

# **Romans: The Good News of God**

## **Do Religious People Have an Advantage?**

*Romans 3:1*

**Rev. Freddy Fritz**

July 22, 2007

# Do Religious People Have an Advantage?<sup>1</sup>

## Scripture

Let's read Romans 3:1:

**What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?** (Romans 3:1)

## Introduction

Every profession has its favorite stories, and the legal profession is no exception.

A beginner attorney was defending a man accused of biting another man's ear off during a barroom brawl. A witness to the fight was on the stand, and the young attorney was cross-examining him: "Did you actually see the defendant bite off this man's ear?"

"No, sir," the witness replied.

That was the answer the young attorney wanted to hear, but he made a common mistake among novice lawyers. Instead of ending his cross-examination when he was ahead and on the winning track, he continued with another question.

"What exactly did you see?" he asked.

The witness replied: "I saw him spit it out!"

The point is that going too far or failing to quit when you're ahead is a mistake in legal disputations.

## Lesson

It is a similar charge—that he has gone too far—that the Apostle Paul seems to hear an opponent raise as he comes to the

---

<sup>1</sup> Much of the material for this sermon is taken from James Montgomery Boice, *Romans* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1991).

end of Romans 2 and begins Romans 3.

We know what Paul has been trying to prove: that all people, Jews as well as Gentiles, religious as well as non-religious, are guilty of breaking God's law and therefore need a Savior.

But Paul has argued this case so forcefully that he has virtually equated the Jew, who was thought to have great religious advantages, with the Gentile, who had none. In Romans 2:11 Paul says that "God does not show favoritism" to either Jew or Gentile. Then, when he reaches the end of the chapter, in Romans 2:29, he defines Jewishness in a way that has virtually nothing whatever to do with a person's religious or ethnic heritage: "No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code."

"But doesn't that prove too much?" an opponent might argue. If God treats Jews and Gentiles alike, not showing favoritism, and if the only thing that makes a person truly Jewish is an inward transformation by the Holy Spirit, then what advantage is there in being a Jew?

Or, to put it in contemporary terms, what advantage is there in being religious? What value is there in baptism, church membership, communion, or any other religious activity if we are all under condemnation anyway?

If religious people have no advantage over non-religious people, then why should we bother with religion at all? Let's enjoy ourselves and sin right along with everyone else. But, if religious people *do* have an advantage, then isn't it possible to please God by our religious practices and be saved by them after all? These are the questions I want to answer today.

## **I. The Jewish Person's Advantages Then**

First, let me tell you about the Jewish person's advantages then.

Paul says that being Jewish and circumcised are true advantages, although they are not the kind of advantages that can save

one.

To do justice to Paul's thinking, we need to look ahead to the list of Jewish advantages appearing not here in Romans 3 but in Romans 9. The present text encourages us to do this, because after Paul asks, "**What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?**" he answers, "Much in every way! *First of all*, they have been entrusted with the very words of God" (Romans 3:1-2, italics mine). The very fact that Paul says "first of all" leads us to look for what is also second and third and so on.

Paul lists only one advantage in Romans 3:2, and that is that the Jews have been entrusted with "the very words of God." I will come back to this advantage in just a moment.

Let's look now though at the list of advantages mentioned in Romans 9. Speaking of the Jews, Paul says in Romans 9:4-5:

Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.

These ideas are worth looking at individually. *First, the adoption as sons.* This first term embraces what follows, for it speaks of a sovereign act of God, who—for his own good reasons and according to his own good pleasure—drew the Jewish people into a special family relationship with himself.

*Second, the divine glory.* In the context of Jewish history, this phrase refers to God's revelation of himself in glory on Mount Sinai at the time of the giving of the law, in the Most Holy Place of the Jewish temple, and in a few other places. No other nation had this privilege.

*Third, the covenants.* This word is plural, so it probably refers to the full scope of those special promises of God to Israel generally known as the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and

New Covenant. In each case, God promised to be and do certain things for his people, not because of any good in them or in anticipation of any special performance on their part, but solely for his own good pleasure.

*Fourth, the receiving of the law.* While all people have the law of God written on their hearts, no other nation had the privilege of receiving the law from the hand of God. Moses received the Ten Commandments from God on Mount Sinai.

*Fifth, the temple worship.* This was an obvious advantage because, in the early days, God actually manifested himself in the tabernacle or temple. However, since the emphasis here is on “worship,” the advantage actually referred to the way in which this worship pointed the pathway to God by the atoning sacrifices for sin, which prefigured the only perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In fact, everything in the temple in some way pointed to Jesus and was fulfilled by him.

*Sixth, the promises.* The Old Testament (like the New Testament) is filled with promises to God’s people. These are of very wide scope, covering all the Jews could possibly need. They are sure and reliable, since it is God who has made and spoken them.

*Seventh, the patriarchs.* This word means “fathers” and can refer to any one of the giants of Israel’s past. It refers primarily to the first three fathers: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God calls himself by their name, saying to Moses in Exodus 3:6: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” It was an advantage to have had such an ancestry, because God had worked greatly through these men. Also, they were models of faith and godliness to their descendants.

*Eighth, the human ancestry of Jesus Christ.* Being related to Jesus Christ did not secure salvation for Jewish people, but it was still better to be close to him and his ministry in this way than to be far from him. If nothing else, there was at least a cultural affinity out of which it was easier to understand the meaning of his teaching.

*And ninth, coming back to Romans 3:1-2, the very words of*

*God.* I suppose that if Paul had been asked to interrupt himself after the first two verses of Romans 3, he might have listed the eight items in Romans 9:4-5.

Still, we must not miss the fact that when Paul is answering the specific question **“What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew?”** in Romans 3:1, it is not the whole list in Romans 9:4-5 but rather the matter of possessing *the very words of God* alone that he stresses.

In fact, although he has also asked, **“What value is there in circumcision?”** he does not speak of the sacraments or any other external sign as an advantage in this context. Just Scripture! Just *the very words of God*. That is the chief item and, in Romans 3, the only one.

Can any of us experience anything in life of greater personal advantage to our souls than possession of the Holy Scriptures, *the very words of God*? Of course not!

Samuel Chadwick, one of English Methodism’s greatest preachers, wrote about the Bible, “I have worked over the Bible, prayed over the Bible for more than sixty years, and I tell you there is no book like the Bible. It is a miracle of literature, a perennial spring of wisdom, a wonderful book of surprises, a revelation of mystery, an infallible guide of conduct, an unspeakable source of comfort.”<sup>2</sup>

The Reformer Martin Luther had this to say about the very words of God, “I have made a covenant with God that he sends me neither visions, dreams, nor even angels. I am well satisfied with the gift of the Holy Scriptures, which give me abundant instruction and all that I need to know both for this life and for that which is to come.”<sup>3</sup>

Without the very words of God we are completely confused, adrift on a sea of human speculation where all the great questions of life are concerned.

---

<sup>2</sup> John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold : A Treasury of Quotations for Christians* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Is there a God? We do not know; at least, in our sinful state we are unable to admit the full personal significance of there being a God.

Who are we? We do not know the answer to that important question. Apart from Scripture, we cannot know that we have been created in the image of the only true God and are called to glorify him and to enjoy him forever.

How do we come to know God? How is our sin to be dealt with? What way of life is best? Does what we do here matter? It is only from the revelation of God in the Bible that we can have sure answers to any of these life-and-death questions.

## II. The Religious Person's Advantages Today

And so, second, let's look at the religious person's advantages today.

At this point I am sure you can see where this message is going, since I am obviously trying to take what Paul has said to the thoroughly religious person of his day, the Jew, and apply it to the thoroughly religious person of our time.

Paul is answering an argument. His answer is a digression from what he has been setting out to prove in Romans 1:18-3:20. Nevertheless, the issue the apostle is dealing with here is of vital importance to everyone. No one is saved by such things as baptism, sacraments, or church attendance. No one is even saved by such an important thing as having—yes, even studying—*the very words of God*. But that does not mean that religious practices are of no use or that one is acting wisely if he or she abuses, neglects, or disregards them.

So I ask this question: “Do religious people have an advantage?” Or I might put the question this way: “Do people who attend a sound, faithful, Bible-preaching, gospel-centered church have an advantage?” I suggest three answers.

*First, even if God never saves you by drawing you from the darkness of your sin to saving faith in Jesus Christ, you will at*

*least sin less because of this advantage and therefore be punished less severely.*

Some will think this a strange place to begin, but I need to begin with the hardest situation in order that you might understand, on the one hand, that there are genuine spiritual advantages (for those who will have them) and, on the other hand, that these in themselves do not save anyone.

You must remember that your situation is desperate. You can do nothing for yourself. Even knowing the truth does not save you, because in your unregenerate state you are unresponsive and even hostile to it. No one can be saved who is not born again, and the work of spiritual regeneration is God's doing.

Still, we have seen that there are degrees of punishment for sin. In Romans 2:5, Paul spoke of individuals "storing up wrath" by frequent and persistent sin.

The Lord Jesus Christ made the point when he described a servant who knows his master's will and disobeys it being beaten with many blows, while another servant who does not know his master's will and therefore unintentionally disobeys it being beaten with "few blows" (Luke 12:47-48).

Even the author of the letter to the Hebrews seems to make the point when he speaks of "every violation [of the law] and disobedience" receiving "its just punishment" (Hebrews 2:2).

So, I say, if nothing else, knowing the law of God and living in the company of people who are trying to obey God's commands and encourage each other to live godly lives is of value—even if you are not saved. For it will at least mean that you will be committing fewer sins for which you will one day be punished.

*Second, going to church and listening to the preaching of the Word of God, if you are in a sound, faithful, Bible-preaching, gospel-centered church will at least cause you to know the way of salvation, even if you do not respond to it.*

A person might argue that knowing how to be saved and yet not responding to that revelation, and in fact rejecting it, is not an advantage but a disadvantage in that it undoubtedly increases one's

guilt. It is a case of the servant knowing his master's will but not doing it.

That is true. Moreover, it is compounded if together with your knowledge you think of yourself as a rather fine Christian. You are worse off if you think that God must somehow think better of you just because you know a great deal.

But it does not need to work that way. In fact, it is meant to work quite the other way. Instead of becoming proud because of your knowledge, you should be humbled by it.

The first thing you learn from the Bible, if you are really profiting from it, is that you are a sinner hopelessly lost by virtue of your own sinful nature and your deliberately wicked choices; indeed, that you are under God's just wrath and doomed to perish eternally unless God is gracious to you and reaches out to save you through the work of Christ.

This is what Romans is all about thus far. Who can read the first three chapters of Romans intelligently and remain proud? Who can read these chapters and fail to see the need of throwing himself or herself utterly upon God's mercy?

As I said, knowledge of the way of salvation, including your need of it as a sinner, in itself will not save you. But it is hard to see how you can be saved without it. This is because without such knowledge you will not even begin to seek God. Most likely, you will consider yourself already saved or at least not needing salvation.

*And third, the great advantage regular church attendance and, above all, faithful adherence to the preaching and study of the Word of God is that, although you cannot claim it as a right from God, it is through the reading and preaching of the Bible that God is most likely to save you.*

How is one born again, after all? Peter writes that you are "born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, 'All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord stands forever'" (1

Peter 1:23-25).

To hear the preaching of the Word of God is the most assured path to salvation and knowing the grace of God.

In the same way James wrote, “He [God] chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created” (James 1:18).

## Conclusion

Some years ago, when I was preaching through John’s Gospel, I came to John 9, where we are told the story of a man who was born blind but who was healed by Jesus from spiritual as well as physical blindness. I remember reflecting on how desperate this man’s plight was and how this is intended to be a picture of our own desperate condition apart from Jesus Christ.

What was his state? For one thing, he was blind. He could not see. Others could see, but he could not. And this meant that he could not see Jesus. If Jesus had said, as Peter and John later said to a crippled man at the temple gate called Beautiful, “Look at us,” the man could not have looked, because he was blind.

This is the state of the lost today. Jesus is preached, but they cannot see him. That is, they cannot understand who he actually is or what he actually accomplished. They cannot understand the gospel. The Bible says, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Again, the man whose story is told in John 9 had been blind from birth, which meant that he probably did not even greatly value sight, having never known what it was. He knew he was missing something, of course, just like many people today are vaguely aware of a missing dimension in their lives. But he did not really know what this was or even think of having his condition cured. In the story we notice that he did not ask the Lord to heal him.

Again, he was a beggar. It is a beggar's task to beg, but he did not beg for sight. He was in the habit of asking the passers-by for money, because he had none. This means that, even if sight could have been procured for some great sum the man's case would still have been hopeless, as grim as before. For how could he buy his sight, having nothing? In his poverty the blind man reminds us of how bankrupt we are before God.

No, there is very little to be said for this man at the moment that Jesus found him. He was blind, unaware, and bankrupt.

But, when I was preparing my studies of this story, I came across a saying of one of the older preachers, who observed that, although little could be said for this blind man, there was this one thing: he was at least in a place where Jesus was likely to go. He was by the gate leading into the temple grounds, where Jesus frequently passed by, and it was there that Jesus looked at him, loved him, healed him, and drew him to himself.

I apply this to you if you are not born again.

Your condition is not good. You are lost and under God's wrath. You are blind to God's truth. You are spiritually bankrupt.

But there is this one thing. Although you cannot save yourself, as long as you can hear the gospel message, you are at least where Jesus is likely to go.

Jesus loves to bless the preaching and teaching of his Word. Therefore, though your condition may be hopeless, it is no worse than that of any other lost sinner before he or she was saved. The mere hearing of the Word is your advantage.

Do not despise it, then. Do not say, "So, then, what advantage is there in attending a sound, faithful, Bible-preaching, gospel-centered church?"

There is great advantage in it. "Much in every way!"

Cling to it. Wring every possible "advantage" from it. Who knows but that God will use the very Word to save your soul? Amen.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons)
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributor\\_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributor_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181)
3. [www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?SpeakerOnly=true&currSection=sermonsspeaker&keyword=Freddy%5EFritz](http://www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?SpeakerOnly=true&currSection=sermonsspeaker&keyword=Freddy%5EFritz)

Please give your input and leave your feedback at websites 2 and 3 when requested to do so. This helps with evaluation and planning of sermons.

## Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

*Answers for Life!*

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: [Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org](mailto:Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

Web site: [www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org](http://www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org)

**PRAYER:**

O Lord our God, thank you for your Word. Thank you that the Word of God teaches us about life and salvation.

I pray that we will appreciate and use your Word to aid us in our understanding of you and of the way of salvation.

O Lord, if there is anyone here today who is not yet a Christian, will you please open that person's eyes and grant the gift of faith alone in Christ alone.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

Blanchard, John. *The Complete Gathered Gold : A Treasury of Quotations for Christians*. Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2006.

Boice, James Montgomery. *Romans*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1991.