

Romans (3:1-8)

At Odds with Grace

PART 9 - AUGUST 15, 2004

SYNAGOGUE SQUABBLES

Paul wrote his letter to the Romans in about A.D. 57. By this time he had been preaching the “Gospel of Christ” for about 20 years; ever since his conversion in A.D. 35. And, whenever Paul entered a city, the first thing he did was to find the local synagogue (“to the Jews first and then the Gentiles”) and deliver the “Good News”.

From Perga [Paul and Barnabas] went on to Pisidian Antioch [which is in modern-day Turkey]. On the Sabbath they entered the synagogue and sat down. After the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue rulers sent word to them, saying, “Brothers, if you have a message of encouragement for the people, please speak.” Standing up, Paul motioned with his hand and said: “Men of Israel and you Gentiles who worship God, listen to me! – Acts 13:14-16 NIV

These are the remains of the first Christian church in Pisidian; it was dedicated to Paul (in the 3rd century A.D.). And, it was constructed on top of the Pisidian Antioch synagogue. And these are the remains of the synagogue where Paul debated the gospel at Pisidian Antioch as recorded in Acts, chapter 13.

By the time Paul wrote Romans, he’d been having these debates for 20 years; the same arguments about grace, over and over. Now, in the last 13 verses (2:17-29) Paul launched an assault against the Jew who’s faith is in religious rules. Paul concluded:

1. That a Jew is no less guilty of sin than a gentile
2. That *outer* rites and rituals won’t bring salvation
3. That only faith will bring the *inner work* of grace

Today, Paul does something very curious. He speaks on behalf of his detractors; he raises their objections to grace. First he makes their accusations, and then he argues against them.

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God. What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God’s faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: “So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.” 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.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, “If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?” Why not say – as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say – “Let us do evil that good may result”? Their condemnation is deserved. – Romans 3:1-8 NIV

QUESTION #1: WHAT'S THE USE?

Paul's detractors have an Old Testament perspective. The Jews don't see salvation as something that happened on an individual basis; they believed they were saved as a *nation*. So, they begin the debate by accusing Paul of claiming God's chosen people have no special privilege, prestige, or position.

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? – Romans 3:1 NIV

Paul makes it clear that although they *are* just as guilty of *sin*, and as needful of *grace* as the gentiles, there is a huge advantage for the Jew that has nothing to do with *status*.

Much in every way! First of all [formost], they have been entrusted with the very words of God. – Romans 3:2 NIV

"It's not about rank; it's about relationship. The living God of this universe revealed Himself to *us*. He spoke to *us*."

Q: "Would you turn your back on that honor if you couldn't earn His favor through acts of religion?"

Q: Why read your Bible, or come to church, or live a clean life for that matter, if it doesn't earn you points with God?

A: Because, every act of obedience brings us deeper revelation of our Heavenly Father, His nature, His character, His essence.

There are Three Basis of Faith:

1. Faith based on fear: I'm afraid of going to Hell; so I put in some time in exchange for my "fire insurance policy".
2. Belief based on blessing: I believe that God rewards His followers; so I scratch His back and He scratches mine.
3. Righteousness based on relationship: I want to know God.

As our love for someone deepens, we naturally begin to do things purely out of love and adoration for the object of our desire. Not out of fear; not for reimbursement; just the pleasure of pleasing.

QUESTION #2: IS GOD UNFAITHFUL?

Next, they try to use Paul's logic against him: "So if we understand you, you're saying that God (who is full of grace) breaks His promises and forsakes His people when they sin?!"

What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? – Romans 3:3 NIV

“Oops. You’re gracious God isn’t very gracious, Paul?!”

Q: Does our unfaithfulness cancel out God’s faithfulness?

Not at all! [Literally: May it never be!] Let God be true, and every man a liar. – Romans 3:4a NIV

Even if everyone turned against God, He wouldn’t stop loving us, looking after us, and longing for relationship with us.

Q: How many times have *you* sinned - since you were saved?

God is faithful even when I am unfaithful. However, God must be true to *all* of His Word: promised blessings for obedience as well as warned consequences for disobedience.

As it is written: “So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.” – Romans 3:4b NIV

They knew this quote. It’s a psalm that King David wrote to God, after having committed adultery. Here’s the original:

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. – Psalm 51:4 NIV

Paul uses the words of King David to argue his point. David certainly didn’t claim that his *Jewishness* should spare him.

- God is faithful when He judges sin; Jewish or Gentile.

David recognized that though his sin was committed with a woman, it was ultimately a violation “against God and, God only”.

Q: How is your sin poisoning your relationship with God?

Q: Do you fully appreciate how His grace detoxifies you?

QUESTION #3: WHAT SHALL WE SAY?

“Yes BUT, David wasn’t *condemned*, he was forgiven and restored; and his sin allowed God to demonstrate His bountiful mercy! God won’t condemn that which benefits His purposes. The Jews’ ‘badness’ has illuminated God’s goodness!”

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.) – Romans 3:5 NIV

“Poor misguided Paul. You still want us to conclude that God is *unjust* in judging us, because He benefits from our sin.”

This is such a self-serving rationalization that Paul can't help making a crack about it: "I am using a *human* argument"

Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? – Romans 3:6 NIV

Paul now points to a huge contradiction in their philosophy:

- A. You believe that God is going to judge the world.
- B. You believe the world deserves it because of sin.
- C. But if sin benefits God, He shouldn't judge them.

Q: And if He's going to judge *them*, why wouldn't He judge *you*?

Then, Paul turns their twisted logic back on themselves with a razor-sharp bit of wit: "I'm a Jew, and you're condemning me for spreading lies. According to your logic, isn't my *sin* benefiting God?!"

Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" – Romans 3:7 NIV

"Oops. You're logic is all contradictory and hypocritical!"

And he doesn't stop there. He pushes their logic into the extreme, in order to demonstrate how illogical it really is.

Why not say – as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say – "Let us do evil that good may result"? – Romans 3:8 NIV

- In other words: Let's gorge ourselves on sin so God can be super-forgiving!

That reminds me of an old Emo Phillips joke: When I was a kid, I used to pray every night for a new bicycle. Then I realized that the Lord, in his wisdom, didn't work that way. So I just stole one and asked him to forgive me. – *Emo Phillips*

Q: Have you ever caught yourself mid-sin, and thought: "Well, I've gone this far ... I might as well finish up."

Q: Or (like Emo): I'll do this sin and *then* ask for forgiveness?

"Oops. You're logic is all contradictory and hypocritical!"

Premeditated sin makes us guilty of *two* sins: the offense itself, and trying to pull a fast one on God. We fail to fully appreciate the poison and price of sin. If we did, we wouldn't take His grace for granted again. A life lived half-in and half-out of God's Kingdom will result in a life filled with the consequences of foolish choices. That's why Paul ends by saying:

Their condemnation is deserved. – Romans 3:8 NIV

Our sin doesn't benefit God; it *robs* Him of glory by mocking the price He paid to redeem us from its grip and consequences. Forgiveness is free, but it ain't cheap!