



**LIVING WORD
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

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The Faithfulness of God

Romans 3:1-8

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This morning we'll be looking at Romans 3:1-8 and as I thought about this passage over the last week I kept thinking of a story I watched on TV. It involved a mailman. Not just any mailman. This mailman was notoriously surly and lazy and because he was surly and lazy he was repeatedly passed over for promotions. But being passed over only made this man more surly and more lazy. He thought that after all the years he'd put in working for the post office, he should have an easier job that paid more money and since he didn't have it, he started taking off early a few days a week. He'd take home the mail that he hadn't delivered and he'd open the envelopes and package looking for cash and other things of value that he could take to make up for not being paid what he thought he was worth. Of course, when letters and packages didn't arrive, people would file complaints. It took a few years, but eventually the post office tracked the missing mail to this man, the police raided his house and found his basement full of undelivered mail, and the man was arrested. But the really outrageous thing was the indignation the man showed in court. He denied nothing. But he stood in front of the judge and asserted that *he* was the aggrieved party. He insisted over and over that he'd only taken what rightly belonged to him in compensation. Even as the guilty verdict was announced and he was taken off to jail he was shouting that he'd done nothing wrong and that it was the post office, the government, and the judge himself who should have been going to jail for the wrongs done to him.

The story didn't get into this man's past, but one would assume that at some point he understood what it meant to be a mailman. People entrust letters and packages to the safe-keeping of the post office and the post office and its employees then deliver those letter and packages to the people to whom they're supposed to go. But somewhere along the line this man lost sight of that. In his resentment, he started feeling entitled and he forgot his trust. Now, if we can understand that, we can understand what Paul's now going to get at in the first part of Romans 3. In Romans 2 we've been following along as Paul engages an imaginary Jew in an argument. The further the argument goes the more we realise that Paul the Apostle is sort of arguing with Saul of Tarsus—his own self before he met Jesus—and that his old self represents unbelieving Israel. He's been talking about judgement—which the Jews looked forward to coming on everyone else in the world, but not themselves, because they were God's people. They had been given his law. They were the circumcised, which was the outward sign of God's covenant. They assumed—really, the *presumed*—that because of this, when God came to judge the nations for their sins, he'd sort of being doing it on half of his people Israel. They had, after all, been on the receiving end of so many of the nations, the Gentiles' sins. But Paul's been stressing that, in fact, no, Israel would be judged just as the Gentiles would be. She's actually more guilty, if that's possible, because she has God's law and she hasn't lived up to it. And so, if God is to be just, it's not a matter of judging the nations for their rebellion and for all the awful things they've done to Israel. No, if God is just, he actually has to judge Israel *first*, then he can go on to judge the nations.

But Paul went even further, as we saw at the end of Chapter 2 last Sunday. Circumcision—again, the outward sign of the Jew—he said, is worthless if you fail to keep the law. He wrote that the person who is a *real* Jew isn't necessarily one who bears the outward

signs, but whose *heart* has been circumcised. Real circumcision he said, is a matter of the heart. As I said last week, those were “fightin’ words” and Paul now anticipates the next question his old self might ask him. Look at verse 1:

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?

What was the point? If God can create a new community of Jews apart from circumcision, why did God call Israel in the first place? Why did God bother to give her his law? Why did he make such a big deal out of circumcision? Was it good for anything after all? And Paul answers in verse 2:

Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.

Yes, in fact, circumcision was worth something. And not just “something”, but it was worth “much”. Paul then goes on to respond by saying, “First of all...” The ESV says, “to begin with...”, but in Greek it's *proton*, literally “first”. And that's interesting, because Paul doesn't give a “second” here. In fact, it will take Paul until Chapter 9 to come back to this question and expand on it. This is part of the difficulty of understanding Romans, particularly these early chapters. Paul's starting out with rough sketches and outlines. He'll come back to them later and fill in the details. Romans is like a symphony. Here at the beginning, Paul gives us musical hints at the big themes that will come later. Here it's just a few quiet notes from a single violin, but later on we'll hear the same theme played at length by the whole symphony.

So, first, to begin with, God's calling of Israel, his gift of the law and circumcision, his covenant was worth something. It was worth much and it really does mean something to be a

Jew because it was to them that the oracles of God were entrusted.

“Oracles” is a funny word for Paul to use. In fact, this is the only time he uses it. Paul usually talks about the words of God or the promises of God. But the word “oracle” brought certain images to mind, especially for people with a pagan background, like many of the Roman Christians. Oracles were associated with the divinely inspired words of prophets—who were often called “oracles” themselves—but the pagan prophets were known for the mysteriousness of their oracles. They were often written down and passed on from one generation to the next awaiting a key to unlock their hidden meaning. And that’s what happened with Israel. God entrusted to her his word, his law, the revelations given through his prophets. It’s not that it was all a bunch of indecipherable gibberish. The pagan oracles were known for prophecies that were so vague anyone could find some way to apply them to themselves or to present circumstances. God’s law isn’t like that. God’s law was clear. But it was also clear that it was pointing to a future day on which it would be fulfilled. And so Israel was entrusted with God’s Word, preserving his oracles, until the day would come when Jesus himself would bring the key and unlock the mysteries that were there. Israel was entrusted with this. That’s what it meant for her to be the light of the world. God gave her his law, but in the law she was holding something in trust for the entire world.

But Israel failed. She was like the mailman who saw the mail not as something entrusted to him, not as something to be delivered, but as something given to him for his benefit alone. Imagine the mailman keeping all the mail to himself and then sneering at the people on his route who never got any letter or packages, as if they were a bunch of poor losers loved by no one. We’d say, “You

idiot! They are loved. People do send them letters and gifts, but they’re not getting them because you’ve kept them for yourself!” That’s what’s happened. Israel’s put on her Canada Post uniform and struts around town feeling self-important, but she’s not actually delivering any mail. This is essentially Paul’s accusation. This was him before he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. He and his people had been faithless. And as he wrote in Chapter 2, the nations who were supposed to know God through her are now blaspheming God because of her. She struts around town looking self-important in her uniform. “Look at me! I work for the post office.” But people are starting to bad-mouth the post office. “What kind of a post office never handles any mail?” It’s not just that the nations haven’t received God’s message. Because of Israel’s failure they’ve actually deduced the *wrong* message. God deserves glory and honour and the nations are, instead, mocking him. So what now? Paul goes on in verse 3:

What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?

This is the first time in Romans that Paul uses this word “faith”. We tend to think of “faith” in terms of the faith we put in Jesus for forgiveness and for life, but it’s really important to understand that at this point Paul’s thinking of faith in the sense of *trustworthiness*. If someone’s faithful, then they’re worthy of our trust. If they’re unfaithful, it’s because they’ve proved that they’re unreliable and not worthy of our trust. So Israel’s demonstrated that she can’t be trusted as God’s messenger. She was entrusted with his oracles for the sake of the world, but she kept them to herself. That’s not to say that there weren’t some faithful Jews who did do what they were supposed to do. Paul’s point is that the nation as a whole has failed. But what does that say about the God who entrusted his oracles to

Israel? Is *he* faithful? Is *he* trustworthy? Does he know what he’s doing? Because, someone might say as they look at Israel’s failure, that God doesn’t seem to know how to pick ‘em. God bet on the wrong horse. Maybe he should have given his law to the Moabites or the Philistines. Maybe he should have waited and given it to the Romans...or really waited and given it to the Canadians or the Americans—to someone who would have been more faithful than Israel. But this is just the point Paul’s working towards: it wouldn’t have mattered. Israel failed because she’s got the same sin problem as everyone else. As he writes later in Chapter 3, “*all* have sinned”. So it’s not a matter of God having bet on the wrong horse or picked the wrong people. In verse 4 Paul writes:

By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, “That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.”

Is God unworthy of our trust? By no means, Paul says. Yes, his covenant with Israel envisioned her being faithful, but Israel’s unfaithfulness does not undermine God’s faithfulness. What it does is bring the real issue, the real question into focus: What is God going to do now? And what Paul will go on to explain is that despite Israel’s unfaithfulness, God’s plans have *not* changed. Israel has been unfaithful, so the solution to God’s plans is a faithful Israelite and God will provide that faithful Israelite himself. As I said a week or two ago, some people characterize the situation as if God were driving to town and his car broke down so he abandoned the car in the ditch and walked the rest of the way. But that’s not what happened. Instead of abandoning the car, God got the car running again with his own power.

Paul says, even if everyone were a liar—even if everyone were faithless and untrustworthy—and that’s exactly the conclusion Paul’s headed towards—God will always be true, God will always be faithful and trustworthy.

Paul quotes Psalm 51:4. This is the Psalm that David wrote after his sin with Bathsheba was exposed. Remember the story: David saw Bathsheba bathing on her roof. (She was most likely bathing on her roof in the hopes he would take notice!) He called her to the palace and they had an affair. But then she got pregnant. She was married to one of his commanders who was away at war. David called him to Jerusalem under the guise of asking him for a report. What he really hoped was that Uriah would go home and sleep with his wife. But Uriah wouldn’t do that while his men were encamped against the enemy. So David instructed his men to charge into battle with Uriah and then abandon him. It was murder, but David was able to marry Bathsheba and hide their sin. Until, that is, the Lord revealed it to Nathan the prophet. Nathan confronted David and David broke down before God, confessing his sin. Paul’s point in quoting from the psalm is to make the same point that David made: God is just. When, as Judge, he condemns sin, his verdict is always just and righteous.

It’s also hard to imagine that Paul didn’t have the rest of Psalm 51 in mind. David didn’t just confess his sin to God. He also knew the solution to his problem and pleaded with God for a new heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit. We all know the words because we sing them regularly: “Create in me a clean heart, O God. And renew a right spirit within me”. Paul knew that *this* was the solution to Israel’s problem. We all have broken and filthy hearts. We’re all unfaithful. But God will not abandon us. He’s

known our problem all along and all along he’s had a solution. Our faithlessness will only serve to highlight God’s faithfulness on that day when he pours out his Spirit and gives his people new hearts.

And now, first in verses 5 and 6 and then in verses 7 and 8 Paul anticipates more objections to his line of reasoning. Both objections make the same basic point: If our sin highlights God’s righteousness, what business does God have condemning us. First, verses 5 and 6:

But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world?

Here’s the problem Paul has in mind. If God is in the right and we human beings are in the wrong, it could sound as if we and God—or Israel and God—are opposing parties in a lawsuit. This was the wrong perspective of Job and his friends. Job imagined himself in a lawsuit with God and, since he’d done nothing wrong, he insisted that he ought to win the case. God was the one in the wrong for afflicting a righteous man. His friends were imagining the same scene, although they were trying to correct Job and were arguing that since God is just, it must have been Job who was in the wrong—maybe he just forgot his sin. How often do we do the same sort of thing ourselves? Bad things happen and we put God in the dock and bring charges against him. What have I done wrong? Why are you letting bad things happen to me? But the point of the book of Job, which we see as God finally speaks in the end, is that *both* Job and his friends were wrong. God is *not* the plaintiff or the defendant. God is the sovereign Judge who judges justly. Paul makes the same point here. God is the *Judge*. God is *always* the Judge.

And God is a *righteous* and *just* Judge. If the judgement seems unjust, it may well be because we’ve refused to acknowledge God’s truth. If God’s judgement seems unjust, as it did to the Jews, it may well be because we’ve forgotten our calling—like the mailman who came to see himself as entitled to keep the very thing that had been entrusted to him for others. Or it may be, as Job finally admitted, that such things are beyond our understanding and that we simply need to cover our mouths, stop speaking, and trust in the God who has proved by showing over and over that he always judges justly.

In a sense that’s where Paul goes with the second accusation. It gets at the same point from a different angle. Look at verses 7 and 8:

But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

If Israel’s causing God to be blasphemed amongst the nations ultimately causes God to shine all the more brightly, why should God object? If Israel’s faithlessness ultimately enhances God’s glory by giving him an opportunity to show his own faithfulness, well, shouldn’t God be pleased? Why, the Israelite asks, should I be condemned as a “sinner”? Paul has been stressing that the same judgement that the pagan Gentiles deserve will also justly fall on Israel and that’s the sense of “sinner” here. In the Jewish mind a “sinner” was one of those unclean, pagan, lawless, Gentiles. Think of the accusation levelled at Jesus that he ate with tax collectors and “sinners”. But that’s just it. Israel has the same sin problem as everyone else. But, this person asks, if my sin causes God’s truth to abound, why is he punishing me? In fact, if sin gives God the opportunity

to reveal his glory, well, maybe we should sin all the more. Apparently, this was a charge that had been brought against Paul before and we get the sense that he's exasperated by it. He doesn't even give a response—although he'll come back to this later. Paul's angry at this point and you can almost picture him banging his fist on the table because this accusation is so outrageous. "Absolutely not! And if you really think this way, if your thinking is this twisted, then you truly deserve God's just judgement!"

That's what this is about, but why did Paul feel the need to make these points about Israel? It may seem like he's making a long and overly complicated argument about something that doesn't really matter. But that's just it. It *does* matter. We need to go back to Chapter 1 and to verse 17, where Paul wrote that in the gospel—in the announcement that this Jesus, who was crucified and rose from the dead, is the world's true Lord—this gospel announcement *reveals the righteousness of God*. And as Paul has been arguing ever since then, when he talks about God's righteousness, what he means is God's faithfulness to his covenant promises. God is righteous because he does what he says he will do. God made a promise to Israel. There were plenty of Gentile Christians in Rome just as there are plenty of Gentile Christians today who couldn't care a fig that God made promises to Abraham and to Israel and that's just what Paul is concerned about here. Already in Rome this attitude was creating problems between Jewish and Gentile believers and could easily damage the witness of the Church to unbelieving Jews—and we've seen that it really has damaged our witness. But, more importantly, if God has not been faithful to his promises to Israel, it knocks the foundation right out from under the gospel itself.

It's easy to forget, and we often do forget, that Jesus came to fulfil God's

promises to his people. We often talk about the gospel as if Jesus could have been come at any time and to any place—as if the whole history of Israel in the Old Testament hardly matters—but Paul stresses that it does matter. In fact, it's everything. Without it the Gospel falls apart. As it seems like I keep saying, we're getting ahead of Paul at this point, but the point Paul is building towards is that in Jesus the Messiah, God has been faithful to his promises. God did not abandon his people because they were faithless. No, because God is faithful, he sent his own Son to be Israel's representative and to faithfully fulfil her mission. *Jesus the Messiah is the messenger who finally delivered the message*. And in Jesus we see God's righteousness revealed. In Jesus we see that God is faithful to his promises. Brothers and Sisters, because God has revealed his righteousness in Jesus, we have every reason to trust him. It also means that, like Paul, we can proclaim the good news about Jesus, about his death and resurrection, and about his lordship with confidence. We have no reason to be ashamed. This message that Jesus has given to us is the power of God for salvation—it and nothing else.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, we give you glory this morning because of your righteousness, because you are faithful to your promises. We give you glory because you have proved yourself to be a just judge. Forgive us for our unfaithfulness. Forgive us for our presumption. Forgive us for our failure—sometimes even our refusal—to trust you. Thank you for the Scriptures and for the story of your faithfulness that they give us so that we can know you are worthy of our trust. Thank you for your Son, who came to fulfil your promises and thank you for your Spirit, whom he gave to transform our hard and rebellious hearts. Teach us to trust you, Father. Remind us of the need to steep ourselves in your Word, that we might better know you and know your

faithfulness. Fill us with your Spirit that our hearts and minds might be renewed more and more each day. And as we go from here this morning, fill us with your grace and with your light and keep us faithful to the task you have given, to be your messengers to the world around us. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.