

Romans | God's Righteousness (Romans 3:1-8)

November 17, 2019 | Matthew McNutt

We are working our way through the book of Romans, taking a deep dive over the course of this year into this letter from the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome. This fall we're looking at the first few chapters; we've called it "The Problem." Why? Paul wrote this letter, probably around 57 AD, to the believers in Rome. This was a group comprised of Gentile and Jewish Christians – but mostly Gentile. Basically; Jewish Christians were Christians who had been Jews, and Gentile was a word used to describe everyone who had NOT been a Jew.

Blending the two groups made for some culture challenges. The Gentile believers came from a background with pagan idolatry and no familiarity with the God we believe in. The Jewish believers came from a background focused on the law of the Old Testament, and the belief in their status as the chosen people – often forgetting all of the times God says they are the chosen people so that He can bless the entire world, not just them. And so some of the turmoil that resulted in these different backgrounds converging was the question of just how Jewish did the Gentiles need to become to be Christians? This was a serious question for the Gentile men; they didn't feel that they needed a surgical procedure (circumcision) to love Jesus!

Two weeks ago, Pastor Nate dove into the second half of Romans 2, where the Apostle Paul went after the legalism of the Jewish believers and called them out for dishonoring God with a dead faith. He went after their head-deep faith and their lack of heart-deep faith, he called out their feelings of moral superiority. He rebuked their pride in keeping the law and pointed out that as superior as they may feel, the reality is that they couldn't live up to the law's demands! Paul ultimately tells them that the point of circumcision was to set them apart from the world, and that the only circumcision that matters now is a circumcision of the heart by the Holy Spirit.

To be clear, that is NOT a surgical procedure; it is a metaphor for a spiritual transformation that sets us apart from the world around us in the way that physical circumcision marked the Jews as separate from the world.

Which was fantastic news for the Gentiles; but may have left the Jewish believers feeling a little stung. Which brings us to chapter 3:1-8, where Paul, having just taken them down a few notches, builds them back up.

Romans 3:1-8 (NIV) ¹ What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? ² Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.

Paul uses a common teaching approach from that time; he puts himself in the shoes of listeners and answers the questions he knows they are most likely struggling with in response to Romans 2.¹

He essentially asks the question they are thinking; “so there’s no advantage to the biblical religion we’ve been following for centuries?” Remember; there’s no New Testament yet – Paul is literally writing a part of it in the form of this letter. For them, the Old Testament was the Bible, and it seemed like Paul was kind of throwing it out. To which he responds, “that’s not what I’m saying at all! It’s an incredible gift to have been the ones who received God’s word!” It is a good thing, it is a thing of tremendous value.

³ What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God’s faithfulness? ⁴ Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written: “So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.” [Psalm 51:4]

Paul asks the next logical question; “Haven’t the words of God failed? There are so many who haven’t believed in Jesus; what happened to the promises?” The Jewish believers were looking at their people and struggling with God’s covenants with them; aren’t they the chosen ones? Why have the majority rejected God? Shouldn’t they have all naturally believed in Jesus? Does this mean God has failed?

Paul’s responds by putting the blame where it belongs: on sinful man. Just as the men and women in the Old Testament time and again fell away from God and rejected His teachings, they continue to do so – but that does not stop God’s kingdom from advancing. It reveals His holiness; that He does not change, that God is committed to truth. And the fact that they were believers, following Christ, give testimony to the truth of God’s word and power.

⁵ But if our unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) ⁶ Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?

Paul tackles the next potential question; if sin reveals God’s holiness, then how is it fair for God to judge and punish people for providing the means to revealing His holiness! In verse 6, Paul shoots this idea down rather quickly, because if there is one thing the Jewish believers agree with him about, it is that God should judge sin, therefore it is absolutely fair for God to judge people for their sin – even if it is that same sin that, when contrasted with God, reveals just how holy He is.

¹ Timothy Keller, *Romans 1-7 for You* (Purcellville, VA: The Good Book Company, 2017), Kindle location 858.

What do I mean by that? How does sin reveal holiness? How does imperfection reveal perfection?

I love my watch. My wife gave it to me a couple years ago. It's actually self-winding, which, if you don't know anything about watches, means it doesn't have batteries, I don't have to wind it up ... it just does it itself through some sort of magical wizardry. Three of you just tensed up because you know how self-winding watches work; I don't want you to explain it to me. I enjoy the magic too much.

But here's the deal, if I take it off and leave it on my dresser too long, it slows down. I have to sometimes correct it. Which is how it used to be with all the clocks, right? Back in the day, decades ago when I was a child, and we didn't have smartphones and computers that sync their clocks with the coordinated universal time, we all just kind of took a best guess at our time pieces, right? There was actually a phone number you could call to find out the official time and then run around your house trying to get everything in line with it.

Now, could you imagine me going to the headquarters where coordinated universal time, the official time keeping of the entire world, is and walk up to the official clock, look at it, look at my watch, and say, "I KNEW IT! COORDINATED UNIVERSAL TIME IS OFF BY THREE MINUTES! LOOK AT MY WATCH! THEY'RE WRONG!"

It's ridiculous; in that moment, my ability to set my watch is revealed as imperfect. Most of the time it may seem fine, but the odds of it actually being 100% in sync with the official time is virtually impossible.

So when Paul is explaining to them the gift of the Old Testament, the importance of the law and even how our sin reveals God's holiness, it all begins to make sense. We're imperfect. Even the best of us, next to God, is revealed to be a sinner – and their imperfection makes God's holiness stand out even more. Which brings Paul to the next logical question his audience may have:

⁷ Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" ⁸ Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—"Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is just!

So you're telling me my sin makes God look good? I'm on it! I'm going to make Him look amazing! Shouldn't I just go to town and make God have even more glory? Paul's response is straight to the point; absolutely not. It's a ludicrous rationalization of sin. "Their condemnation is just" is his way of saying, that attitude in itself warrants confrontation. Why? Because it reveals a heart that is looking for excuses to sin, for ways to rationalize behavior that does not reflect God's holiness, not a heart that is focused on God.

At first glance, we could dismiss this as a two thousand year old conversation that doesn't warrant much attention, but that would be far from the truth! I think there are three big things we can learn from this interaction between Paul and the Jewish Christians.

1. God's Words are a Gift

One of the first reactions they had to Paul's message in Roman's 2 was essentially, "so none of what happened matters now that Jesus is here?" Is that all out the window? Chosen no more?

But this two-thirds of the Bible has enormous value; God gave it to us for a reason. God preserved it over the centuries and millennia for a reason. Jesus fulfills what the foundation that is built in these pages. These pages reveal God's holiness, His righteousness, our need for a Savior. As Paul points out in Romans 3:2, these are the very words of God – that's a gift of immeasurable value! Do we treat it as such?

How does that apply to today? There is a temptation at times to put all our focus on the New Testament; to be dismissive of the Old Testament. It gets confusing, overwhelming, there's a lot of laws and weird sacrifices. And yet, it is the very words of God. To neglect the Old Testament is to ignore an incredible gift and it says something to God about how we feel about His words.

2. God is Reliable

In verse four, Paul says, "Let God be true." God is completely reliable; we can depend on Him carrying out His promises to us. Our failures do not diminish God's faithfulness to us, a message that Paul hammers home in this passage. What are these promises?

Paul emphasizes this teaching in his letter to Timothy:

2 Timothy 2:11-13 (NIV) ¹¹ Here is a trustworthy saying: If we died with him, we will also live with him; ¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; ¹³ if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself.

In Romans Paul confronts the Jews on their false confidence in their ethnic heritage; some had the view that because of their Jewish ethnicity, then they could live life however they wanted and God would still protect them – they conveniently forgot the passages in the Old Testament warning of judgement if they didn't follow God. But we have something far more significant that we can place our confidence in: Jesus' death and resurrection and the salvation that comes through that. You see, we're not putting our hope in some human ancestry; we're putting our hope in God and He is perfectly reliable. It is the one place where we can have true confidence!

3. Rationalizing Sin is a Trap

Let's be real, I would imagine that we all had the same reaction as Paul to the question suggesting we should sin more to show off God's holiness; it's a ludicrous question!

I don't think there's any parent that would accept the suggestion from their child that all the misbehaving is some sort of gift to their parents to give them the opportunity to show off their parenting ability! It's a ridiculous excuse!

Here's the trap: we're a lot better at recognizing others rationalizing sin than we are at seeing it in ourselves. James writes about how sin comes to be;

James 1:14-15 (NIV) ¹⁴ Each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. ¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

Desire and enticed means thinking about and dwelling on something we are tempted by. As this desire builds, we begin to make excuses; it's not such a big deal, it's just a little thing, I'll never get ahead in this company if I don't make some compromises, it's not really cheating if I'm just looking at pictures and videos – it doesn't even hurt anyone, I'm just looking not touching, if I bomb this test I'll be off the team – it's not a big deal if I copy a couple answers just this once, I've got it under control – I can quit any time I want to. The more we think about it, the more comfortable we get with the bad decision – and deep down, we know it's a bad decision – and James writes that ultimately leads to death. As much as we rationalize, sin causes pain.

And the thing is, God is calling us to something so much better! Paul reacts to the Romans and says even their attitude of rationalizing should be judged because it reveals a heart that isn't focused on God! It's focused on other desires!

[Recap slide] This is part of why we value small groups and classes so much at this church! We need to have deep relationships with other Christians; like I said, we're better at recognizing rationalization in others than we are in ourselves. You know you have bad judgement! Every single one of us has found ourselves looking back at decisions we've made and wondering, "What in the world was I thinking?" In these groups and classes we build the relationships we need to see **God's words as a gift**, to remind ourselves that **God is reliable**, and to keep each other accountable to having hearts focused on pursuing God and NOT **rationalizing sin**!