

**Romans (12):
The advantage of having been Jewish
(Rom. 3:1ff)**

Introduction:

Let us turn to read Romans 3:1-8.

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? ²Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. ³What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? ⁴By no means! Let God be true though everyone were a liar, as it is written,

“That You may be justified in your words,
And prevail when You are judged.”

⁵But 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.) ⁶By no means! For then how could God judge the world? ⁷But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to His glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? ⁸And why not do evil that good may come?--as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

So that we may understand the context of this passage, let us summarize what we addressed last Lord’s Day. Paul set forth...

A. The Jewish failure to glorify God (2:17-24)

He first listed...

1. The blessings and privileges of being a Jew (2:17f).

Paul cited **four advantages** that had historically belonged to the Jew. *First, is the designation “Jew” is itself a privilege.*¹ *Second*, Paul described the Jew as one that did “*rely on the law*” (v. 1b). *Third*, the Jew had the privilege and blessing to “*boast in God*.” He was proud of his relationship with God. It was the single greatest delight and purpose in life. The *fourth* advantage of the Jew was that he, through the revelation that God had given Him, could “*know His will and approve what is excellent, because you are instructed from the law*” (v.18). Paul then described...

2. The ministry the Jew had towards the Gentile (2:19, 20)

The Jews knew that they had a calling of God to represent Him and bring the blessing of knowing God to the Gentile world. They were to represent God as a kingdom of priests before all the earth. The

¹ Paul uses the word “Jew” in this passage and so I am using it. However, I was told years ago by a friend who was a missionary to the Jewish people in Israel. He told me that Jewish people themselves did not like Gentiles to refer to a Jewish man as a “Jew.” It was perceived as derogatory by them. My friend said it was “softer” to them and not offensive to them to refer to them as simply “Jewish.” I have tried to follow this pattern through the years lest I unwittingly cause offense to Jewish acquaintances.

responsibility of the Jew was to provide instruction for the world, communicating God's law that He had entrusted to them. The Jews were to be the mouthpiece of God, performing a prophetic ministry to the world, making known the will of God to all people everywhere. Paul was arguing, however, that the Jews had utterly failed in their noble calling. But then Paul stated...

3. The failure of the Jew in fulfilling his responsibility to God through his failed ministry to the Gentiles (2:21-24)

Israel failed the Gentiles, for while they taught the Gentiles keep God's laws, they themselves broke God's laws. The result was that instead of the Gentiles glorifying God through their witness, the Gentiles were blaspheming God. The apostle then set forth...

B. The conditional value of circumcision (2:25-29)

Paul declared in **verse 25** that circumcision only has value for the one who obeys the law. A Jewish lawbreaker renders his circumcision as though it were uncircumcision; in other words, it rendered him outside of God's covenant. He was no different than an uncircumcised Gentile.

But then Paul declared in **verse 26** that the Gentile who keeps the law will be regarded as a true Jew, a covenant member of God's people. *"So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision?"* (2:26). The rhetorical question implies the answer, "Yes, he will."

Paul went on to explain that the Gentile who keeps the law would sit in judgment of the Jew who fails to keep the law. As **verse 27** declares: *"Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law."*

Paul's explanation of why this would be the case is in **verse 28** and **29**:

"For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God."

Here the Holy Spirit teaches us through the pen of the apostle Paul that natural birth or physical circumcision is not what determines the identification of a true Jew, one who is in covenant relationship with God. It is according to God's grace and a work of the Holy Spirit, not a matter of physical descent or of the physical rite of circumcision. Being born Jewish does not bring one into a right relationship with God. Rather, one becomes a true Jew, a true member of the covenant community, by God performing a spiritual circumcision of his heart, that is, the new birth, or regeneration.

I. Meaning of our text

This brings us to our text in **Romans 3:1-8**. Paul used the formal rhetorical device of what is called "the diatribe." Paul has an imaginary objector posing a question which he then answers. The objection would be the kind of response a Jew, who was well schooled in the Mosaic law, would have made to Paul's teaching in Romans 2. Paul's assertions of Romans 2 were a "sustained attack on the adequacy of the Mosaic covenant since Jews failed to keep the Mosaic law."² The "objector" asks the question, essentially, "What advantage does the Jew have respecting salvation if what you have said is true?"

One would expect Paul's answer to be, "There is no advantage with respect to salvation for the Jew." But that is not how Paul answers the question. When we consider what Paul had just said with respect to the true covenant people of God, that to become a member of God's covenant community through grace alone, it is not according to one's race, the question justly follows: *"Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?"* (Rom. 3:1). What difference does it make, therefore, being a Jew or a Gentile?

² Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (Baker Academic, 1998), p. 147.

Paul argues that even though being a Jew does not cause one to be in a saving relationship with God, having been born into the Jewish community had great advantages with respect to salvation over being a Gentile. **Verse 2a** reads that the Jews were advantaged over the Gentiles, “much in every way.”

But Paul does not list the ways in which the Jews were advantaged over the Gentiles, other than identifying their greatest advantage.

We should expect the apostle to specify several of the respects in which the advantage and profit of which he speaks actually obtained. He does this later in the epistle when he says that to Israel pertained “the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises” (Rom. 9:4). And we might all the more expect this when he begins by saying, “first of all”; we would naturally look for a second and a third. But this is not what we find. He gives us what is first and is content with that.³

We read in **verse 2b**, “*To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.*” God had given the Jews the advantage of possessing the written Scriptures, what we call our Old Testament. In the Holy Scriptures the knowledge of God and His salvation had been imparted to the Jewish people. What is being implied by this, however, is that *these Holy Scriptures contained God’s promises of His purpose to save Israel*. Paul will later in chapters 9, 10, and 11 set forth more fully God’s intention and the manner of the realization of God’s purposes with Israel.

With Paul’s reference to “the oracles of God”, I thought that it would be helpful to pause and address the matter of the Old Testament as Holy Scripture.

Aside: The Old Testament as Holy Scripture

Paul describes the Scriptures by the expression “the oracles”, which is the translation of the Greek word, **τὰ λόγια** (ta logia). This Greek word is similar to the Greek word, **λόγοι** (logoi), which is translated, “words.”⁴ By the use of the word, “oracles”, Paul was stating the Jewish belief, as well as the Christian belief, that God had inspired the Holy Scriptures in *the very words that are recorded*. This is what we mean when we say we believe in the verbal inspiration of the Holy Scriptures.

The Jews had the words of God spoken and then recorded for them. God had revealed Himself personally and clearly, communicating His will to His people. God Himself declared the privilege that He had given the Jews for having revealed His Word to the Jews. We read in **Deuteronomy 4:5-8**.

See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. ⁶Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ ⁷For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? ⁸And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?

Interestingly, the Jewish people even in the days of our Lord’s earthly ministry were not in full agreement of what constituted the Holy Scriptures. The Jewish religious order of the **Sadducees**, who were most of the Jewish religious leaders of the nation, who lived in and near Jerusalem, accepted only the five books of Moses, Genesis through Deuteronomy, as authoritative Scripture. The **Pharisees**, a group of tens of thousands devoted men, believed the Scriptures to contain three collections of books, which is still retained

³ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1 (Eerdmans, 1959), p. 92.

⁴ The difference between these two forms is that the word, **τὰ λόγια**, is neuter in gender, whereas **λόγοι** is masculine in gender.

in the Hebrew Bible. Their view was held by most of the Jewish people in synagogues throughout Israel as well as throughout the Roman Empire.

The Hebrew Scriptures came to be recognized as containing **24 books** organized in **three divisions**. These were...

1. the **Law** – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy,
2. the **Prophets** --Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, which were called the Former Prophets, and Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve (Hosea through Malachi), which were called the Latter Prophets.
3. the **Writings** (all the rest, which includes the Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah).

In Luke 24 the risen Lord Jesus spoke of the Holy Scriptures to His apostles. There He confirmed the three-fold division of the Scriptures, the same belief of the Pharisees and the majority of the Jewish people.

⁴⁴Then He said to them, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in *the Law of Moses* and *the Prophets* and *the Psalms* concerning Me.” ⁴⁵And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. (Luke 24:44f)

Here, the word “Psalms,” is understood to be a reference to the third division and collection of books--“The Writings.”

This three-fold division of the Hebrew Scriptures reflects the historic development of the *canon* of Old Testament Scripture. The word “canon”, which is not spelled with two n’s as cannon for an artillery gun, is the transliteration of a Greek word [κανόν (kanon)], meaning “rule” (Gal. 6:16). The word was derived from an old Babylonian term for a “reed” or “papyrus rod”, which was used as a measuring stick, standard, or norm. When we speak of the Bible as our “canon”, we are saying God has made it the authoritative standard by which our faith and lives are governed.

The term, “**canonization**”, describes the process by which books came to be included in our canon--our Bible. The Bible is a collection of books that were written over some 1500 years. These written books were gradually regarded as canonical. When we speak of the books of the Bible in terms of their canonization, we are describing the historic recognition that they are God’s written Word. And so, canonization does not speak of when the books were written, but when the books came to be recognized as God’s authoritative written Word, the Holy Scriptures. Again, the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible (the same as our Old Testament) reflect the historic canonization process. Historically, Israel first recognized “the Torah”, or the first five books that were written by Moses, as the written Word of God. Centuries later, the entire collection of “the Prophets” was also included in the Jewish canon. Last of all, sometime after the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon, “the Writings” were acknowledged by the Jews to also be the inspired written Word of God.

The organization of the Hebrew Bible differs from other Bibles. The Protestant Old Testament contains 39 books. The Greek Orthodox Old Testament has 45 books. The Roman Catholic Old Testament has 46 books. The Hebrew Scriptures (“Old Testament”) contains 24 books.

In content, however, our Protestant Old Testament does not differ from the Hebrew Old Testament, but it does differ in order and organization. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the 12 Minor Prophets are counted as one book, “The Book of the 12.” Some books are two books in our English Old Testament which are combined to form one single book in the Hebrew canon: Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah. However, *the content of the Hebrew Scriptures 24 books is identical with the 39 books of the Protestant Old Testament.*

Why do we hold to our 39 books of the Old Testament and only 39? Why do we reject the teaching of the Roman Catholics and the Eastern Orthodox traditions, which add the books of the Apocrypha to the canon? One of the major reasons is due to what Jesus said in **verse 44** and **45**.

⁴⁴Then He said to them, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.” ⁴⁵And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.

Here, the Lord Jesus identifies the Scriptures as containing this three-fold division, the Law, the Prophets, the Psalms (Writings). Furthermore, the LXX which the early church saw as the Old Testament, did not include the books of the Apocrypha.

Why does our English Old Testament differ in order and number of books from the Hebrew Scriptures? The early Christians followed the pattern of the Septuagint (LXX), the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The translators of the LXX changed the order out of a concern for chronology, subject matter, and reputed authorship. They also divided the larger books into two books and broke up the Twelve into twelve individual minor prophet books.

I might say a brief word about **the Apocrypha**. This is what the collection of additional books in the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Bibles that are not in our Protestant Bibles.⁵ The word “apocrypha” means “things that are hidden.” They are of ancient origin, having been written before the first century, probably before the 2nd century B.C. None of the books of the Apocrypha are in the Hebrew Bible. Interestingly, all of the books of the Apocrypha except for 2 Esdras were in the Septuagint (LXX). Some of the early church fathers quoted them as Scripture; of course, they were wrong to do so. Toward the end of the 4th century AD when Jerome translated the Bible into Latin, the common language of the people of the day, which became known as the Latin Vulgate, he included the Apocrypha in a separate section. But he did not view these apocryphal books as Scripture. I found this exchange on a Roman Catholic website:

Question: St Jerome was persuaded, against his original inclination, to include the deuterocanonicals (i.e. the apocrypha) in his Vulgate edition of the Scriptures. What are your comments?

Answer: True, yet he classed the Apocrypha in a separated category. He differentiated between the canonical books and ecclesiastical books, which he did not recognize as authoritative Scripture. This is admitted by the modern Catholic Church.⁶

Actually Jerome wrote that the apocryphal books were not to be regarded as Scripture. In all the future printings of the Vulgate, the Apocrypha was included, but commonly Jerome’s comments that they were not to be regarded as Scripture were not included, leaving the impression that he translated the Apocrypha as though he regarded them as Scripture.

The Roman Catholic Church did not officially declare the Apocrypha to be inspired books of Holy Scripture until **The Council of Trent** (1563). Rome then officially declared the Apocrypha as deuterocanonical, in other words, “a second canon.” They are regarded as inspired and authoritative as all the other books of the Bible.

⁵ The Apocrypha contains different kinds of literature, including epistolary, didactic, historical, novelistic, devotional and apocalyptic books. The names of the books are these: The Roman Catholic Apocrypha include 1 & 2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, Additions to Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, or Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach, Baruch, Letter of Jeremiah, Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Men, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, Prayer of Manasseh, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees. In addition to these books listed the Eastern Orthodox Church recognizes 3 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees, and Psalm 151.

⁶ See <http://www.justforcatholics.org/a108.htm>

A serious warning is given in Scripture about changing the content of the Word of God, either adding to it or taking away from it. In the closing words of the last book of the Bible, the Revelation, we read these words:

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. (Rev 22:18f)

Returning to Romans 3:1 and 2, Paul had reasoned, “What difference does it make touching on salvation, therefore, being a Jew or a Gentile?” Paul argued that even though being a Jew does not itself result in having a saving relationship with God, nevertheless, having been born into the Jewish community had great advantages over being a Gentile. **Verse 2a** reads that the Jews were advantaged over the Gentiles, “much in every way.” The advantage of which he was speaking is the blessings and privileges that God had given to the Jews respecting their salvation through a covenant relationship with Him that the Gentiles never possessed.

But Paul does not list the ways in which the Jews were advantaged over the Gentiles, other than identifying their greatest advantage. We read in **verse 2b**, “*To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.*” Paul used a passive verb to describe their privilege, “The Jews were entrusted with”, which implies what Paul had stated overtly earlier, it was God who had given them the Scriptures for the purpose of them teaching the Gentiles God’s Word. The word “entrusted” speaks of a trust, a responsibility, which God had given the Jews.

We next read in **verses 3 and 4**, “*What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? ⁴By no means!*” What did Paul mean when he described the Jew as “unfaithful”? The Jews had been unfaithful to God in several ways. **First**, Paul had earlier declared that the Jews had been unfaithful to their trust by God to a world-wide mission. Instead of leading the Gentiles to glorify God through their instruction, the Jews had led the Gentiles to blaspheme God. But more is suggested regarding the Jew’s unfaithfulness. **Second**, Paul had accused the Jews of failing to keep the Mosaic covenant with God in that they had broke God’s law. And **thirdly**, Paul was accusing the Jews of failing to believe on Jesus as their promised Messiah, to which the law of Moses had been directing them.

Well then, should the failure of the Jews and there resultant condemnation rather than salvation lead one to conclude that God had been and would be unfaithful to them? Certainly not! In other words, what is intimated here by Paul is that God will save Israel in spite of their unfaithfulness to His law. Again, much later in the epistle, in Romans 9, 10, and 11, Paul will set before his readers how this will come to pass.

Paul then makes a statement that affirms we should desire and seek to clear God’s name of all false charges of failure or unfaithfulness. Paul declared, “*Let God be true though every one were a liar...*” The unfaithfulness of man in no way negates the truth of God’s Word and the certainty that He will bring about what He has declared to take place in His Holy Word. He then quoted a verse from the Old Testament to underscore his desire to clear God’s name and justify His dealings with people. Paul declared,

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.”

Paul quoted **Psalm 51:4**. This psalm records David’s confession of sin after God had drug a confession from him. Here are the opening words:

Have mercy on me, O God,
According to your steadfast love;

According to your abundant mercy
Blot out my transgressions.
²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin!

³ or I know my transgressions,
And my sin is ever before me.
⁴Against you, you only, have I sinned
And done what is evil in your sight,
***So that you may be justified in your words
And blameless in your judgment.*** (Psa. 51:1-4)

David's sin of adultery with Bathsheba was a scandal. David was God's king over Israel. When David sinned in this manner, it brought discredit to David's God. When David had come to his senses and sincerely confessed his sin, he expressed his desire that God's name would be cleared of any accusation because of his unfaithfulness to God. God's glory, God's holy character, should not be diminished in people's thinking because this man of God had sinned so egregiously. In the same way, Paul is reasoning that although the Jews, the nation of Israel, had failed so terribly in not bringing forth glorify to God among the Gentiles, it should not reflect upon God's character or faithfulness. God had been faithful to His people; they had been unfaithful toward Him. In fact, Paul argues that the unfaithfulness of Israel was the occasion of God judging Israel for their failure.

Paul then supposes another objection in **Romans 3:5** and **6**.

⁵But 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.) ⁶By no means! For then how could God judge the world?

Paul asked two questions in verse 5 that might have been surmised by someone reading of the Jews' unfaithfulness to God's "oracles." Paul had declared that God would be faithful to judge Israel for its unfaithfulness. And so, if Israel's unfaithfulness to God actually served to display or show forth the glory of God's faithfulness, why does God condemn them for their failure? Paul reasons that this is a ludicrous argument. For if you go there, then you would have to conclude that God would be unjust to condemn the world in judgment, which is, of course, a ridiculous notion.

Then Paul wrote these words,

***⁷But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?
⁸And why not do evil that good may come?--as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just. (Rom. 3:7, 8)***

Apparently Paul had his opposers commonly accuse him of promoting licentious behavior by the gospel that he preached. If we are saved by God's grace through faith alone, then it does not matter what we do, it does not matter if we sin egregiously, for we will be bringing glory to God in His great willingness and ability to forgive us our sins.