

## **Romans Study**

### **Session 4 - Romans 3:1-30**

When I was in seminary, I was amazed at the ability of some of the professors to take the most difficult question and answer it with ease and clarity. Then I realized twenty-five years into being a pastor, I was doing the same thing - just without any amazement. It's just natural. If you teach the same subject long enough, you begin to anticipate the same questions over and over. The first few times you answer a question, you may stumble around a bit or miss the point but in time, you learn to refine your answer so that is complete yet succinct. People are tempted to say, "Wow! You are really sharp." but the truth is far from there. If you walk a path every day, you get to know that path well. As we continue in our study in Romans, we are going to see this very principle at work in the opening verses of chapter 3. Paul has been preaching the gospel for over 20 years at this point. As he presents the gospel, he's also heard the same questions and objections raised to it over and over and over again. Since he is not in Rome in person, he wants to make sure that as he's discussing the gospel and the reason its needed, that he also covers some of the more common questions and objections while stating his case.

The deal is that the first century mind is different than our modern way of doing things. If we were to write Romans 3, we'd write out our entire argument first. Then we'd go back and write the common questions and then in bullet points give our answer. That's not the way Paul (or those in the first century did it). They put the questions right in the middle of the thought or point they were trying to make. This makes reading these sections difficult for us today. In fact, the first 8 verses of Romans 3 is one of the hardest sections to interpret because of this going back and forth between what Paul wants to say and the side comments he's making to answer the questions and objections he's heard from others so often. After we get through these opening verses, the rest of the chapter is fairly straight forward and is some of the most powerful teachings in the entire Bible.

We are going to break our session into these parts: 1) God is always right in His judgment, 2) All of humanity stands under the righteous judgment of God, 3) Justification comes from God's grace, 4) There is a righteousness that comes apart from the works of the Law.

Remember last week, our focus was on the Jews. While the Jews did possess certain advantages over the Gentiles when it came to knowing God, they did not possess any advantage over the Gentiles when it came to avoiding God's wrath. Their reliance upon their covenant relationship with God was not going to save them because they didn't unite their knowledge with faith. Thus, they were just as guilty as the "heathen" Gentiles and stood to face the same wrath from God for their lack of faith in what He'd revealed to them.

#### I. God is always right in His judgments [Romans 3:1-8]

V.1 seems like a strange question after the blistering treatment on equity that Paul presented in chapter 2. Most people, after reading chapter 2 would answer this question "none". Yet, Paul surprises us that while the Jews have no advantage over the Gentiles in the judgment of God, they do possess some privileges.

Q: What is the privilege of the Jew according to Paul? (v.2 - *they were entrusted with God's Word.*)

What is interesting is the word “first of all”. There is no “second” given. This word can also mean “most importantly” which is a better way to bring it into English as there is no second argument.

Q: Why is being entrusted with God’s Word the most important privilege? *(because by possessing God’s Word, you can know the truth about God and His will and the truth about mankind and creation, etc. The person with God’s Word isn’t left to speculate or hypothesize about who God is and what He wants.)*

Before getting into vv. 3-8, I need to do a bit of review from last week concerning the Jewish mindset concerning sin and judgment. The common Jewish belief was that God’s righteousness and God’s covenant faithfulness gave the Jew virtual immunity from God’s judgment. What Paul is going to be saying is this: The wonderful and marvelous blessing of knowing God’s Word is a double-edged sword. It promises blessing for obedience but it also warns of curses for disobedience. (See Deuteronomy 27-28 for an illustration of this.) It doesn’t matter whether man is faithful or unfaithful, in either case, God is faithful to His Word and His character remains righteous.

Look at vv. 3-4 In the covenant, God had imposed upon Israel several requirements they needed to fulfill in order to maintain the covenant relationship. But Israel, as a whole, failed to keep those commands. How would God respond? Would He cease to be faithful because Israel had not been faithful?

Q: According to our passage, would God respond to Israel’s unfaithfulness by Himself becoming unfaithful to the covenant? *(no. v.4)*

Q: What does this teach us about God? *(that He is faithful to His character and to His Word always. He never changes according to the behavior of man - whether it be faithful or faithless.)*

The remainder of v.4 is a quote from Psalm 51:4. This is one of the more famous psalms as it is David asking for God’s forgiveness after committing adultery with Bathsheba.

#### **[Read Psalm 51:4]**

David was showing that he understood that God was right to judge him for his sin and in bringing punishment against him. So when God judges anyone for anything, especially sin, He is right and just in doing so. Remember the Jewish thought of the day was that God’s faithfulness tended to be oriented positively towards them: God would only do good things for His people. Yet, this reminds them that God is faithful when He judges them for their sins - just as David himself had also acknowledged.

Now comes the big question on the minds of the Jews and Gentiles in v.5. If by our (mankind’s) unrighteous behavior (sin) God is shown as righteous, then how can God judge sin at all? Think back to the example from David. David sinned but through his sin, God was seen as righteous and just. Thus, how can God get mad and judge sin when it is an action that brings Him glory in the end? The charge could be leveled that God is unfair to inflict wrath upon the

Jews because their very unfaithfulness to the covenant has led to the establishment of righteousness in an even greater way in Christ. Thus v.5 is one of those questions Paul has heard a million times. Isn't God unrighteous if he judges sin because the sin of mankind displays God's absolute righteousness? (It paints a more stark contrast between God and man, thus God's glory is seen more brightly - that's the thought.)

Paul brushes this argument aside in v.6. He says that if v.5 were the real case then God would never be able to judge anyone - not the Jews, not the Gentiles. Since in God's providence, all sin gets turned into praise for God and His righteousness, there would be no way He could judge a single guilty soul as that sin leads to praise of God. V.7 is basically a repeat of v.5. He calls this way of thinking "a lie" or work of fiction. The lie is that it is unfair of God to condemn people when their sin leads to His glory. In this case, why not sin and sin heartily with a good conscience because every sin you commit points to God's righteousness and God as holy. It glorifies Him. My sin is doing God a favor so why would He judge me? This isn't the only time this thought is brought up in Romans. We'll see it again in chapters 5 & 6 and the answer is the same.

Q: What is Paul's answer to those who believe this lie? (*v.8 - their condemnation is just, deserved*)

In the big picture of what Paul's teaching in this passage, the Jews cannot excuse their sin and lack of faithfulness to God's covenant just because God uses it for good in his over all plan of salvation for the world.

Like the Jew, modern Christians are in a covenant relationship with God. Through the blood of Jesus we have been forgiven for all our sins once and for all. That's the truth. So like the ancient Jew, there can be a tendency among those who have a faulty understanding of grace to believe that sin doesn't matter in the life of a Christian. That one can sin with impunity and not worry about facing any judgment for that sin due to our covenant standing with God.

Q: What is wrong with that belief? (*It assumes that sin is still a natural part of the Christians' existence. It is not. Our nature has been changed so that we are no longer under the bondage of sin at all. It is unnatural to us. It attempting to live independent of the God who saved us from living in sin. While the Christian will not be condemned for their sin there are still consequences for sin in this world and it is living far below the plain of existence God has for His children. It is living apart from faith in Him and thus doesn't please Him. It wrecks our witness to the lost world.*)

## II. All humanity stands under the righteous judgment of God [Romans 3:9]

The word in v.9 translated "better" means to surpass. From what Paul has concluded is there any evidence to support that the Jew has surpassed the Gentile in terms of avoiding God's wrath - that's the question being asked.

Q: Are the Jews in a better position than the Gentiles? (*no. v.9 - The Jews were privileged to have been entrusted with God's Word but they didn't believe it and as a result everyone is under*

*sin.)*

V.9 is one of the central verses of the entire book of Romans and the Bible for that matter. It states clearly that everyone is under sin. The phrase “under sin” is critical to understand the nature of sin as it relates to mankind. Paul did not say that people “commit sin” and thus imply that it is an occasional occurrence. Instead he said we were under sin which means that we are in bondage to sin, we are slaves to sin. It’s the nature of all mankind, the default setting for humanity to be slaves to sin. To drive his point home to even the most hard-hearted Jews arguing with him, he quotes several passages from the Old Testament. (This is the longest quote of Old Testament passages in the New Testament.)

*(Here’s an important side-note to this discussion. A person can only have one nature. That is who they are at the core of their being. What they do is just the outward showing of that inward nature. Since all man is “under sin” - in bondage to sin - as we start life - everything we do is sinful. Sin is rebellion against God and it is living a life independent from Him. God hates independence because He has created us to live fully dependent upon Him for everything. Thus, all of our works (before coming to Christ) are sinful because all our sinful nature can produce is sin. These works may look good outwardly and they may be the exact same works done by a Christian but they are not “good” in God’s sight but are sin because they are self-directed. Now when a person is saved their nature changes. Once changed, the Holy Spirit lives within the person and that person can now do the good works God designed them to do because it is God leading and providing for those good works. Instead of being self-directed, they are done under the leadership of the Spirit to accomplish God’s will. See Ephesians 2:8-10. We are saved FOR good works not BY our good works.)*

**[Romans 3:10-18]** - These are passages that support the conclusion that everyone is under sin and thus will face God’s wrath.

1) (vv. 10-12) **[Psalm 14:1-3]**

Q: Who are these verses speaking about in the original passage? *(the fool, the wicked)*

2) (vv. 13-14) **[Psalm 140:1-3]**

Q: Who is the psalmist asking to be rescued from? *(evil men)*

**[Psalm 5:8-9]**

Q: Who does the psalmist say has nothing reliable to say? *(his foe)*

**[Psalm 10:4-7]**

Q: Who does this passage describe? *(the wicked)*

3) (vv. 15-17) **[Isaiah 59:7-8]**

Again, this is describing the sinner and the fulness of his iniquities.

Q: What do all these psalms have in common? *(they describe the wicked)*

Q: Why do you think that all of these quotations deal with the wicked? *(Paul knows that the hardest people to convince of his point will be the Jews. These verses are used to show that they are accountable to God for their failure to faithfully fulfil the covenant obligations. He uses the very Scripture that they point to as their privilege to show them their guilty nature as those under sin - like everyone else in the world.)*

The first group of accusations makes the point that all humans are sinful in general. The second group (vv. 13-14) deals with sins of the tongue and speech and how we use language to harm others. Then the third group (vv. 15-17) deals with sins of violence. Then by the time Paul gets to v.18, he is speaking of a general disregard for God and how that is universal among mankind.

### **[Romans 3: 19-20]**

Q: According to v.19 - what is the conclusion Paul makes from vv. 9-18? *(Everyone is under the law and thus accountable to God and under the sentence of God's wrath. Everyone is addicted to sin and thus is a sin-junky.)*

The phrase "every mouth may be closed" is a figure of speech. It pictures a defendant in a courtroom who closes his mouth before the judge because he has absolutely no response to the evidence presented against him. In his silence, he is throwing himself at the mercy of the judge who is about to pronounce the sentence against him. It's the picture of a guilty man who knows he cannot refute his guilt. In other words, it's used here to display the truth that every mouth is silenced before God as all are accountable for their sins against Him. This is the capstone of everything Paul has said from Romans 1:18 all the way to 3:18. Everyone disregarded the revelations of God, both natural and special. Everyone lives in bondage to sin and is without defense and thus subject to face the wrath of a holy God.

Q: In what way won't anyone be justified? *(v. 20 - by the works of the law. Even the works the Jews do in obedience to the Torah (Law) could not justify them. This is called the poverty of works.)*

Q: What does that mean for us? *(It means that we cannot depend upon any of our works, even those we and others consider good and noble to impart righteousness or salvation to us. There is nothing we can do on our own to merit our justification.)*

Justification means being declared not guilty by a judge with the authority to rule on a matter. When God justifies us, it is Him, as Judge of the Universe declaring us not guilty of our sins and rebellion against Him. It is "just as if I'd" never sinned.

Q: What is the purpose of the Law? *(v.20 - it gives us knowledge of sin. We come to know God's holy standards through the Law and thus we know sin when we break that Law or fail to believe it.)*

Q: What does this mean for us today? *(It means that no one can be saved through their own works or keeping a set of rules. It shows that legalism doesn't save anyone.)*

Q: What is legalism and what are some of its forms?

Q: V. 20 is not a vague or obscure passage. Why do you think so many people chose to live legalistically even though this verse is clearly spelled out?

This is the bad news. With 3:20, Paul ends his discussion of everyone being under sin and rightfully subject to God's wrath. What's next is another high water passage of the Bible. In just a few short verses, Paul is going to introduce us to justification by faith - the good news and how it ties in with everything else Paul has been teaching up to this point.

### III. Justification comes from God's grace [Romans 3:21-24]

So while the Law is inadequate to justify anyone, God's righteousness has been made known by providing a way to justify sinful mankind. It is important to note that God's revelation of salvation has been revealed in "stages". This is often called salvation history. The Law was given and the Jews lived under the old covenant. This gave them a means of atonement from sin that was temporary, looking forward to the day when God brought about a new covenant, which He did in Christ. The law had to come first to show us that living by the law was impossible and that something/someone else was needed. The coming of Jesus into the world and His death and resurrection inaugurates the final step in God's plan for salvation of mankind - the coming of grace. Notice there is no distinction as to who can be justified which comes through faith in Jesus Christ. It is open to both Jew and Gentile. Just as all have sinned, justification is open to all who believe.

The words "But now" signal the switch from the worst news to the best news ever.

#### **[Mark 2:22]**

Q: What's the problem with putting new wine in old wineskins? (*The wineskins break.*)

Q: What happens when you try to put the new teachings of grace inside the old container of the Law? (*both are ruined*)

In v.23 we are told why God's righteousness needs to be available to all who believe. It's because all have sinned. It is said that we all fall short of God's glory due to our sin. Glory is the awesome presence of God. While in the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve shared in God's glory. However, they lost it when they sinned. But what Adam lost; Christ reclaimed.

V. 24 states clearly that we are justified as a gift by His grace.

Q: What is God's grace? (*It is God's unmerited favor being bestowed upon a person who believes in Jesus Christ. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit being given to the inner man of a person who is justified and thus has become a new creation. It is a gift from God that allows Christ to live through us.*)

It is important to note that God gives His grace freely without any compulsion. Grace is purely on our behalf. Nothing we can do requires God to put us right with Him. We can receive grace but only as a pure gift from Him.

**[II Corinthians 5:17]** - By grace we become new creatures. The old sinful life is gone and the new Spirit-filled life is ours.

**[Ezekiel 36:26]** - Our old hearts of stone were removed and replaced with new hearts of flesh, those hearts capable of responding to the leading of God's Spirit that He placed within us when we were saved. Thus, there is no need for the law or "rule keeping" after salvation.

Redemption means to liberate a person by paying a price for them.

Q: Why is Christ's work called "redeeming" in v.24? (*Because it paid the price for our liberation from sin*)

**[Romans 3:25-26]**

These verses sum up that Christ's sacrifice vindicates God's justice. Remember how Paul made a big deal about God being just. Everyone was subject to God's just wrath due to their faithlessness and sin. Now comes the good news. Christ's sacrifice of Himself satisfies God's justice so that we can be saved.

The word "propitiation" is only used one other time in the New Testament (Hebrews 9:5). In the Hebrews passage and the 27 times it occurs in the Greek Old Testament (LXX), it means atonement cover. It was what we typically call the "mercy seat" of God, that gold cover with the cherubim that sat on top of the ark of the covenant. Blood was sprinkled on this seat once a year by the high priest to atone for the sins of man or propitiate or avert His wrath by satisfying the holy requirements of God for the nation. Here it means a votive or free-will offering to God that satisfies God's wrath. In the Jewish faith, it was always a sacrifice to God. This was God's way to take care of the sin problem of mankind. This was costly as this gift cost God His only Son.

Notice that this death of Jesus satisfied God's wrath and displayed God's righteousness. He could not leave the sins of man unpunished. His wrath had to be poured out due to the sinfulness of mankind. Yet, He chose to pour out that wrath upon Jesus so that He would remain true to His nature as righteous and just and at the same time redeem us.

Then comes a strange statement in v.25. "He passed over the sins previously committed;" This seems to contradict what was just said about God being just and not being able to overlook sin.

Q: What do you think Paul means by "He passed over the sins previously committed"? (*It means that those who died in the Old Testament times were not punished with the full severity. People who sinned should have faced spiritual death because there was not yet an adequate sacrifice to atone for their sins. But in God's mercy, He passed over their sins. The Old Testament saints were thus justified by their belief that God would, one day, provide that perfect atoning sacrifice for their sins. Thus God remained true to Himself by responding to their sins by the blood of Jesus as well. The thrust here is that the sacrifice of Christ paid for the sins of all those who came before the cross and all those who would come after the cross. That's the gist of v.27))*

This negates the thought that God is not just because He has given grace to those who believe upon Christ now but locked up the Old Testament saint under sin forever. Both are covered by grace.

**[Hebrews 10:14]** - Christ's death on the cross perfected for all time those who believe in Him.

Q: So apart from Christ, what is man? (*a helpless slave of sin who will face God's wrath*)

Q: How does God maintain His righteous and just nature and at the same time justify us?  
(*Through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross*)

Q: What do you think happens to the person who refuses to accept the sacrifice of God's only Son for their sins? (*They will rightfully face God's wrath*)

#### IV. There is a righteousness that comes apart from the Law [Romans 3:27-30]

In this section Paul puts an end to Jewish (and really all) boasting about one's right standing before God. The Jew would boast that they had kept enough of the Law to be right in God's sight. Yet, it was already shown that they did not keep the Law or believe to the point of keeping it according to the covenant. Thus, no one could boast in their works before God. In fact, any soul boasting in his or her accomplishments is nonsense when seen that justification comes through a gift received by faith - not by our works.

Q: How is man justified? (v. 28 - *by faith apart from the works of the law*)

**[Romans 10:1-4]** - Christ is the end of the law for righteousness.

Q: Why do you think it is important to God that no one be able to boast about their right status before God? (*Several reasons. It shows how holy God is and how sinful man is. There is no work unrighteous man can do that will positively impact a completely holy and sinless God. It also means that no one can do anything that will force God to accept them as righteous. Everyone must come to God on God's terms alone.*)

The references to circumcision at the end here just make the point that both Jews and Gentiles are both saved in the same manner. There is no two-tier track for salvation with God. There is a paradox in this section. The freedom from the Law's condemnation puts us in a relationship with God in which true obedience is motivated and empowered by the Holy Spirit (the agent of God's grace within us). We could not obey the law but only fell condemned by it. Yet it's only outside the law where we find we are able to live in a pleasing manner to God - through His Spirit.

For us, there needs to be made a distinction between boasting which is the result of illegitimate pride and on the other hand contentment. Contentment is the result of doing a good job at something. It's what we get when we know we have done the right thing.

Q: So where do you think the line is between contentment and boasting? (*The line is when we think that our good works exert a claim upon God - i.e. -that He must react or bless us in a certain way due to our good work.*)

Q: Do you have any questions, comments, rebukes or rebuttals?