

Religious duty or abounding Grace? - Romans 3:1-20

Introduction:

My text and theme today may appear somewhat untimely in light of our recent Easter celebrations

However, all that we remembered and celebrated of Jesus` passion to His resurrection was God`s remedy for the sinful nature of mankind

These verses describe the fallen nature of man

Romans 3:1-8:

Robert Louis Stevenson`s book, "*The strange case of Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde*"

Is a story of a Victorian doctor who expressed the very best of Victorian morals and decency but who through his experiments as a doctor discovers a dark side lurking underneath his presentable exterior

Mark Twain commented:

"Everyone is a moon and has a dark side which he never shows anybody"

Bad before the Good:

In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul expounds the gospel, the good news, of Gods great plan of salvation

However, in order to bring the *good news* he has to start with the bad news – the dark side of the moon as it were

The universal problem of human depravity due to our sinful nature

Depraved doesn`t mean we are as bad as we can be – even bad people have the capability to do good and decent things to others

Depravity has more to do with our vertical relationship with God than our horizontal relationship with each other

Our sinful deeds prove that we are as bad off as we can possibly be

Our good deeds do nothing to restore our separation from God, legally or relationally

Quite simply we stand condemned before a righteous God

Not because of what we have done but because of "**who we are**"

How can we gain understanding of our need for a Saviour unless we are made aware of our depravity and our powerlessness to help ourselves?

We need God`s help to reveal what is lurking in the depths of our inner beings,

Created in God`s image:

God created us first and foremost as spiritual beings

Within the human spirit of fallen mankind there is no depth to the potential of its depravity

We only have to consider the acts of serial killers, rapists or sex traffickers or that of an evil dictator's rule to acknowledge that

Of course, the opposite is also true

Within the spirit of mankind there is no limit (or height) to what we can achieve in the arts, in goodness and in our love to our fellow man

We do not deserve any of the credit for anything good we may do – all the goodness within us has its origin with God; *Ps 16:2*

Enslaved to evil:

Fundamentally we have a nature that is enslaved to evil

But for the fear of being caught and the consequences of our wrongdoings, of being punished, we would plunge ourselves into all forms of corruption

It has been said:

“Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”

Without external restraint, the depraved nature within each of us would soon express itself in acts of cruelty and hatred

“Fallen man is not merely in danger of ruin and destruction, but is already sunk in them”

Previously in his letter to the Christians in Rome has exposed the lie of those who believe they are exempt from God's wrath and judgment

1. Those who choose to be ignorant – They give the appearance of uprightness and wisdom, yet worship the creation rather than the Creator
We live in a culture which attempts to explain everything scientifically
And anything supernatural is viewed with scepticism
We increase in knowledge of the workings of our universe but for many the idea of God as Creator is viewed as irrelevant and unscientific
2. The self righteous – Who consider themselves above judgment
“I'm a good person”
Yet underneath their conscience condemns them –
3. The super religious - Relying on religious rituals to bring them into right standing with God

The Jews themselves who were chosen of God and with whom His word was revealed

Had a greater knowledge of God yet rebelled against Him time and time again
They possibly stand under a greater judgment for this rebellion as they understood the scriptures were the inspired word of God

No exceptions:

3:10-18 describes the condition of fallen man through the word of God

Most of the verses mention a body part

Throat, tongue, lips, mouths, feet

Jewish teachers emphasized that the evil impulse ruled all the parts of the body

Paul argues that this condition of man applies to everyone

For all are under sin

There is no one righteous, not even one; 3:10

The standard by which our righteousness is measured is not that of how we would rate a good person

But that of God, who is perfect and unblemished

None of us, however good, can ever meet His perfect standard

there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. 3:11

We cannot understand God purely intellectually nor do we seek God on our own initiative

It is only when we have no other option that we turn to Him

Many come to faith as a result of a crisis

All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." 3:12

We look for answers in things other than God. We try to fill that God shaped hole with so many other alternatives which do not satisfy

"Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." 3:13

The whole of this verse appears to belong to their habit of lying, defamation, slandering, etc., by which they wounded, blasted, and poisoned the reputation of others.

Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." 3:14

The word “bitterness” is used to denote severity, harshness, cruelty; reproachful and malicious words.

Their feet are swift to shed blood; 3:15

They make use of every means in their power to destroy the reputation and lives of the innocent.

ruin and misery mark their ways, 3:16

and the way of peace they do not know.” 3:17

“There is no peace, says the Lord for the wicked”

They neither have peace in themselves, nor do they suffer others to live in quiet: they are brooders and fomenters of discord.

“There is no fear of God before their eyes.” 3:18

They do not fear Gods judgement.

Without a proper fear of God there will never be repentance and a turning back to Him for forgiveness

Paul would no doubt have shared the good news amongst those in the synagogues and he would have had his objectors
To pre-empt the most common objections he restates each of the four in the form of a question in his letter to the Christians in Rome

1. The question of racial advantage - 3:1-2

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?

What was the point of the covenant God established with the decedents of Abraham if it did not make them righteous?

Gods covenant was not intended to make the Jews free from judgment
But they had an unrivalled privilege of receiving the word of God with its message that through them all peoples would receive Gods invitation to receive grace

We see time and time again in scripture where Israel as a nation experienced unparalleled success when obeying the word of God

Yet total despondency when they chose to wilfully disobey God

2. The question of God`s faithfulness 3:3-4

What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God`s faithfulness?

If some would not believe the word of God, or keep their end of the bargain, would that prevent God from establishing His plan to save mankind?

Of course not – God is faithful and will keep His promises despite mankind's unfaithfulness

As an illustration Paul quotes David's prayer of repentance from *Ps 51:4*

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. *Ps 51:4 NIV*

3. The question of confused righteousness 3:5-6

But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us?

If God makes these moral demands knowing mankind will fail, does that not make His wrath unjustified?

Surely we were doomed from the start

The Law is not what made humankind guilty of wrongdoing

God's perfect character has always been the standard

The Law establishes the distinction between what is right and wrong

It is there to reveal how sinful we are

It was part of God's plan to redeem us

4. The question of twisted logic 3:7-8

Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?"

If God's light shines brighter because of our darkness – don't we glorify him all the more by our wrongdoings?

The more we sin will result in more of God's grace

This thinking fails to comprehend the destructive nature of sin

For example:

"If fires & disasters give rescue workers an opportunity to display their skills and bravery, why not set far more fires and cause more disasters so they will have greater opportunity to show their courage?"

But there are no victimless sins

Every choice to do wrong harms someone; it has a knock on effect

Sin, far from glorify God, grieves Him

Sin separates the Creator from the creation He so loves and desires to relate to on an intimate level

Paul in his summary of this twisted logic says forcefully;

"Their condemnation is just"

Application: Religion versus grace

Paul`s Jewish readers objected to the doctrine of justification by grace through faith for the same reasons that all human empowered religions do

All our lives we are told we need to do something in order to receive something

Society for the most part is works driven

Even the church can fall into this mode

1. God`s unmerited favour releases the individual from religious control

All religions that are not inspired by God have a controlling element at heart

Choices are restricted and even chosen for those under such control

2. Grace supersedes religion as the means by which a person maintains a relationship with God

Religion is a hard task master, but grace frees us to be who we were born to be

Testimony: Share the discussion we had with gentleman we met whilst out delivering daffodils.

He appeared not to be able to comprehend what we saying about Christianity

That it is primarily a relationship with God not a religion

His world view and understanding had been shaped by other forces and by a misrepresentation of God by those who ministered the gospel to him (he was called a liar)

3. Grace completely changes the purpose of good deeds in the life of the believer:

Our good deeds are done out of our love and relationship with God not through a sense of obligation and foreboding if we do not do them

Personal testimony:

(My week – so much to do – so little time – important to trust in God, and not to be driven but led)

Chuck Swindoll writes:

Grace and religion send these conflicting messages:

Our possessions

Religion says: "Keep it, be proud of it, it is your reward for good behaviour"
Grace says: "Share it, be grateful for it, it is God's to steward wisely"

Our actions:

Religion says: "Continually strive to earn God's favour, because enough is never quite enough"

Grace says: You already have God's favour, because His grace is sufficient"

Our self-regard:

Religion says: "I am a good person because of what I have accomplished. Look at me!"

Grace says: "I am a sinner who has been given the righteousness of God. Look at Christ!"

As you examine your life; how you handle possessions,
What drives your activity, how you regard yourself
Will determine what voice you are heeding
Are you answering to the call of religion and daily striving for acceptance
Or are you receiving His grace and daily resting in that relationship