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*“Great Advantage & Just Condemnation”*

ROMANS 3:1-8

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## INTRODUCTION

As you turn in your bible to Romans 3:1-8 I want to read for you the words of the Apostle Peter.

*“just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures.” 2 Peter 3:15-16*

Here is Peter, who walked with Jesus for three years, a leader of the church, an Apostle and he is saying that Paul is a brother and the words he writes are words of wisdom given to him. Yet some of it is hard to understand. If Peter is not referring here to Romans 3:1-8, I don't know what he is referring to!

John Piper preached on this passage in March of 1999. At that time he told his congregation that this was one of the most difficult passages to understand and preach. He cited Martin Lloyd-Jones who, in the 1950's, commented that this was the hardest passage in Romans and indeed in all the bible!

Thus, we now endeavor to work through the passage, confident of two things: we have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us who will guide us to the truth, and the Word of God never returns void. Pray for me as I strive to faithfully unpack this most difficult passage.

## Romans 3:1-8

**Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?<sup>2</sup> Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.<sup>3</sup> What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.)<sup>6</sup> By no means! For then how could God judge the world?<sup>7</sup> But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?<sup>8</sup> And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.**

In order to understand this question, we need to go back to the conclusion drawn from Romans 2:25-29. In that passage, Paul makes the argument that physical circumcision, which was a sign that a person was part of the covenant people of God, the offspring of Abraham, was of no inherent value. Rather, one must be circumcised in their hearts, in other words they needed to have the kind of faith Abraham had before he was circumcised.

The physical mark of circumcision had become symbolic of a guarantee of Heaven. “No circumcised man will go to hell” is what Paul's Jewish contemporaries taught. And Paul is saying

outward religious expression, no matter how sincere or how true to form, if they do not represent an inward affection for the Lord, are nothing. Real circumcision that counts is circumcision “of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter.”

### WHAT ADVANTAGE?

Now Paul takes the perspective of a cynic and asks, **Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?**

We would expect Paul answer that there is no advantage. Instead, he answers in **verse 2, Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.**

They were given the Law and the prophets. God chose Israel, the offspring of Abraham through the line of Isaac and then Jacob. God chose these people not based on anything they had done but merely as an act of His grace and they were **entrusted with the oracles of God**, the very Word of the God, His message for humanity came through the Jews.

Paul says **to begin with** which other translations might say *first*. The Greek word *protos* means *first* not necessarily in a sequence but in the order of importance. Thus, Paul is saying the primary advantage of the Jews was Scripture, God’s preeminent gift. He will pick back up in Romans 9:4-5 with other advantages, but first among them is the revelation of God’s Word.

Why is that such an advantage for the Jews? It reveals who God is and who man is. It reveals God’s nature, His will, His standard. It reveals the infinite chasm between God and man, put there by our sin. It reveals God’s love and kindness, His mercy and compassion. It reveals His holiness and wrath, His righteousness and judgement. Scripture reveals God. And this revelation of God came to man through the Jews. That’s a high honor. That’s a great advantage.

The Bible speaks of itself in *Hebrews 4:12* “*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*” It is powerful. Paul says that the Gospel is the power of God for salvation for all who believe.

This is why we preach the bible; we open the bible and we invite you to open your bible and follow along. The Word is powerful to transform. There is great advantage to having the Word of God.

### WHAT IF SOME WERE UNFAITHFUL?

Unfortunately, much of what was spoken through Moses and the prophets was correction. The tenor of the Old Testament was that of rebellion and faithlessness. Which is why he asks another rhetorical question in **verse 3, What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?** Does the faithless disobedience of the Jews nullify the covenant of God? And if so many Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah and deserve God’s judgment, as you claim, doesn’t that mean God is not true to His Word?

The cynic in Paul’s mind is thinking, if we’ve been so faithless and we’re subject to God’s judgment, then God’s Word hasn’t proven to be all that great of an advantage. If God has promised to save Israel, how does that hold up if the majority of the Jews were unfaithful? Has God failed?

**By no means!** Paul says in **verse 4. 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.”**

Every one of us, **every one** in the world is a **liar** to some degree. We all break our promises. We all fail to let our yes be yes and our no be no at some point. But even though **every one** is a **liar**, God remains truthful. God is the one and only promise-keeper. Even if every human being alive denied God, God would still be true! He would still be faithful. He would still be reliable. He doesn’t lie like

we do. He doesn't break His promises. In fact, the only hope that any Jew has of being saved, or Christian for that matter, is that God is not like us.

To illustrate this point, Paul quotes David in *Psalms 51:4* "*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.*"

God is always true even when His people, including the king of Israel whose throne would be established forever, sins grievously against Him. David was repenting of a serious sin against the Lord – he committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband, Uriah, murdered. He sinned against her, against Uriah, against his own family. But David knew he sinned ultimately against the Lord.

And he acknowledged that God is right to judge him for it. He confessed that God had every right to hold him accountable for his sin. He refused to throw up the "that's not fair" flag. David knew he did wrong and God was right to judge him for it. Even when David, the chosen king of Israel, sinned against God, God remained true. God remained faithful. God's judgement is faithful. It comes from His righteousness and faithfulness.

## GOD, THE JUST JUDGE

When God judges the world, He will do so a perfectly true, perfectly just, and perfectly faithful judge. He will be justified in sending to hell everyone who rejects His offer of forgiveness.

Thomas Schreiner sums it up, "...the saving righteousness of God does not rule out his judging righteousness. Even though God has promised salvation to the Jews, no individual Jews should presume upon those promises and think their salvation is guaranteed."

He says that even though the Jews possessed God's promise of salvation, they were not exempt from His judgment. The promise was not that any individual Jew could presume upon their heritage while living faithlessly. Isaiah called individual Jews to repentance, not presumption.

*"Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."* Isaiah 55:6-7

## A WARNING FOR THE CHURCH TODAY

Two thousand years after Paul wrote Romans, this should serve a major warning for Christians who have had the great advantage of the gospel for so long. Just as the Jew presumed upon their heritage, their family, their religious association, some Christians also presume upon their associations with the church, perhaps marked by baptism or membership, their family heritage for confidence in their salvation.

People raised in the church, though we possess the promise of salvation in the Gospel, are not exempt from judgment. It is not association with the church that saves. It is not knowing the Gospel that saves. It is believing the Gospel that saves. We are saved by grace through faith.

Speaking of grace, Paul continues his diatribe by addressing another argument in verse 5 & 6. It's another attempt to justify oneself, to try to escape judgment. **Verse 5 says *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.)***

The basic argument goes, "If, as you say, God's grace is magnified in forgiving sin, then why would my sin be punished?" If God is really being glorified, his righteousness is being manifest by His grace and by His judgment, then what gives God the right to punish me? Why would my sin be punished if the result of my sin is God's glorification?

Paul can't even say these words without apologizing. This is what he means by **I speak in a human way**. Its sophistry. It's twisting words to deceive, to manipulate. And we better be careful when it comes to twisting God's Word.

Again, Paul answers in **verse 6** **By no means! For then how could God judge the world?** Paul replies, You know better than that! The Jews knew that God is going to judge the world.

Paul argues that if the faithlessness of the Jews was not held against them, by what standard would He hold anyone in the world accountable? If the ones who had the written code were not held accountable for breaking it, how could God hold those who did not have the written code accountable?

And if He did not hold anyone accountable, why would God choose Israel as His people and what would He be saving people from? The answer is simple: God is going to judge the world, including the Jews and church people. It's an essential part of God's righteous nature. He is judge.

That's what the oracles of God reveals. That's what the Old Testament and the New Testament reveal. And Romans 1-3 makes it clear that man is unable to live up to God's righteous standard and without His grace, we have no hope for salvation.

R.C. Sproul argues that everyone wants to get a free pass. Everyone wants to imagine that because they haven't been judged yet, they never will be. They falsely presume upon their own notion of "fairness" and imagine that God is going to contort His righteousness to ours. But that will never happen.

He says, "No preacher in the history of the world more ominously spoke about the certainty of wrath of God than Jesus."

We will be held accountable for the righteous requirement of the Law. "It is because God is righteous that He is wrathful," says Sproul.

### THEIR CONDEMNATION IS JUST

Paul takes the argument one step further in **verses 7 & 8**, switching to the first-person pronoun, yet still speaking from the perspective an imaginary cynic. He says, **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.**

He goes from an anonymous group "our" in verse 5 to an anonymous individual; I think to make a point; to really drive home the condition of the sinful human heart. **Why am I still being condemned as a sinner?**

The cynic, who represents every sinful person, is judging God for judging him. Who does God think He is to judge me. **My lie** causes **God's truth to abound to His glory**. My sin manifests God's righteousness. How can He judge me and hold me accountable for that? I have the Law and the prophets and circumcision and a religious heritage and I'm a moral person, and I'm baptized, and I'm a member of a church, so what if I'm not perfect...who is God to judge me?

This is Paul's point in v. 4. We have no grounds for impugning God when He judges us. Paul doesn't even acknowledge the question or justify it with a response. He simply says **their condemnation is just**. God is right to condemn the sinner.

From great advantage to just condemnation in 8 verses.

## WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? TO JESUS!

Where do we go from here? We go to Jesus! We go to our knees. For those who know Jesus we thank Him that even though we still sin we know that Christ died for our sin. Even though we still lie, Christ died for our lies. Though we lie, God remains truthful.

We don't presume upon the Lord, but rather we praise Him. And we remind ourselves that without Christ, without His atoning work on the cross, we would be the objects of God's wrath.

For those who do not know Jesus, we go to our knees in humble contrition, acknowledging that God is perfectly just to condemn you to hell for your sin. And calling out to Him to be merciful and gracious and forgive you your sin by faith in Jesus, His Son.

As you examine your own heart today, do you hope in His atonement or do you hope in some false idea that because you have not yet been judged you never will be? What is it that is going to exonerate you in judgment? If it is anything short of Christ's atoning blood poured out on your behalf, you have not yet dealt with your sin. Deal with it today. Lest your great advantage become your just condemnation.

Blessings to you, church!

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