

# Week 6 | Romans 3:1–20

The Barna Group recently released a fascinating study on people’s attitudes about sharing their faith:

Almost all practicing Christians believe that part of their faith means being a witness about Jesus (ranging from 95% to 97% among all generational groups), and that the best thing that could ever happen to someone is for them to know Jesus (94% to 97%). Millennials in particular feel equipped to share their faith with others. For instance, almost three-quarters say they know how to respond when someone raises questions about faith (73%), and that they are gifted at sharing their faith with other people (73%). This is higher than any other generational group: Gen X (66%), Boomers (59%) and Elders (56%).

So, the majority of Christians believe that they are witnesses for Jesus and knowing Jesus is the best thing for a person. A lot of believers, particularly from the younger generation, are comfortable answering for and sharing their faith. All this is good news, right? Well, there is one other attitude the survey uncovered:

Despite this, many Millennials are unsure about the actual practice of evangelism. Almost half of Millennials (47%) agree at least somewhat that it is wrong to share one’s personal beliefs with someone of a different faith in hopes that they will one day share the same faith. This is compared to a little over one-quarter of Gen X (27%), and one in five Boomers (19%) and Elders (20%).<sup>1</sup>

If knowing Jesus is the best thing that could happen to someone, why would many Christians decide that sharing their faith is a bad idea? There are probably lots of factors at work. Younger people have been taught to celebrate diversity of all kinds, they are more likely to have friends who are of a different faith, and they live in a culture that has redefined tolerance to mean unqualified acceptance of every aspect of another person’s life.

Yet there may be something deeper than these cultural factors that affect all of our willingness to share our faith, whether we are 28 or 88. We either don’t understand or don’t really believe the message that Paul is hammering home in this section of Romans: God is an impartial judge, everyone is guilty, and only Jesus can make us right with God.

## Day 1

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<sup>1</sup> Barna Research Group, “Almost Half of Practicing Christian Millennials Say Evangelism Is Wrong,” *Articles in Faith and Christianity*, (February 5, 2019), <https://www.barna.com/research/millennials-oppose-evangelism/>

This week we're diving into Romans 3 where Paul is still dealing with Jewish objections to his message. Recall that at the end of Romans 1, Paul illustrated the sinful spiral that humanity goes down when it denies God and worships created things rather than the Creator. Then Paul turns his attention to the Jewish hearers of this letter who might have felt exempt from that description. He also challenges any presumption of Jewish superiority. Paul is going to finish that challenge in the passage we are looking at this week.

Last week we looked at Paul's bold assertion about circumcision at the end of chapter 2. Not everyone who bore the sign of the covenant was necessarily a Jew and those who were not circumcised could be part of the covenant family. Paul knows that this declaration would get a strong reaction, so he has prepared a response to likely objections.

## Read the Word

### Romans 3:1–20 (NIV)

**3** *What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? <sup>2</sup> Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.*

<sup>3</sup> *What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? <sup>4</sup> Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written:*

*"So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge."*

<sup>5</sup> *But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) <sup>6</sup> Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? <sup>7</sup> Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" <sup>8</sup> Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—"Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is just!*

<sup>9</sup> *What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. <sup>10</sup> As it is written:*

*"There is no one righteous, not even one;*

*<sup>11</sup> there is no one who understands;*

*there is no one who seeks God.*

*<sup>12</sup> All have turned away,*

*they have together become worthless;*

*there is no one who does good,*

*not even one."*

<sup>13</sup> *“Their throats are open graves;  
their tongues practice deceit.”  
“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”*  
<sup>14</sup> *“Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”*  
<sup>15</sup> *“Their feet are swift to shed blood;  
<sup>16</sup> ruin and misery mark their ways,  
<sup>17</sup> and the way of peace they do not know.”*  
<sup>18</sup> *“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”*

<sup>19</sup> *Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. <sup>20</sup> Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.*

- Make note of all the rhetorical questions. What objections has Paul anticipated?
- Where do you notice quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures? Why do you think he would he bring these into the conversation?
- The word “therefore” usually points to a conclusion. Where do you find this word and what is the conclusion?

## Reflect

By using courtroom imagery, Paul has painted a picture in which we all stand before God, the judge — Jew and Gentile, slave and free, religious and irreligious — and we’re all guilty. We’ve rebelled against God and his good design and in so doing we hurt ourselves and others. God would be right to condemn us. I don’t know about you, but I’m ready to flip the page to the second half of Romans 3 and consider how Jesus secures us a “not guilty” verdict. But perhaps it’s good for us to spend a few more days thinking about God’s judgment. Not so we wallow in guilt or shame, because in Christ we are forgiven and redeemed, but so we think about how this truth affects those around us, particularly those who don’t yet know Jesus.

- Be honest. Do you really believe that we’re all guilty before God and Jesus is the only means of salvation? What evidence could you give for your answer?

If it’s helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

*Father, I am grateful that because of Jesus I can relate to you as Father and not as judge. As I work through another challenging passage this week, remind me of your love and grace. But let me also feel the weight of what your Word says. May it compel me to pray for my unbelieving friends and look for opportunities to tell them about Jesus.*

## Day 2

There is a common assumption in our culture that to get ahead, you need an advantage. In sports that might mean the latest and greatest equipment, the best coach, custom-tailored workouts and a special diet. All of these things not only make you better but give you an advantage over other players. In Paul's day, many Jews looked at the law and the covenants in a similar way. Not only did they enable a person to live rightly before God, but many thought it gave them an advantage over the rest of humanity.

In Romans 3:1–20 Paul is dealing directly with the question of Jewish advantage. This is an objection that he saw coming, especially after the bombshell he dropped in the section before. If the law and circumcision don't give the Jewish people an advantage before God, what good was it to be a Jew?

## Read the Word

### Romans 3:1–4(NIV)

*<sup>3</sup> What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? <sup>2</sup> Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.*

*<sup>3</sup> What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? <sup>4</sup> Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written:*

*"So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge."*

- What advantage does Paul say the Jews have?
- What is his concern in verses 3–4? Whose reputation is Paul defending?

## Reflect

Have you ever been given something precious to take care of for a time? Maybe you've been a house-sitter, pet-sitter, or even babysitter. Someone entrusted you with something (or someone) incredibly valuable. Hopefully you took that responsibility seriously!

Romans 3:2 explains that the Jews were entrusted with the "very words of God," or literally "oracles of God." One way of looking at Romans 3:1–20 is to use verse 2 to help frame the rest.<sup>2</sup> The Jewish people had unique knowledge of the Creator of the universe and had been chosen, rescued, disciplined and loved by him. They had experienced God through his presence and through his law. Their prophets had recorded his words. All of this should have

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Wright, [\*Paul for Everyone: Romans Part 1: Chapters 1-8\*](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 43.

made them an example to the surrounding peoples so that the name of Yahweh would be glorified. Israel was to be his light to the nations. But they had been unfaithful to this calling.

Not only had the Jews failed to obey the Torah, but most had failed to recognize and accept their Messiah. But their unfaithfulness cannot nullify God's faithfulness.<sup>3</sup> One of the questions that undoubtedly came up as Paul proclaimed the gospel throughout the empire was "what about Israel?" Had God abandoned his covenant people? And if so, didn't that make him unfaithful to his covenant promises? Paul will directly address those questions in Romans 9 and will list more examples of Jewish advantage in Romans 9:4–5. For now, he's simply gives his conclusion. God has not been unjust in his dealings with Israel. Though they have been unfaithful by failing to obey the Torah and in their rejection of Jesus, God is faithful and cannot be otherwise.

God's faithfulness to his promise to bring humanity back into a right relationship with him is not at all contrary to his role as righteous judge. He has worked through Israel to bring forth the Messiah who makes salvation possible for anyone who will put their faith in him. "In the Messiah, Jesus, God has found the way to be true to his original promises. Jesus, as Israel's representative, has offered the faithful obedience which Israel should have offered but did not."<sup>4</sup> In Christ we witness complete faithfulness. We also benefit from it because in Christ we are made right with God.

- Do you have a hard time reconciling God as a faithful Savior with God as a just judge? How is your study of Romans helping you?
- As a believer in Jesus, what has God entrusted you with? How will you use it honor him and love others?

## Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

*Father, I praise you for your justice and your faithfulness. Thank you for Jesus, the Messiah of Israel who was obedient to you all the way to death on the cross. As your child, I have been entrusted with your Word and an intimate knowledge of you. I don't want to take that for granted but share it with those around me.*

## Day 3

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Joshua W. Jipp, Second Edition, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic: A Division of Baker Publishing Group, 2018), 159.

<sup>4</sup>Wright, *Paul for Everyone*, 47.

One of the most comforting attributes of God is his faithfulness. If God said it, he will see it through, and human action cannot derail his plans. Yet in this section of Romans we see Paul painstakingly demonstrate God's impartiality when it comes to judging sin. How does this square with his faithfulness? Can God's faithfulness be called into question if he is judging his covenant people for their unfaithfulness? In other words, is God fair in punishing the Jewish people alongside Gentiles since God promised to be faithful to them?

This line of thinking leads to the objections Paul counters in the verses we will look at today.

## Read the Word

### Romans 3:5–8

*<sup>5</sup> But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) <sup>6</sup> Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? <sup>7</sup> Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" <sup>8</sup> Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—"Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is just!*

- This is a tricky set of verses, but in your view, what objection does Paul seem to be answering here? Can you paraphrase Paul's questions in your own words?

## Reflect

Paul is defending God's character. God is true to his word which means he is both faithful and righteous. Paul asks a rhetorical question in verse 5 that one scholar expands and rewords this way, "If our unfaithfulness makes no difference to God's faithfulness, what point, or need is there for us to be faithful and why should we be blamed for being unfaithful?"<sup>5</sup>

Verse 8 helps us understand why Paul poses this series of rhetorical questions in verses 5–7. In his travels Paul encountered many challenges to his gospel proclamation, particularly from fellow Jews. It may have gone something like this: if Paul is saying that in Christ people could receive God's complete forgiveness, then isn't he just encourage people to sin? And not just sin, but sin more. Why not? The more sin the more grace, right? Of course, Paul was teaching no such thing, but his opponents may have been accusing him of such in order to discredit him.

Another option is that his Jewish opponents rejected the way Paul portrayed their relationship with God. They believed that their entrance into the covenant was by God's grace. In other words, observing the law didn't get you into the covenant, but it did maintain your position. They assumed that Jews who responded appropriately to God's grace by keeping the law would be saved. Yet Paul has argued that everyone, Jew and Gentile, is guilty before God. One

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<sup>5</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, vol. 38A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 141.

scholar summarizes this understanding of the objection: how can God be “righteous in condemning the Jews if they are frail creatures who have no ability to choose righteousness and their only hope is God’s grace?”<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of what the original objections were that prompted Paul to mount this defense, the apostle is clear in his indictment of human sin and exaltation of God’s character. God is just in his condemnation of sinners but has shown his mercy by providing us a means of escape by trusting in Christ. We are also given the ability to choose righteousness by the Spirit. But God’s grace is never an excuse for sin. As we’ve seen, living contrary to God’s good design is damaging to us and others. The more we experience God’s grace, the more we should want to trust and obey him.

- Have you heard objections to the gospel similar to what Paul describes here? What are they?
- Are there times you take advantage of God’s grace by knowingly doing something wrong? Based on the verses we looked at today, what would Paul say about that?

## Pray

If it’s helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

*Father, I know you are righteous. You cannot be unfair or unjust. I’m so grateful that I can trust you completely. I don’t want to be someone who uses clever sounding arguments that might discredit your Word or excuse sin. Give me wisdom and teach me to yield to your Holy Spirit.*

## Day 4

Paul has laid out his case to the house churches of Rome. No one gets to feel superior to anyone else because everyone stands guilty before God, the impartial judge. Paul has reasoned with his Jewish hearers to convince them, and now he’ll end his argument with a strong appeal to Scripture.

## Read the Word

**Romans 3:9–20**

*<sup>9</sup> What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. <sup>10</sup> As it is written:*

*“There is no one righteous, not even one;*

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<sup>6</sup> Schreiner, 164.

*<sup>11</sup> there is no one who understands;  
there is no one who seeks God.  
<sup>12</sup> All have turned away,  
they have together become worthless;  
there is no one who does good,  
not even one.”*

*<sup>13</sup> “Their throats are open graves;  
their tongues practice deceit.”  
“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”  
<sup>14</sup> “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”  
<sup>15</sup> “Their feet are swift to shed blood;  
<sup>16</sup> ruin and misery mark their ways,  
<sup>17</sup> and the way of peace they do not know.”  
<sup>18</sup> “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”*

*<sup>19</sup> Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. <sup>20</sup> Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.*

- Each set of quotation marks that you see in verses 10–18 indicates a different Old Testament citation. How many do you count?
- According to verse 20, what does Paul say that the law does and does not do?

## Reflect

Romans 3:9–20 gives us a good summary of Paul’s argument in 1:18–3:8. Sinful rebellion is a problem for everyone. It doesn’t matter if you are a wealthy Roman of status, a poor slave, or a well-educated Rabbi. At the final judgment, God is not going to take into account the group to which you belong. To the Jews and Gentiles in the churches in Rome who were holding each other in contempt based on how the other viewed the Torah, Paul is sending a strong message.

In verse 9 we see Paul’s view of sin, and it’s one we will see again and again in Romans. Sin is more than an action a person takes; it is an enslaving power that constrains them. As one scholar puts it, “Judaism acknowledged that all people without exception are sinners, but Paul thought that sin had wrapped its tentacles so tightly around human beings that they could not keep the law.”<sup>7</sup> Paul backs up this assertion with a litany of Old Testament citations.

Paul quotes from Ecclesiastes, Isaiah and the Psalms. By citing their own scriptures, he is using one last tactic to answer Jewish opposition. “Whatever distinction between Jew and Gentile remains, whatever is the continuing advantage of the Jew (3:1–2), it does not apply

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<sup>7</sup> Schreiner, [Romans](#), 171.

here. When such scriptures assert that no one is righteous, no one understands, no one seeks for God, no one does good, no one fears God, they mean *no one*.”<sup>8</sup>

Paul finishes this section of his argument with a firm conclusion. The law cannot be used as a defense at the last judgment. Paul uses the phrase “works of the law” and it is one we will encounter again in Romans. According to many scholars, “works of the law” are different from doing the law or fulfilling the law.<sup>9</sup> They are those acts that openly indicate membership in the covenant — things like circumcision, food laws and keeping the Sabbath. These are all things that Jews pointed to as signs of their unique position before God. Paul is explaining one more time that works of the law won’t save them at the judgment.

With that Paul concludes this section of his argument. If Paul had been holding a mic, he may have dropped it after verse 20. Of course, he would have quickly picked it back up to continue because he’s finally ready to deliver some good news in Romans 3: 21–31. I’m ready, how about you?

- Paul tells his fellow Jews that they won’t be able to rely on their membership in the covenant community when they stand before God. What do most Americans think they will be able to stand on when they meet the Lord? Why?

## Pray

If it’s helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

*Father, there really is no other way than Jesus. To a lot of people that is not an acceptable thing to think. I admit, I sometimes struggle with doubt. But your Word is clear. It also makes your grace even more amazing. You have offered everyone a way of escape and I praise you for that.*

## Day 5

It’s Friday! You know what that means — a chance to think and reflect on what you’ve learned, make some connections to your everyday life and spend some time in prayer. Take a deep breath, invite the Spirit to work in your heart and enjoy your time with the Father.

### Consider what you’ve learned

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<sup>8</sup> James D. G. Dunn, [Romans 1–8](#), vol. 38A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 157.

<sup>9</sup> Dunn, 159.

Since we've come to the end of a portion of Paul's argument from 1:18–3:20, how about we review? Take a moment to look back over 1:18–32, 2:1–16, 2:17–29 and 3:1–2 and give a two sentence summary Paul's argument in your own words. Then record your biggest personal takeaway from this week's section of Romans.

## **Make Connections**

God's grace to sinful people is scandalous. I know that in the modern world people often find his judgment unpalatable. But really, if you follow Paul's logic from Romans 1:18 all the way through chapter 3, that any of us escape condemnation is not only remarkable, but outrageous. Can any of us claim that we are not guilty of rebelling against God's good design with willful disobedience? Or of hurting our fellow image-bearers in some way? Have any of us been unwaveringly faithful to God and his will? Not one of us.

But Jesus came. Hallelujah! Jesus came. He came to dwell here with us, teach us his ways, show us a glimpse of his kingdom, die in our place, defeat sin and death and give us new life and the Spirit of God. He loves us unconditionally. He's brought us into his family. "But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God" (1 John 1:12). If justice is getting what we deserve, then we have escaped justice. That's amazing! And it's scandalous.

Let's never get over the scandal of the gospel. It's news that shapes our lives and news that needs to be shared. Stop right now and praise God for his unfathomable grace and mercy!

## **Pray**

Based on what you've read and reflected on this week, spend some time with your Father in prayer. To help you get started, here are a few prompts based on our passage for the week. Don't like these? What do you see in this passage that moves you to prayer?

- Pray that you will take responsibility for what God has entrusted you with (Romans 3:2).
- Praise God that he is the righteous judge. He can never be flattered or bribed into acting unjustly. He is always just (Romans 3:3–4).
- Thank God that by the Spirit you've been rescued from the power of sin (Romans 3:9).
- Pray that you will not assume any kind of special privilege with God based on a group identity such as class, race, ethnicity, theology, denomination, political party or any other group (Romans 3:9).
- Seek God's forgiveness for sins of speech (Romans 3:13–14) and sins of action (Romans 3:15–16).

## **What's Your Next Step?**

We may not be declared righteous by "works of the law" but we will by the work of Jesus! God's judgment is real but so is his mercy. How is the Spirit prompting you to take a next step

in following Jesus? What does that look like for you? Are there changes you need to make in how you treat your family, approach your work, show compassion to the marginalized and hurting, or something else? Are there sinful patterns of thinking and behavior that the Spirit is prompting you to examine and change? Be honest with God and yourself, then yield to the Spirit and allow him to transform you.