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OBJECTIONS ANSWERED

Romans 3:1-8

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Romans Lesson 14

Objections Answered Romans 3:1-8

If you share the gospel with unbelievers, you will encounter a number of common objections: Why does a good and loving God allow so much suffering in the world? Why is Jesus the only way to God? Will God send good, sincere people from other religions to hell? What about all the people who have lived and died without ever hearing about Jesus? Will they be punished eternally in hell even though they never had the chance to believe? Is this fair? What about all the errors and contradictions in the Bible? What about the contradictions between science and the Bible? Etc.

I gave two messages last summer dealing with these and other objections, so I'm not going to speak directly to these questions today. (See "Witnessing: Answering Questions and Objections," Parts 1 & 2, June 27 & July 4, 2010, on the church web site.) But our text shows the apostle Paul responding to questions and objections that he anticipated in response to his teaching in chapter 2. These were probably questions that he had often encountered when he preached the gospel in Jewish settings. He knew that religious Jews would challenge his statements (2:28-29) that being a true Jew and being truly circumcised were not external matters, but rather, matters of the heart. His aim is to show that even the most religious of Jews, like the Gentiles, are all under sin and thus need the gospel (3:9-20).

So in rapid fire he raises and answers a series of questions that Jewish critics would have fired at him. If you find it difficult to track with the flow of Paul's argument in these verses, you're in good company. Many commentators admit that these are the most difficult verses to interpret in Romans. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Romans: The Righteous Judgment of God* [Zondervan], p. 174) says that many say they are not only the most difficult verses in Romans, but also in the whole of Scripture! John Piper devoted an entire sermon on these verses to answer the question, "Why God Inspired Hard Texts" (on desiringgod.org). John Bunyan (cited by William Newell, *Romans Verse by Verse* [Moody Press], p. 74) composed a little

ditty: "Hard texts are nuts—I would not call them cheaters: whose shells do oft times keep them from the eaters." So to eat the meat of this "nut," we have to work hard to crack the shell.

First I want to try to explain the text, because we cannot properly apply any Scripture unless we understand what it is saying. Then I will offer some practical applications. First I will give an overview; then we'll work through the text more carefully.

The first question Paul anticipates in response to his comments that being a Jew or being circumcised physically are not what matter is (3:1), "Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?" These are the same question stated in two ways to correspond to Paul's assertions in 2:28-29. To paraphrase, Paul's Jewish readers would have objected, "Paul, if being a physical descendant of Abraham and receiving the sign of circumcision are of no value, then you're throwing out the entire Old Testament! What good are God's promises to Abraham? What good was God's choice of the nation Israel?" Paul replies (3:2), "Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God."

That leads to a second objection (3:3): "What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?" Does Jewish unbelief negate God's promises? Paul responds with horror to the thought that God might be unfaithful (3:4): "May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar." Then he cites David from Psalm 51:4 to show that God is faithful whether He keeps His promises or whether He judges guilty sinners. He is glorified in both instances.

This leads to a third objection (3:5): "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.)" If our sin glorifies God's righteousness in judgment, then isn't God unrighteous to punish us for it? Paul apologizes for even stating such an ungodly thought and then adds (3:6), "May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world?"

But the objector isn't silenced yet. He restates the objection of verse 5 (in 3:7): "But if through my lie the truth of God abounded

to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner?" The absurd idea is, if my sin brings God glory when He judges me, then He should thank me, not judge me! Paul takes it further by alluding to some slanderous charges that had been leveled against his teaching (3:8), "Let us do evil that good may come." He replies tersely, "Their condemnation is just."

Now let's work through this dialogue more carefully. I will paraphrase the critic's challenge, followed by Paul's response.

1. "Doesn't your argument about being a Jew inwardly imply that there is no advantage in being a Jew?" "No, because God entrusted His Word to the Jews." (3:1-2)

The Jewish critic is saying, "Your view, Paul, takes away all the advantages that the Old Testament promised to the Jews. In effect, you just wiped out the entire Old Testament!" Because of what Paul said in 2:28-29, you would expect him to answer, "You're right! Being a Jew or being circumcised doesn't get you anywhere." But instead, he surprises us by saying, "Great in every respect." He then says, "First of all," but he doesn't list a second or third. Much later (9:4-5), he gives a list: "who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen." All of Romans 9-11 is devoted to answering the question of whether the unbelief of the Jews somehow nullified the promises of God.

But in Romans 3:2, Paul only lists one great advantage of being a Jew: "They were entrusted with the oracles of God." This refers to the Old Testament as a whole, with special reference to God's promises of salvation (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 182; Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 149). God had not revealed Himself in this specific way to any other nation on earth (Deut. 4:8; Ps. 147:19-20). God promised through the Jewish prophets, as recorded in the Old Testament, to send the Savior of the world through them (John 4:22). Through the symbolic significance of the Temple and of the laws and sacrifices, the Jews uniquely had God's revelation about the coming Messiah and Savior. All the other nations were left in spiritual darkness. God entrusted the Jews with His very Word!

This was a great privilege, but also a great responsibility. To have the light of God's Word and yet to reject it means that you are more accountable than the person who had no light except the general revelation of creation (Rom. 1:20; Matt. 11:21-24). During two thousand years of human history from Abraham to Christ, the pagan nations worshiped their false gods, offering sacrifices to appease their anger, living in fear and confusion, with no hope of salvation. But the Jews knew how to approach the living and true God, maker of heaven and earth. They had His promises to send the Savior. The godly in Israel were looking for the fulfillment of that promise (Luke 2: 25-32). What an unspeakable privilege!

But the fact that many in Israel did not believe in God's promises of salvation leads to the second objection:

2. "But doesn't the unbelief of many Jews nullify God's promises?" "No, Jewish unbelief does not nullify God's faithfulness to them or His right to judge their sin." (3:3-4)

"What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? 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 judge'" [most scholars agree that the last verb is active in meaning, in line with Ps. 51:4].

Paul answers this more thoroughly in Romans 9-11, where he shows that the widespread Jewish unbelief did not thwart God's sovereign election of a remnant. There is still a future widespread conversion of the Jews, when "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:26). But here, he first gives some grace to his critics by asking (3:3), what if *some* did not believe? Actually, most of the Jews did not believe. Only a few were faithful. But Paul probably is being gracious so as not needlessly to offend his Jewish critics.

But then he takes it farther by arguing that even if every person in the world were unfaithful and accused God of being unfaithful to His promises, it would only mean that they all are liars and God is true. God's faithfulness to His Word is a necessary attribute of His being. If He were not faithful, He would not be God, but a liar. But it is a given that God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). If there

seems to be a discrepancy between His promises and what we perceive, the fault *always* lies with us, not with God. In any contention, He is right, even if the whole world lines up against Him.

Paul backs up his assertion by citing Psalm 51:4, "That You may be justified in Your words, and prevail when You judge." Psalm 51 is David's confession and plea for mercy after his sin with Bathsheba. He agrees that God is justified in every word that the prophet Nathan spoke to David about the consequences of his sin. David has no excuses and no grounds to complain. He deserved death, but God mercifully spared his life. But God also pronounced a series of judgments against David. David is saying, "God, You are completely right in Your judgments and I am completely wrong and guilty before You."

Paul uses this quote to show that God is just as faithful when He judges His people for their sins as He is when He saves them according to His promise. If sinners repent, God mercifully forgives the guilty, but He *never* treats them unjustly, even if He judges them. We all have sinned many times, so we all deserve His judgment. If He judges the guilty, He does not cease to be faithful to His promises to save those who repent and trust in Him.

At this point, those who object to Paul's reasoning move into the realm of the ridiculous. They are showing what William Barclay (*The Letter to the Romans* [Westminster Press], rev. ed., p. 54) calls their "amazing ingenuity" in justifying their sin. But Paul had no doubt heard this objection when he preached in the synagogues:

3. "But if our sin demonstrates God's righteousness, how can He judge us for it?" Paul replies, "But that argument would mean that God can't judge even the Gentiles." (3:5-6)

"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.) May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world?"

To paraphrase: "Paul, if you're saying that God's righteousness shines through when He judges us, then He would be wrong to judge us because we would actually be instruments for His glory! How can God judge us for something that He turns to His own

advantage?" It's an outrageous argument, but when people start to rationalize their sin, reason goes out the window, replaced by "amazing ingenuity"!

Paul answers this objection first by apologizing for even stating it ("I am speaking in human terms"). Then he gives the strong negative, "May it never be!" Then he asks a question that he knows his Jewish opponents would not want to concede: "For otherwise, how will God judge the world?" The Jews wanted God to judge the Gentiles for their many gross sins, but they thought that the Jews would get a free pass. But Paul is saying that their line of reasoning would prohibit God's judgment on anyone. If the sins of the Jews bring God glory and thus should be exempt from His judgment, then the sins of the Gentiles would also merit exemption. Their argument proves too much.

But Paul's critics are not ready to concede defeat, so they rephrase the objection of verse 5 again in verse 7:

4. "But your teaching, Paul, implies that if my sinning abounds to God's glory, not only should I not be judged; also, I ought to sin all the more." "That's ridiculous! You just hung yourself!" (3:7-8)

Paul shifts here to the first person. Some (John Piper, "Let God Be True Though Every Man a Liar," on desiringgod.org; the following is my summary) think that Paul is using himself to refute the critic by saying, "Take me, for example. If you think that what I'm teaching here is false, but my lie results in greater glory for God, then how could God judge me?" In other words, "The argument that you're using to prove that God should not judge you (3:5) applies to me, also. If God shouldn't judge you for your sin, then neither should He judge me if I'm lying." Or, Paul may be using the first person to individualize his critics' argument by bringing it home to the individual's conscience. In this case, verse 7 should be in quotes, as the critic asks, "But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner?"

Paul adds a logical extension of this retort (3:8), "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."

In other words, Paul's critics accused him of teaching that if our sin magnifies God's grace, then let's sin a lot so that God will be more glorified! The end justifies the means. But Paul has shown that his critics have just hung themselves. If they accuse Paul of arguing that we should sin more to bring more glory to God, they accuse themselves, because that's where their excuses for their own sin lead (3:5, 7). So Paul refutes them with a terse, "Their condemnation is just." Their absurd conclusions reveal that they are under God's righteous judgment.

Although Paul's argument in these verses is not easy to follow, his bottom line is pretty clear:

If you contend with God, He will win
and you will be condemned.

Paul's bottom line is, you can raise all the objections you want against God, but in the end, He wins and you lose. You will end up under His just condemnation.

Conclusion

Now (hopefully) that we understand the text, let's apply it:

1. Spiritual privileges do not give you any advantage with God if you do not respond in faith and obedience; rather, they increase your accountability to God.

Israel as a nation was given amazing spiritual privileges. They were the only nation on earth entrusted with the very words of God. But rather than responding in faith and a life of thankful obedience to God, most of the Jews rebelled against Him and worshiped the idols of the pagan nations around them.

If you grew up in a Christian home, you have an amazing spiritual privilege. Your parents taught you about God and the way of salvation that He provides in Jesus Christ. They took you to a church where you could hear God's Word explained and applied. But, have you responded with faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior? Have you repented of your sins? Do you seek to walk in obedience to God's Word? If not, on judgment day growing up in a Christian home will prove not to have been a blessing, but a curse, because it increased your accountability to God.

2. The Bible is a great treasure that God has entrusted to us. Therefore, we should study it and seek to obey it as the only wise way to live.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones applies this point this way (*ibid.*, p. 171): “So the point, therefore, at which you and I start is this: we say, ‘This is no ordinary book, this is the Word of God.’ Do we show that we realize that and what a privilege it is, by reading it, studying it, delving into it, spending our time praying over it?” He continues by saying that we should not just quickly read over a few verses as a matter of custom in the morning before rushing off to more important things. Rather, we should say, “Here God is speaking to me, ...” He says that if we really believed that the Bible is God’s direct word to us, we would not spend more time each day reading the newspaper and other things than we do seeking to understand and apply “the oracles of God.”

John Wesley, the great 18th century evangelist, wrote about the Bible (cited by James Boice, *Romans: Justification by Faith* [Baker], pp. 279-280):

I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God and returning to God, just hovering over the great gulf ‘till, a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing—the way to heaven, how to land safe on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach me the way. For this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God!

If God has entrusted us with His very word, then surely it must be the foundation of our life and the light for our path in this dark world! Do not neglect your Bible!

3. If you are fighting against God, you are fighting a losing battle. The only way to win is to give up and submit to Him.

There are many things in God’s Word that are difficult to understand, such as the doctrine of God’s sovereign election. There are things that are difficult to rejoice in, such as the doctrine of eternal punishment. There are matters that are hard to understand: Why does God allow little children to suffer terrible things? Why

does He allow many to live and die with no gospel witness? Why doesn't God tear down the satanic strongholds of false religions that deceive millions? I'm not saying that we shouldn't wrestle with these hard issues and try to think them through more carefully.

But, there are two ways to approach these hard matters. You can come as a submissive child, asking the Father to give you more light, so that you will know Him and His ways more accurately, so that you can obey Him more fully. Or, you can come as a critic, demanding that God give you answers, as if He owes it to you.

If you try to prove that you're right and God is wrong, you're on thin ice! Even though you may not understand God or His ways, you have no right to contend against Him or accuse Him of wrong. The Book of Job shows that even the most righteous man on the face of the earth has no grounds to contend with God and demand answers, even if he feels that he is suffering unjustly. Learn from Job to slap your hand over your mouth, admit your own insignificance in God's presence, and repent in dust and ashes (Job 40:4; 42:6). If you fight against God, you lose. If you submit to Him, you win. So wrestle with your questions in a spirit of submission, not defiance.

4. Be careful not to use your questions and objections as an excuse for not repenting of your sin and trusting in Christ.

It's easier to rationalize sin rather than to repent of it. It's easy to latch on to some objection about God or the Bible, use that objection to dodge the clear truth of the Bible about Jesus Christ, and then justify your own sin. The Lord Jesus Christ is the centerpiece of God's Word. If He is true, then every objection against Him is a lie. God will prevail when He judges all sin. Make sure that you have repented of your sin and taken refuge in the Lamb who was slain for sinners! Jesus Christ and Him crucified is God's final answer to every objection!

Application Questions

1. Why is it important to approach difficult spiritual questions with a submissive attitude? Does this mean setting aside your reason or logic? Why/why not?
2. What spiritual privileges has God given to you? How have you responded? Do you need a course correction? How?
3. When you're sharing Christ with a person raising objections, how can you know whether he is trying to dodge his sin or whether he is sincere? How should you respond in either case?
4. Was there any basis for the criticism that Paul taught, "Let us do evil that good may come"? See Rom. 6:1. Does a proper view of God's grace perhaps open one up to that criticism?

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