

Lesson 7: Two Objections Raised and Deferred

Romans 3:1-8

I. The First Objection

¹ Then what advantage has the **Jew**? Or what is the benefit of **circumcision**?

² Great in every respect.

First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.

³ What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?

⁴ **May it never be!** Rather, let God be found true, though every man *be found* a liar, as it is written,
“That You may be justified in Your words and prevail when You are judged.”

II. The Second Objection

⁵ But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the **righteousness of God**, what shall we say? The God who inflicts **wrath** is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.)

⁶ **May it never be!** For otherwise, how will God judge the world?

⁷ But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner?

⁸ And why not *say* (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), “Let us do evil that good may come”?

Their condemnation is just.

NASB

Paul has Challenged Our Religious identity

At the end of Romans chapter 2, Paul rejects the religious presumption that identifying as a Jew and participating in Jewish ritual, such as circumcision, will make a person acceptable to the court of God on the day of judgment. And we should be careful to not read back into this any kind of anti-Jewish sentiment. Paul targets the Jew as the person with the best possible religious argument. The Jews truly have received promises from God and truly received ritual practices from God. Paul is not looking down on the Jew. He is saying that even though you can claim to be an actual member of God’s people and to have followed God’s ceremonial law, you still do not stand before God on that basis. Your religious acts do not make up for your sin. The scale of justice still tilts guilty.

But I am a Jew! That does not matter in this court. But I am a Baptist! Does not matter. I am a Roman Catholic! Does not matter. I am Methodist, Orthodox, Brethren, Bible church, Presbyterian, Anglican, Non-denominational, Undenominational, free spirit...It does not matter. Your religious identity does not count a whit in this court. Have you or have you not consistently and thoroughly lived out the moral will of God in your life? Does this court have any righteous claim that can be brought against you? That is the question of justice.

But that does not seem fair. It may make sense to reject the pagan or the Hindu or the Muslim, but to reject the Jew or the Christian whose circumcision, baptism, communion comes from the Word of God. That does not seem right. Paul is pausing here at the beginning of chapter 3 to entertain 2 objections against his prosecution of the case so far. The first objection in chapter 3:1, “Then what advantage has a Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?” contains a deep emotional complaint that is best understood when we put ourselves into the place of the Jew in Paul’s argument. This is about religious identity. Before we go further in the text let’s try to enter personally into the problem Paul is addressing.

You have a religious identity. As you have grown up and developed your understanding of God and how to relate to him certain values and memories and presuppositions have become part of who you are. Whether you have embraced your childhood exposure to religion or rebelled against that early teaching; whether you are a traditionalist or a free spirit; whether you have stayed consistent in your path or have experienced a dramatic conversion; whatever the case, you have a religious identity and religious values. You have a way of approaching God that feels right to you. You feel secure with God or insecure with God because of how you view God and how you view yourself. You have your own story. I have my story. I will share with you a bit of my story by way of example.

I grew up in the Moravian church, a protestant denomination that came before the protestant reformation. The Moravians came from Moravia which is part of the Czech Republic. The Moravians passed through a renewal in Germany before coming to America. So, there is both a Czech and a German background. Moravian traditions have settled deep in my soul. I smell beeswax candles at Christmas, a brass band makes me think of Easter sunrise service, I catch myself whistling the tune to “Jesus Makes My Heart Rejoice” and “Christ the Lord, the Lord Most Glorious”, green mountains take me back summer camp memories, and ginger cookies never live up to the paper-thin Moravian cookies we got at Grandmother and Granddaddy’s house.

In college, I began to get interested in my roots. Being the church archivist, Granddaddy gave me access to old, dusty books that contained the story of Moravian missions. Our history stretched back past Martin Luther to the Slavic reformer Jan Hus, martyred in 1415 for holding up the Bible as the Christian’s highest authority and for claiming the right to preach to Czech people in their heart language. When the Moravians came to Germany in the 1700s, God did an amazing work in that small community, sending missionaries through Europe, to Greenland, Africa, the Caribbean, even Palestine. More important to me was the arrival of my great, great, great, great, great, great grandfather who joined the community of believers at Friedland Moravian Church in North Carolina, where I grew up going to church. That was 250 years ago. I have this religious heritage and experience that is part of who I am. And I want to believe that it matters.

I used to think that 250 years was a long religious heritage, which, for America it certainly is. That was before I moved to Croatia. But living in Croatia, I walk by buildings that are 250 years old and there are families who claim to have been Roman Catholic for 1000 years, easily outdistancing my heritage. And they have stories of holding on to their faith through war and persecution. For so many, to be Croatian is to be Catholic. Their religious identity is deeply intertwined with their cultural and ethnic and political identity. That is getting closer to Paul’s case with the Jew. Their culture outdoes Protestant and Catholic and Orthodox. They claim a heritage 4000 years back to Abraham. They have suffered more than any through war and persecution. Theirs are the prophets. Even the Christian writers of the New Testament are Jews. In Paul’s day to be a Jew was a religious statement intertwined with culture, ethnicity and politics.

And yet, here Paul argues that it just does not matter in the courtroom of God. It does not matter if you are a Jew. His point is not that it just does not matter for the Jew. It does not matter for the Jew or for whatever identity you claim. Whether your heritage is as old as Abraham or whether you were the first in your family take the road you are on. Paul would strip you of all your religious dress; all your sacraments and ordinances; your baptism, your Lord’s Supper, your Christmas and Easter celebrations, your confirmation, your Bible reading, your prayer, and your fasting. All your rituals and your self-definition, traditionalist, conservative, moderate, free spirit, progressive, future oriented, of Moses, of Peter, of Paul; however you define yourself, that too will be stripped away.

Paul’s insistence that we will be judged in the moral court of God based on our own thoughts, our own words and our own deeds takes us back to the garden of Eden, where the only questions that count are, “Why are you hiding and what have you done?” No matter what religious identity and traditions we would use to cover our nakedness, no matter what bush we try to hide behind, God sees. God sees through to the heart. King David acknowledged, “You desire truth in the innermost being and in the hidden part you will make me know wisdom (Psalm 51:6).” I cannot package myself in such a way that I come out looking good to God. He sees me, truly, exactly as I am.

We are left with this at the end of chapter 2. Paul has condemned the Pagan man, the Moral man and the Religious man. He pauses now to raise these two objections that regularly come against the gospel. If religion does not suffice in the court of God, then, “What about the Jew?”, and secondly, “What about sin? If no religion are we free to sin?” We will address each objection in turn starting with “What about the Jew?” in chapter 3:1-4.

The First Objection – What about the Jew?

[Read Romans 3:1-4]

“Paul, if religion does not matter, if we stand naked before God, then what is the point? Why did God call Abraham in the first place and promise a son and save Israel from Egypt and make them a nation? Why did God give them circumcision and command ritual obedience?”

That’s the objection. And the objection can be raised both emotionally and theologically.

The Objection Understood Emotionally

Emotionally, Paul’s presentation of the gospel attacks our sense of religious identity. That is what I have been setting up. This is deep in us. We feel this. I gave you a bit of my story. Here is another.

I once met a student who had switched from the University of Zagreb to the University of Split. He originally came from the coast of Croatia. Moving to Zagreb he got into a party crowd, drinking some drugs, not much studying. So, he moved to Split to start over. The emptiness did not go away. One night he called out to God, “If you exist, let me know who you are?” The next day, he met some friends that I had set up in an English class. They went to coffee. He heard that he could have a personal relationship with Jesus. He prayed to God that night, and his life was changed. He was one of those who experienced a dramatic transformation, from being empty and lost to experiencing joy and purpose. He could not get enough of the Bible. He spent time with Jesus. The partying stopped. No more drinking, no more drugs. He started to study and do well in college.

So, his parents took him out of the University in Split. There was an island near his home with a cross on it. He would go there to pray. His parents noticed this difference. He had grown up Roman Catholic but had never prayed or read the Bible. Now he could not stop talking about Jesus. They became afraid that he was losing his identity, so they took him out of University again. My friend from Split called him and his mom answered his phone. She said, “Look, I know you are a good person. I know you helped my son stop drugs and get his life together. But he was born a Catholic, raised a Catholic and he will die a Catholic. Do not ever call him again.”

She was feeling this deep threat to identity. That was so important to her that she could not see that her son was beginning to develop a true relationship with Jesus Christ. The primary issue is not about being Roman Catholic, being Jewish, being Protestant. The issue is about, knowing Jesus, walking with Jesus, trusting in Jesus. Sometimes our religion is so deeply a part of who we are that we cannot hear the voice of Jesus calling, knocking on the door. We are afraid to listen, afraid of what we might lose. The objection is not rational, but even more powerfully, it is deeply emotional.

“Who are you to say, Paul, that it does not matter if we are Jewish or circumcised? You are a traitor to the faith. You have given up on your own people. You have thrown away precious tradition forged through centuries of suffering. What do you mean there is no advantage in being a Jew who is circumcised? You are crazy Paul. You are an outcast.”

Paul experienced this kind of emotional response from people in his ministry. For example, Acts 17 records Paul being pleasantly received by Jews of the synagogue of Thessalonica. Initially, his teaching about Jesus was given a hearing and some joined him. But when it became clear that the message was also for non-Jews, uncircumcised Gentiles, a powerful, emotional backlash followed, and Paul was driven from the city. Their identity as the special people of God had been threatened.

Paul’s proclamation of the gospel strips away the presuppositions of our moral and religious identity. We are not safe in who we have defined ourselves to be.

The Objection Understood Rationally

The objection of verse 1 can also be understood rationally or theologically. There is a rational problem with Paul’s gospel message. God really did make special promises to the Jewish people. “But now, thus says the Lord, your Creator, O Jacob, and he who formed you, O Israel, ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine (Isaiah 43:1-2)!’” What name has God called his people? “O Jacob, O Israel.” God knows their name. He gave them the name Jew. He made

promises to Abraham and to Moses and to David. “You may stumble, you may suffer, you may be exiled. But you are mine O Israel. I will not forsake you. I will bring you back. You are my people. I am your God.”

If we simply ignore and wipe away all significance of being a Jew and the value of Jewish ritual, then the Old Covenant becomes very confusing. It makes no sense. God took those things very seriously. Paul is not rejecting the Law, Writings and Prophets. Paul carefully communicates both the discontinuity and continuity inherent in moving from the Old Covenant to the New. Claiming the birthright of the Jew and holding to all the traditions will not save you from a just and holy judge on the day of judgment. But that is not the same thing as saying that there is no value in the name Jew and the rituals instituted by God.

So, what is the advantage of being a circumcised Jew? Verse 2, “Great in every respect.” And the very first advantage is that the Jew has been “entrusted with the oracles of God.” Jews are not wrong to claim access to the will of God. They are not wrong to claim to be a light to those who are in darkness. The word of God is a precious, precious possession, enabling the Jew who receives it to see the world as it really is; to see God and people and relationships from God’s own perspective.

And that is all Paul has to say right now on this which is a bit disappointing, really. It’s a solid objection that he is being asked. The Old Covenant emphasizes the value of being a Jew and performing circumcision. But Paul claims it does not help on the day of judgment. Unpack that for us Paul. But he does not unpack it. Instead, he gives what I call the Dad answer: short, a little confusing, and definitely unsatisfying. Paul starts with, “First of all.” And what should naturally follow later after “First of all?” At some point we should have “and second...and third...” Paul starts a list that he never finishes. What’s going on here? Is Paul distracted? Does he not know how to answer the question? Is he frustrated that anyone would dare raise a point. No, no and no, that is not what is going on. When we study the rest of the letter to the Romans, we find out that Paul gives a detailed answer to this question. The whole of chapters 9-11 answer this question, “What about the Jews?”

Paul is an experienced evangelist. He knows that his presentation raises problems for people listening to him. He acknowledges the problem and gives a short answer to show he is not avoiding the question, but he needs to finish the basic message of the gospel before he can turn to a new topic. Especially in this case, because understanding the foundational truth of the gospel is necessary to answer the question, “What about the Jews?”

The short answer here is that even though simply being a Jew does not justify a person in the court of God, there are great advantages, like possession of the Word of God. Furthermore, in verse 3, God’s faithfulness to his promises will not be overturned simply because some Jews did not believe. “What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?” The theological objection argues that Paul’s gospel makes God out to be unfaithful in his promises to the Jews. Paul responds, “Lack of belief by some will not overrule God’s faithfulness.” He emphasizes that with his emphatic, “May it never be!” If Paul’s version of the gospel is correct, then it will show God to be true even if every person claiming to be a member of his people turns out to be a liar, a hypocrite. In verse 4 it is God who is on trial and God who is justified. The God of Paul’s gospel is judged for not giving appropriate value to religious identity and ceremony. He is judged as an unjust judge or as a breaker of promises. That is why Paul asserts himself so emphatically. “May it never be! That God would be unfaithful or break his promises.” Paul is refuting the claim that his gospel shows God to be unjust, arguing that in fact his gospel is the only way to show God as just. “Let God be found true, that he might be justified in his words and prevail when he is judged.”

The gospel is necessary to reveal the righteousness of God in his plan of salvation. It is necessary to help us understand his promises to the Jews and not only to the Jews, but also to the Christian church. Paul will address the question of God’s faithfulness to his people in chapters 9-11. For now, he wants to mention another objection and then get back to his gospel presentation.

The Second Objection – What about sin?

[Read Romans 3:5-8]

We might find the second objection a little convoluted, but it is an objection that comes against the gospel regularly in various forms. This objection begins by claiming that our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God. What unrighteousness is Paul referring to? Well, in the context it is the unrighteousness of the religious person who depends on outward identity and ritual, while not living up to their own creed. God sees through religious hypocrisy and is shown to be righteous in his judgment of religious man. But if God knows that man falls short and man's falling short only affirms the righteousness of God, then why does God punish man for falling short? Our sin reveals his righteous glory. Therefore, our sin adds to his praise. God is glorified by our sin, so it is wrong for him to punish us.

Sophistry is a smart sounding argument that twists words around to deceive, or it is the attempt to win an argument through clever, but false reasoning. This is sophistry. The objection is a twisting of Paul's language from the beginning of his gospel presentation back in chapter 1. Paul had declared that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God, that's in 1:17. God also reveals his righteousness in his wrath against sinful man, that's in 1:18. This objection twists that around to suggest that the sinfulness of man reveals God's righteousness, and so, God is unrighteous to inflict the punishment of his wrath, since the end result of our sin is glory to God. If you follow that, the basic idea is that we sin, that shows God to be right. God receives glory. If he receives glory through our actions he is not just in punishing us.

Paul is pretty quick to denounce this argument, using his favorite emphatic phrase again in verse 6, "May it never be!" The whole idea of judgment would be lost if somehow our sin is added up as a positive. One thing that is quite clear in the Bible from the garden of Eden to the new Jerusalem is that God judges sin. A just God must judge sin. Our just God does judge sin.

Verse 7 and 8 repeat the sophistry. "If through my lie the truth of God abounded to his glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner?" The gospel radically affirms that the law cannot save because people cannot live up to the law. Opponents to the gospel hear that the law cannot save and in their minds they twist that assertion, either purposefully or mistakenly, to say that these Christians oppose living the moral life exhorted by the law. If Christians reject salvation by law, then Christians must be lawless.

This is a valid objection here. If you take away the law as the standard that justifies, then what motive is there for living a righteous life? That is a significant challenge to the gospel. And to be fair, a lot of Christians have added fuel to the fire. If grace means we can live however we want in our behavior towards others, in our business practices, in our sexuality, then it looks like the gospel declares people righteous while promoting unrighteous living. To religious outsiders looking in, it sounds like we are saying, "Let us do evil that good may come?"

Paul rejects the logic. He concludes that the condemnation of the unrighteous is just. Again, he gives us an unsatisfyingly short answer to an important question. This does not mean that Paul does not recognize our need for better understanding here. This is critical, and he will come back to this objection with a long, in depth answer in chapters 5-8. For now, in regard to both of these objections, Paul goes ahead and gives us his short answer. He is a good evangelist. He knows that he has to finish the basic presentation of the gospel before he answers these more difficult questions. He does not leave us in doubt about his conclusions, but he does defer the longer answer until after he has completed his initial gospel presentation. Is God unfaithful in his promises to the Jews? May it never be! More on that later in Romans 9-11. Does the gospel of grace promote sin? May it never be! More on that later in Romans 5-8. But first, let's finish with the indictment of all men so that we can move on to the salvation that has been made available to all men. Let's establish the gospel and then we will come back to these two important issues.

The Two Questions of Covenant

The separation of these issues is quite important for us. There is a lot of confusion or lack of clarity among Bible believing Christians over the role of good works in our lives as believers. It is a confusion of the roles of law and grace. This is one of the major motivations for carefully walking through the whole of Paul's gospel presentation in Romans. To understand how the gospel saves and to understand how the gospel empowers us for life, we need clarity on the issues of law and grace.

Paul's refusal to address these two questions about the Jew and about sin at this stage in his presentation indicates how foundational chapters 1-4 are to understanding the gospel. This is basic arithmetic. We cannot move on to higher mathematics until we have absolute clarity, regarding the foundational truths.

Here in the conclusion of this lesson, I am going to give you two questions. Understanding the gospel answer to these two questions will enable you to frame the issues correctly. I am not going to give you the gospel answer to these questions, not yet. We will let Paul do that in his time. For now, it is key just to recognize which question we are dealing with. One reason our thinking gets muddled on law and grace is that we are not clear on the question we are trying to answer.

I call these two questions, "The Two Questions of Covenant." The biblical history shows that God chose to relate to his people from Adam through Jesus, using the concept of covenant. In the Ancient Near East, in the context of Abraham and Moses and David, the nations surrounding Israel used covenant treaties to define their relationships with one another. A great king would make a covenant with a vassal people to define the basis of their relationship and the expectations he had in that relationship.

God used this cultural idea of covenant to help people understand their relationship with him. He made special covenants with Abraham, Moses, David and, of course, Jesus with the New Covenant. We are not worrying about the details right now of the covenants. We are just thinking about the big picture, there are two essential question to covenant. question number one is "What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?" We can ask that question slightly differently, keeping in mind our current moral and legal context of Romans. Paul is talking about justification before the court of God. So, we could ask question number one like this, "What makes me righteous before God?" That is the question of acceptability before a holy God. "What makes me acceptable or righteous before God, so that I might have a covenant relationship with him?" That is the first question of covenant.

A lot of confusion about the gospel of Jesus Christ has to do with the role of grace and the role of law. So, let's apply to the first question of covenant law and grace. What role does grace play in making me acceptable to be in relationship with God, and what role does law play in making me acceptable to be in relationship with God? Here by grace I mean that which is completely dependent on God. What does God do for me that I simply receive as a gift of grace? By law I do not mean here the whole of the Torah but rather the stipulations of covenant, the dos and the don'ts. These could be the moral dos and don'ts like do not steal, do not lie, love your neighbor, show hospitality. These are easy to find in the Bible. They are through the Old Testament and New Testament. We can also include in the dos and don'ts of law religious rituals and behaviors. Do not eat shrimp, do read your Bible, do pray, do not work on the Sabbath, and so on. Essentially grace is what God does for us and law is what we do.

Here is the question for you to answer before our next lesson. "What makes you acceptable to be in relationship with God?" And you do not have to answer this precisely, just make an estimate. Use percentages. What percentage is the first question of covenant answered by grace and what percentage by law. So, if it depends half on God and half on you then your answer would be 50% grace, what he does for me, and 50% by law, that is what I have to do in relationship. And remember, law in this case is not bad. Law is the ten commandments and the sermon on the mount and Romans 12-15, the dos and don'ts of covenant, whether you are thinking Old Covenant or New Covenant.

I think I will not tell you what the second question of covenant is because I do not want to influence your answer to the first question of covenant. That can be your extra credit question. Along with answering the first question of covenant, you can try to come up with what you think is the second question of covenant. I will give you a couple of lessons to think about that. We will just stay with the first question of covenant because this is the question Paul is dealing with in Romans 1-4. This is what we have been talking about. “What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?” “What makes me righteous in his eyes?”

When we can clearly understand this answer, it prepares us up to go much deeper into understanding and living out the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So, do not listen to the next lesson until you have written down your answer for this question: “What makes me acceptable to God? What percentage is grace, God’s action, and what percentage is law, my action?”

We will answer that fully in our next two lessons.

Reflection Questions

1. Religious identity is often positively affirmed in the Bible as long as that identity does not create the wrong assumptions. Reflect on your own identity. Make sure that you are in a quiet place. Take a deep breath. Relax. Now ask yourself the question, “Who am I?” Write down different words as they come to mind. Do not analyze the words. Just write them down.

2. To add to the list from question 1, answer these questions. For now, list anything that brings you pleasure as it comes to mind. Or anything that feels significant or important to you.

a. What are some traditions or disciplines that you appreciate about the church you currently attend? What do you do regularly as a community?

b. What are some spiritual habits in your own life that you find important to your walk with God?

c. Think back to your childhood. What traditions or practices do you appreciate from your past?

3. Now imagine that you stand in the courtroom of God. God sees you. He sees all that by which you define yourself. His eyes see you as you truly are. He sees the good of his image in you. He sees also the selfishness in your heart. Along with the beauty in you, He may see greed or pride or lust or pettiness or jealousy or apathy. He sees whatever is truly there. For a moment all the good things about who you seem to be set aside and of no account. The bad is brought forward as an accusation against you.

Now you are ready to ask the question in 3:1. Instead of “Jew” or “circumcision” you can fill in the blank with the words of your own spiritual identity and practice. “If my identity and practices do not help me to stand before God under his judgment, then what advantage is there in being _____ or what benefit is there in _____?”

4. What stands out to you as interesting or important or confusing in 3:1-4?

5. How would you paraphrase the objection and Paul’s answer in these verses?

6. What stands out to you as interesting or important or confusing in 3:5-8?

7. How would you paraphrase the objection and Paul’s answer in these verses?

8. What percentage would you assign to the role of grace and law in answering the first question of covenant, “What makes you acceptable to be in relationship with God?”

What percentage is grace, God’s part?

What percentage is law, your part?