

Romans 2:17-3:8 A Challenge to the Chosen People

Introduction

Paul has been highlighting the problem facing the whole human race - our own sinfulness. He has begun with coverage of people who in a particular culture, and their equivalents in our own, who might be considered 'serious' sinners. In chapter two he then addresses groups of people who might say to him: 'Paul, those people are sinners, they need to deal with their problems, but I am not like that. I am a basically a good person, a decent neighbour and a good work colleague and doing okay within my family. Romans 2:1-16 covers the challenge from hypothetical persons who might claim 'I can be good without God'. Now in the next section Paul turns to another group of potential readers of this letter who would also claim exemption from his classification of them as sinners needing to repent and turn to God. These people are Orthodox Jews. They would protest strongly at any sense in which they could be listed alongside Gentiles as 'sinners'. They would remind him that God gave them the Law of Moses (the Ten Commandments), that is the revealed will of God for their lives, and the sign of the covenant (circumcision), to set them apart as a special people unto God. Did not God say through the prophet Amos: *You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth* (Amos 3:2)? Paul, in the light of these facts, and we could fill out the list as you know, there is no way Gentiles and Jews could be viewed in the same light before God. In Romans 2:17 to 3:8 the apostle will comment on the two things they highlight as unique features of their status before God, the Law and circumcision, and address some objections that might be made to his argument.

1. The Jewish people and the Law of God (Romans 2:17-24)

¹⁷ Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; ¹⁸ if you know His will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; ¹⁹ if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— ²¹ you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who boast in the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? ²⁴ As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." (a) **Paul highlights the marks of Orthodox Jewish identity** (i) *You call yourself a Jew* (Romans 2:17a) such a person is open about their faith and convictions; they are not hiding what they claim to be. Naturally this is commendable when someone is open about their beliefs –as we should be as Christians. (ii) *You rely on the law* (Romans 2:17b) that is the law of Moses, revealed to him by God on Mount Sinai; this was the foundation on which they built the practices they followed and which served as the authority for their conduct. We too should have no problems acknowledging that as Christians we declare the Bible to be entirely trustworthy from Genesis to Revelation. Scripture is the revealed will of God for His people and when accurately interpreted and applied is the authority for our faith and practices. (iii) *You... brag about your relationship with God* (Romans 2:17c) Paul uses the same vocabulary in Romans 5:11 (*we rejoice in God*) in the context of the blessings of being placed into a right relationship with God through Jesus sacrifice in our place on the cross, which we have received through His grace, by faith. It is commendable when someone wants to share their faith in God with a person who is yet to know Jesus. However, what these people were placing their confidence in, was believing in one God (monotheism) and an

exclusive relationship for Jews with God that was not open to someone outside Judaism. The gospel Paul wanted his readers to proclaim was open to all people of whatever race or class. In essence, the apostle was alerting his readers to grasp that the gospel really can be good news for everyone who hears it –as long as they are willing to receive it. The question he might put to us today is this: you are secure in your relationship with God through Jesus – are you willing to pass it on to other people? (iv)...You know His will (Romans 2:18a) you know what God wants people to believe and how they ought to behave; His standards on basic issues are clear in the Bible. If we assent to that then we are accountable to practice it! (v) You...approve of what is superior (Romans 2:18b) or as translated in Philippians 1:10 able to discern what is best... that is you are capable of making the right application of God’s law to your daily life. A parent could, in theory, give an instruction manual to a young child and instruct them to cook dinner in the oven while they were out. After all, the child could read the words in the manual. However, in practice, this would not happen because although the child might understand the words it would be inappropriate to place such responsibility onto their shoulders. In matters of faith, Paul declares, well-instructed Orthodox Jewish men and women are more than capable of applying their beliefs to typical life situations. (vi) You are instructed by the law (Romans 2: 18c) The reason for this capability is because of their training in their faith. No other faith community in the ancient world was as well-taught. In our context we have been so well off in terms of the availability of Bibles, concordances, commentaries and other theological books to help us understand God’s Word. (vii) You are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark (Romans 2:19) many orthodox Jews understood the passages in Isaiah that we use to point to Jesus as the ‘servant of the Lord’ as a reference to the whole nation. Therefore, verses such as Isaiah 42:6-7 might be in mind here: “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles,⁷ to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. Or Isaiah 49:6: “It is too small a thing for you to be My servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that My salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.” It is great when we can help one another in our faith journey, maybe in a one-to-one context or within a house-group setting where it is amazing what insights can be discerned as God’s Word is studied by His people. These people Paul has in mind are capable for carrying out this task, because (viii) You have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth (Romans 2:20) As a former strict Pharisee Paul could rattle off this list with ease and know that its accuracy would be affirmed. Yes Paul you have summed it up well for us.

(b) **Paul presents five challenges to his hypothetical Orthodox Jewish reader** Okay you affirm that I have summed up your situation accurately –do you practice what you say you believe? The apostle will ask them five rhetorical questions about their behaviour: (i) You then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? (Romans 2:21a) (ii) You who preach against stealing do you steal? (Romans 2:21b) (iii) You who say people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? (Romans 2:22a) (iv) You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? (Romans 2:22b) (v) You who brag about the law, do you dishonour God by breaking the law? (Romans 2:23). Once again it is likely that a typical Orthodox Jew would reply –of course Paul I keep these commandments. It would be inconsistent with my profession of faith not to keep them all! However, there were too many Jewish people who were failing at this point. A number of Romans commentaries mention Rabbi Jochannan ben Zakkai, a contemporary of Paul, who lamented the decline of moral standards in his day. He drew attention to: ‘the increase of murder, adultery, sexual vice, commercial and judicial corruption, bitter sectarian strife, and other evils.’ [C.H. Dodd, *Romans*, p.39] Here Paul has asked his hypothetical debating partner an Orthodox Jew if in his actions he is practising what he

says he believes. This test or challenge would have been seen as most reasonable, but the apostle will later point out that we can possibly keep all the rules concerning our actions, but can we do so in our speech and in our thoughts? Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) reveals the total impossibility of having perfect attitudes towards other people (see Matthew 5:21-30). However, at this point in the argument living by the law was still an option for the conscientious observant Jew. After all, then and now, living a morally upright life, being a trusted work colleague and a good neighbour is the best way to live.

2. **The Jewish people and circumcision** (Romans 2:25-29)

(a) **The heart of the matter is obedience with respect to God's laws** (Romans 2:25-27)

²⁵ *Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised.* ²⁶ *So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised?* ²⁷ *The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.* The other badge of honour for a Jewish male was the covenant sign of circumcision. Some Jews thought that observing this ceremonial practice guaranteed them a place in heaven regardless of their lifestyle choices. There are a number of rabbis who make this point, both in New Testament times and in the centuries that followed. For example, Rabbi Levi (c.AD300) wrote: 'At the last Abraham will sit at the entrance to Gehenna (hell) and will not let any circumcised man of Israel go down there.' (for details and more examples -see C.E.B. Cranfield, *Romans*, Vol.1, p. 172) Not so, says the apostle in Romans 2:25: *Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised.* Jesus in his parables warned his Jewish audience that a failure to honour God in their lives could have eternal consequences and people they thought were hopeless cases, might enter heaven and they themselves be excluded. Matthew 21:31b-32 states: *Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you."* ³² *For John [the Baptist] came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.* Therefore, Paul declares: circumcision without obedience equals uncircumcision; but uncircumcision with obedience is the equivalent of circumcision. Now for the first time in this section the hypothetical Orthodox Jew is unhappy with what is being proposed. He wants to argue that possessing the law and receiving in his flesh the sign of the covenant is sufficient to be accepted into heaven. No states the apostle, a truly saved person will show by their obedience to God's commandments the evidence of their salvation. Therefore, in heaven the following scenario may play out: *The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker* (Romans 2:27). Or as Paul expresses it in Ephesians 2:10: *For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* Our profession of faith from our lips is revealed to be genuine when its fruit is in evidence in our character and conduct in every day living.

(b) **A genuine Jew lives out his faith in daily life** (Romans 2:28-29)²⁸ *A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical.* ²⁹ *No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.* Paul's argument here is not new. It is consistent with God's critique of His people's behavioural lifestyles throughout the Old Testament. Leviticus 26:40-42 records something of God's judgement against His chosen people because of their wickedness, but also holds out a restoration of covenant privileges, because of God's grace –if they are willing at such a time to exercise genuine repentance from their sins. *"But if they will confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors—their*

unfaithfulness and their hostility toward Me,⁴¹ which made Me hostile toward them so that I sent them into the land of their enemies—then when **their uncircumcised hearts are humbled** and they pay for their sin,⁴² I will remember My covenant with Jacob and My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land. Moses challenged disobedient Israelites with these words in Deuteronomy 10:16: *Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.* In other words change your attitude towards God and take Him seriously –if you are expecting Him to take you seriously. Right at the end of his life in a message that addressed how God’s people could live lives that were pleasing to Him, Moses explained how this would come about: *The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love Him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live* (Deuteronomy 30:6). Yahweh is offering His people a ‘new’ or transformed heart to enable them to love and serve Him as they should. Ezekiel 36:25b-27 states: *I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.*²⁶ *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.*²⁷ **And I will put My Spirit in you and move you to follow My decrees and be careful to keep My laws.** These words proclaimed through Moses above pointed forward roughly seven hundred years to the time of Jeremiah who prophesied of the New Covenant that God would bring about in relationship with His people, that was fulfilled in Jesus. Jeremiah wrote: *“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put My law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be My people.*³⁴ *No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more”* (Jeremiah 31:33-34). Notice also some extraordinary words in Ezekiel 44:9 where God declares: *This is what the Sovereign Lord says: **No foreigner uncircumcised in heart and flesh** is to enter my sanctuary, not even the foreigners who live among the Israelites.* Therefore, Paul concludes this section: a ‘true Jew’ may also be a non-Jew, a Gentile, whose inner person has been spiritually transformed by the Holy Spirit. Outward ceremonies are appropriate, but they can only convey what we hope is a real sign of inner grace and transformation in our daily lives. The most powerful symbol in our faith is the practise of believers’ baptism. The outward act of obedience in water points to an inner spiritual transformation in a Christian’s life. Paul will explain this point in more detail in Romans chapter six, but for now Romans 6:4 will suffice: *We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death **in order that**, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, **we too may live a new life.*** Paul would want to ask us –on what basis are we hoping to be accepted by God for salvation? Professions of faith with our lips are essential. But they are only credible if they point to God’s Spirit at work in our inner person, transforming our attitudes and our speech as well as our actions. The sign of initial obedience to the covenant for a Jew was the act of circumcision. The sign of initial obedience under the terms of the New Covenant in Jesus is believers’ baptism? Is this a step you need to take? Is this something you have put off until now and need to take action on at this time? If that is something God is speaking to you about –please don’t put it off –receive the blessings of obedience to His commandments. As Jesus Himself said in His final commission to His followers in Matthew 28:18-20: *“...All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me.*¹⁹ *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*²⁰ *and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* It is important to point out that His felt presence with us is surely linked to our obedience to our Lord and Saviour. Is there a step of obedience you need to take at this time?

3. **Is there any advantage in being Jewish?** (Romans 3:1-8)

His hypothetical Jewish opponent(s) then raises four objections to Paul's teaching:

(a) **Paul's message undermines the covenant** (Romans 3:1-2) *What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?* ² *Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.* It has been agreed that God chose Israel as His special people entrusting them as the guardians of His moral law, for the nations, together with circumcision as the sign of their covenant commitment. Yet if a person may be acceptable to God who is not ethnically Jewish and who has never be circumcised, then what value is there in this special status for the Jews? Has God dispensed with the Jews under the 'New Covenant'? A fuller explanation of this point is given in Romans 9-11. The blessings of being Jewish will be explained in Romans 9:4-5. However, at this point in the argument the apostle says is it not a big enough privilege to be entrusted to take care of the Word of God? The revelation of God in Holy Scripture was entrusted to the Jews alone. You ought to rejoice in that! The anonymous author of Psalm 147 does exactly that: *He has revealed His word to Jacob, His laws and decrees to Israel.* ²⁰ **He has done this for no other nation; they do not know His laws.** *Praise the Lord* (Psalm 147:19-20). As people with personal copies of the Bible, something unknown to many Christians in North Korea and probably a number of other countries as well, what a privilege is ours, but do we take the time each day to read a little and meditate on it? Or are we missing out on the blessing our privilege can bring?

(b) **Paul's message calls into question God's faithfulness** (Romans 3:3-4) *What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness?* ⁴ *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"* John Stott has helpfully and more literally translated Romans 3:3 in this way: *If some to whom God's promises were entrusted did not respond to them in trust, will their lack of trust destroy God's trustworthiness?* (John Stott, *Romans*, p. 96) Verse four begins with a Greek phrase that conveys the deepest emotion and passion in rejecting such a notion. The idea of such a notion is totally ludicrous. God is entirely trustworthy. God cannot be other than truthful and reliable in every respect. Human beings all fail but not God. He is perfect. David recognised this fact when confessing his sin with Bathsheba. Psalm 51:4 records: *Against You, You only, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight; so You are right in Your verdict and justified when You judge.* It is painful to me as a pastor, and I suspect equally so to some of you, when we come across a man or woman who once followed the Lord but now does so no longer as a result of the sinful misconduct of a professing Christian. God has been blamed for the wrongdoing of another human being. The one who has fallen into sin has in effect brought His name into disrepute. However, that is not a legitimate excuse for walking away from God and from fellowship in a local congregation of His people. God will always maintain His complete integrity in every situation. Are there not times, though, when you and I think God might have been less than fair or just in permitting certain things to happen in our lives or in other people's lives? On the surface it certainly can look that way sometimes. As some people seem to face so many more hardships in life than other people; Paul wants to reassure us that God will never act in a manner inconsistent with His holy character. Our difficulty arises because we see so much less of the situation in question than God. Had we the ability to see a situation through His eyes then our perceptions might be different. Therefore, the apostle encourages us to have total confidence in God in His dealings with us. If there is something you are struggling with members of our prayer team are available to pray with you in this situation with a view to helping you to overcome this trial.

(c) **Paul's message denies God's justice** (Romans 3:5-6) *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.)* ⁶ *Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?* Here (and again in Romans 6:1-2) Paul responds to the individual who claims that if God can gain glory and honour as a result of dealing with my unrighteousness then this appears to be a license to sin even more in order to give God the opportunity to be even more glorious in

dealing with it! Therefore, if this is the case, does it not call judgement for sin into question when God is glorified through this situation anyway? Of course declares the questioner, God was right to punish the immoral Gentiles (Romans 1:18ff); certainly God was right to take action against the people who look down on other people, thinking themselves better than these ‘sinners’ (Romans 2:5)! Surely Jews as God’s people are exempt from divine judgement at the end of the age? No says Paul, can’t you see that if Jews are excused their sinful misconduct then how can God be consistent and not also decline to punish the Gentiles for their sins? Once more Paul uses that same passionate and strong phrase to reject out of hand such a ludicrous notion. The N.I.V translates it as *Certainly Not!* (Romans 3:6a). God is the judge of all peoples and will judge each person with perfect and fair judgement at the end of the age through Jesus, as Paul made clear when preaching in Athens to an audience of philosophers. *In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent.* ³¹ **For He has set a day when He will judge the world with justice by the man He has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead**” (Acts 17:30-31). All of us Gentiles together with Jews have a duty to live holy God-honouring lives, because He is both consistent and righteous.

(d) **Paul’s message falsely increases God’s glory** (Romans 3:7-8) *Someone might argue, “If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?”* ⁸ *Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—“Let us do evil that good may result”?* *Their condemnation is just!* This objection follows on from the previous one. If my condemnation glorifies God as does my vindication by holy living, then why does my wrongdoing lead to my condemnation when God is glorified either way? Surely as verse eight notes, could not the carrying out of more sins bring more glory to God? Putting this in more contemporary language, the argument here is something like this: my testimony is too ordinary; I really cannot plead guilty to committing GBH in primary school; arson and manslaughter in high school; and racketeering and organised crime in my twenties. But what a testimony it would make should I make up for lost time in criminality and then ‘repent’ of it. I could get a book deal for my story with a Christian publisher and be a guest speaker at numerous churches that might not give me a second look now...No! Never! A recipient of God’s grace who truly grasps what Jesus went through on the cross to procure my salvation will never think this way. They / we will want to honour God by our love for Him; our devotion to Him and a holy lifestyle that brings pleasure to Him. God will be most glorified when I trust Him implicitly in each and every area of my life and seek to practice it in daily living? Do you need to spend some quiet time alone with Him reflecting on how He can be even more glorified in your life? This passage is a particular challenge to Orthodox Jews, but there are clear pointers to each of us how we too can reflect on how we are getting on in our faith journey. May God help us to address any issue that He by His Spirit has raised in our consciences today, Amen.