

The Justification of God

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- [0 : 00] Hi, everyone. Grab your Bibles, please, and open them to Romans chapter 3. That was the first reading. It's on page 940.
- And as you do that, let's pray together. Father, we come to you on this All Saints Eve.
- And we're reminded, Father, that you are a God who has reached down into our darkness and spread your light in our hearts.
- You've shed abroad your light in our hearts. And you make us, you make people into saints, into people who desire to see your light, to move toward your light and truth and glory.
- And we ask, Father, that tonight you would do that work again in our hearts for some of us for the first time, for a lot of us. Will you deepen and refresh us in that work?
- [1 : 19] So grant us to see tonight your faithfulness. In Jesus' name. Amen. Well, friends, we are walking through the letter to the Romans, Paul's letter to the Romans.
- And if you've been with us over the past few weeks, you might have noticed that there's something of a little bit of a mini-series within the bigger series.
- I mean, the bigger series has been just in the epistle to the Romans. But in the last few weeks, we've been talking a lot about, well, Paul has been talking a lot about religion.
- And as we've walked through chapter 2, Paul has been deconstructing our confidence in outward religion, in placing our confidence in outward formalized religion as the thing that's, you know, really, really important.
- And what Paul's been doing is he's just been shooting that full of holes, just shooting it full of holes. He's just been going right after some of the most religious, observant, respectable people of his day.
- [2 : 31] And he's just been critiquing them with this searing critique. And he's been showing that religion can be just terribly corrupt.
- Now, that brings up a pretty important question. And it's a question we need to look at tonight as we begin chapter 3. And here's the question.
- If it's true that religion, even the most correct forms of religion, if it's true that religion can be terribly, terribly corrupt, even corrupting, if that's true, and that we've been seeing that, if that's true, what does that mean about God?
- If it's true that religious people are often just as messed up as anybody else, if that's true, does that mean that there is something wrong in God?
- Does that mean that the flaw is in God? Let me put it this way. If the church fails in whatever way, does that mean that God has failed?
- [3 : 44] Okay, do you catch the question? And I figure it's a pretty darn important question because I think all of us here could agree.
- I think maybe there's somebody that would disagree with this, but I would have a hard time imagining that. I would think everybody would agree that the church is one of the most common reasons for rejecting God.

Isn't that true? I mean, aren't there times where... I mean, isn't the church disappointing sometimes? Isn't the church embarrassing sometimes?

Whether it's your local church or the church, kind of broadly. Isn't there times where you're just ashamed of the church? There's a guy called Christopher Hitchens.

A lot of you will know who he is. He wrote a book. He's one of the... They call him kind of the new atheists. He wrote a book called God is Not Great. And if you read through the book, he's not just focused on the Christian church.

[4 : 50] He's focused on religion generally. But what he does... I mean, one of the things that he does... I don't want to oversimplify the book. But one of the things that he does is he catalogs this huge list of how horrible and deplorable religion has been in its different varieties.

And he draws the conclusion from that, that if religion has failed this badly, then so has the concept of God generally.

I mean, his point is that it's just been an absolute failure. Therefore, the whole concept of God is something that we should just chuck out. It's a really important question.

Here it is. What does the failure of God's people mean about God? That's what we're going to think about tonight as we look at chapter 3 of Romans.

And there's three things that I want to show you. The first thing that I want to show you from this passage is this. God is faithful, according to this passage, even when we are not.

[5 : 58] Or another way to put that is God is not an insecure nail-biter. Let me explain what I mean by that. Look at verse 3. Verse 3.

Paul's talking about Israel. He's talking about God's historic people, particularly in the context of the Old Testament. And he asks a rhetorical question and then he answers it. Verse 3. What if some, meaning God's people, meaning Israel, the Jews, what if some were unfaithful?

Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? Okay, do you see the question there? That's the key question. Verse 4.

Paul says, By no means. Let God be true, though everyone were a liar, as it is written, that you may be justified in your words and prevail when you are judged. Okay, if you were here last week, you'll remember how we mentioned that the Bible is surprisingly hard on religion.

Do you remember that, if you're here? The Bible does not idealize the people of God at all. In fact, particularly if you read the Old Testament, it's kind of a sad story.

[7 : 14] Have you ever noticed that? It reads like a sad story because if you read through it, all the main characters fail and fail badly.

I mean, think about it for just a second. You start off with Adam and Eve, right? And God creates the world and he creates Adam and Eve and he sits them in the garden and they've got this great gig and everything's brilliant.

And by chapter 3, they've messed the whole thing up. So, okay, and then you go on a little bit further and you get to Israel. God establishes Israel to be his representatives in the world.

You get this feeling that God's almost starting over with Abraham and with Israel, trying to undo what Adam and Eve did. And God, in a dramatic way, rescues the people of Israel out of Egypt.

Do you remember this? The Passover story. They go through the Red Sea. It parts dramatically in front of them. They pass through. And you think everything's going to be great.

- [8 : 21] But within just a few days, they make the interesting decision of preferring to worship a cow as opposed to God.
- You know, it's not an impressive moment. And so, okay, you wait a little bit longer and you get David. And David, you know, he kills Goliath, which seems promising.
- And he becomes king. And he's the best king Israel ever has, which is nice. And then he takes a vacation. He stays home from the war.
- And he commits adultery with Bathsheba. And then he kills her husband. And the pattern just keeps on going.
- I mean, it just rolls on through the Old Testament. There's a sense to which the Old Testament in particular, but the Bible generally, is a sad story of God's people failing and failing badly.
- [9 : 16] Okay, so do you see why the question comes up in verse 3? God's people are regularly unfaithful. And does that mean God has failed?
- Does that mean God's not been faithful? What does it mean that God's people regularly fail? And Paul comes back just super strong. He says, absolutely not. Here's the thing.
- And here's the thing from this passage that we need to keep, we need to grab hold of. This is going to sound strange. God is not a nail biter.
- I know that sounds bizarre. Do you know what I mean by that? I bite my nails. I shouldn't. It's gross. But I do. I know I'm not supposed to.
- But when I get insecure, when I'm nervous, when I'm anxious, I'll find myself just kind of, you know, biting my nails. That's not the way God is.
- [10 : 14] And a lot of times we think of God, I think we think of God as if he's sitting up in heaven, looking down, looking at all his people, looking at the church just mess things up, looking at Israel just do deplorable things.
- And it's almost like we think of God up there going, oh, no. Wringing his hands and biting his nails and going, oh, what am I going to do? You know, Archangel Michael, what am I going to do?
- You know. That is not the God of the Bible. And in one sense, it's true that the Bible is a sad story of God's people failing and failing badly.
- But in another sense, and in a far deeper sense, the Bible is a story of a very strong, faithful God.
- The Bible. You know, the main hero in the Bible is not God's people. It's God. The Bible is a story of God showing himself utterly faithful, fulfilling all of his promises, getting the job done in spite of the fact that he's chosen a people that regularly reject him.
- [11 : 34] And in fact, that's part, that's the key to the whole thing, or at least it's part of the key to the whole thing. God is so powerful, according to the Bible. God is so trustworthy that he keeps his promises to his people even when they default on theirs.
- God's not biting his nails. And the thing we've got to catch is that God is that faithful. He is that powerful. He is that good. He is that sort of God.
- And we've got to keep in our minds that God is supremely powerful, irrespective of the failures of his church. One of the reasons that's really important for us to remember is that if you are a follower of Jesus, it will not take long before you witness the failure of God's people.
- You will witness the failure of the church. Everybody here who has walked with Jesus for any length of time knows I'm right. You're going to see church leaders fail and fail and fail you.

You're going to watch the church around you fail to care the way they should. Fail to live lives of holiness the way they should. And their failure will hurt you and wound you.

[12 : 54] And the worst thing of it all will be there will come a day when you will realize that you yourself have participated in the failure of God's people. And that your failure has wounded others.

And on that day when you realize the failure of God's people, you will be tempted to wonder whether or not God has failed.

And that's when you need to remember the teaching of Romans. Because the teaching of Romans is that God has not defaulted on his promises to his people even when his people default on their promises to him.

And when we see the failure of the church, sometimes the catastrophic failure of the church, that is the time when we are to lift our eyes away from the church, which was never to be the locus of our trust.

We are to raise our eyes and look to the face of Jesus because that is where we see true strength, true power, true faithfulness, true trustworthiness.

[13 : 58] Okay, that's number one. Number two, look at verse five. As soon as we start talking about this stuff, it brings up a question. And the question is in verse five. But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say?

That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath upon us? I'm speaking in a human way. Paul's almost embarrassed right there. Yes, I don't mean what, you know. Anyways, skip down to verse eight. And why not do evil that good may come?

As some people slanderously charge us with saying their condemnation is just. Okay. You see the question there that Paul's posing in a few different ways. If it's true that God's going to get the job done, even if we mess up all the time.

Um, and if, and this is implied here, if God's faithfulness is even clearer in contrast to his people's failure.

Then does that mean that we as God's people should just kind of, well, it doesn't really matter what we do. Um, God shouldn't really judge us anyway. Let's just go off and be crazy.

[15 : 06] Um, and just not bother obeying God at all. Um, here's the second thing we need to see. God takes the church's failure more seriously than we do.

Now we've been talking about this for the last few weeks, so I'm not going to spend too much time on it, but we need to see some, something here. Part of the way God shows his faithfulness. Part of the way God shows his trustworthiness and his, and his, uh, and his truthfulness is by holding his own people very accountable and to the same standard and even higher standard than he holds everybody else.

Look at the end of verse four. You see the quotation marks there? You know, it's kind of set aside as it is written that you may be justified in your words and prevail when you are judged. Um, that quote comes from Psalm 51.

And Psalm 51 is the prayer that David prayed right after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba and killed her husband. And here's David.

He's the king of Israel. You can't get a higher status within the people of God at that time than the king of Israel. I mean, and he, not only is the king of Israel, he's the best king that Israel has ever seen.

[16 : 33] It says elsewhere that he was a man after God's own heart. And yet, and this is very important, yet when he sinned, when he committed adultery and murder, God did not give him special treatment.

God held him accountable. And the key thing for us to see is that even the king of Israel was not above the justice of God.

And one of the things that that proved, and David mentions it, that's the point of that quote. God's judgment upon David proved that God is just and that everyone stands under his justice.

God takes the church's failure more seriously than we do. And it doesn't matter whether you're a Christian or whether you're not a Christian.

When you look at the failure of the church, there are a lot of people who just get indignant. I mean, do you get indignant when you see some of the failures of the church? You probably should.

[17 : 42] I mean, one of the things that we've got to see from Romans is that God is more indignant at the failures and the sin and the corruption and the wickedness in his people than we are.

It's one of the whole, we've been seeing this all through chapter two. It's something we've got to wrestle with. Which means it is absolute folly for us to look at the faithfulness of God and then conclude that we should just do whatever we want.

This passage calls us to a sober kind of repentance. We need to look at ourselves and we need to continually ask, Lord, what is it in my life that is not under your allegiance, that is not under your control?

Where am I trying to put on a mask and run away from you? Lord, grant me to repent because I want to come and I want to live under the light of your grace.

We need to repent. This calls us very soberly to it. One of the other things it does, though, is it addresses those of us who have been hurt by the church.

[18 : 57] I mean, some of us here have been really hurt by the church. Some of us here have been really hurt by this church. I don't know all the ways in which this church has hurt you or the church has hurt you, but undoubtedly the church has hurt you.

And one of the things when you have been really hurt by the church, you need to know that God's not just kind of overlooking it. You need to know that God is indignant in the way the church has hurt you and perpetrated evil against you.

God is indignant at the sin of his own people, particularly when his own people hurt others of his own people. And you need to know that because you need to know that God wants to come and pay very close attention to the way you have been wounded and he wants to heal you.

And I feel that I need to say to those of you who have been hurt by this church. That as I look at this passage, I have to come to the conclusion that God takes the sin of this church against you.

I don't know the ways in which that's happened, but I know that God takes it seriously. And so to whatever extent it's legitimate for me to do this, I want to say we're sorry. I hope that's not cheap.

[20 : 20] It's so cheap to say this so generally, but I hope there can be some authentic way in which that can be said. And I pray it's true. And if there's any way that we can make things right, let us know.

We would want to repent. Okay. The second point is that God takes the sin of his church very, very seriously, more seriously than we do. Last point.

Last point's very important. God's faithfulness is enough for all of us. Look at verse five. And I want you just to look at the first few words in verse five.

I know that's strange, but it'll make sense. Look at verse five. But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, and then the sentence goes on. But I want you to look at that phrase.

Our righteousness serves to show the righteousness of God. Now that's a little bit of a strange line. And the reason I focus in on it is Paul's going to make more of this as we go on in Romans.

[21 : 23] So I hope you don't mind a spoiler. Do you mind spoilers? You know, like movie spoilers and TV spoilers. If you don't like spoilers, shut your ears.

Because I'm going to talk about what the rest of Romans teaches. One of the key questions is this. How can the unrighteousness of God's people show the righteousness of God?

Think about the Old Testament for just a second. This will make sense in just a moment. If you, you know, we talked about how the Old Testament is a sad story of God's people failing to keep their end of the bargain.

Right? You had God who made all these wonderful promises to Israel. And then you have Israel consistently failing to keep their end of the bargain. Now, in that scenario, God could have, you know, Israel fails to live up to their end of the bargain.

It would have been very plausible for God just to reject Israel. Right? It would have been kind of like a divorce. Israel didn't fulfill their end of the bargain. God rejects them and walks away.

[22 : 30] That would have been legitimate for God to do. It would have been just. But that's not what God did. God was too faithful for that. Do you know what God did?

Instead, this is remarkable. God decided to take on their end of the bargain. Jim, what do you mean by that?

This is what I mean. I mean, here's Israel. They're being consistently unfaithful. And so what God decides to do in a remarkable way is he became an Israelite.

I mean, he became one of his own people. God became a Jew. That's who Jesus Christ is. And as a Jew, as an Israelite, Jesus could fulfill their end of the bargain in a way that nobody could ever have done before.

And as God, he could fulfill God's end of the bargain. And so all of a sudden you have now God fulfilling being faithful and Israel being faithful.

[23 : 39] Now, this is some of what's going on in our other reading in the gospel text for tonight. Remember, Jesus goes into the wilderness and is tempted by the devil for 40 days.

Why is that important? Well, it's important for all sorts of reasons, but one of the reasons it's important. Do you remember Israel? When Israel went through the waters of the Red Sea, they come out in the desert.

And that's precisely where they are tempted away. They're tempted away from following God. In the gospel of Luke, when Jesus is baptized, he comes out of the waters.

Where does he go? Where's the place the Holy Spirit drives him? The Spirit drives him into the desert. Why? To be tempted. Why? So that he can be proved whether or not Jesus is going to follow the same pattern that everybody else did in the Old Testament.

Whether he's going to follow the same pattern as Israel. And you expect when he goes into the desert and he's tempted, you think, based on the Old Testament, Oh, no, here we go again. But there's a twist.

[24 : 45] And the twist is, he beats the devil. He doesn't fall. He doesn't fall. He's faithful. And this is why.

I mean, this is a remarkable thing. Jesus represents God's people now. And he is faithful where we are consistently unfaithful.

God fulfills both sides of the bargain. God's faithfulness is enough for us. It's enough for Israel. Now, even if you're not a Christian, even if you're not a Christian and you think all this stuff is just crazy madness, could you imagine a God that is more faithful to his people than this?

I mean, isn't it amazing? And, of course, what we're going to rehearse tonight at communion is that Jesus, as the one faithful Israelite, goes to the cross and takes upon himself God's judgment.

I mean, once again, fulfilling both sides of the bargain. Now, can you see how this just transforms what it means to be a Christian?

[26 : 00] Can you see how this is just so different than just mere formalized religion? Being a Christian does not mean anymore. It never meant this. But it doesn't mean being just better than everybody else. It doesn't mean that you're particularly good at religious things or you're kind of into that sort of thing.

It doesn't mean any of that. Being a Christian means that you know that your life, apart from God, is a sad story of failure and unfaithfulness. And, therefore, you need someone to be faithful where you cannot be.

And we cling to Jesus. What does the failure of God mean about God? It's the question we started with, and we could switch the question around a little bit.

If you look, given the faithlessness of the church and the failure of the church and of Old Testament Israel and all of those things, given all of those things, what is the point of being a Christian?

Why should we be in this whole thing? Why should we be part of the church? Look at verse 1. What then? What advantage has the Jew?

[27 : 05] Or what is the value of circumcision? Verse 2. Do much in every way. To begin with, Paul has a whole list that he's going to give us in chapter 9. But to begin with, the Jews are entrusted with the oracles of God.

Now, verse 2, that whole thing about being entrusted with the oracles of God, that applies just as much to us as it did to them. In fact, he was probably talking to Jewish Christians, so it applies directly to us.

The great joy of being a Christian. The great joy of being a Christian is that we have been entrusted with the oracles of God. We have been entrusted with the promises of God.

We have been entrusted with this sweet news that God is faithful to such a remarkable extent, way more than is reasonable. We have been entrusted with this sweet good news.

It's not, like I said, that we're so fantastic. It's that God is, and he has confided in us about it.

[28 : 08] And that places us under a wonderful and solemn responsibility. It's the solemn responsibility, in a sense, to savor the promises of God's faithfulness and to display and point to the promises of God's faithfulness.

You know, our job is not to vindicate the church. You know, when you're talking to non-Christians and they complain about the church and they bring up good points about how the church has failed, our job is not to vindicate the church.

Our job is to use that as an opportunity to say, let me tell you the oracles of God. Let me tell you the promises of God. Let me tell you, yeah, you're right, the church is messed up, but let me tell you about God who is not and who has been so remarkably faithful.

That's what we get to do. And it's a joy. And that's what we're going to be doing tonight at communion. So let your hearts rest in God's faithfulness.

Amen. Sit or kneel.

[29 : 28] Dear Lord, we thank you that you alone have the power and the wisdom to judge.

We thank you that although we sometimes don't understand it and often don't model it in our own lives, we are reassured through your spirit and your word that you are a God of faithfulness, justice, and righteousness.

We think of your faithfulness to each of us, even when we have not been faithful. We think of your ultimate justice towards those who love you and those who turn from you.

And we think of your righteousness. May we seek to know it more and to reflect it in service and righteous living that pleases you. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

Father, we think of the evil desires we see in our own hearts and how this is shown in the larger fallenness of the world, which leaves so many in pain, anger, or sorrow.

[30 : 46] We pray that you would be with those in the world who are victims of conflict, natural disaster, or political oppression. Give us hearts of thanks for the peace and prosperity that we enjoy.

And may this thankfulness motivate action to serve others joyfully. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. We ask for your protection over those of us who are struggling with grief, stress, sickness, or loneliness.

And we lift up the names now of those people on our hearts who need your comfort and healing. We pray that we, as your people, may be defined by our love of each other.

Give us strength and discernment in this, we pray. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. God, even as we fail to follow you and instead hurt ourselves and others, may we gain perseverance and joy as we think of your promise of life and rest through your Son.

May we live this hope out this week by entrusting our burdens to you, being confident of the work you're doing in our lives, and seeking opportunities to reach out and love those around us in your great name.

[32 : 17] We lift these things up to you in Jesus' name. Amen.