

Prayer

You have commissioned us, Lord Jesus Christ, to do Your perfect will;
Prepare us for what lies ahead, and help us by Your strength;
Show us all we need to know of Your great will and purpose;
Encourage us to do what is right, all the time, and with grace;
And grant us the empowering of Your Spirit, who knows the perfect way:
AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Ask the Lord to give you a better understanding of how you respond to others, especially how you respond when you feel rejected. Seek His wisdom and blessing

On-going prayers

- **Confess your sins to God.** Look back over your past life and offer to God any people you have not forgiven
- Pray for the leaders of the oil industry, after the spill in the Gulf
- Give thanks to God for His mercy shown through Jesus

Meditation

Rejoice to see the start of every day;
Believe the providential power of God
And see at work His universal laws
Of goodness, faith and hope and love.

Dispel the demons of today's despair;
The awful power of evil's dark intentions,
Driving backwards all for which we truly care
Towards the misery of loveless gloom.

Let God's power reign here and now
And hear Christ Jesus say in triumph, 'No contest!'
For deep within, the Spirit claims the ground
So we by faith can taste the victory He's won!

Bible passage – Romans 3:1-8

¹ Now, is there any benefit in being a Jew? Or is there any value in circumcision? ² A great deal, in every way.

Firstly, the Jews were entrusted with the words of God. ³ What does it mean if some refused to believe? Does their lack of faith make God's faithfulness ineffective? ⁴ Absolutely not! God is surely true and all people are liars; for it is written, 'So that You may be proved right in what you say, and confirmed in Your judgement.'

⁵ Now if our wrongdoing serves to demonstrate God's justice, what can we say? Is God wrong to inflict punishment (humanly speaking)? ⁶ Absolutely not! For how else can God judge the world?

⁷ For if the truth of God thrives to His glory because of my faults, why then am I condemned as a sinner? ⁸ Why not say that we should do evil so that good may come of it, as some people slanderously report us as saying? Well, they deserve their condemnation!

Bible Study

Review

If we were to hear this passage read without having first read the previous verse, we would have a problem! Perhaps here more than anywhere else in Romans, we realise that we are listening in on a private dispute between two parties, and it is not immediately obvious what is going on!

The first two verses are straightforward enough. Paul speaks about the value of being a Jew by birth, and picks out the immensely important fact that they have '*the words of God*' (3:2). By this, Paul certainly means the Laws of Moses. But by avoiding the term 'Law' and using the phrase '*words of God*', his words suggest that the Jews should value not just the Law, but also the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures, including the prophets. It is a subtle point, but worth bearing in mind, considering the complexity of what Paul says here.

In truth, Paul had just written rather scathingly about Judaism, and he had even questioned the rite of circumcision, the time honoured sign of a Jewish man (2:25-29). This might lead his readers to think that Paul was rubbishing Judaism completely, so he wrote to correct this impression. Now, this goes to the heart of our passage, for throughout, Paul seems to argue against someone who is criticising what he has just said. However, he does this to counteract any criticisms that might arise in Rome, because he knew from experience how people might try to oppose his preaching of the Gospel.

We must now look in detail at what Paul says. In verses 3 and 4, he writes against the suggestion that if the Jews were unable to do what God wanted, then God had either lied to them or His Word was ineffective. Against this, Paul says that God must surely be just and true by definition, whatever the state of humanity, and to make his point, he quotes a part of Psalm 51, which reads:

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that You are justified in Your sentence and blameless when You pass judgment. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.
(Psalm 51:3-5)

Because of the differences between Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek, it is quite difficult to spot the connection between these two, but it is easy when we read them side by side. The connection makes it clearer to us that Paul is reflecting on the basic sinful nature of humanity and the pure righteousness of God. It is not something that people can question!

You are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment (Psalm 51:4)
Your are proved right in what You say and confirmed in Your judgement (Romans 3:4)

In verses 5 and 6, Paul responds to the idea that God is wrong to punish people because of sin. It suggests that God needs sinful people and shows Himself to this world by saving them, and so He should not punish those He needs! This is a philosophical 'red herring', of course, that diverts people from addressing the truth about their relationship with God, and Paul replies to it simply. He says that God is always right, because He is the sole arbiter of what is right and wrong within His world.

Lastly, in verses 7 and 8, Paul responds to the added criticism that if doing evil enables God to do what is right, then it appears right to do plenty of wrong things to allow God to show even greater mercy in forgiveness! In the end, Paul does not even grace this criticism with a logical reply, he simply declares the condemnation of people who peddle this deception (3:8).

This may leave us wondering where Romans is going, but we should not be worried. By responding to these rather devious criticisms of the Gospel, Paul constantly refers his readers back to the absolute justice of God and the sins of humanity. We must have a clear understanding of God's justice and human sin if we are to appreciate the power of God's salvation through Christ.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Paul's method of letter writing
- The question of Judaism and possible benefits of being Jewish
- An accusation about the perversion of sin

Notes on the text and translation

V4 'so that You may be proved right in what you say and confirmed in Your judgement'

Other translations:

'so that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge' (NIV)

'so that you may be justified in your words and prevail in your judging' (NRSV)

The two halves of this say quote similar things. The first half is about getting speech right and the second is about getting judgement right. The words used by different translators simply attempt to convey these ideas in an appropriate way.

V7 'thrives and demonstrates His glory'

Other translations:

'if my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases His glory' (NIV)

'if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to His glory' (NRSV)

The NRSV translation is the closest to the Greek, however it is hardly understandable in English, because people just do not use words in this way. My translation attempts to make the phrase understandable, because the word for 'abounds' can in my view be adequately translated as 'thrives', and the Greek expression 'to his glory' incorporates the idea of being made known.

Going Deeper

These verses could be said to show more of Paul's passion than his theological good judgement. Certainly it is not easy to follow what he says. Nevertheless, it is fascinating, and as we explore the passage further, we will come to understand a little more about why Paul was so 'hot under the collar'!

Letter writing!

As we look further at this passage, it is helpful if we remind ourselves that Paul was writing a theological treatise in the form of a letter. After the beginning of the letter in chapter one, Paul wrote to a general readership because his purpose was to give a full account of the Gospel. In addition, Paul did not have the benefit of word-processors or even the luxury of being able to erase something and start again. The process was simple. Paul spoke, and a scribe wrote down what he said on a parchment, and once written, it could not be changed. Neither should we assume that writing was a quick process; the parchments we have in our possession from those times indicate that scribes wrote carefully, word by word, in capitals only and with no punctuation. Amendments and additions were made in small marginal notes.

If we imagine the whole process whilst in action, two things are obvious. Firstly, once a part of the letter was written by the scribe, then it could not be changed. Secondly, Paul had time to think through what he was saying whilst he dictated; which was a mixed blessing because if he began something which he decided on reflection that he would deal with later, then he could manoeuvre what he said accordingly. It is quite fair to suggest that at the beginning of this reading today, Paul thought about giving a substantial explanation of the place of the Jewish people in God's plan, as indicated by the beginning of a list in verse 2 'firstly ...'. Having made one point about this, however, he decided to wait and do this later on in his letter, but with no ability to 'correct' what was written, he proceeded to turn the direction of the letter back in the general direction of the theme of the absolute justice of God.

The question of Judaism and possible benefits for being Jewish

The first four verses address the question posed at the beginning of verse 1 and which was probably thrown at Paul whenever he spoke about God's justice. If he said that all were equal under God's moral authority, then why should there not be some benefit for the Jews given that they had born, however painfully, the historical evidence of this justice? If we are now to understand Paul's response to this, we must realise that the question probably hurt him personally. It is highly likely that this subject was one that he agonised over in the years he spent coming to terms with the call Jesus placed on his life (Gal 1:17f.), and although others must have asked him this question on more than one occasion, he writes in this letter about this, as if arguing with himself!

Anyone reading Paul's letter through from the previous chapter (2) might think that Paul would say there was no benefit for anyone in being a Jew. He had, after all, just dismissed the notion of circumcision as a meaningful physical sign (2:25-29). Therefore when he gives a positive answer to his own question 'is there any value in circumcision' (3:1,2), it is surely because of the spiritual value of circumcision and what it means to have a Covenant relationship with God which is 'of the heart'. Paul also mentions the benefit of the Jewish possession of the 'words of God'. In some versions of the Bible you will find this is translated 'the oracles of God', but it clearly means Scripture as a whole, and specifically, not just the Law. The phrase,

although it is not common in the New Testament, fits Paul's argument from Romans 2 against the Jewish claim to uphold the Law, which consequently gave little weight to the rest of Scripture.

Paul will not hold back from his belief in the impartial moral justice of God, and holds that this must be true of God irrespective of whether Jews have been faithful or unfaithful in their Covenant task (3:3). How can any human success or failure upset the balance of moral justice? In order to conclude this point, Paul quotes partially from Psalm 116:11 'I said in my consternation "everyone is a liar"', and by implying that all people sin, points forward to what he will say next in the wider theme of his letter (see 3:9f.). However, he then makes a problem for himself by quoting from the very well known (then as now) Psalm 51; but he only gives the second half of verse 4, which makes it very difficult for us to understand his point. For this reason, Psalm 51:3-5 is below:

3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. 4 Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment. 5 Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.
(Psalm 51:3-5)

What Paul wants us to see in his quote is the great generosity of God when dealing justly, but graciously with repentant sinners. Most of the sin Paul has talked about in his letter so far has been unrepentant sin, but our God, says Paul, is so incredibly gracious, it is a sign of the greatness of His justice, not weakness! He has his eye on what he wants to say about the glorious work of Jesus!

An accusation about the perversion of sin

Paul quickly picks up a point from what he has just said that was clearly something that people had argued with him about. From verse 5 onwards, Paul has in mind the perverse accusation that if God's grace is shown by the way He forgives sinners, then surely we should be content to sin as often as we like, because the more we sin, the more grace we need from God. There is some evidence in other documents of the early church that some people took this casual line on sin. They said, for example, that it did not matter if you sinned after you became a Christian, because the Lord rejoiced to forgive the sin, and providing you made suitable confession, there was no problem. It was also a short theological jump from this to the belief that God did not really punish sinners. After all, Jesus loved them!

Verse 7 is difficult to grasp, but when we read it, it is best to imagine that Paul is quoting a form of this argument which goes something like this. If God gets glory when we sin, why should we take any ultimate blame; surely it is all 'good news' for God, and why should we be still 'judged a sinner' (3:7)?

Paul begins his attack on this way of thinking by insisting yet again that God is right to act against sin, though the words used in verse 5 for 'inflict punishment' are very close to those used earlier in Romans to describe the working of God's 'wrath'. Earlier in his letter he has described how those who sin are handed over to the consequences of their sins and drawn further and further away from God (see 1:18f.) His point is obvious; there can be no such thing as morality unless there is a genuine, equal and just judgement against all that is evil and wrong; Paul asks 'how else can God judge the world?'. We cannot 'get out' of judgement by making some perverse deal with God which allows us to do whatever sins we want just because God will get the benefit (glory) when we confess them. As Paul will explain later in Romans, those who think like this have not yet grasped the full implications of their salvation by which we are led into the path of holiness.

Application

At the time of writing to the Romans, Paul was concerned to give a proper explanation of the whole of the Gospel, and how people responded to it. From the point of view of where the Gospel started, Paul had to explain what it meant for Jews (he was one himself) and also the Gentiles like those at Rome who had accepted Jesus Christ, and experienced the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives. Consequently, he had to explain how God dealt with the sin found in each community, both Jews and Gentiles. However, from this passage of Scripture, it seems that Paul's opponents are not Jews or Gentiles, but people who opposed him for whatever reason, and sought to misinterpret his teaching. It is not clear who said the different things that lie behind this passage, some of the criticisms could have come from Jews, some from Gentiles. Certainly, if people want to tear something down by criticism, it does not matter where the ammunition they fire comes from!

Unfortunately this is true today, and it is a sad fact that the criticisms that are levelled against the Gospel of Christ today come more from people within the church who want to argue about it than people outside who object to it. Most people outside the church see no need to argue against it simply because they think it is irrelevant! From this, we can learn that it is possibly easier to fight against reason than it is to fight against apathy and disinterest!

It remains a matter of concern to the church today that many Christians still have a loose attitude towards and approach to sin. Many people who experience the Lord's salvation live in the light of it and go on to greater things, but strangely, many find it hard to deal with sins that continue to afflict their lives. Sometimes these are matters of habit or social practice, from heavy drinking to reading horoscopes and all manner of sexual sin. When challenged, people will either deny that a problem exists or confess immediately on the presumption that the Lord will forgive; but they return to the same sins whilst the enemy holds them in the grip of personal or social habits which are an affront to Almighty God. There are ways to deal with the most difficult of sins, but they can only be accessed if people accept that God is just and His justice does not go away just because people like to sin!

Throughout this Scripture, Paul says 'be careful', for justice is real. We face the consequences of our sins in this life and the next, and it is wrong to assume that the Lord is happy to accept 'apparent' repentance rather than real repentance. Real repentance means 'never again'. We need to say it and mean it, and seek the power of God's Holy Spirit to release the grip of the enemy that continues to hold many people in sin. These are not trivial matters.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Read through the passage of Scripture, and if you are in a group, check with each other that you understand each verse.
2. When you think about God as a Judge, what picture comes to mind, and how do you react to it?
3. What sins do people trivialise today by suggesting that they do not matter? How can they be highlighted and handled without upsetting people unnecessarily?

Personal comments by author

Dealing with sin is difficult at the best of times, but dealing with misunderstanding and the entrenchments and trouble that can arise from such situations can be very much harder. Today, it seems to me that people make a mockery of true theology when they debate some of the issues that divide Christians, such as baptism or Calvinism, or the Catholic and Protestant divide. They have become a scar on the face of the church that causes great pain to us and to God. I long for fresh approaches to scripture that can break through the problems that Satan has compounded to create division, so that our history of faith can be cleansed as we come to understand why God has done things at different times and places so that His Gospel can be declared.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Paul agonised because of his own personal experience and the way that people accused him of misrepresenting the Gospel. What arguments divide people sharply in the life of your church? Pray about this and ask the Lord to help you understand what is happening.*
- *Pray for all those who are seeking to find ways of overcoming the great problems dividing Christians today. Pray in earnest that divisions between the main churches will be addressed as a priority, and not as an afterthought.*

Final Prayer

Bless the special time we set aside each day to spend with You, Lord God. If we have been challenged, guide us in our response; if we have been at rest with You, move us on. May we always be responsive to the guidance of Your Spirit, and may we return to You each day with hope, confidence and joy. AMEN
