

The Justification of God

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[0 : 00] Amen. Before I begin to preach, let me say, if you've noticed some hobbling and wobbling and wondered what's going on, I am awaiting hip surgery, and it shows.

And you will oblige me by not bothering about it and concentrating now on the Word of God. I don't know whether you are like me, but one situation that I do very much dislike is coming in, in the middle of something, a concert, a play, a program, a lecture, whatever it is, and having to try and orient myself to what is going on, knowing that I've missed the beginning.

That bothers me, and I'm anxious that you shouldn't feel that sort of bother as we turn to Romans chapter 3, verses 1 through 8, where we come in, in the middle of an argument that Paul began back in chapter 1 and verse 18.

So, let's just glance back quickly at what has been happening. We are in the middle of the first chunk of teaching in Romans.

The chunk that begins with the words, The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

[2 : 30] That's chapter 1, verse 18. And the chunk ends in chapter 3, verse 20, with the words, By the works of the law no human being will be justified in God's sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

And the whole section is calculated by Paul to convince everyone who reads the letter that this is the truth about us, and this is where we start with God.

Paul is opening up a world of thought to which the modern world is stranger. In this world of thought, God reveals that he sees human behavior as rebellion against himself, guilt because of what we do, and shame because a lot of what we do is so scandalous.

And this bit of the section, or the chunk as I called it, is focusing on what Paul has just said about God's reaction to human behavior, the certainty that he disapproves.

Indeed, that word is far too mild for the reality. He hates it, and he is going to judge it as it deserves. He is hostile to it, and there will be retribution for it.

[4 : 30] And that is what mankind has to look forward to. Yes, I know this is heavy and tough stuff, but that's what Paul is saying in a very forthright and comprehensive way.

The good news of the gospel does start with the bad news of our sin and our condemnation before God. And Paul is implying what indeed Christians for centuries have known to be true, that you can't really appreciate the gospel until you appreciate your own lostness without it.

Well now, the points, the big points that Paul has been bringing out in the first two chapters are all humans without exception indulge anti-God thoughts and desires and actions.

Some people who behave this way are moralists. and while they are not too worried about their own track record, they do spend time criticizing the way that other people behave.

That's the beginning of chapter 2. And Paul says very bluntly, so you have no excuse, oh man, might have said sir, you have no excuse, sir, every one of you who judges and who, by your habit of criticizing how other people behave, get into the way of thinking that you are somehow better than they.

[6 : 29] You're not, says Paul, not at all. And then, halfway through chapter 2, he turns on his fellow Jews.

You've got to remember, Paul has to deal with the question of where the Jews stand in relation to the gospel because as he tells us in detail in chapters 9 through 11, and as he shows in the things that he says later on after that regarding church life, there are converted Jews in the church at Rome and he is being given to understand that they don't always get on very well with the converted non-Jews who make up most of the congregation.

Paul himself is a Jew and he has very strong feelings about what he called, he would have called the Jewish problem.

Whatever that phrase might mean for other people, what it means for Paul is that God gave the Jewish people promises and a covenant and now here they are mostly outside the church not believing in Christ and opposing those who do believe in Christ.

And this breaks Paul's heart. Towards the end of the letter he makes that clear. But just for the moment he is telling us how in relation to what he is saying about everybody being guilty before God the Jews fit in.

[8 : 23] Well, this is how he says. And chapter 2 verse 17 moves into this. You call yourself a Jew?

Yes. You rely on the law. You boast in God. You know his will. You approve what's excellent because you're instructed from the law. You've got knowledge.

Yes, says Paul, but you Jews, my fellow Jews, you have not got obedience to the law which you know so well and are so ready to explain to other people.

You yourself are people whose actions or works as he calls them are guilty before God. They're not acts of obedience but acts of disobedience.

They are not expressions of love to God and man. They are expressions of a different spirit altogether. A spirit of superiority and content.

[9 : 35] And Paul goes on from that to say, well, for people who live that way knowing the law and being circumcised doesn't count.

And he says, what my fellow Jews have to face is that they're in exactly the same boat as everybody else. Well, what you have in our section, that is Romans 3.1 through 8, which follows on from chapter 2, of course, what you've got there is an attempted comeback from imaginary Jews. No doubt Paul has had all these comeback arguments thrown at him by real Jews in the past. And he remembers those exchanges as he writes this little paragraph.

It's a rather, what shall I say, it's a rather brief paragraph for the weighty points he's making.

Well, he knows that he's going to deal in detail with the problem of Jewish unbelief. when he gets to chapters 9 through 11. But he just wants to say a little about the attempted Jewish comeback that he foresees in light of what he's just been saying and how unsuccessful it is.

[11 : 20] So, into the paragraph and we shall see this. Paul imagines a Jew saying to him, look Paul, you're talking nonsense.

For look what would follow with regard to us Jews if you were right. The first thing that would follow is that being a Jew isn't after all a privilege.

verse one, what advantage has the Jew? What the value of circumcision? Paul imagines the question being raised and raised in that way by a critic.

And he answers straight away by saying much in every way there's real value and real privilege in being a Jew and inheriting all that God has given to the Jews down the centuries.

To begin with, he says, we're in the middle of verse three now, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What does that phrase mean? It means the Old Testament scriptures in which God's whole plan of salvation by grace, which is what Romans is about, is revealed in advance if you've got eyes to see it.

[12 : 47] what the supposed critic is showing is that he doesn't have eyes to see it. All right, says Paul, but remember the Jews were entrusted with the word of God.

Oh, what a privilege that is. What a great thing it is to have the word of God and what a sad thing it is not to have it.

this is a terrific privilege. If, of course, you don't learn from the scriptures which you have, if you don't take them seriously, well, then, alas, you are unfaithful and you are positioning yourself in a way which makes the gift meaningless so far as you're concerned.

good. But, don't undervalue the privilege of having the word of God just because you yourself are not faithful in learning from it and living by it.

And that's what he is moving, that's the thought he moves to at the beginning of verse three. What if some were unfaithful as the majority of Jews so far have been?

[14 : 11] Well, says Paul, does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? No, let God be true though everyone were a liar as it's written, he quotes from Psalm 51 now, that you may be justified in your words and prevail when you are judged, when you are assessed.

The Jewish critics that Paul is imagining here is saying in effect that God hasn't done the good and wise thing that Paul has just been saying that he did, giving the Jews privilege.

There's something phony about the suggestion that the Jews are privileged people. That's judging God. God has and Paul is saying if you judge God, well so much the worse for you because God is in the right and when you judge him, well it's scandalous and blasphemous and you're wrong. You're the one who's been unfaithful. And that's his reply to the first Jewish comeback that he imagines.

And then secondly, Paul imagines the Jewish critics saying now look Paul, if you're right, God has not been faithful to his covenant promises.

[15:56] promises. For those covenant promises in scripture hold forth a blessed destiny for the Jewish people and you are saying now that we're all in the same boat of sin and guilt and condemnation.

To which Paul's response is as just stated, no, God is true. Though everyone were a liar, God is justified in his words.

God prevails when you criticize him. The truth is, and your criticism makes it evident, that the problem is with you, not with him.

You have been unfaithful to the word he gave you. He, in the whole gospel economy, which Paul will come to very shortly, he is being faithful to his word.

Your faithlessness will not then nullify the faithfulness of God. Yes, I know Paul is saying it elliptically and missing out some of the bits of the argument, but then he wants to keep this bit of his letter as short as he can because he knows that he is going to go into all this in detail when he gets to chapter nine.

[17:29] Just for the moment, he wants to say as much as he feels he has to say to show that the Jewish critic hasn't got a case. Now, he imagines the Jewish critic trying again, attempting to bounce back, and saying, well, look at verse five, if our unrighteousness serves to show up the righteousness of God, show does mean show up the righteousness of God, what are we going to say then?

And, Paul, you are implying that that's the case. Our unrighteousness shows up the righteousness of God because you are saying you've got to you've got to contrast God's hatred of sin with man's love of it.

So, what are we going to say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? And then in brackets you have the words I speak in a human way.

I speak as a man might speak. Paul conceives that, how can I say it, the person with a conscience that isn't working properly, might very well say this.

Are we going to conclude then, says Paul, as you want us to conclude, you the critic, that God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us just because we are showing up his righteousness by our own sinfulness, highlighting the contrast.

[19:17] Christ. In other words, take a deep breath, friends, the critic is saying, look, we're really rendering God a service by being the sinners we are.

So why does he condemn us when we're doing something for him? Paul does feel that that's a blasphemous way to think, and he shows that that's his reaction by the words, I speak in a human way.

I know that there are men who would reason this way, though don't think of me as one of them. And then in verse 8 he's going to say, well, all this line of thought actually is blasphemous, and when people accuse me, as they do, this is Paul being accused of such reasoning, well, that's blasphemy too.

But Paul wants to make it very clear that this is wild thinking, not realistic thinking, and not true thinking. It isn't like this at all.

The positive point, which he's been making laboriously through chapters 1 and 2, is that God assesses us, and judges us, and condemns us, by what we've actually done, viewed not in the light of its consequences, but simply in itself.

[20:51] Was it action taken in obedience to God's word? No. Was it action that glorifies God? No. Was it action that expresses love to God and man?

No. Says Paul, that's the view of our behavior that God takes, and it's in light of that perception that God condemns us, and that we have to acknowledge that we deserve the condemnation, because

our way of living has been all wrong.

He answers the critic, who was attempting to say that if Paul is right, then God isn't entitled to condemn us for sin, because we're doing him a service by our sins.

Paul is answering that in two stages. First of all, he says, no, by no means, in verse six, is a gentle translation of a more forceful phrase in Greek.

If you wanted to say it in terms of, how shall I say it, literary English, you could with advantage render it perish the thought, or if you wanted to say it in ordinary slang, you could say something like, good Lord, no.

[22 : 37] For then, says Paul, verse six, if it's right for God to think of us as doing him a service by our sins, how could he judge the world?

I spent paragraph after paragraph, says Paul, insisting that God is going to judge the world by taking account of everybody's works, everybody's actions, everybody's behavior.

And that's fact. says Paul, that's how it's going to be. And your objection assumes that it isn't going to be.

Well, I'm not going to take your objection any further, says Paul. God is going to judge the world according to what our actions actually deserve.

God is going to do it. And then, once again, the critic tries to bounce back and in verse 7, Paul imagines him saying, no, no, no, don't go so fast.

[23 : 46] If through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner for I'm doing him a service?

That's the point that he made before. And why not do evil that good may come? That would be the natural conclusion, Paul, from what you're saying.

The natural conclusion. No. No and no and no. Says Paul, some people do slanderously charge us with saying that.

But that's the very opposite of what we are concerned to say. It is never right to do evil that good may come. Those who say that this is what we ought to be doing are justly condemned.

Paul is outraged and his words are intended to express this sense of outrage. Why not do evil that good may come? That's what you're seriously saying to me.

[25 : 01] Some people slanderously do charge me. Well, charge us. I suppose he means other Christian preachers beside himself. Some people slanderously charge us with actually saying that.

But that's outrageous. And their condemnation announced by God is just. It's righteous. It's condemnation that ought to be.

So, at the end of this little section, Paul is saying very emphatically, you may squirm, my Jewish brother, you may wriggle, you may try one way or another to get out of the place of condemnation, but I'm telling you that your thinking is unprincipled.

I'm telling you that God judges according to what you actually have done and actually are saying and actually are thinking at this moment and you are under condemnation together with the rest of mankind.

well, it's somber stuff and it isn't really any fun to expand it. Paul felt he had to write this paragraph, as I said at the beginning, in order to make sure that no perky fellow Jew imagines that he can excuse himself from the condemnation that Paul is proclaiming.

[26 : 42] All right, and I think you will agree that Paul has made his point, crushingly really. So now, what are we to learn, you and I, from this paragraph?

Well, what we have here is some reminders, reinforcing things that we've learned already, and underlining them, if one can put it that way, highlighting them, and here they are, three things.

First thing, let us relearn and be in no doubt, that God's judgment against sinful human beings for our sins has no exceptions.

We are all guilty as charged. judgment of God against our failures to do what God required us to do from the start, the judgment that he passes against us for our wrongdoing then, and our failures, expresses his righteousness, its just condemnation, and his righteousness expresses his holiness, that is, his hatred of sin, and his intolerance of it, and his insistence on removing it from his world in the final judgment, if not before.

And how far, you'll agree with me, brothers and sisters, how far our modern world is from grasping this, and how urgent it is that Christians shouldn't flinch from making it clear that this is where we really start with God.

[28 : 49] We are sinners under condemnation. The gospel begins here, as I said earlier. Everybody needs to know this. Yes, God is against all the lovelessness and lawlessness and ingratitude to himself and iniquity in dealing with our fellow humans, and you can't get around that.

This is a certainty. We are all under just condemnation from our creator. So, let us relearn that. And then second, let us relearn that human sinfulness, whatever its form, has no excuse and no extenuating circumstances.

Look, Paul imagines the Jewish objector saying, why not do evil that good may come. Here is an example of doing evil out of which good came.

I'm echoing Peter and what he said in his Pentecost morning sermon. Him, Jesus, being delivered up by the fixed plan and for knowledge of God, you, by the hands of wicked men, crucified and slew.

[30 : 27] And from one standpoint, that was the worst thing that had ever happened in this world. The most scandalous, the most horrible, the most cruel, the most unprincipled.

You, through the hands of wicked men, crucified and slew the Prince of life. But in another way, it was the best thing that ever happened in this world because it brought salvation.

Christ died as the substitutionary sacrifice for our sin and because he's died, there's forgiveness, there's pardon, there's peace with God, there's new life.

The cross is a wonder and a glory. Did good come out of the evil then that the Jews did? Sure.

But does that excuse them? No, says Peter. They interrupt his sermon and say, brothers, what are we to do? And Peter knows the answer and gives the answer.

[31 : 36] He says, repent. That's what you've got to do. Tell God honestly that you recognize is your sin. Forsake it.

In purpose at any rate, ask him to enable you to forsake it and ask him to show you the love of the Lord Jesus bleeding to death on the cross for your sins.

Now loving you from his throne. Now inviting you to himself so that you may leave the past behind and move out of condemnation into new life.

That's wonderful. So is God wrong then in condemning us when we did the dreadful thing of having the Lord crucified?

That's what they have to ask themselves. have they done evil that good may come and so created a state of affairs in which God isn't entitled to condemn them because of the good that came out of their cruelty and their ungodliness?

[32 : 58] No, says Paul. It's blasphemy even to suggest it. The condemnation of sinners is just God judges according to what we've actually done, not treating any of the surrounding circumstances or consequences as if they extenuated or excused what we've done.

We have sinned, we are guilty as charged, and nothing can exempt us from the condemnation that faces us unless we turn to Christ.

And that's the third truth, the truth that is coming in great detail after this preliminary section of Romans convincing the world of sin.

Yes, mankind is lost without Christ. You and I are lost without Christ. We have no hope without Christ.

we face condemnation without Christ, but through Christ's death as our sacrifice for sin, through Christ's resurrection to be our life giver and to change our hearts by the work of his spirit, we may enter into a new life, and that's the good news, to which, says Paul, I'm working up in this letter, but until you've appreciated the bad news, you're not in a position to grasp the goodness of the good news.

[34 : 42] And so I hammer away, says Paul, at the bad news in order to prepare you for faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior, your Lord, your life, your hope, Paul calls the Lord Jesus all those things, and so such indeed Jesus is for those who trust him, and brothers and sisters, I now apply the text in the simple way to you, are you in this with those of us who know Christ's salvation, those of us who appreciate our need because of our sin, and who in humility and faith have turned to Christ to enter into the new life.

Well, you've heard that question before, that this passage from Romans prompts us to face up to it again, and that's what I ask you to do as I close this message, to ask yourself, where do I stand in relation to my guilt before God and the promise, the offer, the gift of new life in Christ, to which the gospel bears witness, salvation, yes, glory, yes, all of that, but only if you're Christ's.

God grant that every single one of us here in church this morning may leave church knowing and rejoicing that yes, I belong to Christ, the past is washed out, my new life has started, yes, Lord, I am yours for time and eternity, yes, Lord Jesus, you are my Savior, you are my God, you are my Lord, you are my life, you are my friend.
May God in his mercy grant it. Amen.