

# Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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**Sermon Title:** Objection Time

**Sermon Text:** Romans 3:1-8

**Rom. 3:1 ¶** Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?

**Rom. 3:2** Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.

**Rom. 3:3** What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?

**Rom. 3:4** By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written,

“That you may be justified in your words,  
and prevail when you are judged.”

**Rom. 3:5 ¶** But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? ( I speak in a human way.)

**Rom. 3:6** By no means! For then how could God judge the world?

**Rom. 3:7** But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?

**Rom. 3:8** And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

**Main Point:** God is consistent, not arbitrary. He is fair, and never unjust. He is good and holy, and no human efforts or objections can overturn the steadfast goodness, mercy, and character of God.

### **Outline:**

1. The Faithfulness of God in the Face of Unfaithfulness (3:1-2)
2. Sin and the Promotion of God's Righteousness (3:3-8)

### **Introduction**

Today we're looking at just 8 important verses. And these verses exist because of what Paul said last week. Here was the fiery claim that Paul made: "But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart."

That was the last verse of chapter 2. And if you remember, that chapter was aimed at law-keepers who rely on the law and have a legalistic mindset. It was certainly something a Jew would need to hear, but anyone who tries to hide behind ceremonies or works of any kind to have peace with God needs to hear that this is a dead-end road. That if you rely on this stuff but don't have faith in Christ, you're as good as uncircumcised or unbaptized. It is as if you've kept none of the law. As Paul put it in Philippians talking about himself, all of those ceremonies and works done apart from faith in Jesus were refuse, garbage. Completely useless. They accomplished nothing.

"Circumcision is of the heart." Paul knows this is an extreme claim to make. He's saying there *are* some people in Israel who have been truly circumcised in the heart, but there are also some *gentiles* who are circumcised in heart, too. You can be physically circumcised, but not *truly* circumcised. True Israel, in other words, is constituted by faith, not by external markers. Paul is taking aim at a particular point of pride for his Jewish listeners: the thing they put their confidence in. The thing that made them feel secure: the ceremonies that they thought defined them.

And that really is the point: that God has an agenda to remove any point of pride or boasting or anything about ourselves that we think gives us peace with God, or makes us special. Any answer that we give as to why we're saved that points to

something in ourselves is a boastful salvation that is centered in the self and not in God's salvation in Christ.

Here's the problem: If Jews and Gentiles are ultimately on equal footing before God because they can both be saved by faith in Christ and not by ceremonial works from the Law of Moses, then what is the point of the Jews having been in covenant with God in the first place?

Implied in this objection is this. Here's really what the question is about: "Paul, you're wrong about Jews and Gentiles both being able to come to God, apart from the law. Because if you were right, then the Jews wasted 2000 years of history following the law of Moses."

And so Paul's task here in this section is to show that this objection leads to the wrong conclusion. Just because Jews and Gentiles can come to Christ apart from keeping the law, and just because people can come to Christ by faith alone does not mean that all that history was wasted or that there has never been any benefit in Judaism. And so if Paul can point out the positive benefits that the Jews have enjoyed, then the objection being made here fails.

Now, this is important because what's really at stake is this question: is God finicky? Does he just change how he deals with people? Does he set people up and then pull the rug out from under them? Is he consistent and just and faithful all the way through, or is he just a little arbitrary?

Is the salvation that Jesus provides consistent with God's character and how he has dealt with the Jewish people?

Is there consistency and continuity from the time of Abraham through the New Testament, or does God keep changing and modifying and adjusting, sort of like the referee who tries to change the rules halfway through the game? And really one background implication here is this fear that if the Christians are right, then God is schizophrenic and unpredictable.

To work through these objections and take seriously what Paul is dealing with, we'll be looking at two points today. First, the faithfulness of God in the face of unfaithfulness. Then second, another objection Paul addresses will force us to reckon with Sin and the Promotion of God's Righteousness.

I promise you, Paul may be discussing Judaism here (at least on the surface), but what Paul talks about here is important for all of us, whether we are Jew or Gentile.

## **1. The Faithfulness of God in the Face of Unfaithfulness (3:1-2)**

First this passage confronts us with the faithfulness of God in the face of unfaithfulness.

Look at verses 1-4 again:

“Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, ‘That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.’”

I mentioned before that there is this objection underlying what Paul is doing here. The question is, does God deal with human beings in such a way that he changes things? Pulls the rug up? Does he deal differently with one group than another?

There were people in church history who believed this. They saw divergence between the Old and New Testaments.

One group who believed this was Marcion and his followers. Marcion famously taught that the God of the Old Testament was a different, inferior god from the god of the New Testament. This led him to reject the Old Testament entirely.

But other groups, including some branches of dispensationalism, seeing church history as being divided into separate and distinct periods, believe that God dealt differently with one group than another. In some permutations they would see the Old Testament as being a story about how God saved the Jews and the New Testament as being a story about how God saves everyone else. So instead of seeing Christians as being ingrafted into the tree that is Judaism, they see Christians as being a separate branch of God’s people, saved in a different way than the Jews were saved. The more extreme versions believe that the Jews were

saved by their sacrifices and ceremonies, but now today people can be saved by means of faith in Christ. Not all dispensationalists take things this far or in such an extreme way, but it is certainly a view that many people still hold today.

Even today there are some branches of evangelicalism that tend to practically speaking, practice this. In these places the sermon always comes from the New Testament, there's really no enthusiasm for the law of God or the preaching of the wrath of God. If the Old Testament is read or preached at all, it's to give moral examples or prophecies about Jesus or the end times, but there is very little positive place for the law in the eyes of many modern evangelicals. Though they have no kind thoughts about Marcion (they may not even know who he is) in effect the God of the Old Testament is treated like a foreign God who is far from the God we know today.

We're gonna talk more about the positive use of the law in coming weeks. But for now, just know that Paul sees a smooth consistency between how God dealt with the Jews and how he deals with Gentiles even today. God is not arbitrary or random.

We know this for a few reasons. For one, this whole book is really about showing how anyone can join the family of Abraham. And how Abraham was saved by faith, not by works of the law. And how when we are united to Christ, we're also part of that same family. And how even in Abraham's day they were saved the same way we are saved today: by believing the Christ preached by the law.

Now, Paul comes in and says, no, we're not erasing Jewish history. No, we're not saying that Christianity is some kind of clean break from Judaism. It's not like the Gospel is plan B, because plan A (Judaism) didn't work.

And to begin making this case Paul begins by saying, "Yes, the Jews enjoyed incredible blessings and benefits" (see Deut. 4:8; 7:1-11; Ps. 147:19-20; Amos 3:2). The greatest advantage is in their being given the Scriptures.

God rescued Abraham and his family. He then called them out of Egypt. He led them through the desert and provided for them. He spoke through his prophet, Moses, who was the author of the first five books of the Old Testament. He spoke through other prophets after that, he never abandoned or gave up on his people,

Israel, even when they were deeply disobedient. And the books of the Old Testament are evidence that our God is a speaking God. He speaks to his people. He speaks for his people. He is a speaking God. A God of words. He is not silent.

But the Old Testament is not some separate alien country from what we have in the New Testament. The New Testament is riddled with Old Testament quotations and ideas. The whole Old Testament provides everything we need to know to make sense of the events of the New Testament. They are woven together like a tapestry.

And in the Scriptures, God speaks and preaches, and the sermon that he had been preaching to the Jews was a sermon about Jesus.

Peter Martyr makes this point here about the Jews and their Scriptures. Whether they ultimately acknowledged it or not, Jesus was actually being preached to them constantly through their scriptures, through the ceremonies, through the prophets for centuries before Christ came.

- Every time they laid their hand on the head of a sacrifice, they were having Christ the substitute for sin preached to them.
- Every time that they circumcised their child, their sin was being exposed and Christ was being preached to them.
- Every time that they received the Passover, Christ the lamb of God was being preached to them.

The entire Old Testament and every law and ceremony was declaring Jesus to them.

We take the preaching and proclamation of Jesus for granted, perhaps. We just think, "Well of course you have to have the preaching of the word." But just think of what an incredibly special thing it is to have Jesus set before you each and every week.

Well the Jews had more than a century of Christ being proclaimed to them in their prophets and Scriptures. And they had the Scriptures which preached Jesus over and over and over to them without fail. The males among them bore the mark of Christ in their flesh. They had ceremonies that preached Jesus to them.

But the problem is, instead of devoting themselves to Christ they “devoted themselves entirely to emphasizing circumcision and external ceremonies.”

Now, John Murray (the Scottish Presbyterian) says that it’s implied that there are other advantages as well which Paul leaves unstated here. He’s not saying everything. But the advantage in being a Jew is not absolute if you do not and will not listen to the very Scriptures from which that advantage comes. It has advantages but not saving advantages apart from faith.

And it was always like that. As I say, when we get to chapter 4 we’ll see that Abraham is a case study of the person who has the law of circumcision, he has the gospel preached to him, he believes the gospel, and he gets saved before he is ever even circumcised. Abraham, the father of the Jews, was saved apart from works. Paul is going to go there in chapter 4.

Now, after Peter Martyr makes this point about the Old Testament preaching Christ constantly, he does something important: he says this isn’t just about them. It’s about all of us. He says, there are people among us today who act like the Jews did with circumcision. He says there are people who look at the Lord’s Supper and they *don’t* look to Christ, they just look at the symbols and instead of partaking of Christ by faith, they just fixate on the bread itself and wine itself, and think there is something magical about them. They think, “if I can just receive Christ with my stomach but not my heart it will be just fine.”

The problem is, we do not and cannot receive Jesus with our stomach. We receive him by faith alone. If we put the bread in our mouth but don’t trust Christ, we’re not receiving Christ in any sense at all. And Martyr says, if that’s you, you have something in common with the Jewish person who obsesses over his ceremonies but doesn’t place his faith in Christ. These ceremonies become empty and devoid of life, instead of being life-giving.

The point here is that these are not problems just for a specific day and time and era that is now long past. We still misapply these principles and get fixated on externals. This is a persistent human temptation.

Our God is faithful in the face of unfaithfulness. He has never failed to give Jesus to his people.

## 2. Sin and the Promotion of God's Righteousness (3:3-8)

Next, Paul anticipates another objection. I call this second point Sin and the Promotion of God's Righteousness.

In verses 3 and 4, Paul raises this hypothetical: "Okay, so some were unfaithful, but that still doesn't mean that God abandoned them. Instead, in contrast to the dishonesty and untruthfulness of sinners like you and me, God stands out. He is truthful, he is just. He is everything that we're not. He is true, and we are liars. God is glorious, and I am filthy. And in some way our sin and unfaithfulness magnifies God's own goodness even more."

And Paul's objection is, why not have more unfaithfulness in light of that?

Isaiah throws himself down on the ground in Isaiah chapter 6 because he sees the Lord high and lifted up. And do you remember his confession? He was so overcome by the holiness of God that he says, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" I saw Yahweh. And now I see how filthy I am. So the objector Paul is imagining is basically saying, "When I'm unfaithful, God is faithful. Therefore when I sin, God gets glory." "I'm Isaiah, if you really think about it! My sin just makes God look more glorious!"

It is true that there is something about this sinner and his filthy mouth being in the presence of almighty God that helps us to see just how perfect and righteous and glorious God is.

Paul knows, by the way, that what he's saying here isn't a strong argument. He mentions in verse 5 that he's speaking in a "human way," which I think is his way of saying, "This isn't the best argument, but some people are going to ask it."

The argument misunderstands God's holiness.

It is not my sin that accentuates and brings out the holiness of God. When I do something evil, God doesn't become more holy. When I do something wicked, it's not like God then becomes greater and greater.

God's greatness and glory, his righteousness and goodness exist independent of me and what I do. In fact, can we just rejoice in that for a moment here? God repeatedly talks about how God is not a man, nor is he an idol. He isn't like us, and he isn't made by us or propped up by us, or dependent on us in any way. He is who he is with or without us.

This makes God different from idols. The idols of the nations are silver and gold, the work of human hands (Ps. 135:15). They neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell (Deut. 4:28).

But God is not made with human hands. There is nothing about God whatsoever that depends on human beings. Even the glory of God isn't something we can increase. We do not enlarge his glory or diminish his glory. We can give God glory, but that doesn't mean to make his glory greater, but to make his glory *seen* more greatly.

And I think this gets us to what Paul is talking about here. He's making an argument that if you wanted to steel-man it, he might be saying, it's not that my sin makes God more glorious or good or righteous, but maybe my sin gives God glory in that sense: that now people see how great God is because they see how bad I am.

So in verses 5-8, then, Paul contemplates this abuse of the doctrine. After all, how can God punish sin if it is instrumental in illustrating his righteousness and glory? If I sin, and my sin makes God look even more holy, and if my sin brings out his goodness, why shouldn't I sin? Paul will answer this question more fully in chapter 6, so we'll wait for his fuller argument there.

But here, Paul says two things. He wants to short-circuit this goofy way of thinking, so first he just outright rejects where this argument was going: God is not unrighteous to punish us for sin. Period.

And he says we know this, because we know God will judge the world, and if he can't judge sin, then it doesn't even make sense that there is a coming judgment. Paul says, this is silly talk.

We need to dispense with this idea that really deep down my sin is serving God or helping God.

We were meant to be telescopes, not microscopes. God's glory is not small and in need of being increased. God's glory is great and immense and worthy of worship. And so when we do something righteous because of faith in Christ, we do glorify him. We don't increase his glory, but we increase his glory's being *seen*. That's what a telescope does. It takes something great and grand and huge and makes it visible. We aren't microscopes, we're telescopes.

Christianity, like Judaism before it, shares a God-centered, Christ-exalting, faith-proclaiming message that says, "God is good. We are not. Jesus calls us to repent and turn to him in faith."

If you try to short-circuit that and say, God is glorified no matter what, so we can do anything, we miss the meaning of our lives entirely. We are made for God's glory, not for our own shame. We were made to reflect what is great in God, not to serve as a contrast.

Think about how the Scriptures talk. They never talk about our sin being a way to glorify God. Never. Instead, Scripture speaks of sin as falling short of God's glory (Rom. 3:23). We saw earlier in Romans that when people sinned they were "exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images" (Rom. 1:21-23). Ezekiel 36 speaks of Israel's sin and God says, "They profaned my holy name among the nations" (36:20-23).

God's glory is essential to who he is. We cannot increase it, we cannot diminish it. But we can profane his name in the eyes of the watching world. But we were made for holiness. We were made to manifest his glory. We were made to *show* the glory that is already there.

What does Jesus say in Matthew 5:16? "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." It is our *good* works which glorify our Father, not our sin.

John 15:8: "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."

1 Corinthians 6:19-20: "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body."

Never let yourself believe the lie that sin can be good. That is a clever lie of the enemy, but sin makes us stupid. It twists our thinking. And in that twistedness we can be fooled into believing some truly awful ideas. Even this.

We were made to glorify God, not by sinning, but by living by faith in the son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us. The holiness that is evident in the lives of the faithful shows the world God's glory, graciousness, kindness, and mercy. That is the opposite of sin.

You were made to glorify God. Every human being on this earth is a bearer of the image of God. Every one of us is meant to be an envoy of the king of kings. This is where the gospel becomes so precious: you and I have not done this. We have not lived up to God's law. God calls us to be holy as he is holy, but we've fallen short.

Whether you are a Christian, or are not yet a Christian, never forget what verse six today tells us: that God will, in fact judge the world. Today is the day to call upon the Savior while he may yet be found.

What are we supposed to do? The law tells us that we have sinned and deserve God's wrath.

The gospel doesn't deny this, but it keeps going, and says, "That doesn't mean you should despair. Christ has come. The Jesus promised in the Scriptures has come. The Savior preached through the Passover and circumcision and the feasts and the sacrifices and everything in Israel's history... he has come. And he is a Savior who defeats sin, throws down the devil, and through faith in him restores us to what we were, not through our own righteousness, but through the righteousness of the son of God who loved us and gave himself for us."

*Let's pray.*