

## 3 God's faithfulness (Romans 3)

Have you heard the phrase *justification by faith*? For some, *justification by faith* is the gospel of salvation. Justification means to be declared righteous.

But what is the connection between *faith* and *righteousness*?

And how do these words relate to *gospel* and *salvation*?

These are the keywords in Romans 3, so that's our theme this session.

But first, any questions from Romans 1–2, where Paul drew out the conflict between Jews and gentiles. Gentiles rejected God's decrees, but Jews did too. The animosity between them was damaging the church. It undermines the credibility of the gospel, since the gospel says God is bringing all people together in the Messiah's leadership.

### 3.1 Humanity doing wrong by God (3:1-18)

Jews or gentiles: who does God prefer? Do Jews have the advantage? Is it better to belong to the community of the circumcised? Jacob's descendants had been God's chosen people for more than 1000 years.

Do Jews have a right to feel more privileged? Paul gives two answers that disagree:

**Romans 3:1-2, 9 (NIV)**

<sup>1</sup> What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? <sup>2</sup> **Much in every way!** ...

<sup>9</sup> What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? **Not at all!**

There are many advantages to having God leading your nation.

There's no advantage if God's people don't follow his leading.

#### **Advantages of being Jewish (3:1-8)**

**Romans 3:2 (NIV)**

Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.

Israel became God's nation when Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt. At Mount Sinai they heard the LORD's voice as he gave the Ten Commandments. It was terrifying:

**Exodus 20:1, 18b-19 (NIV)**

<sup>1</sup> And God spoke all these words: ... <sup>18</sup> They trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance <sup>19</sup> and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die."

It was intended to stop them turning away from God (Exodus 20:20). But what if Israel was no different to the nations? What if they formed their own god (a golden calf)? What if they refused to enter the Promised Land, to live as a nation under God?

Does their unfaithfulness make the covenant not worth the stone it was written on?

**Romans 3:3 (NIV)**

What if some were **unfaithful**?

Will their **unfaithfulness** nullify God's **faithfulness**?

The crucial question is: Can the covenant relationship work if one side is unfaithful?

### Romans 3:3b-4 (ESV)

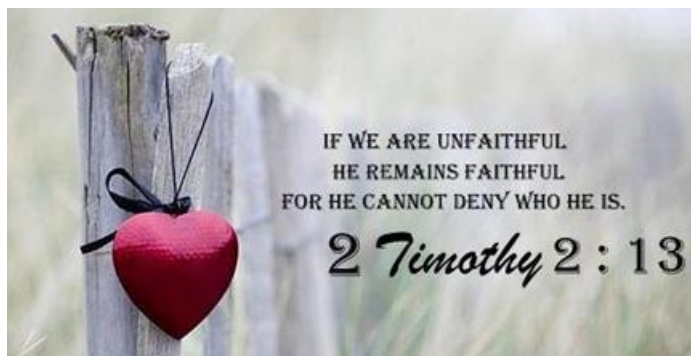
<sup>3</sup> Does their **faithlessness** nullify the **faithfulness** of God?

<sup>4</sup> 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." [Psalm 51:4]

Astoundingly, God's covenant faithfulness stands true even when everyone is untrue. God's faithfulness remains when every person on the human side of the relationship is unfaithful to the covenant.

So here's the connection between *faith* and *righteousness*:

- Out of his **faithful** character, God **does right** by us.
- That remains true even if every human is **unfaithful** to God, and therefore **does wrong** by God.



God remains faithful even when human unfaithfulness goes all the way to the top. King David took Uriah's wife, and arranged to have Uriah killed so he could keep her. He set the tone of unfaithfulness for the nation.

Yet God remained faithful to Israel. God sent his spokesman (Nathan) to confront the king—a dangerous task! That story is the background for the quotation in Romans 3:4:

### Psalm 51:title, 4 (ESV)

*A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet went to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.*

<sup>4</sup> Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.

Confronted by God, David bowed to God's throne. David said God was **right** (*justified*) to call him out for what he'd done *wrong*.

So, this is how Paul connects *faith[fulness]* and *right[eousness]*:

- out of **unfaithfulness** to God, David (leader of Israel) **did wrong**, and yet,
- out of **faithfulness** to David (and Israel) God **did right** by David (and Israel).

God was justified (doing **right**) in confronting David (about doing wrong).

Why? Because God remained **faithful** when David was **unfaithful**.

This is the answer to Paul's question in verse 3: *Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness?* The answer is no: God remains **faithful** to his people and does **right** by them, even when they are **unfaithful** to God and do **wrong** by him.

This connection between *faith[fulness]* and *right[eousness]* is foundational for where this chapter is headed (3:21-26). Out of *faith[fulness]*, God does *right[eousness]*; and out of *unfaith[fulness]*, humans do *unright[eousness]*.

This has huge implications for Israel's history. The northern tribes were **unfaithful** to God, so in his **faithfulness** God sent Elijah to confront them: “*You have abandoned the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals*” (1 Kings 18:18).

Eventually God handed Israel over to Assyria (2 Kings 17). Why? “*Because they were unfaithful to me*” (Ezekiel 39:23). That left only Judah.

Eventually God handed Judah over to Babylon. Why? “*The people of Israel and the people of Judah have been unfaithful to me,*” declares the LORD (Jeremiah 5:11). Each time God sent a prophet to address their unfaithfulness, the prophet bore witness to God's *faithfulness* to them.

From the time of the exile (587 BC), Israel—the nation that previously had every advantage over the nations—ended up serving the nations because they'd refused to serve the LORD. Which nation they served depended on who was in power: Babylon, Persia, Greece, the Ptolemies and Seleucids, and then Rome. Instead of living as a nation under God, God's people were back where they were before the Sinai covenant, ruled by tyrants like Pharaoh instead of the LORD.

That's the question Paul asked: ***What advantage is there in being a Jew?*** (verse 1) The covenant with God gave them every advantage over the nations, but they lost that advantage and ended up serving the nations because of their unfaithfulness.

That was the tragedy of Israel's experience. “Where is your **faithfulness** to David?” they asked God (Psalm 89:49). “Have you utterly rejected us and are you angry with us beyond measure?” (Lamentations 5:22)

Paul affirms God's **faithfulness** by using David's own declaration that God did **right** by him when he did wrong by God (Psalm 51:4). The opening statement of Paul's letter affirms God's **faithfulness** to his people: God's good news, promised beforehand through the prophets, is that God has placed his Son—a physical descendant of King David—in power (Romans 1:1-5). That's the **faithfulness** of God: God doing **right** by his people, even as they in their **unfaithfulness** were doing **wrong** by God.

The answer to the question in verse 3 is a resounding, No! Israel's *unfaithfulness* does not nullify God's *faithfulness*. Now, a twisted person might calculate, “Well then, I can get away with anything. The worse I am, the more I show up how good God is.”

### **Romans 3:5-8 (NIV)**

<sup>5</sup> But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.)

<sup>6</sup> Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?

<sup>7</sup> Someone might argue, “If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?”

<sup>8</sup> Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—“Let us do evil that good may result”? Their condemnation is just!

Some people fear that preaching grace will encourage people to keep doing wrong. Presumably the person Paul had in mind is the one he addressed in the previous chapter, the one who preached condemnation as the path to overturn sin (2:1).

Paul's gospel does not promote doing wrong by God. It calls us to *faith[fulness]* to God, so it results in *doing right* by God, through the power of the Holy Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead and gives life to our mortal bodies as he lives in us (8:11).

### ***No advantage at all (3:9-19)***

If Israel had been unfaithful to God before Christ, they were unfaithful when God sent his Messiah. Handing him over to Rome, they declared, “*We have no king but Caesar*” (John 19:15). They chose to continue under the nations rather than under the king God sent them. They were under the same power that ruled the nations:

#### **Romans 3:9 (NIV)**

What shall we conclude then? Do we have any **advantage**? Not at all!  
For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are  
**all under the power of sin.**

The advantage they were meant to have as a people under God's reign became *no advantage* as they lived under the power of the nations who were *under the power of sin*.

We tend to think of *sin* as something I do wrong. It's more than that. Sin is a power calling us to claim *the knowledge of good and evil* for ourselves (Genesis 2:17). By rejecting God's authority, we end up ruled by Sin instead of ruled by God. Sin is more than a bad action: **Sin is a power that wants to rule God's world.**

The first time the word *sin* appears in the Bible, God was warning Cain not to let this power rule him: “*Sin is crouching at the door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it*” (Genesis 4:7). By choosing to follow Sin rather than God, Cain left the presence of the LORD and built a city where violence ruled (Genesis 4:16-24).

After the flood, the nations went their own ways, making war to form kingdoms that were designed to bring the power of God down into human hands (Genesis 10:10; 11:4). In rejecting God's reign, the nations gave themselves to the power of Sin that was bent on taking control of God's world. The tyrant named Sin reigned through the rulers of the nations—the kings of Babylon and Tyre for example (Isaiah 14:4-14; Ezekiel 28:10-10).

Now that God has raised up his Son in power, all of us (Jew and gentile) are called to recognize God's Messiah. He is the one God sent to set the world free from the ruling power called Sin (6:12-14).

But if Jews reject God's Messiah, how are they different from gentiles? They have *no advantage at all*: like the other nations, they remain *under the power of Sin* (verse 9).

Paul refers to the Jewish Scriptures to make the point that Sin dominates all people, Jew and gentile. The reason Sin rules is that all people—Jew and gentile—turned from God's authority:



**Romans 3:10-18 (NIV)**

<sup>10</sup> As it is written:

“There is no one righteous,  
not even one;

<sup>11</sup> there is no one who  
understands; there is no one  
who seeks God.

<sup>12</sup> All have turned away, they have  
together become worthless;  
there is no one who does good,  
not even one.”

<sup>13</sup> “Their throats are open graves;  
their tongues practice deceit.”

“The poison of vipers  
is on their lips.”

<sup>14</sup> “Their mouths are full of cursing  
and bitterness.”

<sup>15</sup> “Their feet are swift to shed  
blood;

<sup>16</sup> ruin and misery mark their ways,  
<sup>17</sup> and the way of peace they do  
not know.”

<sup>18</sup> “There is no fear of God  
before their eyes.”

**Old Testament****Psalm 14:1b-3 || 53:1-3 (NIV)**

<sup>1</sup> There is no one who does good.

<sup>2</sup> The LORD looks down from  
heaven on all mankind to see if  
there are any who understand,  
any who seek God.

<sup>3</sup> All have turned away,  
all have become corrupt;  
there is no one who does good,  
not even one.

**Psalm 5:9b (NIV)**

<sup>9</sup> Their throat is an open grave;  
with their tongues they tell lies.

**Psalm 140:3b (NIV)**

<sup>3</sup> The poison of vipers  
is on their lips.

**Psalm 9:28 (Septuagint)**

<sup>28</sup> Him whose curse and bitterness  
and guile fill his mouth, under his  
tongue are trouble and distress.

**Proverbs 1:16 (NIV)**

<sup>16</sup> for their feet rush into evil,  
they are swift to shed blood.

**Isaiah 59:8 (NIV)**

<sup>8</sup> The way of peace they do not  
know; ... no one who walks along  
with them will know peace.

**Psalm 36:1b (NIV)**

<sup>1</sup> There is no fear of God  
before their eyes.

Most of those quotations are from the Davidic king. Most of David's psalms are about his enemies, the powers that wanted to take God's people under their control. And because God's nation rejected his leadership, they did eventually fall to the nations, so that all people—Jew and gentile—were ruled by Sin.

That's why the Jewish people who had *much advantage in every way* under God's reign ended up with *no advantage at all* as Sin ruled the nations and them.

Any questions on the first half of Romans 3?

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## 3.2 God doing right by humanity (3:19-31)

So here's God's problem. God chose Abraham to create a people that would be all he created humans to be (Genesis 12:1-3). God established his nation at Sinai, giving them the Law (Torah) that called them to be faithful to him.

But the Torah did not have the power to make Israel or the nations right with God. God never gave the Torah to the nations (though they are accountable to God), and Israel's unfaithfulness to God resulted in them doing wrong by God. What the Torah did was reveal how Israel, like the nations, served sin instead of serving God:

### Romans 3:19-20 (NIV)

<sup>19</sup> Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. <sup>20</sup> Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

The next statement is as tightly packed as a rosebud. This rosebud opens into full bloom over the next five chapters (Romans 4–8). Everything Paul said about *faith[fulness]* and *right[eousness]* has been preparing us for this:

### Romans 3:21-26 (NIV)

<sup>21</sup> But now apart from the law **the righteousness of God** has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> **This righteousness** is given through **faith** in **Jesus Christ** to all who **believe**.

There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by **Christ Jesus**.

<sup>25</sup> God presented **Christ** as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by **faith**. He did this to demonstrate **his righteousness**, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—<sup>26</sup> he did it to demonstrate **his righteousness** at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have **faith** in **Jesus**.



Before we pick our favourite words (like *sacrifice* and *atonement*), look for the key phrases, the ones that repeat. The message is the relationship between these phrases.

What are the outer leaves of the rosebud? ***The righteousness of God*** occurs twice at the top (verses 21 and 22) and twice at the bottom (verses 25 and 26). The same root word (*dikaïos*) forms the conclusion: God ***is right*** (just) and ***makes right*** (justifies).

Within ***the righteousness of God*** is ***faith[fulness]***. Twice in verse 22 and again in verse 25 we find the root word (*pistis*). It's also the goal in verse 26: ***faith[fulness]***.

And at the heart of the rosebud—wrapped in ***right[eousness]*** and ***faith[fulness]***—is the person who restores the people of earth to their heavenly sovereign.

If Sin was personified as the power trying to take over God's world, *the righteousness of God* is also presented (made visible) in a person, namely *Messiah Jesus*. He is *the righteousness of God* made known. He is *the faithfulness of God* in human form. His arrival calls us to *faith[fulness]* to him. That's how the world is *set right*.

In him, God restores the relationship between heaven and earth. Our heavenly sovereign *does right* by all the people of the earth (*Jew and gentile*) by providing his anointed leader (*Christ Jesus*) to lead us. Giving us his Christ is *God-doing-right*, the visible expression of God's *faithfulness* on earth.

Messiah Jesus is *faithful* to the heavenly throne, so he *does right* by God. He fulfils what we were designed to do but fell short of: imaging the glory of our heavenly sovereign in his earthly creation (so doing right out of faithfulness).

So it's in him that we see the faithfulness of God in visible form, the righteousness of God made manifest, *God-doing-right* for all to see.

That's literally what this text is saying:

### Romans 3:19-26 (my translation)

<sup>19</sup> We know that as much as the Torah says it says to those constituted by the Torah, so that every mouth is silenced and the whole world becomes accountable in relation to God. <sup>20</sup> It follows that no flesh will be **made right** before him from doing Torah, for through Torah comes awareness of sin.

<sup>21</sup> Now, separate from Torah, **God's righteousness** has become manifest, having received the witness of the Torah and the Prophets,

<sup>22</sup> **God's righteousness** [made visible] through the **faithfulness** of **Messiah Jesus** into all the **faithful**. For there is no distinction, <sup>23</sup> for all who offended and lack God's splendour <sup>24</sup> are being **set right** as a gift by his generosity, through the emancipation in **Messiah Jesus**,

<sup>25</sup> whom God presented as atonement through [his] **faithfulness** in his blood, in demonstration of **his righteousness** in disregarding the offences that happened previously <sup>26</sup> by God's clemency as a demonstration of **his righteousness** [God doing right] at the present time, showing him to be the one who **does right** and **sets right** out of **Jesus' faithfulness**.

Unfortunately, language is ambiguous. Does the phrase *pistis Yesou Christou* in verse 22 mean *faith in Jesus Christ* (NIV) or the *faithfulness of Jesus Christ* (my translation)? The same issue occurs in verses 24 and 26. Is Paul discussing our faith or his faithfulness?

Ultimately it's both, but the sequence matters. We're not made right with God by our own faith[fulness]. It's a bit late for that: humanity had turned against God (sinned) long before you were born. Humanity went wrong, and ended up enslaved to sin instead of reflecting God's glory over creation as he intended (verse 23).

So it's not about us doing right out of our faith[fulness] towards God. It's about God rescuing us, *God doing right* out of his *faithfulness* to us. The manifestation of *God-doing-right* out of his *faithfulness* arrived as a person: his anointed ruler, Messiah Jesus.

The leader God gave us *did right* out of *faithfulness* to his Father. He did this for all of us. So God's gospel (the good news that his Christ is our Lord) calls us to respond by trusting our God-appointed leader with our loyalty, that is, responding with faith[fulness] to him. God sets humanity right as we give our **trusting loyalty** to Jesus the Messiah. Our response mirrors what heaven has done for us. The sequence is:

- a) Out of his faithfulness, God did right by us (providing Messiah Jesus).
- b) Out of his faithfulness, Messiah Jesus did right for his people, setting us right.
- c) Out faithfulness to the Messiah, humanity is set right by God.

That's verse 22: *God's righteousness [was made visible] through the faithfulness of Messiah Jesus into all the faithful.*

Within the framework of these repeated phrases, so we can now understand this:

#### Romans 3:24-25a

We are being set right [*dikaioō*] as a gift by his generosity [*charis*], through the redemption [*apolytrōsis*] in Messiah Jesus whom God presented as atonement [*hilastērion*] through his faithfulness [*pistis*] in his blood.



**Justification** is acquittal, a judgement that we're in the right. Some have regarded what God does in justifying us as "legal fiction," as if his heavenly court makes a judgement about us that has no basis in reality. That's not what Paul is saying. Given our previous track record of rebellion against God that culminated in assassinating his Son, an acquittal is an unearned gift based on our heavenly sovereign's generosity (grace). But it's not just a fiction: in Messiah Jesus God is transforming us. It's a real *redemption*—returning creation to heaven's management. The earth is emancipated from the reign of sin and death, into divine governance, as the world recognizes the anointed king God gave us (Messiah Jesus).

So what does it mean to say, *God presented Messiah Jesus as atonement*?

The temple had a room devoted solely to God (the Holy of Holies). It contained a throne for God (the ark of the covenant). The lid of the ark was called the **atonement cover**. It represented the interface between God and his people. The ark contained the Law that defined the covenant people, and God sat over them, symbolically *enthroned between the cherubim* (1 Samuel 4:4; 2 Samuel 6:2; 2 Kings 19:15; 1 Chronicles 13:6; Psalms 80:1; 99:1; Isaiah 37:16). Once a year on the Day of Atonement, the high priest approached the throne to maintain the relationship between the heavenly sovereign and his people on earth (Leviticus 16).

That's what happened in the first temple anyway. When Babylon destroyed the temple, the ark of the covenant of the LORD was lost (Jeremiah 3:16). The high priests still held the Day of Atonement ceremonies, but it's not clear exactly how it worked.

In Christ, it's God who takes the initiative to restore relationship. Instead of a priest approaching God, God approaches us. Instead of a priest presenting the blood of an animal as a gift to God, God presents us with the *faithfulness* of his Messiah—God's faithfulness when the rebellion against God led to the bloodshed of the Messiah.

His *blood* is his death. Since the life was understood to be in the blood, giving his blood is giving his life. God's Messiah remained faithful—even unto death! That is who God presented to make “at-one-ment” between heaven and earth.

(The NIV introduces the word “sacrifice” in verse 25, but it's not there. *Hilastērion* is not a sacrifice; it's the lid of the ark, the atonement cover, sometimes called the mercy seat.)

The point of verse 21-26 is God's *righteousness* as the expression of his *faithfulness* to a world in rebellion. Out of faithfulness, God did right by us, setting us right in the Messiah (the faithful one). So out of faithfulness to him we do right by him. That's the gospel of God transforming the world.



### 3.3 So what?

Is this approach reframing how you think about the gospel of salvation?

Have you understood sin as a power seeking to rule God's world, so we fall short of the glory of God?

Have you viewed Messiah Jesus as the opposite of sin: *the righteousness of God* revealed?

Is the gospel the good proclamation that God's anointed has been raised up to reign, i.e. the expression of our heavenly sovereign's faithfulness doing right by us?

Does the gospel call us to mirror that relationship with God, i.e. out of faithfulness to him, doing right by him?

Is that what justification by faith looks like: giving our loyalty (faithfulness) to Christ, so the world is set right and does right by God?

That's not how Romans 1–3 has always been understood. Sometimes the church has taken the role of judge, as if it is our role to make people feel guilty so we can get them saved.

In the Middle Ages, Catholicism traded on making people feel sinful. Luther realized that God justifies by his grace through faith in Christ. But Luther never questioned why the church's message had become proclaiming guilt rather than gospel, i.e. God's call for people to turn and give their loyalty (faith) to the Messiah who came to power when God raised him from the dead.

At times we've reduced God's glorious gospel—his proclamation that Sin is dethroned and he has installed his Christ as our Lord—to something we can sell individuals:

- a) You are guilty, so admit you're a sinner (Romans 3:23).
- b) You deserve death for your sins, but Jesus died to forgive you (Romans 6:23).
- c) Now, pray the prayer admitting your guilt, and you will be saved (Romans 10:9).

This selective use of verses from Romans (the so-called "Roman road") is nothing more than a marketing technique. To sell anything, you:

- a) demonstrate the client's need,
- b) present your product as the solution, and
- c) close the deal.

So, what is the gospel? And how do we present it to the world? Your thoughts?

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For next time, read Romans 4–5.