

A Study in Romans

Chapter 3

Circumcision and Living in the Truth

(Romans 3:1–2)¹ What advantage then has the Jew, or what *is* the profit of circumcision?² Much in every way! Chiefly because to them were committed the oracles of God.

Given to Israel by God himself, the Torah and the covenant sign of circumcision signaled the fact that the Jews were special, elevated above all other peoples. But Paul brings into play here the spiritual meaning of circumcision and the laws entrusted to them.

(1) “What advantage ... what profit?”

What advantage does the Jew have in being circumcised? Is there any profit to it? You might expect Paul to answer, “Nothing, now that Jesus has come!” But He doesn’t. He exclaims that there is much advantage or profit, if understood the way God intended.

There is a spiritual application of the OT rites and ceremonies. In this passage he reveals that these things had a purpose—the purpose of education, which is always an advantage. They were intended to teach the Jews something about God and His salvation, for all mankind. Including women (who were not circumcised)!

God still wants us to understand these OT concepts in light of Christ and His mission. It gives us an advantage to know the sanctuary doctrine and what it says about God’s plan of salvation.

God’s Righteousness, Our Unrighteousness

(Romans 3:3–8)³ For what if some did not believe? Will their unbelief make the faithfulness of God without effect?⁴ Certainly not! Indeed, let God be true but every man a liar. As it is written: *“That You may be justified in Your words, and may overcome when You are judged.”*⁵ But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? *Is* God unjust who inflicts wrath? (I speak as a man.)⁶ Certainly not! For then how will God judge the world?⁷ For if the truth of God has increased through my lie to His glory, why am I also still judged as a sinner?⁸ And *why* not say, “Let us do evil that good may come”?—as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say. Their condemnation is just.

Verses 3–8 is one of the most difficult passages to interpret in Paul’s entire letter. It is difficult to sort out the different “voices” Paul uses to make his points. It appears that people in the Roman church have opposing points of view to his own, but it is challenging to figure out exactly that these views are.

(2, 5) “faithfulness of God ... righteousness of God”

There was a common Jewish belief that God’s “righteousness,” which equates to His “covenant faithfulness,” gave the Jews virtual immunity from judgment. Paul is dispelling that notion by arguing that all people are judged on the same basis. The Jew has no free pass into eternity. It is quoted in the Mishnah Sanhedrin that ‘all Israelites have a share in the world to come.’ (E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, p. 147)

“If the Jews’ possession and knowledge of the law did not exempt them from the judgment of God, neither did their circumcision. To be sure, circumcision was a God-given sign and seal of his covenant with them. But it was not a magical ceremony or a charm. It did not provide them with [a] permanent insurance cover against the wrath of God. It was no substitute for obedience; it constituted rather a commitment to obedience. Yet the Jews had an almost superstitious confidence in the saving power of their circumcision. Rabbinic epigrams expressed it. For example, ‘Circumcised men to not descend into Gehenna,’ and ‘Circumcision will deliver Israel from Gehenna.’” (John Stott, *Commentary on Romans*, p. , including a quotation by C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, p. 172)

(3) “what if some did not believe?”

Just because some do not believe, did not mean that God abandoned His covenant, or His promise to save those who do believe. The issue in the rest of the letter is salvation. So, part of Paul’s transition to that topic is to tear down the idea that the Jews can be lost by their unbelief, despite having all the privileges given to them.

(5) “Is God unjust who inflicts wrath”

Part of Paul’s argument is that God is righteous, or faithful to His covenant. When He judges negatively and “inflicts wrath” upon those who do not believe, Jews are part of that group if they do not believe.

The reality is that God is righteous when He judges against His sinners. This is clearly stated in the OT, but was reinterpreted by the rabbis before the time of Jesus.

(Deuteronomy 11:26–28)²⁶ “Behold, I set before you today a blessing and a curse: ²⁷ the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you today; ²⁸ and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way which I command you today, to go after other gods which you have not known.

(7) “if the truth of God has increased through my lie to His glory, why am I also still judged as a sinner”

One of the Jews may have been advancing was that it is unfair for God to condemn Jews for acts that enhance His glory, whether they are sinful or not. Paul responds with a question that is intended to appear absurd to the reader: “Why not say, “Let us do evil that good may come?” This question has obvious problems, specifically that anyone who chooses to “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (1:18), even in an attempt to glorify God, still commits evil. This is like saying that sin is justified as long as it eventually brings good.

This is clearly in opposition to the teaching of Jesus:

(John 8:39–41)³⁹ They answered and said to Him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would do the works of Abraham.⁴⁰ But now you seek to kill Me, a Man who has told you the truth which I heard from God. Abraham did not do this.⁴¹ You do the deeds of your father.” Then they said to Him, “We were not born of fornication; we have one Father—God.”

What we do is important to Jesus. After all, we are judged according to our works, which is evidence of whether we believe in Christ or not.

All Have Sinned

Paul now writes about sin as a condition in all people.

(Romans 3:9–18)⁹ What then? Are we better *than they*? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin.¹⁰ As it is written: “*There is none righteous, no, not one;*¹¹ *there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God.*¹² *They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one.*”¹³ “*Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit*”; “*the poison of asps is under their lips*”;¹⁴ “*whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.*”¹⁵ “*Their feet are swift to shed blood;*¹⁶ *destruction and misery are in their ways;*¹⁷ *and the way of peace they have not known.*”¹⁸ “*There is no fear of God before their eyes.*”

(9) “Are we better than they?”

To further address the Jewish belief that they were superior to the Gentiles due to their heritage and knowledge, Paul concludes with an unequivocal, “Not at all.”

Maybe we should ask ourselves, “What’s the advantage of being an Adventist?” There are many things like the Sabbath, the health message, our understanding of the sanctuary doctrine, the second coming, and a prophetic understanding of end time events. But none of these make us better than anyone else. We are all judged in the same way, and according to what we know is right.

(9) “both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin”

This is the first statement by Paul that every person is under sin, meaning its power and condemnation. He will come back to this important truth later in the letter to remind the reader of their need of the righteousness of God through faith in Christ.

It’s important to remember that sin isn’t just something we do, but a nature we possess. Of course, we have a propensity to think and act in ways that transgress the Law of God. But our nature is corrupt, which is why we do what we do. Sin is inherited before committed. Acknowledging our fallen condition is an important first step before moving on to accepting the remedy, Jesus Christ.

(10–18) “There is none righteous, no, not one...”

Paul provides a list of statements showing the condition of sin in both “Jews and Greeks.” His primary point that “there is none righteous.” Each statement is offered as evidence of the unrighteousness that comes out of the heart of sinful mankind.

Under the Law

(Romans 3:19–20) ¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. ²⁰ Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin.

(19) “whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law”

Those who are “under the law” are under its condemnation. The law “speaks” to all sinners, revealing that they have not, nor cannot, measure up to its requirements. Paul is talking about our great need of deliverance by Christ.

[More about the term “under the law” or “under law” in notes under Romans 6:15.]

(19) “that every mouth may be stopped”

We have no excuse, as Paul states in the first chapter (1:20). Therefore, anyone who opens his/her mouth in their own defense is stopped by the realization that God is righteous, even in His wrath.

(19) “all the world may become guilty before God”

Here Paul confirms his understanding of the far-reaching authority of God's law. Not just the Gentiles, but "all the world" stands guilty before God because of sin.

Guilt is an awareness that we have sinned against God. There is nothing we can do to remove ourselves from His just judgment.

(20) "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified"

The word "therefore" suggests that this verse is a conclusion that can be drawn from verse 19. It is because every mouth is "stopped" and the world stands "guilty before God" that we cannot justify ourselves.

Paul meets all objections by the Jews who believe that keeping the law releases them from all condemnation. He tells them that the law is powerless to change their standing before God. This is a fundamental paradigm shift in Jewish thinking in that their generation had been taught that keeping the law justifies them before God.

The emphasis here seems to be on the "deeds of the law," meaning their obedience to it. Paul's point is that even our best performance of the requirements of the law cannot bring a person into right relationship with God. No works of any kind, done in obedience to the law can justify. This is why moral upstanding people are still not just in God's sight.

We all need a Savior!

(Signs of the Times, August 24, 1891) All religious service, however attractive and costly, that endeavors to merit the favor of God, all mortification of the flesh, all penance and laborious work to procure the forgiveness of sin and the divine favor,—whatever prevents us from making Christ our entire dependence, is abomination in the sight of God. There is no hope for man but to cease his rebellion, his resistance of God's will, and own himself a sinner ready to perish, and cast himself upon the mercy of God. We can be saved only through Christ. Not by any good works which we may do, can we find salvation. There is no mercy for the fallen race except that which comes as the free gift of God. There is no blessing we receive but that which comes through the mediation of Christ.

(20) "for by the law is the knowledge of sin"

Paul concludes this section by giving the true purpose of the law. The law is intended to show us what sin is. It is not until we see perfection—the law as a revelation of God's character—that we can fully understand that we are hopeless sinners in desperate need of God's grace.

(Isaiah 64:6–7)⁶ But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; we all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away.⁷ And there is

no one who calls on Your name, who stirs himself up to take hold of You; for You have hidden Your face from us, and have consumed us because of our iniquities.

Justification by Faith

(Romans 3:21–26)²¹ But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets,²² even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference;²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God set forth *as* a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed,²⁶ to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

The good news of Christ’s salvation is the focus in the next five verses. We have sinned, but God has justified us by His grace.

(21) “But now”

The paragraph opens with “but now,” referring to our status in Christ in contrast to before when all were “under the law” and in slavery to sin and its power.

(21) “righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed”

The law of God is diagnostic, not therapeutic. It exposes our sinful condition, but it does not provide the answer to it. We need someone outside of ourselves to save us. That someone is Jesus, the Messiah and Savior of the world.

Jesus lived out the righteousness of God in His life. While the law reveals God’s character written down, His character came to life in Jesus. In this respect, the righteousness of God was “revealed” beyond the letter, and the Spirit.

(21) “being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets”

This phrase means that the law and prophets pointed to the answer. The Old Testament testified about the coming Savior who would save all people from their sins.

(Luke 24:44) Then He said to them, “These *are* the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and *the* Prophets and *the* Psalms concerning Me.”

(John 5:39) You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me.

(22) “the righteousness of God”

We noted previously that the “righteousness of God” is His covenant faithfulness, His perfect character, full of love and grace, that drives His untiring efforts to save mankind. We have no righteousness in and of ourselves, so He sent a Messiah who came to save us from our sins and give His righteousness to us.

(Matthew 1:21) “And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins.”

NOTE: Jesus, the “Son of God,” conquered the enemy at every point that all prior “sons of God” have failed.

(22) “through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe”

God’s righteousness comes to us *through* faith. It cannot be earned.

Faith is more than mental assent to the existence of a Savior. It’s believing that He will do for us the things we cannot do for ourselves. We have no righteousness, but Jesus does.

“All” is a reference to all mankind, not just to the Jews. Anyone who puts their “faith in Jesus Christ”—who believes—receives the righteousness of God.

(The Desire of Ages, p. 25) Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His.

(23) “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”

Following Paul’s statement that “there is no difference,” he declares that all of us are in the same situation. We have sinned and fall short of God’s glory. We cannot measure up to the perfection of His character.

At Mount Sinai, the Ten Commandments were given as a transcript of the character of God. Consider the response God gave to Moses in response to His request to see the glory of God.

(Exodus 33:18–19; 34:4–7)¹⁸ And he said, “Please, show me Your glory.”¹⁹ Then He said, “I will make all My goodness pass before you, and I will proclaim the name of the LORD before you. I

will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.” ... ⁴ So he cut two tablets of stone like the first *ones*. Then Moses rose early in the morning and went up Mount Sinai, as the LORD had commanded him; and he took in his hand the two tablets of stone. ⁵ Now the LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. ⁶ And the LORD passed before him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, ⁷ keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing *the guilty*, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children’s children to the third and the fourth generation.”

The Lord showed Moses His glory by proclaiming His character (righteousness) in the writing of the Ten Commandments. These “words of the covenant” (Exodus 34:28) was His promise to re-create the people in His own image (character/righteousness), revealed in the Ten Commandments. But this could not happen in their own power to keep the law perfectly (which was impossible). God wanted to write the law on their mind and heart, something only He could do from the inside out.

Now, the new covenant is accomplishing what God intended to do from the beginning.
NOTE: The old covenant was based on the people’s performance, not on God’s power.

(Hebrews 8:7–13) ⁷ For if that first *covenant* had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. ⁸ Because finding fault with them, He says: “*Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—* ⁹ *not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord.* ¹⁰ *For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.* ¹¹ *None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.* ¹² *For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.”* ¹³ In that He says, “A new covenant,” He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

(24) “justified freely”

Paul emphasizes the sinners need of God’s righteousness. When we are justified by God, we are forgiven of all our sins and our life account is credited with the righteousness of Christ. Justification is a declaration of our standing in Christ, not any kind of transference of divine goodness that has become innately ours.

God treats us just-as-if-I’d never sinned.

(John 8:36) Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed.

This is nothing we can earn ourselves. Righteousness is a free gift imputed to us the moment we believe (Eph 2:8–9).

(24) “by His grace”

It is impossible to justify ourselves. We receive God’s righteousness as a free gift “by His grace.”

“‘Grace’ (*charis*) is a key theological idea in Paul. He uses the word to stress that all God does on our behalf is done freely and without compulsion. It is God’s very nature to be free from any outside ‘requirements’ about how he acts. Nothing we can do requires him to put us right with himself. We receive what he does as a pure gift.” (*NIV Application Commentary: Commentary on Romans*, by Douglas Moo)

Christ’s Righteousness is imputed to us by grace through faith, which is believing in the redemptive work of Christ in our behalf.

(Ephesians 2:8–9)⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God,⁹ not of works, lest anyone should boast.

(24) “redemption”

Redemption (*apolytrosis*) has the connotation of liberating someone by paying a price. It’s the idea of paying money to buy freedom for a slave. In essence, this is what Jesus has done for us.

[We will cover this in more detail in Chapter 6]

(25) “a propitiation by His blood”

God was propitiating His own wrath against sin by means of the blood of His Son. His propitiation made reconciliation possible.

“Propitiate” *def.*: “to gain or regain the favor or goodwill of” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

In the pagan sanctuaries the purpose of the sacrifices was to appease the deity, and to provide for the deity’s physical needs. But God has no physical needs that human beings can supply.

(Psalm 50:12–13)¹² “If I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world is Mine, and all its fullness.¹³ Will I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats?”

The sacrifices in the OT ceremonial services are a depiction of Yahweh Himself as the sacrifice, propitiating His own wrath. He supplies the sacrifice for us.

(Leviticus 17:11) “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.”

(25) “in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed”

God passed over the sins previously committed by not counting our sins against us. In His mercy, God held back judgment while His plan of salvation was fully implemented.

(Acts 17:30) Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent,

Paul’s choice of words is undeniably connected to the first Passover for the Hebrews in Egypt. The destroying angel passed over the homes that had the blood of a lamb sacrificed for them. The blood was a symbol of Christ’s blood that would be shed for all mankind.

(Exodus 12:25–27)²⁵ “It will come to pass when you come to the land which the Lord will give you, just as He promised, that you shall keep this service.²⁶ And it shall be, when your children say to you, ‘What do you mean by this service?’²⁷ that you shall say, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice of the Lord, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households.’” So the people bowed their heads and worshiped.

Today, as we accept Jesus’ incredible sacrifice for us by faith, we find mercy as our sins are “passed over” and receive the grace to stand in the judgment.

(26) “to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness”

It is most likely that Paul is referring to God’s covenant faithfulness as His righteousness in this instance. This is an important aspect of God’s character, especially as a response from His heart of love for human beings.

(Romans 5:8) But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

(26) “He might be just and the justifier”

How can God be just while justifying sinners? Because Christ took upon Himself our sin and its penalty (death).

(1 John 1:9) If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

God's wrath against mankind's sin was satisfied on the cross. Jesus was not a third party to our rebellion against God, stepping in to die in our place. He was the offended party. He had the right to take upon Himself the sins of the world that were committed against Him. And He has every right to do that.

(2 Corinthians 5:19) God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

No Boasting

(Romans 3:27–31)²⁷ Where *is* boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith.²⁸ Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.²⁹ Or *is He* the God of the Jews only? *Is He* not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also,³⁰ since *there is* one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.³¹ Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.

There are many Bible scholars who believe that this passage belongs to the next section than it does at the conclusion of chapter three.

Note the parallels with chapter four (*The NIV Application Commentary*, by Douglas Moo):

Boasting is excluded (v. 27)	Abraham had no right to boast (vv. 1–2)
... because one is justified by faith, not works of the law (v. 28)	... because Abraham was justified by faith, not works (vv. 3–8)
Circumcised and uncircumcised are united under the one God through faith (vv. 29–30)	Circumcised and uncircumcised are united as children of Abraham through faith (vv. 9–17)

(27) "Where is boasting then?"

There is no boasting because God in His grace redeemed us by the blood of Christ. We have nothing to add, nor is it possible because we cannot keep the law. We have all broken it.

Paul may have been letting the Jews know that they have nothing to brag about. They may have felt superior as God's chosen people, but in Christ they are on a level playing field with

the Gentiles. Remember we saw in chapter two that Paul criticized the Jews' tendency to take pride in their obedience to the law. Therefore, Jewish boasting in the "works of the law" is the same as any human boasting in their accomplishments. All of it is nonsense in light of God's grace.

(27) "the law of faith"

The only boasting anyone can do is by faith in what the Lord has done. Jesus obtained salvation for all by His demonstration of righteousness.

(Psalm 34:1–3)¹ I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise *shall* continually *be* in my mouth.² My soul shall make its boast in the Lord; the humble shall hear *of it* and be glad.³ Oh, magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together.

(28) "a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law"

Paul returns to this truth repeatedly throughout his letters. There is nothing we can in keeping the law that justifies us in God's eyes. Our justification is by faith in Jesus Christ.

The deeds Paul is referring to here are our attempts to be saved. If we don't do this or that, we cannot be saved. Have you heard that lately? Salvation by commandment keeping. Salvation by diet. Salvation by kindness to others. There are many more!

(30) "there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith"

The words "one God" are easy to pass over in the text. But they are significant. The Jews proudly confess that there is only one God (monotheism). Taken logically to its conclusion, the God they believe in must be equally the God of Gentiles too, since there is only one Creator of the world. Paul's argument tears down any difference between Jew and Gentile when talking about salvation and re-creation in Christ, the Savior of the world.

(31) "Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not!"

We've already seen that the law has a purpose. It: 1) shows us the character of God, and 2) how we do not measure up. With the second, the law reveals our sin and how far we have fallen short of the glory of God.

Paul realizes that some people will conclude from his teaching that keeping the law cannot save us means that the law is no good at all. But to think that the law is void because of what Christ has done, Paul gives an emphatic "No!"

(31) “we establish the law”

Some make the mistake of thinking that Paul is only addressing the Mosaic Law in this passage. But it is the whole Torah, the first five books of the Bible, that Paul is referring to. This includes the Ten Commandments.

The law is established by faith, meaning that faith in Christ satisfies every requirement of the law. The ceremonial law is fulfilled by Christ. The Ten Commandments were kept by Christ as He demonstrated His righteousness and gave it to all who believe. Jesus established the law and then passes it on to us as we exercise our faith in Him. Righteousness by faith places the law in its proper position in the life of every believer.

(Isaiah 42:21) The LORD is well pleased for His righteousness' sake; He will exalt the law and make it honorable.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. (Matthew 5:17)

Jesus came to earth to reveal by His life of perfect obedience that Christians can obey God's law through the empowering grace of God. His plan of justification by faith reveals God's high regard for His law in demanding and providing the atoning sacrifice in Christ. If justification by faith abolished the law, then there would have been no need for Christ to die to save mankind.

(Psalm 89:14) Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne; mercy and truth go before Your face.