

October 6/7, 2012

The Gospel Story: Not by Works

A Study of Romans

Romans 3:1-20

Pastor Bryan Clark

I would suggest to you this morning that there are two ways to avoid Jesus and His salvation. One is by being really, really bad. The other is by being really, really good, and I would suggest to you that those who consider themselves to be really, really good are the most difficult people to reach with the *Gospel Story*.

Jesus told the story that we often refer to as the story of the prodigal son. It's even interesting that we title the story that way, because there are two groups of people that are at play in the situation that causes Jesus to tell the story. The story is precipitated by the Jewish religious leaders questioning Jesus as to, "Why do you spend so much time with the sinners and the tax collectors and the prostitutes?" In order to answer that question, Jesus tells a story, but it's worth noting there are two groups of people. There are the religious legalists and there are the sinners and the prostitutes and the tax collectors, so when Jesus tells the story, interestingly enough, there are two brothers—one a prodigal, whose lifestyle looks a lot like Romans chapter 1, but there's a second son, the older son, the good boy, who stays home and does everything right and follows all the rules. It is also worth noting that, at the end of the story, it is the prodigal son that ultimately enters into the forgiveness of his father and celebrates the relationship with him. But when the story ends, the older son is still a mystery and we're left wondering if he'll ever choose to come in and enjoy the party. Jesus was referring to the sinners and tax collectors and the prostitutes and He was referring to the religious legalistic crowd in the telling of that story.

When Paul writes to the Corinthians, he reminds us that Satan disguises himself as *an angel of light*. If you go back and look at the context of that remark, there's no question what he's referring to is *religion*. The way he disguises himself as an angel of light is through the promotion of religion because it ultimately can become a barrier to receiving Jesus and His salvation. In another letter Paul refers to *a thorn in his flesh* and, over the years, commentators have tried to figure out what the thorn in the flesh is, but I would suggest to you, if you look at that comment in its context, the thorn in the flesh are the religious Jewish leaders that followed Paul everywhere he went and made his life miserable. There is a consistent message in the New Testament that this highly moralistic, legalistic religion is often a barrier to experiencing the life and the forgiveness of Jesus. I would suggest to you that in a state like Nebraska, and in a wonderful community like Lincoln, Nebraska, the most difficult people to reach with the gospel story will be very good, highly religious, moral people. If I don't believe I'm lost, I see no reason to be saved. That's what we want to talk about this morning.

If you have your Bible, turn to Romans, Chapter 3. It's good to remind ourselves that the chapter divisions throughout the Bible were put there by the editors, and so it's best to think of this as an ongoing, on-flowing discussion. Paul is continuing to talk about the same thing he talked about at the end of chapter 2. In the last paragraph of chapter 2, Paul in essence redefined what it means to be circumcised. He redefined what it means to be Jewish, to the degree that he actually said the Gentiles could be more Jewish and could be more circumcised because the issue is ultimately an issue of the heart, not of religious activity. Those words would have been quite shocking to a first century religious Jewish person. Based on that, then, Chapter 3, Verse 1: (They respond...)

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?

(*NASB, Romans 3:1)

Now, again, Paul is still in the same diatribe style, meaning he's imagining an objector and he's having this ongoing dialogue. Knowing that Paul spent so much of his teaching life in the Jewish synagogues, I'm going to guess that he heard these arguments—these objections—hundreds of times and interacted with the Jewish religious crowd on these topics many times. So he's probably reflecting arguments and discussions that he's been through many times. We would expect him to answer the question regarding what advantage the Jew has, to say, "Well, actually no advantage; that's the whole point." But that's not what he says. Verse 2:

Great in every respect. (vs. 2a)

Now this boils down to a definition of terms. What does he mean by **advantage**? What does he mean by **benefit**? The Jewish religious crowd had convinced themselves that they had certain advantages because they were Jewish, because they had the Law, because they were circumcised. The Jewish religious leaders believed that they were sinful people; they didn't disagree with that. They also believed that God disciplined them because of their sin; they didn't disagree with that. But they did believe, because they were circumcised Jewish religious people, at the end of the day they were exempt from the judgment of God, that they stood no risk of ultimately condemnation and wrath from God because, as the Jewish people, they were exempt from that. Instead, they believed that was their advantage. As Paul is explaining, "That's simply not true. God never promised that," then it raises the question, "Then what's the advantage? What is the benefit?" Paul says actually, "There are quite a few benefits":

First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God. (2b)

Now he says there are quite a few benefits and he only lists one, possibly because he talked about several of the benefits in chapter 2. But think about the life of the Hebrew people. There were a lot of benefits; there were a lot of advantages. They actually received the specific revelation of God. Romans chapter 1 talks about what we call *the general revelation* of God—God revealing Himself through creation. But God also specifically revealed Himself through the Scriptures, and the Jewish people had the amazing privilege of being the stewards of **God's oracles**. They actually had God's written word in their possession. But think about the miracles; think about the deliverances; think about the victories; think about the ways that God made His power and presence known to these people in a very special and unique way. We would certainly say there were lots of amazing blessings that these people experienced.

It might raise a similar question in our culture today: "What is the benefit, or what is the advantage of being religious?" I could think of quite a few. For example, religious people tend to have a sense of community. There is a sense of togetherness—that's a good thing. They also have a sense of wanting to care for one another and love one another. Often when people go through difficult times, their religious group gathers together and takes care of them and loves them and helps meet those needs. That's a good thing! Often religious groups are very active in the community, as far as trying to feed the hungry and take care of the homeless and do things that reflect the compassion of God in a community. In those things we would often partner up with them because we think that's God's heart, too. So we could go through a long list of things and say that there are lots of good things that good, moral, religious people do that's positive. There are benefits to that—certainly contrasted with just an irresponsible sinful life, like what's reflected in chapter 1. But—and this is a

very big but—if that religious activity convinces these good moral people that somehow that makes them right with God, therefore they have no need for Jesus and His salvation, that religion has actually become a barrier to experiencing the life and forgiveness that Jesus offers. That’s exactly what happened thousands of years ago. The Jewish people had convinced themselves because they’re Jewish, because they’re circumcised, because they’re religious, that somehow that activity exempts them from the judgment of God. It had become a barrier to experiencing Jesus and His salvation.

Verse 3...the objector then raises a question:

What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? Paul responds...May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written,

**“THAT YOU MAY BE JUSTIFIED IN YOUR WORDS,
AND PREVAIL WHEN YOU ARE JUDGED. (vs. 3-4)**

The objector is probably giving an objection that Paul has heard many times in the synagogue, as the Jewish religious leaders say, “Just because there’s those people that haven’t lived up to the standard or haven’t been faithful, does that mean God breaks His promise, that God is unfaithful?” And Paul’s response is in very strong language: “**May it never be!**” Absolutely not! But the problem is they’ve misunderstood the promise of God. God never said that because you’re Jewish, because you’re religious, because you’re circumcised you have a free pass, that you’re exempt from My wrath and judgment. God never promised that. As a matter of fact, God said “If you’ll obey Me, I will bless you; if you disobey Me, I will punish you.” It was clearly laid out in the Law. So Paul says, “God will always be faithful to His promise, but He didn’t promise what you’re saying He promised. As a matter of fact, even if every person on the face of the planet is a liar, and that’s just another way of saying *is sinful*, God will still be faithful to His promises because God’s righteousness is not dependant on human behavior, but on His character, and He’ll always be true to His nature, or His character.”

Then he quotes from Psalm 51. That’s the psalm where David, after his sin with Bathsheba, confesses his sin before God. The Hebrew people are saying, “Because we’re Hebrew we’re not under the judgment of God,” and Paul is saying, “Actually David disagrees with you.” David would be one of their heroes; he’s right up there with Abraham for their Jewish heroes. David, when he confessed his sin, actually said as part of his confession, “God, my acknowledgement of my sin just reminds us that Your judgment of me is just; it’s right, I’m deserving of that.” So basically what David said is, “God is just in judging me because I am sinful.” So Paul is making the argument that even David didn’t agree with your position, but believed even as David, the king of Israel, he was worthy of God’s judgment because he was indeed a sinner. So the objector responds:

But if our unrighteousness...they’re saying, “Okay, if this is true that we really are sinful and unrighteous, if our unrighteousness...demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? Paul responds...(I am speaking in human terms.) May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world? But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner? And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), “Let us do evil that good may come”? Their condemnation is just. (vs. 5-8)

So what's the argument there? The objector is saying this: "Okay, Paul, if it's true like you said with David, that by acknowledging our sinfulness we reveal the justice or the righteousness of God, then couldn't we say that our unrighteousness actually reveals the righteousness of God, so our badness turns out to be something good? And if that's true, how could God possibly hold us accountable for that?" In essence what they're saying is, "Maybe it's just a big setup. Maybe God chose us to be His people and gave us the Law, knowing we couldn't keep the Law. Therefore our unrighteousness would reveal His righteousness, and if God just set us up for that, then how could He judge us for that?" Paul puts in parenthesis: *this is a human argument*, saying, "This is so ridiculous I want to separate myself from anyone thinking this is my argument." But he does go on to say, "If that's your logic, then God couldn't even judge the world because even the Gentiles could say their unrighteousness actually reveals the righteousness and the grace and mercy of God. Therefore their badness turns out to be something good; therefore God couldn't judge them either." And Paul is in essence saying, "That's a ridiculous argument." But they go on to kind of re-hash the same argument as Paul says, "You've actually gone so far as to say that we, meaning the apostles, have promoted the idea that we should sin more in order that God's grace and righteousness might be displayed more." This must have been a widely-known charge because Paul brings this up several times in Romans. People have accused him of saying, "Should we sin more in order that grace might be displayed more? Shall we be more unrighteous so it reveals more of God's righteousness?" And Paul is saying, "You've taken this argument to such a degree you're actually claiming that we are saying, '**Let us do evil that good may come.**'" That argument is so out there, he doesn't even respond to it. Basically he says, "I'm not even going to answer that; it's so ridiculous." He ends with the statement, "**Their condemnation is just**". In other words, he's not even going to entertain that argument. He just comes back to the fact that you are under sin; therefore you're under the condemnation of God, and that's just and right and I'm not going to argue about it anymore. Verse 9:

What then? Are we better than they? (meaning the Gentiles) Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;

He said in chapter 3, verse 1, that the Jews do have an advantage. They do have a benefit. They've been stewards of some pretty special stuff from God, so he gets to verse 9: **Are we better than they?** In terms of God's judgment, the answer is, "No". He says that I've already established that. The Jew and Gentile alike are equally under sin. Now he begins to summarize the argument that he's made. At the end of the day, the argument is very simple. Every single one of us fail to live up to God's standard. Therefore, every single one of us is under sin. It doesn't matter if you're really bad; it doesn't matter if you're really good. At the end of the day, we're equally condemned under sin. And then, to remind them this is nothing new, he's going to quote seven Old Testament passages. I'm just going to read through them, they're fairly obvious what they mean, but listen for the *all...everybody....not one*—very inclusive statements.

as it is written,

**"THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;
THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;
ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS;
THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD,
THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE."
"THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE,
WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING,"
"THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS";**

**“WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS”;
“THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD
DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS,
AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN,”
“THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES.”** (vs.10-18)

That is very inclusive. There is no one who stands righteous before God. Nobody is that morally good. So he says **there's none righteous**; there's none that measure up.

Now, it seems to me, at this point in Romans, it's fairly obvious what Paul is saying. I've had as my goal that no one would walk out of these doors at the end of today without understanding every single one of us is condemned under sin. There's not a single person in this room, in this community, or in this world that is morally good enough, that is religious enough to somehow merit favor with God. We are all condemned under sin. Seems pretty obvious. The only thing one can do at this point, to get out from under this, is to simply say, “I'm not buying it. I don't think so. It's just Paul's opinion and I happen to disagree with Paul's opinion.”

The very first week we established when Paul said that the gospel story is the story that has been recorded through the Scriptures of God down through the ages, I said that we are going to accept the book of Romans as the authoritative, inspired Word of God. In other words, this is God's opinion; this is what God says about our situation. Now there may be those in the room who say, “I just don't buy that; I dismiss Paul's opinion”, and basically what you're saying is, “I dismiss the Bible; I just think it's man's opinion.” The question I would pose to you is, “What is the basis by which you do that? You'd have to admit it's the most significant book ever written—that the evidence for that is overwhelming. So what is the basis by which you just summarily dismiss it?” I could demonstrate a number of reasons why there is credible evidence to believe it is actually the inspired Word of God. The Bible claims that from cover to cover; it claims to be the Words of God. We can demonstrate that through the internal evidence, the harmony. We can demonstrate that through fulfilled prophecy, through archaeology. We can demonstrate that through the evidence for the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus and demonstrating that Jesus said, “Every word of this Book is true,” so basically there are lots of reasons to believe that the Bible actually is the authoritative Word of God. What would be the evidence that is so credible that would cause someone to reject the Bible and its claim to be the Word of God? For our study, we're going to say we believe it is the authoritative, inspired Word of God, and the conclusion of this part of Romans is, “We're all in trouble.” Verse 19:

Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed... (19a)

That phrase **every mouth may be closed** is a very interesting phrase. Paul uses a lot of legal language, a lot of language that comes out of the courtroom. It's important to remember in the first century that the courts were conducted in public. So people were very familiar with the activity in court and the various terms and activities. In this case, what that's referring to is when someone who is accused of something was in the courtroom, that person was allowed to give a defense. But if it became so abundantly obvious that this person has no defense—they're just rambling on and on about nothing—at one point the judge would give a signal to a court official and the court official would go up and pop that person in the mouth—not slug them in the mouth—but pop them in the mouth and it meant, “You need to be quiet now. You have no defense; that's abundantly obvious; stop talking. The judge is going to give the verdict.” That's where this phrase comes from: that we

stand before God and we give all our excuses about how good we were; it wasn't my fault, and I'm really a good moral person and these are all the things I did. At some point somebody comes up and pops us in the mouth and says, "It's time to be quiet. You have no defense. The judge is ready to give his verdict." It's a very colorful and powerful phrase:

...that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. (vs. 19b-20)

That's his conclusion, that there are no works, no religious activity, no moral good that we can ultimately do in order to make ourselves **justified**. It's a legal term, to be *declared righteous before God*. Everybody condemned under sin—everyone guilty. All the world is accountable to God and he reminds us the purpose of the Law was never to be a means of salvation, but to be a standard by which we could measure ourselves and realize that we are desperate sinners in need of help.

I want to close this morning with two simple illustrations to try to help make the point that Paul is making. Several years ago, quite a few years ago, we had a car that was in the shop so we were down a car; so some friends let us borrow a car. When I drove the car home—I'm a garage guy—always park in the garage, but this car had no garage door opener, so obviously I park it in the driveway, go to bed, get up in the morning, get in our vehicle, open the garage door, and do what I always do: back up...but back up without looking, and I hear that terrible crunching sound. Now I'm not exaggerating when I say I sat there for a good sixty seconds thinking: there's got to be a way to undo this. This didn't just happen. And then I came up with a plan. I thought: if I spent all day being the world's greatest driver, surely that would remove the dent. So that's what I did. All day long I was the world's greatest driver. I never went through a yellow light; I drove below the speed limit. When people rode on my bumper I said, "Just do that as long as you want if that makes you feel good; it's fine with me." When people are driving thirty miles under the speed limit, I said, "That's fine; take your time; I have no life; I'll just enjoy the drive." When people wanted to cut me off, I said, "That's fine; cut me off; have a nice day." I was the world's greatest driver. I got home that evening; I parked my vehicle, and I ran to the other vehicle because I was sure my good behavior had removed the dent. Now of course, obviously, it did not and I didn't really do that. I did actually sit there for about sixty seconds thinking: there's got to be some way to undo this, but the fact of the matter is: no amount of good driving makes the dent go away.

This is the problem with highly moral, religious people. They think, on the basis of their religious activity, their good moral behavior, somehow it makes the dents go away. And what Paul is saying is, "It does not. It simply isn't possible that good behavior removes the sin." Some would say, "Yes, but wait a minute here. There are people that are really bad and, as I look at the world, I would consider myself to be pretty good. And surely God grades on a curve, and if anybody gets in, I think it would be me." Think of it this way: I would agree with you. There are people that do a lot more bad things than other people. So the really bad people, they're drowning in one hundred feet of water. The good, moral people—highly religious people—fine, they're drowning in ten feet of water. At the end of the day, both people are equally dead. It doesn't matter how deep the water is; you're equally dead just the same. It's what Paul is trying to say, "Whether you're a good, moral, religious person or whether you're an out-of-control Romans 1 person, sin is sin and everyone is under the judgment of sin. Everyone is under God's wrath. There is not any religious work or activity that anyone can do to change that." ...Which gets us back to our question: Then, is there no hope? Is there no way out? See you next week.

Our Father, we're thankful that You love us but we're sobered by the reality that we are all sinful and we are all under the condemnation of sin. Lord, I'm going to guess there are people here this morning that think they've been so bad that there's no way that they can stand right in Your presence. Lord, but there's probably others here this morning that think they're good enough. As a good moral religious person they have little need for Jesus and a Savior. Lord, I pray that your Holy Spirit would convince both that they are wrong and that we would find our home in the gospel story of Jesus Christ, Amen.

*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2012 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.

The Gospel Story: Not by Works

A Study of Romans

Romans 3:1-20

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. Do you think most people in our community avoid Jesus more by being bad or by being good? Why do you think that?
2. Describe how the two brothers in the story of the prodigal son represent the two main groups Jesus encountered in His earthly ministry. Describe how these two groups would manifest themselves in our culture today. Is there significance to the fact that in the story the prodigal son ends up partying with his father while the older son does not?
3. In II Corinthians 11 Paul refers to Satan as one who disguises himself as an angel of light. In the context of II Corinthians it seems evident he is referring to religion when he makes this comment. How might Satan use religion to keep people from Jesus?

Bible Study

1. Review what Paul said in Romans 2:25-29. Who are the true Jews and what is the true circumcision?
2. Read Romans 3:1-4. What advantage was there to being a Jew? In a similar way what are the advantages of being a good religious person in our culture today?
3. Paul and the religious Jews were defining “advantage” differently. The Jews thought being Jewish meant they were exempt from God’s judgment and wrath; that even if they did sin God was bound by His promise to “save” them. What are some misunderstandings that religious people might have today concerning the promises of God and His salvation?
4. The more secular we become as a culture the more we elevate our view of man and lower our view of God. When we do this we begin to think it unfair that God would hold us accountable for our choices and we seek to explain away the judgment of God. How does Paul use David’s confession (Rom. 3:4) from Ps. 51 to challenge this belief? In other words, how does David’s confession of sin reveal the righteousness of God?

5. Read Romans 3:5-18. The basic argument here from the religious Jews is that if their sin actually reveals the righteousness of God and His judgment, then how could God see their sin as a bad thing worthy of His condemnation? In other words, if the end result is glorifying to God then how could God be just in His punishment of them? How might people today seek to argue away the judgment of God?
6. Review the 7 Old Testament quotes Paul uses to make his case that we are all under sin. Is anyone good enough for God?
7. Read Romans 3:19-20. What is Paul's summary of Romans 1:18-2:20? Rewrite verses 19 and 20 in your own words. How bad is the bad news?

Application

1. What are the good things about religion in our culture and what are the dangers or concerns?
2. Talk about what might be the most effective way to reach the Romans 1 people in our community and what might be the most effective way to reach the Romans 2 people in our community?
3. Based on Romans 1:18-3:20 what must the Gospel story include to accurately reflect the need for a Savior?