

Romans (Strengthened by the Gospel) (Week 4/18) Religion isn't Enough

Small Group Discussion Questions

Connect Reflect on how you would feel if your inner thoughts, motives, and secrets were fully revealed (v.16). How would the promise, “everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame” (10:11) speak to you?

Warm-Up

1. What is the best letter that you have ever received? What made it so good?
2. What has been the flow of Paul's big points that he's been making so far in the letter?

Read Romans 2:17-29

3. What does Paul suggest are some of the descriptors of being a Jew — one of God's people?
4. How are these various things *privileges*? What privileges do we have as God's people?
5. Whilst there are many privileges, how are God's people guilty of privilege without practice?
6. What were some of the consequences of people's disobedience? How did it blaspheme God's name?
7. Does the hypocrisy of Christians ever tarnish what people think about God today? Is that valid?
8. How were the gifts to God's people meant to distinguish them? If our obedience won't save us, why is it still important for us to try and live obediently in God's strength? What does it say about our heart?
9. What was the purpose of circumcision? In light of Jesus, how are believers marked out today?
10. How does this all point to our need for the Gospel? How does it help you to reminded of your need?

Read Romans 3:1-8

11. What are the four hypothetical questions that Paul now works through? Just trying naming each one.
12. What advantage do God's people have? How have they confused this advantage?
13. Does our unfaithfulness somehow 'nullify' God's faithfulness? Why or why not?
14. Does our unrighteousness make God look better? How is God's goodness not dependent on us?
15. Why did some people claim that this all meant that they could sin all the more? Why was this so flawed? If we are forgiven by grace and not works (or religious identity), *why should we seek to not sin?*
16. Do you ever feel self-entitled towards God or in comparison to others? Do you have any grounds to?
17. If we ever feel tempted to rely on our efforts or a sense of entitlement, what is a good antidote?

Read Romans 3:9-20

18. How does Paul make it clear that being under the power of sin is a *universal* and *pervasive* condition?
19. In what way is this list confronting? Where should a sense of personal conviction of sin point us to?

Apply *Is there anything (other than Jesus) that you're tempted to rely on for your standing before God? What are the rhythms of your life that remind you that it is only because of the Gospel that we are set right.*

Pray *Gracious God, thank you that it is because of your mercy that you show us that we are guilty. Please help us to see this reality and look to you. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

GOING DEEPER

Romans (Strengthened by the Gospel) (Week 4/18) Religion isn't Enough

Small Group Discussion Questions

On Your Front Line this Week

How often do you pray for the world and the persecuted church? Pick up a prayer guide to help shape your prayers.






For Families

- *Download:* some of the family resources to use at home: stbartskids.org

Listen, Watch, and Read

- *Listen (sermon):* “What has gone wrong with the world?” by Vaughan Roberts: <https://stebbes.org/sermons/what-has-gone-wrong-with-the-world/#sermons>
- *Listen (sermon):* “Knowing Good” by Tim Keller: <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/knowing-good/>
- *Listen (sermon):* “There is no one righteous” by Richard Trist: https://www.allsouls.org/Media/AllMedia.aspx?show_media=50723&show_file=54381
- *Read (letters):* Correspondence between C. S. Lewis and Mrs. William L. (Philinda) Krieg and her son, Laurence (1955-1958): <http://larrykrieg.name/Lewis/index.html>

Series Resources

- *Read:* “Strengthened by the Gospel” by Brian Rosner. 
- *Read:* “The Story of God Bible Commentary: Romans” by Michael Bird.
- *Read:* “Into the Heart of Romans” by N. T. Wright. 
- *Read:* “Epistle of Paul to the Romans” by F. F. Bruce. 
- *Read:* “The Message of Romans” by John Stott. 
- *Read:* “The Epistle to the Romans” by Leon Morris. 
- *Watch:* “Romans” by the Bible Project: <https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-romans/>

 Available to borrow from the St Bart's Library (Toowoomba): stbarts.com.au/library

ROMANS (STRENGTHENED BY THE GOSPEL)

Week 04/18 "Religion Isn't Enough"

by the Rev'd Adam Lowe (07/05/2026)

종교만으로는 충분하지 않습니다 | 宗教信仰还不够 | மதம் மட்டும் போதாது

Bible Passage: Romans 2:17-3:20

Heart of Sermon: *In the face of our sin and the inevitability of judgement, any efforts or sense of self-entitlement will not save us: only the Gospel will.*

Gracious Father, please help us to see the stark reality of our sin, so that we would not rely on ourselves but on the strength of our Saviour. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

An excerpt from a letter *without any context* rarely makes much sense!

- I suspect you compose more text messages or emails than letters. But just imagine for a moment if someone were to have a look at your text messages, and tried to make sense of *who you are*, *who you are writing to*, and *for what purpose*, only by considering just one part of what you had written, without any reference to anything else that you had said!
- At best: it would be difficult, perhaps a bit vague or even amusing. At worst: it could be damaging with the potential to be misrepresented or misunderstood. /
- Here's an example from a little PS addendum to a letter written back in 1955:

P.S. Laurence wants me to tell you that he hopes you'll be charitable toward panthers. He admires them greatly, as he does lions, their cousins. "They act pantherish because that's the way God made them...."

- Taken on its own: we really don't learn much! *There's not a lot of clues here. It's a bit cryptic.* Someone is writing on behalf of Laurence who is concerned that the recipient of letter, has been on some sort of crusade against the pantherish behaviour of panthers!
- All sounds a bit silly. But actually, this is just a tiny excerpt from a series of letters written by a mother *on behalf of her son* to C S Lewis.
- The whole family had only come to faith a few years earlier. And her nine year old son was devouring Lewis' Chronicle of Narnia Series at rapid pace. *But the boy had grown concerned that his affection for Aslan might be eclipsing his love for Jesus.*

- The mum was a bit cross with Lewis — in fact she said when she first wrote she was angry, *for her little boy knew that the worst possible thing a person could do is to worship a false God,* and perhaps he was hurdling along a road towards idolatry.
- If you just read the PS, you would miss the point.

We want to be careful as we read through Paul's letter to the Romans, section-by-section over eighteen weeks, that we don't miss the point.

- There's great value in plumbing the letter in detail — that's why we're doing it, but as we step into the tailend of chapter 2, and the beginning of chapter 3, you could easily miss the point of the case that Paul is building.
- *He wants us to see the unique beauty and our desperate need for the Gospel.*
- That's why in chapter 1 after stating up front that the Gospel is the best news ever, that: *Paul outlined the problem and pervasiveness of sin that pervades humanity and every heart.*
- That's why at the beginning of chapter 2: *Paul warns in that light of our sin and that because God is just, that judgement is inevitably and inescapably coming.*
- Which all is leading to chapter 3 verse 21, to two greatest words ever paired together: BUT NOW — *we rejoice for God has provided a solution to a situation in the form of a Saviour.* And that we can have a righteousness — be set right forever by faith in Jesus Christ.
- But before Paul gets to the BUT NOW, Paul needs the Romans — and us, to truly understand that no one is immune from the need for the Gospel.

Of what he says next.

Some people thought that this didn't apply to them. *Couldn't apply to them!*
Perhaps we can be tempted to think the same way?

Some thought that they were special.

That they were exempt.

That they could hide behind their *efforts* or even a sense of *entitlement*.

- *"Paul, are you sure that this applies to us, too?"*
- Paul's answer? YES. /
- You all need the Gospel. We all do.
- Because:
- **You Don't Obey;**
God Doesn't Owe You; and
No One is Righteous.

YOU DON'T OBEY | ROMANS 2:17-29

불순종함 | 你并不服从 | தேவனுக்கு கீழ்ப்படிதல் அவசியம்

First, *Paul says we all need the Gospel because you don't obey*. Chapter 2, verse 17:

¹⁷ Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; ¹⁸ if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; ¹⁹ if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, ²⁰ an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth— ²¹ *you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself?*

When Paul lays out this series of IF statements to his fellow Jews:

IF you rely on the law and boast in God,

IT you know his will and approve of what is superior,

IF you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, *a light in the dark, instructor to the foolish, and a teacher of little children* — **he is NOT being sarcastic.**

- BEING God's people should've involved a *hunger to live God's way*.
BOASTING in God didn't *mean showing off or feeling superior but having your confidence in him*.
BELIEVING that they were to be *a guide for the blind and a light in the world*, wasn't as a brag or because they thought they were better, but was in fulfilment of their calling as a nation.
- These privileges are real gifts from God to his people.

- They truly did have the law, God's will, and were entrusted to be a light to the nations.
- Paul is not mocking them. /
- The problem is that they've come to rely on possessing the law rather than *truly* obeying it.
- / "If you then, who teach others, do not teach yourself?"
- You preach against stealing, but steal.
You tell others not to commit adultery, but do.
You boast in the law, but dishonour God by breaking it. /
- When Paul accuses them of expressing hatred for idols but robbing temples, we're not really certain of the situation that was occurring in that context, it could be referring to a range of unsavoury things, but the point is: this is bad!
- This is privilege *without practice*. / Knowing the truth isn't the same as living it, and for some, dangerously, it has become a false basis for confidence.
- Paul knew what it was to be a self-righteous religious person, so he's speaking with some credibility here!

He knows what it is to confuse *having the law* with keeping it.

- And he wants them to see their situation clearly. *Not just to heap it on them*.
- Paul doesn't have some sort of twisted delight in calling out hypocritical people.
- He wants them to see that if their confidence is based simply on the law, along with their ability to obey it, they're deluded, seriously mistaken, *and in grave danger*.

- All of the gifts they were given were meant to distinguish them.
As people set apart by God and for God to display God's holiness and character.
- But instead of their witness causing others to honour God — *that is to give him praise*, the witness of their hypocrisy causes others to blaspheme God — *to cause him disrepute*.
- As the world watches on it mocks: what a joke!
If your God is like you, then he must not be that great afterall.

Isn't that a relief that we're not like that!

- That we never think *we're better than those who don't believe*.
That we never feel *even a smidge of superiority because we call ourselves Christians*.
That we never tarnish *God's name by lives that contradict the book we call our Bible*.
- *Phew! What a relief! The reality of course is more confronting: behaviour undermining the message is not only an ancient problem.*
- Martyn Lloyd-Jones put it like this:

As you read the Bible day by day, do you apply the truth to yourself? What is your motive when you read the Bible? Is it just to have a knowledge of it so that you can show others how much you know, and argue with them, or are you applying the truth to yourselves? ... As you read, say to yourself...This is me! What is it saying about me! Allow the Scripture to search you, otherwise it can be very dangerous. There is a sense which the more you know of [The Bible]. The more dangerous it is to you, if you do not apply it to yourself.

This is not just a beat up!

- The point is not that we can achieve perfect obedience! Of course we can't!
That would be a false basis for confidence — in part that's what Paul wants to topple.
- Their righteousness is fake. God wants hearts that are sincere.
- That's why Paul says, in verse 29:

...a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.

- Circumcision was the outward *sign of belonging to God and being part of his covenant people*.
- But circumcision didn't save them anymore then knowing the law.
- External signs, religious privilege, moral knowledge, spiritual heritage, none of those things can save because that was never their intention.
- They were meant to point to the one who can.
The one who when we love him, transforms us from the inside out.
- The one who can give us a confidence,
Not on the basis of what we possess, or how much we know, or how we appear,
but *entirely* on the basis of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.
- That's why we need the gospel.
- But Paul doesn't stop there.

GOD DOESN'T OWE YOU | ROMANS 3:1-8

하나님은 당신에게 빚진 것이 없습니다 | 上帝并不亏欠你 | தேவன் உங்களுக்கு கடன்பட்டவர் அல்ல

Second, *he wants them to remember* that **God doesn't owe them.**

In response to what Paul had just said about the obvious inadequacy of our **efforts** to save, he now gets on the front foot and addresses anyone who is feeling **entitled**. *Ch. 3, verse 1:*

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

You can almost imagine people listening to Paul's letter being read out and asking that question!

- In fact, Paul proposes four *types of objections—questions—that people might raise.* /
- I'll give them to you in summary form:
- *Well, what advantage is there then?*
Doesn't our unfaithfulness cancel out God's faithfulness?
Doesn't our sin make God look better?
Doesn't that mean that we can sin however we want to?
- The quick answer: *except for their being MUCH advantage, the other answers are NO, NO, + NO!*
- / But let's work them through briefly one-by-one.
- **1: So, what advantage is there?**

MUCH: *You have been entrusted with the very words of God.*

- **2: Doesn't our unfaithfulness cancel out God's faithfulness?**
NO: *Our failures don't impinge on God's faithfulness — his faithfulness independently stands.*
- **3: Well, doesn't our sin at least make God look better?**
NO. For God's goodness is not relative.
God's goodness is objectively good.
Even if humanity never existed he would be perfect.
- **4: Does that mean that we can sin however we want.**
NO — THAT'S ABSURD! Being God's people is not a license to sin. /
- It seems that at the time, people were trying to tell people that they could sin!
That it didn't matter what they did, because God owed it to them
or even *perhaps* that the worse it got the more glorious his grace looked.
But Paul says, that's preposterous. It's a lie.
That those whose hearts are far from God, who feel:
justified to do as they please, justly stand condemned.
- Can you see what is happening here?
They don't just have a distorted view about themselves and about God.
But because of that, they've got a distorted view of the basis on which they can approach him.
- Because of who they are.
Because they think God is bound to them.

- There's a sense of trying to weasel out of any culpability, any guilt.
We might not throw up these precise questions, but of course we can do something similar.
- Why would I be found guilty?
I've never murdered anyone.
I'm baptised. I come from a Christian family. I go to church.
I do the right things, I even belong to the right church!
- BUT Paul makes it clear that there's: There's no exception, no exemption, and no excuse.

This is good news, because Paul is showing us how **not** to approach God.

- He's laying it bare.
- It almost like some of the people Paul is writing to are kind of squirming around, manoeuvring this-way-and-that.
- They're resting on their effort.
They're reaching for entitlement.
They're reasoning with every excuse. //
- They're resisting the one thing which is needed:
Repentance.
- [story]
- The same need is for everyone.

NO ONE IS RIGHTEOUS | ROMANS 3:9-20

의로운 사람은 없습니다 | 世上没有义人 | யாரும் நீதிமானல்ல

Finally, *we ALL need the Gospel because **no one is righteous***. Verse 9...

What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin.

So note:

The first time Paul asks, "*do we have any advantage?*" back in v.1, his answer was YES! *MUCH!*
But the second time he asks, "do we have any advantage?" in v.9, his answer is NO! *NOT AT ALL!*

- So which is it Paul? Have you forgotten what you wrote just a few verses ago?
Is there an advantage or is there not?
- Paul isn't forgetful. He isn't contradicting himself or flip-flopping on his position.
- The answer is YES AND NO.
- God's people do indeed have an advantage,
but it is not the advantage *they think*: it is not a superior standing before God.
- For some of them it would be like the rug being pulled out from under them,
as he makes clear that everyone — without exception — is under sin.
- He couldn't make it any clearer. Listen to the repeated emphases from *verse 10*...

10 As it is written: “There is **no one** righteous, **not even one**;
11 there is **no one** who understands; there is **no one** who seeks God.
12 **All** have turned away, they have **together** become worthless; there is **no one** who does good, **not even one.**”

In just three verses, *Paul makes the point eight times that the problem of sin, a lack of righteousness, applies to everyone. Jew and Gentile. / No exceptions.*

- These verses, along with those which follow, are basically a litany of OT references woven together to present one unified image about our condition.

- This isn't new news.

The quotations that Paul draws on are mostly from Israel's own scripture about Israel. This is their own *self-testimony*.

- **Of the UNIVERSALITY of sin:** it applies to every person. Individually and collectively.
And the COMPREHENSIVENESS of sin: it affects every part of a person.

- Our MINDS: *no one understands.*

Our MOTIVES: *no one seeks God — all have turned away.*

Our WILLS: *there is no one who does good.*

Our WORDS: *their throats are open graves; their tongues deceitful, poison is on their lips.*

Our RELATIONSHIPS: *they are swift to shed blood; the way of peace they do not know.*

Our RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD: *there is no fear of God before their eyes.*

- It's not a pretty picture! *There's no amount of sprucing it up or trying to spin it that will help!*

- And when I hear that list:

it's not only that *the seriousness of the problem is confronting.*

- (After all, it's confronting when you see the news, even reel-sized pieces.

The depth of tragedy, heartache, pain, and failure. So confronting.)

- But it's also *personally convicting.*

Because this descriptor isn't just about *someone else.*

It's about *everyone.* Which also *includes me.* /

- *And there's no amount of rolling up my moral sleeves that can work me out of the predicament.*

When I was in primary school, I used to have a recurring dream — sometimes even when I was awake — that I walking in a field. At the same point on the walk, I would see something on the ground, bend over to pick it up, and the moment I did, it triggered a sense of falling endlessly without any power to stop it. / Later on in life I realised that what I was experiencing was a panic attack. I had no idea of course back then, and it was terrifying. I felt hopeless. I felt powerless to change my predicament.

- Maybe as you think about the reality of sin and the inevitability of judgement, you can feel a bit the same way. Powerless to change your predicament.

- The reality is that on our own we are. / That's the point. Hear what Paul says: *verse 20:*

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

- The Law isn't there to save us. It's there to show us that we need saving. //
 - This is only part of the story:
The answer is not pointing us inwardly.
 - Awareness of sin moves us to cling onto someone—the only one—who is strong enough.
 - The one who perfectly fulfilled the law FOR US.
The one who truly embodies what it truly means to be his people.
The one who gives us new hearts and one day will make us new.
 - In Jesus there is a great BUT NOW. //
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When C S Lewis wrote back to the mother of the boy who was concerned that he might be committing idolatry, Lewis pointed out that there's no way he could love Aslan more than Jesus, because anything that he loves about Aslan was just a pointer to Jesus himself.

Lewis wrote a prayer that the boy could pray to grow his love and dependence on Jesus.

But he also with great humility added that the boy might like to pray for him:
And if Mr. Lewis has worried any other children by his books or done them any harm,
then please forgive him and help him never to do it again.

- Acknowledging our sin is nothing to fear,
when it propels us toward the one with the power to forgive and set us right.