

Romans: The Revealing of Righteousness (part 8 of 9)

The “Unfairness” of God

Romans 3:1-8

Mark Vroegop

“Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? 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.” 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.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world? But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.” (Romans 3:1–8, ESV)

Last Sunday my wife sent me a text and asked me if I wanted to meet her for lunch after the third service at our favorite Mexican restaurant. She had to come back to church around 2:00 to pick up one of our kids, and so we enjoyed a spontaneous lunch date over chips, salsa, and fajitas. It was wonderful.

When I arrived home, one of our kids asked me where I had been. I said, “Oh, I was out to lunch with Mom at El Rodeo.” His response was classic, and I cannot tell you how many times as a parent I’ve heard this line: “That’s not fair.” I laughed. “Not fair?” I said. “Yeah,” he said, “I’m stuck here eating leftovers while you guys are out at El Rodeo . . . it’s just not fair.”

How many times have you said something like that about the issue of fairness? How many times have you appealed to “the fairness doctrine” in your lifetime? I would imagine that if you could drop a microphone into homes during the conversation about bedtime, you would hear many children crying “foul” as it relates to the issue of fairness.

A sense of fairness is deeply embedded into who we are as human beings. It is part of the cultural air that we breathe. It affects policy decisions and politics, laws and lawsuits, families and friends, and many other areas. I watched two congressmen get into a verbal kerfuffle this week over whether it was fair or not to conclude a meeting before everyone had a chance to speak. Or let me bring this right into your living room: when your parents distributed gifts on Christmas Day, did you ever think it odd that everyone always received the exact number of gifts? Fairness is a big deal.

Fairness and the Book of Romans

Now the reason I mention the issue of fairness is because we tend to bring our standard human understanding of fairness with us when we study the Bible. To a certain extent that is right and

appropriate. After all, much of the Old Testament law is really based on the principle of fairness. Or as Jesus said: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:39).

However, there are limits to our understanding fairness, and the book of Romans – especially chapters 9-11 – will show those limits to us. In other words, if you approach the book of Romans with the firm belief that everything in this book has to make sense to you and fit your sense of "fairness," there will be some things that are really challenging – even alarming. And we get our first taste of this in our text today: Romans 3:1-8.

Why is Paul talking about fairness? There are two reasons, both of which relate to what we have studied so far in Romans:

- 1) **"The righteousness that God requires is a righteousness that He gives."** This was the good news of chapter one, namely, that God demands a righteousness that He must give to us without effort or merit on our part. Grace depends on God, not on us.
- 2) **"God shows no partiality."** This was the bad news of 1:18-29, and the message was simply that whether a person is a Jew or a Gentile, there will be no escaping God's judgment and there will be no excuse. Jews will be judged by the Law, and Gentiles will be judged apart from the Law.

When you put all of this together, it means that human beings are hopeless and sinful and that even the supposed righteous things that we do (like Jewish circumcision) do not give us the kind of righteousness that God requires. True righteousness is something that God does for us, and it must be believed. We are saved by what God does, not by what we do.

In chapter two we have seen how this plays out with Jewish people. Basically, Paul says that as it relates to God's righteousness, your Jewishness, your possession of the Law, and your circumcision really do not matter. In fact, these things make it worse, by convincing people that they are spiritual, when in fact they are not, and by creating a judgmental spirit about others.

Chapter two was a stinging indictment of the Jewish people, and Paul anticipates the objections that he would receive. What I want to do today is show you three objections that he addresses, show you how he answers each one through the concept of judgment, and then draw some conclusions for us as it relates to the issue of fairness.

Three Objections Romans 1-2:

The great thing about studying the books of the Bible that were written by the Apostle Paul is that he presents an argument. There is a flow of thought to his inspired writing. And often Paul will address issues as though someone were arguing with him. He raises objections that he would anticipate.

In Romans 3:1-8, Paul raises three objections:

1. **Since Israel was faithless, God must not be faithful.**
2. **Since unrighteousness displays God's righteousness, it is unrighteous for God to judge us.**
3. **Since lying and evil produce God's truth and good, condemnation is not fair.**

Let's look at each of these to see what we learn.

Objection #1: Since Israel was faithless, God must not be faithful (vv 1-3)

The first objection relates to what Paul has previously said about being Jewish as it relates to righteousness. Paul anticipates that someone would suggest that Jewish identity is nearly pointless, which is another way of saying that God's previous plans really did not work. You can hear this quite clearly in verse 1: *"Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?" (Romans 3:1, ESV)* The argument might sound like this: "So, if keeping the Law and circumcision are not central to righteousness, what's the point of the Jewish people and God's plan for them?"

Now Paul answers part of that question in verse two: *"Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God."* (Romans 3:2, ESV) Based upon chapter two, one might anticipate that Paul would say that "Yes, being Jewish doesn't matter at all." But he does not say that. Rather, he affirms Jewishness (*"much in every way"*) and gives what appears to be the first of many reasons (*"to begin with . . ."*). Romans 9:4-5 identifies other blessings, such as God's adoption, the glory, the covenants, the law, the worship, and the promises. So Paul is not saying that Jewishness does not matter. In fact, he affirms it.

This opens up an interpretive and theological issue that we will cover in more detail when we walk through Romans 9-11. Within Evangelical Christianity, our church, and even our Eldership, there are differing views as to whether "Israel," in Romans and the rest of the New Testament, means 1) a true spiritual Israel, including Jews and Gentiles, 2) that a remnant of believing ethnic Israel will be saved, or 3) a national conversion of the people of Israel. I hold the third view, believing that God had, in Paul's day and ours, a plan for ethnic and national Israel. I do not think that plan is fulfilled in the nation of Israel today, but I do think that the gathering of an actual state of Israel in our own day may be preparatory for what is yet to come.

Part of the reason why I hold my view is based upon Romans 3:2. The text says, *"they were entrusted with the oracles of God."* If you look ahead to verse three, you will see that Paul's main issue here is the faithfulness of God. So "oracles" are connected to the faithfulness of God. Therefore, it seems that Paul is talking about promises made to the Jewish people, which they still possess and which are still going to be fulfilled, including their future salvation.¹ And I see that the salvation of Israel being rooted in the Abrahamic promise ("oracle"), which included a national identity and land.² So it seems that Paul's initial argument is that Jewishness does matter because God's promises are still going to be fulfilled. There is something advantageous about being Jewish. Chapter two did not negate God's plan for the people of Israel.

Let's leave that theological issue there, because the real point of Paul's objection is found in verse three. Regardless of your views on the place of national and ethnic Israel, the point in verse three is simply that the Jewish people were unfaithful. Everyone agrees on that point. The conclusion that might be drawn is simply that Israel's faithlessness means that God is not faithful. The question is

¹Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998). 149.

² See Genesis 12-15, 17:6-8, Jeremiah 31:24, 32:37, Ezekiel 34:27, 36:24,28; 37:12,14,21,25-26

stated very clearly in verse three: *“What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?”* The Jewish failure to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, according to this objection, means that God’s plans have failed. In other words, God’s promise to Israel was not only unfulfilled, but it was not true. Therefore, according to this objection, it is unfair for God to judge Israel for unfaithfulness when God’s promises are not really true.

Objection #2: Since unrighteousness displays God’s righteousness, it is unrighteous for God to judge us (v 5)

The next objection takes the logic of unfairness even further. Remember that beginning in Romans 1:18, Paul identified that the unrighteousness of humanity served as a backdrop against which the gospel was displayed. The gospel is glorious because of the inglorious nature of humanity. Most of chapter one and all of chapter two made that clear.

Paul anticipates someone suggesting that this set-up is unfair: *“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.)”* (Romans 3:5, ESV) This is a similar tone and question as to what we will find in Romans 9:14 (*“What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means!”* (Romans 9:14, ESV)) There are ways that God operates which might cause someone to raise the question of fairness.

In verse five the logical conclusion was that since humanity is hopelessly sinful and since salvation is a gift which maximizes God’s glory, it seems that God is unfair to punish people for the very thing that makes Him so glorious. If unrighteousness shows the righteousness of God, how is it fair or even right that God punishes helpless, unrighteous sinners?

The first objection is related to God’s truthfulness, and this objection relates to His righteousness.

Objection #3: Since lying and evil produce God’s truth and goodness, condemnation is not fair (vv 7-8)

After we cover this objection, we will discover how Paul briefly answers these charges. But the third and final objection is a bit of a “the-ends-justify-the-means” argument. Paul anticipates someone suggesting that since disobedience produced the eventual glorification of God, why is disobedience punished?

“But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying . . .”
(Romans 3:7–8a, ESV)

There are two aspects of this objection. First, Paul anticipates that some people might say that our lying, which is judged by God’s truthfulness, gives Him glory, so why does God condemn us if it all works out for His glory anyway? One might ask the question a bit differently: *“Why does God hold me accountable for sin if it is impossible for me to do anything else and if it results in Him receiving glory?”* How fair is that?!

Second, he identifies that some people are actually saying that His gospel teaching amounts to a license to sin – that you can keep doing evil because God’s grace comes to you apart from your

works. This was a frequent charge that the apostle Paul received and one that he specifically addresses in Romans 6.

The point of this objection is simply that our disobedience produced good results which have honored God. Therefore, any judgment by God seems to be unfair. If bad produces good, then what is the problem?

Underneath these three objections is the belief that it would be truly fair if people were saved by their works. In that way it would be up to human beings, and any failure would clearly be their own fault, without question. But the gospel is fundamentally not fair.

Judgment: Appealing to Who God is

Now that we have identified the three objections that Paul anticipates, let's go back and see how he addresses these issues. It is fascinating to me that each objection is answered with a connection to God's judgment. Notice where the concept of judgment appears:

- v 4 – Paul quotes Psalm 51 as evidence that God's judgment is based upon truth
- v 6 – Paul says, "then how could God judge the world?"
- v 8 – Paul concludes with "their condemnation is just . . ."

So what Paul does here is answer each objection with some aspect of judgment:

First, to the charge that God is unfaithful because of Israel's failure, Paul states that God is true even when everyone else is a liar (v 4). And he prefaces that statement with "May it never be!" – one of Paul's favorite expressions to something that is outrageously untrue.³ Then he quotes a text about David's moral failure to show that even when people are unfaithful, God is still true and just. In other words, Israel's faithlessness does not mean that God has failed. God's judgment will prove that.

Second, to the charge that it is unrighteous for God to hold people responsible for something that makes Him righteous, Paul appeals to the Jewish understanding that God was going to judge the world. In verse six we again see "May it never be!" And then Paul simply appeals to their assumption regarding future judgment. His argument is that if the Jews are not judged for unrighteousness, then Gentiles would not be judged either. This idea of final judgment was a foundational concept in the Jewish worldview, and that is why Paul appealed to it.

Modern people are often eager to accept the idea that no one will be judged and all will be saved, but it would be unthinkable for the Jews of the second temple period. They would presuppose that God had to judge the world, especially the Gentiles who were outside the covenant. If Gentiles would escape the judgment, the covenant made with Israel would mean nothing at all. Their whole history as God's elect people would be an illusion and a mockery.⁴

³ See also Romans 3:6, 3:31, 6:2, 6:15, 7:7, 7:13, 9:14, 11:1, 11:11

⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998). 158.

For the people of Israel, their salvation was directly tied to judgment. If you were here during our study of Exodus, hopefully you will remember that the plagues were a vital part of Israel's deliverance. Exodus 7:4 describes their salvation with this motif: *"I will . . . bring my hosts, my people the children of Israel, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment."* So salvation and judgment were inextricably bound together.

Now this is very important to note: Paul appealed to something about God and His plan that was more foundational than their sense of fairness. Paul appealed to God's judgment.

Third, to the charge that the gospel is about doing evil so good will come, Paul simply says, *"their condemnation is just"* (Romans 3:8). Notice that he does not go into great detail as to a defense of the gospel or a refutation regarding the idea that on a person's lie is an effective means of God's truth being more well-known. Paul does not even really address this charge specifically. Instead, and because the charge is so ridiculous, he simply appeals to God's judgment once again.

Let's review what Paul has done here. He assumes that there will be Jewish people who question the fairness of God at multiple levels. He knows that people are prone to see the work of God and to process it through their human lens of a fairness doctrine. But how does he answer? He appeals to something more foundational than fairness! He appeals to judgment, which is really appealing to who God is.

In other words, there are some questions or issues in life that are not solved by things making sense to us. They are solved by appealing to the fact that God is not like us. There are truths in the Bible that are designed to make us realize one stunning but disconcerting truth: we are not God!

We will see this in our study of Romans 9-11, but let me show you one example that illustrates this very clearly. Romans 9 is a chapter about the sovereignty of God in salvation, the great mystery of the doctrine of election where God chose people to be saved. There are so many hard questions with this issue, but notice how Paul answers those questions:

"So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?"" (Romans 9:18-20, ESV)

Notice that Paul does the same thing here that he does in Romans 3! He appeals to something greater than fairness. In Romans 3 he appeals to who God is by virtue of judgment, and in Romans 9 he appeals to who God is by virtue of being the creator of the universe. In both cases, Paul appeals to who God is as his answer to the question about fairness.

Or, to state it differently: Fairness is not the ultimate answer for what is right or wrong; God is. The book of Romans aims to show us that the ultimate purpose of everything in life is the glory of God. And there are times when that objective is so beyond our thinking that the only answer is: "You are God and I am not."

How to Think about "Fair"

Romans 3 is helpful because it introduces this issue of fairness, a matter that we will deal with more fully when we come to Romans 9-11. However, let me give you a few things to think about when it comes to this issue of “fairness.”

1. Our human default is toward this “fairness doctrine.” It does not require any training or teaching for human beings to have a great passion for what is “fair.” And we just need to recognize how powerful this perspective really is for us as human beings.
2. We can take this “fairness doctrine” with us into our study of God and the Bible. In fact, I think we do this more often than what we realize. We come to the text with a “fairness” lens, and that is where we often get into trouble.
3. The Bible is filled with “understanding gaps.” As you study the Bible, and as you look at life, you need to be careful that you do not assume that you will understand how everything works or that you will be able to make sense of everything. There are things in the Bible that are meant to humble us by blowing our minds. Take Job, for instance. One fascinating thing about the story recorded in the book of Job is the fact that God never told him what was really going on behind the scenes. God felt that it was sufficient for Job to know that God was in control. Or, as I have said before: the answer to the “Who?” question is more comforting than the “Why?”
4. The solution to “fairness” or “understanding gaps” is God Himself. In other words, it is not that things always have to make sense to you; rather, it is that you can choose to trust in a God who knows better than you.

Let me take you to the bedtime conversation between a parent and a child. A child might protest for a while as to why he or she needs to go to bed. He might ask about what time everyone else is going to bed or for the rationale for going to bed when he is not tired. After a few questions and additional resistance, most parents will eventually get to the point where they will say, “You need to go to bed because I, as your parent, am telling you to.” And that is the end of the discussion. Parental authority trumps childish questions which feel very legitimate to children with limited understanding. So it is with God.

5. Remember that the Good News is fundamentally unfair. God poured out our judgment on His innocent Son and gave us a righteousness that we never deserved and could ever earn. So when we think of the “fairness” of God, we need to always remember that the cross was not fair.

The Bible is full of hard and perplexing texts like Romans 3:1-8, and they are meant to teach us something about God and about ourselves at the same time. Texts like these are designed to hallow Him and to humble us.

The book of Romans is about God’s righteousness being revealed. And when you see it for what it is – including all its mystery – you cannot help but understand why Paul wrote this in Romans 11:33 –

“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Romans 11:33,ESV)

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