



ROMANS

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By the time Romans was written, there were questions still unanswered. How were Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus to be related? What should be required of the Gentiles for inclusion in the church?



DIALOGUE WITH A JEW

DISAGREEMENT AND DIALOGUE

How do we handle our disagreements? One standard response is aggression. Go to war! Attack your opponent and beat him into submission. The opposite tack is to withdraw. Take your football and go home. Disengage. In their most extreme form, these approaches end up in either murder or suicide.

Far better than aggression or withdrawal is dialogue, a way of choosing a leader or deciding on a course of action by arriving at a consensus. Dialogue can take the form of a casual conversation or a formal debate. During election cycles, we have grown accustomed to debates between candidates who tout their strengths and find fault with their opponents. The first presidential debate, the famous televised clash between Richard Nixon and John Kennedy, helped decide the election in 1960. As a nation, we're still addressing and debating some heavy issues, including civil rights, the legalization of drugs, same-sex marriage, and immigration.

The Christian church in the first century faced a great issue too: what to do about the Gentiles? Jesus and the Twelve were all Jews. But Israel was an island in a sea of Gentile nations. The Acts of the Apostles records what happened when the Gospel was carried beyond Jerusalem “to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Along the way, God had a “dialogue” with Peter in the form of a vision on a rooftop (Acts 10) that propelled



Peter into the home of a Gentile, Cornelius. Jesus encountered Saul of Tarsus and set him apart, as He explained to Ananias, as “a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles” (Acts 9:15). Saul became Paul, the spearhead of the Gentile mission.

As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul had argued persuasively before the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) for the inclusion of Gentiles and for minimizing the requirements made on them. The council had reached consensus and made a decision for inclusion, along with some basic “mandatory minimum” requirements from the Law of Moses, but people needed to be persuaded. To be persuaded, they needed to understand what was at issue.

By the time Romans was written, there were questions still unanswered. How were Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus to be related? What should be required of the Gentiles for inclusion in the church? What was to become of the religious traditions of the Jews, especially circumcision, the rite of entry into the covenant?

In this lesson, we get to tune in to the debate as it played out in a “congregational” setting. Paul has not met the people in Rome, so he constructs an imaginary dialogue with a Jewish believer who has questions.

ADDRESSING MISPLACED CONFIDENCE

ROMANS 2:17–24

The dialogue begins in 2:17. Paul presents his case in the form of a dialogue with an imaginary Jewish opponent. That opponent is confident, even boastful about his spiritual standing. “You...brag about your relationship to God” (2:17 NIV). Paul could have been describing himself before his conversion on the Damascus road! He had lived the life of the self-righteous Jew: “a Hebrew of Hebrews...a Pharisee...blameless” (Phil. 3:5–6).

Like a king with a string of honorifics, that boastful Jew claims four titles for himself. He thinks he is:

A guide to the blind,

A light to those who are in darkness,

An instructor of the foolish, and

A teacher of children.

It would be Gentiles, especially, to whom pious Jews would be referring as those blind, foolish infants. If you read these verses aloud, you can hear and feel the sarcasm in Paul’s description. His opponent is smug, sure of himself and his standing.

There is nothing wrong, of course, with being a guide, a light, an instructor or a teacher! This list reminds us of the job description God gave the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 42:6–7: “I will give you as... a light for the nations [Gentiles], to open the eyes that are blind.” The problem is that instead of receiving such roles as a sacred trust from God, the opponent has presumptively claimed them because of his religious accomplishments. When Paul says, “you are sure” in verse 19, he uses a verb that means, “you have persuaded yourself.” Paul’s imaginary opponent was basing his confidence on himself. It was his pedigree, his knowledge, and his faultless obedience that made him confident before God. It was a confidence misplaced, resting on oneself and not on the gift and mercy of God.

Let’s get personal. One doesn’t need to be an ancient Jew to have a misplaced confidence! A modern-day church member could do the same thing. Like the haughty Pharisee in the temple (Luke 18), we might recite our ecclesiastical accomplishments. If we listen to ourselves, we might hear a voice fishing for a compliment, or occasionally complaining that we haven’t been properly thanked. After all, “I worship every Sunday, sing in the choir, give generously, and help with VBS!” Good things all, of course, if we know ourselves forgiven sinners who are receiving mercy we did not deserve.

Paul responds to his opponent with a string of probing questions (vv. 21–24) that all have this underlying theme: “Are you practicing what you preach?” We might flinch at some of these questions ourselves! “You...who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery?” For some of us, the first thing such questions bring to mind are the notorious scandals surrounding televangelists like Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart a generation ago and the decades-long problem of pedophile priests in the Roman Catholic Church. Lest we wind up congratulating ourselves that we are “not like other men,” we’d better look in the mirror and ask, “Lord, is it I?”

The bitter fruit of saying one thing and doing the opposite is that God is dishonored! His name is “blasphemed” in the public’s mind (v. 24). The source of Paul’s quotation is footnoted in most Bibles as Isaiah 52:5 (“all the day my name is despised”), but the quote is not exact, and there may be other passages in view (Ezek. 36:20–22 is one). But there’s no mistaking what he means, is there? Most of us know people who quit the church over the misbehavior of its members or even its pastor.

WHAT ABOUT CIRCUMCISION?

ROMANS 2:25–29

Paul’s dialogue now turns to something most Jews regarded as a kind of guarantee of their good standing before God: circumcision. There was no doubt of its importance in the Old Testament. Genesis 17:1–14 records the story of God making a covenant with Abram. The promise of abundant descendants is renewed. Abram’s name is changed to Abraham (which means “father of a multitude”) as a way of underlining the promise. Finally, the rite of circumcision is instituted as a sign of the covenant. It was for “every male” (even aliens!) and those who did not submit were to be “cut off” from Israel. It was to be an “everlasting” covenant.

From God’s perspective, circumcision was a gracious seal on the kindness God had bestowed on Abraham and his heirs (as Paul will later explain in Rom. 4:11). The problem arises when people turn circumcision into a “good work,” making it just another of many things they do to impress God and others. If you’re going down that road (righteousness as an accomplishment, a work), says Paul, you’d better do it perfectly! Otherwise, circumcision is invalidated (v. 25).

Now he says something astonishing, something that would shock any Jew who read his words. Real “Jewishness” (real religion!) is an “inward” matter, a “matter of the heart” (vv. 28–29). Having a heart for God matters more than circumcision. In fact, an uncircumcised person who has that kind of love for God and lives the spirit of the law can be regarded as “circumcised” without the act. A Gentile may be one of God’s people, while a circumcised Jew may not be! In the story of Jonah, even the pagan sailors on that storm-tossed ship gave God’s reluctant prophet a lesson (Jonah 1:4–10) in prayer and the fear of God. What Paul argues here will be developed more fully in Chapters 9–11, where Paul will actually re-define “Israel.”

All of this is not an invention out of thin air by Paul. Moses himself had said God would “circumcise your heart...so that you will love the Lord” (Deut. 30:6). Jesus also made one’s heart and what comes out of it a primary consideration in evaluating human behavior (Matt. 15:19). Reference to the heart means it’s a matter of motive. Paul’s words make us look in the mirror and ask: “What moves me to worship or serve on a committee?” “Why do I give an offering?” Am I doing this because I have a heart for God, or am I thinking, “What’s in it for me?”

MEETING OBJECTIONS

ROMANS 3:1–8

Paul anticipates objections to his position. In Chapter three, he has his imaginary opponent give voice to a sequence of questions. In verse 3, the

opponent says, in effect, “If all this is true, then what good is it to be a Jew at all? What good is it to be circumcised?” British scholar William Barclay portrays the dialogue in his Letter to the Romans. This question and the ones that follow in verses 3 and 5 are voiced this way by Barclay (excerpted from pp. 51–52):

Objector: The result of all that you have been saying is that there is no real difference between Gentile and Jew and that they are exactly in the same position. Do you really mean that?

Paul: By no means.

Objector: What, then, is the difference?

Paul: For one thing, the Jew possesses what the Gentile never so directly possessed – the commandments of God.

Objector: Granted! But what if some of the Jews disobeyed...and were unfaithful to God and came under his condemnation?...Does that mean that God has broken his promise and shown himself to be unreliable?

Paul: Far from it! What it does show is that there is no favoritism with God...The very fact that he condemns the unfaithful Jews is the best possible proof of his absolute justice...

Objector: Very well then! All you have done is to succeed in showing that my disobedience has given God an opportunity to demonstrate his righteousness... My sin is, therefore, an excellent thing! It has given God a chance to show how good he is! I may have done evil, but good has come of it! You can't condemn a man for giving God a chance to show his justice!

Paul: An argument like that is beneath contempt!

This dialogue is preparing the way for the case Paul is about to make for how the righteousness of God is given to us. The rest of Chapter 3 will show us the

desperate need of sinful humanity and then bring us to the very heart of the Gospel message of our justification by God's grace through faith alone — for both Jews and Gentiles.

FOOTNOTE ON OLD TESTAMENT CITATIONS

Along the way, Paul again quotes from the Old Testament. He affirms God's truthfulness in verse 4, saying,

“That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.”

The footnotes in most Bibles identify the source as Psalm 51:4. Students will notice that here and elsewhere (the previous citation in 2:24, for example), the words Paul uses do not match the source exactly. Here is Psalm 51:4 (ESV):

“So that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.”

We are used to quoting sources precisely lest we be accused of twisting words. New Testament writers, however, had a looser approach to quotation. They might have simply wanted to give the general sense of things and not cite word-for-word. According to the *Concordia Self-Study Bible*, they might “purposely (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) enlarge, abbreviate or adapt an Old Testament passage or combine two or more passages” (p. 1720).

There is something else readers of the New Testament must remember. Paul and other writers were writing in Greek. When they quoted the Old Testament, most were relying on a Greek translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint. The Septuagint was a translation from the Hebrew into “common” Greek during the second century BC.

Keep all this in mind as we proceed into the next part of Chapter 3, where Paul undergirds his urgent message about human sin with a whole string of Old Testament quotes. Be ready to mine the footnotes!

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ROMANS 3:9-31

Blessed Lord, Your Word is a gift I unwrap again just now. Grant that what I see with my eyes may find a place deep in my heart and produce fruit in my life. In Jesus' Name. Amen.

For Review:

1. What are the questions raised by Paul's imaginary Jewish opponent in Chapters 2-3?

2. Why would Paul argue against seeing circumcision as a "guarantee" of one's standing before God?

3. What's the Septuagint, and why is it important?

Romans 3:9-20

4. Someone has called this section "the shattering indictment of humanity." How many times in verses 9-12, does Paul use the pronouns? "all" _____ "none" (or "no one") _____
In both cases, he's making the same point, namely...

5. At what point in your life did you come to a serious realization of your own sinfulness?

6. Jewish rabbis liked to underscore their arguments with a string of Scripture quotes. How many passages are on the "string" in vv. 10-18? _____ What OT references is Paul quoting?

Helpful hint: use your Bible's footnotes.

7. Imagine that a friend of yours said he didn't like hearing "fear of God" in verse 18. How would you explain what those words mean to you?

8. According to verse 20, what's the purpose of the law?

Romans 3:21-26

9. Ed McMahon used to introduce Johnny Carson with "And now, here's Johnny!" Verse 21 begins with the words "But now..." What is here being introduced?

10. Twice in these verses, we read the phrase “righteousness of God.” How would your understanding of this phrase change if it read “righteousness FROM God”?

11. Paul says that “all have sinned and fall short” (v. 23). According to Isaiah 59:2, what is the result of our sins?

12. The word “redemption” (v. 24) in Greek is a term borrowed from the slave market. The release of a slave was obtained by the payment of a “ransom.” Who are the slaves Paul has in mind?

What is the ransom?

13. Verse 25 contains a word strange to our ears: “propitiation.” Look up this word in a dictionary (or “google” it). What words would make good synonyms?

Romans 3:27–31

14. When Luther translated verse 28, he added the word “alone” after faith, though it was not in the Greek text. Why might he have done that?

15. In verse 31, what’s the charge Paul anticipates from his opponents?

16. In this section of Romans, what was your biggest discovery?

Your most puzzling question?

Memory Verse Challenge for Chapter 3:

Romans 3:23–24 *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.*