

## Is God Unrighteous?

Romans 3: 1 – 8<sup>i</sup>

### Rhetorical Questions

Is God unrighteous? ... Seems like a silly question, doesn't it? I know I've shared this before, but I'm reminded of the Sunday School teacher who asked his class, "What's big as a house, grey, has big floppy ears, a spindly tail, and a long nose? As the story goes, the class was silent for a bit, and then one boy piped up, "Well, I want to say 'an elephant,' but since this is Sunday School, I'm going to go with 'Jesus'."

Just so, when we hear the question, "Is God unrighteous?" I think a lot of people (no one here, of course) might be tempted to say, "Well, I want to say 'yes,' but since this is church, I'm going to have to go with 'no' instead." And that would be the easy answer. "Is God unrighteous?" No. What a silly question. Then we could close the service and just go home.

And yet the Apostle Paul was inspired to ask just this question in verse 5 of our text this morning. He wrote:

<sup>5</sup> But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? Romans 3:5 (ESV)

Of course, he also felt compelled to qualify the question even before answering it, adding:

<sup>5</sup> ...*(I speak in a human way.)* Romans 3:5 (ESV)

Or, as an older translation has it:

<sup>5</sup> ...*(I speak after the manner of men.)* Romans 3:5 (ASV)ii

And since it is still very much "the manner of men" to question the goodness, righteousness, and kindness of God—particularly when it comes to His judgment of sin—it is good for us that this third chapter of Romans begins with a series of rhetorical questions that address the subject from every angle, demonstrating each time that no matter how the question is framed, the answer is always the same.

### What Advantage Has the Jew?

Of course, we begin where we left off back in June. The Apostle, having established that

<sup>28</sup> ...no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. <sup>29</sup> But a Jew is one inwardly... Romans 2:28–29 (ESV)

went on to ask:

<sup>1</sup> **Then what advantage has the Jew?** Or what is the value of circumcision? Romans 3:1 (ESV)

Now, again, we have to realize that Paul had no problem at all investing the word "Jew" with a couple of different shades of meaning in just 3 verses. First, he says that no one is a Jew

simply by way of physical descent or ritual. Rather, a true Jew, “is one inwardly,” and the meaning of this is clarified further in Galatians, chapter 3, where Paul stated:

<sup>27</sup> For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ... <sup>29</sup> And if you are Christ's, **then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.** Galatians 3:27–29 (ESV)

So, taking that as the definition of a true Jew after the argumentation of Romans chapter 2, we almost expect the answer to the question, “Then what advantage has the Jew?” to be, “None whatsoever.” But the apostle saw it differently; quite the opposite really. He said in verse 2:

<sup>2</sup> **Much in every way.** To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. Romans 3:2 (ESV)

And, as we have seen previously, most commentators are in agreement that **this word, “oracles,” denotes the whole of the inspired Scripture.**<sup>iii</sup>

So, the advantage given to the people of the Old Covenant is that they were in fact entrusted with the covenant—the very Word of the Living God. They did not have to blunder around in ignorance and darkness. They did not have to read the omens and interpret auguries to find their way to God. God found them. God called them. God chose them. God brought them near and promised to dwell among them.

There could be no greater advantage—no greater privilege—than to be included in the community of God's covenant people, and we need to reckon with this when we consider what it means to be part of the visible church. Today, we who have been baptized into Christ and who gather at His table looking to Him alone for our salvation and discerning His body in the gathering of His people, today we are the community of God's covenant people, and we too have been entrusted with the very oracles of God. This is the amazing gift that God gave to Abraham and to his children.

### What If Some Were Unfaithful?

The thing is, many—if not most—of those who were entrusted with the oracles of God did not remain faithful to them. Which leads to Paul's second question:

<sup>3</sup> **What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?** Romans 3:3 (ESV)

The point, if not the question, seems reasonable, given that the first generation of Israel who came up out of Egypt and were entrusted with the Word of God, were destroyed for this very thing. According to Hebrews 4, verse 2:

<sup>2</sup> **...the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.** Hebrews 4:2 (KJV 1900)iv

So, someone might ask, “Doesn't this nullify the advantage if, having been given the Word, much of Israel appears not to have believed it?” By extension, what about those who were

born into Christian families, baptized into the covenant people of God, and raised on the Word of God, and yet have turned and walked away? What about them?

<sup>3</sup> ...Does **their** faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? Romans 3:3 (ESV)

And the answer is the same today as it was almost 2,000 years ago. “Certainly not!” “Absolutely not!” “**May it never be!**”<sup>v</sup> as it says in some other translations. The ESV has it:

<sup>4</sup> **By no means!** Let God be true though every one were a liar... Romans 3:4 (ESV)

Because God always keeps His promises. As a matter of fact, He was keeping a promise when He overthrew Israel in the wilderness. You can read about it in Numbers, chapter 14, and it’s this very faithfulness of God, not only to bless but also to judge, to which Paul turned in framing his answer. He wrote:

<sup>4</sup> ...Let God be true though every one were a liar... Romans 3:4 (ESV)

and then, “**as it is written,**” in the Greek translation of Psalm 51:

“That you may be justified in your words, **and prevail when you are judged.**” Romans 3:4 (ESV)

There’s much that could be said about this, but let me quote Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

The Apostle here takes up this quotation and you notice how very [appropriate] it is. He says, whatever a man may do, God always does that which is right...Indeed, he says, God is always right and history will justify God...It is a very bold picture. It is a picture, as it were, of God on trial, with mankind querying and questioning Him. No, says David, when the ultimate facts are revealed, God will be justified, and the world will have to admit, as I am having to admit now, that God is right and I alone was wrong.<sup>vi</sup>

As Calvin wrote:

...the faithfulness of God is so far from being nullified by the perfidy and apostasy of men, that it, thereby, becomes more evident.<sup>vii</sup>

### Is God Unrighteous to Inflict Wrath?

But, that being the case, Paul’s next question:

<sup>5</sup> But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us?... Romans 3:5 (ESV)

Of course, the answer in verse 6 is exactly the same as before.

<sup>6</sup> By no means! For then how could God judge the world? Romans 3:6 (ESV)

But as I we noted earlier, even before going to the answer, Paul qualified the question.

<sup>5</sup> ...if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (**I speak in a human way.**) Romans 3:5 (ESV)

or, “I speak as a man,” which is to say, this is a disingenuous question, like the so-called “problem of evil.” You know how it usually goes; “If there is a God and he is both all good and all powerful, how do you account for all the evil in the world?” It’s the fallacy of false dilemma—the assumption that there are only two options available. A certain kind of unbeliever will regard this as a mic-drop question, and a certain kind of Christian will get all tangled up in the cord trying to answer it.

But frankly, the person who asks the question doesn’t really want an answer. What they *really* want is to disprove the existence of God so that they (we) can be free of Him. Think of that teacher of the law who came to Jesus one time to put him to the test with another disingenuous question. He asked, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” and Jesus turned the question back on him, replying, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” According to Luke, the man answered well. Luke 10, verse 27:

<sup>27</sup> ...he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” Luke 10:27 (ESV)

But verse 29 is the key to the story, and to the parable that follows.

<sup>29</sup> But he, **desiring to justify himself**, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” Luke 10:29 (ESV)

See, he didn’t really want an answer; he wanted to justify himself. He didn’t want to be called to repentance and faith; he wanted to go on his way thinking well of himself in his sin. And frankly, you run into this kind of thing all over the place today, and especially on (anti) social media.

You point to the goodness of God; someone will inevitably point to all the evil in the world as if somehow the latter negates the former. You direct their attention to the evil found in the heart of man, and they will say, “Sure, but then if there is a God, He’s the one who made me this way, so,” to borrow a phrase from Romans 9, “Why does he still find fault?”<sup>viii</sup> As in chapter 3, if, in fact, our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, isn’t it clear that God would be unjust, or at the very least unfair, to find fault and judge us for it. And never mind the cosmic implications, verse 7 demonstrates this personal dimension:

<sup>7</sup> ...if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? Romans 3:7 (ESV)

### **Why Not Do Evil that Good May Come?**

Furthermore, verse 8:

<sup>8</sup> And why not do evil that good may come? Romans 3:8 (ESV)

Now, I don’t want to take too much time with this today, because it will come up again in chapter 6, where Paul opened with the question:

<sup>1</sup> What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? Romans 6:1 (ESV)

To that question, he gave the very same answer, “By no means!” but at that later point in the epistle, he followed with another rhetorical question:

<sup>2</sup> ...How can we who died to sin still live in it? Romans 6:2 (ESV)

See, as we noted last Lord’s Day, if God’s grace simply throws a cover over our sin and leaves us essentially unchanged, then the question, “Why not do evil that good may come?” is valid. After all, the bigger the sin, the bigger the cover and, in theory, the more God would be glorified. But when we come to understand that

<sup>4</sup> We were buried...with [Jesus] by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, **we too might walk in newness of life.**  
Romans 6:4 (ESV)

then we also come to see the question, “Why not do evil that good may come?” for the blasphemy that it truly is.

When we come to understand, as it says in the Heidelberg Catechism, that “it is impossible for those grafted into Christ by true faith not to produce the fruits of gratitude,”<sup>ix</sup> then we understand Paul’s answer in Romans 3. Having twice repeated the simple phrase, “By no means!” (“May it never be!”), he responded more harshly here. After observing that this was a charge that had been slanderously leveled against him, Paul simply stated of those who made the accusation:

<sup>8</sup> ...Their condemnation is just. Romans 3:8 (ESV)

Their condemnation for accusing Paul was just, but there were and are those who are actually teaching this, and their condemnation is just too. It’s important that we understand this, especially as we come to the Lord’s Table in a few moments, for “we do not come to this supper claiming any merit in ourselves.”<sup>x</sup> It is all Christ’s merit. It is all of grace.

<sup>23</sup> ...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus... Romans 3:23–24 (ESV)

But just as certainly:

<sup>22</sup> ...now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. <sup>23</sup> For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:22–23 (ESV)

Let us come to the table then, as those who are truly sorry for our sin, who sincerely believe in the Lord Jesus as our Savior, and who earnestly desire, by the grace of God in Christ Jesus,

<sup>10</sup> ...to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God... Colossians 1:10 (ESV)

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- i All Scripture citations, unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
  - ii *The Holy Bible: American Standard Version* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995).
  - iii Cf. Donald Grey Barnhouse, *God's Wrath: Romans 2–3:1–20* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953), 148.
  - iv *The Holy Bible: King James Version, Electronic Edition of the 1900 Authorized Version*. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 2009).
  - v Cf. Romans 3:4 NKJV, NET, and NASB95.
  - vi D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans (Volume 2): The Righteous Judgment of God* (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 179.
  - vii John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 116.
  - viii Cf. Romans 9:19.
  - ix Christian Reformed Church (CRCNA), "Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 64", in *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Publications, 1988), 40.
  - x Christian Reformed Church (CRCNA), "Celebration of the Lord's Supper", in *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids, MI: CRC Publications, 1987, 1988), 984.