

God in the Dock

Romans 3:1-8

Series: Romans 2022: Righteousness from God – Yay!

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Worship: True and Faithful God

Key Sentence: We can't shift the blame to God.

Outline:

I. Why did God bother with the whole Jewish project? (Romans 3:1-4)

II. Isn't God's use of our unrighteousness unrighteous? (Romans 3:5-8)

Romans 3:1–8 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? ²Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. ³What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? ⁴By 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.”

⁵But 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.) ⁶By no means! For then how could God judge the world? ⁷But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? ⁸And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

God in the Dock Romans 3:1-8

We're all pretty good at making excuses. "Oh, I must have missed your email." Or "I was too exhausted. You wouldn't believe my day." Or "actually, it was so and so who messed that up, not me." Or "it can't be my fault, I just did what I was told to do." Or "I tried to do what I should, but so and so just doesn't like me." Or, "It was your fault for tempting me. You know I can't resist temptation." Or the classic "he, [or she] did it first. I was just responding."

Looked at this way Romans 2:1-3:8 could be called "Dismantling Excuses." Paul is listing, then dismissing, the excuses people use to say they are not accountable for sin. The big one is denial. "I don't sin." This is what the hypocrites in Romans 2:1-3 and Romans 2:11-24 would say. "It's not me who sins. I uphold the law and even teach it." Another excuse is found in Romans 2:4-5 where people presume that because God is kind and patient he won't take their sin seriously. That presumption is seen again in the person who relies on ritual "I may sin but because I'm part of the covenant God will dismiss my sin."

Paul's answered all these objections already, but in chapter 3 Paul's "objector" takes the excuses to a higher level, essentially saying "I may sin, but it's God who is unjust." The objector excuses himself by accusing God. First, "if circumcision is of no value, why did God do whole Jewish thing." Second, "if my sin is just a tool God is using to show his righteousness by judgment, how isn't God himself unjust." These last two excuses will be dismantled in Romans 3:1-8, where Paul reminds us that we can't shift the blame to God.

I'm calling this sermon "God in the Dock." That's the name of a famous essay by C. S. Lewis. In this short essay Lewis reflects on the difficulties of evangelism in his day, specifically the opportunities he had with squadrons of the Royal Air Force during World War 2. He says "the greatest barrier I have met is the almost total absence from the minds of my audience of any sense of sin." He expands on this by saying "The early Christian preachers could assume in their hearers, whether Jews or pagans, a sense of guilt." Lewis' studies of pagan religions showed a common thread: people trying to assuage their guilt in different ways. Because their hearers understood guilt, he says, "the Christian message was in those days unmistakably the Evangelium, the Good News. It promised healing to those who knew they were sick." Now, he says, "We have to convince our hearers of the unwelcome diagnosis before we can expect them to welcome the good news of the remedy."

“Ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man the roles are reversed. Man is the judge: God is in the dock. Man is quite a kindly judge: if God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty, and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that man is on the bench and God in the dock.”

Like so much Lewis wrote, this recognition was prophetic. Recently we spent a whole summer defending God against what Rebecca McLaughlin called “12 hard questions for the world’s largest religion” Each of these is an accusation against God, where people contend God should be found guilty. “Doesn't Christianity Crush Diversity?” “Doesn't Religion Cause Violence?” “Hasn't Science Disproved Christianity?” “Doesn't Christianity Denigrate Women?” “Isn't Christianity Homophobic?” “Doesn't the Bible Condone Slavery?” “How Could a Loving God Allow So Much Suffering?” “How Could a Loving God Send People to Hell?” These are accusations.

The same kind of thing is happening in Romans 3:1-8. God is on trial and mankind is the judge. Everything in this text is an attempts to shift the blame for our sin to God. We can learn a lot by studying how Paul answers these objections. Our outline is very simple. The first question, in verses 1-4 is basically “if all these things we’ve just said are true, why did God bother with the whole Jewish project?” The second question in verses 5-8 is “if our sin displays God’s righteousness, isn’t that use of our unrighteousness unrighteous?” No. We can’t shift the blame for our sin or God’s judgment to a flaw in God.

Let’s read Romans 3:1-4 *Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? ²Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. ³What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? ⁴By 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.”*

Paul has been showing his Jewish and legalist readers that the law does them no good unless they keep it, and they don’t. Furthermore rituals, such as the circumcision, which makes you part of God’s covenant people, are of no value if you don’t keep the law, which you don’t. Now Paul puts the words he expects to hear in the mouth of his “debating partner” or “objector”: “Well, then, given all that, what value is there in being a Jew? Or what value is there in circumcision.” We might expect Paul to say “No value. It’s all about faith,” but he doesn’t. He says “much in every way.”

Some commentators say Paul is contradicting himself. It's true that the Jewish people have no advantage in salvation. It's not by works, even works of the law, but by grace through faith. But in many other respects, which is what Paul means by "in every way," the Jews have great advantages. Oddly, Paul only lists one here. It may be he intended to give a longer list. He picks up the thought way on, in chapter 9, and says "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. ⁵To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen."

That's a great list, but Paul doesn't get there yet. He focuses on one great advantage. Verse 2 "To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God." This is, as Douglas Moo says, the supreme privilege granted to the Jews. The word "oracles" is the Greek "logia," a general term for words, though mostly used of God's words or divine utterances. God has spoken to his people by his word, entering into a special relationship with them. The Old Testament affirms this. Deuteronomy 4:8 "And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?" Psalm 147 says "He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and rules to Israel. ²⁰He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his rules."

Paul is probably referring to more than just the law, but also to the prophets and the promises. In Psalm 119 the psalmist rejoices in God's promise. Psalm 119:41 "Let your steadfast love come to me, O LORD, your salvation according to your promise." Verse 50 "This is my comfort in my affliction, that your promise gives me life." Verse 58 "I entreat your favor with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise." God's promises, Moo says, are "those "sayings" of the Old Testament in which God committed himself to certain actions. . . . At the same time, this language implies a responsibility on the part of Israel: God's "entrusting" his oracles to Israel requires response."

Given that God's great gift to the Jewish people was his word and his promises, and that these oracles called for a response, Paul asks another dialog question. Verse 3 "What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?" Paul is plainly saying that some of the Jewish people were unfaithful. We see this in chapter 2, but we also know it from the history of the Old Testament. Time after time, despite God's warnings, judgments and rescues, the Jewish people turned to idols in their worship, to injustice in their society, and to other nations for their security. They were unfaithful to God, and they failed to believe God's promises and trust him for salvation.

But their unfaithfulness, Paul says, doesn't nullify the faithfulness of God. Even though the Jewish nation collectively, and Jewish people individually, failed to trust in the promises and failed to keep the law, God always remained faithful to them. He continued to work out his promises, ordering the life of the nation so that when the time was full he would send his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law. He was faithful to his great overarching promise, that they would be his people and he would be their God and he would dwell with them. But in an even larger sense, God was always faithful to his own unchanging character. The unfaithfulness of God's people does not change his faithfulness. As Paul says in 2nd Timothy "if we are faithless, he remains faithful— for he cannot deny himself."

Sometimes when Paul asks a rhetorical question, he lets it be a rhetorical question and just hang there. But in this case he feels so strongly he does respond. Can any unfaithfulness of people cause God to be unfaithful? Verse 4: 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." The first phrase in that verse is "me genoito," which is a strong negative, "no way," literally "never may it be." Such an assertion, even as a rhetorical question, is unthinkable. The contrast between God's being "true" and the human being a "liar" restates the contrast between Israel's unfaithfulness and God's faithfulness in verse 3. When Scripture speaks of God being "true," it means not just that he tells the truth, but that he is reliable, or trustworthy; true to his word. And, while the promise to which God is true is usually his promise of blessing for his people, God's truth is also displayed when he carries out his judgment of sin. In Nehemiah 9, when the Levites confess the sins of the nation, they say "Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly." God does truth in faithfulness, but people, by contrast are liars, unfaithful. The Greek word has a range of meaning that includes "unreliable, perfidious, faithless." This is not just a wish that God would be faithful to his promises and in his judgments, it is a recognition that he is faithful, and that everyone else is unfaithful.

Paul concludes the verse with an Old Testament reference. "As it is written, 'That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.'" The quote is from Psalm 51, David's confession after his sin with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah. In verse 4 he says "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." The English Standard version translates the last phrase "prevail when you are judged," but other versions translate it "prevail when you judge," which better fits the Old Testament original.

But if God is in the dock, if God is on trial here, then “prevail when you are judged” also makes sense. God will not be found guilty of an offense that would mar his character of faithfulness and truth, no matter how loudly he is accused.

In this first section we’ve heard the objector ask “is there any value to being a Jew?” “Yes, you’ve got the oracles of God.” “But those oracles didn’t lead to faithfulness among the Jews.” “No, but the oracles still true and God is still faithful and righteous, as anyone who honestly evaluates both his keeping of his promises and his warnings can see.” That train of thought raises another issue: “Doesn’t my sin then magnify God’s righteousness?” Verses 5 to 8: *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.)* ⁶*By no means! For then how could God judge the world?* ⁷*But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?* ⁸*And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.*

While this section may still be talking about Jewish objectors, it has a more universal feel. Paul says “what shall we say?” Plural, not singular. This seems to broaden the conversation. These objectors are saying “our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God.” This says the same thing that verse 4 said. that God by his judgment is shown to be right. Moo points out that Paul is not talking about God’s righteousness in general, his own personal integrity, nor about his saving righteousness, as in Romans 1:17, but about his “being right” when he judges, either in the context of the covenant or, more broadly, when he judges the sinfulness of all people. When he judges Jews according to the covenant he is “being right.” When he judges Gentiles according to the law that has been written on their hearts, he is also “being right.”

Don’t miss this. Paul is addressing the argument, still heard today, that if our sin is part of God’s plan how can he judge us for it. Paul goes on: “what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us?” and adds parenthetically “(I speak in a human way.)” Is God unrighteous to inflict wrath on sinners when that very wrath reveals his holiness and justice? We hear forms of this question all the time: “How can God send people to hell?” “How can God allow so much suffering?” “How can God allow natural disasters?” “Why do bad things happen to good people, or innocent people?” We need to be sensitive to these questions, because real people, hurting people ask them. But we also need to be able to respond. The thing that is the same in all these questions is, I think, an assumption about God’s sovereignty that doesn’t conform to what the Bible reveals.

These questions assume that God runs people like robots, that there is no such thing as meaningful choice in the life of the world, so people can't be held responsible. Let me say again what I think is the Biblical position on divine sovereignty and human responsibility. First, God is sovereign and the world runs according to his sovereign plan and purpose. Everything that happens is woven into the plan of creation and the plan of redemption from eternity past. Therefore God chooses who will be saved. But people are responsible. People can choose to repent and choose to believe. People can also choose to do evil, choose to be rebellious against God, choose to do harm to others. And these choices are meaningful. These choices have consequences. These choices bring the effects of sin and suffering into the world. This is true on the largest scale, where what we call natural disasters are the long-term consequences of Adam and Eve's sin, and the changes that sin brought to what is now a fallen world. It's true in the longest term, where those who choose sin are eternally separated from the God they have rejected. But it is also true in the short term where horrible sinners who abuse or murder or steal or start wars or order genocides. These choices start chains of consequence that do grievous harm to their victims, and to a widening circle of people and generations.

But the most incredible thing is that these truths aren't contradictory. God is sovereign, people are responsible, but God is so infinite and omnipotent that he can work all the choices people make for good or for ill into his plan without violating their free choice, their free will. So we could examine each of the objections I voiced and see that in each case God's sovereign will is working together with the evil choices of people. Natural disasters are a long term consequence of the fall. Human suffering is usually a consequence of sinful choices people have made. Hell is a consequence of a person's choice to suppress the truth about God and live for themselves. Paul's question, "Is God unrighteous to inflict wrath upon us?" is answered by the recognition that we're not robots. We've made the choices that justify that wrath. It would be unrighteous of God not to give us the consequences of those choices.

Verse 6: "By no means! For then how could God judge the world?" Is God unrighteous to take our sin seriously? No way. To do anything but take our sin seriously would be the greatest injustice. We want God to hold people accountable for their sins, for the harm and hurt and loss and generational pain that their choices have caused. If God does not see our unrighteousness, then he's the wrong person to put in charge of the world. And if God doesn't have a righteous standard, then what good is his judgment. He isn't a fair judge unless our unrighteousness does reveal his righteousness, his unchanging standard, applied equally to both his covenant people and the Gentiles.

In verse 7 Paul restates the argument: “But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?” Notice that in this restatement, Paul goes back to the beginning of verse 4 and picks up this idea of truth and lies, which we saw were parallel to God’s faithfulness and our unfaithfulness. So, the word lie is not being used here in the sense of lying to other people, but in the sense of lying to God, telling him one thing about our life or faith or commitment and then doing another. But even though we are unfaithful to God, he is true and faithful to us. Thus, he shows his nobility and thus he shows his glory, the manifestation of the perfection of his character. But again the argument is “if my unfaithfulness and double-mindedness toward God shows his faithfulness and lets his glory be seen, why should I be judged as a sinner. Aren’t I really doing an important work by providing a dark contrast to God’s glorious light. Why should I be judged for that?”

By the way, think about that for a minute. Is God more glorified when his glory is seen in contrast to the darkness of our sin, or would he receive even more glory when his perfection, a light brighter than white, shines out in contrast to the plain white of human faithfulness. I think God’s perfections will be even more apparent in an eternity where they stand out in the midst of redeemed and perfected people, and where all creatures reflect his glories back to him.

In any event, Paul answers the objection by plainly stating its absurdity. Verse 8 “And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.” The arguments of verses 5 and 7 are summarized as “why not do evil that good may come.” This simple form of the objection makes it plain the objection is absurd. Piling up evil is no way to generate good. It’s like you’re painting a wall with more and more black paint so that more and more white paint will be needed to cover the black, and then rejoicing in how much white paint has been used.

Yet, Paul says, he has been slanderously or blasphemously accused of just this kind of thinking. Douglas Moo says “Paul indicates that the objection to his teaching that he puts here in the mouth of a Jewish objector is one that he has heard before and one, more than likely, that the Roman Christians had also heard.” From the point of view of the objector, Paul’s teaching that obedience to the law was not the basis for ultimate salvation is undercutting morality. There is no reason to be moral if you are not held accountable for your sin. Paul does in fact preach this, what Barclay called “incongruous grace”—grace given without regard to worthiness—and this doctrine inevitably raises questions about justice. How can God be just and not punish our sin? Paul does not answer this here. He’ll give an answer in just a few verses.

But here he intends the absurdity of the question “why not do evil that good may come?” to be it’s own answer. The viewpoint taken by the Jewish objector, that because my sin highlights God’s righteousness, therefore it would not be righteous for God to punish my sin is not just absurd, but a slander against Paul and a blasphemy against God. Thus Paul concludes “their condemnation is just.” Moo summarizes “God’s faithfulness is ultimately not to Israel but to his own person and promises. God is therefore righteous when he punishes his people for their sin as well as when he rewards them for obedience. But this does not mean, Paul concludes, that we should excuse sin simply because it always magnifies God’s righteousness. Such an attitude brings God’s own name into disrepute.”

This is the outcome whenever we put God on trial. We put God in the witness stand and cross examine him from the bench while we simultaneously sit in the jury box and judge him. With our questions “Why is there hell? Why is there suffering? Why is there judgment of sin?” we think we’re accusing God, but in fact we are turning the responsibility back on ourselves. God is not the sinner – he is the only righteous judge. God did not disobey in the Garden, he kept his word. God did not inflict cruelty and abuse and war and oppression on humankind. These are choices people have made over and over in every generation. It’s absurd to blame God for the sins of mankind or to accuse him for promising just judgment. Instead, we ought to fall at his feet and plead for rescue, and as those who have read the rest of the story we should rejoice that though all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, we are justified freely, by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.