



“God’s Faithful Condemnation”¹ Romans 3:1-8

Some of my favorite stories in the Bible are the stories that have a shocking twist at the end. For example, the story of Jonah. God sends Jonah, as a prophet to Nineveh. Jonah doesn’t want to go because the Ninevites are extremely wicked. The whole big-fish-swallowing-him situation changed things around, and then Jonah went to Nineveh. He goes through the city, calling the people to repent. They do! Then Jonah’s angry. He is mad at God for forgiving the city. And the book ends more with a confrontation with Jonah than it does with the city of Nineveh. Will Jonah see that his identity as a Jew and his status as a sacrificial prophet doesn’t make him better than murderous Ninevites?

The story of Jonah seems to mirror somewhat the New Testament parable of what we call the Prodigal Son. We like to highlight the really disobedient son; however, Jesus’ emphasis is more-so on the obedient son. The story goes that the disobedient son demands his inheritance from his father. Culturally, this was like a child saying to their parent, “I wish you were dead.” And, culturally, no father would have given his son the inheritance. However, this father shows mercy on the son and gives him the inheritance. The son goes out, squanders the wealth and is left penniless. In the midst of this, the other son stays home. He works. He’s faithful in his tasks. But every day, his father is looking out the window, wishing for the disobedient son to come home. Then, one day, the younger son is seen on the horizon. The father runs to him, hugs and kisses his son – and he sets in motion a feast. This is a unique and set-apart party to welcome his son back. Word gets to the older son. The older son has been working for his dad day-in and day-out while his dad has been longingly looking out the window, and now that the younger, disobedient, unworthy son come back; dad is throwing him a party?! The older son won’t have it any longer. He goes to the entrance of the party to have a talk with his father. The father invites his son to come in, but the son refuses. So, the dad goes out to hear what the older son has to say, and this is what the son says, **“Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. ³⁰ But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!”²**

Why is the older son angry? Because he looked at himself and his works to give him greater status. Listen, the older son didn’t care about his dad. In actuality, he was just like his younger brother. The younger brother just wanted his dad’s stuff. And that’s all the older brother wanted, too. The younger brother got it through disobedience. But the older brother thought he could get his dad’s stuff through obedience. But you notice the son’s heart in this statement. He starts with a rude “Look!” Then he goes on to essentially say he’s slaved away for his dad. Even though he’s not slaved. Then he gets to what he really wants. He wants recognition. He wants a celebration. He wants a young goat. He doesn’t really want his dad! So, look at the father’s response: ³¹**And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. ³² It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead,**

¹ This manuscript is still in the rough draft phase. I recommend you utilize these notes in conjunction to the sermon to gain greater insight and clarity.

² [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Lk 15:29–30.

and is alive; he was lost, and is found.' ”³ The father emphasizes the privilege his son had. He could have had a relationship with his dad. He could enjoy many blessings. But the son didn't want it. He wanted the father's stuff, not the father. And so, he couldn't rejoice with a brother who was reconciled with his dad. Jesus directed this story towards the religious people in the crowd who were listening to him. They are just like the older brother. They're angry that God would give kindness to people who were so disobedient when they've done so much for God!

When you hear this, you may think, “I love those stories, too! Definitely convicts those religious moralists, doesn't it?” But then I have to make sure we're applying to us, too. What about the child who's jealous of their sibling getting more attention from mom or dad due to disobedience? Or, take it to another level. What about the scenario between a husband and wife. One spouse went off into persistent sinful patterns. The other spouse is faithful – seeking God's wisdom. Then the disobedient spouse repents. As they repent, they experience forgiveness and joy. They're growing in the Lord. Then the “faithful” spouse is angry. They're still hurt. They're still feeling like they're barely treading water. In all of these scenarios, from Jonah to the sons to our own situations of obedience and disobedience, we can end up asking ourselves, **“What's the point of obedience if it doesn't have any advantage?”** We can even be tempted to think, **“Maybe I should just sin so that I can be blessed like those other sinners!”**

Both of these ideas are brought up in the text we're studying this morning in Romans 3:1-8. This is the final passage directed specifically to the Jews, and it's Paul getting to the final straw for the Jewish people. Last week, Paul said they can't trust their ethnic Judaism nor can they trust circumcision to save them. He went straight for their identity and said their identity wasn't enough. Their works can't save! And so now, they're at the point of saying, “So, what's the point of obeying God and why not just sin all we want if our obedience can't make us better in God's sight?” Now, remember *why* Paul is saying all of this. Paul is planning on emphasizing how *we* cannot save ourselves. Our self-justification only reveals that we're sinners, deserving condemnation. Instead, we must see that Jesus alone can save us through faith in him. Paul's going to get there at the end of chapter 3, but right here, Paul is leveling the Jews so that they can see that apart from Jesus, they're just as lost as the Gentiles. They're the older brother who was just as lost as the younger brother, and everyone is in need of reconciliation with the Father!

With this in mind, let's read the text together this morning. And, I'll pray before we read:

3 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? 2 Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. 3 What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? 4 By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, “That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.” 5 But 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.) 6 By no means! For then how could God judge the world? 7 But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? 8 And why not do evil that

³ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Lk 15:31–32.

*good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.*⁴

As I was starting my study for the sermon today, I was definitely a little surprised when two commentators said that this text was one of the most difficult in all of the book of Romans! That always makes me chuckle because I'm reminded again of my weakness and also my need for God's strength to be at work in me. But, it also spurs me to trust the Lord and believe he will work through my weakness. I pray that's the case today.

As we read these words, you could probably hear those two big questions I mentioned earlier: What's the point of obedience and maybe I should just sin so that I will be blessed. Paul argues against both of these ideas, and like a master teacher, directs the Jewish religious moralist back to the point: **God is just in condemning the unbelieving Jew.** Again, and I know I might sound like a broken record, let me emphasize that I do believe the applications can move more broadly than to only the Jews. So, even as I talk about the Jewish person, I am going to try to bring application to those of you who may simply be a religious moralist and not truly someone who trusts Jesus. If that's you, God is just in condemning you as well. And, as much as that angers you, I pray that the truth of the words of Romans 3 awaken you to see your need not merely for God's stuff, but for God himself. I pray that you would be drawn into the party of reconciliation with God through faith in Jesus! So, let's dive into the text and see what it means that God is just in condemning the unbelieving Jew. We're going to start by looking at how we know God is just.

1. God is just (vv. 1-4).

Verses 1-8 comprise a series of questions and answers. Paul has done this already in chapter 2, but it's a unique way of teaching to help us to learn how to grapple with information. So in these verses, we have at least four *main* questions with responses. The first two questions essentially relate to the same thing. And they fall under this idea of questioning whether or not God is just. So, verse 1 could be understood like this, **"What's the point of being a circumcised Jew if it doesn't save me from God's just punishment?"** Remember what I said last week. In the first century, the Jews essentially believed that being a circumcised Jew meant that you could not be punished. No matter how wicked you were in your life, you were set because you were circumcised. And, all of these beliefs revolved around an idea thinking that God would be unjust if he condemned a circumcised Jew. That's why the Jew would say, "Then what's the point?!" It's not simply that they're saying what's the point for them. They're also essentially saying that God's unfair if he were to punish them.

By the way, this isn't far from what some people in our day believe. Some say that if you've been baptized into the church, you're set. I've spoken with others whose lifestyles would shock us, but when the topic of being a Christian came up, well, of course they were a Christian! When they were a kid, they prayed and they're all set. But what were they praying for? Were they trusting the prayer or trusting the Savior who hears the prayer?

So, here we have the Jewish people saying, "What's the advantage of being a circumcised Jew if it doesn't get us out of Hell? God would be unjust." Right here, we should see the utter selfishness of the statement. The Jewish people to whom Paul is speaking are centered on themselves. Their argument

⁴ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 3:1–8.

isn't first starting with God and then moving to them. They're starting with themselves and then moving to God. Therefore, they're trying to self-justify. And, we should all understand this. I know I've done this, and I'm sure you have to, but let me ask. Have you ever thought God should be proud of you for reading your Bible and praying everyday, and that God should maybe give you some more blessings than someone else because you've sacrificed more for him than that other person? Do you realize that you're viewing obedience as a tool to manipulate God into giving you what you think is best instead of trusting that God is best and he'll give you what he deems best?

You might say, "Well, what's the point of obedience if I can't get God to give me what I want?!" And that's the problem. You're essentially saying you don't want God. You're starting with you and you want *you* to be emphasized. You like God's stuff, but you don't want to center around him. And that's what the religious moralistic Jew was saying. He just wanted God's stuff. And now Paul is going to force the religious moralist to start with God and see how they need to revolve around God's glory, not their own broken, sinful "glory."

Now, at this point, we might be shocked by Paul's response to the question asked. He actually answers that the blessing is not salvation, but instead that **God gave Jews his oracles!** Look at verse 2 again: "2 Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God."⁵ Just because circumcision doesn't save, and being an ethnic Jew doesn't make you better than the Gentiles doesn't mean there were no advantages to being a circumcised Jew. Paul says here that the Jews were entrusted with God's oracles. The phrase "to begin with" could mean "Foremost" or "to begin with." I tend to think the idea is probably both; so, we could say "First and foremost." So, greatest of all blessings is that the Jews were entrusted with God's oracles. What does this mean? God's oracles from an Old and New Testament perspective didn't only highlight God's commands, but also God's promises and declarations. In Psalm 147:19, the psalmist emphasizes God's statutes and decrees as the blessing of his Word. So, **the oracles of God contain the knowledge of God's character, God's covenants and God's commands!** The Jewish people received this knowledge from God. What an amazing privilege!

But keep in mind that Paul has already highlighted that knowledge of God doesn't equal salvation. Instead, the Law and covenants reveal that we're sinful people in need of God to save us. But even this is a privilege to the Jews. They should have been first to run to God for reconciliation. But instead, they were like the older brother working for God's gifts and not entrusting themselves to God.

Having said this, the underlying concern of God's justice is addressed to the Jewish people. They could think that because their circumcision doesn't save them that God's unjust, and Paul's response is, "Look what God gave you!" He gave you a revelation of himself! Is God unjust?! No. God's gracious to you. He showed you that you needed him! But then comes the next question. The urge to blame God becomes more evident, and the next question is:

If Jews are unfaithful, how can God remain faithful? Right here you might be wondering the point of this question. So, remember against the beliefs of the Jewish people and their understanding of the covenants. They believed that God promised all ethnic Jews eternal security with God simply because they're circumcised. Circumcision was a sign of the covenant God made with Abraham to bless all nations through them. So, they believe that God must hold up his end of the covenant. They're circumcised; so, God must save them!

⁵ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 3:2.

Or, to put it another way, who cares if they're unfaithful in their lives! God isn't going to take back his promise simply because the Jewish people don't heed it, is he? God must follow through on his promises! He must remain faithful!

And, to that, we would all agree that God must always remain faithful, right? But we have to ask, "Faithful to what?" Does God always have to remain faithful to what I think he should do? No. God must always be faithful to himself and to what he says. The religious moralist could be thinking to themselves, "Right. That's what I believe, too." But here's where they get in trouble. They highlight God's promises for mercy and grace at the expense of his promises of judgment. But the oracles of God did not only include God promising Israel blessing. It included cursing as well.

This makes sense of this second question. The Jews would ask, "Are you saying our unfaithfulness nullifies God's faithfulness?" By the way, the word "nullify" means to "render powerless." So, the Jew is saying, "Paul, you have a weak view of God! Our unfaithfulness can't make God unfaithful!" And then Paul counters that and says, "Of course our unfaithfulness doesn't make God unfaithful. God is faithful all the time." But he's not always faithful to give grace to each individual person! God is faithful to all of his promises: both the promises of forgiveness and the promises and judgment.

So, go back to last week's message about circumcision and Abraham. When was Abraham circumcised? Before faith or after faith? After faith. So, faith is essential. Circumcision is only a sign. The covenant with Abraham speaks to God rescuing people through faith – not works or rituals. But we need to see our need to trust God for salvation. So, we go to the covenant with Moses. And, in that covenant, God doesn't say that obedience to the Law saves you. Instead, the Law is used to show that they don't obey. And, when you read the Old Testament, the Jewish history is one story after another of how the people were disobedient. And, throughout the Scriptures we see both punishment and mercy.

Therefore, Paul answers their question. Is God unfaithful? Look at verse four again: ⁴By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, "That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged." ⁶ What's Paul saying here? Answer (and listen carefully), Paul is saying that **God has been faithful in showing the Jews how sinful they are!** Now, that actually probably sounds almost ridiculous to some of us, doesn't it? I mean, especially in our day as well, when we're constantly trying to affirm people and tell them how awesome they are, and how they're not that bad and we congratulate them for every little thing. The emphasis in our culture is similar in the religious moralist's heart. We want to inflate people's egos and we want to self-justify! When we do that, we focus more on ourselves than God. So, Paul is using heavy language to wake us up! The focus should be on God and his faithfulness to his glory. He is always faithful to his promises. The promises aren't to be used to excuse our sinfulness or to congratulate ourselves. Instead, in showing our sinfulness, we're reminded of God's promises to punish sinners – whether Jew or Gentile.

This would be hard for the religious moralist to take because they were relatively good. They were spiritual. They were disciplined. They slaved away for God! And, maybe you feel that way, too. You've done so much for God. And yet, your works don't justify you before God? Your sacrifice as a spouse. Your obedience as a child. Your suffering for God for decades. Your discipline in parenting. Your self-control in making sure you've read your Bible and prayed every day. None of these things make you right with God, nor do they make you more privileged in his eyes. None of these things keep you from the judgment! And none of these things are worthy of trusting in to get you through it!

⁶ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 3:4.

Instead, the very fact that you have to grow in these things reveals that you aren't perfect. And therefore, apart from Jesus, you're going to be judged that way! That's why Paul quotes from Psalm 51. This is a psalm where David is confessing his sin before the Lord and he states that God is just in whatever judgment he gives!

Ventura, this is something that many people will not admit. We often want to judge God. This has been the case all the way back with Satan in the garden. Satan said to Eve that God was a miser and was keeping things back. People today feel the same way. If God judges us for things we love to do, we blame God for being mean or vindictive. He's a joy-squasher, we think. Paul clears the air and says that the point of life isn't us and our desires. The point of all is God and his glory! And, while we tend to think God is only glorified through showing grace, Paul says here that God is glorious in both showing grace and also in punishing. Do you realize that? God is glorious in all he does – including punishing. If you cannot confess that, then you believe that God has an area of his life of which he should be ashamed. But should God be ashamed of any area of his life? No. Deuteronomy 32:4, in speaking of God's ways and his justice, says, **“The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.”**⁷ God is faithful and sinless in his decrees of mercy and his judgments to punish. Therefore, he is just to punish the Gentile and just to punish the religious, moralistic Jew, even if that Jew was circumcised. God is just. Now, Paul moves on to show us not only that God is just, but God is faithful to actually condemn.

2. God is faithful to condemn the unbelieving Jew (vv. 5-8).

This is somewhat redundant, but if there's one thing we learn about Paul's teaching style, he wants to ensure he's covering all the bases. He doesn't want people walking away saying, “Well, Paul might be giving me a little wiggle room over here!” When Paul targets a point, he states, restates, emphasizes and reemphasizes. That is what he's doing here, but he's also giving a little different nuance, too.

It's not simply that Paul is saying that God is just. To be just is to say that in whatever God does, he is right. But, these verses press further. Paul is saying not only is God just to do so, but God *will* do this. God's justice is not theoretical. It's a reality. Every human being will be judged.

By the way, this is a reality that many humans want to ignore. Even as I think about us as Christians, when was the last time you pondered that an unbelieving family member (if they refuse Christ) will hear Jesus say “depart from me?” Too often, I think even professing Christians are more concerned about living comfy lives in these United States of America than we are willing to spread the message of the gospel with those around us! Do we grasp that there will be a judgment? Then, go and tell!

But even for those of you who have told others, you may have received some respectful responses, but you may have received responses of people laughing at you or thinking lightly of it. There are people who view Hell like it's going to be a party. But, many people don't even think a Hell exists. Even in saying this, though, I have to press this text to its intended audience: to the Jew, and then to the religious moralist. Again, the Jews would have thought God unjust to punish them when they were circumcised. But Paul reminds them that God is just in whatever he does – whether in promising grace or punishing sinners.

⁷ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Dt 32:4.

What we see here is that the religious moralist is an individual who doesn't ignore Hell, but they quiet their conscience by trusting in their good deeds. And therefore, they silence the screams of Hell – even though they're running straight for it. Is that you? Even in hearing these words, you could be angry or bothered and you could think to yourself, "then what's the point of my good works?!" And this is what Paul projected of the religious Jew. Look at verses 5-6 with me again: ⁵But 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.) ⁶By no means! For then how could God judge the world?⁸

When Paul says "What shall we say," that's his way of asking a question he knows someone else would ask. And the question is essentially this: **If my sin highlights God's righteousness, then my sin shouldn't be judged, right?** Talk about a twisted way of thinking, but this shows you how focused we are on ourselves. Let me explain for a moment. In this question, the moralist is suggesting that God needs them in order to be more glorious. Do you see that? "My unrighteousness serves to show God's righteousness." Or, "My disobedience makes God's faithfulness known!"

Hold on. Hold on! We are not that powerful. God didn't make humans because he needed them! And while God responds to our sin, that doesn't mean that he wasn't faithful beforehand! What a sick logic. But this is the same logic of the moralist about their morality. And, some of you may fall into that trap right now, today. Why do you come to gather with the church? Some of you may say, "To worship God and show him how much I love him." And what you mean by that is that you expect a pat on the back for your behavior. Or, you serve in some other ministry because you believe that if you don't do it, people aren't going to see God. God needs *you*! This is a wrong mindset. Acts 17:25 says that God is not "served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything."⁹ If you serve God in such a way as though he needs you, you're making much of you and diminishing him!

This is the logic of the moralist. So, when frustrated that their morality won't make them better off with God, they say, "Well then, at least my sin will make me better off!" But to the religious Jew, Paul says, **"If that's the logic you want to follow, then God can't punish any Gentile!"** Well, the Jew will not affirm that statement. So, again, they're caught. And now, Paul brings them to the last straw. Let's read verses 7-8 together: ⁷But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? ⁸And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just. ¹⁰

The Jew feels as though they're just a puppet in God's providential plan for the cosmos! The religious and moral person cannot do anything to make themselves right. But maybe there's one thing. And here's the essence of the final questions: **Then we can sin in the anticipation that God will forgive, right?** Why are they being condemned a sinner if God gets all the glory even from my sin?

I remember when I was a youth pastor, and one time I had a conversation with a teen who was frustrated by this statement: When you sin, you're to blame. When you do right, God did it! Why was the teen frustrated by that? Because, like every other human being, we're glory stealers. We want to claim something as being from us. But if we really understand our sinfulness and our need for God, we will know that all hope is found in God!

⁸ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 3:5–6.

⁹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ac 17:25.

¹⁰ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Ro 3:7–8.

But the moralist simply responds that instead of coming to God, let's do evil because God gets the glory through our evil! This is like many professing Christians in our day who say, "Who cares if I sin. I'll just ask God for forgiveness later!" Or, it's like some who think that God is obligated to save someone who prayed a prayer they never meant in their heart. But, if they never truly meant it, was God really at work in their heart and life? NO! Do you buy into that blasphemous logic? Paul is clear here and in other writings that those who pursue a life of sin will not inherit the kingdom of heaven. Why? Because they haven't been saved. As Paul said in chapter 2, those who are rescued by Jesus receive a circumcision of the heart. And that leads to a life of imperfect-yet-growing obedience to the Lord. We don't want to sin that grace may abound.

Now, Paul does admit that the Jews charged him and of teaching this. So, maybe the Jew was simply mocking with this kind of statement. But Paul's final sentence indicates that even the asking of this question revealed that the moralistic person would ask this question because they simply refuse God and his gospel in Jesus.

What's sobering to me in reading this is that Paul doesn't argue with those who slanderously speak against the gospel. He doesn't give a line of logic to this question at this point. He simply answers the fool according to his foolishness, and says, "**their condemnation is just.**" In other words, by making that statement, you reveal you deserve to be condemned by God. And, if you're sitting in your chair saying, "How so? Why am I deserving of condemnation?" Then you don't realize how sinful your sin is. You don't truly believe God is in control of all and can do whatever he pleases. And in not realizing these things, you will be lost unless you turn to Jesus who takes the punishment sinners deserves and gives the promise of grace to all who trust in him for rescue and reconciliation with God. Hear me. **God is just in condemning the moralist and the religious.** We've seen this to be true over the weeks. I pray you'd turn to the Lord!

Only through Jesus is God completely emphasizes as the just one and the Savior. No more boasting in ourselves, but only boasting in God. Will you believe or will you pursue yourself? At this point, Paul has now leveled both the Gentile world and the ethnic Jews. In Romans 1:16-17, Paul says that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe. And chapters 1-3:8 reveal that everyone needs God's power to save them. All Jews and Gentiles must come to God at the foot of the cross. Why? Because it was at the cross that Jesus took the condemnation sinners deserved – even though he wasn't merely moral, but he was perfect. **Jesus fulfilled the Laws demands because he himself is righteous. He is God. Look at the love of Jesus! Behold his majesty. He was condemned so you could be welcomed. At the foot of the cross, there's freedom and hope and life! Turn to him.**

So, if you're a Christian here today, I hope you see all that Christ has set you free for. And, if you see that you're not one who trusts Christ, I pray that you would lay your efforts down and rest in the Lord!

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