

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

C. The Guilt of the Jew, 2:17-3:8

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

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.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 ("... there is not fear of God before his eyes"). 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

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

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."

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 divine 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.

c. The human 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!

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 assumes the state of 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.

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 sinners 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.

B. The Reception: Faith, 3:27-31

This paragraph is connected to chapter four. What is stated here is illustrated there in the faith-life of Abraham and the experience of David. The apostle continues to employ the rhetorical method of posing questions (5) and answering them. Paul's point is that

the justification described in vv.21-26 is ours through faith without any human contribution or merit on any kind.

A way of organizing the lesson composed of these verses is around the three questions that Paul poses. The apostle answers these questions cryptically in the paragraph and unfolds the answers more fully in subsequent chapters.

v. 27: The question of boasting.

v. 29: The question of by-faith justification and ethnicity.

v. 31: The question of the relation of justification to law keeping.

1. The exclusion of boasting, vv. 27-28

a. The interrogation, v. 27

If salvation was a reward for obedience, we would have something to boast about, but such is excluded since salvation is not a result of human endeavor. “In this context, ‘boasting’ should not be taken in the sense of unwarranted self-adulation for meritorious achievement but as justifiable pride... (Mounce).” Simply put, faith excludes pride of achievement; we have nothing to claim for ourselves. Faith does not cause salvation; faith receives salvation; faith is a response of shock and wonder that God could overlook our sin forever.

Paul’s point is that when it comes to the issue of the divine declaration of forgiveness works and faith stands in stark, antithetical contrast.

Parenthesis: Does God demand conformity to the Law of Moses for salvation? Was law keeping a prerequisite for the OT believer to enter life? Was divine justification by law keeping in the OT? Jewish preoccupation with keeping the Mosaic Code as a means of relationship with God is a twisting of the role of faith. In recent years some evangelical scholars (N.T. Wright, J.D. G. Dunn) have understood, “works of the law,” only to refer to dietary laws and circumcision (those rites that set apart the Jewish nation as unique) and not to the Mosaic Code in general. However, v.20 (“through the law is comes the knowledge of sin”) is difficult to interpret that way in light of the universal phrase, “works of the law,” since circumcision and dietary restrictions are part of the Mosaic Code. Further, in similar phrases (2:23, 14; 2:25. 26, 27; 7:25; 8:4; 13:8) to “works of the law” in other parts of Romans (2:25 being a clear example) indicate that circumcision is part of the law. Paul’s clear point is that we are not saved by law-keeping.

Parenthesis: What is the meaning of biblical faith?

Typically, faith has been defined as having three aspects: biblical faith has content, the substance being the person and accomplishments of Jesus Christ; biblical faith consists of awareness that the content of faith is true; and biblical faith consists of trust in the truthfulness of the content. The devils embrace the initial components of faith, but tremble on fear, not trust. One has defined

biblical faith as “that sure and certain knowledge of God mercies granted through Christ.” Another has said that faith, is “living unto God.”

In the context of the passage before us faith has to do with salvation-faith. There are two other uses of “faith” in the NT: With the article (“the faith”) it means the sum of Christian teaching (Gal. 1:23, Jude 3). It can mean trustworthy, a “faithful servant” (Matt 24:45; 25:21, 23).

Parenthesis: Why should we not boast in faith (in a proper sense) since it is an expression of choice that we exercise? While we can express faith, we cannot create the object of Christian faith, we cannot boast because the origin of the object of faith is beyond any ability that anyone possesses. Choices are made based on the perception of pleasure as opposed to the potential of pain and adversity. We can make choices, but we do not have the ability to choose what is impossible to perceive. No one can perceive the beauty of Jesus unless it is revealed. We cannot boast in our faith because the object of our faith is a gift from God.

Parenthesis: In what sense is faith not a gift from God? In what sense is it? Faith, the ability to manifest confidence in an object, is something that all people can express. So, the ability of expressions is not a Christian particularity. Faith is a gift from God when the object is the person and beauty of Christ. So, faith is a gift in two senses: first, the object to express faith, being Jesus Christ, the infinite manifestation of the infinite God, is beyond human comprehension (“that which is flesh is flesh” meaning that which is human cannot rise above humanness [John3:6]). Second, not only is the object of faith a gift, but the ability also to see and embrace that object is of divine enablement.

Parenthesis: If no one is saved without faith, faith being a prerequisite, how can we claim that salvation is free if something is required? Salvation is free in the sense that is not within the grasp of human perception. The expression of faith is a human ability, but the expression of faith in Christ is not. If the Spirit does not supernaturally reveal the beauty of Christ, no one would express faith simply because no one expresses faith in an object they have no awareness. The necessity of faith is not opposed to a free salvation because of the nature of divine salvation.

Parenthesis: If a person is faithless, is it God’s fault?

The answer is “no.” Paul has made the point in chapters two and three that all people have received a revelation from God externally in the creation and internally in the conscience. The witness of nature and conscience is sufficient to alert people to the existence of God and a sense of oughtness. Based on such a “taste,” many find it distasteful and, therefore have no desire for anymore. God is not obligated to provide more when they have no interest in what they have been

given. Faithless is not the fault of God because people do not want any more disclosure from God and go their own ways.

b. The explanation, v. 28

The “for” introduces the reason for the answers of verse 27. In a very real sense, this verse summarizes Paul’s basic premise. A person is not justified because of faith, but through faith. Faith embraces God’s gift; it does not cause it to be given. Faith looks to what God has done; works have respect to what people do. When Luther translated this verse he added a word not in the text, “alone.” He was certainly correct interpretatively in doing so!

Parenthesis: What is the function of the Law?

The word, “Law,” has at least three different meanings in the Bible. First, it can refer to the whole Old Testament (Rom 3:19 is composed of a litany of quotes from Psalms and the Prophets). Second, it can refer to a part of the Old Testament, the five books of Moses (the Torah, which literally means instruction).

The Law has a three-fold function: first, it reveals the holy standard of God for moral conduct in the various spheres of social existence. Second, the Law function to show us the depth of our shortcomings so that we would turn from our devices to Christ to cleanse the conscience. The Law condemns! Third, the Law functions in the believer’s life to show us how to walk in a worthy manner as God’s children (remember the writers of the NT frequently quote the OT to warrant moral conduct).

Parenthesis: The Law and the New Covenant

The applicability of the Mosaic Code to New Testament believers has been and continues to be a debated topic. Expect for those who see not applicability, the issue of what to carries over and what not applicable unclear. What can we say? First, clearly the ceremonial law, and the fourth commandment, has been fulfilled because what it prefigured has become a reality .in the final sacrifice ending all sacrifices. It seems clear, though not explicitly stated, that some of the judicial laws, such as fabric restrictions and leprosy regulations, do not carry over (the true significance lying in the heart of the participator rather than something magic happening in the action itself). Second, some parts of the Mosaic Code apparently is universal because they are repeated in the New Testament (some call this the “Law of Christ” but in reality it is the same as Moses). Third, some facets of the law are not understandable to us because we are removed from the content and situation in Ancient Israel. I think some laws are not to be understood literally because they carried symbolic meaning for their inception, though that is difficult to demonstrate. One revealing example of how ancient Israelites understood the Mosaic law is in Ruth. In the eyes of Boaz, the unnamed redeemer, and the elders of the city levirate responsibility applied to a redeemer. However, that is not true technically what the written legislation indicates; it only

applied to a brother (the unnamed redeemer was only a near relative, closer than Boaz even but not a brother of the deceased. From this example, it is evident that they understood the Torah as setting forth general principles that they were to apply to whatever life situation presented itself.

2. The rejection of the ethnic divide, vv. 29-30
 - a. The questions, v. 29a-b

A second sequence of questions is introduced. Since salvation is through faith, not works, distinctions based on ethnicity are rejected. This opens the door of salvation beyond the limits of biblical Judaism to the world; the gift of righteousness is not limited to Jews. Since it is available to all, it cannot, therefore, be the realm of a specific ethnicity only.
 - b. The explanation, v.29c-30

The way of salvation for the Jew and the Gentile is the same; it is through faith. The words, “by faith” and “through faith” mean the same thing. Paul’s point is that there is no difference between salvation for the Jew and salvation for the Gentile. Paul seems to be conceding, for argument only, that the Jews are saved by law-keeping. If Mosaic obedience earned salvation, and the Gentiles do not have the Law, then either salvation is not by law-keeping, or no Gentile can be saved. Obviously, since Gentiles are saved without law obedience as the cause, neither are the Jews.
3. The establishment of the law, v. 31
 - a. The question, v.31a

Faith does not overturn the Old Testament way of salvation, because the law, or works, was never the means of it. Law is not adverse to salvation by mere faith alone; it establishes the fact that it has to be other than obedience because no one is obedient in the mind of God.
 - b. The explanation, v. 31b-c

The “by faith” way of salvation rightly establishes the proper use of the law. The law was not meant to save; it was meant to condemn. This can be taken in two ways: first, it is the perfect standard of communion with a perfect God. Communion with God cannot be achieved by human effort; in fact, human effort cannot even recognize the fact of salvation through Christ (let alone come near it!). The proper use of the law is its fulfillment by Christ for us. It is God’s standard of redemption. Second, the proper use of the law is to condemn so that human beings would know to turn outside of themselves for salvation.

Applications:

1. Salvation is something to be received; it cannot be earned. The religions of the world in contradistinction to Christianity, says, “Do this and you shall be saved.” Christianity says, “It has been done for you. Will you receive God’s gift?” Don’t you often wonder why people refuse a gift when we live in a most self-concerned, self-centered culture? What do you think this says about human nature?
2. Faith does not merit salvation; faith is not a cause; faith is not a Protestant sacrament. If faith were the cause of salvation, faith would be a work because salvation would result from

it. The Bible never indicates that we are saved *because of* faith, but it does say that we are saved *through* faith. Faith does not save; it is Jesus' work that saves us because the Father's wrath toward our misgivings has been appeased. Faith is not a power; it is a means of expressing

3. Faith receives or accepts God's provision for sin in Christ. Faith is an expression of gratitude, amazement, and delightful trust; it is the action of the newborn in Christ. Is the gospel, the good news, the announcement that we should do something or is it that God has done something in Christ for us? Is faith-obedience the gospel or is it the consequence of the gospel? Do you explain to people the claims of Christ, His person and accomplishments, or about what they should do?
4. The demands of the law (obey or die!) have been fulfilled in Christ. Jesus endured the penalty of our sin for us. To use the law as a means of salvation is to misuse it. The law was meant to reveal our deepest of shortcomings that we might turn from self-centeredness and self-misperception. Why do you think people have taken a gift to reveal our deepest need and have reinterpreted it in such a way that it was never intended?
5. Jesus made the point in the Sermon on the Mount that He did not come to abolish the Law, but to fill it with its deepest and truest meaning. The fact that Jesus quotes the law and the writers of the Scriptures used His words as exhortations to the church tells me that the Law has a function in the life of the church today. Obviously, the law has no redemptive value, but it does have corrective value; it shows us how to walk in a manner that honors God.
6. The creature has nothing to boast of in himself/herself unless it is in what God has done. What are we but blighted, disobedient creature clothed in the rags of twisted perception of our worthiness?
7. One would think that the sinner would love to be forgiven at no cost. Unfortunately, that is not the case. After all, sinners have their pride. They desperately want to claim some role in their own redemption. Do you know people who desire to promote their self-worth and, in doing so, are unwilling to humble themselves before Christ?
8. When I think of the wonder of the gospel. When I think that God because of Christ's endeavor on my behalf, has clothed me in His own righteousness, I wonder why I am at times sad and depressed when temporal things seem adverse. The gospel is not for unbelievers only; it is for believers; it is a message that believers need to hear. What can cheer the troubled soul more than to hear that Jesus died for us! When you get disappointed, do you turn to the wonder of Calvary and contemplate the glories of Christ?