

How Bad is It?

Romans 3:1-18

Studies in Romans #11

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Like a doctor, Paul has been diagnosing humanity's problems before God. And like a patient we keep asking, "How bad is it?" He's diagnosed the ungodly and unrighteous world of the Gentiles. He's diagnosed the hypocritical and self-righteous world of the Jews. He tells us how bad it is. We know how bad it is. But knowing and believing are two different things. He tells the Jews how bad off they are along with the Gentiles but they don't want to believe it. And so they start arguing, asking questions, and making objections. As Paul interacts with potential detractors in Rome, it's as if he knew them so well. Perhaps he asked these questions before his own conversion?¹

Here in Romans 3:1-8 there are four objections. Why? The Jews still want to assert that they have some special privilege before God. And their objections seem like biblical objections. But they're also prideful objections. This should strike us as well. Don't we always view everyone else out there as worse off than ourselves? Then in 3:9 he reiterates his first question, bringing his answer full circle.

Objection 1: If Israel is not Better off, then the Lord's Covenant is

Nullified

Back in verse 11 he Paul said there is no favoritism with God; and in verses 28-29 he said circumcision is not in the flesh but in the heart. And so the question is asked, **Then**

¹ Philip, 45; Stott, 95.

what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? (v. 1) In other words, *if Israel is not better off, then the Lord's covenant is nullified*. You can see here the self-righteous heart of sinners; they just will not go down without a fight. Paul's just told the Jews that they sin just like the Gentiles, but like a cornered dog, they still attack. Do you know anyone like that? I was like that! The question is how is God going to break through to this person? How did God break through to Paul? How did God break through to you? Like the poem, *The Hound of Heaven*, God pursued Paul and I down every road and into every corner we fled from God. And in all this Paul is telling us that we have to be brought to place in our lives where we can say, "Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ" (Phil. 3:7). As the hymn says,

When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss,
and pour contempt on all my pride.²

So how does Paul answer this objection? He does so fully in chapters 9–11, but here he says, **Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God** (v. 2). The one great benefit is that the Lord gave the Jewish people his sacred Word. Out of all the many privileges Paul emphasizes this one as the capstone. As the nations said of Israel, "What great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law?" (Deut. 4:8). How was this a blessing? Remember 2:4: the kindness of God in blessing Israel was meant to lead them to repentance. They had this huge privilege but also just as huge a responsibility to appropriate by faith all that God said to them.

² From the hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross."

Objection 2: If Israel is not Better off, then the Lord is not Faithful

“But if what you are saying is true, Paul, and since some Jews don’t believe, *if Israel is not better off, then the Lord is not faithful.*” That’s what verses 3–4 are all about.

Children, God was a Father to Israel. And it’s like your dad promising you that you are his son or daughter and because you are that he is going to go outside everyday and play catch with you. But then you see him playing catch with your neighbors son or daughter. Does this mean God is not your Father anymore? If that’s true, then dad hasn’t kept his promise. This is what Israel is thinking when Paul says God also saves Gentiles.

To bring this out, Paul uses a series of play of words. In verse 2 he says to the Lord **entrusted** (*episteuthēsan*) his Word to Israel. Then he asks in verse 3, **What if some were unfaithful?** (*ēpistēsan*) And he asks again, **Does their faithlessness** (*apistia*) **nullify the faithfulness** (*pistis*) **of God?** Again, he’ll answer this more fully in chapters 9–11. How does he answer here? **By no means!** (v. 4) This phrase, *mē genoito*, is the strongest way for him to say not merely, “No way,” but, “Not on your life; not in a thousand years!” If God fails to keep his promises then he is not God! Paul uses this phrase nine times in Romans at critical junctures to refute error. So it’s really important.

So how can God be faithful if his people were unfaithful? Because of what he just said in 2:28–29 and what he later says in chapter 9: not all outwardly circumcised are inwardly circumcised; not all ethnically Israel are Israel by electing grace. God’s promise was never to eternally save everyone in Israel; they had to trust in the Lord. It’s the same with us. When we experience the terrible news that a member of this church has renounced faith and walked away, what are we to think? Did they lose their salvation?

And if so, did God change his mind and break his promise? Not in a thousand years! First, not all who say, “Lord, Lord,” enter the kingdom as Jesus said. They enter the church but not the eternal kingdom of glory. And second, we do not know how the story will end. God is faithful and those whom he has elected, sent his Son to die for, and given his Spirit to always come back, always repent, and always are restored to fellowship with God and the church. Pray for this in our church as we have several in this situation right now.

Objection 3: If Israel’s Sin Shows the Righteousness of God, He is not Just

Then comes another objection in verses 5–6: *if Israel’s sin shows the righteousness of God, he is not just. But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us?* (v. 5) In other words, “Is it fair?” Can God rightly judge unbelieving Israel if their unbelief was used by God to show his righteous judgments? Notice how careful Paul’s response is:

First, he says, **I speak in a human way** (v. 5). This objection is so on the verge of blasphemy that Paul says, “I’m not asking this question seriously at all; instead, I’m asking it to show how ridiculous it is!” Second, he says again, **By no means**—*mē genoito* (v. 6). “Not on your life; not in a thousand years!” Third, he says, **For then how could God judge the world?** (v. 6) Scripture says over and over and over again that God is Judge and that he will judge the world. If he is unrighteous in his dealings with unbelieving Israel how then could he presume to judge everyone else? In a word, Paul says to this objection, “How dare you suggest this!”

Objection 4: If Israel's Sin Leads to the Lord's Glory, then We'll Keep Sinning

Let me quickly move to the fourth and objection in verses 7–8: *if Israel's sin leads to the Lord's glory, then we'll keep sinning!* It's the *reductio ad absurdum*, the argument to the absurd. And the Jews think this shows how absurd Paul is, but in fact, it shows their absurdity! **But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?** (v. 7) Really? **And why not do evil that good may come?**—as some people slanderously charge us with saying (v. 8). It's hard to believe those who knew the Old Testament so well would argue this way.

Let me pause and say that this may not seem a relevant objection at all to you, but as a pastor I've heard this. Professing members of this church have said it like this: "Since God has foreordained everything anyway, and since my foreordained sins just show his righteousness, there's nothing I can do." I've heard professing Christians say, "I'm just going to throw my hands up in the air, do what I want, and trust that in the end I'll get what's coming to me." If this is you today, I need to warn you with all seriousness. Paul's conclusion for those who think this way is this: **their condemnation is just** (v. 8). If you argue this way you are evidencing that you are under condemnation. But I also want to say to you that there is still time—time to repent of your self-serving ideology, your self-serving lifestyle, and time to embrace Jesus Christ as the one who was condemned in your place that you will be received into God's eternal arms of love and mercy.

Conclusion

After all this Paul concludes by going back to the question in verse 1: **What then? Are we Jews any better off?** (v. 9) Here's the cornered self-righteous Jew. And what's the answer? **No, not at all** (v. 9). In fact, he reminds them of all he's been saying in 1:18 and following: **we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin** (v. 9). God's wrath is being poured out against the whole world, including the all ungodliness and unrighteousness of the Gentile world (1:18). The Jew who condemns the Gentile of his sin is condemned as well (2:1). The Gentiles who do not have the law but do the things of the law will be judged by that law of conscience; and the Jew who has the law but does not do the things of the law will be judged by that law (2:12–16). All are under the curse and dominion of sin.

And Paul ironically cites from the Jewish Old Testament to prove this in verses 10 and following. Note in verses 10–12 the Old Testament condemns the sinful nature of man:

**“None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”**

Note in verses 13–18 the Old Testament condemns the sinful actions of man:

**“Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.”
“The venom of asps is under their lips.”
“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”
“Their feet are swift to shed blood;
in their paths are ruin and misery,**

and the way of peace they have not known.”
“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Or, look at these verses in another way. The ungodliness and unrighteousness of the human race against which the wrath of God is being poured out is shown here. Jews and Gentiles are ungodly because as verse 11 says, **no one seeks for God**, and as verse 18 says, **there is no fear of God before their eyes**. Jews and Gentiles are unrighteous because as verse 10 says, **none is righteous, no, not one**. And as verses 13–17 say, this unrighteousness is pervasive throughout our being, in every part of who we are: our **throat**, our **tongue**, our **lips**, our **mouth**, our **feet**, our minds that **have not known**, and our **eyes**. This ungodliness and unrighteousness is universal: **“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one”** (vv. 10–12).

How bad is it? This bad! But because we are this bad the gospel of Jesus Christ is so good! Because our sin nature is this deep the gospel penetrates to the root and saves us from sin. Because our sinfulness is so pervasive in thoughts, words, and deeds, Jesus Christ is a complete Savior from all sins; not one is left. Amen.