from Ps. 51:4 after his sin with Bathsheba, affirming God's justice and giving proof that God remains faithful and true no matter how individuals may sin. God is going to keep his word no matter how many fail. God's faithfulness is not dependent on man's response.

C. Objection 3: Paul's teaching impugns God's justice 3:5-6

The argument continues: If the previous statement from Ps. 51 is true that God is just and justified when he judges sin then my unrighteousness benefits God or better, displays his character more clearly. Here God is accused of using the Jews to his advantage—showing his righteousness by their failure. Therefore, he is unrighteous and cannot rightly judge those whom he has so used.

Would it not be unfair of God to punish them (*the Jews*) for something which is to his advantage? Even as he expresses this tortuous reasoning, Paul feels embarrassed and adds apologetically in parenthesis: (*I am using a human argument*) (5b).

Answer: *me genoito* – God forbid, certainly not, categorically no! This takes us back to 1:18. The Jews to whom Paul is writing all agree that God is going to judge the world – his righteousness and holiness demand it. Since God is bound to judge sin and the sinner he must also judge the sin of his chosen people. If he is going to be just and judge righteously he must judge all sin regardless of who commits it.

D. Objection 4: Paul’s teaching misrepresents God 3:7-8

If my lying, for example, glorifies God by showing Him to be the only perfectly truthful person, why does God punish me for lying? If one takes this line of thought to its logical conclusion it reads like this: *Let’s do evil that good may come.* (v. 8)

This argument will be expounded further at the end of chapter 5 and beginning of chapter 6. Read 5:20-6:2.

Answer: here in chapter 3 Paul simply states: “*If anyone thinks that God should overlook his sinning because in a sense his sin glorifies God, that person deserves condemnation*” (end of vs. 8). The argument is so ridiculous that Paul doesn’t really answer it at all.

The essential objections are as follows.

1. The Jews are a privileged people (vs. 1-2).
2. God will remain faithful to the Jews despite their unfaithfulness to Him (vs. 3-4).
3. God will be merciful since the Jews’ failings have magnified God’s righteousness (vs. 5-6).
4. God will overlook the Jews’ sins since they contribute to the glory of God (vs. 7-8).

Self-righteous people still raise these objections. Some people assume that because God has blessed them He will not condemn them (*objection #1*). Some believe the character of God prohibits Him from condemning them (*objection #2*). Some think that even though they have sinned God will be merciful and not condemn them (*objection #3*). Some feel that since everything we do glorifies God in some way God would be unjust to condemn them (*objection #4*).

Paul has given a brief response to each objection and now drives the final nail in mankind’s spiritual coffin by citing Scripture proving that all are guilty for all are under sin and have sinned.

II. Paul Concludes his Argument from Scripture – “all are under sin” Rom. 3:9-20

The apostle is approaching the end of his lengthy argument begun in 1:18, and asks himself how to wrap it all up, how to rest his case: What shall we conclude then? (9a)

He has exposed in succession the blatant unrighteousness of the ancient Gentile world (1:18–32), the hypocritical righteousness of moralizers (2:1–16), and the confident self-righteousness of Jewish people, whose anomaly is that they boast of God’s law but break it (2:17–3:8). So now he arraigns and condemns the whole human race.

In 3:1 Paul asks: ‘*What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew?*’ And he has answered: ‘*Much in every way!*’ Now in verse 9 he asks: ‘*Are we (Jews) any better or ‘any better off?’* And he replies: ‘*Not at all!*’ He certainly sounds as if he is contradicting himself, asserting first that there is great advantage in being a Jew and then that there is none. How can we resolve this discrepancy? Only by clarifying what benefit or ‘*advantage*’ he has in mind. If he means privilege and responsibility, then the Jews have much because God has entrusted his revelation to them, chosen them and made covenants with them. But if he means favoritism, then the Jews have

none, because God will not exempt them from judgment: We have already made the charge (1:18–2:29) that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin (9).

The force of the language here in v. 9 leaves no doubt about what is meant. The word is ‘*sin*’ not ‘*sins*’—and means “*the dynamic of sin;*” and ‘*under*’ means “*under the power or dominion of.*” Everyone in the world is under the power of the dynamic of sin! Jews are not better (*more obedient*) than Gentiles even though they received greater privileges from God. The problem is not just that people (*Jews and Gentiles*) commit sin but that all people are enslaved to sin.

What we have in this statement (v. 9) and in the following verses (10-18) is the most explicit description of the total depravity of mankind in all of Scripture. This does not mean man is as depraved as he could be, but that there is always room for ‘*deprovement*’ because he is under the power of sin. It means that sin has affected every part of his or her being and consequently there is nothing anyone can do to commend himself or herself to God.

He quotes six Old Testament sources in fourteen sweeping statements with devastating artistry. First, he describes mankind’s depraved character (vv. 10-12) and then his depraved conduct (vv. 13-17) and finally the cause (v. 18).

A. Depraved in character 3:10-12

“*No one is righteous, no one understands, no one seeks God, no one does good, not even one, all have turned aside and all have become useless.*” The repetition hammers home the point. Twice we are told that ‘*all*’ have gone their own way, four times that ‘*no-one*’ is righteous, and twice that ‘*not even one*’ is an exception. Sin has affected emotions, intellect, and volition of all.

“*There is no one who does good, not even one*” (v. 12b). Obviously men do good things, but they do not do them consistently or profoundly. A good work must not only conform to the commandments of God, it must come from a heart committed to honoring him, and no one habitually does this.

B. Depraved in conduct 3:13-17

What is down in the heart comes out in speech – vulgarity, hypocrisy, little white lies, slander, put-downs, sharp caustic words meant to hurt, and sarcasm that cuts and depersonalizes another. We are all guilty. The speech of those without God is like the odor from an open sepulchre. Sometimes it is filthy, sometimes it is deceiving, sometimes it is as deadly as a cobra’s bite.

Our feet soon follow our hearts (vv. 15-16). Wherever man goes, ruin follows.

Why do cities always develop ghettos and slums? Why do our beautiful mountains and streams become polluted? It is because of the heart of man.

Why is all this true? Why do we think, speak and act this way? Verse 18 answers...

C. Cause of depravity 3:18

“*There is no fear of God before their eyes*”. That brings us right back to chapter 1:18-23. When men reject God, they lose everything. All these things follow because “*there is no fear of God before their eyes.*”

If all that is true, what is the point or value of the law as given to the Jews?

D. The value of the Law 3:19-20

Jewish people reading the series of Old Testament quotations would assume that they applied to those wicked and lawless Gentiles. And of course, God’s judgment would fall on them. But Paul reminds Jews of their common knowledge: we know that whatever the law says (*here meaning the Old Testament in general*), it says

to those who are under the law (v. 19a, literally, 'within' the law), namely themselves as Jews, so that they will be included in the judgment as well. In this way every mouth is stopped, every excuse silenced, and the whole world, having been found guilty, is liable to God's judgment.

The purpose of the law was not to provide people with a series of steps that would lead them to heaven. It was to expose their inability to merit heaven (Gal. 3:24). Returning to verse 20, Paul continues, through the law we become conscious of sin (v. 20b). That is, what the law brings is the knowledge of sin, not the forgiveness of sin.

So this is the point to which the apostle has been relentlessly moving. The idolatrous and immoral Gentiles are 'without excuse' (1:20). All critical moralists, whether Jews or Gentiles, equally 'have no excuse' (2:1). The special status of the Jews does not exonerate them. In fact, all the inhabitants of the whole world (3:19), without any exception, are accountable (*hupodikos*) before God, that is, 'under accusation with no possibility of defense.'

Conclusion

This is not a popular message. Understandably. It is no more popular than the doctor's words: 'Your tumor is malignant.' But it is vastly more hopeful. 'Your tumor is malignant' may or may not be hopeful news because the doctor may or may not have a cure for your cancer. But 'you are under the power of sin and a child of wrath' always has a cure. The good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ who gave himself for us on the cross.

So how do we respond to Paul's devastating exposure of universal sin and guilt? We can't ignore it or redefine it in terms of self-esteem, or blame our genes, nurturing, education, or society. Our first response needs to be an acceptance of our human condition so that we can find the solution in Christ alone. That is what the book of Romans and what Christianity and the Bible are all about.

Because for all this bad news about my true condition, there is a remedy. And the only reason for telling me the bad news is so that I will understand the remedy and take it - namely, the righteousness of God, freely given to those who really trust in Christ 3:21ff.