
Prayers

To God

God has asked you to do His will. What might this be today?

Pray and wait on the Lord until you become a little clearer about what His will for you today might be.

Praise God who inspire your soul!

For Self

Think about the people you will meet today, and the people you will communicate with by email or text. Think for a moment what their problems and issues might be - not to try and dig out sordid details but to be understanding of the people with whom you live and work. Bless them all in prayer, even briefly.

For others

Father God, come in power to save our world from selfishness and self-centredness. Save me from such sins and save us from politicians and leaders of industry who exemplify such things. Lift up to positions of authority people of charity, understanding and integrity who will win people's hearts by honesty and compassion, and do what is necessary to build the better world within our capability. AMEN

Meditation

Rejoice to see the start of every day;
Believe the providential power of God
And see at work His universal laws
Of goodness, faith and hope and love.

Dispel the demons of today's despair;
The awful power of evil's dark intentions,
Driving backwards all for which we truly care
Towards the misery of loveless gloom.

Let God's power reign here and now
And hear Christ Jesus say in triumph, 'No contest!'
For deep within, the Spirit claims the ground
So we by faith can taste the victory He's won!

Bible Passage

Romans 3:1-8

¹ Given all this, is there any benefit in being a Jew, or any value in circumcision? ² I still say there much, in every way; to begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the words of God. ³ Does it matter if some refused to believe? Does their lack of faith somehow make God's faithfulness ineffective? ⁴ Certainly not! Where all people are liars, God is utterly dependable; as it is written, 'You will be proved right in all you say, and vindicated in Your judgement.'

⁵ Is it possible then to suggest that our wrongdoing serves merely to prove God's justice? And from a human perspective, is God also wrong to inflict punishment? ⁶ Certainly not! For the world must surely be judged by God! ⁷ If, to His glory, God's truth shines out because of my faults, why then do some condemn me as a sinner? ⁸ You might as well say we should do evil just to get some more of God's goodness, as, quite slanderously, some are reporting us as saying! Well, they deserve their condemnation!

Bible study Review

You would be forgiven for wondering what on earth is going on here in Romans. Chapter 2 has been a long treatise against the traditional self understanding of Jewish people. Many had become Christians, yet they still valued their Jewishness and wanted the church to honour their historic covenant with God. Paul's attack on their attachment to the Law and circumcision in particular would have caused them deep hurt. So why does Paul now speak of the value of being a Jew (3:1f.)?

In the broader scheme of this letter, Paul is now turning away from discussing the faults and failings of people to focus on the greater characteristics of God. The first paragraph calls on all to accept God's absolute and just rule (3:1-4), and the second berates those who think they can get something out of God rather than submit to His just authority. It is all so contentious; we are listening in on a hot dispute, and Paul is determined to win his argument!

After all his criticisms, Paul asks whether there is any benefit in being a Jew, and his answer is 'Yes!' After all, he was a Jew and had not renounced his heritage. Interestingly, he picks out the significant fact that the Jews had been give 'the words of God' (3:2). Paul does not say 'the Law', as some might expect. By saying 'the words of God' he refers to the whole of Old Testament scripture, not just the Law. It is a subtle but important point, for the Christian bears the heritage of God's Word, not just one part of it.

Writing to the church at Rome, Paul boldly tells his readers that the qualities of God are not dependent on the human response to them. His faithfulness, His justice and His Word all stand secure whether or not people believe them or accept them, and God's Word remains steadfast whether or not the Jews have interpreted it properly (3:3,4). It is not as if the Old Testament fails to deal with this failure on the part of the Jews. Psalm 51 famously speaks of this, and Paul refers to it here in verse 4:

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against You, You alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that You are justified in Your sentence and blameless when You pass judgment. Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me. (Psalm 51:3-5)

It is not easy to spot the connection, though less difficult when read side by side:

*You are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment (Psalm 51:4)
Your are proved right in what You say and confirmed in Your judgement (Romans 3:4)*

Looking at this makes it very clear that Paul is comparing people's core sinful nature with the pure righteousness of God. God is just and true, and this is not something we can question!

Verses 5 to 8 may sound strange, but yet again, we must read them carefully. Basically, Paul is responding to an idea gaining ground in his day which went like this; if God's gracious love is shown to those who sin, why not sin again and again and so get even more of God's love?

This is what Paul refers to in verse 5, and makes more plain in verse 7, and he answers this by pointing to the sheer glory and majesty of God. People can only think such things if their eyes are on what they can get out of religion, instead of dwelling on the glory of the God who saves them! Paul is furious that apparently, some have interpreted his Gospel as giving them permission to believe such things, as if the love of God is some kind of automatic benefit (3:8)!

Where is Paul going with all this? We do not have long to wait and find out, for before chapter 3 continues far we will find ourselves immersed in Paul's forthright explanation of the Gospel of God's love and grace. It is however worth remembering a point from from this passage. Even Christians today can fall into the trap of believing that once saved, sin is merely something to be confessed on Sunday and His grace received automatically. Paul would be aghast. Sin is an enemy to be fought, and God is the Judge who will condemn all sin. It is only when we take this seriously that we are in a place to truly understand the Gospel.

Going Deeper

Letter writing!

Remember, Paul was writing a theological treatise in the form of a letter. Yes, he writes to the church at Rome, but his intention is to give a mature explanation of the Gospel. He starts firstly with the state of the world (chapter 1 verse 18f), then deals with the question of whether the Jews have a special place in God's new work (chapter 2), and now attacks any view of the Gospel that discounts the supreme authority of God. In all this he had to think carefully. He did not have the benefit of word processors and could not correct himself as he went along. As Paul spoke, a scribe would write his words down on a parchment, and once written, it could not be changed.

So it is quite fair to suggest that here at the beginning of this reading today, Paul was adding to what he had earlier said about the Jews, giving an explanation of the place of the Jewish people in God's plan. Having made his point, however, he says no more for now. We will find the question of the Jews returns in chapters 4, 9,10 and 11 but for now, the general theme of his letter is to turn to the majesty and absolute justice of God.

The question of Judaism and possible benefits for being Jewish

Paul was probably asked quite frequently whether there were any benefits to being a Jew. Many of his converts were not, and some Jewish Christians told them to accept Jewishness and be circumcised, but Paul said 'no'. We can imagine the ensuing conversations about what it meant to be a Jew or a Gentile Christian, and everything Paul writes here had been honed through such conversations. So were there benefits for being Jewish given that they had born, however painfully, the historical evidence of God's work in the world and His justice? The question probably hurt Paul; he spent years thinking it over after his conversion (Gal 1:17f.). It is a small thing to us, but was big for Paul and the early church.

So when Paul gives a positive answer to his own question about the value of being a Jew, we should not be surprised at the inherent contradictions revealed in his presentations. Yes, he had just dismissed the Jewish claim to uphold the Law and circumcision (chapter 2), but he was not about to dismiss the rest of Scripture (3:2). Note that some Bibles translate '*words of God*' in verse 2 as '*oracles of God*', but this merely hides his core argument which is that the Old Testament scriptures as a whole are not compromised just because the Jews were unable to fulfil their God-given mission.

Paul's quotes from Scripture

Neither will Paul hold back from his belief in the impartial justice of God, and holds this must remain true irrespective of Jewish unfaithfulness (3:3). How can any human success or failure affect the moral integrity of God? In verse 4 Paul quotes from Psalm 51 (see above), but he also quote first from Psalm 116:11 '*I said in my consternation "everyone is a liar"*', in this way pointing forward to what he will say next (see 3:9f. tomorrow). It is vital to his flow of thought that we recognise the infallible and unremitting justice of God in dealing with human sin; there is absolutely no worldly form of escape from the consequences of our sinful actions, even in the religious ceremonies and intensity of Jewish worship and religious life. All stand under the same judgement of God.

An accusation about the perversion of sin

From verse 5 onwards, Paul deals with the pernicious accusation that if God's grace is shown by the way He forgives sinners, then surely we should get more grace from God the more we sin, as if sin was a helpful means to getting more attention and benefit from God. There is evidence in the documents of the early church that some people did indeed take this line on sin and God's grace.

For example, it was said by some that it did not matter if you 'sinned' by doing what the Roman authorities required - which was for all citizens to attend a Temple of worship to pour out libations (mainly wine) to the Emperor as to a God. They felt that by so doing they gained their independence and all that was required was for people to go to church and confess this sin. God would make it right again. Paul and others argued strongly that this would not do, and it is very clear that some (including the famous Christian Polycarp) were martyred for refusing to worship the Emperor. This was no small matter.

Verse 7 is a little odd, because Paul is trying to turn this argument onto the heads of those those who support it. He complains that others who believe differently to himself on this matter have called him a sinner; but points out that those who say this are illogical, for surely, according to their argument, his sin simply serves to illustrate God's glory! Of course, Paul has turned the matter on its head and inside out. He is simply using his best logic to defeat the people he believes oppose the Gospel of God.

Application

Discipleship issues

The misinterpretation of teaching

At the time of writing Paul had to explain what Christianity meant for Jews (he was one himself) and also Gentiles like those in the church at Rome. Consequently, he had to explain how God dealt with the sin found in each community, both Jews and Gentiles. However, from this passage of Scripture, it seems that Paul's opponents are not merely Jews or Gentiles, but people who opposed him for whatever reason, and sought to misinterpret his teaching.

From this, we should make note that opposition to sound teaching has always been a feature of the life of the church, and good leaders have always had to defend their teaching against those who would seek to denigrate it, misinterpret it, or put it down in some other way. Yet Paul does not desist from arguing from Scripture, using sound principles, and refusing to give an inch in the quest for truth under God. neither should we make light of opposition to sound and good teaching in the church today; we should use Scripture, and every means at our disposal to confront and challenge what we believe to be wrong, remembering always that God alone is Judge.

Unfortunately, some of the most difficult criticisms of the church come from those within it who do not have the breadth of vision or the grasp of the Gospel sufficient to understand that their points of view are wrong. It is a sad fact that those outside of the church oppose it largely by ignoring it - from their point of view, to ignore it proves its irrelevance. It is possibly easier to fight against reason than it is to fight against apathy and disinterest!

Misunderstanding sin

It remains a matter of concern to the church today that many Christians still have a loose attitude towards and approach to sin. Many people who experience the Lord's salvation live in the light of it and go on to greater things, but strangely, many find it hard to deal with sins that continue to afflict their lives. Sometimes these are matters of habit or social practice, from heavy drinking to reading horoscopes and all manner of sexual sin. When challenged, people will either deny that a problem exists or confess immediately on the presumption that the Lord will forgive; but they return to the same sins whilst the enemy holds them in the grip of personal or social habits which are an affront to Almighty God. There are ways to deal with the most difficult of sins, but they can only be accessed if people accept that God is just and His justice does not go away just because people like to sin!

Throughout this Scripture, Paul says 'be careful', for justice is real. We face the consequences of our sins in this life and the next, and it is wrong to assume that the Lord is happy to accept 'apparent' repentance rather than real repentance. Real repentance means 'never again'. We need to say it and mean it, and seek the power of God's Holy Spirit to release the grip of the enemy that continues to hold many people in sin. These are not trivial matters.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- Paul agonised because of his own personal experience and the way that people accused him of misrepresenting the Gospel. What arguments divide people sharply in the life of your church? Pray about this and ask the Lord to help you understand what is happening.

- Pray for all those who are seeking to find ways of overcoming the great problems dividing Christians today. Pray in earnest that divisions between the main churches will be addressed as a priority, and not as an afterthought.

Questions for groups

1. Read through the passage of Scripture, and if you are in a group, check with each other that you understand each verse.
 2. When you think about God as a Judge, what picture comes to mind, and how do you react to it?
 3. What sins do people trivialise today by suggesting that they do not matter? How can they be highlighted and handled without upsetting people unnecessarily?
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Final Prayer

Bless the special time we set aside each day to spend with You, Lord God. If we have been challenged, guide us in our response; if we have been at rest with You, move us on. May we always be responsive to the guidance of Your Spirit, and may we return to You each day with hope, confidence and joy. AMEN