

THE ROAD OF THE RIGHTEOUS

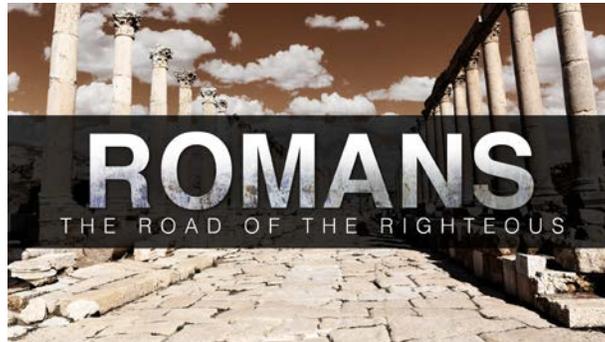
Expositional Study Of Romans

Romans 3:1-8

Written By

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How do religious people respond to the verifiable claims and teachings of Christianity? How do those who hold to different views of spirituality react toward the definitive declarations of Jesus and His gospel? When they begin to see leakage within their own belief system to typically go on the offense with a Socratic technique we'll call *deflection*. How does this method work? It poses provocative, unfounded, and misinformed questions in order to permit the person in question to remain firmly entrenched in their inferior belief system and to put the Christian on their proverbial heels. Here are some examples from Islam.

Muslims deny the biblical and historical fact that Jesus was the very Son of God.

30. The Jews said, "Ezra is the son of God," and the Christians said, "The Messiah is the son of God." These are their statements, out of their mouths. They emulate the statements of those who blasphemed before. May God assail them! How deceived they are! (Surah 9).

For them, the thought of God having a literal son is abhorrent because it suggests God had sexual relations with a woman, Mary. The Koran backs this thinking up in chapter 6:

101. Originator of the heavens and the earth—how can He have a son when He never had a companion? He created all things, and He has knowledge of all things (Surah 6).

This belief is also articulated in Surah chapter 25:

2. He to whom belongs the kingdom of the heavens and the earth, who took to Himself no son, who never had a partner in His kingship; who created everything and determined its measure (Surah 25).

Hence, to any Christian who speaks about Jesus being God's Son, the Muslim will ask, "How can this be said of God?," and then they will accuse the Christian of blasphemy (Surah 5:17, 73).

It is not my purpose in this study to develop and defend the deity of Christ but to merely demonstrate how deeply religious people respond to the teachings of the Holy Scriptures. When they do not like what they hear, when that data goes against what they've been led to believe, they use deflective questions to stay safe and secure in their works-based belief system. Perhaps this is how you respond to the Bible. You pose questions to keep you from embracing the clear evidence of Scripture regarding, say, the person and work of Jesus: "How could God have a Son? Doesn't this mean there are, then, at least, two gods? If Jesus was born of Mary, then it suggests He did not exist prior to this. If He is God, how could this be possible for God is, by your definition, eternal? How could all the sin of all time be placed on one man while on a cross for a few horrible hours? How could Jesus be the only Savior when there so many well-meaning religious people of other faiths in the world?"

How should the Christian respond? First with love and patience, and second, with the facts God has given us in His inspired Word. I call this apologetic process the art of *deflation*. *Deflation* meets *deflection* head-on by entertaining the pugnacious, provocative questions with clear, concise thinking based on what God has actually revealed to mankind. We learn this much from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. In chapter 1 verses 16-17, he said he was not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus which saves sinners who believe in the Savior and His redemptive work. In the ensuing verses of chapter 1 he then moves to definitively teach that the Gentile world is, in fact, sinful and guilty before the Holy Trinity. In chapter 2, he shocks his Jews, who rely upon their Jewish pedigree, love of the Torah and its various laws, and loyalty of Jewish rituals, by informing them that they, too, stand guilty before God for they project outer holiness while lacking inner holiness which can only come through a faith relationship with the Messiah.

Having debated Jewish opponents all over the known world inside and outside of synagogues, Paul knew the deflective questions they typically posed to keep them from trusting in the Messiah. I'm sure many of those questions he had used when he was not a Christian. Once the risen Savior appeared to Paul, he quickly laid those vain, vacuous questions at His feet. But I'm sure he still remembered them, and I'm sure he still entertained them as he spoke about the exclusivity of the gospel of Jesus, coupled with its power to save all sinners, Gentiles who lived like pagans and Jews who lived devout religious lives. In chapter three, verses 1 through 8, Paul turns and poses questions Jewish religionists would (or did) posit in order to deflect his teaching about the utter inadequacy of their Jewishness and adherence to religious works and rituals to save them from God's wrath.

There is much meat in these verses to chew on and digest. For the Christian, there is a lesson from a master apologist regarding how to deal with well-crafted questions designed to diminish the gospel of Jesus and the Word of God. We must learn well for God calls us to reach out to those questions religious people ask because Christianity runs counter to what they think. For the non-Christian, there are numerous lessons: One, do you pose your question(s) in order to learn or to merely defend your given belief system, be what it may? Two, are your questions based on what the Bible actually teaches, or have you read unfounded concepts into the Bible? Three, do realize that God wants to hear your questions so He can answer them and guide you to spiritual truth which saves.

As sink our teeth into the meaty steak of these verses, let me explain why they are meaty. The fact Paul is posing and responding to ancient Jewish arguments against the gospel, *ipso facto*, makes them somewhat difficult and demanding because we did not live then and we are probably not all steeped in Judaism. Don't let this fact cause you to pull back from the table. For the Christian, learn from how Paul deconstructs the deflective questions so you can go and do likewise because the Lord's evangelist always encounters questions of this nature. For the non-Christian, don't back up from the table because you are not familiar with the meal in question. Do pull forward and evaluate the motivation behind the questions you articulate to Christians. And, then, be brave and ask God to guide you to someone who can really answer those questions for you so your life can be founded upon logical, lasting spiritual truth.

We will begin our "meal" with a helpful question:

How Should Christians Engage The Devoutly But Misguided Religious Person?

The answer is played out before us as we see how Paul handles the thorny questions of the religionists, who happen to be Jews in this ancient context. For our purposes, we will follow the structure of the passage which is built around a question and answer format by Paul.

Round 1: Romans 3:1-2

Question #1. Why Be Jewish If It Doesn't Mean Anything? (Rom. 3:1). Remember that Paul had just completely demolished how Jews believed they were saved in chapter 2, verses 17 through 29. They thought being Jewish would save them. Paul said it wouldn't. They thought the fact God gave them the Law would save them. Paul said it wouldn't. They thought being circumcised per God's command would save them. Paul said it wouldn't. Imagine the ramifications of his teaching about how a sinner secures a righteous standing before the Holy Father. He had literally verbally demolished everything their priests, parents, and grandparents and so on down the ancestral line told them regarding kingdom entrance. For Paul, kingdom entrance was all about the righteousness which comes by means of faith in the person and work of Jesus, the Messiah. I'm sure many Jewish jaws were on the floor when they read his words in chapter 2. All of this new teaching and truth would cause them to pose an emotional and logical question to Paul:

¹ Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision?

Every Jew knew God had called Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3), that He promised to make them special people, that He had delivered them from Egypt through miracles (Ex. 1-10), that He had revealed himself to Moses on Mount Sinai (Ex. 20), that He had given them the Promised Land (Joshua), that He built His tabernacle among them (Ex. 24-40), and that He had specifically given them priests and prophets. They knew they were a special people of God special privileges (Deut. 7). Had Paul, therefore, the rabbi steeped in the Old Testament, forgotten all of this? Had he lost his theological mind? How could He, of all people, make these crude claims?

Mark well how Paul responded. He was quite positive in light of the historical facts at hand. Will you go and do likewise when someone struggles with the logical ramifications of the gospel of grace?

Answer #1. Jews Have Spiritual Advantages (Rom. 3:2). Paul agrees with their thesis and thinking that the Jewish people were indeed a special people to God, and this unique standing gave them inherent advantages. He mentions one of those advantages in verse two:

² Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.

Before we look at this particular advantage, let me say something about this particular deflective question. It is built upon a false deduction of what Paul said. Or to put it in other words, it missed what Paul actually said and drew a conclusion he would have never drawn. If you are a non-Christian, I would challenge you to consider the type of questions to pose to Christians and ask yourself if those questions really represent what the Christians teach and think. Quite often I think you will find that your understanding of Christianity is skewed and in need of some much needed fine tuning.

Now, back to the question at hand.

To be a Jew was, indeed, a great thing. In fact, Paul says that every which way you consider Jewish life you come out a winner where divine privilege is concerned. He says their advantage touched every facet of life. Although he mentions only one key advantage here, he does go into it in detail in chapter 9, verses 4 through 5 where he states emphatically:

⁴ who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the *temple* service and the promises, ⁵ whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen (Rom. 9).

Jews had these great things from God's sovereign hand. They were benefits the nations around them had no clue about. This is why we encounter in Deuteronomy 4 this timely question:

⁷ For what great nation is there that has a God so near to it as is the LORD our God whenever we call on Him? ⁸ Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?

The answer was simple: there was no other nation with so much sovereign privilege from God.

Speaking of their wonderful position, Nehemiah said hundred years after Moses words Paul would've known well:

¹³ Then You came down on Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven; You gave them just ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments (Neh. 9).

No other nation had the honor and privilege of having a personal audience with in a direct line to God Almighty.

On the other hand, consider the blindness of the Gentile world. Polytheism defined their religions. Gods were everywhere and in everything. William Durant reminds us of the Grecian the logical system when he writes,

Originally, so far as we can make out, the great god of the invading Greeks, as of the Vedic Hindus, was the noble in various sky itself; it was probably this sky-god who with progressing anthropomorphism became Uranus, or Heaven, and then the cloud-compelling, rainmaking, thunder-herding Zeus. . . . The earth, not the heavens, was the home of most Greek gods. And first the earth itself was the goddess Ge or Gaea, patient and bountiful mother, pregnant through the embrace of raining Uranus, the sky. A thousand lesser deities dwelt on the earth, and its waters, or in its surrounding air: spirits of sacred trees, gushing forth as wells or springs, or flowing as stately streams like the Maeander or the Sperecheus; gods of the wind, like Boreas, Zephyr, Notus, and Eurus, with their master Aeolus; or the great god Pan, the horned, cloven-footed, sensual, smiling Nourisher, god of the shepherds and flocks, of woods in the wild life lurking in them, he whose magic flute could be heard in every brook and dell. . . . Everywhere in nature there were gods; the air was so crowded with spirits of good and evil that, said an unknown poet, There is not one empty chink into which you could push the spike of a blade of corn.¹

Lost. That's what the Greek world was, along with its culture, and the same can be said of other cultures, both modern and ancient. It was only to the Jewish people God chose to disclose Himself (Deut. 7:1ff). They had circumcision, the law, the temple, prophets, personal theophanies of God, clear teaching on how sinners must approach him through blood sacrifice, insight into how to live wisely before him, insight regarding what constitutes sin, and prophetic promises concerning the coming Messiah. Amazing. Of all the people on the planet, God chose, out of love for us, to speak directly in and through the Jewish people. Paul calls God's speech His oracles. What is this?

Oracles, from the Greek *logia*, which means words, is used in Acts 7:38, where Stephen likens them unto the laws God disclosed to Israel on Mount Sinai. The same word is used in 1 Peter 4, verse 11 to denote a man who is giving divine utterance, "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God." This is exactly what the prophets and writers of the Old Testament period did. God gave them His inspired words and they spoke them so sinful mankind would know how they could come to know and follow God. Because of this special revelation, the Jews, above all peoples of the earth, knew three things for sure:

1. Who is God, what is He like, and how does He want us to live?
2. Where did men come from what is his nature?
3. What is God's purpose for man?

Talk about a high and holy privilege. There can be no greater privilege than to have God speak directly with you. The Jews had this.

What many Jews had forgotten, however, was that with divine *revelation* comes human *responsibility*, a responsibility to do what God commanded. What was that? To obey inwardly, not outwardly. Samuel, the prophet/priest hit the nail on the head with these words to solve after he sought to placate God after his disobedience and hopefully obeying God by offering sacrifices. We've discussed these verses before but they are worth reading again:

¹William Durant, *The Life of Greece* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), 177-178.

²² Samuel said, “Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, *And* to heed than the fat of rams. ²³ “For rebellion is as the sin of divination, *And* insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has also rejected you from *being king*” (1 Sam. 15).

King Saul’s life was merely a picture of Israel’s life, spiritually speaking. Outwardly they relished in the privileges God had bestowed upon them, and they performed His ceremonial rites to garner His favor. Inwardly, however, their hearts were as hard as stone toward God’s word and ways. Jews *were* privileged, but they had failed to live up to the responsibility of the privilege, therefore, they were under the judgment of God . . . just like the Gentiles.

By way of application to us, the same holds true. We in the New Testament age live at a time great privilege from God. We have the completed revelation of God, we know many prophecies have been fulfilled with precision, we see many being fulfilled before our eyes, we have the Church of Jesus Christ, the right of baptism and the Lord’s Supper to name a few. Yet the possession of these benefits does not mean we are saved. Far from it. What we do with Christ is what counts where a relationship with God is concerned. Hence, if we, like the Jews, reject an inner faith relationship with Jesus, while opting for showing off all the outer religious trappings, none of these lofty spiritual privileges mean anything. Let all mankind, therefore, beware of our penchant to look to the outer religious things while neglecting the inner spiritual things which start with faith in Jesus.

Let us who do know God be ready and willing to answer the queries of those who still don’t know Him, but might think they do. Might we, like Paul, pause long enough to listen to them and give them the facts they need to deflate their false spiritual view so they can be led by the Spirit toward the true spiritual view.

Moving from this first question Paul had most certainly heard before, he proceeds with verse three into his second round of provocative questions in light of his penetrating, and paradigm-shifting teaching.

Round 2: Romans 3:3-4

Question #2. Did Unbelief Nullify God’s Promises (Rom. 3:3). If anyone knew their sordid spiritual history it was Jews. Their spiritual history was littered with open, stiff-necked rebellion to God:

- When the Egyptian chariot army bore down on them as their backs were to the Red Sea, they wailed in unbelief that it was over even in the face of divinely orchestrated plagues (Ex. 14:10-14).
- No sooner did they arrive in the wilderness after the parting of the Red Sea than they complained they didn’t have any food to eat (Ex. 16:1-3).
- When Moses took his time coming down from the mount blazing with the fire of God, they resorted to worshipping a golden calf (Ex. 32).
- When ten of twelve spies told the people they couldn’t take the Land of Promise because of the presence of fortresses and giants, the people wailed in despair before God (Num. 14).

Need I go on? I don’t think so. This was the picture of Israel’s spiritual walk until they were carried away into captivity. Some loved and followed God, but the majority willingly ran their

lives off the spiritual rails and lived however they desired (Isa. 5), and worshipped whatever god they could construct (Ezek. 6, 8). All Jews knew this sad, sick history too. In Paul's day they used this data as a battering ram against the gospel. How so?

³ What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?

Sinners who don't want to come to God on His terms are most clever. Their argument here is very shrewd. Put in our own vernacular it goes like this, according to R. Kent Hughes, "Paul, how can you possibly say we Jews have so completely failed in our privileged position and still insist that we are an advantaged people? If we have failed as you insist, God's Word is powerless and he is unfaithful."²

Sounded good in theory but it didn't fly when scrutinized with the facts. Consider Paul's second reply to a provocative statement about God.

Answer #2. God's Promises Are Unchanging and Unalterable (Rom. 3:4).

⁴ May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man *be found* a liar, as it is written, "THAT YOU MAY BE JUSTIFIED IN YOUR WORDS, AND PREVAIL WHEN YOU ARE JUDGED."

Paul's opening words readily capture his offense at their unbelievable position: "May it never be!" This forceful statement can be translated into our vernacular as, "There is no way that is ever going to happen." Throughout Romans, Paul uses this phrase to express his disdain for erroneous spiritual positions (Rom. 3:6, 31; 6:2, 15; 7:7, 13; 9:14; 11:1, 11).

Paul says, "God is the essence of truth, and all mankind is the essence of lies. Thus, there is no way God would ever go back on what he promised." The apostle then quotes from Psalm 51:4, which captures David's confessional words to the Lord after his sin with Bathsheba. He uses this quote at this juncture to demonstrate to the questioning Jews that God is always faithful no matter what actions his people, like David, take. God will fulfill the great promises contained in the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Palestinian, Davidic, and new covenants despite the unbelief of His people. The Jews were wicked and needed to take a hard look at themselves instead of concocting all these intricate arguments which kept them from being saved. Again, they failed to understand that their wickedness was a real issue with God which needed to be addressed, but that He still remained faithful to His word. He never changes. Men do. You do, too. But He never does. God never changes and His unconditional promises do not depend on the faithfulness of men, ever.

Isn't this a wonderful lesson? Our sin does not and cannot abrogate the promises of God, be what it may. Our faithless cannot overturn His perpetual faithfulness, especially to what He has promised. If He promises to save us when we believe in the Messiah, Jesus (John 3:16), then He will most assuredly fulfill that despite how wicked we've lived.

A third and last query is most interesting and intricate:

² R. Kent Hughes, *Romans: Righteousness from Heaven*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 74.

Round 3: Romans 3:5-8

Question #3. Should We Sin To Make God Look Good? (Rom. 3:5). Any man of God who properly teaches and preaches the Word of God is going to have people twist what he says in order to discredit him before others. I daresay that if you are a preacher or teacher of the Bible and people never have a problem with what you say, you are probably not a faithful preacher or teacher of the Bible. Truth causes those in darkness to either run toward the light or to react negatively toward it. When they do the latter it is usually seen in some kind of attack upon the teacher/preacher of truth, and this is done by misrepresenting what he originally communicated.

In order to discredit Paul, the crafty Jews concocted the following lie. They taught that his rejection of the Law as necessary for salvation, coupled with his emphasis upon salvation by grace alone led to lawlessness. Put differently, they argue that Paul taught that once you are saved by grace you can go out and sin all you want because your sin makes God's holiness stand out in bold relief. It is a bizarre position, but one the Jews labeled Paul with on more than one occasion (for example, Rom. 5:12-6:4). With this background in mind we are better prepared to understand what Paul is saying in this verbal skirmish concerning spiritual truth.

Here was the Jewish argument:

⁵ But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.)

You can see them sneering at Paul with a statement like this. Let's rephrase their argument: "Paul you've said we Jews will also experience the judgment and wrath of God if we don't come to Him by means of the gospel of grace. However, you say our unrighteous living makes God's righteousness more visible, then how can He ever judge us since we are simply making Him look good? To judge us would be to be unfair." Oh, now there is word we all know too well in our culture. "Yeah, Paul, if you say our sin causes God's rich grace to come to the forefront in order to show us His mercy by means of the gospel, then judgment of sinners would be unfair because our lives are merely showing His righteousness in an unusual manner."

Interesting position. How crafty is the sinner in his bid to escape the judgment of God. Paul will show them the tenuous nature of their position with his third and final answer.

Answer #3. No Way! God Will Judge Sin And Sinners (Rom. 3:6-8). Paul is once more quite forceful and direct.

⁶ May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world?

Hold it right there. What did he just say? He said, "You Jews actually believe that God is going to judge the world. Its detailed in many of your inspired writings God has given to you." He used their own thinking against them by reminding them of what they actually believed. Divine judgment is a major them of the Old Testament (Psalm 9:7-8; 96:10-13; Ecc. 3:17; 11:9; 12:14; Ezek. 18; Isa. 2:10-21; 24:1-27:13; Amos 5:18-20; 8:8; Zeph. 1:7; Zech. 12-14), so to argue against it by saying God can't judge Jewish sinners whose sin is merely showcasing His righteousness is flat-out erroneous. Who said the thinking of sinners was sound, consistent, and logical? It never is.

Paul could have stopped at this point, but he didn't. He went on in his analysis:

⁷ But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner?

Translated: If my sin showcases His glory, then why is His judgment still all over me as a sinner? There is more on his mind. Next Paul says, “Why don’t you just push your position to the logical extreme:

⁸ And why not *say* (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), “Let us do evil that good may come”? Their condemnation is just.

Ah, now we get down to the theological nitty gritty. Jews passed around the slanderous notion that Paul was all for living sinfully so God’s grace could be more readily seen. Had he EVER said this? No. Would he EVER say this? No. He will develop his point further in chapters 5 through 6 where he will demonstrate that where sin abounds, grace abounds more; however, this is a far cry from saying we should just enjoy sinning so grace can be unleashed in greater abundance. Paul would never, ever teach anything like this because he knew that God calls His people to live holy lives, not unholy ones.

Why did the Jews pass this information around? Why did they say this was what Paul was teaching? To keep other Jews from listening to and embracing the free gospel of grace he spoke about wherever he showed up. I’m sure if they would have had *Yelp* back then, the Jewish opponents would have filled the site in question with all sorts of stuff which didn’t reflect what Paul said, taught, preached, or stood for. But this didn’t stop Paul. He engaged them in love and meticulously deflated their vain augments with the spiritual truth so they, too, would have an opportunity to move from their sin to the Savior. We can, and should, do no less. Why? Because there are a lot of well-meaning, religious, moral people around us who think they are fine, spiritually speaking, when divine judgment is upon them.

Along these lines, consider the nice golfers in Hawaii. With a violent volcano erupting behind them, these nicely dressed and committed golfers will not let anything stand in the way of their game. This is absolutely shocking, isn’t it? When the ground could split open and swallow you any moment, when massive boulders the size of Chevy truck could drop from the sky on your golf cart, when smoke and ash could choke you to death, yes, when death was right upon them, they were oblivious to the fact and carried on as normal.



<https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/16/sport/golfers-hawaii-photo-trnd/index.html>

Is this not the picture of the Jewish religionist, or any religionist as it were? Indeed. They live and play as if they are fine, and they will not let anything thwart them from enjoying the life they live, but all the while spiritual death and destruction are imminent. Is this a snapshot of your spiritual life? Wake up. Jesus waits to save you from your false spiritual sinking and to give you eternal forgiveness and a place in His kingdom. Why not leave your vacuous, clever

arguments at His feet this day and be saved?

