

A Wonderful God: God is Above the Law

Romans 2:17-3:8

The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last. Righteousness is not being better than someone else but being right with God. But some do have advantages.

I. Being Right with God is Inward; 2:17-29.

¹⁷ Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; ¹⁸ if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; ¹⁹ if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth-- ²¹ you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? ²⁴ As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." ²⁵ Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. ²⁶ If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? ²⁷ The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. ²⁸ A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹ No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.

Paul lists nine privileges the Jews enjoy: (1) They possess the name "Jew", distinct from all others, whom God had chosen to be His own. (2) They "rely on the law." Jews were proud that they alone had been entrusted with this record of God's character and will. (3) They "brag about their relationship to God." (4) They know God's will. (5) They "approve of what is superior." Jews are able to discern right from wrong. They are "instructed by the law." (6) and (7) They are "a guide for the blind" and "a light for those who are in the dark". They are in a position to help others understand the truth about God. (8) and (9) The Jews are also convinced that they are "instructors of the foolish" and "teachers of infants".

Being circumcised and possessing the law do not qualify a person to be part of God's true people. Being truly right with God can never be determined by physical birth, by rituals, by traditions, or by devotion. To be right with God is an inward matter. It is marked by the circumcision of the heart, not the written code. Paul is convincing his listeners of their need for a different kind of righteousness.

Is there a benefit to growing up in a Christian home? Absolutely! You have access to God's Word, worship, Christian community, and seeing God at work around you in the church. But it does not automatically make you right with God. Being right with God comes from faith in His saving work through Jesus.

II. The Faithfulness of God; 3:1-8.

¹ What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? ² Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God. ³ What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? ⁴ Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge." ⁵ 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.) ⁶ Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? ⁷ Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" ⁸ 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"? Their condemnation is deserved.

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew? Paul surprises us when he says, "much in every way!" The Jews' privileges give them no ultimate advantage over Gentiles in the judgment because God will assess both Jew and Gentile on the basis of a true faith in Jesus. But this does not mean that the Jews have no privileges.

They have been entrusted with the words of God. What if some of the Jews did not respond in faith? Did their lack of faith cancel out the faithfulness of God? Not at all! God will remain true to His promise even though every person should turn out to be a liar. God will be proven right when He speaks in judgment.

The blessing of knowing God's Word is a double-edged sword. God's Word promises blessing for obedience, but it also warns about the curse that will fall on disobedience. God remains faithful and righteous in all He does.

The Jewish objector argues it is unfair for God to condemn Jews for acts that enhance His glory. Paul responds with a counterquestion intended to show the absurdity of such an objection: Should we then take the view that any act is justified so long as it brings good in the end?

In reference to Psalm 51:4, Paul is hinting that his concept of God's faithfulness is broader than the view. Jews in Paul's day tended to think of God's faithfulness as oriented positively toward themselves: God would do good things for His people. But Paul reminds them, God is also faithful when He punishes the sin of His people.

It is unfair for God to condemn people whose sin leads to His glory. "Let us do evil that good may result" is the logical conclusion from this way of looking at sin. Jews cannot excuse their sin just because God uses it for good in His salvation plan.

Being entrusted with and knowing God's Word has never meant that anyone is immune from judgment; in fact, that very Word promises judgment for disobedience.