

The Book of Romans Study Guide

Chapter 3

In this chapter, Paul continues speaking directly to the Jewish believers of Rome.

3:1-8

After saying in 2:11 that there is no partiality with God, there might seem to be no advantage or benefit in being Jewish. But we have to remember that the impartiality is in respect to the way of salvation. So, here in verse 1-2 he shows that Jews do have an advantage.

It helps to understand the underlying meaning of the Greek word *perissos*, translated here as “advantage.” It literally means “exceeding the usual number or size.” We express something similar in English when we say that someone went over and above the expected norm. A clear example of the usage of *perissos* is in John 10:10, where Yeshua states He came so that people may have life “abundantly.”

That is what Paul is getting at here. The Jewish people have been given something abundant or over and above the rest. And then he describes that, first of all, being entrusted with the oracles of God, which refers to the written revelation of God. What a great over and above gift that was, in light of the fact that the rest of the world only had God’s general revelation in creation and our conscience. Paul will pick up this theme again in chapter 9 with additional advantages.

- v 3 He then pivots to the reality that some Jews did not believe, which connects to that written revelation. In other words, they did not believe the revelation in the Hebrew Scriptures that pointed to Yeshua as their fulfillment. But that lack of belief did not nullify (*katargeo* – “destroy,” lit. “take down and make idle”) God’s faithfulness. In other words, just because some people didn’t heed the written words that they had been given, it doesn’t mean that the words themselves weren’t true.
- v 4 That is reinforced in the next verse that contrasts the truthful nature of God and the corrupted nature of humanity that is characterized by our lies. And then he further reinforces that by quoting the last part of Psalm 51:4, where David confesses His own deception in contrast to God’s true righteousness.
- v 5 He presents a potential counter-argument that can be inferred from the first part of Psalm 51:4, because the Hebrew literally reads: “I have sinned against you only so that you may be justified” (*chatati vehara be’eyneka asiti lema’an titzdaq*). So that counter-argument might be – “When we sin, it ultimately serves to demonstrate God’s righteousness in the form of justice, and that is a good thing.”
 He refers to a similar claim in v. 8 – “Let us do evil that good may come,” or, put another way, “Let’s sin as much as we can so God can be glorified even more.” We also see in v. 8 that someone had made a slanderous claim that Paul was making this kind of teaching.
- v 6 His response begins with a phrase that he will use altogether ten times in the book of Romans – “*Mē genoito*” – literally meaning “may it never be,” but used in the sense of “God forbid,” which is a very common Jewish cultural expression. He immediately refutes the possibility of sin bringing about ultimate good because that would negate God’s ability to judge the world.

- v 8 At this point, Paul doesn't devote any further response to this misrepresentation of his teachings other than to say that their condemnation is just. But he will address this theme again at the beginning of chapter 6.

Read 3:9-20

- v 9 Once again, Paul makes a pivot by saying "What then?" In spite of having the advantage being entrusted with the oracles of God, the Jewish people, including Paul himself ("we"), are no better in God's eyes than Greeks/Gentiles, because all people are under sin. The simple preposition "under" (Gr. *hupo*) conveys the sense of being held in an unbreakable grip, or in a state of slavery to sin, and thus unable to escape that condition through human effort or merit.

Paul, then backs up his statement by quoting a series of verses from the *Tanakh*/Old Testament.

- v 10-12 (from Ps. 53:1-3; cf. Ps. 24:1-3).

By saying "there is none righteous, not even one," it confirms that that no ordinary human could ever be righteous on their own merit. Only Yeshua was purely righteous because, being not just fully human, but fully divine, He was like ordinary humans who possess a sin nature, and, thus, He never sinned.

Heb. *tzaddik* = "to be right," Gr. *dikaiois* – "judged to be right."

In the next chapter, we will cover the way that Abraham was reckoned or credited with being righteous, which is imputed by nature, not inherent in the man.

In v. 11, Paul quotes David saying that "there is none who seeks God." That statement may appear to contradict Jeremiah 29:13, where God says, "You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart." But, here in v. 11, "there is none who seeks God" is parallelism with the phrase "there is none righteous." So that tells us, just as God imputes or credits people with righteousness, He also initiates a work in people through His grace in order to overcome our natural indifference, and then invites people to seek Him. That is consistent with Yeshua's words in John 6:44 – "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him."

He then illustrates his argument by quoting other verses from the *Tanakh* with imagery that depicts the pervasive nature of sin.

- v 13 (Ps. 5:9; 140:3)

- v 14 (Ps. 10:7)

- v 15-17 (Isa. 59:7-8)

- v 18 (Ps. 36:1)

- v 19 Paul sums up this section with a personification, in which he likes the Torah/Law speaking the previous verses to everyone who is under the law. And, in so doing, the Torah shuts up the mouth of anyone who claims to be righteous on their own.

- v. 20 He shows that even though no one can be justified in God's sight by doing the works of the Law, the Law itself is still valuable because it provides us with the knowledge of sin by establishing the boundaries between righteousness and unrighteousness. In other words, the Law can only condemn us; it can never save us. But it can inform us of our great need for a solution that does save us. And that solution will be described in the next section.

I think you will agree that the picture being depicted up to this point is rather dark and lacking in hope. But that changes dramatically in the last part of this chapter.

Read 3:21-31

v 21-22 Paul contrasts the total inadequacy of man's attempts at righteousness, that we have been reading about, with God's righteousness that he characterizes 5 ways –

- It has been manifested or made apparent.
- It is apart or separate from the Law.
- But it is witnessed by the Law and the prophets, meaning that it is foreshadowed and portrayed prophetically.
- It is received through faith in Messiah Yeshua.
- And it is available for all people without any kind of distinction.

He, then makes another contrast between the hopeless condition of humanity on our own and the great hope we can have through a solution offered by God.

v. 23 First, he depicts the universality of the problem – “all have sinned” – including those with only general revelation, and those with a sense of morality, and even those with the advantage of knowing what the Scriptures declare. And, because of that, “we fall short of the glory of God.”

That is a clear word picture. The Hebrew word for sin is *chata*, which literally means “miss the mark.” When you aim for a bull's eye with an arrow, but miss the mark, it doesn't matter how far you miss it, you have sinned in God's eyes. Here in Romans 3:23, we are given a description of a target that consists of all things that bring glory to God, but it is set so far away that no matter how hard you try, you will always fall short of reaching the target. It is impossible to hit it on the basis of your own might.

v 24 But the good news is that you don't have to try. When he writes the words “being justified freely,” it is in the passive voice. You cannot justify yourself with works or rituals. But you can be justified by someone else, who is exclusively identified in this verse as Messiah Yeshua. And it is freely given by the grace of Yeshua.

Now, to understand more fully this Greek word *dorean*, translated as “freely” (KJV, NJV, or “as a gift” in the NASB), we can consider its usage in John 15:25, where Yeshua says about His opponents, “they hated me without a cause,” where the last word is *dorean* in Greek. So, in the manner of consistency, Yeshua was saying that they hated him freely. Can you see the parallel to us? Just as there was nothing in Yeshua that deserved Him being hated, there is nothing in us as humans that is deserving of our justification. And yet Yeshua gave us the gift of redemption freely and by grace alone.

The concept of redemption has a very specific meaning. The Greek word *apolytrōsis* is the equivalent of the Hebrew term *geulla*, which means “buy back” and is used in the Tanakh in the sense of paying off a debt, especially in regard to buying back or paying off the debt of a slave by a family member. And that connects back to v. 9 where Paul refers to Jews and Gentiles alike being “under sin” or a slave to sin. But Yeshua has paid the price to redeem our debt that was caused by sin and He freed us from that slavery.

- v 25 Paul also calls the redemption of Yeshua an act of propitiation. That Greek word is *hilastērion*, which is used in the Septuagint to refer to the cover or mercy seat on the ark of the covenant where atonement was carried out on Yom Kippur. Specifically, propitiation refers to the appeasement of God's wrath. So the wrath of God resulting from human unrighteousness that Paul writes about in 1:18, is appeased or held off by virtue of Yeshua's sacrificial act of redemption.
- v 27 Because of the divine nature of our redemption from sin, there is no room for boasting on our part.
- v 28-30 He reiterates his two main themes of the chapter – we are justified by faith, not by the Law, and God justifies Jews and Gentiles by the same way through faith.
- v 31 But that reality does not nullify the Law, but instead establishes it or obtains its full purpose by revealing sin. And this verse is an echo of the words of Yeshua, who declared in Matthew 5:17 – “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill.” And the Greek word *plēroō*, translated as “fulfill,” literally means to “establish the full meaning.” So Paul and Yeshua are in full agreement on the Torah, the Law of Moses.