

Romans: Chapter Three

Romans 1.18-3.20: SIN (Righteousness Required)

The Jewish Pharisee (2.17-3.8)

As Paul concludes his indictment of the Jewish Pharisee he engages in a 'diatribe' (philosophical debate) with his critics. These were probably questions that were his as an unconverted Pharisee, or that he fielded on a regular basis during synagogue evangelism. It is therefore of worth to see the debate as between *Saul* the Pharisee and *Paul* the Apostle.

Four objections that impugn the character of God are brought before the Apostle. **vv.1-2:** First, if obedience to the law and circumcision cannot effect salvation (2.17-29) what is the value of belonging to God's chosen people, the Jews? *There is great value!* The first and principle benefit was that the 'oracles' or 'utterances' of God had been entrusted to them. These 'oracles' include the OT scriptures as a whole, particularly the Law given at Sinai (Acts 7.38) and the promises of God in relation to the nation (as is clear from what follows). **vv.3-4:** Second, but *some* Jews (understatement) transgressed the Law, and rejected (or were *faithless* in respect of) the promised Messiah. Will God then be *unfaithful* to His promises? *God forbid! Far be the thought!* God is true (reliable or trustworthy) and, in contrast, every human being is a liar. Even David confessed the righteousness of God's character and judgment when confessing his sin with Bathsheba (Psalm 51.4). **vv.5-6:** Third, if the unrighteous actions of some Jews 'highlight' ('commend' is to *set together*) God's holiness, isn't He unfair in punishing them? This sin brings such honour to Him! Again, Paul dismisses such feeble arguments. If God was unjust in judging sin, how could He judge the world? Genesis 18.25. **vv.7-8:** Fourth, and to summarise the argument so far (adapted from **William Barclay**): *My unfaithfulness has given God a marvellous opportunity to demonstrate his faithfulness (vv.3-4) and my unrighteousness has given God an opportunity to demonstrate his righteousness (vv.5-6). My lies have highlighted God's truthfulness, thus glorifying Him. My sin is, therefore, an excellent thing! Let us continue sinning that more good might come (vv.7-8)!* Some had even accused Paul of promoting this doctrine as he preached a gospel of grace rather than works. He does not dignify this argument with an answer. It stands self-condemned. Individuals who argue like this are worthy of God's condemnation.

The Proclamation of the World's Guilt (3.9-20)

Paul summarises his teaching thus far with a damning indictment on the whole world of humanity ('none' x4; 'all' x3). This is a **courtroom** scene with a *charge*, *counsel* for prosecution and defence, and *verdict* from the Judge.

- Charge (v.9). So much is clear. The Jew is no better than the Gentile in terms of their standing before God. Both have been proved guilty (1.18-3.20) and 'under' the power, authority, burden and condemnation of sin.
- Counsel for the Prosecution (vv.10-18). Paul quotes from a variety of OT texts that denounce the unrighteous and applies them to *all* mankind. It is shown that sin has infected man's whole nature and life. The expose reaches to man's *character* (what he *is*, vv.10-12, 18); *conversation* (what he *says*, vv.13-14) and *conduct* (what he *does*, vv.15-17). Every person may not have *committed* all the sins listed here, but every person is *capable* of such.
- » **Character**. The list is encompassed in two principal statements: **1.** There is none that is righteous, or who can stand 'right' before God, having conformed perfectly to His will (**v.10**). **2.** The root cause and source of all sin is a lack of regard and reverence for God (**v.18**). Men are destitute of any sense of His presence and thus do not fear to do wrong. **vv.11-12:** Not one person 'understands' or is able to make sound moral judgments (Ephesians 4.18). There is none that determinedly seeks after God; there is no movement of the natural heart towards Him. This leads to having gone astray from the paths of righteousness (Isaiah 53.6), becoming worthless as sour milk. There is no-one that practices moral goodness as a habit of life.
- » **Conversation**. What a person is (character), affects their speech and betrays their heart condition (Matthew 12.33-37; James 3.1-12). Mankind's throat is like an open gave, emitting the stench of corruption. Their smooth talking is deceitful and cannot be accepted at face value. Every mouth has the potential to use malicious and slanderous words to spread poison like snakes (**v.13**). Their mouths are heavily laden with cursing against God and bitterness (animosity) against one another (**v.14**).
- » **Conduct**. **vv.15-17:** Mankind is swift in the pursuit of violence and revenge bringing ruin and misery along their path. Their actions are characterised by war, not peace.
- Counsel for the Defence (v.19a). The law (used here in its widest sense of the entire OT) has **spoken** and condemned, first and foremost, all those who live under the law (Jew and proselyte). But of course this is really a condemnation of *all*. If God's chosen, sample nation – tested under ideal conditions – are found utterly wanting, then what of the rest of humanity? **MacDonald:** *It is like a health inspector taking a test-tube of water from a well, testing the sample, finding it polluted, and then pronouncing the entire well polluted.* Thus, mankind has no defence.

There is **silence**. Every mouth is **stopped**. The defendant is speechless in the light of the overwhelming weight of evidence against him.

- Verdict of the Judge (vv.19b-20). The verdict is plain and simple – **guilty** (*hupodikos*). The word does not occur elsewhere in Scripture but in extra biblical Greek it means ‘liable to judgment’ and ‘accountable’. The inevitable punishment of the crime is to follow and cannot be avoided. This is the position of all humanity in the presence of a holy God ‘because’ (a better translation than ‘therefore’, v.20) it is impossible to attain a righteous standing before God on the basis of what a person does (works of law). Self-salvation is impossible. All the law can do is expose our rebellion against God and inability to merit salvation. **MacDonald**: *We can use a mirror to see that our face is dirty, but the mirror is not designed to wash the dirty face. A thermometer will tell if a person has a fever, but swallowing the thermometer will not cure the fever. As Luther said, its function is not to justify but to terrify.*

Romans 3.21-5.11: SALVATION (Righteousness Received & Reckoned)

The sin case is proved. Man is *ruined* and in desperate need of salvation that must come from outside himself. This section presents God’s *remedy* in the Person and work of Christ and man’s subsequent *responsibility* to receive the *free* gift of justification by faith. The terms ‘righteousness’, ‘justified’ (from the same root, *dike*) and ‘faith’ occur throughout.

The Provision of Christ (vv.21-26)

v.21: ‘But now’ is a critical statement (cf. ‘at this time’, v.26). The time of expectation and anticipation is over. The great plan of salvation (a means of being right with God), in harmony with the witness of the law (types) and prophets has now been fully revealed in the Person and work of Christ at Calvary. This is a plan altogether independent of the law (as a ground of salvation) but fully consistent with the righteousness of divine character. **v.22**: This righteous standing with God is available ‘to all’ (universal scope), but only ‘upon all’ (individual salvation) on the basis of faith ‘in’ Jesus Christ – He is the object of faith. Salvation is offered to all on the ground of *propitiation*; but is only upon all them that believe on the ground of *substitution*. [**Parenthesis, vv.22b-23**: No distinction is to be made between Jew and Gentile in this matter of salvation. **v.23**: *All* require it; *all* can receive it. ‘All have sinned’ is *aoi*, implying the apostle is taking a panorama of the whole aggregate of human sin. As a result, mankind is ‘coming short’ (*present* tense) or ‘destitute’ of the glory of God. There is much discussion about the meaning of this phrase, but ‘glory’ in Scripture often refers to the magnificent presence of God. Thus, man has fallen short of being suited for God’s presence; fallen short of divine requirements. In the OT, no-one could stand in the immediate presence of God’s glory and live. It had to be veiled in the Holy of Holies. Even on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest must be covered by the incense. In addition, Paul uses ‘glory’ in Romans to refer to bringing honour and praise to God, cf. 1.23; 4.20; 6.4. Thus it is also true to say that human beings fail to bring the honour due to His name through their lives and living. Rather, they dishonour Him.]

vv.24-25: Resuming the thought of v.22a, those who believe are ‘justified freely (without a cause, for nought) by His grace’. How is this possible? Only through the Person and work of Christ at Calvary. Paul uses language that draws from the law court (**justification**), slave market (**redemption**) and tabernacle (**propitiation**). Justification is to be cleared or acquitted of every charge (guilt, cf. v.19) and declared just in the sight of a holy God. Redemption is to set free (deliver, cf. v.9) by the payment of a price (the precious blood of Christ). Propitiation is a *sacrifice* by which God’s justice is *satisfied*, thus providing a *sanctuary* from His wrath (cf. v.6). In Greek, the word is *hilasterion* or ‘mercy seat’ – the lid or cover of the ark of the covenant – the very throne of God. It became a *mercy seat* when blood was sprinkled upon it on the Day of Atonement. It was on this ground that God could meet and commune with His people (Exodus 25.22). **Christ** has effected propitiation ‘in His blood through faith’. His shed blood is the basis on which God can *meet* guilty mankind in mercy. **Leckie**: *The mercy seat of old was a visible, tangible, piece of gold upon which was sprinkled the blood of animals but our mercy seat is through faith. It is a living Saviour before God in all the value of His precious blood shed at Calvary, set now before the eye of faith.*

The mercy seat in the tabernacle was hidden from public view behind the veil, but Christ has been ‘set forth’ or ‘manifested’ in the interests of God’s eternal purpose and vindication (*middle* voice). Why does God need to be vindicated? Some may accuse God of unrighteousness and injustice in the ‘passing over’ (remission) of sins in the OT. How could He do so when animal sacrifices could not satisfy His justice? Is God unrighteous? God forbid! He did so in view of Calvary which was yet future. In His ‘forbearance’, God did not exact a full and immediate punishment for sin upon His people in the OT; that too awaited Calvary. **MacDonald**: *Although Christ had not yet died, God knew that He would die, and He saved men on the basis of the still-future work of Christ. Even if OT saints didn’t know about Calvary, God knew about it, and He put all the value of Christ’s work to their account when they believed God.*

v.26: God is thus seen to be just (righteous) in all His dealings, and can *even* justify the guilty sinner that believes in ‘Jesus’. **Leckie**: *When the precious blood was shed at Calvary, God’s righteousness was declared in His ‘going on’ (dwelling) with men, despite the inefficacy of the blood of the animal sacrifices.*