

Romans 3:1-20 - Facing the reality of sin and turning to Jesus as Saviour

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[0 : 00] Okay, everybody, we're going to start the reading for today. We are going through Romans 3, verses 1-20, page 1130.

! God's faithfulness. What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew? Or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way. First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.

What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? 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.

But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what should we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? I'm using human argument. Certainly not.

If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, if my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?

[1 : 07] Why not say, as some slanderously claim that we say, let us do evil, the good may result. Their condemnation is just. 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. As it is written, there is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands.

There is no one who seeks God. All have turned away. All have together become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves.

Their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood. Ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.

There is no fear of God before their eyes. 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.

[2 : 08] 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. This is the word of God. Thanks, Teddy, for reading.

Keep that passage open in front of you. It's going to help you to follow along. I'm going to pray for us, that the Lord might give us help as we come to look at his word. Let's pray. Father, we do want to pray and ask for your help this morning.

We know how easily distracted we are. And so we pray that you might, by your spirit, quieten our hearts to listen to what you are saying to us through your word.

I pray that what I say, that what we all hear, would be helpful to us, that you might speak and be glorified. In Jesus' name.

Amen. What you might notice as you look at the passage is that it is shaped around a contradictory answer to a repeated question.

[3 : 09] Here's the question. If you look down at verse one, what advantage then is there in being a Jew or what value is there in circumcision? What advantage is there in those things?

Answer, verse two, much in every way, he says. Then in verse nine, you get the same question. What should we conclude then? Do we have any advantage?

Answer, not at all. None whatsoever. Same question, two different answers. Now, that apparent contradiction, and it isn't a contradiction, we'll see that in a moment, that apparent contradiction gets to the heart of what our passage this morning is all about.

That is, what is the advantage of being a Jew? What is the advantage of being around God's words? What is the advantage of being familiar with the content of the Bible?

Probably a person now of kind of Christian heritage, someone who's been to church a bit. And the answer is, well, there are many advantages, but still all of those advantages will not on their own save you.

[4 : 16] And so that the warning here is not to imagine that simply being around the Bible or the message of the Bible is enough for you this morning, enough for me.

On the 28th of January 1986, the NASA Space Shuttle Challenger exploded just 73 seconds after liftoff.

It killed all seven astronauts whose bodies were found a few weeks later in the Atlantic Ocean. It was perhaps one of the first televised disasters that unfolded live on the news.

And I'm sure some of us here, I can remember watching it. Others of you are thinking, wow, 1986, that's like a lifetime ago. But anyway, some of us remember it.

The morning of the flight, it was cold and the engineers had warned that the rubber rings, that O-rings that stop flammable gases escaping from the boosters, had not been tested in cold weather.

[5 : 12] But their concerns were ignored and the launch went ahead. Later, investigations showed that the people who were making the decision over whether or not they should launch just ignored those people because they thought, well, we've launched rockets before.

We've never had a problem before. Surely it will be all right. And those who had doubts, they stopped speaking up because, well, what's the point in saying anything because no one listens to us anyway? So they kept their mouths shut.

So the pressure to appear successful and not to have negative publicity meant that the decision to launch was taken. And 73 seconds later, seven people lost their lives. The Challenger disaster has become a sort of case study of what's called groupthink, where a group of otherwise perfectly competent people can convince themselves to do something stupid and terrible results happen.

And when you look, I think, at Romans 1 to 3, I think you see that Paul's concern is that in churches there's a kind of groupthink, a theological groupthink that goes on in churches, where the idea of universal judgment, original sin, the presence of judgment, moral responsibility, warnings of future wrath, all of those are ignored, not because they've been proved wrong, not because they're shown to be untrue, but because they're deeply unpopular, they're unpleasant, they're difficult to accept.

And so churches, like ours and others, can stop talking about them, fearing that if they do that, they're going to empty their building. You know, we want a positive message, we don't want a negative message, we don't want three chapters on sin and its judgment.

[6 : 49] That's so heavy. We want light. We don't want heavy. That's so negative and we want to be positive. But Paul, under the inspiration of the Spirit, will not drop it. And so for the third week in a row, we find ourselves, don't we, considering God's judgment at human sin.

And I want us just to split our time in this passage together this morning, just around those two answers to the same question. So let's take the first answer. The first answer is, it's good to be here. It's good to be here.

Look down at verse two. Paul is pretty clear about the significant advantage of being a Jew. Being raised as part of God's people means that you are exposed to what he calls the very words of God. Here Paul is referring to the Old Testament law and he says that, that knowing the Old Testament law is literally knowing what God says.

Those are his words. The instructions for moral living, the instructions around the temple, the design of the kingdom, all those in the scriptures and are part of what God says. And knowing what God says is a significant advantage in life.

That's still true today. If you've been brought up going to church, if you've been along to Sunday school, if you've had a Christian friend who's opened a Bible with you over the years, that is a good thing.

[8 : 03] The Bible is God speaking and hearing what God says is a good thing for you. Verse three underlines that point. Which he begins by noting that people who are exposed to the Bible are not always faithful.

Sometimes they are unfaithful. Here's some news for you. Church people can be as bad as anybody. But that, says Paul, doesn't undermine the advantage of hearing the Bible. Because the unfaithfulness of people is not the same as the unfaithfulness of God.

Look what he says in verse three. What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? 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.

In other words, his point here is that the faithfulness of God is not dependent on the morality of his people. God can be true and everyone else a liar. That's the nature of being God.

His character and his goodness are not dependent on me or you or anybody else. They were present before anyone existed. So God's word is still good and having it is still an advantage to you even if the story of the people who spoke God's word to you is one of consistent unfaithfulness.

[9 : 19] I wonder if it's worth pausing with me a moment here. I think there are probably some of us here this morning who need to hear this. Maybe what's putting you off if you're not a Christian this morning, maybe what's put you off becoming a Christian over the years or maybe as a Christian what's really making you struggle as a Christian is you look at the people who say they believe it and they behave so badly.

Maybe really badly towards you personally. Perhaps the church that you've been to, perhaps this church has let you down in somewhere. Maybe a Christian friend has let you down, betrayed you.

Maybe the Christian parents that you had fought terribly at home. No one would have known it at church but you knew it because you were at home with them. Maybe it was even worse than that. Maybe someone who went by the name of Christian abused you and treated you appallingly.

And maybe because of that you conclude, well the Bible can't be true, can it? Because, you know, if the Bible was true, people who believe the Bible would behave better than they are behaving or have behaved. Now that might seem perfectly reasonable to us on the surface but Paul says it's a false logic because God's word can be true even when everyone else is bad.

God's goodness and the goodness of his word is independent of people, even the people who claim his name. It's just like the cooker instructions, the instructions that you received when you bought a cooker, if you bought a cooker or got a cooker, those instructions are separate, aren't they?

[10 : 48] They are independent from the cooker itself. So the instructions aren't wrong just because you burn the dinner, right? God's word can be true and good even if everyone else is a liar because his goodness is independent from the behaviour of you, me or anybody else.

So let me encourage you this morning, don't give up on God and his word because the people who taught it to you are fools. That won't help you. It will only make it worse. Then comes a slightly different argument.

The goal is the same. The goal is still this kind of trying to wiggle out of the difficult truth about God's judgment but it takes a slightly different tack So look down at verse 5. But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly what should we say?

That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? I'm using a human argument. Here his point is that if God is true and every man a liar and the lies and the unfaithfulness of humanity just exposes the faithfulness of God then why is unfaithfulness and lying such a big deal?

Surely God loves the opportunity to be made to look greater and more faithful? Well the response listen to it verse 6 certainly not. If that were so how could God judge the world?

[12 : 02] Here again Paul is unpicking isn't he the logic of the claim? The logic is that wickedness makes God look great so therefore wickedness is not wicked anymore. Well that means judgment can't happen and nobody thinks judgment shouldn't happen because wickedness is wicked and it needs to be judged.

He repeats the argument and the answer in verses 7 and 8 some might argue if my falsehood enhances God truthfulness and so increases his glory why am I still condemned as a sinner? Why not say as some slanderously claim that we say let us do evil that good may result their condemnation is just.

Let me go back to the cooker for a moment and the instructions. If you are in possession of a cooker is it an advantage that you are also in possession of the instructions for that?

Yes it is. They're the words of the manufacturer. They are important. They are true. They show you how to use it. What if you burn the dinner by ignoring the instructions?

Does it then follow that the instructions are somehow bad? No it does not. The freedom to burn the dinner is entirely yours outside of the goodness of the instructions on how to use it.

[13 : 13] In fact a series of burnt dinners shows you just how important and wonderful the instructions are. As you look at the pictures in the instruction manual of beautifully cooked dinners and your burnt offerings you go wow this is even better.

I want this. Well then surely the manufacturer is really pleased with my burnt dinners because they make his instructions look better. No.

That's illogical and stupid. The manufacturer produced the cooker for you to have fine tasting meals not burnt ones. Well so it is for the Jew or today for the young person raised in the church or the adult with a Christian heritage.

Is it good for you to be familiar with the moral expectations of God's word? It is really good for you to be familiar with those. Those are God's words. It's what God says. It's brilliant for you to know them.

But you say well but I've messed up. I've not kept the moral instructions. That means the instructions are bad. They don't work. No it doesn't mean that at all. Our failure is not God's failure.

[14 : 20] Our freedom to ignore his word is not a denial of God's goodness. It's our freedom to ignore his words. In fact our freedom to ignore his words and our wickedness make his goodness look greater. Oh well if his goodness looks greater by my wickedness is my wickedness not so bad anymore?

No. Don't be ridiculous. It doesn't mean that. The very definition of the life that you were given was to be given to you to live for God's glory for you to know what is good.

Alan McDonald was an engineer with a company that built the rockets for the Challenger shuttle. He had persistently told the NASA managers and his own superiors that the launch should not go ahead if the temperature was below 53 degrees Fahrenheit.

Whatever that means. The Americans in the room you can tell me what 53 degrees Fahrenheit but apparently it's cold. He said listen if it's below that temperature the O-rings are going to fail.

Nobody listened to him. Nobody took him seriously. Let me ask you was it good that Alan was there? Yes it was really good. Was he any less right because he was ignored?

[15 : 28] No. Does their failure to listen make his advice stand out as better? Absolutely it does. Does Alan looking better absolve them of moral responsibility for launching the shuttle?

Absolutely not. And so it is for you and me. Is it good that you're here this morning? It is brilliant that you're here this morning. Thank God for every time you've been in a church.

Thank God for every time you've opened his word and someone's explained it to you or shown it to you. It's been a great thing. It's great that we've heard of God's moral expectations. It's really good to be here.

But does our failure to keep God's moral commands mean that God's moral commands are no longer any good? No not at all. Does our failure and the mess make God look greater?

It does. Does that absolve me of responsibility? No it does not. It's good to be here but it's of no saving advantage. So that's the second point.

[16 : 25] We are no better off for being here. This is Paul's point in verse 9. Look down at verse 9 let me read it to you. What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage?

Advantage. Not at all. We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are under the power of sin. It's worth noting that although our translation states the question in a very similar way in verse 1 and verse 9 the word translated advantage is actually different in verse 1 and verse 9.

Verse 1 is something to do with sort of the benefits. What are the benefits of being a Jew? But here the question is really whether being a Jew being exposed to God's word gives you some kind of superiority.

Whether exposure to God's word gives you a spiritual advantage. Literally does God's moral law give you a free pass on God's judgment? And the answer to that says Paul not at all.

Because he says that the problem with all of humanity whether you're a Jew a Gentile whether this is the first time you've been in church or whether you've been to church all your life the problem is not so much ignorance of God's word but rebellion against God's word.

[17 : 36] That's the problem in the universe. Look at how verse 9 puts it he says we are all alike under the power of sin. The word power there is not actually there in the Greek it's just literally under sin as if sin is a master under which we are squashed.

He has dominion over us. And Paul then proves that with a string of Old Testament quotes that he blends together. Now I don't think these verses really verse 10b down to verse 18 take much explaining at all.

Let me just read them to you slowly look down at your Bibles and notice with me all the no ones and the alls. This includes everybody in the room. There is no one righteous not even one.

There is no one who understands. There is no one who seeks God. All have turned away. They have together become worthless.

There is no one who does good not even one. Their throats are open graves. Their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips.

[18 : 41] Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood. Ruin and misery mark their ways and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.

I don't know what you're thinking as that list is read. Maybe you think goodness me it's a bit overstated isn't it? Is it is it really that bad?

Are you really saying that nobody seeks God? Really? I thought everyone was looking after God this day and age. My friends are interested in God.

No one does good really? Have you ever met my gran? She's a lovely woman. She was a good woman. Notice Paul's point is not that everyone is morally the same. He's not saying that.

Nor is he saying that morally everybody is as bad as they could be. It might well be that you are better than the person sat next to you. I don't want to comment. I don't know them and I don't know how well they're living. It could be that.

[19 : 44] But his point is it doesn't matter whether you're morally superior to the person next to you because none of us have enough moral credit to pay God so we can escape judgment. All of us have a moral debt to pay.

It may be small. It may be smaller than the person next to you. It may be big but it's always enough to condemn us. We're all in the same boat. And the impact of that is supposed to be verse 19.

If we've understood it we're supposed to just fall silent. Have nothing to say. The church just sit and feel the weight of it.

No one righteous. Universal judgment for every single man and woman who ever lived. Condemnation for every moral trespass.

Mine, yours, everyone's. Big or small. Ronald Reagan who was president of the United States at the time of the Challenger disaster appointed a guy called William Rogers and Neil Armstrong to chair an investigation into what went wrong.

[20 : 52] Alan McDonald I think was too junior to be in the meeting himself so his bosses spoke to him and tried to suggest that despite concerns about the cold weather the engineers collectively were happy to launch.

When Alan understood what they were going to say he walked into the meeting himself and he said that he and the other engineers had told them not to launch and the room fell silent.

McDonald was called into the middle of the room and his testimony exposed what had happened and it brought justice for the astronauts who were killed. In a sense verse 19 is that kind of Alan McDonald moment isn't it for us?

That kind of collective group think of churches where we can look at each other and think well we're pretty much sure right aren't we? We're probably better than most people aren't we? That kind of group think is called out by Paul.

The law his word for the Old Testament scriptures has been calling us sinners for as long as we've been exposed to it. The problem is when we choose to do nothing about it.

[21 : 55] The law said your works are bad and we've doubled down on our works and kept trying to earn favour with God so we're without excuse. there is no saving advantage in having the word of God unless you listen to its warning says Paul.

Literally I mean there's no there's literally no point in being here unless you're going to hear the warning of God's word about the emptiness of your works and the conclusion is there in verse 20 therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by works of the law rather through the law we become conscious of sin.

Let me try and simplify it let me try and put the point of these verses just as simply as I can. Listen it's something like this it's great you're here but being here won't save you that's it.

Now in a way we could leave it there I think that's a fair summary of the content of these verses but the truth is that our job this morning is not just to summarise neatly what the verses say we need to know what it means for us don't we?

So before we finish let me just try and draw out a couple of implications for us from what we've seen the first one is this you cannot be a true Christian without being convinced of your sin you cannot be a Christian without being convinced of your sin this is what Paul means in verse 20 by being conscious of your sin that really if you're going to understand who Jesus is if you're going to put your faith in Jesus in the way in which the Bible is inviting you to if you're going to receive salvation in Jesus' name in the way in which the Bible is inviting you to if you're going to live a life which pleases God and the Lord Jesus in a way that the Bible is inviting you to then you're going to have to do more than just be convinced that Jesus gives you a purpose in life right?

[23 : 47] If you're going to know that the joy and the hope that comes from knowing Christ you need to be persuaded of more than just I don't really know what I'm living for you need to know more and be persuaded of more that Jesus is not just the one who can help you through the challenges of life there are as many challenges in life as there are people in this room and more besides right?

If you're persuaded that Jesus is the only person who can help you in the challenges that you face in life that's brilliant but it's not enough it's not enough because more than that in a sense ahead of all of that you and I need to be convinced that without the death of Jesus on the cross in my place bearing the punishment of God that I deserved I would rightly be condemned to hell and God would not be good and would not be holy if he didn't do that this is uncomfortable I know it's uncomfortable I can imagine that Paul took absolutely no delight in stringing these Old Testament quotes together in verses 11 to 18 Paul has no twisted satisfaction in making us feel better I don't rather the point of this is he's quoting these scriptures because he wants you to know not only that his message is true but it's important it's repeated over and over because if we don't know that we're sinners we won't know that we need a saviour now perhaps I can anticipate an objection to this maybe you're thinking something like this

I don't know whether you are but maybe you are you're thinking this is terrible for my self-esteem Steve maybe there's a conversation going on in your head which goes listen I came in this morning and I was feeling pretty rubbish about myself before I even came in and now you're telling me some stuff that I spent all week trying to ignore you're making it worse now I came to church with a kind of imposter syndrome now you're telling me that at the heart of Christianity is a belief in my own failure but listen if that's you let me try and give you an illustration imagine at home you've got a sofa right you've bought yourself a beautiful cream sofa but then that thing happens which always happens when you buy a cream sofa which is what people stain it yeah and it gets marks on it the dog jumps up with his muddy paws on it and the sofa is covered with stains and you're embarrassed now you're embarrassed about the state of your cream sofa so you strategically place cushions on your sofa to cover over the stains and a throw as well and if someone points out a stain you're like oh don't do that please or don't move the cushion because I don't want you to show the stain

I'm trying to hide it from everybody well imagine then that someone comes around and they give you stain removal spray works every time on every stain that doesn't exist by the way but imagine it does right and so you you throw all the cushions on the floor you get all the throws that you've strategically placed to cover over the stains you lob them off yourself and you get about spraying and wiping it down so that you've got a beautiful cream sofa again now that's the gospel right conviction of sin is really really important not because there's any spiritual merit in feeling rubbish about yourself rather it's because sin is the problem and Christ is the answer and so because we know the one who has the answer to sin and guilt we are not embarrassed to be convicted of our sin or shown our sin because every time we see it we turn to him and we remove the stain

Lord Jesus let me come to you again in a sense as a Christian even being caught in sin is a kind of mercy because it turns me to the saviour who has the solution here it is really listen self-esteem is a hollow gift right if you think you're brilliant and your self-esteem is like you know through the roof doesn't really matter it doesn't really matter because there's something way better than that and that is that knowing Jesus loves you even with the rottenness of your sin loves you enough to die for you in the rottenness of your sin do you know that is so much better than self-esteem you could keep your self-esteem I want to know that Jesus loves me and I want you to know that too and so we need to be convinced of our sin finally we cannot be a faithful church without preaching about sin

[28 : 42] I think it's probably a fair assessment to say that the church in Britain in general is probably not as clear on sin and judgment as we could be or should be I don't know whether you followed in the Christian press actually in the secular press a bit as well about this quiet revival that's going on amongst younger people who are starting to come back to church listen that's great isn't it there are some of you here this morning and it's great that you're here it's brilliant and we are delighted to have you but it seems that as you read about it a bit more that what's sparking that is not so much a conviction of sin but a realisation that the materialistic atheism that's been sold to us by the school system and the government system basically is kind of hollow right and that's good that you've seen through that if you've seen through that but the shallowness of materialism is not really the big problem that Jesus came to solve and unless we're really clear on this as a church we're no better than the NASA committee that decided to launch the Challenger because we're ignoring the reality and our church won't help people a friend of mine used to illustrate it like this he said imagine that you're a steward on an aeroplane where the engines have failed okay and there are enough parachutes on the aeroplane to provide one for everybody on the plane and so as a steward on the plane where the engines have failed you're trying to persuade people to put their parachutes on and clip them on properly and so you walk down the aisle and you say listen this is a really comfy attachment for you to wear it will make life in that seat much more bearable

I know it's a bit uncomfortable you're in economy class aren't you and you can't lean back as far as you'd like to but this is like a kind of cushion it goes lovely with the outfit that you're wearing by the way as well would be a great addition to your outfit this afternoon well if you do that is anyone going to put the parachute on with a sense of urgency that it's required are people going to just ignore it I know you walk back down some are kind of holding it over one shoulder and some are kind of leaning on it like a pillow now listen if you want people to put the parachute on properly to understand its importance you have to tell them the plane is crashing and then they will understand and that's it here judgment the judgment of God the fact that everyone in this room all of us without exception everybody that you meet will stand before their maker to give an account for the life that they have lived is not the craziness of a street preacher it's the truth of God's word and it's the inevitable truth of a holy God and a sinful creation and Christ is the only answer not your works not the fact you went to church not the fact that you're less of a sinner than someone else you know only Jesus and so to preach Jesus we can't just speak Jesus speak about

Jesus we need to speak about sin and judgment and hell we need to show that the peril that we face is greater than the discomfort or grief or lack of purpose or sadness because without the reality of judgment the cross of Jesus Christ makes no sense and with it it's the most beautiful thing in the world let's pray together we don't get lots of opportunity for quiet so let's just have a few moments of quiet we can pray in our own hearts as we thank and ponder on what God has said to us from his words thank you Thank you.

Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

[34 : 04] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. united with you as our loving Heavenly Father.

I pray this morning that there might not be a single person in the room who leaves without that kind of confidence in Jesus. Please Lord, convince us of our sin and convince us too of the power of Jesus alone to forgive us as we pray in his name.

Amen.