

Romans: The Good News of God

Two More Questions

Romans 3:3-8

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Scripture

Today we resume our study in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. My series is titled, *Romans: The Good News of God.*"

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter, the greatest letter ever written, to explain to the Christians in Rome, and to all Christians, how God brings us into a right relationship with himself.

So far we have looked at Romans 1:1-3:2. Today, I want to examine Romans 3:3-8. Let us now read Romans 3:3-8:

³ What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? ⁴ 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.”**

⁵ 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.) ⁶ By no means! For then how could God judge the world? ⁷ But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? ⁸ And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just. (Romans 3:3-8)

Introduction

It is not often that you or I get to witness an exceptional mind at work, particularly in a debate or other confrontational situation.

The presidential debates, which have become a staple of the American election process every four years, should provide it. But they do not. Usually they are only presentations of well-rehearsed positions, with little true interaction, and they are slanted to the media and what we have come to call “image building.”

Law courts, where legal questions are argued and decided, could provide an example, but the discussions are usually humdrum and technical. Besides, few of us have opportunities to witness trials.

Presbytery meetings and General Assemblies sometimes provide opportunities to witness excellent debates. But, usually only elders get to attend Presbytery meetings and General Assemblies.

I have wracked my mind trying to think of where one would see great minds at work, and I cannot think of an example.

The closest example of settings in which most of us could see keen minds at work were on some of those television programs like Ted Koppel's "Nightline" or William Buckley's "Firing Line." But, the current television formats cater to "sound bites" and not to substantial debate.

The Apostle Paul was a keen-thinking individual, perhaps one of the sharpest men who ever lived. But we do not have many places at which to observe his mind in action.

In the book of Acts, which records the progress of his missionary journeys, we are told repeatedly that Paul went into the Jewish synagogues and "reasoned" with the Jews (cf. Acts 9:22; 17:2-3, 17; 18:4, 28; 19:8). But there is almost no record of the form these debates took or of how Paul dealt with the questions his opponents would have been asking.

And so, as I say, there are not many places where we can see Paul's brilliant mind in action. But here in Romans 3 we get at least a glimpse into the kind of back-and-forth reasoning that must have taken place regularly in Paul's ministry.

The first two chapters of Romans contain the bedrock teaching of the Apostle Paul regarding the nature and universality of human sin. All that he has said in those chapters is to be summarized in Romans 3.

But Paul seems to have been hearing in his mind the questions that sharp Jewish opponents had thrown up at him over the years, and he is therefore reluctant to move on to his summary without dealing with at least the most important of them.

We have already looked at one of these questions: “Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?” (Romans 3:1). In following Paul’s logic at this point, we have seen that there are genuine advantages to the possession of spiritual things, even though they in themselves do not guarantee salvation. In particular, it is a great advantage to possess the Word of God.

In Romans 3:3-8 Paul deals with two more questions. In the text there are actually seven question marks as the apostle phrases these questions, no doubt reflecting ways in which they had been voiced to him. But there are really only two basic questions, and it is these two questions that Paul answers before moving on to the great summary of Romans 3:9-20.

Lesson

So, today, let’s look at the two questions Paul asks and answers in Romans 3:3-8.

I. The First Question: God’s Faithfulness (3:3-4)

The first question has to do with God’s faithfulness.

The question Paul raises in verse 3 grows out of what was being previously discussed. Paul asks: **“What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?”**

In the first few verses of Romans 3 Paul has defended the value of circumcision (the chief Jewish sacrament) and the possession of the Old Testament (the Jews’ Bible). Yet, at the same time, Paul has maintained his chief point, namely, that Jews are not saved by these things any more than human morality or good works saves Gentiles. Furthermore, all Jews and all Gentiles stand equally under the just condemnation of God apart from faith in Jesus Christ.

“But,” says Paul’s opponent, “if Jews are not saved by these

things and are therefore perishing in unbelief (since we all know that the majority of Jews do not believe in Jesus), isn't God then proved to be unfaithful to his people—since he has made an eternal covenant with them?" Paul responds in verse 4 by saying, "**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.'**" Paul is stressing the sovereignty of God in this verse. God will not break promises he has made to his people.

In our sin all of us presume on God, trying to manipulate him in the sense that we try to oblige him to save us regardless of what we either believe or do. The Jew did it by claiming that God must save him because of God's eternal covenant made with the nation of Israel. And the Gentile did it by claiming that God must save him because of his morality or good works.

Some of you may believe that God must save you because your parents were Christians. Or because you were baptized. Or because you were confirmed. Or because you try to live your life in accordance with the Ten Commandments. Or because you regularly attend church and support the work and worship of the church.

But you cannot be saved that way. God is faithful. He will save every single person he has promised to save. *But not apart from faith!* If you are to be saved, it must be by faith in Jesus Christ, God's Son, whom God has appointed Savior.

Several years ago we visited family and friends in South Africa. At one point Eileen asked one of them if we were going to see him in heaven.

"No," he said. And then he added, "But if you do, it will be by the skin of my teeth. Maybe God will find more good works than bad works in my life."

Friends, I want to say to you that this kind of thinking is extremely common, but it is unfortunately unbiblical. Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of

works, so that no one may boast.”

The only way anyone is ever saved is by grace through faith. There is no other way to heaven except by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. And because God is faithful, he will receive anyone who arrives at the gates of heaven trusting alone in Jesus Christ.

II. The Second Question: Our Sin (3:5-8)

The second question has to do with our sin.

When Paul deals with the first question in Romans 3:3-4, he recognizes that it is an important question. In fact, he later devotes three chapters to answering the question of God’s faithfulness more fully in Romans 9-11.

But that is not the case with this second question. It really is not so much a question as a quibble. It is playing around. It is toying with theological matters and, as a result, deserves the scorn Paul gives it.

Yet Paul must have heard it a lot, just as we do. We gather this from the fact that he seems compelled to present it in three forms.

A. *God’s Role as Judge (3:5-6)*

The first form of the question has to do with God’s role as judge of all the earth. Paul asks in verse 5: **“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.)”**

This could be rephrased by asking, “If our unrighteousness (or sin) is the necessary background against which God displays his wisdom, love, and mercy in salvation, how can God judge us for what therefore obviously has a good end?”

We might think at this point that Paul would reply with some carefully reasoned distinction or with some truth that has formerly been hidden from us. He might reply that a good end does not jus-

tify a bad means.

But he does not. Instead, he replies by a categorical statement regarding the certainty of God's judgment in verse 6: **"By no means! For then how could God judge the world?"** The argument is: If there is a world, there must be a God who made it, to whom all who live and act in this world are responsible. Therefore the judgment of God is a given, and any argument that would suggest it is not is fallacious.

B. My Condemnation (3:7)

The second form of the objection is like the first, but it centers more on one's own contemplated judgment than on God's role as judge.

The first says, "How can God judge sin if sin actually leads to what in the end is beneficial?" Paul's answer is that God is going to judge sin regardless.

The second form of the objection is in verse 7: **"But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?"** Paul does not even answer this, but instead passes on to the third form of the question, after which he concludes, **"Their condemnation is just"** (3:8b).

C. Doing Evil that God May Result (3:8)

The last form of the question is the most extreme, but it seems to have been the way in which Paul most often heard it—both because of the way Paul refers to it here and the fact that he deals with it in other places (cf. Romans 6:1-23).

Here Paul admits that this charge has been widely disseminated against him in verse 8: **"And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying."** That is, the more one sins, the more God is glorified.

I believe this is the most extreme form of the question because, in addition merely to dismissing the judgment of God or ex-

cusing sin, this argument actually encourages indulgence of the sinful nature and appetite by allegedly Christian people.

You have heard this argument, too. It goes by the theological name of *antinomianism*: “If we are saved by grace through faith, entirely apart from any works of the law, then what does it matter whether we live righteous lives or not? Indeed, isn’t it good that we sin, because then God is given even greater glory as our Savior?”

As soon as I put the argument in that form, you recognize—even if you have not done so before—that although Paul is answering questions put to him many centuries ago, the issue is not a past issue but a current and very critical one. Indeed, it concerns the very nature of the gospel.

Is it true that the gospel of salvation by grace through faith leads to sin? Or at least that it excuses sin? Is it enough to sin and then glibly claim, “I am forgiven,” without genuine repentance expressed in a repudiation of the evil and a decision to live differently, not to mention a desire to make restitution?

If it is—if this is where Christianity leads—then I for one want nothing to do with it. It is a mockery. It is an offense to God’s justice.

But if, on the other hand, we insist on Christians doing righteous deeds—declaring as Paul does, that we must not sin that grace may abound—how do we preserve the true gospel of grace apart from human merit?

Here is where Roman Catholic theology and Protestant theology part company most radically. Roman Catholics have a proper concern for works; no one can ever say that it is all right to sin and yet be saved, according to true Roman Catholic teaching. But Roman Catholic theology brings works into salvation in the sense that God justifies us in part by producing good works in us, so that we are saved by faith plus those good works. The Roman Catholic formula for justification is:

Faith + Good Works = Justification

Protestants reply that we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ alone. No works enter into justification: not even faith is a work. But Protestants add (or *should* add—there is a great deal of deficient Protestant theology at this point) that good works *must* follow faith if we are justified. The Protestant formula for justification is:

$$\text{Faith} = \text{Justification} + \text{Good Works}$$

The formula for antinomianism, which is one of the deficient views in Protestant theology, is:

$$\text{Faith} = \text{Justification} - \text{Good Works}$$

In other words, “Let us go on sinning so that grace may increase” (cf. Romans 6:1).

It does not take an accomplished theologian to see that this is not true Christianity. Think, for example, how Jesus insisted on a radical change of behavior for all who would follow him. He said in Luke 9:23: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

He admonished those whose “faith” was only verbal or intellectual in Luke 6:46-49: “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I tell you? Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great.”

Furthermore, he told the Jews of his day, “. . . unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20).

The reason all this can be said is that God never justifies a

person without regenerating him or her. That is, the person being saved is given a new nature, which must and will hate sin and strive for righteousness.

Paul does not spell this out in Romans 3, being content merely to scorn the position that thinks it possible to be on good terms with God and yet continue to sin. But he gets to it later—in Romans 6. There he shows that all who are saved are joined to Christ. Because Christ lives in them, they increasingly want what Christ wants. And if they find that they are not increasingly coming to hate sin and love righteousness, they are not really Christ's. They are not true Christians.

Conclusion

By definition, Christianity must be the most beneficial (I would say, the *only* ultimately beneficial) force in the world. Why? Because it is the work of God, and only God can be ultimately beneficent.

Do you doubt this? If so, you have not understood the first two chapters of Romans. Those chapters have told us of the nature and extent of human sin. They have demonstrated that men and women, left to themselves, are on a path leading away from God, the only source of true good, and that the progression along that path is always and inevitably downhill. No original or ultimate good comes from any mere man or woman, only evil. Therefore, if good is to be seen anywhere, it must be from God himself and be seen in those in whom he has planted his very nature.

What a calling, if you are a Christian! What a destiny!

“Do evil that good may result”? If you find yourself thinking that way, you are no true Christian. You are no Christian if evil in yourself and in others does not distress you. You are no Christian if you can take the transgressions of God's law lightly.

But, if you are a Christian, you will hate sin, repudiate it, fight against it, and strive for righteousness. Amen.

Two More Questions

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*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.*

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PRAAYER:

O Lord our God, we thank you for your faithfulness. Your covenant is eternal and unfailing. You will save every single person whom you intend to save.

O Lord our God, forgive us for our sin. We try to deceive you and others, but only end up deceiving ourselves. Show us our sin so that we might recognize it and turn to you in repentance. By your grace grant us the gift of faith so that we trust in Jesus Christ alone for eternal life.

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.