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In Defense of the Gospel, Part 2

Romans 3:1-8, Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? ² Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. ³ What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? ⁴ 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.”

⁵ 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.) ⁶ By no means! For then how could God judge the world? ⁷ But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? ⁸ And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just. ¹

The Nature of Apologetics

There is a word in the Christian vocabulary that when spoken, usually provokes one of two responses: Either the feeling of dread or of conquest. That word is *apologetics*.

¹ *The Holy Bible : English standard version*. 2001 (Ro 3:1–8). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

For most Christians *apologetics* means confrontation! And depending on the type of person you are when it comes to confrontation the mentioning of the term *apologetics* will either make you nervous or excited. And that's too bad because apologetics has much more to do with discourse and a relationship than with confrontation!

One of the most well-known apologists, the late Francis Schaeffer, said that if he had an hour to spend with a total stranger, he would use fifty-five of the minutes asking questions and listening, and five of the minutes talking. Truly, apologetics is not banging people over the head with the Bible, rather it is understanding where people are coming from, and then lovingly showing them the truth of God's word. After all, how can you help someone you know nothing about?

Romans 3 is an example of Biblical apologetics. In the opening chapters of this epistle Paul devotes his efforts to showing that salvation must be by grace through faith because ALL people, Jew and Gentile alike, are sinners (Romans 1:17; 1:18-2:29)! This raised a rather strong indictment against the Judaism of Paul's day. In spite of the many privileges the Jew enjoyed as a participant in the covenant community, Paul said that they nevertheless would receive condemnation on account of their disobedience to God's Law (Romans 2:1-29).

Now as we have seen, this would have raised many objections amongst the Jews of Paul's day! And it is at this point that you see Paul the "Apologist." In response, Paul doesn't bang his Bible, resort to intimidation or give threatening warnings. Rather, in Romans 3:1-8 Paul anticipates the objections the Jew would have raised to the Gospel, and then lovingly and graciously responds.

Previously we saw the first objection that the Jew would have raised to the Gospel: If the child of Abraham could incur the wrath of God, then the gospel must abrogate the benefits of the promise (Romans 3:1). To this objection, Paul responded that there are innumerable advantages in being a member of the covenant community. It is just that these advantages don't save you (Romans 3:2).

Now, we are going to look at the second objection that Paul addresses in the defense of the gospel: The gospel would nullify the faithfulness of God.

Does It Nullify God's Faithfulness?

Romans 3:3, "what then? If some did not believe."

Paul's treatment of the morally upright has revolved largely around the Old Testament promises given to the Jew; promises which served as the basis of their boast and hence the assurance of their salvation. What specifically were these promises? While there were many, two of the most prominent ones were these:

- Their possession of the Oracles of God, (Romans 2:17-20) hence Paul's treatment in Romans 3:1-2.
- The ordinance of circumcision, (Romans 2:25-29) which is Paul's focus here.

Did you get that? The key to understanding Paul's words in Romans 3:3-4 is seeing that he is grappling

with the covenant promise given to Abraham regarding his children. Now in the Jewish mind it was through circumcision that the descendants of Abraham were saved. Now as we have seen, Paul's treatment of the gospel in this epistle contradicted this...

Romans 2:25, "For indeed circumcision is of value, if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision [which in Judaism was nothing less than condemnation]."

Again, this was a radical statement because more than anything it brought into question the efficacy of the promises that God made to Abraham. And hence Paul continued:

Romans 3:30, "if some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify."

The word for "nullify" literally means to "render inoperative or invalid," "to nullify," "to put out of action," or "to make ineffective." For example it is used in Romans 4.

Romans 4:14, "For if those who are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise is nullified."

The idea is that while the promise can still be read and preached upon, nevertheless it is empty, of non-effect! That is the idea behind nullify.

Romans 6:6, "Knowing this, that our old self was crucified with *Him*, that our body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin."

The idea is NOT that in Christ our sinful body literally has been removed by Christ. RATHER, its influence has (Galatians 3:17). From these passages hopefully you get the idea. To "nullify" does not mean to remove or destroy, but to remove or destroy the effectiveness of something. Accordingly, in the Biblical sense of the term:

- An unloaded gun has been "nullified."
- A car without fuel has been "nullified."
- A radio without reception has been "nullified."

And so the question that Paul's treatment of the Gospel and Judaism raised was, "Does the loss of a covenant child nullify or render empty..."

Romans 3:3, "the faithfulness of God."

The word behind "faithful" in the Bible literally means "able to be trusted." It is variously translated as "trustworthy," "dependable," or "faithful."

With this the second charge that the Jew leveled against God is placed on the floor. Simply stated, it went something like this: If God promised to be the God of Abraham's descendants, and He did make such a promise,

Genesis 17:7-8, "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

****AND**** God's promises have NOT been rendered inoperative, which is Paul's contention in Romans 3:1-2 ****AND**** some of the children of Abraham receive condemnation, which is Paul's point in Romans 2, then the conclusion must be this:

- God is not able to be trusted when it comes to His promises!
- He is no different than the idol that can do nothing for its maker.
- His promises are empty.

The Jew would say that God's "faithfulness" is an empty attribute, a theologically significant but practically worthless characteristic!

Just as in Romans 3:1, I want you to see that this is a valid and formidable objection! As wonderful the news is that Paul presented in Romans 1:16-17, most Jews would have had a difficult time receiving it. On the surface it seems to contradict the doctrine of covenant succession and so would have brought into question the attribute of God's faithfulness; if God promised to save Abraham's children and some are lost, then God's promise is untrustworthy and God is not faithful.

Paul's Response

Let us look at Paul's response.

Romans 3:4, "may it never be."

This is the strongest negative in the Greek denoting a "recoil of abhorrence." It carried the implication of impossibility, and is thus translated, "Let it not be!" or "Never!" With this Paul continues.

Romans 3:4, "let God be found true."

Another way of saying this is this:

- Let God be seen to be what He is: true, faithful, reliable, trustworthy.
- Let it be seen or acknowledge that God keeps covenant!

Family of God, before us is an important principle when it comes to objections regarding God, His Kingdom, His demands, His calling, and His word. In essence Paul's answer to the Jewish questioning of God's faithfulness was to say, "Don't ever..."

- Bring into question the character of God!"
- Doubt the integrity of the Lord!"
- Question the veracity of His word!"
- Look with arrogance upon God's calling or claim on our life!"

RATHER let us

- 1) Acknowledge the inviolable character of our God,
- 2) Accept His claim over our life, and so
- 3) Bring under scrutiny the real culprit: MAN'S Integrity!" That is exactly where Paul brings us in his response...

Romans 3:4, "let God be found true though every man be found a liar."

The idea behind "liar" is that of falsehood or unfaithfulness. Truly when the issue of "faithfulness" is concerned, it has been and remains man who is:

- The one who lacks integrity!
- The culprit!
- The unfaithful one!

Jeremiah 17:9, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?"

A brief look at redemptive history reveals this. Consider Psalm 106:6-8, 13, 19, 24, 28, 32, 34. In this Psalm detailing the faithfulness of God and the sordid history of man, the Psalmist made the following comments,

Psalm 106:6, "We have sinned like our fathers, we have committed iniquity, we have behaved wickedly. Our fathers in Egypt did not understand Thy wonders; they did not remember Thine abundant kindnesses, but rebelled by the sea, at the Red Sea."

Psalm 106:13, "hey quickly forgot His works; they did not wait for His counsel... 19 They made a calf in Horeb, and worshiped a molten image."

Psalm 106:24, "they despised the pleasant land; they did not believe in His word."

Psalm 106:28, "They joined themselves also to Baal-peor, and ate sacrifices offered to the dead."

Psalm 106:32, "They also provoked *Him* to wrath at the waters of Meribah, so that it went hard with Moses on their account."

Psalm 106:34, "They did not destroy the peoples, as the Lord commanded them."

And yet in and through this horrible record of sin and rebellion, we read these words:

Psalm 106:44-46, "Nevertheless [God] looked upon their distress, when He heard their cry; and He remembered His covenant for their sake, and relented according to the greatness of His lovingkindness. He also made them *objects* of compassion in the presence of all their captors."

When it comes to the question of the Jew and their condemnation, the issue is NOT God and His

integrity, BUT man and his lack of integrity!

You say, how does this address the valid objection of Romans 3:3; specifically God's faithfulness regarding the promise made to Abraham?

On the basis of Paul's treatment, in which he questions man's integrity, we see an implied truth housed in the covenantal promises made to Abraham. Notice that the promise of God to Abraham was NOT an unconditional blank check! Rather it included conditions, which is why Paul's response here was to highlight man's unfaithfulness. Man is the one who has blown it, not God!

For example,² throughout the prophets we read strong announcements of judgment on the part of God. Let me give you one example, Micah prophesied of Judah speaking of the false prophets and wicked leaders of the day AND in conjunction with the doom awaiting the northern Kingdom of Israel:

Micah 3:12, : "Therefore, on account of you [the prophets/leaders], Zion will be plowed as a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the temple *will become* high places of a forest."

Based on this prophecy, we conclude that in 735 B.C. God gave a prophecy of the doom and downfall of Judah, a downfall that would occur when the Northern Kingdom of Israel fell. Yet the Southern Kingdom didn't fall. So, was God unfaithful here when it came to the prophecy of Micah? May it never be!

On what basis do we say this? The promise given in Micah 3 had an implied condition to it; fast forward a little more than 100 years. During a difficult time in the history of Judah, Jeremiah like Micah prophesied of the doom of Judah. As a result the people and the officials wanted to put him to death. Yet they were thwarted:

Jeremiah 26:17-19, "Then some of the elders of the land rose up and spoke to all the assembly of the people, saying, 'Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah; and he spoke to all the people of Judah, saying, "Thus the Lord of hosts has said, 'Zion will be plowed *as* a field, and Jerusalem will become ruins, and the mountain of the house as the high places of a forest.'" Did Hezekiah king of Judah and all Judah put him to death? Did he not fear the Lord and entreat the favor of the Lord, and the Lord changed His mind about the misfortune which He had pronounced against them? But we are committing a great evil against ourselves."

This is an important passage because the prophecy in Micah contained no statement of conditionality. In fact, the doom seemed sure. But with the text in Jeremiah we discover that accompanying most every message of doom in the prophets is the conditional statement, "Unless you repent!" (Jeremiah 18:5-8)

This illustrates an important principle as we seek to understand Scripture. Almost every promise of blessing or cursing in the Bible involves the condition of faith/reliance upon God. If we will trust God, we will know blessing. If we refuse to trust God, we will know cursing.

So it was when it came to the promise made to Abraham from which the doctrine of covenant succession is derived. It included the necessary condition of faith or reliance. Without faith in the

² Cf. also Jon. 1:2; 2 Kings 20-:1-2.

Messiah, the covenant child could not be saved. Think of it! Abraham was saved not on account of circumcision but because of the work of the Messiah and so through faith (Romans 4:3, 9, 22)! Thus, if we are going to benefit by the promise made to Abraham, we too must submit to the condition inherent in the promise: Faith!

Galatians 3:6-9, "Even so Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, *saying*, 'All the nations shall be blessed in you.' So then those who are of faith are blessed with Abraham, the believer."

It was in light of this, the conditional element of the Abrahamic Covenant, that Paul responded to the second objection raised by the Jew. Truly, if in the Last Day a person receives condemnation, one who...

- Was raised in the church.
- Went forward on an altar call.
- Served the church faithfully all of his life.
- Was baptized or confirmed!

THE one to blame is not God, but man! It is not God who takes the promises of the covenant for granted; it is man! It is not God who transgresses the covenant; it is the unbeliever! It is not God who is unfaithful; it is the sinner!

And so if a child of Abraham receives condemnation it is not because God is unfaithful to His promises; it is because man is! Now with this, Paul gives an Old Testament example to bring the point home.

Romans 3:4, "as it is written [quoting from Psalm 51], 'That Thou mightest be justified in Thy words, and mightest prevail when Thou art judged.'"

This is a fitting quote to end Paul's response here for it deals with a very similar and parallel circumstance. In Psalm 51 David, a covenant child, an heir of the promises given to Abraham, suffered at the hands of God for his sin. David's child died!

Now to the outsider, the accusation in this case could also be raised...

- *Is God just?*
- *Hadn't He promised to bless Abraham's offspring?*
- *How could He do such a terrible thing to David? To Israel?*
- *Is He able to be trusted when it comes to His promises?*

In anticipation of these objections David clears the slate in Psalm 51 by showing that HE was the one at fault, not God! Accordingly the king openly confessed his sin in order to show that God's judgment was just and right.

Romans 3:4, "that Thou mightest be justified in Thy words."

Literally this reads “that it might be declared that you are right, just, or true by means of Your word.”

Romans 3:4, "and mightest prevail when Thou art judged."

The word for “prevail” has in mind a legal context. When a judge passes a verdict it remains to be seen whether or not that verdict is just. In the case where the verdict was shown to be just, the judge is properly said to have “prevailed.” Thus to “prevail” is to leave the court room as a judge vindicated, endorsed, and in the right such that everyone says, “That was a just decision!”

From this allusion to David, Paul brings his argument to an unobjectionable end. No Jew would have questioned the faithfulness of God when it came to the punishment David received. In fact, they would have readily agreed that God’s faithfulness demanded David’s punishment! In light of this Paul asks the Jew here, “Why then is it any different when it comes to the salvation of the child of Abraham? If some do not believe and so stand condemned, has God been untrue?!” The obvious answer is, “Absolutely not! The problem rests with man!”

From all of this I hope you see that the gospel in no way nullifies the faithfulness of God! When it comes to the issue of integrity, it is not God who is unfaithful; it is man! We are the unfaithful ones!

Application

How do you apply this passage to your life? Let me give two suggestions. First, our focus has been on the status of the covenant children of Abraham, let me encourage us as parents (if you are childless you are not off the hook; you are responsible for the children in this congregation) how it behooves us that we never stop laboring for the souls of our children. By all means parenting isn’t easy; but it is rather simple! The focus in all that we do is NOT firstly making sure Junior:

- Gets a great education.
- Excels among his/her peers.
- Is well-liked, popular, and beloved.
- Behaves in church.

Rather, the first and primary duty of the parent is to raise their children that they might believe/trust Christ! Many Old Testament parents missed this! Paul, speaking of the qualification of an elder and so any and all men wrote this:

Titus 1:5-6a, “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, *namely*, if any man be above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe...”

We take this to mean more than that their children are saved, but that the bent of their child’s life is that of reliance upon Christ. This doesn’t mean that they are perfect and so are even model Christians. Rather, it means that when it comes to the struggles of life, the matter of eternity, living as sinners in a state of sin and misery, the child has been taught to rely upon the Lord and NOT...

- Themselves.

- Their peers.
- Their parents.
- Their teachers.
- Their education.

When it comes to parenting, the heart of the matter is this: do my children run to Christ both in the good or bad times?

You say, “How do I force my child to run to Christ in the good and the bad?” You don’t! You lead them! When the chips are down and life is rough, the question is: Do they see you go to Christ? Or do they see you take matters into your own hands? When you are slandered or accused, do they see you go to Christ or defend yourself? Is Christ your joy, consolation, hope, and crown? Or is it money, the praises of men, a job? in the words of Richard Baxter:

As long as men have eyes as well as ears, they will think they see your meaning as well as hear it; and they are apter to believe their sight than their hearing, as being the more perfect sense of the two. All that a minister doth is a kind of preaching; and if you live a covetous or a careless life, you preach these sins to your people by your practice. (Baxter, 1974, pp. 84-85)

When it comes to our children, it behooves us to LEAD them to a life of faith and trust in Christ!

Yet, there is another application that is drawn from the text. When it comes to God’s word, His providence, or His character, we must not allow a critical heart to be named among us. Recall that this is where Job went wrong. For much of his life he served the Lord in a certain way and the Lord blessed him. He had...

- Wealth.
- Land.
- Servants.
- A vast property.
- A wonderful family.
- Etc.

But then with no change in Job’s living, all of these things were taken from him. In a world which believed that “God helps those who help themselves” this raised a serious question in Job’s mind. Is God just? See Job hadn’t changed; yet his circumstances had, and so is it possible that God changed? Did God capriciously withdraw His love? His approval?

We know the answer. God hadn’t changed. Yet because Job fell prey to a “Theology of Experience” he falsely looked at God’s providence and used it to draw conclusions about God and placed himself as judge over God and His word. Family of God, in the words of Paul in our passage this morning, “Let God be found true, though every man *be found* a liar!”

While it is true that the Gospel does not nullify the faithfulness of God and His word, it is also true that NOTHING else can! Not...

- Science.
- Tragedy.
- Sickness.
- Tribulation.
- Weakness.
- Distress.
- Ill-health.
- Persecution.
- Public opinion.

NO THING can nullify the integrity of God and His word! Now we need to hear this! See we live in a world that evaluates the merits of an act or experience on the basis of the “good” it does to the individual. Thus because the “pursuit of happiness” is considered to be “good” in our society- in fact, an inalienable right!!- that which promotes that end in MY personal life must also be good.

As such..

- The history test was good because it was easy, and that made me happy.
- My date with Shelly was good because we went dancing, and that made me happy.
- My job is good because I make a lot of money, and that makes me happy.
- Life as a parent is good because my children obey me, and that makes me happy.

Now based on this logic, we find ourselves at times thinking or even saying...

- When the tragedy hits, “God must not be good because I’m not happy.”
- When the difficulty arises, “God must not be faithful because I’m not happy.”
- When the job is lost, “God must not be love because I’m not happy.”
- When things don’t turn out the way we want, “God must not be caring because I’m not happy.”

Listen to this text, “Let God be true, though every man be found a liar!” (Romans 3:4) Do you understand what this means for your life? Let God be true...

- Though science says His word is a lie!
- Though experience seems to contradict His promises!
- Though the times are difficult!
- Though there be no food on the vine!

Today, when the waters are calm, we must make the commitment never to question God’s faithfulness or goodness.

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

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