

## **Romans 3:1-20**

### **Introduction**

In the previous section, Paul addressed two aspects of Judaism that the typical Jew of his day put misdirected trust in. One was the law and the other was circumcision. These two gifts from God were turned into barriers that excluded the Gentiles in the past, and were continuing to do so in the new age (in the church in Rome). The Jew also thought God treated them more leniently when it came to sin because they possessed the law and practiced circumcision. Paul shot down this assumption and their exclusive national pride not only by exposing the fact that Jews break the law just like the rest of the world, but also by demonstrating that Gentiles sometimes live the intent of the law. Paul's conclusion was that it is not the outward ritual that makes someone a Jew but it is what's inside (the heart) that makes a Jew (physical descendent of Abraham) a true Jew. It is not the possession of law or the practice of circumcision that truly matters, but rather it is the work of God's Spirit within a person that matters.

"Paul next constructs an imaginary dialogue between a nationalistic Jewish teacher and himself through 4:22; the teacher begins; the subject throughout is the relationship of presumed Jewish privilege and God's covenant-keeping faithfulness. In 3:1-8, God's faithfulness is described with multiple terms: faithfulness, truth, truthfulness, just, and justness. They all functionally mean the same thing here" (Fredenburg note).

Paul quoted from a number of passages proving that the Jew breaks the law. Therefore, both Jew and Greek have dishonored God and are all going to equally be held accountable to God. The Jew will not and cannot be accepted as covenant partner based on doing what the law says. It has to be based on something else.

### **Jewish Privilege and God's Faithfulness: 3:1-8**

The diatribe style Paul used here is fairly easy to see. The National Jewish Teacher is speaking in verses 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9. Paul is responding to him in verses 2, 4, 6, 8, and 9b.

After showing the assumption that possessing the law and having the covenant of circumcision put Israel in a favored nationalistic position with God to the exclusion of the rest of the world was a false assumption, the door was opened to question the advantage and value of being a Jew. It might be expected Paul would have replied with, "None at all."

There was a great advantage. The objector missed the point of the previous section. There was an advantage in having been entrusted with the oracles of God. From its very common usage in Paul's day, whether from a Jewish or Gentile perspective, the word "oracles" spoke of utterances from God (or gods) that were given with the intent the message would be passed on to others. Israel had been "entrusted" with the utterances of God (orally and written), not exclusively for their own benefit but for the benefit of the world. As seen in the previous section, they had not been faithful to their calling and even led lives that often caused the Gentile world to blaspheme God. The word translated "entrusted" in verse 2 plays on the words "unfaithful" and

“faithfulness” in verse 3. It is a form of the word faith (*pistis*). Israel had not been faithful with the oracles God had given it.

The next response (v 3) questions the faithfulness of God in the midst of Israel’s unfaithfulness. Israel’s unfaithfulness is not talking about their personal belief in God, but rather their lack of faithfulness to the covenant God had given them. This question has to do with God’s faithfulness to Israel. Will God, or has God, abandoned Israel because of their unfaithfulness? Paul’s gospel that included the equality of Gentiles with Jews in the new gospel age led to this concern on the part of the Jew. Paul’s short answer is “Absolutely, positively, without a doubt, no!” Even though Israel did not understand God’s purpose for choosing Israel, and were not good stewards of the oracles of God, what God is now doing in the world through Jesus is a continuation and fulfillment of his promises to and purpose for Israel. Paul did not here address this question in length but will do so in chapters 9-11. The Greek word translated “true” is almost always used in the LXX to translate the Hebrew word for the covenant faithfulness of God to Israel.

The end of verse 4 is a quote from Psalm 51, David’s psalm of repentance after the adultery with Bathsheba. David used courtroom language to portray the justice of God’s judgment against him. In the text David admits to “lawlessness” (also translated “transgressions” and “sin” in Psalm 51). The imaginary challenger Paul was talking to would have equated lawlessness with faithlessness. David did not question the rightness of God’s judgment against him, and he did not ask for favored status because he had the law and practiced circumcision. The Psalm goes on to speak of a new heart and Spirit that David longed for. Paul used David to support his belief God would be just (covenant faithful) in His treatment of Israel.

The next challenge (v. 5) questions God’s justice, whether or not the possibility of God inflicting final wrath on the Jew would be just. This comes from the conclusion Israel’s unfaithfulness has given opportunity for God’s faithfulness to be seen. If the world has the opportunity to see the patience and mercy of God (i.e., the story of Hosea and Gomer) in His faithful pursuit of sinful Israel, how is God just (faithful to preserve and bless Israel) if in the final judgment He pours wrath upon Israel in the same way he pours wrath on Gentiles? This question shows the depth to which God being impartial in his treatment of both Jew and Gentile was repugnant to a Jew. Habakkuk made a similar complaint concerning the domination of Israel at the hands of the Babylonians, a domination God brought and continued to allow. “So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails” (1:4).

Remember, this question arises out of the false assumption God will deal with Israel’s sins more leniently than the Gentile world. The question that challenged God’s justice (covenant faithfulness) was so blasphemous to Paul that he had to make an apologetic statement recognizing the challenge of God’s justice (and possibly what he had even thought prior to his conversion) was a human perspective of things.

The response again is, “Absolutely, positively, without a doubt, no!” Even if God is glorified by the opportunity sinful Israel gave for Him to show His mercy, sin cannot be overlooked. It must be dealt with. God is judge over the whole cosmos including both Jew and Gentile. If God was unjust, He could not judge the world. It needs to be noted that this conversation has to do with the final judgment. Paul’s response was similar to a statement made by Abraham in Genesis 18 when negotiating with God not to destroy

Sodom and Gomorrah if enough righteous people could be found. Abraham came to the conclusion (v. 25), “shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?”

The “falsehood” of verse 7 probably has to do with the implications connected to their having claimed privileged status with God based on law and circumcision. This misguided understanding of the purpose of law and circumcision did not result, as they thought it would, in God being more partial to them than to the Gentile. So, the objection is, “If our (the Jews) false claim that God is more partial toward us ends up giving glory to God, how can we be judged a sinner? When the Jews broke their own law, even though they claimed more piety than the Gentile, the Gentile world slandered the Jew and blasphemed God claiming the Jew’s motto for life was, “Let us do evil that good may come.” Paul concluded that the charge of hypocrisy from the Gentiles is deserved. The problem was really more than just hypocrisy, for the Jew is pictured in 2:17ff as not being concerned about their sin because of their false perception that they have an untouchable favored status with God.

### **No Justification Through Law: 3:9-20**

The final challenge comes out of a conclusion from the previous statements that not only do Jews have no advantage over Gentiles, even though they are God’s chosen people, they must then be at a disadvantage. Paul’s answer again, “Absolutely, positively, without a doubt, no!” But not being at a disadvantage is of no comfort to a Jew who took pride in their favored status with God, for that only brings things to the conclusion that both Jews (with the law) and Gentiles (without the law) are equally under the power of sin. “Under the power of sin” means more than “missed the mark,” and its scope is broader than specific sins in a person’s life. Sin in Romans is personified as a force so strong that it has put all of humanity, including the Jew, helplessly under its power. So strong, that only God can deal with it. Proof of this is found in Hebrew Scriptures. The texts Paul cited are not an indictment of humanity as a whole. They are indictments directed specifically to the Jew from their own scriptures. These verses serve functionally in respect to the Jew in the same way 1:18-32 did of the Gentile. Covenant partnership with God cannot come through keeping the law.

### **Conclusion**

The Jews had an advantage because they were entrusted with the oracles of God. But they came up short in that they did not understand God’s purposes for them (something they should have understood from those oracles) and therefore did not live in such a way that drew Gentiles to honor God. But even in the midst of their unfaithfulness, God remained faithful to His covenant/promise to bless the world and has not abandoned unfaithful Israel. That God will not act unjustly toward Israel is seen in the fact that he will judge everyone with impartiality.

The Jewish scriptures themselves indict the Jews as law-breakers under the power of sin. Again, the Jews (with the law) are in the same boat with the Gentile (without the law). There is no covenant partner relationship based on one’s ability to keep the law because no one can keep the law. Law was used by sin to bring people under its power. Law has no power to bring freedom.

N.T. Wright has a great comment related to humanity being under the power of sin that helps us transition into the next lesson. “Yes: and in precisely this situation God will

act, because of the divine righteousness (*covenant faithfulness*), to judge the world, to rescue the helpless, to establish the covenant.” It is in the situation of humanity’s helplessness against the power of sin that God acted through Jesus to fulfill His covenant faithfulness to the world, for the Jew and the Gentile. God’s response to the helplessness of the world will be the discussion in the next section.

