

## 05. Romans 3:1-31

We all need redemption. It is offered to us in Jesus





Paul has listed the kinds of sinful behaviour committed by people who are Gentiles or Jews. All have sinned in one way or another. All who need to be freed from sin. Having the law and being circumcised, as they know from experience, are no guarantee that a person will not sin.

As noted in the previous presentation, Paul has consistently gone to the heart of traditional Jewish teaching on the justice and impartiality of God, on the importance of obeying God's will written in the heart, and on circumcision of the heart. The conclusions he has drawn affirm the deepest dimensions of traditional Judaism, but at the same time they highlight the fact that the external law and external circumcision are not essential to a life of obedience to God. He has said, in effect, that belonging to the Jewish race gives no special privileges in regard to judgment, and is not essential for salvation.



In chapter three Paul wants to underline this point and he does so by employing a rhetorical form called a diatribe. A person asks a question or puts forward a point of view (typed in italics) and Paul responds.

Romans 3:1-9 a diatribe

Romans 3:1-2

1. *Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?*

<sup>2</sup>*Much in every way. For in the first place the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.*

The first question and answer make it clear that, in claiming that the Jews have no special privileges as far as God's judgment is concerned, and no monopoly on salvation, Paul is not intending to deny that the Jews have their own special grace. He will have more to say about this later (see 9:3-5). Here he is content to highlight the privilege of being 'entrusted with the oracles of God'.



We recall Moses' words: 'What other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?' (Deuteronomy 9:7-8).

Also the Psalmist: 'He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and ordinances to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his ordinances' (Psalm 147:19-20).



## Romans 3:3-4

2. *What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?* By no means! Although everyone is a liar, let God be proved true, as it is written, ‘So that you may be acknowledged as just in your words, and prevail in your judging’ (Psalm 51:4).

The second question and answer make it clear that in saying that it is possible for a Jew to be unfaithful (and thereby, by implication, to miss out on the promise), Paul is not calling into question the fidelity of God. Even if ‘everyone is a liar’ (Psalm 116:11), God remains true in passing judgment, as Psalm 51 asserts. God’s faithfulness to the covenant is a central theme of the scriptures (see Psalm 89).



## Romans 3:5-6

3. *But if our injustice serves to confirm the justice of God, what shall we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world?*

The assumption behind the third question is that God is ultimately responsible if we act unjustly. It is all part of God's plan! **'By no means!'**, replies Paul. It is we who are responsible for the choices we make. It is we who must suffer the consequences,

## Romans 3:7-8

4. *But if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not say (as some people slander us by saying that we say), 'Let us do evil so that good may come'? Their condemnation is deserved.*



## Romans 3:9

5. *What then? Are we Jews any better off?* No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin.

The fifth question is the key one in this whole section. Granted the advantages that Paul admits belong to being a Jew (3:2), is the Jew *better off as regards salvation and judgment?* Paul's answer is a resounding No! Everything he has said since 1:18 has shown that sin affects everyone, not only the Gentiles, but also the Jews, even with their law. And God must judge each person impartially according to his or her behaviour.



Paul concludes the first section of his Letter by quoting from the Scriptures to support his claim that, as regards salvation and judgment, the Jews as well as the Gentiles are in need of redemption.

### Romans 3:10-18

'It is written: 'There is no one who is righteous, not even one; there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one' (Psalm 14:1-3).

'Their throats are open graves, they use their tongues to deceive' (Psalm 5:9). 'The venom of vipers is under their lips' (Psalm 140:3).

'Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness' (Psalm 10:7).

'Their feet are swift to shed blood, 16ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known' (Isaiah 59:7-8).

'There is no fear of God before their eyes' (Psalm 36:1).



## Romans 3:19-20

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For ‘no human being (σὰρξ) will be declared righteous in his sight’ (Psalm 143:2) by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

This statement is concerned with the grounds or basis of justification. It states what the basis is not: it is not obeying the law. If, as 2:13 says, those who do the law are in fact declared righteous, it is not because the law has the power to put one in the right relationship with God. We must look for a more profound reason. The law does, however, bring ‘**knowledge of sin**’.

Paul made the same point in his letter to the Galatians when he said that the purpose of the law was to make sin obvious by making it appear as ‘transgression’: the breaking of a law (Galatians 3:19).



Paul has concluded the first major section of his letter (1:18 - 3:20). On the surface one could say that he has begun with a section on sin and has appealed both to human experience and to the authority of scripture to establish the fact that all, Gentile and Jew, are under the dominion of sin.

At a deeper level, however, something far more significant has been established. He began by speaking not of sin as such but of the anger of God (1:18). Even the condition in which all find themselves because of their sin is a revelation of the 'righteousness of God' (3:5; 1:17), in so far as it manifests the justice of the punishment that comes to the sinner within the order willed by God, but more basically in so far as it is a revelation of God's **'kindness, forbearance and magnanimous love'** (2:4) leading everyone to repentance and to enjoy eternal life (2:7). For the power of God is indeed in view of salvation (1:16) for all those who are under the dominion of sin, whether Jew or Greek (1:16).



The law did not make people righteous. Its purpose was to make people aware of sin (3:20). Those under the law (the Jews) were still under the power of sin (3:9). Paul is now ready to show the way in which God has chosen to do what the law could not do.

In the section just completed, Paul is not saying that there is no value in being a Jew. God is faithful, and so God's promises to those who have the law stand in spite of human infidelity. One special value that the Jews have is God's revealed word (3:2), which Paul uses to demonstrate that they as well as the Gentiles are caught up in sin. Furthermore, he makes it clear that he is not saying that God is unjust to allow punishment, nor that sin is excused because it helps to highlight God's justice.



What he is arguing is that the advantages enjoyed by a Jew do not include being exempt from sin. All are caught up in sin in one way or another, and so all have need of God's merciful forgiveness. He has already said that his gospel is 'the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek' (1:16). Since the law clearly does not guarantee salvation or withdraw people from the dominion of sin, there must be another way out of being under sin's dominion.

A Jew would have argued that the way out was to repent, to cling to the law and to perform from the heart what the law required for atonement. In this way a person would open him/herself up to God's mercy and to receive the grace promised by God. Paul wants to present another way: the way which God has revealed in Jesus. It is a way that goes beyond the law. Unlike the law it is offered to all, Jew and Gentile, and, unlike the law, it is effective in freeing from the dominion of sin all who welcome it in faith.



## Romans 3:21-31

Having established that it is God's will that everyone be liberated from sin and its consequences, and that everyone, including the Jew who has the law, needs this liberation, Paul now (3:21 – 4:25) goes on to demonstrate that it is God's will, in fulfilment of his promise, to bring all into communion with him through sharing in the faith of Jesus.



## Romans 3:21-22

Now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus the Messiah for all who believe.

Paul has shown that all, Jew and Gentile alike, stand in need of the gospel which he described earlier as: ‘the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith”’ (Romans 1:16-17).

We recall here the commentary on the phrase ‘through faith for faith’ (1:17). ‘One interpretation of this phrase is that Paul is saying, firstly, that it is through the faith of Jesus that God’s righteousness and the way in which we are called to be in the right relationship with God are revealed; and secondly that the revelation of the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus is for our faith; that is to say, that Jesus’ faith bears fruit in ours’. Paul seems to be making the same point here.



In the gospel is disclosed 'the righteousness of God'. Paul's primary focus is on God and on the characteristic quality of God which he calls 'righteousness'. God is righteous, in that God always acts according to God's nature. The gospel reveals that God is love, and so we can be certain that all that God does flows from love. We can be confident that God will be faithful to God's promises and true to the covenant. We can trust without reserve that God will be true to the hope that has been placed in God, and true to God's desire to bring about right relationships of all people to God and to each other. God will continue to offer to all the grace to live righteously and to attain salvation.



The gospel, therefore, is also, and in a secondary sense, about the righteousness that we can have, thanks to God's gracious love. This righteousness of God, though 'attested by the law and the prophets' (see 1:2), has been fully disclosed only 'now', in the person of Jesus and in a way that transcends the law. This is 'the fullness of time' (Galatians 4:4); 'the ends of the ages have come' (1 Corinthians 10:11). 'In Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!' (2 Corinthians 5:17).



The righteousness of God is disclosed through the fidelity with which Jesus carried out his Father's will and through the trust which Jesus placed in God, especially, in his self-giving on the cross. Jesus offers us a share in his faith and if we welcome his offer, if we share his trust and if we, through his grace, learn to be faithful in our turn and to do the will of God – in other words, if we 'believe' - we will experience the communion in love that is the life of Jesus (see Acts 10:43). This is the '**righteousness**' that is God's gift to us, and our assurance that God judges us to be in the right relationship with God.



## Romans 3:22-25

For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by God's grace as a gift through the redemption that is in the Messiah Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.

Paul describes our redemption as being brought about by ‘a **sacrifice-of-atonement** (ἱλαστήριον) by his blood.’ On the day of atonement, the high priest entered the inner sanctuary of the temple, bearing the sins of the people. There is no place for sin in the presence of the Holy One and so, when the high priest approached the mercy-seat (ἱλαστήριον), the sins were cast aside, to be taken by the scapegoat into the wilderness.

Jesus, our brother, offered his life for all, Jew and Gentile alike, and when he was welcomed into the divine presence, we were welcomed with him, our sins forgiven by divine mercy.



## Romans 3:25-26

Jesus whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed. God did this to prove at the present time that God is righteous and that God justifies the one who has the faith of Jesus.

Through Jesus' **faith**, revealed in his offering of his life (his '**blood**'), God has now come to our aid and removed the threat hanging over us while we were under the dominion of sin. Jesus inspires us to accept God's forgiveness and welcome God's love and so be taken into the protective realm of God's gracious mercy. Paul stresses that Jesus' self-offering was something ultimately willed by God.



God's righteousness has been revealed in the past by the way God has remained faithful in spite of human sin and has been active in kindness, forbearance and magnanimous love in drawing people to repentance, not abandoning mankind to the consequences of 'sins previously committed'. God's righteousness is fully revealed 'at the present time'. The gospel is that God is not only patient and forgiving, but is actually making people righteous, removing us from the dominion of sin and causing us to live in a proper relationship to God. This God did through the sacrificial self-offering of Jesus. We are speaking of grace, of a gift freely offered in love. To be effective, it has to be freely welcomed in love. Only those who open their hearts to receive 'the faith of Jesus' can experience this righteousness. As Paul says, it is 'effective through faith'.



God has now revealed his righteousness in a way that encompasses Jew and non-Jew without distinction. The law pointed towards this way, but what God has done in Jesus goes beyond the law. Like the law it is a free gift. Like the law it is in view of redemption. Unlike the law it is effective because, as Paul will go on to demonstrate, it offers the power of God's life-giving Spirit to anyone willing to share the faith of Jesus.

Paul is particularly keen to help faithful Jews see that by opening themselves to God's new gift in Jesus, they are being faithful to the law, even though their new life in Christ may mean that they leave behind some of its requirements. The law has come to its goal. It has done its job.



Paul stresses 'justification by faith', not because this is a point of disagreement with Jews, but precisely because it forms a basic point of agreement. Only on this agreed basis can he encourage a faithful Jew to see that the God in whom a Jew believes has now done a new thing, and is inviting all, in the same attitude of faith, to open their hearts to share in the faith of Jesus as lived out in the Christian community.

We are not justified by faith. We are justified by God. The gospel is that God does this through Jesus and that our role in this is to believe: to welcome God's offer in trust and to allow the grace of God's love that is poured into our hearts from the heart of Jesus to bear fruit in love.



## Romans 3:27-31 A diatribe

*Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded.*

*By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.*

*Is God the God of Jews only? Or is God the God of Gentiles also?*

*Of Gentiles also, since God is one; and God will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith, and the uncircumcised through that same faith.*

*Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?*

*By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.*

This Paul sets out to establish in Chapter Four.