

Romans: Comment and Commentary

“Therefore, accept one another,  
just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God (15:7).”

Parenthesis: This verse seems to summarize the book.

“Accept one another:” the purpose of the book (12-15)

“Just as Christ accepted us:” the foundation of the exhortation (1-11)

I. Prologue, 1:1-17

II. The Universality of Human Sinfulness, 1:18-3:20

A. The Guilt of the Gentile, 1:18-32

B. The Ground of Divine Judgment Established, 2:1-16

1. According to truth, vv. 2-5
2. According to works, vv. 6-10
3. According to impartiality, vv. 11-16

C. The Guilt of the Jew, 2:17-3:20

1. Their privileges, vv. 17-20
2. Their practices, vv. 21-24
3. Their folly (ritual w/o affection), vv. 25-29
4. Objections answered, 3:1-8

After charging the Gentiles with sin and guilt in chapter one, Paul turns to the Jews (2:1-3:8); the guilt of the sons of Jacob is explained. Paul elucidates the general principles of divine judgment (2:1-16), applies the principles to the Jews (2:17-29), and takes up Jewish counterclaims (3:1-8). Paul’s point is that, while Gentiles and Jews are alike condemned before God, covenant status is no refuge for the Jew. However, the promises to the nation are still valid. They are God’s unique people.

The posing of questions and answering them suggests several things. First, the Jewish-Gentile conflictive attitudes and resultant tensions were present in the Roman churches, or, in the least, Paul was seeking to arrest an issue that proved common in the churches. Second, having made the point that Jews and Gentiles are equally face the just peril of the holy wrath of God, Paul seeks to make the point here and in chapters 9-11 that His promises to the Jew has not been imperiled by the inclusion of Gentiles into the family of God as equals with them. It would be logical to surmise that the inclusion of a once second-class people, at least in Jewish eyes, brought into question certain divine promises to them.

- a. What is the advantage of the Jew? Does Paul’s teaching undermine God’s covenant His ancient people? vv. 1-2

- 1) The question, v. 1

The method Paul uses is diatribe; he puts questions into the mouth of an imaginary objector and answers them.

The essence of the question is this: Since neither ethnicity nor circumcision, the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant, has no redemptive value, what is the benefit of being a Jew? Or, since Jews and Gentiles are equal before God, is there no advantage for the Jew?

2) The answer, v. 2

Yes, indeed, the Jews have been given “the oracles of God,” the special disclosures of God to His people (Acts 7:38; Hebrews 5:12; 1 Peter 4:11). Some take the phrase, the oracles of God, to refer to the whole OT, but this does not appear to be its use in the NT. It would seem to include instruction about the moral law and obedience to it. The Jews had been given special revelation of God’s Word, God’s law, and God’s mercy, particularly seen in the messianic promises and prophecies (see v.3).

Paul’s point is that though the Jews have enormous advantages, these do not give them an advantage in the judgment. It is not possessing privilege that is the issue; it is obedience considering privilege.

Paul’s use of “first” without a subsequent “second” is found (here for the second time [1:8]). It is not infrequent in intense writings such as this that his grammatical constructions are incomplete.

b. Does man’s unfaithfulness invalidate God’s promises? Did the lack of faith by some Jews cancel out the promises of God? vv. 3-4

1) The question, v. 3

The “for” introduces the argument by which Paul answers the unexpressed objection, “But what about Israel’s unbelief?” The accusation has to do with the faithfulness of God to His promises. It is a question of God’s veracity. Has Israel’s unfaithful path cancelled God’s promises?

2) The answer, v. 4

Paul’s answer is threefold: first, it is abhorrent to say such a thing; second, in a case before the court, God would always be the winner when it comes to promise-keeping; third, Scriptures show this to be true. Psalm 51:4 is a passage in which David pictures himself in a heavenly court and confesses that his opponent (God) is correct. David was unfaithful and repented, but God is faithful to His promises! David’s confession of sin shows that God is just in judging. However, judgment does not cancel a divine promise, the two not being incompatible. God remained faithful to David when he was unfaithful to God.

c. Is God unjust in punishing the unjust since He is glorified in doing so? vv. 5-6

1) The question, v. 5

The “but” introduces an objection by Paul’s imaginary Jewish opponent. This follows logically from verse 4. David’s unrighteousness in adultery was the occasion for the demonstration of God’s righteousness. Does this mean that God is unjust in punishing sin since He is glorified in it?

“God’s righteousness” is not that which He grants to forgiven sinners. Here it means God’s attribute of righteousness; in this case, it is what God is in Himself.

“I am speaking in human terms,” suggests Paul’s view of unenlightened reason; it is opposed to the wisdom of God.

2) The answer, v. 6

God’s righteousness is not established by sin; it is established by God’s character. Therefore, God must judge sin. The motive for sinning is not to commend God’s righteousness, quite the contrary, so it merits judgment.

- d. Is it right to judge sinners who glorify God by being sinners? Is there something wrong about a God who benefits from judgment? vv. 7-8  
Unlike the previous question, this one is about mankind rather than God.

1) The question, vv. 7-8a

The last judgment seems to be primarily in Paul’s mind as the future tense (“shall judge”) indicates. The question is this: if God is glorified by my sinning, why not sin? Should my sin preclude judgment since God is profited?

2) The answer, v. 8b

Paul’s reply is a brief statement. Evil is evil, no matter what God may bring from it. Since evil requires an ungodly attitude to manifest itself, it must be judged by a righteous-in-character God.

D. Conclusion: The Universality of Condemnation, 3:9-20

In *Whatever Happened to Sin?* Karl Menninger, a well-known American psychiatrist, has argued that, though the word sin has almost disappeared from modern vocabulary, the sense of guilt remains in minds and hearts. While it is a testimony to a fundamental problem in mankind, the book fails to give a solution. The Roman Ovid wrote, “We all strive for what is forbidden.” “There are two good men,” an ancient Chinese proverb goes; “one is dead, and the other is not yet born.”

1. The questions and the indictment of all, v. 9

Paul’s concluding charge is that all mankind (i.e., Jews and Gentiles) stand before God as guilty. The word translated “better” occurs only here in the Bible; perhaps a more explicit translation of the word would be “preferred.” The answer of the apostle can be translated two ways, “Not at all” or “Not altogether.” The context (vv. 1-8) suggests a limited advantage of being a Jew (the second choice being the point).

The orientation from which Paul addresses the universality of guilt is Jewish (“we”). The Jews have advantages over Gentiles, but not preferential treatment: God’s justice does not have a favored class-exemption clause.

2. The proof for the indictment, vv. 10-18

From an array of quotations, Paul demonstrates the pervasive and extensive condemnation of the entire race. Of the seven quotations, one is from Ecclesiastes (7:20), five from the Psalms (5:9; 10:7; 14:1-3 [53:1-3]; 36:1; 140:3), and one from Isaiah (59:7-8). Paul nowhere else combines so many quotations in a single passage. This, by the way, demonstrates that when Paul speaks of the Holy Scriptures, he is thinking of the Hebrew Scriptures.

a. The character of men, vv. 10-12

Note the emphasis on universality (“none” 4x, “all” 1x, “together” 1x, “no, not one” 1x). Paul’s citations are from Psalms 14:3 and 53:3.

b. The conduct of men, vv. 13-17

The emphasis here appears to be on the intensity of human sinfulness. In verses 13-14 the stress is upon the words of men, the sins of speech; in verses 15-17, it is upon the ways of men, the sins of conduct.

1) The words of mankind, vv. 13-14

The emphasis here is upon inner corruption and the deadly effects of sin (throat, tongues, lips, mouth).

2) The conduct of mankind, vv. 15-17

Says Wiersbe, “In Romans 3:15 and 16, Paul pictured the sinner’s feet. Just as his words are deceitful, so his ways are destructive. The Christians’ feet are shod with the Gospel of peace (Eph. 6:15); but the lost sinner brings death, destruction, and misery wherever he goes.” The thoughts of mankind are distant from God, not knowing the way of peace, preferring rather lies. The mind is the gatherer of knowledge, affections control choices, and the will brings about the resultant action. The unsaved have a mind or knowledge deficiency and, therefore, heart problem.

c. The cause for the conduct of men, v. 18

The quotation is from Psalm 36:1. Lack of fear or unbelief is the root of sin.

3. The conclusion, vv. 19-20

“Now” (v. 19) is transitional; the apostle moves to his conclusion. The term “law” probably refers to the Old Testament since Paul has just quoted the Ecclesiastes, Psalms and Isaiah, not the Mosaic Law.

In v. 20, the “therefore” should be translated “because.” The verse is not an inference drawn from the preceding verse; it is the ground of the preceding statement of guilt. The law, which the Jews thought was their birth certificate, was their death warrant! The law brings sin and judgment, not life. It points to the need for life but is inept in bringing life.

### III. The Universality of Divine Righteousness for the Jew and Gentile: Justification, 3:21-4:25 (Deliverance from the Penalty of Sin)

The good news announced in 1:17 is here elaborated. Faith alone in Christ’s work is the basis of a right standing before a just and holy God. The structure of the passage is this:

The basis of the righteousness of God in us is the gift of God through Christ, 3:21-26.  
The means of the gift of divine righteousness through Christ is a wholehearted embrace of the provision purchased by Christ, 3:27-31.  
The gift of divine righteousness through faith in Christ is confirmed, 4:1-25.

A. The Basis: The Free Gift of God's Righteousness Declared, 3:21-26

This paragraph has been called "the heart of Christian theology." There is nowhere in the whole Bible a passage that sets forth the righteousness of God in Christ as clearly. Leon Morris has called this "possibly the most important single paragraph ever written." Luther called this paragraph "the whole point of the Bible," believing that the gift of righteousness through faith was the heart of the divine revelation. Calvin stated, "There is not probably in the whole Bible a passage which sets forth more profoundly the righteousness of God in Christ." This passage states the essence of evangelical Christianity.

1. The manifestation of God's righteousness, vv.21-23

True righteousness, the prerequisite of eternal life, is "by-faith" righteousness, a gift from God; it could be no other way because of the constancy of human error.

a. Its relationship to the law, v. 21

The "but now" is a welcome relief to mankind's total failure. The righteousness of God, which in the theme verse, was "revealed" (1:17) is now "manifested."

It is interesting in this verse you have two usages of the word law. The first instance refers to the Mosaic Code, the Ten Commandments; the second instance it means the Bible.

"Righteousness of God" means the same as in 1:17, the activity of God whereby sinners are given a right to stand before God without condemnation because of the gift of His righteousness to them. This righteousness is apart from the law, apart from legal efforts or works. It is not contrary to the law, because the law never taught that salvation was through good works. God grants His righteousness; He does not look to human righteousness. This is clear from Gen. 15:6; Ps. 32:1-2; Isa. 8:14, 28:16, 59:20-21; Hab. 2:4. All these texts Paul mentions.

b. Its basis in faith, v. 22

The root of true righteousness is faith. It is a gift; it is not earned. Salvation is not a human achievement! It is for Jew and Gentile alike.

c. The reason, v. 23

All have sinned, Jew and Gentile. This is probably a reference to personal actions, not our relationship to Adam's first sin, as suggested by the context (1:18-3:20).

The verb translated "come short" is present tense referring to present action; all are constantly coming short of God's requirements.

“Glory of God” in this text means that the creature has consistently failed to reflect His character. Charles Hodge translated the phrase this way, “All men are sinners and under God’s disapproval.”

2. The description of God’s righteousness, vv. 24-25a

a. The manner or principle, v. 24a

“To justify” means to declare or reckon to be righteous; it does not have the force of “to make righteous.” It is the pronouncement of a judge rendering a verdict (compare 2:13; 3:4; 4:3-25).

The declaration of righteousness is without cost from the human perspective. God, the judge, judged His own Son, who stood in the sinners’ place as the guilty one. The innocent was sentenced to death and the lawless were set free.

“Freely by His grace” indicates the mode of justification, as entirely unmerited. Grace is one of the apostle’s most significant theological terms. He uses it not so much to describe a quality of God as to show the way or manner of His acting toward His people. If salvation is through God’s unmerited favor, grace, it cannot be by human merits. Grace is God’s activity; the human response should be faith. Grace in its very nature is the opposite of works. No element of Paul’s doctrine of justification is more central than this. God’s justifying act is not constrained to any degree by anything that human beings are or do which could be esteemed as disposing God to act.

b. The method, v. 24b

This was accomplished, this free justification, through the “ransoming away” by Christ. A price has been paid that only God could pay, though He was not required to do, so that guilt could be pardoned. The verb suggests the fact that believers shall never again come into slavery to sin (Lev 16:22). The Father provided the satisfaction of His own holiness and justice in His own Son. It was the blood-payment of Christ to offended justice that secured redemption. God displayed the Christ publicly as the payment—the ransom price for His people’s sin.

The word “redemption” means ransom or purchase by the payment of a price. The one who paid the price was Christ.

c. The means, v. 25a

The benefits of the death of Christ are procured through faith, faith alone, because the sacrifice has been made by Christ (the NetBible reads at this point, “God publicly displayed him at his death as the mercy seat”). “Propitiation,” translated mercy seat, means satisfaction, literally the place of the mercy seat, the place where blood is poured to cover sin, the covering over the Ark of the Covenant framed by two golden angels. In the New Testament, the cross, the instrument of violence, is the divine mercy seat!

Parenthesis: Propitiation

The term “propitiation” literally means “the place of satisfaction.” See also Heb 9:5. The OT term means “covering,” the place of covering for sin being the

mercy seat in the Holy of Holies between the golden cherubim. (Ex25:22) on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:13). The word appears 21 times in the NT. Calvary's tree became the place of covering (the place of satisfaction the place God's wrath was appeased). Satisfaction is in both testaments through the taking of life, the shedding of blood.

By calling Christ the mercy seat, Paul is saying that the cross in the New Covenant is the fulfillment of the mercy seat as a type in the tabernacle. What in the OT was shadowed has now been unveiled in Christ's death on the cross.

As redemption contemplates our bondage, being the provision of grace to release God's people, propitiation contemplates their liability to the wrath of God. In propitiation, God is not a reluctant forgiver won over to grace by the intervention of His Son; He acted for His people in giving them His Son ("set forth").

3. The intent of God's righteousness, vv. 25b-26
  - a. Righteousness for the past, v.25b  
God's intent in Christ was to make a final provision for past sins, violations passed over by God in the daily and annual sacrifices. The "past sins" are those committed before Christ came, those in the old economy ("the times of ignorance," Acts 17:30). The sacrifices of the Old Testament were with a view to or in anticipation of the final sacrifice.

Parenthesis: The meaning of "passed over"

In what sense did God pass over the sins committed before the coming of Christ? Translating the term is difficult because it only occurs here in the New Testament. The question is this: Did God forgive sins in the past looking forward to Christ's future cleansing work at Calvary or did He not countenance them knowing that Christ's death would later deal with the sin problem? It seems that God did not reckon judgment in anticipation of Christ. God does not reckon the sequence of time; His view is constant though I freely and willingly confess that His mind is greater than ours and we will never fully understand the mind of God.

- b. Righteousness for the present, v.26a  
Christ died for the sins of mankind in the present age, the time between the two advents.
    - c. Righteousness for the believers, v. 26b  
The problem is not how to get men to God; it is how a righteous God could justly come to sinful creatures. In Christ's great sacrifice, God's just wrath has been appeased so that He can justly (the debt having been paid) forgive His people.

Parenthesis: Just in justifying

I think the phrase that God is "just and the justifier" is one of the truly astonishing in the Bible. How could it be that a God of justice could forgive sinners? How could God be just in forgiving sin? The answer is

two-fold: first, someone other than God, who has no obligation to do so, must pay the debt of infinite injustice (the gravity of a sinful act is measured by the object sinned against [since all sin is against God, all sin merits infinite punishment]). Second, the person who would pay the debt of sin must be of infinite quality because God would not be just in accepting anything less than what is equal to His character. The gospel story is so wonderful. God did not, nor could not, surrender His character to redeem us. The way that His justice could be completely satisfied and that He could declare sinner just in His sight is for an impeccable man, who is also God himself, pay the debt of infinite justice for us. Jesus did that! We have been forgiven by God! Herein is the greatest of all miracles, the miracle of human redemption.

Applications:

1. Privileges from God do not guarantee a relationship with God. It is a testimony to human blindness and callousness that God richly blesses but cognitive, daily gratitude is often very much lacking. God paints the sky with magnificence, but how often do we spend a day without looking up! The best way to express thankfulness is to trust and obey. Obedience is the test of thankfulness. This was the failure of God's ancient people. Is it ours, yours?
2. Blessings from God do not imply the right to disobey God without consequences. God's character, His justice, demands punishment for violation. Divine love is not contrary to divine justice, wrath being the extension of His justice. What this means is that it is not wise, dangerous, to play loose and fast with God. For us chastisement is remedial (it is an outgrowth of love to correct); for the unbeliever it is a gracious warning of a dire potential circumstance in the future.
3. Salvation must be a gift because mankind has nothing to offer to God that would dissuade him from His anger. This is because God would not be truly God if He accepted anything contrary to His character (since God is infinite holiness, His criteria being Himself, He will only accept perfection [He cannot deny or act contrary to Himself]). The wonder of the gospel is that God Himself in Jesus who alone meets and met at Calvary all the demands of righteousness that God's character requires. Since we are but creatures, since we have the life of God, it must be a gift!
4. Salvation is by works, but people are so twisted that they cannot keep the law perfectly. We have been given a wonderful substitute, Jesus Christ, who paid the penalty of sin for us. In His life Jesus perfectly obeyed the law thus qualifying Him to be mankind's substitute. No other man could accomplish what Jesus did because only Jesus possessed equality with God. Jesus did what we could not do for ourselves because of His holy character. Salvation is by righteousness, but only Jesus met the qualification and He did it for us. We are saved by His work!
5. To receive the good news of a divine Redeemer, we must be convinced of sin, humbled under the sense of its condemnation, silenced under the conviction of its destructive power, and prostrated before the footstool of God's grace, knowing that if we are saved it must be by other merit and other power than our own. Have you expressed your gratitude to God for the unfathomable gift of the redeemer lately?



6. The function of the law is neither to justify nor to sanctify. It convinces and condemns. It was given to us to “that every mouth may be stopped (v.19).” Law never approves and rewards; it only reveals shortcomings. To come to Jesus requires that we recognize the need to come. This is the function of law; it is to reveal our failures and accordingly drive us outside of ourselves to Jesus for refuge. Are you still thinking that you can obey the law and please God or have you come to realize that the law was meant to show us our need of a savior?
7. The plight of mankind described by Paul in these verses is bleak, yet you and I have met wonderful mature and deeply kind people. How do you explain the fact that we have all met really caring, kind people who do not know the Lord? In fact, we have all met unsaved people that act in a Christianly manner, people worthy of our emulation. Answer: The Bible argues that humans cannot perfect righteousness; that all at best are inconsistent, at worst destructive. If you live around anyone long enough your evaluation will more than likely need to be redefined. Redemption does not cure the darkness of the soul; death followed by resurrection does that. What are some of the practical implications for living that you can derive from Paul’s understanding of basic anthropology?
8. Disobedience on the part of God’s people, ancient or new, does not have the power to cancel out the promises of God. While dereliction can have negative implications, God’s promises are rooted in His character. God would be found a liar should He renege on His promises. We must realize that God has not promised health and wealth; He has promised to carry each of His children to be with Himself. God will always remain true though that is hardly the case with us. God is so committed to us that no form of disobedience can ever drive Him away. Does this not make you desire to serve him more diligently and joyfully each day?