

God's Faithful Desire

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[0 : 00] G'day everyone. I'd love to say it's great to see you, but I'm glad that you've decided to join tonight to watch the stream and to sit under the word with us.

There's an outline available on the website just above the link to the stream if you want to follow on along that or take notes. But the headings of the outline will come up on the screen as we go. Well, have you ever had an unmet desire? Maybe you didn't get the gift that you expected. Maybe someone didn't perform like you thought they would.

Let me tell you about Ian the Builder. He took on a new apprentice every few years. He liked training people and usually they became highly skilled carpenters and often he had a job for them at the end.

John was nearing the end of his time, so Ian was looking for someone new. He was young and fresh, excited to get to work, the new bloke.

[1 : 15] But after a while, Ian began to worry. The new apprentice wasn't picking up skills in the way the others had.

But Ian was patient. He was a good trainer. Just look at John and the others. Ian desired a fully equipped, qualified tradesman.

And so he faithfully provided appropriate training, lessons and guidance to allow the apprentice to reach the goal. And so the years rolled by and he tried his best.

But things didn't seem to be working out. His date to be signed off as a tradesman was approaching. And Ian wasn't sure if he could sign off in good conscience.

What had happened? He just didn't turn out like Ian expected. And the apprentice, well, he desired to become a competent chippy.

[2 : 20] But he never became the carpenter he thought he would. And he knew the others. He knew what they could do. But he wasn't like that. What had happened?

Who was at fault here? Could the apprentice rightly accuse Ian of not keeping up his end of the bargain? Would he have any leg to stand on?

In tonight's passage, Paul asks some questions of God and the Jews with some themes and ideas similar to Ian and his apprentice.

The driving question behind it all being, If the Jews were unfaithful to the words and commands God gave them, is God still faithful in giving them?

It's a bit like asking who's at fault. As we begin, it's important to keep the context in mind. The beginning of this letter, from the start up to chapter 3, verse 20, that we just heard, is like a unit.

[3 : 29] Paul has made clear what he desires for them. Living by faith from first to last. That is, beginning and finishing in faith.

And what Paul wants to do in this unit is to level the playing field. Historically, the Jews were the people of God.

They're the ones included in the promise. They were given the law, which taught them how to live with God. But what we've seen is that all people, both Jews and non-Jews, ignored God, ignored what he'd made plain about himself.

So all people will be judged, either under the law or apart from it. We saw that last week. So a question you might be wondering is, if all are judged by God, under the law and apart from the law, then what's the point of the law?

What's the point of the whole story of Israel if they all end up the same? And it was questions like these that Paul preempted from his readers and what this passage teaches us.

[4 : 48] And what we'll see is this. Yes, another bleak image of the state of humanity before God because of sin. So get ready for that.

But we'll also see the character of God and what he desires for both the special Israel and the whole world as well.

So let's take a look. This passage is structured around a bunch of questions that Paul asks in the shoes of his readers in response to what he said so far.

Look at verse 1. What advantage then is there in being a Jew or what value is there in circumcision? You may remember the point that Paul just made about outward and inward circumcision.

We saw that outward circumcision isn't what matters. What does inward circumcision of the heart by the spirit. So if physical circumcision isn't what makes someone a Jew, then what's the point?

[5 : 59] And to this question, we expect a negative response, don't we? That there's no point. But that's not what it says. Just listen again. What advantage then is there in being a Jew or value in circumcision?

Much in every way. Huh. That seems surprising. So what is it? Well, first of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.

Ah, that does make sense, doesn't it? When we look back to the beginning of the Jewish story, we do see that advantage, don't we? God chose Abraham.

And not because of anything special in him, but because of God's love and because of God's kindness. And particularly at Sinai, which we just saw in Exodus, God entrusts Israel with his words and he shows them how to live with him, doesn't he?

Out of all the nations of the earth, they are allowed in his presence. What privilege. That's a serious advantage, isn't it?

[7 : 14] And then his word was handed down from generation to generation and he continued to speak to them through prophets. But from a human point of view, it didn't seem to work.

All through the Old Testament, we see God calling his people into a relationship with him, but we see them running to other gods. Just think about the golden calf.

Only 40 days after God called them to obedience and them saying, we will do everything you say, did they give up on God and bow down to an idol? So we might ask, how is there an advantage? It didn't work. Well, verse three asks a question like this. It says, what if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify or invalidate God's faithfulness?

This question is looking for blame, isn't it? Who's at fault in what's happened here? Can God really be faithful when it's gone so wrong?

[8 : 27] A disaster ridden history, scattered among the nation, conquered time and time again? Excuse me. Well, the answer is no.

That's right. The answer to who's at fault is no. Why? Well, because it's the wrong question. Look again from verse three.

Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all. Let God be true and every human being a liar, as it is written, so that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.

This opening section of Romans is about the reality of human sinfulness. It's not about whether God is right or wrong.

The character of God is not up for debate. The character of God is clear. The question asks if God is unfaithful, but it's actually the opposite that's true.

[9 : 37] God is faithful. What happens to the Jews is just what God said would happen if they didn't obey. As scripture says, God is right when he speaks.

He prevails in judgment. But some may not be convinced. They can only understand God from their point of view, which is the same today.

And they're using a human lens to understand God. So they follow up with verse five. If our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us?

I am using a human argument. Maybe another way to say this is, is God's truthfulness seen more clearly with the contrast of human error?

Well, no. Verse six says, if that was so, how could God judge the world? This is a human argument Paul is using, viewing God as equal to humans or fallible like humans.

[10 : 48] We can make grand promises, can't we? But we can also make huge mistakes. That's not true of God. The character of God is not up for debate.

It's revealed. It's known. He is the true, righteous, faithful judge. And so the final question, asked again from the position of not understanding what God is like, says, if my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?

Why not say, as some slanderously claim that we say, let us do evil that good may result? Their condemnation is just. God is not human that he should change his mind.

God's character doesn't flip-flop because of what happens to me. God clearly makes himself known to Israel as the gracious, kind and loving God who blesses those who trust him and who condemns those who don't.

If they use their misunderstanding understanding of who God is to justify their evil, they deserve everything they get. And the same is true for us.

[12:14] If we respond to God in faith, he is faithful and just and cleanses us from all unrighteousness. And if we respond to God with sinful rebellion, he will be proved right.

He will prevail in judgment. So what does this mean about this so-called advantage for the Jews? Well, they're advantaged because God in kindness and grace, he gave them his word. But the problem isn't God's offer.

The problem is their response. They, like all people, reject the truth about God. So, point two, their advantage goes begging.

Verse nine says, what should we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all. For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin.

[13:20] So, has Paul gone crazy? Because he's just asked the same question with the opposite answer. Some may say so. But what's crucial is understanding his argument.

The advantage the Jews had was found in God's kindness. But when the Jews, like everyone, reject God's kindness, then their advantage is lost.

They, along with all people, are under the power of sin. It's sort of a bit like if you gave me a phone for Christmas, that's very nice, and I drop it in the toilet.

Whose fault is it? Well, it's absolutely mine, isn't it? And is your lovely, kind gift somehow taken away by my stupidity?

Are you no longer kind because of the dumb thing I've done? Of course not. Both Jews and Gentiles, those far away and those near are together under the power of sin.

[14:30] This is the reality where we find ourselves in Paul's second grim explanation about the state of all people before God. I'll read a few highlights. No one righteous, not even one.

No one who seeks God. No one who does good. Their throats are open graves. Their feet are swift to shed blood.

There is no fear of God before their eyes. This may have been hard to hear for a Jew.

lumped together with the nations. No more leg to stand on than they. Though they wouldn't be surprised if they knew the scriptures.

David, God's righteous king, was fully aware of the depth of his sin in Psalm 51. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

[15:37] Yes, he was able to approach God and be forgiven, but sin was just as prevalent in his heart as anyone else. All alike under the power of sin.

And so we might be tempted to wonder again, what's the point of the law if the Jews ended up the same as everyone else?

God says, what's the law? The law teaches us about God and about us. In the law, we see that God desires his people to be in relationship with him, but that doesn't happen.

So what's its purpose? Point three, it makes us conscious of sin. Look at 19 and 20. 20.

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.

[16:42] Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law, rather through the law we become conscious of sin. In the law, we see that God's people can't measure up to his expectations.

They can't meet his standards, and so they can't live with him. There is no one righteous, not even one. In light of this, we see in the law just how desperately we need the life God wants for us, because the life we chose is death.

I say we now because we also refuse to listen to God. We also reject the life that he offers, like every person from the very first.

The law is written in our hearts. This is why Paul says the law speaks to those under the law so that everyone, every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world held accountable to God.

We are all God's people by design. We are all called into relationship with him. And in our rejection of God's call, of God's desire for us, we all stand in silence before him, accountable to him.

[18 : 22] God rightly says in verse 20, no one will be declared righteous in his sight by the works of the law. The law is not the pathway to righteousness.

we will never work or obey our way into relationship with God. And only when we realize that will we be able to begin our relationship with him.

Over the last three Sundays, we've had some pretty bleak presentations about the state of humanity before God, haven't we? And the abrupt ending to this passage is confronting again, isn't it?

Become conscious of sin. What can I take from this except that to God we're all worthless? What encouragement is there?

The encouragement comes from remembering what Romans is about, what Paul's doing. it is about living by faith.

[19 : 40] The law shows us that we can't live with God by obedience, but it also shows us that he does desire us to live with him.

If we realize this, that living with him doesn't come from us, that we're completely sinful, well then we can stand silently before God, not making any excuses, but admitting our guilt and realizing that it's only the kindness of God that brings us into relationship with him, just like it was at the beginning.

Not by obedience, but by faith. That's what God desires for us. And we'll see this more clearly when we look at Abraham's faith, but just listen again to David's prayer in Psalm 51 on the screen.

Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me, yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb.

You taught me wisdom in that secret place. God desired faithfulness even in the womb. God has given the power of sin.

[21 : 04] Friends, if you haven't yet realized your desperate need to become conscious of your sin, to see that we all stand before God under the power of sin, then realize it tonight.

Recognize our great advantage. God has kindly given all people his word and the offer of salvation in Jesus Christ. Don't turn off your screen tonight without saying to God, I am a sinner.

Through the works of the law, I will never be righteous in your sight. I trust in your strength. Please let me live with you by faith.

faith. This is what God desires. This is why God gave us his word, that we might recognize his faithful character, that we might respond to him in faith.

If you've already become conscious of sin, what does this passage have for you? Although forgiven, we still live under the power of sin.

[22 : 30] We still give into falsehood. We still justify evil. And like we saw last week, sometimes we even forget our sin altogether and judge those who God loves and desires to save.

Christian brothers and sisters, don't forget who God is. Don't forget that he is faithful and kind.

We don't deserve our inclusion in his family. You might need to remember tonight that like King David, your sin is ever before you.

Well, you might be feeling particularly aware of your sin. God's faithfulness and kindness.

Let's go away this week praying with David, create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. let's go away this week remembering what God truly desires, a life of faith from first to last.

[23 : 51] Let's pray that God will help us to do this. thank you heavenly father for your desire for our salvation.

Thank you for your ongoing kindness and forgiveness. Please father help those who don't know you to begin their life of faith and help us who do to keep loving and trusting you.

Amen.