

Romans 3: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 02 August 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Romans chapter 3 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.

What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means. Let God be true, though everyone were a liar, as it is written, that you may be justified in your words and prevail when you are judged.

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. By no means.

For then how could God judge the world? But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come? As some people slanderously charge us with saying, their condemnation is just.

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin. As it is written, None is righteous.

[1 : 0 4] 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. 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. Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

For by works of the law, no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested, apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

For there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith.

[2 : 1 6] This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just, and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means. On the contrary, we uphold the law. In Romans chapter 3, we arrive at one of the richest chapters of the Apostle Paul's writings, but a chapter that is very complex and challenging in many ways.

If we are reading Paul carefully and intelligently, we should be able to anticipate some of the movement of his argument, much as Paul is anticipating the objections of his imagined interlocutor.

[3 : 23] Truly to understand a passage of scripture, we need to understand the movement of thought that leads from one verse or argument to the next. Too many people read scripture as if it were a succession of temporarily disjointed tones, rather than the flow of a single piece of music through time.

At the end of chapter 2, we should have guessed that the natural response to Paul's relativisation of circumcision, his statement that circumcision becomes uncircumcision for breaks of the law, and that the uncircumcision of the Gentile who keeps the law would be countered to circumcision, the natural objection to that would be that this denies the advantage given to Israel in the covenant, and it denies the value of circumcision.

If we anticipated this, then we are reading him well, as these are precisely the points that Paul turns to address here. Paul is not denying that the Jewish people enjoyed great privileges on account of circumcision, most especially the fact that God entrusted his revelation to them, above all other peoples.

God had given them the scriptures, and he had given them promises. And even though many of the Jewish people were unfaithful, this doesn't mean that God himself was unfaithful to his promises. These remain certain.

Indeed, far from the faithlessness of Israel nullifying God's faithfulness, the glory of God's gracious faithfulness was, if anything, seen even more powerfully against the backdrop of Israel's unfaithfulness.

[4 : 45] This leads, however, to another natural objection. If it is indeed the case that Israel's unrighteousness and unfaithfulness served to reveal God's faithfulness and righteousness more fully, why should God bring judgment upon and condemn sin?

It seems that sin has served his purposes. This identifies a crucial problem that Pauline theology has to address. If God's grace occurs entirely apart from human merit, and indeed is most powerfully manifested in the very contrast between the judgment that our sins merit and the undeserved goodness that he bestows, doesn't this cast divine justice and the moral order of the universe into question?

Indeed, taking this to its logical conclusion, if our sins are the very things that make God's grace appear more glorious, why shouldn't we pursue evil so that God's grace might be seen most fully?

In the previous two chapters, Paul has made amply clear that God is concerned for the moral order of the universe. His wrath is revealed from heaven against the unrighteousness of men, and the thoughts and actions of men will be judged on a coming day by Jesus Christ, according to Paul's gospel.

On that last day, people will be judged according to works, and those who, by patience and well-doing, seek for glory and honour and immortality will be given eternal life. However, how to hold together God's concern for the moral order of the world, where judgment is according to works, and the radical grace of God which is given entirely apart from works, is a real question.

[6 : 15] N.T. Wright notices that Paul's questions here reappear later in the letter in various forms, in chapters 9 to 11, where they receive fuller answers. And this is something that we see on a number of occasions in Paul, where arguments can be recapitulated later in some fuller or different form, helping us to get a firmer grip upon what he is saying.

Paul gives a lot of his argument for the whole book of Romans in a nutshell in this chapter, and then he unpacks it at a later point. Understanding of truth often arises from appreciation of the relationship and interplay between the condensed and the expounded presentation of a truth, or the fundamental common logic that binds two realities together, or the different facets of a single reality.

And Paul's recapitulated arguments may be designed to help to strengthen our grasp upon fundamental truths in such a manner. Paul began this chapter by answering the question of whether Israel enjoyed any privilege on account of circumcision and its possession of the law.

He gave a positive answer to that. However, a somewhat different question surfaces here. Are the Jews better off in more absolute terms? Does their possession of the law and circumcision mean that they are somehow better than every other people, somehow free from the dominion of sin and death, somehow immune to God's wrath declared against all unrighteousness of men?

And to this question, the answer must be no. As Paul has already maintained, Jews and Gentiles alike are under sin. Paul proceeds to present a catena of scriptural quotations to substantiate his point.

[7 : 50] Within these quotations, he presents a portrait of the wicked, one that applies across the classes of Jews and Gentiles. From the initial general charge of unrighteousness, he moves to people's spiritual blindness, their failure to seek after God, their turning aside into sin and wickedness, the destructive and violent character of their speech and their ways, and their utter lack of the fear of God.

He also shows how various parts of the body are conscripted for the cause of wickedness. Such a portrayal might perhaps remind us of the characterisation of the wicked prior to the flood in Genesis chapter 6 verse 5.

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. Paul, as usual, when he is remixing scripture in such a manner, is very mindful of the wider context from which he is drawing.

We need to be aware of abstracting his quotations from their original contexts, especially as those original contexts can undermine certain ways in which people presume that Paul is using these quotations here.

For instance, in Psalm 14 verses 1 to 3, which Paul uses, read as follows. The fool says in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt. They do abominable deeds.

[9 : 06] There is none who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside. Together they have become corrupt.

There is none who does good. Not even one. But verses 4 to 5 that come after it read as follows. Have they no knowledge, all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread and do not call upon the Lord?

There they are in great terror, for God is with the generation of the righteous. Clearly the statement that there is no one righteous needs to be qualified in some sense because the text that Paul is quoting refers to people as righteous.

However, here we should notice the general nature of the characterisation of humanity that begins the psalm that Paul quotes. The human race more generally is characterised by a sort of practical atheism, by foolishly acting as if there were no God in heaven to judge.

The statement isn't exclusively made about the Gentiles. It's more comprehensive than that. It includes Jews under it. The righteous here are like Noah who find favour in the sight of God.

[10 : 11] Their existence is somehow anomalous though, because it isn't as if they are somehow without the sins that lead to the condemnation of their fellows. For instance, even after the flood in Genesis chapter 8 verse 21, the Lord repeats the characterisation of mankind that provoked the destruction of mankind in the first place.

I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth. Even the humanity rescued through the flood are fundamentally marked by this evil intention of the heart.

And it seems to be the same thing here. Although there may be some who are described as righteous, they are not described as righteous as people who are immune from that characteristic. All of these scriptures serve to silence mankind before God, rendering all, Jew and Gentile alike, accountable before him.

By the works of the law, Paul claims, no flesh will be justified in God's sight. Paul refers to humanity here as all flesh. And the term flesh is by no means a neutral term for Paul.

It foregrounds human weakness, corruptibility, mortality and rebellion. Flesh is not just humanity as such, it's humanity under these particular conditions.

[11 : 24] The law doesn't grant some immunity to God's judgment upon sin. Quite the opposite, the law itself, as the verses Paul has just cited illustrate, condemns man. The law has the effect of bringing sin to light.

So it is simply not the case that the works of the law could justify. What are the works of the law that Paul has in view here? Historically, many, particularly Protestants, have regarded the works of the law as deeds performed to accrue merit before God, as if we could earn God's favour by good deeds.

However, I don't believe that that is what is in view here and there have always been Protestants who have held a contrary view to this, holding that it refers to something more particular, ceremonies of the law or something like that.

It seems to me that that's closer to the truth. Paul's emphasis in this context is upon teaching that Jews are not excluded from the general judgment upon all flesh. The works of the law are those things that Jews would have believed set them apart from the Gentiles, putting them in a better position in absolute terms relative to God's condemnation of sin on account of the fact that God gave them the law and the covenant.

In particular, the works of the law are those practices like circumcision and the dietary requirements, those things that set Jews apart from the Gentiles, marking them out as people of the law.

[12 : 41] However, as Paul highlights here, that does no good because rather than rendering those under it immune to God's judgment upon sin, the law itself brings sin to light and condemns it.

It's a means of the very judgment that some presume to escape by being marked out by it. Having presented the problem, Paul now declares God's response. While many present the book of Romans as principally being about man's problem and God's solution in the way of salvation, it is worth considering the way in which the book is more about God's problem and God's solution to his own problem.

The problems that Paul has emphasized to this point are less problems on man's side of the equation, though it's clearly shown that we have no shortage of these, but rather the problems that God faces.

So God must be a just and impartial judge. He must judge Jews and Gentiles alike. He must judge according to truth. For instance, in Exodus chapter 23, verse 7, he commands, keep far from a false charge and do not kill the innocent and righteous for I will not acquit the wicked.

If God will not acquit the wicked and indeed to acquit the wicked would be contrary to his very nature, how can he justify the ungodly? It seems we have a problem. However, God has, on the other hand, made promises to Israel, promises declaring his intention to save and to save not just Jews but also Gentiles.

[14 : 05] How can God do this and still be righteous? Paul now presents God's solution. The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.

God has revealed his saving justice at this climactic point in history. It is not a timeless way of salvation, rather it's a timely act of God in history. It has been manifested apart from the Torah.

It wasn't the law itself that accomplished God's saving justice, his setting of the world to rights. God's saving justice has also been revealed in a way that overrides the division and distinction in humanity established by the Torah.

It comes to both Jews and Gentiles alike, rather than being exclusive to the former. However, while being manifested apart from the law, the law and the prophets testify to it.

They foretell and foreshadow it in many and various ways. There is a consistency between God's former revelation in the law and the prophets and God's revelation of his saving justice in Christ and the new covenant.

[15 : 06] This saving justice is manifested through, literally, the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe. And there has been considerable debate concerning whether the faith of Jesus Christ refers to faith in Jesus Christ, the most common position, or the faith or faithfulness of Jesus Christ himself, or perhaps even to Christ faith, faith with a quality that is grounded in, ordered towards, and constituted by Christ.

In the next chapter, we read, for instance, of the faith of Abraham, which refers both to Abraham's own faith, but also to the faith of the sons of Abraham who believe like their father.

Christ faith, or Christian faith, is, I believe, something similar. It's a Christ-shaped faith, a form of life first exemplified in Christ to which we are conformed.

It is through this faith that God's saving justice, his righteous setting of the world to rights, an establishment of his just moral order and fulfilment of his promises, is accomplished.

It is fulfilled through the rich and the multifaceted reality of what faith represents. So on the one hand, faith stands for the faithfulness of Christ himself, a faithfulness by which we are reconstituted and into which we are formed by the Spirit.

[16 : 22] It also stands for the way that faith correlates to divine promise and free gift, in contradistinction to the way that obedience correlates to the commands of the law. Faith receives through trusting receipt of a free gift.

We should be careful here of the way that some would try to redefine faith as faithfulness, in a way that dulls our awareness of the correlation between faith and free gift and faith and promise.

That aspect of faith is very important to Paul. Faith also stands for something that, in contrast to the Torah and its works, is open to all humanity, Jew and Gentile alike.

And in the verses that follow, Paul refracts some of this rich reality that the term faith represents. So first, faith upholds the fact that there is ultimately no distinction between Jew and Gentile.

All have fallen short of God's glory and receive a good standing with God on the basis of a free gift given without regard to whether they are Jew or Gentile. Second, it is a free gift received through the empty hands of faith, rather than something obtained through obedience.

[17 : 29] Third, it is accomplished by Christ's faithfulness upon which our new Christian existence depends. God put Jesus forward as a mercy seat, a place of atonement and covering for sin.

Christ is the great sin offering who takes sin upon himself. In Christ, God deals with sin in a way that it must be dealt with. Sin is taken seriously in Christ.

He has passed over sin until the point of Christ. The sacrificial system, for instance, did not finally deal with sin. It puts sin into a great sort of cosmic pending tray waiting for it to be dealt with and that great sacrificial act that was awaited by which it would finally be dealt with occurs in Christ.

On the basis of this event, God can be both just and declare people of faith constituted by God's work in Christ to be in the right to be persons in good standing with him.

This statement, on the basis of what Christ has accomplished, can be a statement made in accordance with truth. As Paul will go on to show in this letter, God can uphold the moral order of the universe even as he declares people who are sinners, Jews and Gentiles, to be right before him and can make that judgment according to truth so it's not just a fiction of the law but something that really relates to what is the case.

[18 : 50] All of this has the effect of nullifying and excluding all boasting and status and privilege, most particularly the idea that Israel has a peculiar status that sets it above all of the rest of humanity, that makes it somehow special and unique and immune from God's judgment.

By what kind of law or Torah is this sustained? By the Torah of works? The Torah that set Israel apart from the nations by its performance of rights such as circumcision? No!

Rather it is by the so-called Torah of faith as people have good standing with God on the basis of a promise and free gift received by faith, something that has been testified to and witnessed to by the Torah rather than on the basis of obedient performance of legal rituals that set Jews over against Gentiles.

God is the one creator God of all humanity, not only one part of it, the Jews, and every human being that enjoys good standing with God enjoys that good standing on the basis of faith and its receipt of God's free gift.

The righteous circumcised who are within the covenant stand in their good standing before God by faith. The righteous uncircumcised who have no covenant standing before God as Gentiles enter into such a righteous standing through faith.

[20 : 09] As we move forward in Paul's argument we will see that the law itself is not jettisoned. Indeed we can see the law arriving at its intended destination through faith.

The law is upheld not overthrown by faith. A question to consider. Reading the book of Romans to this point as a story of the revelation of God's justice what are some of the details that assume a greater prominence or salience?