



MAIN COMMENTARIES ON 'ROMANS'

Chapter 3

After examining in chapter two the ways in which some Jews betrayed the gifts God had given them, St. Paul answers an important question: is there any advantage in being a circumcised Jew (Romans 3:1)? He answers, "Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God" (3:20). These oracles - whether they are the Old Testament as a whole, or the Messianic prophecies - were advantageous because they gave the Jews a special understanding of God and His will, the human condition, and God's salvation through the Messiah.

St. Paul then answers three possible objections to his teaching. First, how can the Holy Scriptures be an advantage to the Jews if they do not believe these Scriptures? Does the unfaithfulness of some Jews mean that God is prevented from being faithful to His promises to them (Romans 3:3)? St. Paul responds that even if all - and not merely some - people disbelieve God, this simply highlights His truthfulness (3:4).

The second objection involves God's justice: how can God be just in condemning people when their unrighteousness highlights God's righteousness (Romans 3:5)? St. Paul simply responds that God could not judge - and therefore govern - the world if human unrighteousness limited God's righteousness (3:6).

The final objection is that, if God is glorified through human sins, perhaps humans should continue sinning and thereby bringing glory to God (Romans 3:7). St. Paul finds such an objection to be ridiculous: of course humans should not sin! As Theodoret, bishop of Cyr (in Syria) in the fifth century, writes, "(The Apostles) demanded that everyone abstain from all manner of wickedness." St. Paul concludes that God is just in condemning people sinful people (3:8).

In the end, neither Jews nor Gentiles are better than the other group: both are "under sin" (Romans 3:9), meaning that they are dominated by the power of sin, and therefore under judgment for being under sin's power.

In verses 10-18, St. Paul engages in *charaz*, a rabbinical practice of rapidly quoting scriptural passages to prove a specific point. William Barclay explains:

We see Paul doing here what Jewish Rabbis customarily did. In Rom. 3:10-18 he has strung together a collection of Old Testament texts. He is not quoting accurately, because he is quoting from memory, but he includes quotations from Ps. 14:1-3; Ps. 5:9; Ps. 140:3; Ps. 10:7; Isa. 59:7-8; Ps. 36:1. It was a very common method of Rabbinic preaching to string texts together like this. It was called charaz, which literally means stringing pearls.

The passages St. Paul quotes in Romans 3:10-18 are:

Romans 3:10-12 - Psalm 14:1-3; 53:1-3

Romans 3:13 - Psalm 5:9

Romans 3:13 - Psalm 140:3

Romans 3:14 - Psalm 10:7

Romans 3:15-17 - Isaiah 59:7-8

Romans 3:18 - Psalm 36:1

These passages show that no one is righteous (Romans 3:10-12), that everyone sins by both word and action (3:13-15), and that the lifestyle of unrighteousness is evil and destructive (3:16-18). People engage in such an unrighteous lifestyle because they lack a proper fear of the Lord (3:18). The fourth century Christian Ambrosiaster expands 3:18 by stating that the problem was not that people did not fear God Himself, but that they did not see how their actions were viewed by God: "Scripture did not say that they did not have the fear of God. It said: *There is no fear of God before their eyes*. For seeing how evil their works were and not being horrified by them, they are said not to have the fear of God before their eyes."

According to St. Paul, the purpose of the Law is to create in people knowledge - meaning a real, life-affecting knowledge - of sin (Romans 3:20). Because of this purpose, people cannot use simply knowing the Law and being circumcised as a way of avoiding God's judgment (3:19).

Now that he has established that all people are alike, under sin and incapable of protecting themselves from God's judgment against sin, St. Paul is ready to address the Gospel. In verses 21-26 St. Paul provides what many commentators call the "heart of the Epistle," because in this passage he describes the way in which God provides salvation to people under the bondage of sin.

St. Paul tells his readers that the righteousness of God is revealed apart from the Law (Romans 3:21). Romans chapter two and the first part of chapter three provide the basis for understanding this statement. Simply understanding the Law, and fulfilling its requirements without any real reference to God, is inadequate to save a person from God's judgment; instead, a person must faithfully relate to the righteous God to whom the Law points. The righteousness of God must therefore be revealed apart from the Law to prevent people from believing that they have attained righteousness without a relationship with God.

At the same time, as we noted when we mentioned that the Law points to God, the Law and prophets are witnesses to the revelation of the righteousness of God (Romans 3:21). This is important: if people are knowledgeable about the Law and the writings of the Prophets, then they should be able to recognize the righteousness of God which has come in Jesus Christ.

Fr. Lawrence Farley explains the significance of Romans 3:22-23:

Righteousness and divine benevolence are experienced through faith in Jesus Christ. If one will but accept the apostolic Gospel and be baptized, living as a disciple of Jesus, one can experience God's kindness and salvation. It is thus available to all those who have faith, without any distinction between Jew and Gentile. This is only fitting, St. Paul adds parenthetically, for all have sinned - Jews and Gentiles alike - and lack the glory of God.

We need to understand what St. Paul means when he says that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), as well as his earlier statement that "there is none who does good, no, not one" (3:12). Some Christians believe this means that humans are totally depraved, incapable of any good

behavior at all. If you look at the world around you, however, you will see many non-Christians who engage in acts of charity and other good works. St. Paul is not saying that humans are incapable of any good at all: instead, he is saying that no human is capable of *consistently* or *constantly* doing good - when we try to do good things without involving God, our good behavior will always be sporadic and undermined by our inherent selfishness.

Furthermore, he is not using simple decency or proper behavior as the definition of goodness: he is instead measuring our goodness with the righteousness of God (Romans 3:10). If you look at God's perfect righteousness, and your feeble attempts at being good, you can honestly say that you are incapable of truly doing *good* in the same sense that God is good.

Verse 24 gives an important detail about the salvation offered by God: it is a free gift of grace. In contrast to the Gentiles (who rejected God and thought that there was nothing from which they needed to be saved) and Jews (who thought they would be spared from God's judgment simply because of their ethnic identity, or because they gave nominal attention to the Law), humans can only be justified by receiving God's gift of His grace.

Humans therefore cannot save themselves from the power of sin and from God's judgment: the source of salvation is "the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:24). The word "redemption" is a translation of the Greek word *apolytrosis*, which refers to buying slaves in the marketplace in order to set them free. St. Paul has made clear that humans are slaves to sin: whether it is a blatantly immoral lifestyle, or self-righteous judgmentalism and hypocrisy, when left to ourselves we will always inevitably choose to sin. The only way in which we can be freed from this slavery to sin is through Jesus' redeeming work.

The way Jesus accomplished this redemption is through His death on the Cross (Romans 3:25). Christ's death on the Cross took away the sins of the world and reconciled humanity to God. Christians receive this sacrifice, and its saving effects, by faith (3:25). This sacrifice is an act of God's forbearance: St. Paul earlier remarked that God is forbearing longsuffering so that people can come to repentance (2:4); here he reminds us that God's forbearance currently gives people time to accept the gift offered through Christ (3:26).

Because this salvation is a gift from God, no one can boast that he or she earned it through effort and self-discipline (Romans 3:27). St. Cyril, bishop of Alexandria in the fifth century, teaches:

For who will glory, or for what, when everyone has become worthless and gone out of the right way, and nobody does good works anymore? Therefore he says that all glorying is excluded...How? We have acquired the forgiveness of our former sins and have been justified freely by the mercy and grace of Christ.

Furthermore, God does not show favoritism by offering this gift only to a small group of people: God will justify people from all ethnic groups through faith (3:29-30).

St. Paul concludes this chapter by answering one more objection. Some people may think, "Since God saves people through faith, there must no longer be any need to follow the Law" (Romans 3:31). St. Paul responds that, rather than voiding or getting rid of the Law, Christians uphold the Law. Blessed Augustine of Hippo writes in the fourth century:

The law is confirmed by faith. Apart from faith the law merely commands, and it holds guilty those who do not fulfill its commands, so that it might thereafter turn to the grace of the Deliverer those groaning in their inability to do what is commanded.