

Jn 8.2-11, Rom 3.1-26

aim: the gospel of faith in Christ shows that God is both just and faithful to his promises

INTRO:

Have you been enjoying Wimbledon this week - drama on Centre Court, as the tennis stars battle for victory. Some games are hard-fought, and when they reach 40-40, you need two points to win. "Advantage!" But when the pressure is on even the finest stars can mis-serve, and a double-fault can lose the point. Wimbledon umpires are models of fairness, patience and restraint, and today's players today seem to accept their decisions, but some of you may remember former stars who challenged the umpire and line-judges. John McEnroe may now be a respected commentator, but in his playing days (1979) he was called Superbrat for his bad-tempered challenges—"you cannot be serious!"

Today we continue our series in Paul's letter to the Romans, a church struggling with ethnic rivalry between Jewish and Gentile believers. Paul wants them to understand the full glory of the gospel, which he claimed back in ch 1.16 reveals the righteousness of God.

"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."

To grasp why the gospel is such good news, we need to understand God's character - that he is righteous by nature and action - both fair and faithful. Paul does this by relentlessly exposing the godlessness and wickedness of all humanity, and we squirm: we may delight in condemning the sins of others, but we do not enjoy the exposure of our own. In particular Paul's argument in chapter 2 has annoyed his Jewish readers, who thought that their ancestry gave them a huge advantage - they thought the umpire was on their side, and in this 3rd chapter, Paul presses home his argument, that no-one has an advantage, that the umpire cries 'fault!' for every player.

Perhaps we need to change our perspective from being spectators on Centre Court at Wimbledon to being defendants in the dock in the Crown Court of heaven. Paul argues that God is a righteous judge- just and faithful, that we-all humanity- stand guilty before him, but that God has wonderfully acted through Christ to declare innocent all who believe and trust in him.

POINT 1: GOD'S RIGHT TO JUDGE vv 1-8

Before the trial begins, there are some legal objections to be cleared up. In these first few verses Paul answers three objections, challenging God's right to sit in judgement. Paul is still conducting a debate with the individual or group from ch 2: the morally upright and rather judgmental Gentile, the Jew proud of his observance of the Law of Moses.

V 1 First objection: are you saying that there is no advantage in having a moral sense, or being a Jew? No value in keeping the Law, which includes the rite of circumcision? v.2 No- says Paul: **Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God.**

Paul has already described how the gentile nations have wickedly suppressed the truth about God, and wandered into gross idolatry and immorality, but the Jews have been given God's own words, faithfully recorded by Moses and carefully preserved for over a thousand years, when he was writing. Paul here clearly holds a high view of the value and trustworthiness of the scriptures. It is amazing that God has preserved them through many trials and persecutions, and done so by entrusting them to his peculiar, chosen people. Moreover those writing preserve his amazing promises to his people. That is an immense privilege, but we shall see that it also carries a responsibility.

Then a second objection quickly follows

Second Objection: v.3 What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness?

Remember that the term 'the Righteousness of God' means both his justice, pure, fair and holy, and his faithfulness, his steadfast love, fulfilling his promise to save. If some, indeed many of God's people have turned out to be faithless, does that mean that God has failed in his promise? No, says Paul, quoting Ps 51, when David admits that God is right to judge him for his adultery with Bathsheba. God can be true, even if everyone else is a liar. It does not follow that God has failed in his faithfulness if he judges sin, as Ps 51 explains, when repentant David has his sins forgiven and is restored to joyful fellowship with God

The third objection is in v5: If our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.)

Paul thinks this is a disgraceful argument, but he has met it before - in numerous debates in synagogues around the Roman world: indeed he may have said it himself when he was still the non-Christian Saul.

If our unrighteous conduct highlights the righteousness of God, if my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness, then God should be grateful that I have added to his glory by being a sinner, and ultimately done good by being

bad! God should be grateful, not angry! It's like a hardened criminal standing before a judge and saying, "You can't sentence me, because it's people like me who keep judges like you in business".

Paul doesn't need to say any more - their condemnation is just.

So the objections are dismissed. God's right to sit in judgement on our case is secure. He is righteous in both senses - both faithful to his promises and just in his judgment. He can judge both Jew and Gentile. He can judge us, and we should not expect any advantage, any favouritism, because we have received the privilege of having or knowing our bible, being baptised, coming to church, taking communion: the question is not what advantages have you had, but have you believed, trusted and obeyed?

POINT 2 WE HAVE NO DEFENCE

So now the trial begins. All humanity, Jew and Gentile, stands in the dock, and in vv 9-20 Paul states the charge and presents the evidence:

v9 We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin."

"Under sin" is a new and strange concept in the letter. What does Paul mean?

It is not just that all of us- both Jew and Gentile -occasionally let ourselves down, but we are persistently sinful. And it is not just a regular habit that we could break if we really tried, but in fact we are 'under sin'- helpless under the power and control of a hostile power, an occupying force. Sin is a cruel master and we are its slaves. Perhaps this is not just a criminal but a civil case, and Sin is claiming rightful ownership of humanity. Sin presents a collection of 7 quotations from the Old Testament, mostly from the book of psalms. This was the hymnbook of the synagogue and the early church, so the words would have been well known, and they set out a cumulative argument.

vv.10-12 Sin's ownership is universal. No-one does what is right, or seeks after God, but all have turned away from him.

vv 13-14 This is evident by the way we speak: our throats and tongues, lips and mouths are full of poison, deceit, cursing and bitterness

vv 15-17 and it shows in the way we live: feet swift to do evil, spread misery, not the way of peace.

Sin calls God's words as evidence against us. "Look at them", says Sin to God: "everything about them - their hearts, their speech, their actions show that they belong to me!"

And Paul states the inevitable verdict that God must surely pass, if he upholds His Law and is Just and holy. vv 19-20

"Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."

Or as he puts it in v 23: "**All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**" God created us in his image and likeness - to reflect his glory to the universe, but we have sinned, and fallen short - not by an inch, a narrow percentage, but by a mile. Sin concludes the case for the prosecution, and there is no case for the defence: every mouth is silenced, the whole world is accountable to God. This is grim news, and I want to pause and consider what this means. It is a grim verdict, but in another light it is a clear diagnosis, and a clear diagnosis is good news, because it enables the doctor to prescribe an effective treatment. In his book on Romans Andrew Ollerton describes the Christian doctrine of Original Sin as 'a dose of realism that cultivates honesty'. Article 9 on Original Sin calls it "The fault and corruption of the Nature of every man, whereby man is very far gone from original righteousness and is of his own nature inclined to evil."

Our culture tries to deny the reality of in and our responsibility. "Sophisticated people prefer to talk in psychological terms about obsessive behaviour, or neurotic patterns, deviance, disorder. and sin has been air-brushed out. "In order to improve the world and ourselves, we just need better education, greater social equality, more therapy and positive thinking, but it doesn't work: simply trying harder, passing harsher laws, blaming society, playing the victim won't cure our fundamental spiritual problem: we are under sin. Ollerton calls it a democratic doctrine. No race or religion can claim the moral high ground. And we shouldn't imagine that things now are worse than ever before- because people have always noticed this, even if they didn't understand it.

"What is happening to our young people? They disobey their parents. They ignore the law, They riot in the street. they are inflamed with wild passions!" Said Plato in the 4th century BC, and every moral commentator ever since.

And when we fall silent, turn our plea to guilty before God, we encounter the most extraordinary phrase in the most astonishing paragraph ever written. BUT NOW.

I began by asking if you enjoyed Wimbledon. Do you also enjoy a good courtroom drama - the moment when under cross-examination the witness confesses the truth, the judge and jury gasp, and the whole case is turned upside down. When Tom Cruise gets Jack Nicholson to confess that he ordered the Code Red in a "Few Good men", when Reese Witherspoon gets the daughter to admit that she shot her father in "Legally Blonde". But in this case God the judge admits a new witness with devastating new evidence. God calls his own son to take the stand.

POINT 3: GOD DECLARES US INNOCENT vv 21-26

At last we reach the crux of the matter, the good news of the gospel, the Cross of Jesus Christ, by which God declares the ungodly to be innocent, and proves himself to be just. And this is not God using some clever legal loophole like a fancy lawyer - like Portia against Shylock, in "Merchant of Venice" saying, 'you can have your pound of flesh, but not a drop of blood'. God does not evade justice, he fulfils it, entirely at his own cost, shedding his own blood. This is the most profound mystery, and Paul uses a series of images to help us understand it. I call them images, but they are not illusions: they are the best means we have of seeing and feeling what has happened at the cross.

First Paul speaks v24 of **"The redemption that came by Christ Jesus."**

Redemption is a commercial term. If Sin has a legal claim to own all sinners, then Christ has paid the price to buy us back. Sin may shout "Objection!" but the price has been paid. Christ came to give his life as a ransom for many. He is the Passover Lamb, by which God's people are redeemed from their spiritual slavery, just as the Israelites were rescued from the power of Pharaoh and brought to freedom.

But is Sin a real entity, with whom God must strike a deal and give his Son? So Paul offers another image taken from the Jewish Temple. v 25

God presented him-Jesus- as **a sacrifice of atonement**, through faith in his blood. In the Jewish Temple, still standing, priests performed daily sacrifices for the worshippers. They shed the blood of innocent animals - sheep, goats, bulls - to take away certain, specified sins of the people. God would accept the animal's blood as a substitute for their own. The same sacrificial principle could be found in all pagan rites; you could probably assuage the anger and wrath of the gods by offering them a pleasing sacrifice, but pagans had no confidence that the gods would accept their offering, no matter how extravagant the sacrifice. But now, says Paul, God himself presents Jesus as the sacrifice which atones, puts us right, at one with God. It is not that a loving Jesus manages to calm down a Father angry at us sinners: as Luther puts it, "God loved us as he hated us". He takes the initiative, he suffers the pain and he pays the cost.

And the reason says Paul twice in v 25- 26 was **"to demonstrate his justice"**. If God simply showed his faithfulness to his promises and forgave his people, he would be unjust to ignore sin.

If God simply showed his justice to punish sinners, and failed to save his people, he would be unfaithful to his promises.

But now God demonstrates his justice, "so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus."

It is the most profound mystery why God should become one of us in order to die for us, but this is how we know that God loves us. He does not abandon us to sin, and he does not sweep sin under the carpet and say it doesn't matter. He is both just and faithful - he is righteous.

God has at last shown how he could patiently overlook the sins of previous generations (for the blood shed by animals did not take away sins: it only pointed to the perfect sacrifice to be offered by Christ)

God declares that convicted sinners are now legally innocent.

in v 20 Paul said "No-one will be declared righteous by observing the law".

The Law only has power to expose our sin.

But Now Paul says v. 24 we are justified freely by his grace.

It can be confusing that English translations use these two terms - 'declared righteous' and 'justified' to translate the same Greek word- dikaiouthentes". We are not merely dismissed from the dock, but restored to the palace - as God welcomes us back into his family - enjoying grace, mercy and peace. Our legal status has changed, and our relationship with God is restored, though our character still needs reform in his Spirit (we are still tempted by sin)

And we receive this gracious gift not by our feeble efforts and failure to observe the law but by putting our faith in Jesus. Is this faith a kind of work, that earns God's praise? Not at all.

I have compared studying Romans to climbing a mountain. But as we progressed through ch 1-3, it has felt as if we have been going downhill, not up. By ch 3.20 we stand helpless and silent before a sheer rock face, with no means of climbing up. If faith was a good work, it would be like a rope lowered to us from above: climb the rope to get past the cliff. But we don't have the strength to climb. So instead Christ comes down and ties the rope around us, and by his strength he pulls us up. He doesn't need our faith to pull us up- we may be racked with doubts that he can manage. He just needs our consent to let him tie the rope around us.

CONCLUSION So today let us set aside all pride and self-righteousness:

Nothing in my hands I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling;

Naked, come to Thee for dress, Helpless, look to Thee for grace:

Foul, I to the fountain fly, Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

and rejoice in the truth of today's collect:

Almighty God, you have broken the tyranny of sin

and have sent the Spirit of your Son into our hearts

whereby we call you Father:

give us grace to dedicate our freedom to your service,

that we and all creation may be brought

to the glorious liberty of the children of God; through Jesus Christ our Lord

-2837 words

Icebreaker: Have you ever experienced unfair refereeing or umpiring? Would you expect preferential treatment if you had some connection/relationship with the umpire?

Recap Rom 1-2. What does Paul claim that the gospel reveals (1.16-17)? Where does it leave godless and wicked people (1.20)? Where does it leave moral and religious people (2:1-5)?

What is the 'righteousness of God'?

How can God be both just and faithful in steadfast love? (Ps 98 v 2 & 9)

Read Rom 3.1-8 together: get one person to read vv 1,3,5, and another to read vv 2,4,6-8.

Paul anticipates some heated objections to his presentation of the gospel (and frequently experienced them on his missionary journeys - (see Acts 13.45, 14.2, 15.5, 17.5).

Consider how Paul answers each objection, and how the objection applies to Christians.

Objection #1: what advantage is there in being a Jew, if even circumcision counts for nothing?(2.25-28) How does this apply to Christians - what is the value of reading bible, being baptised, going to church?

Objection #2: does the failure of Jews to believe and trust in God mean that God has also failed?

Objection #3:can God judge us fairly if our sin enables him to display his justice?

Read vv 9-20. Paul quotes 7 'proof-texts', (Eccl 7.20, Ps 53.1-13, Ps 5.9, Ps 140.3, Ps 10.7, Isa 59.7). How would these texts have been known to the Christians in Rome?

What do they prove about humanity? Where do they leave us? (v19)

What does the Law achieve? What can it never accomplish? (vv 19-22)

Read vv 21-28

What does it mean to say that we 'fall short of the glory of God'? (v23) cf Gen 1.26, Ps 8.5, Jn 1.14)

What does the death of Jesus on the cross achieve for us? (vv 24-25a, Rom 4.5)

What does the death of Jesus on the cross show us about God? (vv25b-26, Rom 5.8)

Application:

In the light of Paul's argument, what do we think about the 'Righteousness of God'?

How do we see ourselves in comparison with those more or less religious/moral than ourselves?

MEMORY VERSE:There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (Romans 3.22-24)