

God's Determined Faithfulness and Forgiveness

(Hello! This is a very exciting section of Scripture and there are eight parts to the study, but if you are pressed for time or just Zoomed out, you might want to jump ahead and start at section five.)

1. Read Romans 2:17-23

¹⁷ But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast in God ¹⁸ and know his will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law; ¹⁹ and if you are sure that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— ²¹ you then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? ²² You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? ²³ You who boast in the law dishonour God by breaking the law.

God's people, both in ancient times and now, have failed to follow his holy law.

- In what ways have the failures of the church made it harder to share the good news of Jesus Christ in our society?
- What aspects of God's law do you find it difficult to obey?
- Do you think many people who consider themselves Christians believe that the faith is about obeying as many commandments/doing as many good deeds as you can in the hope you may go to heaven?

2. Read Romans 2:25-29

²⁵ For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. ²⁶ So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? ²⁷ Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. ²⁸ For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. ²⁹ But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

God-ordained rituals are rendered meaningless if people don't follow God with their hearts and break his law.

- Today, how can religious practices become a substitute for living a life full of the love, values and virtues that God desires?
- If circumcision was introduced as a physical sign of belonging to God's covenant community, what does it mean for circumcision to be a "matter of the heart" by the Spirit?

3. Read Romans 3:1-4

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!

The Hebrew scriptures are here referred to as the “oracles of God”.

- Do you think the 21st century church should pay more attention to the wisdom contained in the so-called “Old Testament”? What riches have you found in these writings? How do they help us understand Jesus’ life and mission?
- What do we learn about the nature of God’s faithfulness from these verses - and what hope does that give you for the church today?

4. Read Romans 3:9-18

⁹ What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, ¹⁰ as it is written:

“None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ no one understands;
no one seeks for God.

¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”

¹³ “Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.”

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

¹⁴ “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

¹⁶ in their paths are ruin and misery,

¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known.”

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

Paul asserts that both Jews and Gentiles are “under sin”. We are in equal need of deliverance.

- If “none is righteous” and all the peoples of the earth are sinners in need of redemption, how should this change the way we look at other cultures? Does it encourage a new humility?
- What are the consequences of rebellion and sin that Paul details in his diatribe?
- How has turning away from God affected relations between humans?

5. Read Romans 3:19-20

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

- What are the consequences of the whole world being held to account by God?
- Are you glad that God does not ignore the sin which ravages his creation?
- What does it mean that “knowledge of sin” comes through the law? Has reading the Bible made you aware of new sins?
- If people cannot be “justified” in God’s sight by following works of the law, how would you describe the situation humanity finds itself in?

6. Read Romans 3:21-26

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Paul tells his readers that God has intervened in world history. The prophets and the law itself pointed towards the wonders that Jesus has accomplished and there is good news for everyone.

- If you were trying to explain the message of this passage to someone with no knowledge of the Bible, how would describe the significance of the “righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe”? (Don’t worry if this is difficult - the scope of God’s grace is mind-boggling!)
- Similarly, what does it mean to be “justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus”?
- How would you describe what happened when God put Jesus “forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith”?
- The renowned Bible scholar Leon Morris described this passage as “possibly the most important single paragraph ever written”. Why would he think this?

7. Read Romans 3:21-26 in this translation by Eugene Peterson

²¹⁻²⁴ But in our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened. The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this. Since we’ve compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we’re in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.

²⁵⁻²⁶ God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world of sin. Having faith in him sets us in the clear. God decided on this course of action in full view of the public—to set the world in the clear with himself through the sacrifice of Jesus, finally taking care of the sins he had so patiently endured. This is not only clear, but it's *now*—this is current history! God sets things right. He also makes it possible for us to live in his rightness.

Paul faced the challenge of putting into words the cosmic wonder of what God was doing before his eyes, forgiving the sins of Jews and Gentiles alike and calling them into a relationship both with one another and with him. Translators have then had their own challenge of trying to convey Paul's world-changing insights in English.

- What jumps out of the text when you read Eugene Peterson's paraphrase?
- How do you feel when you read of your sins being forgiven in their entirety?
- How will this change how you face the future?
- What does it tell you about God's love for us that he sent his son to die a sacrificial death in our place?
- How do you feel to be not just pardoned of your sins but called into a new relationship with God?
- What does this tell us about God's faithfulness?

8. Finally, read these words of David Gooding

We have sinned, and God tells us that if we come to him on the basis of our doing our best to keep his holy law, the verdict cannot be anything else than this, that we have sinned, we come short, we deserve its penalty, and must suffer it. The reason many people are so uncertain in their hearts of salvation, is that they haven't faced that prime reality. If we face it that we are sinners before God and liable to his wrath, then God has a wonderful salvation, right at your elbow. And you don't have to wait until you die and emerge into eternity. You can have this wonderful thing now. For God has set forth Jesus as a meeting place. Come to God through Jesus and the blood he shed at Calvary that paid the penalty of our sin, honoured God's law, and assuaged God's wrath. And if we come through Jesus, we may have God's kiss of welcome on our cheek forthwith; his arms of love around us and the guarantee that he will never, never cast us out. The matter settled now and settled eternally.

- How do you think about your salvation? Do you think God wants you have greater certainty? Ask him to give you true assurance.
- Thank God for how Jesus, through his blood, "paid the penalty of our sin, honoured God's law, and assuaged God's wrath".
- Meditate for a moment on how God will "never, never cast us out".
- Discuss how you could describe the significance of Christ's death in a way that a friend who has no knowledge of Biblical terms would understand. Pray for opportunities to share this Good News.
- Praise God for his great love and work of salvation.