

### **Notes on Romans 3**

It may appear from Paul's strong words in chapter two that Paul denigrates the unique position of the Jew in God's plan. Is Paul saying that being circumcised and having the Law provide no advantage to the Jew? Not at all. These were designed to lead the Jew to faith in Christ. But these brought no advantage to the Jew because of his unbelief. Now the Law condemns the Jew of his sin and bears witness to God's righteousness through faith in Christ.

*Though having the Law was an advantage to the Jews, they were not faithful to it. No objection can be made against God's verdict against them without making God Himself unjust and distorting the truth (3:1-8).*

(These are eight of the knottiest verses in the NT as Paul engages in some polemical sparring with the Jewish opposition. Knowing the reasons for the argument and the logic of Paul's answers is very difficult. These are to use Peter's expression "things hard to understand". Perhaps these verses are best understood in light of the Jewish conception that being a Jew and having the covenant of circumcision amounted to a promise from God that they would always be His people and thus acceptable to Him. For the Jew, anyone who argued that the Jews were not acceptable to God was to call into question the faithfulness of God to His promise and to treat the Law and the covenant of circumcision as if they had no advantage or benefit)

v. 1-2—Paul anticipates objections to his affirmation that the Jews have no righteous standing before God based on being circumcised and having the Law: "If being circumcised and having the Law do not result in righteousness, then what advantage do Jews have? What is the benefit of circumcision?" Paul answers, "Foremost among the advantages of being a Jew was to be entrusted with the oracles of God at Sinai." The word "entrusted" implies that God had put faith in Israel to live by the terms of the covenant He made with them. Had they kept the covenant, they would have been righteous by their works and received the promised blessings of the covenant. Yet they failed to do so and lost the advantage.

v. 3—Furthermore, the Jew may object by saying, "But, Paul, if you are right, then God was not faithful to His promise!" Paul anticipates the argument and frames it in a question, "If God doesn't give the Jews the blessings He promised, will that make Him unfaithful to the promise He gave in connection with the covenant of circumcision?" Not at all, since reception of the promise was contingent upon the faithfulness of the Jews. The fact that the Jews were unfaithful will not nullify the faithfulness of God in keeping His promises.

v. 4—If the covenant promise was not fulfilled, then one of two things was true! Either the Jews were not faithful or God was not faithful! For the Jew to insist upon his righteousness was to affirm that God had been unfaithful in keeping His word! Instead, let the Jews under the condemnation of the Law have the attitude of David who in

acknowledging His sin, refused to question the righteousness of God's judgment of him. Let them say that God is always right in his dealings with men, always faithful to His word, even if that makes everybody a liar so far as keeping their promise to obey Him is concerned!

But the Jews insistence that he was still one of God's people in spite of His sins, has two other implications.

v. 5-6—First, it would imply that God is unjust to condemn him. Paul addresses this argument with second question. In a sense, one might say that the unfaithfulness of the Jews in keeping the Law actually demonstrates the faithfulness of God. Could one affirm then that God is unrighteous in afflicting His wrath upon them? Not at all; for if God is unrighteous in His dealings, how could be the judge of the world?

v. 7-8 –Second, it would lead to the conclusion that by doing evil one may receive good. Or to express it another way: if one fails to keep his covenant promise to God (what Paul calls “my lie” in the sense that a promise unkept is a lie) and this somehow abounds to God's glory by calling attention to His faithfulness, why should I in this be condemned as a sinner? And why not just take this whole thing to its logical end and say instead, “Let us do evil that good may come”. We would have come to embrace an idea of people who are justly condemned.

Hence, no objection can be made to Paul's affirmation that Jews are under condemnation that would not result in making God unjust and lead one to the distorted view that one may receive God's covenant blessings while living an evil life.

*The Scripture (the Law) testifies to the sin of both Jew and Gentile, leaving all in silent condemnation and allowing no one to boast of righteousness by law (3:9-20).*

v. 9-10—Though there is an advantage for the Jew in being a Jew, he did not use that advantage and thus is lost. He is no better than the Gentiles. This idea is amply proven from the OT Scriptures themselves.

v. 11-18—The Scriptures amply affirm the reality of sin among both Jews and Gentiles. Passages referenced are:

Ps. 5:9—David describes those in rebellion against the Lord (v. 10), particularly emphasizing their dishonesty and deceptiveness of their speech.

Ps. 10:7—The Psalmist describes the wicked, the “man of the earth” who in pride and greed oppresses the righteous. His mouth is full of curses, deceit, and oppression.

Ps. 14:1-3—David seems to have in mind the heathen nations who oppress Israel (“eat my people”, v. 4). Their wickedness is described in v. 1-3.

Ps. 36:1—David speaks of wicked man who have “no fear before his eyes” and how God will protect his people from them.

Ps. 140:3—The psalm describes wicked and violent men from whom David seeks to be rescued.

Is. 59:7-8—Isaiah recounts the sins of the nation of Israel as the reason for their captivity.

v. 19—Now surely the Law speaks to those under it. As one examines the above passages, he is impressed with the fact that perhaps only one of the passages cited explicitly and exclusively refers to the sins of the Gentiles (Ps. 14:1-3). In the other passages they may be either Gentiles or Jews. The descriptions of them are as graphic and explicit as those unrighteous people described in Rom. 1:18-32. The Gentiles are obviously sinners; but now the Jews are also said to be sinners. Instead of affirming the righteousness of Jews and Greeks, it affirms their sinfulness. Consequently the whole world is accountable to God for sin.

v. 20—“By works of law, no flesh (Jew or Gentile) can be justified (acquitted of guilt)”; because all have sinned against God. Through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. (Paul assumes that the current reader will recognize that the guilt pronounced upon other Jews in the past who have sinned will also pronounce the guilt of the present reader who sins. Thus, the Law gives the knowledge of sin to all, even in Paul’s day).

Additional note: [We should not depart from this discussion without noticing how Paul established the guilt of the contemporary Jew and Gentile to whom he directed his message in Romans. He indicts them as sinners by appealing to the Law of Moses. But, why does he do this?

From the beginning God’s will for man has been made known through law so that sin has been a reality from the beginning even before the giving of the Law at Sinai. This is made clear by Paul in Rom. 1:18ff and Rom. 5:13-14. However, since this law did not exist in written form, it could not verify the wickedness of man. At Sinai, God wrote his law down in the form of the covenant with Israel (which not only instructed them in holiness but pronounced the judgment of God upon the nations around them as well). It was given not as the remedy for sin but “that sin might increase” (Rom. 5:20) making clear man’s need for God’s grace. This revealed law continues its function of giving men the knowledge of sin and showing their need for the gospel. Therefore, Paul writing to Jews who lived years after Jesus’ death points to the Law as the basis for their need for Christ and His gospel. The gospel is not a system of works (cf. “apart from law” in Rom. 3:21) that confronts man’s original innocence and convicts him as a sinner but the remedy for a law which does this, namely, the Law of God which existed from the beginning and was given written expression at Sinai.]

**Now apart from the Law, God's righteousness through faith has been manifested through the gospel resulting in eternal life (3:21-5:21).**

***By God’s grace man’s justification is a gift made possible through faith in Christ’s blood rather than works of the Law. Because of this both Jews and Greeks can be saved (3:21-31).***

v. 21—But now God has provided His righteousness by faith in Christ. It is “apart from law” (i.e. it does not rely upon man’s perfect obedience to law and hence is not produced by “the Law”, a system of works). This righteousness is witnessed by the Law and the prophets through the passages that address the coming Redeemer or Savior.

v. 22-23—It is “through faith in Jesus Christ” (rather than on the basis of works). It is “for all who believe” (it is a universal salvation). There is no distinction (since both Jew and Gentile are sinners, v. 23).

v. 24—Those who believe are being justified as a gift (it is not earned) by His grace (not man’s merit) through the redemption (the purchase of slaves for liberation) that is in Christ (in his person and work).

v. 25-26—Christ himself has been displayed publicly (not hidden behind curtains) as a place of atonement (a mercy seat) in His blood (through his sacrificial death) through faith (the condition of pardon). This display demonstrates God’s righteousness in his forbearance of sins in times past (he did not punish them) that he might be just (true to his law in punishing sin) and justifier (true to his love in forgiving sin) of the one who has faith in Jesus.

v. 27—Where is the boasting in this righteousness? It is excluded, not by a law of works (which would allow boasting through one’s perfect law-keeping) but by a law of faith (which acknowledges personal sin and unworthiness). All men are justified by faith apart from works of law.

v. 28-30—If this were not true, then God would be only the God of the Jews and not the Gentiles, for the Law was given only to them. But since God is one and God of both Jews and Gentiles, then both Jews and Gentiles are both justified the same way, “through faith”.

v. 31—This, however, does not nullify the Law (causing it to have no purpose) but establishes it (causes it to have a purpose). The purpose of the Law is to give the knowledge of sin to all men so that they will see their need for the gospel.

[To seek justification by works of the Law is to nullify the grace of God manifested in the cross (Gal. 2:20). To seek to make one a sinner by the gospel is to nullify the function of the Law (Rom. 3:31). The teaching that Jesus unconditionally removed the Law at the cross nullifies the Law by making the gospel the means by which men come to the knowledge of sin.]