

Romans 3:1-8

The Revelation of God's Righteousness in Wrath against the Wickedness of the Jews (B)

In this passage (3:1-8) the apostle continues to speak about the Jews. He wants to demonstrate that God's judgment upon them does not contradict the advantage of the Jews. Because this line of thought is difficult for us, I will give more detailed notes than usual, in an attempt to make the text understandable.

A. Notes on the Text

Verse 1

If things are worse for the Jew than for the Gentile (chapter 2), the question arises: are the advantages of the Jew (namely, circumcision) still of any use, or are they really a disadvantage?

Verse 2

Paul says that the Jews do indeed have advantages. "First of all" means: "the most important, in which all advantages are contained," is that God entrusted his revelation (covenant, promise, law, etc.) to them. Paul is brief and concise here; in chapters 9-11, especially 9:4,5, he will elaborate on this.

Verse 3

Paul denies that the faithlessness (covenant breaking) of "some" (not all) Jews would result, in turn, in God also becoming unfaithful to his covenant and promises. There were also faithful Israelites who kept God's covenant and therein God showed his faithfulness to the covenant (cf. 9:6: two kinds of Israel).

Verse 4

It must be stated very clearly: first, that God is true, and thus keeps his promise, but also the threat and the curse of the covenant; second, that every man (that is all people, without exception) is a liar (Psalm 116:11). Psalm 51:4 is quoted from the Greek Old Testament translation (the Septuagint, second and first century before Christ): God is faithful to man, although man is unfaithful to him.

Verse 5

In vv. 5ff. objections to maintaining God's truthfulness (literally: truth, justice) are raised (See Glossary #34). The first objection is: if the unrighteousness (injustice) of man is helpful in showing God's righteousness (truthfulness) more clearly, how can God justifiably be angry? Surely God cannot inflict wrath upon us if he needs our sins to reveal himself more gloriously? (See Glossary #36.)

Verse 6

Paul counters this objection by asking another question: Can we accuse God of injustice when, in his judgment, he inflicts his wrath on the sinful world? Sin is deserving of punishment, is it not? According to the Jews, it was certain that God would judge the sinful world (of the Gentiles). Therefore, Paul does not expect any Jew to contradict him.

Verse 7

The second objection is: when through my falsehood (i.e. sin) God's truthfulness is the more clearly manifested, surely then there is no reason to condemn me? On the contrary, should God not be grateful to me for enhancing his justice through my sin? Should sinners not rather be told: "It is good for you to sin, for it serves the glory (honour) of God?"

Verse 8

Paul reduced this objection to an absurdity by drawing the ultimate conclusion from what is being said: "Why not say – as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say – "Let us do evil that good may result"?" Thereby Paul takes a stand against libertinism and antinomianism (see Main Thoughts), about which he will speak more extensively in chapter 6. Here he is content to say: "Their condemnation is deserved." That is: God's condemnation and punishment of those who spread and practice such slander is just. We can add a thought: all sin dishonours God. How then can sin ever be a "good opportunity" for God to reveal (any of) his virtues?

B. Main Thoughts

1. Paul shows that God's covenant and all it seeks to offer is of no use if it is not accepted in faith. Then the member of the covenant (the Jew), together with the Gentile, falls under God's judgment.

In like manner the religious or churchgoing man will react with the question: what then is the meaning of religion, or of faithful participation in the life of the church, when religiosity and irreligiosity, Christianity and atheism are treated indifferently?" (Lekkerkerker)¹

We know that when we are adopted into God's covenant, it puts us under an obligation to accept God's promise. If we do not do this, our punishment will be the heavier (cf. Luke 12:47,48).

2. We may not say what was being taught by the synods at the time of the Liberation (1944): God has promised nothing to unbelievers in the church; their baptism was not a seal of God's promise, but a spillage of water (this

¹ *Ed. Note:* In the Dutch original the author fails to identify the Lekkerkerker commentary. It is possible that the author is referring to *Römer 7 und Römer 9 Bei Augustin* (1942).

latter is from Dr. K. Dijk). From that it would follow what was indeed officially stated, that whoever reveals himself in the church to be an unbeliever is not "really" in the covenant.

3. Libertinism (from the Latin word *libertas*, freedom) and antinomianism (against the law) contend that the more we sin, the more grace is needed.

Romans 3:9-20

The Revelation of God's Righteousness in Wrath against the Wickedness of All Men

In this passage, Paul presents an argument in the form of questions and answers, and concludes, with regard to the previous section (1:18-3:8) that all men, because of their wickedness, are under God's wrath.

A. Notes on the Text

Verse 9

This verse is not easy to translate from the Greek. There are various ways of understanding v. 9. Who are the "we" in this verse? One person says, the Jews (including Paul), another says, the Christians. Whatever its meaning, the apostle says clearly and emphatically that all men are under sin, that is, that they live and act contrary to God's revealed will. The word "already," refers to 3:4, where he speaks of "every man."

Verses 10ff.

In vv. 10-18 Paul quotes various sayings from the Old Testament, mainly from the Book of Psalms. He calls the Old Testament the "law," for the five books of Moses (Genesis - Deuteronomy), were known to the Jews as the *Tora* (law). Paul's quotations are a string of expressions and verses from the Old Testament which do not actually appear there literally. When you compare what it says here with the relevant Old Testament passages you will notice the difference. It is the license and right of the Holy Spirit, the first author of the Scriptures, to transfer his own words from the Old Testament to the New Testament in the way he deems best. The purpose of the quotations is to show that there was in the Old Testament an awareness of the sin of Israel, and, indeed, of all men. "No one" and "all" are repeatedly emphasized, thereby pointing back to the phrase "all men" in v. 9, and pointing forward to the phrase "every mouth" in v. 19.

Verse 20

"Observing the law" was fulfilling the works required of the Israelite by the Law of Moses. They believed that through these works they would achieve a right

relationship with God and obtain righteousness (the correct state of man before God and his acceptance as righteous by God) for themselves. "Human being" [RSV] points to man in his weakness and mortality, and his sin. (cf. Glossary #5)

"Rather, through the law we have become conscious of sin," (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, A. 3). The law was given to man to make him realize that no one fulfils God's law, to stop him from boasting. The law does not take away guilt, but fosters a consciousness of guilt. (See Glossary #18.)

B. Main Thoughts

The main thought in 3:9-20 is that all men, without exception, are sinners and that the law was given to the Jews so that they might learn, by means of the mirror of the law, that they are as sinful as other people.

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