

God's Faithfulness and Justice: Romans 3:1-8

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Sunday, September 16, 2012

I've been reading *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel about slavery in the 1800s, and I came across a passage this week that made me think of the way we study the Bible here at Three Rivers Grace. You see, Uncle Tom was not a great reader, but he loved to read the Bible. The author writes, "Having learned late in life, Tom was but a slow reader, and passed laboriously from verse to verse. Fortunate for him was it that the book he was intent on was one which slow reading cannot injure,--nay, one whose words, like ingots of gold, seem often to need to be weighed separately, that the mind may take in their priceless value."¹

Some of you may be able to read very fast, and that's a wonderful thing. But when it comes to God's Word, it's so good to read slowly. It's so good to study through passages of Scripture thoroughly, in detail, trying to get our minds around the wonderful logic and glorious promises that God is setting before us.

The passage we come to this morning in our study of Romans is a difficult one. So it's good we're going slowly. Scholars and preachers have remarked that this is probably the hardest passage in the whole letter of Romans to understand. What's tricky about it is the way that Paul jumps from one objection to another, giving only brief responses to the questions, and so it's difficult to follow the flow of thought. It's difficult to trace the logic.

So with that disclaimer, I'm going to do my best to explain the general points Paul is making here. But I encourage you to wrestle with this on your own as well. Don't take my word for it. Apply your own mind to the rigorous thinking and study that God's Word requires of us. God is a rationale Being, and He communicates to us through these inspired writers (like the apostle Paul). And His communication to us involves propositional truth, and logical connections. So we have to read slowly and apply our minds to this.

The result, Lord willing, is not just active minds, but worshipful hearts. The truth we grasp with our minds should then fuel praise and joy and hope deep in our souls. We behold the

¹ *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Alladin Classics, page 223.

truth of God, and our hearts well up with delight in His greatness and His goodness toward us.

Well, as we come to these verses at the beginning of Romans 3, you can picture Paul teaching in a synagogue and responding to various objections and questions that are coming at him. He had probably heard these kinds of questions again and again. So as he composes this letter to the church in Rome, he cites those same objections and responds to them. This is a sign of a good teacher. He anticipates the questions that his listeners may be thinking of.

The verses break down into 4 sets of questions and answer. I'll summarize it this way, with these four headings which we'll cover in this sermon. What advantage has the Jew? Is God faithful? Is God just? Am I responsible?

What Advantage Has the Jew? (verses 1-2)

This is a natural question considering what Paul wrote in the previous paragraph. He actually began the last paragraph, in 2:25, by saying that "circumcision indeed is of value . . ." But then he added, "if you obey the law." And then he went on to say that physical circumcision, in and of itself, doesn't do anything for you. What really matters is circumcision of the heart. And he was so bold as to say that there are Gentiles, who are not physically circumcised, who are considered by God to be circumcised and to be true Jews, and that there are ethnic Jews who are considered by God to be *uncircumcised*.

And in the argument of that paragraph, he left that first statement without explanation. He mentioned that circumcision is of value, but he didn't say what that value is. And the rest of what he said made it sound like there is no value in being an ethnic Jew.

So now the question returns. What advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Now, what is the answer you would expect, based on verses 25b-29? We might expect him to say, "None whatsoever. There's no advantage to being a Jew. There's no value in circumcision." But that's not what he says. He says, "Much in every way." And then it sounds like he's beginning a list. "To begin with . . ." Literally, in the Greek, he uses the word, "first." Here's the first thing: "the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God," or literally, "the words of God." That's the first advantage.

What's curious is that he doesn't list a second or third or fourth. And that's part of what makes this passage difficult,

because he raises these significant questions but only gives very brief responses to them. But what we'll find as we continue to study through this letter is that Paul comes back to these questions. Especially in chapters 9-11 he deals with these questions in much more detail. And if you look at the beginning of Romans 9, you find there that he does give a list of Jewish advantages. "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ . . ." (Romans 9:4-5).

So there are many advantages to being a Jew. There are many things that have value that are connected with Israel. The one thing Paul mentions in chapter 3 is that they have been entrusted with the words of God.

Now, let's apply this to the church for a moment. Do you recognize the advantage it is to you that you have a Bible (and if you don't have a Bible, we'd be glad to give you one), and that you can attend a church that teaches and proclaims the truth of God's Word? This is a tremendous advantage to you. You can read the Bible in your own language. You can go online and find sermons and study tools and books that will help you understand the Bible better. You can come here on Sunday mornings for Sunday School and a worship service, where you will learn things from the Scriptures. You can attend small groups and Bibles studies where you can ask questions and discuss these things with others. All of this is tremendously valuable to us, and we should be grateful to God for it.

Simply to be exposed to the reading of God's Word is an advantage. R. C. Sproul shared about this, reflecting on his childhood years. He was raised in a theologically liberal church, but at least they read the Bible as part of the liturgy. The pastor didn't believe in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, but still they would read passages of Scripture each Sunday. Sproul said, "Everything that went before the reading of the Bible and everything that went after it was distortion and heresy. Still, in spite of the minister—not because of him—I was sitting under the Word of God. That was the advantage to me. When I became a Christian, it was through the testimony of the Word of God. In preparation for my call to conversion, the Word of God was at work in my life."²

I think that should be an encouragement to all of us, that we should be putting ourselves under the Word of God. We should

² Sproul, *Romans*, page 79.

read the Bible for ourselves. We should come to church to hear the preaching of God's Word. And how great it is to be at a church where we don't just read the Word and then deny what it says (like the church Sproul grew up in). But we actually believe it, and love it. We've been changed by it, and we seek to live it out in our daily lives.

And that is the other thing that needs to be emphasized, which Paul emphasizes, in this discussion of Jewish advantages. On the one hand, there is an advantage to having the Word of God. That is an advantage the Jews have. But on the other hand, that advantage does not bypass the heart. The advantage of being a Jew, the advantage of having God's Word, does not mean that all ethnic Jews will automatically be saved. The verse right after this passage (3:9) says, "What then? Are we Jews any better off?" Now what do you expect him to say? "Well, yeah, because the Jews have the oracles of God." But what is his answer? "No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin."

Does this seem confusing? Does this seem contradictory? Paul, make up your mind, do the Jews have an advantage or not? Well, I don't think he's contradicting himself at all. He's making two distinct points, and each are valid and important. Yes, there is value to being a Jew, because they are exposed to the Word of God. But Jews are still in the same place as Gentiles in terms of sin. There is an advantage in terms of revelation, but still Jews and Gentiles are equal in their sinfulness, and therefore equally in need of salvation through Christ.

And we need to realize this as well. You have tremendous advantages due to your access to God's Word. But your access to God's Word does not save you. Sitting in a pew, getting baptized, being a member of church . . . none of that will save you. You have to be circumcised in your heart, like I preached on last Sunday. You have to be changed from the inside out. And if you don't have that, you need to cry out to God to help you and change you and forgive you. You need to look to Jesus and put your hope in Him. I'd love to talk to you personally after the service if you're struggling to understand what all this means. There are many here who would love to speak to you in more detail about what the Gospel is and what it means to be a Christian. It's not just going through the motions or doing certain religious rituals. It's about having a radically new life. It's about being a new creature in Christ.

So here's the point, in sum. Avail yourself of the advantage you have. Avail yourself of the opportunities you have

to read and study and learn from God's Word. But never presume upon that advantage. Don't think that your access to God's Word, or your knowledge of God's Word, or your connection to a church, means that you're automatically right with God.

Avail yourself of the advantage. But don't presume upon the advantage.

Is God Faithful? (verses 3-4)

Here's how the flow of thought moves on in verses 3-4. If the Jews have the Word of God, but some are going to be condemned on judgment day (like Paul alluded to in the previous paragraph), that seems to call into question God's faithfulness to His people! Thus the question, "Is God faithful?"

Can you see that? Back in 2:27 Paul alluded to the fact that on judgment day there will be Jews who are condemned. There will be saved Gentiles who look at unsaved Jews and say, "But you had the Word of God! Why didn't you believe?" And now Paul has clearly said that there is great advantage to being a Jew, in that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.

So the reasoning seems to be: "Well, if being entrusted with the oracles of God is such an advantage, but there are still Jews who don't believe and will be condemned in the end, then it sounds like God is dropping the ball here. If God really chose this people and revealed Himself to them and has made promises to them, but they aren't believing, that seems to imply that God is not living up to His promises."

This is another question Paul will come back to and deal with fully in chapters 9-11. The thesis statement there in Romans 9:6 is, "But it is not as though the word of God has failed." And then the rest of chapters 9-11 is a defense of that. We won't go into that this morning. What Paul does here in chapter 3, in this brief dialogue, is quote from Psalm 51. He first uses the very strong negation, "By no means!" Then he writes, "Let God be true though every one were a liar." In other words, even if every single person was unfaithful to God, and therefore judged by God, God would still be true and faithful and just. And then he quotes from this important Psalm to illustrate his point.

He picks it up mid-verse, mid-statement. And so we have to understand the context of those words if we hope to understand how Paul is using them here. Psalm 51, as you may remember, is David's confession after his sin with Bathsheba.

“Have mercy on me, O God,
 according to your steadfast love;
 according to your abundant mercy
 blot out my transgressions.
 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
 and cleanse me from my sin!

For I know my transgressions,
 and my sin is ever before me.
 Against you, you only, have I sinned
 and done what is evil in your sight,
 so that you may be justified in your words
 and blameless in your judgment.” (Psalm 51:1-4)

Do you see how those words function in the context of what David is saying in his confession to God? David is saying, “I’ve sinned against you, O God, and therefore your judgment of me is just.” I sinned. You disciplined me. And I say now, in the humility of my confession, that you are absolutely right to have disciplined me as You did.

Now, Paul picks up on this snippet from that particular Psalm, and he uses it as a response to the question about God’s faithfulness. And I believe this is the point: God is faithful not only in vindicating His people, but also in judging His people. God is faithful, not only to keep His promises, but also in upholding justice.

Is God Just? (verses 5-6)

Then another question arises. If one of the ways God manifests His righteousness is in judging His people, then that means our unrighteousness serves to show His righteousness. And if that’s the case, then couldn’t we turn that around and say that He’s actually unrighteous to inflict wrath on us, since He’s going to be glorified in it anyway? Paul is quick to distance himself from this reasoning, and so he says, “I speak in a human way.” In other words, he wants to be very clear that this is mere human reasoning that he is citing here. And it’s not legitimate to confront God with such reasoning. To doubt God’s justice is to reason in a human manner, in a foolish manner.

Paul gives a short response that pulls this objection right out from under the Jews who are skeptical of his message. He uses this very strong negation again, “By no means!” And then he says simply, “For then how could God judge the world?” He knows that the Jews are very keen on the idea of God judging the

Gentiles, the nations, the world. They just don't like the idea of God judging the Jews. But Paul points out here that based on this foolish reasoning about God being unjust to inflict wrath on us, that would apply to the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Therefore, with that logic, God could not judge anyone, not even the Gentiles. So in that way he puts that flawed reasoning to rest. And this points again to the larger theme that he's getting at in chapters 2-3, that Gentiles *and* Jews will all appear before God on judgment day.

Here's something we all need to hear, especially anyone who is tempted to take some of this skeptical logic and use it to question God or His justice. On judgment day none of this will stand. None of these foolish arguments will hold up even for a second. They will be burned up. So beware, friends, of putting God in the dock and questioning His justice or His faithfulness. He is God. He is the judge. He is just.

And you may wonder if this is bad news for you. God's justice and judgment—that sounds like bad news. Let me tell you, it is bad news for arguments such as these. It is bad news for anyone who tries to weasel out of their responsibility before God. It is bad news for anyone who tries to point a finger at God and accuse Him in any way. It is bad news for anyone who tries to justify their own sin.

But let me tell you this also. There is Good News to be told. There is the glorious news that Jesus Christ laid down His life to forgive our sin and satisfy God's just wrath against sin. And this Good News is for all those who will humble themselves before the cross and plead for mercy. This Good News is for all those who will lay down their foolish and prideful arguments, who will stop trying to justify their sin, who will stop trying weasel out of their responsibility before God. So stop with the objections, and simply cast yourself on the grace of God that comes through Jesus Christ. He is your only hope.

Am I Responsible? (verses 7-8)

The last question is related to the previous one, but it's an even more absurd implication. Verse 7, "But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?" That's basically the same as verse 5. But then verse 8 makes this audacious claim, which some people actually accused Paul of teaching, "why not do evil that good may come?" That's what this logic comes down to, in its most basic and raw form.

Paul, if what you're saying is true about God's faithfulness (even if His people are unfaithful) and God's righteousness being

seen even in His judgment, then doesn't this fundamentally mean that I'm not responsible for what I do? I'm not responsible to obey. Doesn't this all mean that ultimately, my actions don't matter? Because whatever I do, however I live, God is going to be glorified no matter what?

Now, these are weighty issues. These are deep questions having to do with God's sovereignty and human responsibility. And we need to be careful to affirm what the Bible affirms. And we need to be careful not to follow our own human logic in such a way that we end up denying something that the Bible affirms. So we should begin by noticing that Paul does affirm the premise of these arguments. In verse 5 he does not deny the fact that the unrighteousness of man will show the righteousness of God. Verse 6 shows us that he's thinking of the judgment there. On judgment day God's righteousness will be seen in His condemnation of the wicked.

And in verse 7 he does not deny the fact that "through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory." Even human wickedness and falsehood will somehow contribute to the display of God's glorious truth.

So we do affirm these things. God is sovereign. He is in control of all things, including evil. And He is working all things together for the glory of His Name. And yet this doesn't erase our moral responsibility in the least.

At the end of Romans 5 Paul writes a remarkable and shocking thing when he says in verse 20, "Now the law came it to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more . . ." And Paul knows the objection that will follow from that statement. So he raises that objection in 6:1, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" And he gives much more of an answer there than he does in chapter 3. In chapter 6 he says, "How can we who died to sin still live in it?" Here in chapter 3 all he says is, "Their condemnation is just."

And we're also reminded of the argument in Romans 9:19-20, "You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?' But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?" These are the deep questions that we can wrestle with if we're approaching them from the perspective of faith seeking understanding. But if we're tempted to put God in the dock and point an accusing finger at Him, we need to put a hand over our mouths and say with Job, "Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth" (Job 40:4).

Here's a closing summary and encouragement. First the summary. God will be glorified in everything He does, both in saving repentant sinners and in condemning to hell those sinners who do not repent. And He is just in both respects. His righteousness will be seen in His gracious salvation of repentant sinners, and in His just condemnation of unrepentant sinners. And here's the encouragement. Let your eyes go down to Romans 3:26, which says that God is "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." My encouragement and exhortation to each of you this morning is to lay down any skeptical questioning, and instead marvel at the glory of God. Marvel at His intense hatred of sin. Tremble at the thought of His wrath being against you. And find hope in the abundant grace that covers those who repent and believe. God justifies those who have faith in Jesus, meaning He considers us righteous in His sight, even though we are sinners. When we believe in Jesus we are covered by His righteousness. Instead of God's wrath being unleashed on me, it was unleashed on Jesus when He died on the cross. So let's rejoice together this morning in our God, who is just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.