



SCRIPTURE STUDIES: ROMANS 3:1-8

Brandon Sutton, Associate Pastor of The Journey Church in Lebanon, TN

Romans 3:1-8 (ESV) -- Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, "That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged." But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world? But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come? - as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

When I first learned the doctrines of grace, like many, I was very eager to teach these new truths. At the time, I was teaching a Bible study at my church and for the most part, my teaching was being well received. But one man took major exception to my teachings. In fact, he argued with me in every class. I remember one time, I came prepared with some handouts for everyone, and when I began passing out the paperwork, he made the comment to another student, "I wonder what he is going to be indoctrinating us with today."

The man eventually stopped coming. His problems centered around the fact that he couldn't reconcile the teachings he'd grown up believing with my teaching. Specifically, he was brought up believing very Arminian doctrine and the "new" doctrines of grace I was teaching seemed to contradict, in his mind, what he had always believed. In other words, he couldn't reconcile his religious views with my biblical teaching. As a result, he accused me of being a false teacher.

That's what happened to the Apostle Paul regularly. The moment Paul was converted, he began teaching and preaching the gospel. One place he loved to share his views was in Jewish synagogues. He would frequent these Jewish worship centers and reason with Jews and Gentiles alike that Jesus is the Christ from the OT. Can you imagine the push back Paul would have received?! He received a lot; especially with Jews who couldn't reconcile Paul's "new" gospel teaching with what they have always believed, particularly with Jews who couldn't reconcile the fact that they were God's chosen people but that Paul's gospel seemed to be tearing down their Jewish heritage.

Scriptural Context

- **Romans 1:15-2:16.** Paul stated the purpose of his letter—preach the gospel (1:15-16). He began to unpack that gospel unleashing powerful judgments upon the unbelieving, idolatrous Gentile world (1:18-24). Those who reject God are given over to their sins and depravity (1:24-32). Paul then points his fingers at the Jews and begins to bring universal condemnation on all men equally (2:1-16).
- **Romans 2:17-29.** His teachings then become very specifically directed at the Jews. Paul makes it very clear that because the Jews are lawbreakers, they will be judged just like the Gentiles (2:17-23). In fact, because of their inability to keep the law, their heritage and circumcision are worthless as it relates to salvation (V.25-29). What God is looking for is the person who loves and obeys the Lord by faith. Salvation is a matter of the heart, not outward ceremonies and religion.
- **Romans 3:1-8.** Now, Paul is anticipating and answering objections. He knows that his gospel is offending and even confusing some of his Jewish readers. So, Paul addresses those objections because he's heard them before.

Objection #1-What Good is it Being a Jew?

Romans 3:1 (ESV) -- *Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?*

- **Explanation.** Paul is asking two rhetorical questions in anticipation of the Jews' response to his teachings, particularly in 2:17-19. If all men are on equal footing spiritually because all men are lawbreakers and in need of Christ's salvation, as Paul has labored to teach, then what (spiritual or saving) advantage did the Jews ever have over any other people group? What is the point or saving value of circumcision? If our Jewish heritage doesn't make us righteous before God, what's the point? It's a fair question. Paul's teaching continually made the Jew's feel like their Jewish heritage was pointless. The Jews are God's chosen people, and a kingdom of priests, and now Paul is telling them their heritage nor their circumcision will achieve them righteousness.

Transition: You would expect Paul to say, "None! There is no advantage in being a Jew!" That's what we would say. Right? But that's not what Paul says. Verse 2.

Answer #1-The Jews had Every Spiritual Advantage

Romans 3:2 (ESV) -- *Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with every oracle of God.*

- **Much in every way.** *To be the people of God, the covenant children, is a huge advantage and blessing.*
- **To begin with.** This is not a good translation. Translating it, "To begin with" makes it seem like Paul is saying, "first of all" as he begins a list of advantages. The problem is he doesn't continue the list. He just mentions the oracles of God and doesn't continue. It's the Greek word, "*proton*." The root word is *protos*, for first. "Chiefly" is a better translation. Paul is saying the Jews had one huge primary advantage—they had the oracles of God.
- **The oracles of God.** The Jews had a huge advantage (over the Gentiles) because they were given the oracles (Greek, *logion*, *logos*, word) of God, the OT, the very words of God. Deut. 6:1-2, "***Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the rules—that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, ² that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son's son,***

by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long."

- **Tom Schreiner.** "The advantage should not be restricted merely to the possession of the Scriptures and the stewardship required because of their possession...Rather, Paul declares something more profound about the "saving advantage" that ethnic Israel possessed: they had promises from God ensuring them of future salvation."

Objection #3-Does Jewish Faithlessness mean God will be Unfaithful?

Romans 3:3 (ESV) -- What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?

- **Explanation.** The next objection Paul faced is that if the Jews are unfaithful (unbelieving) and as a result have failed to receive the covenant blessings, doesn't that make God unfaithful to His promises? Didn't God promise to save His people, Israel? It seems like your gospel Paul presents God as unfaithful to His promises.
- **God will be faithful.** This is where Israel repeatedly got it wrong. God did not promise salvation to every individual Jew regardless of whether they repented of their sins and trusted the Lord. What God promised was that through the offspring of Abraham, the world would be blessed, and that God would save His people Israel. So, they're right in defending God's faithfulness. But what they didn't understand is that not all Israelites were truly apart of the people of God (Romans 9:6-7; Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated). God promised to save His people, His elect; therefore, even if certain Jews were covenant breakers, God would fulfill His promises to save His covenant people. Those covenant people are those who have been chosen in Christ.
- **Tom Schreiner.** "Even though God has promised salvation to the Jews, no individual Jew could presume upon those promises and think that he or she was guaranteed salvation. God is still just and righteous when He judges sin among the Jews, for no individual is automatically granted God's covenantal mercies."

Answer #2-God is Faithful

Romans 3:4 (ESV) -- By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, "That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged."

- **Explanation.** Paul answers, "God forbid!" Just because His people are unfaithful to the covenant, that doesn't mean God will be unfaithful; nor does it mean that He won't be faithful to His eschatological promises to save Israel. All Israel will be saved (11:26). Even if every man said God didn't do what He promised, all men would be liars and God would be true.
- **God's faithfulness.** Their unfaithfulness highlights God's faithfulness. Even though ethnic Israel failed to keep God's law, God is still going to execute His plan to save His people. Even if every Jew is a failure and a liar, God will remain true to His promises to save His people.
- **Psalm 51.** Paul quotes Psalm 51:4 to prove the point that God is righteous in His deeds/works, particularly His judgments against covenant breakers. David (the perfect example of a godly Jew) said God is justified in His judgments against Him. Paul's point, therefore, is if David believed God was just and faithful even in His judgements against him, He is just and faithful in His judgments against other unfaithful Jews.

Transition. The following are further objections to Paul's theology, but from a different angle. In verses 1-4, they objected that Paul's teachings nullified Jewish heritage and the promises God made to Israel. In verses 5-8, they object that Paul's teachings are heretical. Verse 8 helps us understand how to interpret the entire section (V.5-8). The objection centered around the idea that Paul's theology teaches that the more we sin, the more grace we get, and the more glory God receives; therefore, we should sin all the more. They're trying to discredit Paul's gospel as being antinomian (c.f. 5:20-6:4). They're saying his preaching of God's grace undermines morality.

Objection #3-Doesn't Your Gospel Make God Incapable to Judge Sinners?

Romans 3:5 (ESV) -- But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way).

- **Explanation.** The objection is: If our (Jews) sin (like the sin of David) provides God an opportunity to magnify His glory in judgment, then we are actually the instruments of God's glory; therefore, God would be unjust to judge us, right? If your gospel is right, Paul, then God would be unjust to judge the very people who provide for Him an opportunity to be glorified in judgment even if we have sinned.
- **I speak in a human way.** Paul is making it clear that this isn't his way of thinking. He's answering the objections of others. It's human logic and wisdom, which doesn't line up with the gospel.
- **Rejecting the gospel.** This is an utter rejection of the gospel and a misrepresentation of what Paul is saying.

Answer #3-God's Judgment is Just

Romans 3:6 (ESV) -- By no means! For then how could God judge the world?

- **Explanation.** "God forbid." God isn't unrighteous to judge sin even if your sin highlights His righteousness. Just because God is glorified in judgment doesn't mean He is unjust in punishing the sin that provided Him an opportunity to magnify His judgments. Otherwise, how would judge the world?! You and I both agree He will judge the world. You want God to judge the world, but if your logic right, God can't do that!
- **Judge Illustration.** An earthly judge is praised when he passes just punishment according to the law. Nevertheless, the judge needs a crime to happen to pass judgment. So, in a sense the crime sets the judge up to act justly and receive praise. But this in no way makes him unjust for passing judgment on the one who provided the opportunity to display his justice. The same is true with God. God is praised when He passes judgment. He is glorified in His judgment, but even His judgment requires sin. He still judges the sinner who provided the sin to be judged, and God is glorified as a result.
- **God's judgment of the world.** If their reasoning were true (and it's not), then how could God judge the world at the end of time? If God must set aside His

judgment, for the sake of repaying the one whose sin made it possible to receive glory in judgment, then He can't carry out His plan to judge the world? It doesn't make sense.

Objection #3-Restated

Romans 3:7 (ESV) -- *But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?*

- **Explanation.** The same objection is being made from a different angle. If my lies serve to highlight the truthfulness of God's word, then why would God judge me for my lie? Again, I am simply providing God an opportunity to display His truth and righteousness through my sin. I should be praised for giving God such a wonderful opportunity.
- **Alternative explanation.** This could also be Paul referring to himself, and not a Jewish objector, with the referent "my." If so, he would be saying, "You think I (Paul) am lying when I preach the gospel. But even if I am lying, according to your logic (V.5), God would be unjust in punishing me because my lie actually glorifies Him. You're condemning me as a sinner for the gospel I preach, but you can't condemn me because not even God condemns me, according to your reasoning."

Objection #4-Doesn't your Gospel imply that we should go on sinning?

Romans 3:8 (ESV) -- *And why not do evil that good may come? - as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.*

- **Explanation.** This is the crux of the argument/objections made by Paul's opponents. If God is glorified in the gospel by giving grace and passing judgment on sinners, then why don't we just sin in abundance (Romans 6:1-4)? That way God's grace will flourish, and His judgement will be put on full display? Some people were actually making these accusations and raising these objections to Paul's gospel. Paul condemns such people for their twisted views of the gospel.

Application #1-The Gospel we Preach Should be Scandalously Preached

- **Explanation.** Paul was consistently accused of preaching a gospel that would inevitably lead to antinomianism. The idea was that if God will forgive anyone who simply puts their trust in Jesus Christ, and God is glorified by doing so, then that will lead people to think they can sin as much as they want and without consequence, because God will always forgive their sin.
- **Illustration.** I used to teach every Thursday night at a recovery home in Indiana. There was a man there named Roger who recently became a Christian, and he was always trying to help the guys with their faith. But Roger would become frustrated with them when they didn't behave the way he thought a Christian should behave. So, when I would teach on the gospel of God's free grace and mercy in Christ, it always made him nervous, because, in his mind, my message would encourage the guys to believe that all they had to do was put their trust in Jesus and then they could sin all they want.
- **Application.** In our gospel preaching, we should be so saturated with grace that we're accused of teaching antinomianism. Our gospel should seem so unbelievable, because it's full of the grace of God, that others think it is too good to be true, because it is. Now, of course, we don't encourage sin in our gospel and neither did Paul (Romans 6:1). That's something we need to clarify, but we must error on the side of being misunderstood to preach the gospel of God's free grace in Christ.

Application #2-Don't Abandon One Biblical Truth Because You Cannot Reconcile it with Another Biblical Truth

- **Explanation.** The whole reason Paul's objectors were pushing back against him is because they couldn't reconcile his gospel with their understanding of Israel's election. Paul is saying all must repent and believe in the Savior to be saved, and at the same time, the Bible teaches God showed special favor to Israel. They couldn't reconcile these truths; so, they were ready to abandon Paul's gospel and call it false.
- **Application.** This happens a lot in the church, particularly with the doctrines of grace. People can't reconcile God's sovereignty and man's responsibility to obey. So, they abandon one truth or another. We must not do this. I also see people doing this with God's sovereignty, particularly in the idea that God ordained sin to come into the world. How could God ordain and judge sin? Romans 9 provides a good answer.

Application #3-We Must be Good Stewards of God's Word

- **Explanation.** The Jews were entrusted with the very words of God, but often did not steward those blessings well.
- **William Cowper.** William Cowper wrote, "They, and they only amongst all mankind, Received the transcript of the Eternal Mind; Were trusted with His own engraved laws, And constituted guardians of His cause; Theirs were the prophets, theirs the priestly call, And theirs, by birth, the Savior of us all."
- **Application.** How much more with us, the church? What an advantage that we have to sit under the word of God every week...every day perhaps. But let us remember, the more light, the more responsibility.