

Questions That Need Answering

Romans 3:1-8

June 4, 2017

Introduction:

I've been in the ministry now for over twenty years and over those years I've taught no shortage of Bible studies and Sunday school classes as well as preached quite a number of sermons and counseled with many people. As a result, I can anticipate in advance how people will respond to certain things that I teach on. Given me teaching on such and such passage of Scripture or by bringing up a particular doctrine in a Sunday school class, I can almost guarantee that someone's hand is going to shoot up to ask the same question that others have asked so many times before.

Much in the same way, by the time he writes the book of Romans, the apostle Paul has been preaching the gospel for some twenty odd years. As a result, he can anticipate how people will respond to his message, especially in regards to certain topics that challenge their preconceived notions. Paul knows he can be misunderstood and that people can easily draw false conclusions from what he is saying. So with those years of experience under his belt, Paul in our passage today fields in advance a few questions that he knows will inevitably arise in the minds of his Roman readers. The Romans haven't asked these questions to Paul yet, but he knows they're thinking it, and so Paul takes some time at the beginning of chapter three to address their questions and objections.

So this morning we're going to look at essentially four questions that need answering before Paul can progress any further in his explanation of the gospel. We can think of these verses as Paul temporarily hitting the pause button so he can clear up potential misunderstanding before he moves on. So to that end, let's take a look at what those questions are by opening your Bibles with me to the third chapter of Romans, which can be found on pg. 940 of the pew Bibles if you happen to be using one of those today. Our focus this morning will be the first eight verses of Romans 3, which I'll read through first and then we'll unpack in more detail as we go along.

So then, please follow along as I read Romans 3:1-8. **"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 every one 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."

As you can see, Paul poses a number of questions and then provides answers to those questions and so we need to consider each of those in turn. So then, we have basically four questions that Paul raises and the first of these is this...

1. What advantage is there in being a Jew?

Paul begins Romans 3 with a couple of questions which in essence are asking the same thing. He writes in v. 1, “**Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?**” These questions are a response to what Paul had said in the section right before this at the end of Romans 2. Now since it’s been a couple of weeks since I preached on that passage, let me give you a brief review.

Ever since Romans 1:18, Paul has been laying out his case that the wrath of God is revealed against mankind for their unrighteousness. In chapter 1 his point was that God was just to judge because although God had revealed himself through creation, we neither honored him nor gave him thanks, and thus God gave us over to ever increasing depths of wickedness.

Then in chapter 2, Paul turned his gaze upon the Jews and reminded them that they were no better off than the pagan Gentiles because even though they had the Law and the Prophets, they too failed to properly honor God by obeying his Word. While the Jews thought they could escape God’s wrath by virtue of being entrusted with the Law and given the sign of circumcision that set them apart as God’s chosen covenant people, the truth was they failed to keep the Law just the same as the Gentiles had and thus both Jew and Gentile stand under God’s wrath.

So two weeks ago, at the end of chapter 2, Paul specifically addresses the fact that possessing the Law and being circumcised don’t amount to a hill of beans unless they actually kept the Law by obeying it. Now that raises a question: then what benefit is it to be a Jew if they’re going to end up in the same boat as the Gentiles? That’s the gist of the question Paul raises here in v. 1. If having the Law and being circumcised doesn’t confirm any real salvific benefits, what does it matter?

Perhaps we could think the objection like this: what advantage is it to be born in America where Bibles are plentiful and churches are on every corner when I’m going to be judged for my sin the same as the South American native Indian who has none of those things? If my lot is going to be the same as his, what benefit can I possibly imagine I have by being born into a Christian home in a country with a long history of holding Judeo-Christian values?

Now one might think Paul would answer, “None at all” in light of what he said at the end of Romans 2, but look at what his answer is in v. 2. “**Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.**” Paul sees many advantages the Jews have as a result of their special role in redemption history, and he lists the first one as being “**entrusted with the oracles of God.**” The fact that the Jews were given clear, verbal instructions about who God is and what he expected of them was a gift not to be dismissed. It was a huge advantage over those who only had the light of nature to go by.

Think of it like this: imagine that back in school you have a final exam that everyone has to take in order to pass the class. Then, on the Friday before the test, the teacher passes out a study guide that spells out what exactly what is going to be covered on the test. But it just so happened that a quarter of the class was sick at home that day with the flu. Did those who possessed the study guide have an advantage over their peers who were sick at home? Of course they did! They were way better off because they knew exactly what was going to be on the exam whereas those who missed class that day could only guess at what might be asked.

Now then, the day of the final exam comes and every one fails it. Surprised by this, the teacher talks to the class about it and finds out that the students were so busy that weekend doing other activities that they didn't bother to study and so as a result they failed. So then, since everyone failed the exam, both those with and without the study guide, should we conclude the study guide provided no advantage to those who had it? Of course not! The fault was in those who didn't utilize it. Their study guide was a huge advantage to them provided they used it. They may have squandered their advantage but that doesn't mean they didn't possess the advantage to begin with.

Well, the same thing holds true with the Jews. Possessing the law was an advantage; the problem was they didn't use it. They squandered it by not obeying it. They knew exactly what God expected of them and they still wandered off to worship false idols and engage in wickedness. They can't blame God any more than the students could blame the teacher who gave them the study guide: the fault lies solely on those who were given the advantage but then failed to use it.

We would be wise to remember the advantage we all possess living in the time and place that we do. The fact that you're literate and have the Bible in your own language that you can easily afford to purchase and to read is an advantage that has not been shared by the vast majority of people throughout history. Even today, many don't come close to the wealth of gospel advantages we have here in the West. Yet how many of us squander the advantages we have? As with the Jews before us, all our advantages will do us little good if we don't use them. The failure is not on God's part: it belongs to us alone.

Now it would seem Paul meant to go on in his list of advantages the Jews possess, but after giving his first advantage, he never gets to the second and instead moves on to address a second question which is this...

2. Does our unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness?

Look back now in your Bibles at v. 3. Paul asks, **"What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?"** This next question tries to puzzle out the implication of what Jewish unfaithfulness to the covenant means. So the question is saying, in effect, "All right, let say I agree that the Jews have been as guilty of violating the Law as the Gentiles have. They were unfaithful to the keep the stipulations of the Law and instead they went off after foreign idols and engaged in all manner of wickedness and unrighteousness, such that they have no right to think of

themselves as superior to the Gentiles because they were guilty of doing the very things they preached against. Therefore God is right to judge them. But here's the rub, Paul: God made promises to the Jews. He promised to bless them and give them an inheritance and make them a great nation. So then, if God isn't going to do those things any longer in response to Israel's unfaithfulness, doesn't that mean then God himself is no longer faithful to his promises? Doesn't God's wrath against Jewish faithlessness mean therefore God himself is faithless, renegeing on his promises?"

It's not a surprising question, from a Jewish point of view. The Jews believed they were God's chosen people and that nothing would cause them to lose that position. Things like the Law and circumcision were signs of their privileged status. And even though they as a people were far from perfect - they knew the OT stories of Israel's failures as well if not better than you and I do - they believed God would be faithful to keep all his promises in spite of their failures. So for Paul to preach that God's wrath was to come against them as well as the Gentiles, they concluded that God then must be unfaithful because for God to condemn the Jews would in effect nullify all the promises God made to them.

So what does Paul say to this charge that if what he's saying is true, then God must be unfaithful? Look back in your Bibles at v. 4. Paul answers, "**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.'**" Under no circumstances should one draw the conclusion that God's wrath against the Jew implies God has become unfaithful to his promises. Better to think every man is a liar than for a moment think of God in such a manner. And while the precise reason for Paul quoting Psalm 51 here is a bit debated by Bible scholars, the point seems simply to affirm that God is just and right in all that he does. So Paul here wants to disavow any thought that what he's saying paints God as untrue to his Word.

Now Paul doesn't offer up any explanation as to why God isn't guilty of faithlessness to his promises to the Jews - he only states that such a conclusion is categorically false. But I think the answer is clear when we take all of God's promises into account: God both promises to bless and to curse. Yes, God promised to bless the Jews, provided they remained true to him, but God also promised to punish them if they disobeyed him. Perhaps this is no more clearly presented than at the end of the Deuteronomy. You don't need to turn there; just listen for a moment.

In the first half of Deuteronomy 28, Moses instructs the people saying, "*And if you faithfully obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all his commandments that I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God.*"

But in the second half of Deuteronomy 28, Moses says this, "*But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.*"

So then, the fact that God will punish the Jews for their disobedience is not a case of God being unfaithful to his promises; rather, he is being faithful to promises that Jews happened to forget. God is faithful to both his promises to bless the righteous and to punish the wicked and so God is still faithful when expressing his wrath.

So once again, this passage helps to remind us that God's faithfulness cuts both ways: God will keep all his promises, including those that promise to punish the wicked. We, like the Jews of old, like to focus on all the promises of blessing, but then conveniently forget the promises that God's justice will one day be done. God is faithful to save those who trust in Christ, as he has promised, and God is faithful when he damns unbelievers to hell, just as he said he would. God's judgment is one aspect of his faithfulness to his Word and so we need to remember that God is faithful in that as well.

Having answered those two questions that would have been especially pertinent to his Jewish readers, now Paul tackles two other questions that have a broader appeal than just for Jews. These are more philosophical in nature, questions that might have come up when debating in places like Mars Hill or other urban contexts where philosophy was all the rage. These questions are guilty of "the ends justify the means" fallacy in their thinking. So moving on now to our third question that needs answering, it is asked,

3. **Is God unrighteous to inflict his wrath on us if our sin brings him glory?**

Please look back in your Bible with me at v 5. The next potential question Paul expects his readers to ask is this, **"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.)"** Let's stop there.

The logic is this: if my bad behavior brings about something good, then isn't it wrong to punish me because in the end good was the result? For example, let's say that a man rapes a woman and as a result she goes to the hospital. While being examined at the hospital, the doctors discover a serious heart condition that the woman didn't know she had and as a result, they operate on her, thus saving her life. Would the rapist then in court be able to claim that he should not be punished for his crime since as a result of the rape, the woman's life was saved? Would not the good thing that resulted thereby nullify the need for to punish the wrongdoing?

That's the logic Paul is dealing with here. The thinking is since our unrighteousness, which is a bad thing, results in showing how holy and righteous God is, which is most certainly a good thing, then how God can be right in punishing us for our sin when such a magnificent good resulted from it? It's as if the person can imagine himself standing before the throne of God saying, "Hey, wait just a moment God, before you go all fire and brimstone on me. My sin made you look good. My wickedness made your holiness by comparison all the more bright and glorious. So I really don't see how it's right for you to send me to hell when all my sin did is make you look good."

Think of it like when you go to a jeweler and you want to look at a diamond ring or a sapphire necklace. They will display the jewelry against the backdrop of black velvet,

because the rich blackness of the velvet makes the jewels look all the brighter. So the thinking is here: the blackness of our sin and wickedness makes the jewels of God's holiness shine all the more brilliantly.

It's not difficult to see the problem here. Accidental good results from bad actions do not thereby justify the original actions. Hence Paul makes the parenthetical comment at the end of v. 5, **"I speak in a human way."** He knows this reasoning is faulty as well as you and I do but he wants to make sure that they understand that this isn't how he thinks. He's saying, "I just repeating what the objection some people will make at this point, but don't for a minute think I believe such nonsense!"

So what is Paul's answer to this objection? Should God not punish the unrighteous because our unrighteousness shows forth God's righteousness? Look with me at v. 6. Paul replies, **"By no means! For then how could God judge the world?"** Scripture is abundantly clear that God is the just judge who will judge the world. I could point out text after text that state this, but I don't need to convince any of you of that; the reality of God's judgment on our lives is without question. But if this objection was correct, if God would be unjust to punish us for our sins because our sins magnified his glory, then God wouldn't be able to judge anyone! Such logic would utterly destroy any possibility of God's judgement against anyone since everyone sins.

Thus, any such objection is balderdash. If your objection results in God being unable to rightly judge anyone for sin, then obviously your reasoning is faulty. So clearly this objection to Paul's teaching about God's wrath against Jews and Gentiles doesn't hold any water. But there's one more question Paul fields that we need to consider this morning and so moving on now, question number four is this...

4. Why not do evil so God can bring good from it?

Look back in your Bibles once again at v. 7-8. Paul writes, **"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."**

The final objection Paul raises transitions from what he said before to a more general application. When he asks, **"If through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory"** this is along the same lines as the third question we considered. If my sin results in good, then why am I still being condemned. But the question in v. 8 takes the whole line of argument to its final conclusion: **Why not do evil that good may come?** In other words, given that my sin shows forth God's glory more, why not then do evil because God uses it for good ends? It's a question Paul is going to address again when we get to Roman 6, when he raises a similar objection saying, "Why not keeping sinning so that grace may increase?"

It seems that Paul had to deal with this charge against him often. There were those who heard his gospel and mistakenly concluded, "Well, since God works all things out for his glory, no matter whether it is our obedience or disobedience, and since Christ has been

exalted by virtue of dying for our sins, then it doesn't matter whether I sin or obey because either way God is glorified in the end. In fact, I might just as well do evil because by doing so God is even more glorified than by my obedience, because it shows him to be even more holy and righteous by contrast."

Now at this point, this claim is so obviously ridiculous that Paul doesn't even bother to dignify such thinking with a direct answer. All he says in response to this, at the end of v. 8, is this: "**Their condemnation is just.**" If people are going to so twist the message of the gospel and turn it into a license to sin and dare imagine that there's no moral difference between evil and good such that one can freely do either and not expect God to judge them for it - well, then they indeed will justly be condemned. Such a person has flown so far off the rails that there's no room to even argue with them about it.

Conclusion

So what does this all mean for us, now that we've made our way through the passage? Of course, this isn't a passage with commands for us to obey. There are no imperatives saying "Do this" or "Don't do that." Rather, this is a passage that works to correct our thinking. It warns us against trying to justify ourselves in God's sight for our sin or make God our to somehow be unjust in his wrath towards us.

If there's anything for us to walk away with, it's the reminder that God is right and just in his judgments. God will judge sin, whether you are a Jew or Gentile, whether you come from a Christian home or Christian country or whether you lived in the jungles and had no Christian witness whatsoever. There is no one who escapes the wrath of God for his or her sin by virtue of their family or nationality or any other personal pedigree.

Furthermore, there are no theological tricks or philosophical paradoxes or any word games that will give us a pass or allow us to imagine that we can get away with sin because of some possible good that comes from it. Any thinking that one can do evil because good will result is flat out wrong. The ends do not justify the means. Sin is sin, regardless of how it impacts others or how God uses it for his own good purposes.

Thus, God is just and God is judge and we all stand under his wrath because we all have sinned against him. There is only one escape and that is not to be found into anything in us that we possess: not our goodness, nor our logic, nor our pedigree: it is only found in Christ, who alone takes the wrath of God for us so that we can be truly be forgiven and set free. Let's go to him now in prayer. Let's pray.

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Grace Fellowship of Waterloo, IA by Pastor Rob Borkowitz. Copyright 2017.