

**SERIES: IN THE HANDS OF A FAITHFUL GOD**

**PART 4A: THE GENIUS OF GOD**

Romans 3:1-20

No one likes to be falsely accused. We see a lot of this happening in our culture today. Political maneuvering, lying, manipulation and coercion are the soup of the day. Have you ever been falsely accused? How did you feel when you heard the things people have said you said or did but you know they weren't true?

It hurts even worse when someone confronts you with the truth that you don't want to acknowledge or admit but deep in your heart you know it is true. If you allow the truth to wound you and to cause you to acknowledge the truth about who you really are, the Bible says that is the road that leads you to God. God calls it repentance. Repentance has two movements to it. I must first acknowledge what God's Word says about my own sinfulness, wickedness and rebellion, and then I turn my life over to Him and move in the directions of His purposes and plans for my life.

In a culture where we endorse lying and the ability to try to justify our actions, our study in Romans is just what the doctor has ordered for a culture gone insane. This is exactly what Paul's letter to the Romans does. In the first two chapters of Romans, Paul has been cutting away any grounds we may think we have for being what we would consider a right relationship with God. I admit that it makes uncomfortable reading, both for the irreligious person and perhaps, more so, for those of us who call ourselves Christians.

In chapter 3:1-20 Paul moves relentlessly toward his conclusion in 3:20 **"For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are."** In the first 8 verses of chapter 3, Paul anticipates the questions and objections that he knows chapter 2 most likely provoked among those in the Roman church and were from a Jewish background. Paul was incredibly sensitive in how he approached nonbelievers, and we will see him here placing himself in his listeners' shoes, demonstrating that he respects them enough to think hard about how they were responding to

his teaching. I want us to focus on this morning (afternoon) on **HOW TO RELATE TO PEOPLE WHO NEED THE GOOD NEWS**. Please follow along with me as I read Romans 3:1-20 “**1 Then what’s the advantage of being a Jew? Is there any value in the ceremony of circumcision? 2. Yes, there are great benefits! First of all the Jews were entrusted with the whole revelation of God. 3 True, some of them were unfaithful; but just because they were unfaithful, does that mean God will be unfaithful! 4 Of course not! Even if everyone else is a liar, God is true. As the Scriptures say about Him, ‘You will be proved right in what you say, and you will win your case in court.’ 5 ‘But,’ some might say, ‘our sinfulness serves a good purpose, for it helps people see how righteous God is. Isn’t it unfair, then, for Him to punish us?’ (This is merely a human point of view.) 6 Of course not! If God were not entirely fair, how would He be qualified to judge the world? 7 ‘But,’ someone might still argue, ‘how can God condemn me as a sinner if my dishonesty highlights His truthfulness and brings Him more glory?’ 8 And some people even slander us by claiming that we say, ‘The more we sin, the better it is!’ Those who say such things deserve to be condemned. 9 Well then, should we conclude that we Jews are better than others? No, not at all, for we have already shown that all people, whether Jews or Gentiles, are under the power of sin. 10 As the Scriptures say, ‘No one is righteous--not even one. 11 No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God. 12 All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one.’ 13 ‘Their talk is foul, like the stench from an open grave. Their tongues are filled with lies.’ ‘Snake venom drips from their lips.’ 14 ‘Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.’ 15 ‘They rush to commit murder. 16 Destruction and misery always follow them. 17 They don’t know where to find peace.’ 18 ‘They have no fear of God at all.’ 19 Obviously, the law applies to those to whom it was given, for its purpose is to keep people from having excuses and to show that the entire world is guilty before God. 20 For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are.”**

**How to relate to people who need the Good News:**

**I. Learn to meet people where they are at. Romans 3:1-9**

## Know the questions they're asking:

### A. Is there any advantage to being religious?

Paul has just laid out for us in chapter 2 that a true Jew has nothing to do with Jewish parentage or if you have been through the ceremony of circumcision. Paul argues that a true Jew has to do with your heart being right with God. A changed heart is not obeying the letter of the law from the O.T., but it is having your heart changed by the Holy Spirit, and the proof positive of the true circumcision where the sinfulness and rebellion of our heart has been cut away is that a person with a changed heart seeks praise from God not from people, because they behave in a righteous way religiously. In this chapter Paul demonstrates that every one of us stands guilty before God. Paul has dismantled the common excuses of people who refuse to admit they are sinners.

**1) There is no God or I follow my conscience (1:18-32) 2) "I'm not as bad as other people" (2:1-16. 3) I'm a church member" or "I'm a religious person" (2:17-29).** The Bible says, loved ones, that no one will be exempt from God's judgment of sin. Every person must accept the fact that he or she is sinful and condemned before God and receive God's wonderful gift of salvation. This is a fairly depressing picture Paul is painting that all of us--pagan Gentiles, humanitarians, and religious people--are all condemned by our own actions. The law, which God gave to show the way to live, holds up our evil deeds to public view. Is there any hope for us? "Yes," Paul shouts. The law condemns us, it is true, but the law is not the basis of our hope. God Himself is. He, in His righteousness and wonderful love, offers us forgiveness, hope, mercy, acceptance, purpose, and eternal life. We receive our salvation through our faith in what Jesus Christ did on the cross for us, not by our own deeds or efforts. The first question the religious Jew was asking **"Is there any advantage of being a Jew? Is there any value in the ceremony of circumcision after what Paul had written in Chapter 2?** Paul says absolutely there is. Vs. 2 he argues that the Jews were entrusted with the whole revelation of God (Ex 19-20; Deuteronomy 4:8). 2) The Jews are the race through whom the Messiah came to earth (Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 1:1-17.) 3) They are the beneficiaries of covenants with God Himself (Genesis 17:1-16; Exodus 19:3-6). Yet these

privileges did not make them better than anyone else. These advantages make the Jews that much more responsible to live up to God's requirements.

## **B. Does people's unfaithfulness cancel God's faithfulness? Romans 3:3-4**

Paul knew that Jewish history is replete with their disobedience to the 'words of God'. Paul deals with another question that he suspected would trouble his audience so he continues to use the rhetorical style of diatribe with his imaginary critic. **“What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness?”** To be unfaithful is to refuse to believe, and it is equivalent to rejecting God's Word and, from Paul's perspective, is primarily so when people reject the Gospel. In 11:20 Paul speaks of Jewish people being excluded from the blessings of the gospel, like branches broken off from an olive tree, because of their unbelief. Loved ones, our unbelief is an intentional resistance to believe that God is good, faithful, reliable, loving and near. What is so precious about God our Father, Paul says, is that our unfaithfulness does not mitigate the faithfulness of God. According to Colin Kruze God's faithfulness, despite Israel's lack of faith, will be seen in two ways. First, and this is what Paul stresses in the immediate context, God remains faithful to the terms of His covenant with Israel when He imposes judgment upon Israel for her faithlessness. Second, God will be faithful to His covenant by grafting those 'branches' broken off back in the olive tree of Israel 'if they do not persist in unbelief.' Paul writes in Romans 11:23 **“And if the people of Israel turn from their unbelief, they will be grafted in again, for God has the power to graft them back into the tree.”** Paul knows this is true because God's Word says it, but he also experienced it himself in 1 Timothy 1:12-14: **“I thank Jesus Christ our Lord, who has given me strength to do His work. He considered me trustworthy and appointed me to serve Him, 13 even though I used to blaspheme the name of Christ. In my insolence, I persecuted His people. But God had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief. 14 Oh how generous and gracious our Lord was! He filled me with the faith and love that come from Christ Jesus.”** My unfaithfulness will never cancel God's faithfulness. Even if everyone is a liar the scriptures say God is true.

### **C. If our sinfulness serves a good purpose, isn't it unfair of God to punish us?**

Paul continues his diatribe style when dealing with this question for the benefit of his audience. This imaginary critic, who represents what some people in Paul's day and even today say, calls into question the justice of God in bringing down His wrath upon people for their unrighteousness when their unrighteousness puts into bold relief the righteousness of God. Paul realizes that this question shows contempt for God. That is why he answers in vs. 6 "Of course not! If God were not entirely fair, how would He be qualified to judge the world?" The point is He wouldn't be. But the essential condition of who God is, is that He is the judge of the whole world. Psalm 9:7 says, "**But the Lord reigns forever, executing judgment from His throne.**"

### **D. Is it true the more I sin the better it is? Romans 3:7-8**

Paul will give a further rebuke to these rebellious questions in 6:1 & 6:15, but here Paul says whoever thinks this way deserves to be condemned. Paul demonstrates great boundaries. From his perspective those who distort the truth of the gospel will have to answer to God Himself and serve condemnation for the harm they cause God's people.

### **E. Is it true that the Jews are better than others? Romans 3:9**

Paul emphatically responds the words in vs. 9 "**No, not at all, for we have already shown that all people, whether Jews or Gentiles, are under the power of sin.**"

## **II. Identify how sin affects us as people. Romans 3:10-18**

### **A. Affects our standing before God. Romans 3:10**

Paul quotes Psalm 14:1 "**Only fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, and their actions are evil; not one of them does good!**" Righteousness is a major theme of the book of Romans, appearing in one form

or another more than thirty times. Other terms from the same Greek root are usually translated “justified,” “justification,” or the like. The term righteous is used in its basic sense of being right before God as God created humanity to be. God says none of us are in right standing before Him because of our sin. Our sin has ruined and broken everything. This is exactly why we have such a great need for a Savior. Without Christ you are not in right relationship with God but Jesus came so you could be.

### **B. Affects our minds.** Romans 3:11a

Paul quotes from Psalm 14:1-3. **“No one is truly wise. No one understands.”** The Bible says because our core nature has been corrupted by sin, we don’t understand God’s truth. Paul writes in Ephesians 4:18 **“Their minds are full of darkness; they wander far from the life God gives because they have closed their minds and hardened their hearts against Him.”** Church, ignorance doesn’t cause hardness of hearts because we don’t know God--we don’t love Him, instead heart hardness causes lack of understanding. Our hearts become hard because our self-centeredness leads us to filter out a lot of reality. This is truly a form of denial; we are blind to many truths and our thinking does not compute data as it should.

### **C. Affects our motives.** Romans 3:11b

**“No one seeks God.”** Paul alludes again to Psalm 14:2. As you look at the many religions of the world with millions of zealous adherents, you would think that a great many people are diligently seeking after God. But scripture makes clear, in this passage and in many others, that all religious systems and efforts are, in reality, attempts to escape the true God and to discover or manufacture false gods of one’s own liking. Romans 1:21 states this reality superbly. **“Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn’t worship Him as God or even give Him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused.”** God has given us the absolute assurance that everyone who seeks Him with their hearts will find Him in Jeremiah 29:13.

## D. Affects our wills.

Romans 3:12 **“All have turned away.”** The Greek word is Ekkliino which has the basic meaning of leaning in the wrong direction. In a military context it referred to a soldier’s running the wrong way, in other words, deserting in the midst of battle. Isaiah writes in 53:6 **“All of us like sheep, have strayed away. We have left God’s paths to follow our own. Yet the Lord laid on Him the sins of us all.”** At first blush it might seem inappropriate for Paul to say no one understands, no one is seeking God and all have turned away from God. After all many non-Christians do many good things, using their talents and wealth in ways which are kind and generous and which make the world a better place. But it is important to know what kind of goodness Paul is talking about. His focus is on our relationship with God and whether our good deeds can fix that broken relationship and whether they can establish a righteousness of our own. Paul says the truth is ultimately our good deeds cannot do anything that would earn us or merit salvation. As a matter of fact our good deeds can take us further from God not closer. The Bible sees a truly good deed as being good in action and in motive. For example, if you help a person who needs help across the street, that is a good deed in action; it conforms to God’s will for our Behavior. But why are you helping the person? Is it because you are hoping they will give you some money in gratitude; or because you have seen a friend further down the street who you know will notice and be impressed--then your good work arises from a selfish heart and selfish motives. In 1 Cor. 10:31 the Bible says a good deed in God’s sight is one done for His glory, not our own. I read a story recently that gets to the heart of this point. “Once in a Kingdom long ago, a gardener grew a huge carrot. He decided to give it to his prince because he loved his sovereign. When he gave it, the prince discerned his love and devotion, and the fact that he expected nothing in return. So as the gardener turned to leave, he said: “Here, my son, I want to give you some of my land so that you can produce an even greater crop. It is yours.” The gardener went home rejoicing. A nobleman heard of this incident and thought: “If that is what the prince gives in response to the gift of a carrot, what would he give me if I gave him a fine horse?” So the nobleman came and presented the prince with a fine steed as a gift. But he prince discerned his heart and said: “You expect me to give to you as I did to the gardener. I will not. You are very different. The gardener gave me the carrot. But

you were giving yourself the horse.” In other words, if you know God loves you in Christ, and that there is nothing you can do or need to do but accept His salvation, forgiveness, mercy and acceptance, then you can feed the hungry, visit the sick, and clothe the naked, and all of it will be done as a gift to God. But if you think you are going to get or keep your salvation by doing these good deeds, it is really yourself you are feeding, yourself you are clothing, yourself you are visiting. It is who we are serving in our hearts that matters, not how we are serving with our hands. Without faith in Christ, good deeds are not truly done for God, but for ourselves--and thus are not truly good. This is why, loved ones, any goodness we have becomes sour. If we do good to gain God’s favor, blessing and salvation, and do well, we will be smug, superior, and complacent.

#### **E. Affects our tongues.** Romans 3:13-14

Their talk is foul like the stench of an open grave. We are deceitful, poisonous, bitter and cursing in what we say. The image is that of a grave with rotting bodies in it. Sinful words are signs of decay. We use our tongues to lie to protect our own interest, and to damage the interests of others.

#### **F. Affects our relationships.** Romans 3:15-17

We rush to kill and destruction follows us and there is no peace. This is how sin affects our relationships; we are after each other’s blood--sometimes literally, more often in seeking to push down those who get in our way. Why do we become angry with people? Because they have blocked us from access to an idol--they have compromised our comfort, or prevented a promotion, or made us feel out of control, or are enjoying a relationship we feel we need. When we do not live enjoying God’s approval in the gospel, we do not know peace ourselves, nor can we live in peace with others.”

#### **G. Affects our relationship with God.** Romans 3:18

“**There is no fear of God at all.**” This is a detailed, depressing list. It also contains two particularly surprising claims, and a striking conclusion. Paul claims



that no one seeks God. No one does good. No one fears God. It is both a summary of, and the pointer to the antidote for, our sin.

### III. Lean into the silence.

Vs. 19-20 tell us why works and a performance base type of religion doesn't work. **“Obviously, the law applies to those to whom it was given, for its purpose is to keep people from having excuses and to show that the entire world is guilty before God. 20 For no one can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are.”** Even when Paul was talking to the Gentiles in chapter 1 he was still talking to law-keeping, self-righteous people. This is why Paul has quoted the O.T. Scriptures in his description of the effects of sin in 3:10-18. This is what the “law” says people are like--and Paul has shown that the people whom it is describing are Jews as well as Gentiles. The law applies to those to whom it was given. It applies to everyone who knows and seeks to keep the law, just as much as to those who don't know or don't care about it. What Paul is arguing is that the effect of knowing the law should not be a proud claim that I am a good law-keeper, that I stand right with God on my own merit of keeping the law. It's effect should be...

#### A. A silent mouth is indicative of a spiritual condition.

Romans 3:19 **“The purpose of the law is to keep people silent and from having excuses and show that the entire world is guilty before God.”** None of us have any excuses for our sin. We're all guilty. Timothy Keller writes, **“the law is not a checklist we keep; it is a benchmark we fail.”** “The law simply shows us how sinful we are.”

#### B. Come to God with empty hands, a silent mouth and receive. Romans 3:20

When we read God's law, however loyal, kind, thoughtful, generous or loving we may be, our only response can be: I am a sinner. I have nothing to say to God--no defense to make or offer to make. I am in desperate trouble and need.

