

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part seven

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GRACE MUST NEVER BE USED AS AN EXCUSE FOR SIN

Romans 3:1-20 - "Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? [2] Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. [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. [9] 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, [10] as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; [11] no one understands; no one seeks for God. [12] All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." [13] "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." [14] "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." [15] "Their feet are swift to shed blood; [16] in their paths are ruin and misery, [17] and the way of peace they have not known." [18] "There is no fear of God before their eyes." [19] 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. [20] For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."

If this passage seems like irrelevant technical mumbling it's only because we can't easily imagine the reaction Paul's words in **2:25-29** would have pulled out of the Jewish audience. If it is true that *circumcision* didn't preserve the Jews from God's wrath and judgment then what was the point of God's calling out of a special covenant people in Israel? Why would God require something like circumcision if it had no saving merit? What was the whole point in *having* a covenant people?

There was a great deal at stake in this question. If there was no blessing to be had by the Jewish identity and calling then the whole issue of God's integrity was called into question because it was **God** who initiated the covenant with Abraham. It was **God** who had pronounced blessing on His own covenant people. And if there **was** no blessing, then God seems to have misled His own people. **This** is the issue Paul knows he must face in these first twenty verses of chapter three.

1) **WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE AND THE BLESSING OF GOD'S CALLING OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE?**

Romans 3:1-2 - "Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? [2] Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God."

There were several great blessings given uniquely to the Jewish people. Paul only lists one here. That he *planned* to list several is made clear by the words "**To begin with....**" in **verse 2**, but he loses himself in argument and never continues his list. We'll look at several blessings, beginning with the one Paul mentions here.

First, the Jews were "entrusted with the oracles of God"(2). Paul begins with this because the Scriptures themselves make so much of the fact that God's *special revelation* (contrasted with His *general revelation* - remember back to **Romans 1:18-19, 2:1-2**) was first given to God's chosen people, the Jews:

Deuteronomy 4:8 - "And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all

this law that I set before you today?”

Psalm 147:19-20 - “He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and rules to Israel. [20] He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his rules. Praise the Lord!”

Second, the Jews had the privilege to give testimony to God’s greatness to all the nations of the earth. It was *never* God’s plan to bless His covenant people to the ***exclusion*** of the surrounding nations. Rather, God would magnify His mercy and greatness to the Gentile ***through*** His work among the Jewish people:

Isaiah 42:5-6 - “Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it:[6] “I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations....”

Isaiah 45:22 - “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.”

The ultimate expression of God’s blessing the nations ***through*** His covenant with Israel is our next blessing in the list:

Third, it was through Jewish flesh that the Messiah of all people would be born. It was through the Jewish nation that their redemption and the redemption of the whole world would be accomplished. Such was the high honor and blessing in the Abrahamic covenant. Matthew and Paul both labor to make the link between Abraham and Christ visible and obvious:

Matthew 1:16-17 - “...and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called Christ. [17] So all the generations from Abraham to David were fourteen generations, and from David to the deportation to Babylon fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Christ fourteen generations.”

Galatians 3:16 - “Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ.”

2) **PAUL USES HIS OWN PEOPLE - THE JEWS - TO PROVE THAT GOD IS FAITHFUL TO JUDGE SIN IN ALL PEOPLE**

Romans 3:3-4 - “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.’”

Now we come into the difficult part of the passage. Paul’s sentences are long and convoluted, involving argument and Old Testament quotations. But the point he makes is vital to nail down. Simply put, Paul wants the Jew to know that ***no covenant renders disobedience to God safe from judgment.*** Paul is repeating the point he has already nailed down in **Romans 2:25** - “For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes ***uncircumcision.***” And he repeats the same idea in chapter three because the Jewish mind found the idea of God ***judging*** His own people hard to digest. Circumcision was viewed as implying God’s unqualified ***protection*** from His wrath against sin.

That’s why, in **3:3-4** Paul makes the point that God’s ***faithfulness to Himself requires Him to be consistently contrary to sin.*** God’s consistent judgment against sin, far from ***disproving*** the faithfulness of God, ***establishes*** God’s faithfulness to His own unchanging character. In fact, the greater

the *blessing*, the greater the *judgment* for abusing that blessing - **Amos 3:2** - “You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities.”

To deepen the emphasis of this point, Paul quotes one of the most famous Israelites of all, David - “....so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment”(4). These words are the last part of David’s cry as he brings his sin to God in **Psalm 51:4** - “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.”

David’s words are full of human emotion. He fully remembered burying his son due to God’s judgment on his adultery with Bathsheba. David was God’s anointed. He was God’s chosen king. And now David has to come to terms with a God who took the life of David’s flesh and blood (**2 Samuel 12:9-14**).

Did God’s *calling* of David mean God wouldn’t *judge* David? Did being God’s *anointed* mean David could be less careful about obedience and holiness? David summarizes the whole situation by saying God’s judgment was, and always is, a demonstration of His absolute justice and righteousness.

This is the same idea expressed in an often misread passage from Paul - **2 Timothy 2:10-13** - “Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. [11] The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; [12] if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; [13] if we are faithless, he remains faithful— for he cannot deny himself.”

God will never act out of character. In our Romans text Paul’s conclusion is God is always faithful to Himself. Those “*oracles of God*”(3:2) committed to Israel contained not only *promises of blessing* but *warnings of judgment*. Therefore, when God judges sin, argues Paul, He is still being faithful to His promise.

3) **THE MAGNIFYING OF GOD’S JUSTICE OR GRACE MUST NEVER BE USED AS AN EXCUSE TO TAKE SIN LIGHTLY**

Romans 3:5-8 - “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.”

Be it in extending unbelievable *forgiving mercy* or *righteously judging sin* - either way - in whichever way He expresses His nature, the way He deals with sin will ultimately reveal God’s glory. Either way God is always faithful to Himself.

Then Paul anticipates another argument. It’s boiled down most simply in the *fifth verse* - “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.)” “So how fair is it for God to punish us for indirectly manifesting His glory in judging our sin?”

It’s hard to imagine anyone actually arguing like that. But the reason this text, difficult as it is, is so important to study, is it reveals how seriously Paul takes our almost limitless capacity to excuse and justify obvious disobedience to God.

Paul uses his own Jewish heritage but the point has application to all of us. We’d rather wear ourselves out playing ridiculous, self-destructive mental games, than simply submit in humble reverence before the holy conviction of God. In every life there come *certain* situations - we’re not like this *usually* - where our reason is taken slave to our desires. At times, we will spin out any argument at all rather than admit and

humbly repent of sin.

Paul's simplest response to this argument is that we all **know** God is the judge of the whole universe by right of creation. And if He can judge the whole world, then He's just to judge any one of us at any time - **Romans 3:6** - "By no means! For then how could God judge the world?"

4) **IN TERMS OF STANDING UNDER JUDGMENT FOR SIN, JEW AND GREEK ARE ABSOLUTELY EQUAL**

Briefly, to make this point, Paul strings together a necklace of Old Testament Scriptures. With these words he is reinforcing the idea that these pronouncements of judgment came from the "**oracles of God**"(3:2) with which the Jews had been entrusted:

Romans 3:9-18 - "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, [10] as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one; [11] no one understands; no one seeks for God. [12] All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.' [13] 'Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.' 'The venom of asps is under their lips.' [14] 'Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.' [15] 'Their feet are swift to shed blood; [16] in their paths are ruin and misery, [17] and the way of peace they have not known.' [18] 'There is no fear of God before their eyes.'"

Paul uses this string of Old Testament quotes to broaden the proof of the guilt of mankind before God. These words are cited to sum up Paul's main idea that **everyone** stand guilty before God - **Romans 3:9** - "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...." They also expand Paul's concept of "**law**" used earlier in this chapter to include the wisdom and prophet writings of the entire Old Testament.

5) **PAUL'S CONCLUSION ON THE EQUAL GUILT OF JEW AND GREEK BEFORE THE LAW OF GOD**

Romans 3:19-20 - "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. [20] For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."

This is one of the very first places where Paul delineates the **purpose** of the law. The law of God reveals my sinfulness in **two ways**. **First**, through the law of God people are **encouraged** to attempt good works to establish their own righteousness before God and, to whatever degree they can **achieve** the outward keeping of the law, it promotes boasting before God. But this is, at best, a fleeting righteousness. Then the **second** work of the law is to condemn the sins I'd like to excuse. It makes my sin official before God rather than just a matter of innocent character flaws. What the law actually does for the "**whole world**"(19) is bring an awareness of personal sin.

One final point. When Paul says the law brings the "**knowledge of sin**"(20), he doesn't mean a mental **awareness** that such sin exists. Rather, the law brings an **internal awareness of personal guilt** before that law. It puts people into either **denial** (see 1:18) or **condemnation**. All of this leads into Paul's presentation of God's solution to this universal dilemma.