

Mr. Synagogue Confronts Mr. Apostle Romans 3:1-8

May 6, 2018
Steve DeWitt

Ever have imaginary conversations with other people? My daughters like to create imaginary conversations with their dolls. Our adult imaginary conversations tend to be with people we are upset at. *He will say this, and then I will say this, and that will really put him in his place.* Somehow it works out better in our imagination than in reality.

In the ancient world, this form of argument had a name. *Diatribes*. A diatribe is a written document or a speech where you anticipate the argument of the other. You state what they are going to say before they say it, then refute it with your own argument. This is effective because it answers the objection before your opponent can make it. It shows you understand both sides of the argument. Paul uses diatribe extensively throughout Romans. He presupposes the opposing contention and then answers it.

We are in Romans 3:1-8 today. I read at least two scholars who said this section is one of the most difficult in all of Romans. Not what a pastor wants to read knowing in a few days he has to teach it. So, I'm getting it out there that we have kind of a tough passage. I will try and make it plain and understandable. Before I read it, note that it comes on the heels of Romans 2 where Paul speaks to the Jewish Christians in the church at Rome and says, *before you think judgment is only for the Gentiles, you need to realize Jews are under God's condemnation as well.* The whole chapter presses the point that Jews who had received the law were even more guilty and condemned because they rejected greater light and pursued their salvation as if they could do so on their own by obeying the law. No. Both are justly condemned as sinners regardless of ethnicity.

The Jewish protests won't go down so easy. Paul now anticipates their objections by using diatribe tactics. He says what they are thinking and answers it.

"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." (Romans 3:1-8 ESV)

There are eight verses and eight questions. The diatribe ones are the ones asked by Mr. Synagogue. I've called him Mr. Synagogue because how did Paul know the objections the Jewish Roman Christians were going to have about the gospel? For all these years his pattern of ministry was to go into a city and head right for the synagogue, the Jewish house of worship. He would teach, and inevitably, debate the Jews who took strong issue with what he was saying.

We are blessed to regularly have gatherings of new people to our house for pizza. We generally have a time for people to ask questions about the church or doctrine or whatever. I sometimes say, "Don't be shy." I've done this a long time. I have heard all the questions. Of course, the moment I say that someone asks something totally out there. *I've never heard that one before.*

But for Paul, there wasn't much from the Jewish side that he hadn't heard before. Everywhere he went, similar objections were stressed by Jews who were outraged when Paul said they were basically in the same boat as the Gentiles.

So then what good is it to be a Jew? If Jews were unfaithful can God be too? If God is glorified by forgiving our sin, shouldn't we sin more? Romans 3:1-8 is like the taste of Chicago, it is a little taste of the menu of the city. These verses are a little taste, an appetizer of much fuller menu of answers in Romans 6 and 9.

What Good is it to be a Jew?

"Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?" (Romans 3:1)

This question flows from a basic assumption by the Jews that to be a member of God's chosen people is a pretty great thing. Paul has just written in chapter 2 that being a Jew or being circumcised is not about physical DNA, but spiritual DNA. It's about the heart and being a "Jew" inwardly. You could hardly say anything more inflammatory in a synagogue where being a descendant of Abraham was your entrance into the synagogue and into the eternal favor of God.

If we are under condemnation like the Gentiles, then what good is it to be a Jew by physical heritage? Based on everything he's said, you expect Paul to say, *None.* But Paul doesn't say that, what does he say? *"Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God."* (Romans 3:2)

"Oracles" is a broad word for God's spoken and written word to Israel. This includes the whole Old Testament. Remember, the Jews thought they were good with God because they had and heard the Old Testament. In chapter 2 Paul says, *no, you can't just hear it to be justified you have to do it.* They, and we, have failed miserably to do that.

While having the Old Testament doesn't make you right with God, it is still an incredible privilege and advantage. The Jews had the promises of God. They had the covenantal promises God made to Abraham that through him all nations would be blessed and through David that his descendant would sit on an eternal throne. If we could ask Abraham how blessed he was that God promised him descendants like the stars of the sky, he would say, that promise led to my salvation. Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. If God had not spoken to Abraham or Moses through the burning bush or all Israel through the Torah, where would Israel be and where would the world be? To be a receiver and steward of the Word of God puts Israel in a very special place and makes the Jews a very special people.

Is Israel's Unfaithfulness an Indication of God's Unfaithfulness?

"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." (Romans 3:3-4)

What does human failure say about God's supposed faithfulness? Or what does it say about God when the Jews, in particular, ended up deported to Babylon and their temple was destroyed? Was God unfaithful? Was the Jewish experiment an epic divine failure? God's Waterloo?

Paul's response is strong, "*By no means!*" We may say, "*No way!*" To prove God can and should judge, he quotes from Psalm 51 and King David's acknowledgment of his sin and that God's words and judgments are true.

But what of Israel's failures? Man's failure is no indication of God's failure. Man's unfaithfulness is no indication of God's unfaithfulness. Those oracles he mentioned included stipulations for Israel that if they failed to obey it would mean God's punishment. God kept his end of the agreement. God always does.

In fact, God's faithfulness is so absolute that even if every man was an abject liar, he would always be true. His faithfulness is not dependent on or derived from man's faithfulness. God is who he is no matter if Satan betrays or man lies. His character is eternal and unswayable by the actions of anyone no matter if it is angel, demon, man or woman, Adam or Eve, or even a nation of people like Israel.

Let's take this a step deeper, why is God's faithfulness not dependent or derived from man's faithfulness? Yes, because of his character of faithfulness. But there is a deeper reason. This deeper reason will be a key to unlock much more difficult things Paul is going to say about election and the judgment of the wicked in chapter 9. So, let's get this settling in our minds now.

Why? - God's principal commitment is to his own glory

One commentator makes the point that "God's righteousness is, most basically, his commitment always to act in accordance with his own character."¹ Or to say it this way, God will always act to preserve, protect, and proclaim his own glory.

"For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another." (Isaiah 48:11) The Jews thought that meant God would always bless them. They were God's people. They had the Torah. *We are good with God.* But the same covenants that promised blessing also promised curses if they failed to uphold their end of the covenant. Since God is always true and is glorified by acting truthfully according to his Word, Israel suffered covenantal curses. God will be true even when everyone else is not true because he will always act consistent with his character to preserve, protect, and proclaim his own glory.

We make this mistake all the time. We think God owes us a happy life, a problem-free life, a cancer-free life, a harmonious family life, an economically good life. Essentially, we want a God who always acts according to our glory and whatever would be glorious for us.

Romans is going to confront that and hints at it here. God is faithful to his own glorious character and will act in history in whatever way displays most wonderfully his own glory irrespective of how man might think things should go. Getting this into our understanding will surely make it easier to accept God's purpose in divine election. He saves sinners by his grace and by his choice. People not under his mercy also glorify him by displaying his

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans*, pp. 106-7.

power, justice, and holiness through eternal destruction. There is much more on that to come as we continue through Romans.

Now we know we are tracking with Paul because look at the issue Mr. Synagogue has with it:

Why Not Sin More if it Glorifies God's Mercy?

"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.)" (Romans 3:5)

Paul apologizes for even talking this way. *"I speak in a human way."* This is the kind of thing he heard all the time from his detractors. *So Paul, you are saying we are saved by God's grace and not by obeying the law, but our sin magnifies the grace of God? Then how can God judge us if we are helping to glorify him by our sin? If that is so, then let's sin as much as we can. Hey boys! Paul here says the more we sin the more we glorify God. Well then, let's get sinning!*

Paul addresses this much deeper in chapter 6 but here he strongly denies this is what he is saying. Another *"by no means"* like in verse 4. *No way! That is not what I am saying!*

Paul shows the absurdity of this line of reasoning. If God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us, then he can't judge anybody. You take away the rightfulness of a negative judgment because then you don't really have justice, and if there is no justice, God can't judge the world. All the Jews believed God could and would judge the world. So, Paul shows how their reasoning would require them to deny a basic tenet of their belief system.

"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." (Romans 3:7)

Mr. Synagogue presses further, *well why not just do evil that good may come?* The end justifies the means and if the end result of our sin is God's glory, then let's do as much evil as possible. Paul goes deep in chapter 6 to answer this. Here is a foretaste,

"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Romans 6:1-2) More on that to come.

He is setting the stage for verse 10, *"None is righteous, no, not one."* The Gentile sins against God and His law as seen in nature and written on his heart and conscience. The Jew, while having tremendous advantages, sins against those very advantages in knowing God more fully and clearly through the oracles of God entrusted to him. The result? There is no Gentile that is righteous. There is no Jew that is righteous. There is none that is righteous before a righteous God. That includes you and me.

Application

Don't trust in Jesus because Christians are awesome; trust in Jesus because Jesus is awesome

As Jews were to God's faithfulness in the Old Testament, Christians are to God's faithfulness in the New Testament. We are very imperfect reflections of God's faithfulness. As Jews had advantages over the Gentiles, Christians have advantages over the Jews primarily, the

indwelling Holy Spirit and the new heart and life that flows from it. Yet, even New Testament Christians are failing reflections of God's faithfulness.

This is something that skeptics like Bill Maher in popular culture, and Gandhi in religious culture, point out. *If Jesus is so powerful and salvation is so wonderful, why are the Christians I know such hypocrites? Or My Daddy acted all spiritual at church, but at home he was a monster. Or What about famous Christian _____ that preached and wrote books but then it came out he was an adulterer or embezzler or just a real loser.* I think back to the '80s and '90s where Jim and Tammy Faye Baker were constantly brought up as proof that there wasn't anything to Christianity.

Gandhi has been quoted as saying, *"I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."*² This is the answer to the person who wants to throw out Christianity because of the Christians they know.

I don't trust in Jesus because Christians are awesome, I trust in Jesus because he is awesome. His beauty, love, sacrifice, power, and life are so wonderful that if every Christian was proved to be a liar, I would still love Christ and believe in him.

Trust in God's faithfulness, not man's

We live in a very unfaithful world. People make promises and fail to keep them. People say one thing, and do another. All man's unfaithfulness highlights the glory of God's absolute faithfulness. Israel bombed on the Mosaic Covenant. They promised. They re-promised after walking through the Jordan river. They promised and promised but the Bible describes their faithfulness as the equivalent of a wife who turns into a prostitute. Israel the harlot.

Don't think for a moment that God is that way. All the hypocrisy of Christians and churches don't impugn God's faithfulness in the slightest. If anything, it highlights it and shows that there is no one like our God. Always faithful. Always true.

This should strike both fear and comfort. Fear that God will not fail to fulfill every promise of judgment against the sinner and against the world. That he hasn't done so yet doesn't mean he won't. He is absolutely faithful in all he says, both in blessings and curses.

Here is the comfort as a Christian. God's commitment to his glory means he cannot and will not fail a single promise he has made to us. He will never leave you nor forsake you. (Hebrews 13:5) He will supply all your needs. (Philippians 4:19) He will save to the uttermost. (Hebrews 7:25) Nothing can separate us from his love. (Romans 8:39) All who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. (Acts 2:21) Whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16) These and so many others.

Our God is faithful. Our faith, weak and flimsy though it is, rests in the granite of God's faithfulness. Let God be true even if every single human being is a liar. It doesn't matter. It doesn't change God. He is true and all the unfaithfulness of Satan and demons and humans don't even take the smallest chip off the granite mountain of God's faithfulness.

*"Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father/ There is no shadow of turning with Thee;/ Thou changest not, Thy compassions, they fail not./ As thou hast been Thou forever wilt be."*³

² Source Unknown.

³ Thomas Chisholm, "Great is Thy Faithfulness," © 1923. Ren. 1951 Hope Publishing Co., Carol Stream, IL 60188.

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Permanent Text Edition® (2016)*.
Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

© 2018 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address (www.bethelweb.org) on the copied resource.