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The Jew And His Argument

In Romans 2:17-3:8 Paul is showing that the Jew is condemned along with the Gentile. This fits in with the first major category of systematic theology in Romans; the doctrine of condemnation; including the doctrine of God as the background, the doctrine of man and evil. It sets the stage for the doctrine of salvation; including justification, sanctification and glorification. It is clearly observable by most students of Romans that Paul here, more than any other book, lays out in systematic form the great ideas. And so it is critical that we grasp how good God is and how fallen and corrupt we are so that we understand and appreciate God's mercy and grace extended to us in order to save us to the utmost. The condemnation section is extensive and somewhat depressing. But the true student of Scripture desires to think God's thoughts after Him in every area of life no matter how it might make you feel. It's not about how you or I feel. It's about what God says. And God says pagan Gentiles are condemned by God because of creation and moral Gentiles are condemned by God because of conscience and even the Jew is condemned. This was a most shocking revelation because the Jew had the Law and the Jew had circumcision and the Law and circumcision were what set the Jew apart from the Gentile and it was through the Law that the Jew conceived himself as establishing his righteousness with God and it was through circumcision that he thought of himself as having automatic entrance into the covenanted blessings. However, as 2:17 intimates, there were those who were Jews in name only. Paul's point is that there were true Jews and those who were not true Jews, meaning Jews who understood that righteousness came only through faith and those who did not. Those who understood and believed were true Jews; those who did not understand and believe were Jews in name only. So the Jew in name only was condemned along with the Gentile. He, in vv 17-24, took refuge in the Law, but he did not perfectly obey the Law and therefore stood condemned. He then, in vv 25-29, took refuge in

circumcision, but he only had the ritual of physical circumcision and not the real circumcision of the heart. He had forgotten the true meaning of circumcision in its original context. Originally physical circumcision was a ritual that served as a sign for the Abrahamic Covenant. Its purpose was to reveal the spiritual need of corrective surgery on his sinful heart. It did nothing more than ultimately demonstrate that need. So if a Jew was depending on his circumcision and did not keep the Law perfectly then it was as if the physical circumcision was uncircumcision, because it had not met its intended aim. In verse 26 Paul shows by hypothetical logic that if a Gentile kept the Law then it would be as if his uncircumcision was circumcision. Of course, no Gentile ever did, that's not the point. Paul is using hypothetical logic to get across the point that the physical ritual of circumcision is nothing left to itself! Verse 27 continues Paul's hypothetical logic. If an uncircumcised Gentile kept the Law would he not judge the Jew who had the Law and circumcision? Logically, he would be in a position to judge the Jew. Of course, no Gentile ever did keep the Law but Paul's point stands logically; the important thing is not circumcision or the Law but the condition of the heart. As Paul shows in verses 28-29, the true Jew is not one who has the external marks of circumcision in the flesh but the one who has the internal marks of circumcision by the Spirit in his heart. So what makes a Jew a true Jew is being properly oriented to God through faith like Abraham. When a Jew believed then God circumcised his heart and the Jew became a true Jew. I gave the example of the two Jews by reminding you of the Pharisee and the publican, both who went down to the temple to pray; the Pharisee standing in a very prominent place in the temple saying to God, "thank you God that I am not like other people, I fast twice a week, I pay tithes of all I get, etc..." but the publican stood some distance away and was beating his chest and looking up to heaven saying, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner." I tell you one of these men was a true Jew and the other was a Jew in name only and that is what Paul is teaching here.

Today we come to Romans 3 and here we continue with the condemnation of the Jew for the first eight verses. I mentioned last week that there is a logical flow to Paul's argument to the Jew. The Jew would take refuge in the Law so Paul shows how he could not take refuge in the Law. When he fled the Law he would take refuge in his circumcision so Paul shows how he could not take refuge in his circumcision either. So now the Jew flees circumcision and takes up argument.

Alva J. McClain says, “Some have said that this is the hardest portion of the book of Romans to understand, and it may be.”ⁱ I will admit that I got a headache trying to work through these verses. It is rather difficult; all of Scripture is not simple to understand. Much of it requires time and thought and careful study. I will do all I can to explain it but it may be somewhat difficult, therefore I will do what I can to simplify it.

One thing is simple and that is the fact that there are four objections and Paul’s four replies. The four objections are raised in the odd verses; 1, 3, 5 and 7. The four replies are given in the even verses; 2, 4, 6 and 8.ⁱⁱ

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| Verse 1: An objection | Verse 2: Paul’s reply |
| Verse 3: Another objection | Verse 4: Paul’s reply |
| Verse 5: Another objection | Verse 6: Paul’s reply |
| Verse 7: Another objection | Verse 8: Paul’s reply |

The four objections follow a plan of logic and Paul’s replies show the fallacy of the plan of logic as he pushes the objections to their unthinkable logical conclusion. McClain argues that these objections are raised because “Paul had been a Pharisee once and knew the pattern of their thinking.”ⁱⁱⁱ On the contrary Constable thinks “Probably Paul was simply posing these questions and objections to himself to clarify his view for his readers.”^{iv} It seems to me that the former is more close to correct. Paul is thinking of a very real pattern of thinking that he had faced before because verse 8 includes a parenthetical remark to the effect that Paul had been accused of making certain remarks. So I think that Paul is not merely putting hypothetical words in the mouth of an objector but that these were arguments that Paul truly faced from objectors.

Whatever the case, once you work through this the argument makes sense. It is interesting to watch the Jew wiggle and squirm to try and get away and to watch Paul prohibit him from getting away. In the end a man must be pinned down realizing he has no righteousness which would commend him before God. That is what Paul is doing here to the Jew; pinning him down so that he sees his need for faith.

Now, to teach the steps in the argument, each step depending on the prior step, I will begin by reading the objection as Paul put it, then paraphrasing the objection as I understand it, and then proceeding to look at Paul's reply, reviewing each step along the way in the simplest manner possible. The first objection is verse 1. The objector asks Paul, **Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?** This objection comes out of the previous section when Paul has shown that merely having the Law and being circumcised did not result in the Jew being uncondemned. If that was the case then the Jew asks, what advantage is there then, in being a Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? The objection may be paraphrased as follows: If being born a Jew was an advantage over being born a Gentile and yet Jews are condemned along with Gentiles then what advantage was there really in being born a Jew? Or, if being circumcised was an advantage over being uncircumcised and yet the circumcised were condemned along with the uncircumcised then what advantage was there really in being circumcised? It would appear on the surface that being a Jew and being circumcised did not give them any advantage over the Gentile.

Yet Paul retorts to this line of reasoning in verse 2, **Great in every respect** or "great in every way." Paul maintained that the Jew had many advantages. Seeing that he indicates multiple advantages we would expect Paul to give us a series of advantages of the Jew as he does in Romans 9:4-5, "to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the *temple* service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh..." yet he mentions only one advantage here and this one is sufficient to show not only the Jews advantage but the greater responsibility that came with the advantage. The expression **first of all** may be translated "chiefest of all..." meaning that the advantage mentioned here excelled far beyond all the other advantages. What is the chiefest advantage of the Jew? **That they were entrusted with the oracles of God.** A difficulty is in identifying **the oracles of God.** What are **the oracles of God?** Some maintain that **the oracles of God** refer to the entire OT.^v The OT was given to the Jews and this gave them an advantage. Others maintain that they refer exclusively to the OT prophecies of the Messiah. The Jews were given the OT prophecies as a portion of the OT. I hold that they refer to the OT covenant promises given to Abraham and David that looked forward to the person and work of the Messiah. The Messiah was the One who would fulfill the covenants to Israel. Israel alone is

the covenant nation so this did give them a clear advantage. This view is evidenced by the reference in verse 3 to the faithfulness of God to His covenants. The objector in verse 3 seems to understand that the oracles of God in verse 2 referred to the covenants which God had sworn faithfulness to. So in light of the next objection in verse 3 it seems that the oracles of God in verse 2 refer to the OT covenant promises that centered on the person and work of the Messiah. Now when the Messiah came what was the nation Israel to do? How were they to respond to the Messiah? They were to believe on Him and enthrone Him so that He would fulfill the covenants. Did this not give them a tremendous advantage over the other nations in that they alone had the covenant promises? And yet when the Messiah came as scheduled and in the way predicted by prophecy they did not recognize Him. Because of this, you see, the Jew was condemned. They should have believed in the One prophesied in the OT Scriptures to fulfill the covenants. So, it is clear then that though physical circumcision did not give an advantage in the sense of automatically qualifying him for ultimate enjoyment of the covenant blessings; nevertheless he had a clear advantage over the Gentiles in that by it he was a member of the only nation on earth that had the covenant promises of God. The fact that he did not live up to the advantage was not God's fault but it was the Jews fault! Therefore, though having an advantage, he stood equally condemned with the Gentile.

The second objection is rooted in and grows out of the first. Paul essentially said that the Jews had the advantage of the covenants of God. **What then?** Some Jew objects, **If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?** To paraphrase this objection what is the Jew saying? If we have the covenant promises of God then how can a Jew be condemned on the basis that he did not believe? God made the promise and God will be faithful to His promises. Therefore if a Jew did not believe it makes no difference because God will be faithful to His word and will fulfill the covenant to him anyway. So the objection is that with or without faith the Jew will enjoy the covenant promises because God will remain faithful.

This objection is true to a point. God will remain faithful to His covenant promises. But it is also false on a point. God is not obligated to fulfill His covenant promises to Jews who did not believe. The covenant promises were only to be ultimately enjoyed by those who had a faith like Abraham.

Abraham believed and it was credited to him as righteousness (Gen 15:6). He was a member of the believing remnant. Those Jews who did not follow in Abraham's footsteps of faith but remained in unrighteousness should not be deceived into thinking that God was obligated to them. They remained a part of the unbelieving non-remnant. So would their lack of faith nullify the faithfulness of God to His covenant promises? No, Paul answers in verse 4! **May it never be!** It is good to point out here that the expression **May it never be** is the strongest Greek negative in the language. Paul will use it ten times in Romans to make his points perfectly clear. It is *μη γένοιτο* in the Greek (3:4, 6, 31; 6:2, 15; 7:7, 13; 9:14; 11:1, 11) and it is a very strong way of saying something is impossible. So Paul is saying that on no possible terms will God not be faithful to His covenant promises. However, from the very start God was only obligated to fulfill His covenant promises to the believing remnant; that is, to those Jews who had followed in the faith of Abraham and had a circumcised heart. Consequently, for the unbelieving non-remnant, He had no obligation other than to judge them. As Paul continues to explain in verse 4, **Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar**, the proof was in their prized OT, **as it is written, "THAT YOU MAY BE JUSTIFIED IN YOUR WORDS, AND PREVAIL WHEN YOU ARE JUDGED."** This is an exact quote from the LXX of Ps 51:4 [LXX Ps 51:6], David's Psalm of confession. In the Psalm David admits that he has sinned against God and done evil and therefore God was justified to judge him. Let there be no unrighteousness with God. By application God was not unfaithful to fulfill the covenant promises only to the believing Jews. The rest of the Jews remained unrighteous. God was not obligated to bless them; He was obligated to judge them. It is part of who and what God is as righteous to exercise perfect justice. So for those who were not accounted righteous by faith He would demonstrate His righteousness by prevailing in judgment on them. They should have known this from the OT.

So in verse 1, the first objection amounts to challenging Paul to show how they had some advantage. Paul replies that they had the covenants, a definite advantage. In verse 3, the second objection amounts to challenging Paul to explain how a Jew's unbelief could nullify God's faithfulness to the covenants. Paul replied that God was not obligated to Jews who were not accounted righteous by faith. And now in verse 5 we find the third objection. This one is more insidious and in fact, is one of the most wicked thoughts in all of Scripture because it is an attack on God's rights as God. What the

Jewish objector picks up on is the fact that Paul said that God's righteousness was demonstrated when He judged. To this concept the Jew objects saying, **But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.)** By the comment **I am speaking in human terms** Paul means to say that there is a higher way of thinking than presented here by the objector and he does not at all agree with the way this objection is stated. To paraphrase the objection what is the Jew saying? That if our unrighteousness provides evidence of God's righteousness then is it not unrighteous of God to use our unrighteousness to demonstrate His? Isn't God selfish to use our unrighteousness to demonstrate His righteousness? Think about what is being said here. If God is using our unrighteousness to demonstrate His righteousness then isn't that wrong of God to do that? This is one of the darkest statements in all of Scripture. It is saying that God doesn't or shouldn't have the right to use our unbelief for His own glory. I don't know if you realize true evil when you hear it but this is pure evil. It is really to say that God is unrighteous if He uses our unrighteousness to show that He is righteous.

Paul's reply in verse 6 is with the strongest Greek negative again, *μη γενοιτο*, **May it never be!** God is not unrighteous. **For otherwise, how will God judge the world?** If God was unrighteous because He used their unrighteousness to make His righteousness known then what right would God have to judge the world? Clearly He could not. God would be closed off from judging sinners if He himself was a sinner. If this was true then everyone's slate would have to be cleared; all Gentiles and Jews! That conclusion was unacceptable to the Jew because the Jew clearly wanted God to judge the Gentiles. So it is not unrighteous for God to use their unrighteousness to show His righteousness.

So in verse 1, the first objection is a challenge to show how the Jew had an advantage. Paul replies that they had the advantage of having the covenants. In verse 3, the second objection is the challenge to show how a Jew's unbelief could nullify God's faithfulness to the covenants. Paul replied that God was not obligated to Jews who were not accounted righteous by faith. In verse 5, the third objection is that it is wrong of God to use our unrighteousness to demonstrate His righteousness. Paul replied that if that was so then God

could not judge the world. Verse 7 is the fourth and final objection. And here Paul is going to press the objector's logic to its ultimate end. In other words, he's going to do what we should all do when we talk with unbelievers, and that is push them to be consistent with their logic and live consistent to that logic. This can't be done, as Paul shows by example here. The objector says, **But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner?** How could we paraphrase this objection? That if, through my sin, God gets more glory then why am I judged as a sinner. My sin did something good for God. If my sin did something good for God then why am I still judged? I actually brought glory to God by sinning! How can you judge me then?

In verse 8 we have Paul's reply. And here Paul is saying, well, let's see where that logically ends up, let's push that logic. If God should not judge me for the evil that I do because that evil brings Him more glory then we might as well say verse 8, **"Let us do evil that good may come"**? Now the ridiculousness of this statement is obvious. No one, at this point, doesn't sense that this is nonsense. It's at this point that Paul has finally cornered the Jew in such a way that he has nowhere to flee and nowhere left to hide. The Jew could not escape condemnation. He did everything he could by way of argument to escape condemnation but Paul has nailed him. They have no escape. As Paul says, **Their condemnation is just.** The Jew who did not believe is justly condemned by God. Even though they had the covenants and that was a clear advantage, if a Jew did not believe God was not obligated to bless him under the covenants. Rather God was obligated to judge him because he did not have a righteousness accredited to him through faith. If a Jew thought that God was wrong to use his lack of righteousness in order to demonstrate His righteousness then God would be shut up to judging anyone. And finally, if a Jew really thought this way then the logical conclusion is that we ought to all sin as much as possible because that would mean God got more glory! This is nonsense. The Jew tried to escape but there is no escape.

There are two very clear applications of this chapter. First, there are two kinds of Jews. Those who are Jews in name only, having the Law and circumcision but not believing, and those who are Jews who are Jews indeed, having the Law and circumcision but believing. The latter are the only Jews who will enjoy the ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic, Land, Davidic and New covenants. There is no such thing as a Jew getting a free pass,

automatic blessing or anything like that. A Jew who does not believe is dead in his transgressions and sins and will be eternally judged and sent into the lake of fire just like a Gentile. There is no difference in how a Jew is made right with God. Though the Jew has advantages, he nevertheless is shut up to the same kind of faith that a Gentile must have in Jesus the Messiah. There is no other requirement on the human side for God's blessing; faith and faith alone in Christ and Christ alone, is the sole requirement for eternal life. Second, the end does not justify the means. The Jew reasoned that if in the end our sin caused God's glory to abound then we ought to sin more. This fallacy today is known as situation ethics. Joseph Fletcher developed the moral philosophy that we are justified in doing evil if, in the end, good will result. This philosophy employs a number of fallacies. How does this philosophy account for what is good? How can a human know what is ultimately good unless a human knows every possible effect of an act? There are too many unknowns that are unknowable by any human being to be able to know how to act such that good will result. The philosophy is unworkable in reality.

Tom Constable concludes, "In chapter 2 Paul showed that God's judgment of all people rests on character rather than ceremony. He put the Jew on the same level as the Gentile regarding standing before God. Still God Himself made a distinction between Jews and Gentiles. In 3:1-8, Paul dealt with that apparent inconsistency. He did this so there would be no question in the minds of his Jewish audience that they were guilty before God and needed to trust in Jesus Christ. The passage affirms the continuing faithfulness of God to His covenant people but clarifies that His faithfulness in no way precludes His judging sinful Jews."^{vi}

ⁱ Alva McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace*, p 87.

ⁱⁱ The following chart is an adaptation from Alva McClain, *Romans...*p 87.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, McClain, *Romans*, p 87.

^{iv} Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ro 3:1.

^v Others, like Tom Constable and John Murray, disagree and maintain that the oracles of God refer to the entire OT.

^{vi} Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ro 2:28.

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