

Study 4: Romans Chapter 3

Introduction

After dealing with the reprobates who do not care about God and have no morality, and then the “moral Gentiles” who have some moral fibre but are not repentant towards obeying God, Paul has introduced the Jews. The third chapter deals with the special place that the Jews had in God’s plan, and the relationship of not only the Jews in God’s standing, but their relationship with the Law.

Body of the Study

What advantage does the Jew have?

What is God’s response to the Jews lack of action?

Is God right to inflict punishment?

What conclusion does Paul draw in vs 9?

What was the purpose of the Law?

What is the remedy for the situation?

What does Paul mean by “propitiation”?

What is the conclusion?

Homework and preparation for next week:

- *If the three groups of people represented in Romans are represented in today’s society, then who are the Jews?*
- *What is the essence of the argument that Paul has made so far?*
- Read the notes as a review of the study.
- Read chapter 4 in preparation for the next study.

Notes for study 4: Chapter 3

Introduction

After dealing with the reprobates who do not care about God and have no morality, and then the “moral Gentiles” who have some moral fibre but are not repentant towards obeying God, Paul has introduced the Jews. The third chapter deals with the special place that the Jews had in God’s plan, and the relationship of not only the Jews in God’s standing, but their relationship with the Law.

Body of the Study

What advantage does the Jew have?

Paul has shown that the literal keeping of the act of circumcision, and obedience to the Law does not make a person righteous. This would have had *shock value* to the Jews amongst the church at Rome. Especially when Jesus said that “...*salvation is of the Jews...*” (Jn 4:22). But there are advantages to being Jewish – at least in the first century when the church was in its infancy.

Paul is answering (before they have even had the chance to ask the question) the objections that might be raised by the Jews. (*How can you say Paul, that we are no better than the Gentiles? We are Abraham’s children after all, and therefore God’s people!!!*) It is as if Paul had come into our church meeting and argued that we (as christians) were on the same equal footing with God as an infidel. The response would be stark and sharp. Yet, without the blood of Christ, that is exactly where we stand.

To answer the question, the Jew has great advantages. Firstly and foremostly he has a fundamental understanding of God. Paul says “...*they were entrusted with the oracles of God...*” (3:3). God had (at least from their perspective) given them the (Old Testament) scriptures. And it is true that the Jewish people were chosen by God as a people who would be known as *God’s people*. But the problem was, that the Law with its proscriptive requirements became a burden. The Jews were keeping *the letter of the Law*, but were ignoring the *weightier matters* of justice, mercy and righteousness (Mt 23:23). They wanted the promises, but were not prepared to accept the *promised one* when He came. Paul will deal with this much later in the letter (chapter 10).

As God’s people, the Jews had been conditioned to know of the existence of God, His nature as the true and living God (compared to the idols that the Gentiles worshipped), and how He dealt with and treated and protected His people. Those who opposed God’s people were punished by Him, and so were those Jews who rebelled against Him. The Jews had a relationship with God, and were in a position where they should have known better. Paul has already established the principle of 1:19-20 that *knowledge + opportunity = obligation*. Whilst Paul applied it to the Gentiles in chapter 1, the conclusion of applying it to the Jews is inescapable.

What is God’s response to the Jews lack of action?

Some (of the readers who were Jewish christians) might say “*So what if some of them didn’t obey – we did, so what is the point?*”

Paul now heads off this possible objection by emphatically pronouncing that it is unthinkable that God’s faithfulness would be conditional upon their *response*. Whilst the Jew might not have *taken up* the advantage that he had, that in no way reduces or takes away *the fact* of that advantage. The Jew had failed, but God had not failed. Paul quotes from the Psalmist, who supports the position of the sinner as a failure, but God is still true (Ps 51:4)

As might be expected, Paul vigorously rejects any suggestion that God could fail in terms of his faithfulness (v. 4). The concept of his fidelity is carried forward by the use of a closely related term. He is "true" to his covenant promises because he is true in himself. If one had to choose between the reliability of God and of humankind, one would have to agree with the psalmist who declared in his disillusionment concerning his fellow human beings, "Every man [is] a liar" (Ps 116:11). Even David, one of the best men in Israel's history, a man after God's own heart (1Sa 13:14), proved a disappointment. After being chastened for his sin and his refusal to confess it for a long time, he was ready to admit that God was in the right and he was in the wrong (Ps 51:4). (NIVBC)

Is God right to inflict punishment?

In 3:5, Paul concludes that we are unrighteous (speaking particularly, although not exclusively about the Jews), and that God is righteous and just. We deserve to be punished for our wrongs. If we steal, we deserve to be punished by the authorities (put in jail, or fined, or flogged, or sent to Tasmania, or whatever the right punishment is). We might not like *the consequences* in being punished, but we deserve what we get. We might even feel that we don't deserve what we get (Does the punishment fit the crime? Is a trip to Tasmania a fit punishment for stealing a loaf of bread?). Many of the convicts who were sent to Australia had a strong disdain against the authorities who sent them here. They blamed the authorities for their predicament. To be fair, many stole not very much in order to feed their starving families, and they were in need of mercy rather than revenge. But the authorities *were right* in enforcing the law.

And in exactly the same way, God is right in giving us the punishment for our sins. We might feel like it is not justice, *but we know the consequences*.

If God does not inflict the right and just consequences on the man who sins, then how can he be a fair and impartial God? (But God is also a *merciful* God, and has provided His own Son to pay the penalty!!!)

Some of the Jews might look at this and say "...Well, if God is shown up to be righteous by our sins, then how can He condemn us? Surely this can't be the case, since our sins demonstrate His righteousness!..." (my paraphrase of 3:5) Paul's response is "...What planet are you guys on?..." (my paraphrase of 3:6).

The natural outcome of this is "...Let us do evil that good may come..." (3.8 NKJV). This is an absurd proposition, and the obvious answer is that it is preposterous. Although some people would make an accusation that some of the Jews would actually teach that. These people would rightly and correctly pronounce those who teach such a thing as hypocrites. As such, (if that is what we were teaching) then we would be rightly condemned.

What conclusion does Paul draw in vs 9?

The only conclusion that can be drawn is that all people are under sin. Whether they are Jews or Gentiles, and whether they are sincere Jews or "superficial Jews". They ought to have known better. They are all rightly condemned for sin. The Jews are no better than the Gentiles (even although they had the advantage of knowing God).

Paul now puts together a string of passages from Psalms and Isaiah. Ps 14:1-3; 53:1-3; 5:9; 140:3, 10:7; Is 59:7; Ps 36:1.

These quotations have *hit the highlights* from the passages that he has quoted from. He has shown that his conclusion is exactly in accord with (Old Testament) scripture, and has placed the passages in a logical order. "The arrangement is such, that testimony is adduced: first, for the

state of sin generally (vs. 10-12); second, the *practice* of sin in word (vs.13, 14) and deed (vs. 13-17); and third, the sinful *source* of the whole –...”¹

In 3:18, Paul points out that the prophets foresaw what the root cause of the problem would be. The conclusion that he has drawn (from 3:9) is that *all are under sin*. The Jews as well as the Gentiles. And whilst he has previously pointed out that the basic problem with the Gentiles was that *they did not appropriately recognise and honour God*, (1:21) he has made the conclusion apply just as validly to the Jews – and backed it up from the Psalmist. Jesus said “...*the people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me...*” (Mt 15:8)

What was the purpose of the Law?

The next obvious question that the Jews would ask, was what was the purpose of the Law. Remember that their culture was – “We are right with God because we are Abraham’s children. And God has entrusted the Law to us, and sealed our relationship with the sign of circumcision”.

Paul has already discounted the first premise. The second premise (that they are children of Abraham) is not under question, but Paul will soon deal with the fact *that those who are of faith are the true children of Abraham* (Gal 3:26-29). So, now he deals with the third premise – the place of the Law.

He emphasises that those who live under the Law are obliged to fulfil whatever it requires. He has already discussed this in 2:21-25, and of course, pointed out that the Jews failed in their obligations to God.

The end of the argument (to this point) is found here. He drives the final nail in the argument of condemnation for all of mankind. “...*through the law we have the knowledge of sin...*” (3:20) The Law was given so that we might *know* and *realise* our true position with God. We don’t just have to *think* that we are sinners in God’s sight – we **KNOW** we are!!! It doesn’t matter whether we are morally desolate, or good upstanding citizens caught up in our own self-righteousness, or Jews who claimed to be the sons of God through Abraham. We are all under the same condemnation of sin. The outlook is hopeless.

What is the remedy for the situation?

What Paul now introduces is the remedy for the dire situation that he has painted. Until now, there is doom and gloom. But God has a plan. In fact, God always had a plan – He had it before He even created the world. Paul talks about “...*the righteousness of God apart from the Law...*” being revealed, and that this righteousness is “...*witnessed by the Law and the Prophets...*” (3:21).

He is about to show that through Christ we are all made righteous, and that only comes by faith – the kind of faith that Abraham had. But further, that the coming of the Christ had been foreseen by both the Law and the Prophets.

Every one of us has sinned and we all fall short of God’s glory (3:23). But the remedy for sin has been provided. And it is free. We don’t have to earn it. It is a free gift. It comes from God’s grace. He gives us a gift of salvation that we do not deserve. (This is contrasted to God’s mercy, when he does not inflict on us the punishment that we do deserve).

We have been justified (made right) by Jesus. But Paul adds some details:

1. the justification is conditional upon our faith in Jesus Christ (vs 22),
2. it is available to both Jews and Gentiles alike without distinction (vs 22),
3. both Jews and Gentiles are equally condemned without it (vs 23),
4. it is a free gift given by God’s favour (vs 24),
5. the gift comes only through Jesus Christ (vs 24).

¹ Meyer, H “Commentary on the New Testament” quoted from McGarvey, p319.

What does Paul mean by “propitiation”?

Jesus was established as a sacrifice that would provide appeasement to God. He would pay the price for sin. Sin is a transgression of God’s law, and a righteous and just God must deal out punishment that is fitting of the crime. And the only punishment that is fitting for sin is death. (Although some might argue with me, God is not talking about physical death, but rather spiritual death). We will be separated from God, and be in a place of eternal punishment.

But the price for sin must be paid. The sacrifices under the Old Covenant were described as “...*a sweet smelling savour to God...*” God saw the sacrifices and was pleased. It has a similar idea to the feeling that we get when we come home and smell a wonderful roast dinner cooking in the oven. The lovely smell permeates the house, and we can feel the taste in our mouths and the feeling of satisfaction in our bellies. On the other hand, there are many smells that do not evoke the same response. One of them is when we go to the local garbage tip (and I’m sure that there are many others that you can think of). In such a way, the righteous and just God is satisfied (appeased) by the payment of the debt that is owed against our sins. Jesus became the appeasement, the propitiation, the sacrifice, the offering, the debt that was given and paid in full as the price for our sins.

The Septuagint (LXX) uses the same Greek word (*hilasterion*) for “*mercy seat*” the place where symbolically the animal sacrifices made the atonement for sin under the Old Covenant.

The outcome of the sacrifice and propitiation of Jesus is that “...*God has passed over the sins that were previously committed...*” (3:25). The symbolism of the Passover in the Old Testament is extant. As is the sacrifice of the lamb without spot or blemish. And the male in the prime of its life. God said “...*when I see the blood (of the lamb) I will pass over the house, and I will not destroy you...*” (Ex 12:13). In exactly the same way, when the blood of the lamb is applied to our hearts, God passes over our sins. They are not imputed. They are forgiven, and no further punishment is needed.

The culmination of all of this, is our faith in Jesus Christ. “...*He is just, and the justifier of those who have faith...*” (3:26) As the justifier, He makes us right. We were wrong in God’s sight, but not any more.

What is the conclusion?

We cannot boast about *what we have done*, or that *I’m better than you!* Because we are all equally condemned before God. We have absolutely nothing to boast about! None of can claim that we have done so much, that God “owes us”. We are decrepit in His sight. At our best, we are simply charity cases. The only way that we can be seen as anything, is if we are made right (justified) by the Christ, and that can only come by faith in Him. There is no room for any works of any kind. (That is not to say that there are not works of obedience that we need to do, since God’s promises are conditional upon our faith and obedience. But that is not what Paul is talking about here – he is talking about us seeking to show God how good we are by doing lots of good things for Him, so that He will say that we have earned our salvation. We can never do that! There are no works that we can do that will even come close to making God satisfied.)

The keeping of any kind of Law (the Law of Moses, or Law of any kind – even the Law of Christ as a system of Law) can never make us right in God’s sight. That is not to say that we ought not to keep the Law of Christ. We live under the Law of Christ, and we need to keep the Law that we live under (Gal 6:2). But if we try to say that we have done all that Christ’s law says that we need to do, and therefore God “owes us” salvation at the end of it all, then we are just as misguided as the Jews who thought that salvation came by keeping the Law of Moses. We need to keep the law of Christ, because that is what God wants us to do; not so that we can earn anything from God.

Paul forces a strong conclusion here for the Jews. They have always recognised that there is but one God. And since that is the case, then who is the God of the Gentiles? The only satisfactory

answer is that God is the God of the Gentiles, as well as the God of the Jews. This would cause any serious Jew to have to rethink his position in relation to the Gentiles.

In answering the question about the Law (where the chapter began), Paul comes to the conclusion that rather than making the Law of no effect through faith, on the contrary it is established (3:31). As we have noted above, we are not justified by law (any kind of law). But we are not free from law, just because we are of faith. We are under the law of Christ (Gal 6:2; 1 Cor 9:21). And just like the Old Testament Law, if we live under it we are required to keep it. We live under the law of the land we live in, and we are required to keep that law. If we don't like it, we can (perhaps) choose to go and live somewhere else. We accept the free gift from God, and *the consequences* are that we become subject to Christ. Paul says "...we establish (ourselves as under the) law (of Christ)..." (3:31).