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Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #14

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Objection Overruled!

Romans 3:1-8

By God's grace, I've only been called to serve on a jury once. It was in Dallas in 1983. As it turned out, the accused had already pled guilty. Our task was to assess the appropriate punishment. In order to make our job possible, the assistant District Attorney of Dallas County rehearsed for us the evidence against the man and called several eyewitnesses to the stand to testify concerning the heinous and high-handed character of his crime. I've thought often since that day that we were, perhaps, too severe in the punishment meted out.

In any case, I know that many of you can identify with the stress that comes from serving on a jury and deciding the fate of another human being. There is something fascinating and intriguing about a court of law. Some of the most significant and influential events have occurred in court. Of course, the single most important decision ever handed down took place in a kangaroo court, filled with men who perjured themselves, which led to the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth.

I can think of several other history-making court decisions. The trial and eventual excommunication of Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms in 1521 comes immediately to mind. In more recent days one thinks of the so-called Scopes Monkey Trial which brought before the public the debate over creation and evolution and what should be taught in our public schools. Then there was the trial of the Chicago 7 for events that occurred at the time of the Democratic National convention in 1968. And who among us will ever forget the trial of O.J. Simpson, in which he was found not guilty in the death of his wife and Ron Goldman.

But one of the more significant trials in history never made its way into a courtroom, nor will you find the transcript of its proceedings in any records building or historical archive. It is a trial that transpires wholly within the pages of the Bible, more specifically Romans 1-3. There are several things that make this trial unusual.

In the first place, unlike most trials, there is more than one defendant. In fact, the defendants in this case number in the billions. The accused in this case encompass the entire human race! All men and women, whether Jew or Gentile, from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation on earth, are charged with cosmic treason against the God of all creation.

But this trial is unusual for yet another reason. To be found guilty will not lead to 20 years imprisonment or a substantial monetary fine. In this case, a verdict of guilty demands a sentence of death. Not just physical death, but eternal and everlasting condemnation, and that without the opportunity for appeal. As Paul puts it in Romans 6:23, “the wages of sin is death.” But of course, the good news, as Paul goes on to say, is that “the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord!”

The trial I’m describing is one that I’ve mentioned numerous times since we began our study of Romans. The apostle Paul is taking on the role of a *spiritual prosecuting attorney*. His job is to amass the incriminating evidence against all of us. And he does this thoroughly and methodically.

“Your Honor,” says Paul, “I give you Exhibit A.” Exhibit A, in this case, is the body of evidence indicting the entire Gentile or non-Jewish world. This body of evidence is found in Rom. 1:18-32.

“Your Honor,” Paul continues, “I give you Exhibit B.” Exhibit B is the body of evidence indicting the entire Jewish world, including Paul himself, with only one exception: Jesus. This body of evidence is found in Rom. 2:1-29.

“Your Honor,” says Paul, “I have additional evidence against both Jew and Gentile, irrefutable and undeniable evidence.” This evidence is found in Rom. 3:9-18.

And the verdict is unavoidable. As Paul says in Romans 3:19, “every mouth” has been stopped and “the whole world” is to be “held accountable to God.”

The Objections

The defendants in this case, however, do not remain silent. It is in particular the Jewish defendants among the human race who raise a loud voice of protest. In Romans 3:1-8 we read of their objections and how each of them is entirely and forever overruled.

Before we go any further let me remind you of something I pointed out in an earlier message. Paul makes use throughout Romans of a literary device called a *diatribe*. This is where the author, Paul, makes his point by engaging in an imaginary debate with a student or opponent. Sometimes Paul will put a question or an objection in the mouth of his dialogue partner and then emphatically reject it. We've already seen this four times in chapter two:

“Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges” (2:1).

“Do you suppose, O man . . .” (2:3).

“Or do you presume . . .” (2:4).

“But if you call yourself a Jew . . .” (2:17).

We find Paul making use of the diatribe once again in 3:1 where he puts a question to himself in the mouth of his opponent: “Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?” He does this yet again in v. 8, “And why not do evil that good may come?” I mention this to you so you can be aware of how Paul develops his argument in the book.

The First Objection Overruled (vv. 1-2)

In view of what Paul has just said in chapter two, one can almost understand why the Jewish man or woman would voice this objection in chapter three:

“Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?” (3:1).

If you listen closely between the lines, as it were, you can almost hear the Jewish objection sound something like this:

“Paul, if physical circumcision does not contribute to our salvation, if being a Jew, a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob does not guarantee blessing, if the Law merely brings a knowledge of sin but cannot save, and if Jews are to be judged in the same way as the Gentiles, *what good is there in being a Jew? What advantage is there in being a part of the nation Israel?* Paul, your theology appears to be inconsistent with the admitted privileges and blessings that God poured out on Israel.”

By the way, the word translated “benefit” is *ōpheleia*. Its verb form was used in 2:25 and there meant “saving advantage.” It is likely that the same connotation is present here. The objector’s question, then, is this: “Is there any *saving* advantage in being a Jew or possessing physical circumcision?”

You will recall from Romans 2:17-29 that Paul said some Jews are not really Jews and that some Gentiles can really be Jews, even if they are not circumcised. That appears to put in doubt the special position of Israel as God’s chosen people. I think you can understand why Paul’s comments in the second half of chapter two would stir up opposition among the Jews, as it seems Paul’s theology calls into question the integrity of the OT Scriptures. Simply put: If God promised salvation to the people of Israel, how do we account for such widespread unbelief among the Jews?

Paul very clearly rejects in vv. 3-4 the idea that if some Jewish people are unbelieving, God is unfaithful. Twice he uses the same energetic phrase, translated “By no means!” (see v. 4a, v. 6a). We could also translate this, “May it never be!” “Certainly not!” “God forbid!” “Perish the thought!” It is wholly unthinkable to suggest that God is unfaithful and has fallen short in fulfilling his promises.

I understand the objection. God did choose Israel out from among all the nations of the earth. God did bestow special privileges on them. They alone were the recipients of the Law. To now reduce them to the level of other nations seems either to accuse the OT of falsehood or to accuse God of failing to carry out his plans and failing to fulfill his promises. Listen to how the OT describes the privileged position of Israel:

“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deut. 7:6-8; cf. Amos 3:1-2).

When Paul turns in Romans 3:2 to consider Israel's prerogatives, "one item tops all others, namely, the fact that to the Jews, and to no other nation, was accorded the unique privilege, the high honor, of being the custodians of the oracles of God, that entire special revelation to Israel which consisted not only of commandments, but also of predictions and promises" (Hendriksen, 109).

"He declares his word to Jacob, his statutes and rules to Israel. He has not dealt thus with any other nation; they do not know his rules [or, his just decrees]" (Ps. 147:19-20; cf. Deut. 4:8).

This phrase, "oracles of God," may well refer to the entire OT scriptures. However, Tom Schreiner contends that "the promises of salvation for Israel are uppermost in Paul's mind. The advantage should not be restricted merely to the possession of the Scriptures and the stewardship required because of their possession. This would scarcely advance the argument beyond chapter 2 since the possession of the law by Israel, although an advantage in some respects, ensures only that Israel will be judged because of their failure to obey it" (157-58). It would seem, then, that by the word "advantage" in v. 1 Paul has in mind the promises from God that ensured them of future salvation. We'll explore this more in Romans 11.

It is here that we expect a long list of advantages and blessings that God bestowed on the Jewish people during the age of the OT. The translation, "to begin with" or "first of all" suggests that there is to follow a list of blessings. But he mentions only the one (the "oracles of God"), and then abruptly breaks off his argument. What we soon discover, however, is that he returns to this theme in Romans 9:4-5, and lists several other privileges and blessings that God alone granted to Israel:

"They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen" (Rom. 9:4-5).

Paul's point in mentioning the "oracles of God" is to awaken in his fellow Jews an awareness of the blessing that is theirs and to stimulate them to humility and repentance and faith in God. Instead, as we've already seen, they relied on these many privileges and blessings, such as their ethnicity, as if that alone could guarantee that they are in right relationship with God. They boasted in their possession of the "oracles" of God but failed to sincerely believe and obey them.

So, the first objection has been raised and overruled. The second objection comes in v. 3.

The Second Objection Overruled (vv. 3-4)

The objection in v. 3 can be re-worded in this way:

"But Paul, if in fact Israel as a nation was God's chosen people, to whom the promises have been given, how do you account for such widespread unbelief among them? These to whom such great privileges were given have responded in unbelief. They have rejected the Messiah. Does this mean that God has reneged on his promises to Israel? Does this mean that God can't be trusted to

keep his word? Paul, is it not the case that the unfaithfulness of the Jewish people, especially seen in their rejection of Jesus as Messiah, nullifies the faithfulness of God himself?”

“By no means!” shouts Paul. Objection overruled! But notice what is absent. Paul doesn’t really answer the objection. He simply shouts it down. He simply declares it invalid. Paul makes no attempt to answer the substance of the objection. He will do that when he comes to Romans 9-11.

However, Paul does provide something of a response. But it is a response that will in turn provoke yet another objection! The response is found in v. 4. There Paul says that rather than undermining God’s faithfulness to his word, human unbelief, rebellion, and sin serve to magnify and intensify the glory of God’s justice. To make his point, he cites the words of David in Psalm 51. Let’s look at vv. 1-4.

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment” (Ps. 51:4).

David is making it crystal clear that his confession of sin was designed to highlight the justice of God. God’s righteousness is seen most clearly against the backdrop of our sin. When we sin or fail God, it isn’t because God has failed us. In fact, our failure shines a bright light on God’s justice as well as his mercy.

But of course, this provokes yet one more objection. And you can see it coming a mile away.

The Third Objection Overruled (vv. 5-8)

This objection is stated three times by Paul, each time with a slightly different emphasis. But in each case the central idea is the same. Here it is.

“Paul, if my sin and unrighteousness put God’s righteousness on display, that is to say, if my failure serves to highlight his faithfulness, how can God judge me for it? It can’t be good or just for God to pour out his wrath on people whose bad behavior actually makes God look good.”

Or again,

“If human sin causes God’s glory to shine all the brighter, God would be unjust to punish me for it. If my being a liar has accentuated God’s being truthful, why am I going to be judged for it? How can it be fair for a person to be blamed for his falsehood, when it has actually redounded to God’s glory?”

The protest of our hypothetical dialogue partner is this: If our sin and unrighteousness, like David's in the OT, magnifies or enhances God's righteousness when he judges us, then we are actually the instruments of God's glory. When we sin we magnify God's righteousness. If that is true, wouldn't it be unjust of God to condemn us? He would be judging us for the very thing that magnifies his glory as the righteous God! Paul's immediate response is simply to say: "No, you are very wrong!"

This objection takes on an insidiously wicked form when Paul's hypothetical objector pushes back, as he does in v. 8, and says: "Well, then, why don't we just do more evil so that God can benefit from it? If his righteousness as the judge is magnified when seen in comparison with our unrighteousness, let's sin all the more and do God a favor!"

It's almost as if the objector is contending that God should be grateful to us for sinning. We've really done him a huge favor by our unrighteousness. If our sinning actually achieves the good result of making God look good, let's sin all the more! The point of the objector is that it would be unfair for God to punish the sinner for something that ultimately works to his advantage. How can God condemn a person when that person's sin actually glorifies God by alerting us to the righteousness of God as judge? It's as if the objector is saying, "The worse I am, the better I am, because my sin magnifies God's mercy and shines a light on the righteousness of his judgment."

Again, if God uses my sin for his good and glory, why does he judge me for it? Paul has had enough of this nonsense and feels somewhat embarrassed in even mentioning the objection. He thus adds, somewhat apologetically, "I speak in a human way" (v. 5). That is to say, I am speaking as a fallen human with distorted reasoning would speak. But we know better.

So how does Paul respond to this objection? Does he even answer it? Not really. He simply asserts in v. 6 that if your objection were to hold true, how could God judge the world. But we know that God *will* judge the world. Therefore, your objection can't be legitimate.

But do you see the problem this poses. Paul's point is that divine judgment is certain and inevitable. It cannot be challenged or evaded. Therefore, for you to argue that your sin should be excused and not judged because it serves to magnify God's righteousness is invalid.

Now, if Paul were to respond more fully to the objection, he might be expected to say something like this. First, the fact that your sin magnifies God's justice when he punishes you for it in no way changes the fact that you have sinned. And the wages of sin is death. Second, there isn't a man or woman alive who has ever sinned, intending by it to glorify and honor God. We sin because we are evil and because we despise and disregard God. Third, it is to God's praise, not yours, that he is wise and powerful enough to bring good out of your evil. It is hardly something for which you can take credit. The bottom line is that you can't blame God for the failures of men and women.

One gets the feeling from v. 8 that Paul believes the profound absurdity of the objection implies its dismissal. "Your condemnation is just," says Paul. Anyone who would try to justify their sin by arguing

that it really only serves to magnify the righteousness of God as judge is deserving of what comes his way.

A brief word is in order about the charge levelled at Paul in v. 8. The fact of the matter is that anytime we proclaim grace, people will accuse us of encouraging sin (see Rom. 6:1-2). “After all, if our relationship with God is based entirely on his unmerited favor and kindness, what difference does it make how we live? If our lifestyle is no threat to our standing with God, let’s trust in his grace and live like hell!” That, says Paul, is utter slander! Paul never suggested any such thing and those who push that accusation are rightly condemned. God’s grace serves to instruct us in holy living and to empower us to obey (see Titus 2:11-14), and any suggestion that grace gives us an excuse for sinful behavior is blasphemous.

A Profoundly Important and Eminently Practical Theological Principle

The principle that undergirds Paul’s comments here is the fact that God, in his sovereignty, makes evil serve his purposes. Evil will always be evil. The fact that God can turn it for good does not mean God is evil nor does it mean that evil now becomes good. But evil is not outside God’s providential sway.

Let me give you one example from Scripture. The most explicit incident is the crucifixion of Jesus himself. The murder of Jesus Christ on a cross was the most heinous sin ever committed. And yet it served to display the glory of God and provide for the forgiveness of our sins. But don’t draw the wrong conclusion from this. The fact that God’s grace and glory were on display in the death of his Son does not mean the way in which that death took place is transformed into a good and righteous act. Those who were directly responsible for the execution of Jesus will not be able to justify their action based on the fact that God sovereignly ordained his death for good. Nor will they be able to appeal to the argument that Paul has just refuted in Romans 3 that since God’s righteousness as judge is seen when he punishes sin the sin itself should be excused.

We see this in two places in Acts.

“Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know—this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men” (Acts 2:22-23).

“When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, ‘Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed”—for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and

Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place” (Acts 4:23-28).

Now, think about Herod and Pontius Pilate and the Gentiles and Jewish people who conspired to have Jesus crucified. Think of them in the light of Romans 3:1-8. Could they not protest their judgment by saying,

“But God. You yourself said through Peter in Acts 2 and 4 that what we did we did because you ordained that we should do it. Our action in crucifying Jesus put your glory on display and made it possible for you to redeem and forgive repentant sinners. You accomplished great and marvelous things because of what we did. How, then, can you hold us accountable? How, then, can you judge us? How, then, can you inflict wrath on us? How, then, can you describe us as ‘lawless’ men who sinned by plotting against you and your Son, Jesus Christ?”

But this would be to no avail. They were wicked in what they did. And God will judge them for what they did.

This is but one instance of a multitude of examples in Scripture where we see that God’s sovereignty and mankind’s responsibility are perfectly compatible. They do not cancel out each other. I realize that this sounds to you like a contradiction. But it isn’t. How do I know it isn’t? I know it because Scripture repeatedly tells me so. Scripture does not make any attempt to explain in detail how a sovereign God can be the judge of people who violate his ordained will. It simply asserts it, over and over again.

Will Judas Iscariot be judged and suffer God’s wrath for his betrayal of Jesus? Yes. But how, you ask, if that act of betrayal was itself prophesied by God in the OT and if Jesus chose Judas to be an apostle knowing that he would betray him?

Will the kings of the earth who conspire against Christ and the Church at the end of the age be judged for their wickedness and persecution of God’s people? Yes. But how, you ask, if their determination to persecute God’s people was in fulfillment of God’s sovereign decree? We read in Revelation 17:17 that the kings of the earth will hand over their power to the beast. They will become pawns in the beast’s wicked ways. And yet the text also says that they do this because “God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose, . . . until the words of God are fulfilled.”

This is but one example of a mystery in Scripture that we must acknowledge will never be unraveled or explained by human reasoning. God’s ways are higher than ours. Our responsibility is simply to embrace, without qualification, *both* God’s sovereign providential rule *and* the moral accountability of mankind to obey his commands.

Some of you may think that none of this deep theological discussion is of any practical value. I beg to differ. My entire approach to living, to serving at Bridgeway, to suffering, to leading my family, to trying

to make sense of the world and its chaos, is shaped and undergirded by my strong conviction that God is infinitely powerful and infinitely wise and infinitely loving and will assuredly secure a victory for us and especially for the fame of his name by “causing all things to work together for good” (Rom. 8:28). If I didn’t believe passionately in God’s sovereign and providential control over the affairs of this world and my life, I would undoubtedly fall into complete despair.

People may accuse God of injustice. They may question his motives. They may slander his name for not measuring up to their expectations of what they think God should be like and what God should do. My response to that is the same as that of Paul in v. 4 –

“Let God be true though every one were a liar” (Rom. 3:4).