

All Roads Lead Here: Advantage
By Jason Huff
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Zechariah 1:1-6; John 4:21-24; Romans 3:1-8

Friends, our final Scripture reading today is Romans 3:1-8. May God add His blessing to the reading of His Holy Word. “What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God. What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge." But 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.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" Why not say -- as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say -- "Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is deserved.”

I talk about playing racquetball a lot, but I wasn't always a racquetball player. My sport in middle school was tennis. And tennis has one of the strangest scoring systems of any game I know. You start a game with no points at “love,” then it goes to 15, 30, 40, and game. As it turns out, tennis started in a hall in France. The only way they could keep score was with a broken clock they had. They moved the hands to the four points of the clock. The word l'ouef means egg or zero in French, and when it came to the English-speaking world, they kept the pronunciation and called it “love.” Now you have to win a tennis game by two points, so if it winds up a tie at 40 all, if you earn one point, there's no score at all – you're said to be at advantage. Being at advantage is great, because you've almost won. Advantage is the best place to be in the game, typically.

Now you might be asking yourself, “Why is Jason teaching us about tennis? I thought we were studying Paul's letter to the Romans!” But the analogy is helpful, because Paul is in a sort of tennis match with himself, batting back and forth his answers to questions people had asked him about Christianity.

Previously, Paul showed us how both the Greeks and the Jews had fallen into sin and were under God's condemnation. But that raised new questions. The Jews believed God had chosen them for salvation, and Scripture did indicate that they were God's chosen people. But if they were under God's condemnation for sin, what's the worth of being Jewish? Paul deals with that objection and then hits back another question that leads from his answer. Paul does two main things: he shows the advantage of being racially Jewish, and he shows us why our human questions cannot give us an advantage over God's perfect justice. This passage is confusing if we don't take it piece by piece, but as we do, we'll get the gist of this tennis match and see how God's righteousness comes out victorious over our human objections to His ways.

The first thing Paul deals with is the potential backlash on Jewish people. He had just shown them to be unable to keep the law God gave them, and so they were just as lost and fallen as the Romans. But was there something more to it? Absolutely. As he starts today, “What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all [or chiefly], they have been entrusted with the very words of God.”

There are two things I want us to get out of this short part of the passage for today that apply to us. The first one is very simple: *antisemitism has no place in the Christian church*. Throughout history, the Jews have been one of the most persecuted people groups. It’s only by the blessing of God that they have continued to not only survive but thrive in all sorts of terrible situations. And unfortunately, the Christian church has at times been a reason for that persecution. We’ve used all sorts of excuses, but usually it boils down to issues of sinful greed over land and property and money, and religion becomes an excuse to remove them.

As believers, we should be the first to support and welcome people of Jewish heritage. They are God’s original chosen people. They are the direct descendants of Abraham. God spoke directly to their forefathers – Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, the prophets, Jesus, all the apostles, they were Jewish. They carried the truth of God down to us through the ages. When a Jewish person accepts Jesus as Savior and Lord, they simply accept Him as the fulfillment of the promises of the Messiah made to their ancestors. In His earthly ministry, Jesus and the disciples went intentionally and exclusively to the people of Israel because the Messiah was first and foremost for them and for the salvation of their people. In Paul’s ministry, he always started by preaching at the synagogue to the Jewish people until He was kicked out.

God blessed the Jewish people; they knew Him long before anyone else did. We who are not genetically Jewish are adopted into God’s family. We come to the promises secondhand. We get their full benefits, but they didn’t come through our families. We receive them because God is incredibly gracious, but not because the promises were made to our ancestors. As Paul says later in Romans 11, non-Jewish Christians are supported by the root of Judaism.

So what about those of Jewish heritage who ignore Jesus? Love them. Care for them. Pray for them. Jesus came first for them. He is their Messiah first. Reach out to friends in the community who are Jewish. We have a lot we can learn from one another. And through doing so, we have the opportunity to help them understand that Jesus is not against their heritage but makes their heritage complete.

Here’s a second thing this part of the passage teaches us: *being raised in the church and in a Christian home does not save you, but it benefits you greatly in your relationship with God*. The Jewish people had a huge advantage over the pagans because they were the caretakers of God’s Word. Every day in a Jewish home, there were prayers to God, time spent memorizing God’s Word and discussing it. The whole community shut down in order to worship on the Sabbath. Many orthodox Jewish homes still hold to those practices. While they weren’t saved by following the law, many over the centuries saw that they couldn’t keep the law, they trusted in God for their salvation, and they received it. The religious leaders hated Jesus because He threatened their power, but thousands of Hebrews who met Him, listened to Him, and believed in Him. Pagans had to start from scratch in their knowledge of the true God.

The same holds true today for families bringing up their children and grandchildren in the church. We have been entrusted with the words of Christ. We preach and teach the Word of God. We try to help everyone who comes here know who Jesus is and what He has done for us. We have CrissCross every week for our kids and The Crossing for our teens. That doesn't guarantee faith, but it does mean that families who come consistently will have the foundations of faith for a lifetime.

It's a huge blessing when we don't have to discover God on our own. We don't have to blindly stumble through other religions. We aren't taught that God is a crutch or an out-of-date idea. Even if our children do wind up prodigals to our faith for a time, they have the teaching and the knowledge how to return home to Jesus. That's huge. Did you know that conversion to Christianity after the age of 40 in America is extremely rare for people who had no church background? They've already made their major life choices. But coming back is much easier for those who have already been exposed to God.

Friends, I cannot urge you enough – come to church, and bring your friends and your family and your extended family with you. Knowing about God and being saved by God are two different things, just as Paul said about the Jewish people. Yet we give ourselves and our family and friends such greater chances at eternal happiness if we embrace the heritage we have in the Christian church. When we come, we honor God. We've been given this great opportunity to know God; we've been entrusted with the message of salvation and the ways of righteousness. We are hugely blessed to spread it as we can.

So here's the next volley Paul takes on. Here he asks and answers a question: "What if some [Jews] did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.'" This might be confusing at first, so let's take it apart.

Here's what Paul is saying, our take home thought for both Paul's day and ours: *the lack of faith and faithful living among people who claim God does not change the fact that God exists and He is faithful.* All of us fail, some worse than others. Some people we trust to lead us to God actually do the opposite. How many Israelites were led away from Jesus because their religious leaders called Him demon-possessed and a blasphemer? If God's people don't actually believe or act like they don't, does that mean God isn't there and faithful? Absolutely not!

In our own day, there have been plenty of church scandals. Many of us know about the abuse scandal that rocked the Catholic church a number of years ago. (We Protestants have our own scandals too.) There were some people who thought the abuses the priests committed meant that God wasn't real – if God exists, how could He allow it in His church? How could He believe loving and let this happen?

But God is faithful even though every man is unfaithful. He is always there, always real, always true, always loving, always just. He will repay the wrongs; He will judge; He will make things right. So many Jews didn't live the way the Law said to live. So many Christians do not live what their faith says. God is still there. Because of our sin nature, humans will always fail you. God never will.

Paul's match keeps ponging back and forth. Here's the next question: "But 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.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?""

Let's try to put the argument another way that's easier to understand. God is perfectly righteous. We aren't. Our lack of righteousness, goodness, compassion, and love make God's love, righteousness, goodness, and compassion stand out by comparison. How do we know that the sun is bright? Because it's so dark at night. We appreciate it when our house gets clean because we know how crazy messy it can get. Steak is good, but it becomes great when you compare it to a White Castle.

God's righteousness stands out as total and complete and perfect because we can compare it to our own unrighteousness. If that's the case and God's glory is made more clear, it's increased, by what I do that's wrong, then why is God mad at our unrighteousness? From a human perspective, if our badness points out God's goodness, then it can't be right to punish our badness because something positive happens because of it.

Paul's point for us is this: *God is right to judge the world no matter what good might occur indirectly through sin.* Sin is disobedience to God and His ways. It is always wrong and always punishable. In our confirmation class last week, we learned that God can both be loving and condemn people for their sins at the same time. When someone goes up before a judge, if they're guilty, it's the judge's job to pronounce them guilty and to pass an appropriate sentence. It doesn't matter if the person in the dock is the judge's own son. The judge can love his son but sentence him anyway; if he's a good judge, he must do both. Love and judgment aren't mutually exclusive.

And sin must be punished even if good results. Let's say that a drunk driver gets in their car after way too many drinks and slams into you on their way home. You're not hurt but go to the ER just to be sure you're OK. They do blood work on you and the tests aren't right. They eventually reveal you have a tumor they wouldn't have spotted it if you hadn't had the accident. Good resulted. You'll live 30 years longer than you would have if the accident hadn't happened.

Does that mean that the drunk driver shouldn't be punished, shouldn't pay for the cars he wrecked, shouldn't lose his license, maybe spend some time in jail? Not at all! It was a terrible decision. The drunk driver could just as easily killed someone. No one would ever think that the end result justifies what he did. God made good come out of a terrible situation. The driver didn't do that. God did. What God does doesn't cancel out our responsibility.

That's what we're getting at. Paul is slowly getting rid of every possible way we can get around responsibility for our disobedience to God. Over Romans 1, 2, and 3, he has cut off the routes of escape. The whole point is to leave us saying, "What hope do I have?" Once he finishes this part of the argument, we will see that Christ is our hope. He is the only chance we've got to be forgiven the things we've done.

Paul has to take things one step farther because of charges that have been leveled against him and Christians in general. Here's the final part of the argument. Paul writes, "Why not say – as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say – "Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is deserved."

This argument has been around for a very long time. Paul doesn't even justify it with an answer. He says, "Anybody who thinks this way deserves God's condemnation." That's how serious it is. But unfortunately, this idea is often found in the church, and we need to deal with it. Here's the point as I'd make it: *we must never take lightly our forgiveness through Jesus, but instead we must live to please Him.*

It's easy to think, "Who would ever say that? Who would ever justify the evil they do because God will set things right?" Yet it happens all the time. In the early church, Paul had to come down hard on the Corinthian church. They believed virtually everything was acceptable because of Jesus' forgiveness, and Paul had to set down the moral code for them. Paul had to remind the Ephesians to avoid sexual immorality, the Thessalonians to keep working, and the Colossians not to listen to false teachers. James had to tell the church to get rid of moral filth, and John warned about claiming to know Christ but not obeying Him. There were a lot of moral problems even in the first century church.

Some popular speakers who claim to speak for Christ preach the false gospel that we can do whatever we want because Jesus forgives. If someone tells you to put yourself first rather than Jesus, that's justifying evil – Jesus said we have to die to ourselves and follow Him. I once read a book written about the theology of Charles Schultz' Peanuts comic strip, and the author of that book came to the conclusion, do what you want – God loves you. It's the only book I ever remember throwing against a wall. Hated that book! Because that's justifying evil. If you hear someone say that God can't judge all your future wickedness because you once prayed a prayer accepting Jesus, they're lying; they're justifying evil. Our forgiveness came at an immense cost – the life of God's own Son. We should not make it trivial.

Friends, we are here to love and serve the Lord and love and serve others. Because God is God, He will be glorified no matter what. But as pastor John Piper put it, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him." He is not most glorified by our disobedience. He is not most glorified when we simply know about Him or follow Him out of duty and responsibility. But when we love Him and lose ourselves in Him, He is most glorified.

As we leave here today, remember that we are at all sorts of advantages – we are in a nation where we can worship freely and proclaim Jesus' name. We have the full picture of salvation. God is faithful to us even when we slip up and are unfaithful. So let's not argue that God is not just or righteous when we face a difficult world. Instead, let us live in His righteousness and praise His name that our sins are forgiven.