



The Religious Need the Gospel (Part 2)

Lesson 4 | Romans 2:17-3:8

Many people assume they are right with God for what they think are good reasons. Perhaps they have parents who were faithful church members. Maybe they learned the Bible growing up and understand a lot of what it teaches. Maybe they've gone to church for all their lives, or have been baptized, or serve with the poor. All of these are good things, but none of them save.

Why do people tend to look to such things for salvation when the Bible is clear that salvation is by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone?

Last week we saw that God will judge everyone, He will judge them impartially, and He will judge them accurately. Paul has made the point that it's not enough to say that you follow God or are part of His people, you must live rightly. In this lesson, he will continue that teaching by specifically considering the question of the Jewish people. They could point to their possession of the law and their heritage and think that these things would mean they were right with God. Paul takes care to show them that this isn't true, the good news of the work of Jesus is needed by all, even those who were born Jewish.

The section we are covering today is a challenging passage to modern readers, partly because Paul is addressing issues we are no longer facing. When Christianity started, it was originally seen as a Jewish movement. After all, the story of the gospel is the story of the Jewish Messiah coming to the Jewish people and fulfilling promises that God had made to their Jewish ancestors. In fact, when God made it clear to the Jews that Gentiles could be a part of the church without first becoming Jews, it was a little bit surprising to everyone at the table (Acts 11:18). But as Paul will later conclude, "there is no difference, for all have sinned" (Romans 3:22-23).

Why do we have such a hard time believing that we are sinners who need salvation?

But the Jews will have two possible arguments: "Wait a second, we know the law!" and "Wait a second, we are God's special people as symbolized by our circumcision!" Paul will show that neither of these advantages will bring salvation (2:17-24, 25-29), and then concludes by answer objections he anticipates (3:1-8).

Knowing God's Word Doesn't Guarantee Salvation (2:17-24)

Paul begins by focusing on one of the great advantages the Jews had: their possession of the law. The word "law" in Romans can be tricky, as it can refer to (1) the code of laws found in the Pentateuch (e.g. Sabbath, circumcision, don't kill, etc.) (2) The entirety of the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy), and perhaps at times all of the Old Testament (3) although debated, possibly a principle of how things work (the law of gravity, the law of sin as in 7:23-8:2). Here Paul seems to be focusing on definition (2), the law referring to the Scriptures and the story of Israel in the Pentateuch in particular.

The Spiritual Knowledge of the Jews (2:17-20)

Paul gives a long list of reasons why the Jews might be think they are okay with God. Most of these end up having to do with the fact that Israel possessed God's Word.

Read verses 17-20 and summarize this list.

Paul states that the Jews "rest in the law," "make their boast in God," "know his will," "approve the things that are more excellent," "art confident that thou thyself art a guide of the blind," and "hast the form of knowledge and of the truth in the law." We could sum this list up as (1) the Jews had God's law; (2) the Jews knew God's law; and (3) the Jews promoted God's law.

- **The Jews had God's law.**

Paul says the Jews "rest in the law." No other nation was given so much revelation as the Jewish people. The Jewish people prided themselves on the fact that they had received revelation directly from God, and as we will see later in this lesson Paul agreed with them that this was a major blessing.

- **The Jews knew God's law.**

Not only the did Jews possess the words of God to man, but they also studied Scripture and knew it. Even though their knowledge of God and His Word fell short of salvation, they knew God's plan and were generally able to discern what God would want. Paul as a Pharisee had known God's Word forward and backwards, and so did many Jews of his time.

Why is it that people can study God's Word carefully and miss what is being taught?

How do we make sure we don't miss what God's Word is teaching?

- **The Jews promoted God's law.**

But the Jews didn't just have God's law and know God's law, they promoted it to others. Although they weren't given the same missionary mandate as we find in the Great Commission, they did instruct the nations on what God thought, and some of the Gentiles listened. It is sobering to realize that being a teacher of the law doesn't mean that you are personally a follower of the law.

How could Israel share God's truth with others and yet still miss the same point?

The Spiritual Failure of the Jews (2:21-24)

But as Paul has said before, and as he will repeatedly say throughout Romans, simply knowing God's law isn't enough if you don't keep God's law. Paul lists off a long series of sins that his Jewish compatriots had committed: stealing, adultery, and participating in activity that profited from idolatry. Paul isn't saying that every Jew out there has committed every one of these sins, but rather that as a nation there are

many examples of this, and such examples show that Israel as a whole doesn't practice what it preaches. But this isn't a new problem: Israel has had a long and disappointing history of failing God. Paul will argue this by using a quotation from the Old Testament that shows how rather than pointing the Gentiles to their wonderful God, people had written God off because of the Jews sin and the punishment they received from God.

We are all tempted to think that teaching about the danger of something is good enough. James warns that teacher will receive stricter judgment (3:1) and challenges those who want to teach with whether or not they are truly wise based on their actions (3:13-18). Knowing and even teaching God's Word isn't enough, the question is "Are you following it?" For the Jews as a whole and for individual Jews (and Gentiles), the answer is "no."

Why is it that people can warn against the very same sins they are participating in and feel good about themselves?

How can we avoid never speaking out against sin, but also avoid speaking out hypocritically?

Being a Jew Doesn't Guarantee Salvation (2:25-29)

But the Jews weren't just proud of their possession and knowledge of the law. They were also quite proud of the unique place given to their nation. They were sons of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God had promises to their forefathers that he hadn't made to the ancestors of other nations. This special relationship was signified by circumcision, a symbolic practice that marked out who was part of Israel and who wasn't. If you were circumcised, if you were a part of Israel, didn't that mean that you were on good terms with God?

If you were born a Jew and grew up your whole life proud of your Jewish heritage, Paul makes some shocking statements here. He states that if you are circumcised, the visible sign of being a member of God's special covenant people, that sign does you no good if you don't follow the law. In fact, he goes so far as to say that if an uncircumcised person were to keep the law, they would be more a part of the people of God than you are!

How do you think this would have struck someone who had grown up trusting in their Judaism to mean they are right with God?

How do people today make the same mistake these Jews made? What are things that people trust to give them favor with God?

"God is not just interested in your nationality," Paul tells the Jews. He is interested in your heart. What you are in secret matters much more than who you identify with publicly. God sees the hidden things, and God sees the heart. True praise from God doesn't come based on what other people think of you, but on who you really are. As we will see, that means trouble for the Jews, and for the Gentiles, because all are sinners and have fallen short of God's glory. But at this point Paul is trying to get the Jews to realize that being Jewish isn't enough, they have to live up to God's perfect standard, even in secret.

Why do people think that praise from man means we will receive praise from God?

Objections to God’s Judgment of the Jews (3:1-8)

Every preacher who has preached the same message multiple times gets a feel for how his audience will respond. He knows what statements will raise eyebrows or cause the audience to shake their head in disagreement. He knows what burning questions he will get after the message and which parts of what he says will be twisted and misrepresented. Paul had been in ministry for many years by the time he wrote Romans, and he had a pretty good idea how everything he had said so far about the Jews would land with them. In this section, he anticipates those concerns and addresses them.

How important is it to respond to the objections we hear when sharing the gospel with others?

What are some of the major objections today and how can we as Christians respond?

This section is one of the most challenging in the entire book. Part of the reason is that Paul proceeds by asking questions, sometimes answers questions with questions, and by the end doesn’t even answer the question at all! Paul asks four sets of questions here, and one of the keys to understanding how these questions flow from one to the other is to start with the right perspective.

It’s hard for us to fully grasp how shocking Paul’s statements at the end of chapter two would have sounded to someone who grew up Jewish. Jews, who had been circumcised as a sign of the unique covenant they had with God, were told by Paul that circumcision doesn’t ultimately matter. Those who had the law were accused as law breakers. Once we put ourselves in the shoes of such a listener, the questions that flow from chapter 3 make a lot of sense. When we begin with the perspective of a life-long Jew, we can begin to see how this flow of questions would naturally flow.

So what good is it to be a Jew? (3:1-2)

Paul had made the argument that being a Jew alone wasn’t enough since the Jews were themselves lawbreakers. This would likely raise the question among frustrated Jews: “Well then what good is it to even be Jewish? Who would want to be God’s specially chosen people if the result is that it does you no good?!”

Paul’s Answer: The Jews have many advantages, the main one being that they were given God’s word!

Paul doesn’t go into all the blessings of Israel, but he suggests there are more. What other blessings did Israel enjoy?

Paul will go into greater detail about the blessings of Israel later in Romans (see 9:4-5), but here he highlights that they have been given the Word of God. The Babylonians didn’t receive God’s Word. The Greeks didn’t receive God’s Word. Although it’s not enough to simply have God’s Word if you don’t keep it, to have God’s Word in the first place is a huge blessing.

What difference does having and knowing God’s Word make in the life of a person or nation?

Does Jewish unfaithfulness cancel God’s faithfulness? (3:3-4)

Paul anticipates another objection from the skeptical Jews in his audience. “So, if God promised good things for Israel, but Israel was unfaithful, doesn’t that cancel out God’s plan?” After all, God had made promises of blessings that would come upon Israel. These promises began with Abraham, but were reiterated to Isaac and Jacob. The prophets warn of God’s coming judgment, but they also predict a

glorious restoration for Israel. Some Jews heard Paul say that both Jews and Gentiles could be saved and thought that meant Paul was claiming the Jews had lost any special place in God's plan.

Why does it matter to us if God plans on keeping His promises to Israel?

Answer: No! Man's sin only highlights the faithfulness of God! God would continue to be faithful to His promises, including promises to Israel. How exactly all that gets worked out Paul saves for Romans 9-11, but for now he simply denies the charge in the strongest possible terms and supports himself with Scripture. He quotes David, who in repenting of his sin states that God is right and fair in all His dealings. Man's sin will never derail God's faithfulness to His promises.

How can the truth that our sin can't derail God's promises be a comfort to us?

If Jewish sin highlights God's righteousness, should God judge Jews? (3:5-6)

Once again, if we put ourselves in the shoes of a Jewish listener, the next question would make sense as well: "So if God remains faithful, and our sin simply emphasizes His righteousness, wouldn't that mean our sin is a good thing?" This does not mean that these objections come from people who want to get away with sinning. Paul makes clear in verse 8 that this is an attack he regularly faces from people trying to discredit his message. So what is Paul's response?

Answer: No! God is a righteous judge who will deal with sin. Paul holds God up as the righteous judge who will one day judge the world. If God allowed people to get away with sin because their sin highlighted His goodness and kindness and faithfulness, then He wouldn't be good or faithful or kind. An unjust God is not good, or kind, or faithful to His Word (especially His warnings).

Why is God's judgment on sin so important for Him to be faithful, good, and kind?

If sin brings God glory, why would God judge me for it? (3:7-8)

This final question appears to be one that really upset Paul. Once again he will introduce an idea that will deal with more fully later (Romans 6:1-4) – if sin highlights God's goodness, why not do bad that good may come? This time, though, he sets up the question and appears so frustrated that rather than briefly answer it he simply writes off the person asking the question entirely. The strong, "May it never be!" has become the even stronger, "They are right to be condemned!"

What is wrong with arguing that since evil highlights God's goodness, we should do evil?