

SOUND DOCTRINE FOR SPIRITUAL SUCCESS – Studies in Romans Privilege and Responsibility (Romans 3:1-8)

“Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God. What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, ‘THAT YOU MAY BE JUSTIFIED IN YOUR WORDS, AND PREVAIL WHEN YOU ARE JUDGED.’ But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.) May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world. But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner? And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some claim that we say), ‘Let us do evil that good may come?’ Their condemnation is just.

In writing Romans, Paul was on his third missionary journey and had experienced a fair amount of interaction with Jews and Gentiles alike. His rebuke to Jewish reliance upon ritualism would have no doubt resulted in the complaint that the privilege of being a Jew was of little or no value. He counters that concern with a two-fold question in Romans 3:1; and answers it in v2, with what he considers to be of primary importance: the nation of Israel was “entrusted with the oracles of God.” In other words, the Jewish people were chosen for a stewardship. They alone would be responsible for believing, obeying and communicating the Word of God (Psalm 147:19-20). This responsibility carried with it an incredible privilege. If fulfilled faithfully, the people would live in a covenant relationship with the true and living God. No other nation was provided with such an enormous advantage. On the other hand, their opportunity was contingent on a response of faith, which Paul points to in vv3-4, by quoting from Psalm 51:4, where David confesses his sin with Bathsheba, after having denied it for so long. In effect, he admits that God had every right to confront him about his immorality through Nathan the prophet, even though David held the privileged position of being king (2 Samuel 12:1-15).

The much larger and more profound point which the apostle is seeking to make in vv5-6, involves any possible misunderstanding his readership may have in regard to the character of God. God’s covenant relationship with Israel did not prevent Him from judging their unrighteous behavior. In the same way, even though He created the human race in His image, Adam’s fall and all of our unrighteous behavior ever since, gives God the authority to judge the world as a whole (v6). Paul is also establishing a preliminary premise to a more thorough discussion in Romans chapters 9-11. Namely, in light of Israel’s failure in rejecting her Messiah, is there a future for this nation in the Kingdom of God?

Paul concludes this section in vv7-8, by responding to some nonsensical reasoning, reminiscent of a modern-day troll. Simply put, if the unrighteousness of man provides for a stark relief to the righteousness of God, maybe God shouldn’t judge us in our sin. After all, our sinfulness makes God look that much better. Someone was apparently using Paul’s conversion and apostolic ministry, as well as the existence of the Church in the aftermath of Israel’s rejection of Christ, as “proof.” Paul affirms in v8 that “their condemnation is just.” **The point? God does produce good results from bad events. But that doesn’t make our bad behavior any less bad!**