



The Epistle to the Romans

Romans 1-3: Big Human Problem, Bigger Divine Solution

Paul begins his letter as he usually does, with an elaborate word of greeting to the saints in the Church of Rome. The greeting also enunciates some of the themes that will run through the letter, the Gospel or Good News that Paul preaches (v. 1), which stands in conformity with God's promises delivered through the prophets in the holy scriptures (v. 2). That message of good news focuses on Christ, Son of David according the flesh and eschatological Son of God (v. 3-4). From that crucified and exalted Messiah, comes a mission to proclaim good news to the nations (v. 4). Those who hear and respond are, like the addressees, chosen saints, on whom the peace and favor of God may be invoked (v. 7).

Paul usually follows his greetings with a prayer, often giving thanks or praise to God for what he has done. Another part of Paul's letters is often a reference to his travel plans. In his opening "Thanksgiving" (1:8-17) Paul combines both elements, giving thanks for the "faithfulness" of his addressees (v. 8), which is renowned throughout the world. He thereby sets up another of the major themes in the exposition of the Good News in this letter. Paul's travel plans consist of his earnest desire to visit Rome and proclaim the Good News there (vv 11-15). At the end of the letter he will return to the point, giving some indication of his present circumstances (15:22-29).

Paul concludes his "Thanksgiving" by declaring that the Good News that he has proclaimed and that the Roman followers of Jesus have accepted is his pride and joy. For in it one finds God's justice revealed, a revelation that Paul finds encapsulated in a verse from the prophet Habakkuk, "The Just (or Righteous) One will live by faith (or faithfulness)" (1:16-17). The conclusion to the Thanksgiving concludes the preparation for the argument by enunciating the claim that Paul will defend throughout the letter: that one's standing before God as righteous or just is a consequence of the faithful response to God's gracious call. In that response we in fact find true and abundant human life.

Note that there are suggested alternative translations for certain key words, particularly the adjective *dikaios*, which may mean "just" or "righteous." The related verb, which we will encounter later in the text, has a similar range of meaning. Likewise the noun *pistis* may be translated "faith," which tends in our usage to have connotations of acceptance of propositional truth, or, alternatively, "fidelity," which has connotations of a firm determination of the will and heart. So the related verbs can be translated "to believe" or "to be faithful."

Different readings of Romans often arise from different choices in translating such key words. We shall return to this matter frequently in our study.

After his “thanksgiving” section, Paul launches into the argument of Romans demonstrating that God’s justice is revealed in the Gospel that he preaches. The first stage of the argument, extending from 1:18 to 3:20, offers an assessment of the human condition generally, finding that all, both Gentile and Jew, are involved in sinful behavior.

Before looking at the details of the argument it is worthwhile to reflect on the underlying dichotomy between Gentile and Jew. That division had marked the social world of most of Paul’s ministry and it apparently weighed heavily on the Roman community that Paul addresses. Paul believed that God through Christ had done something to erase that distinction. He was committed to the vision, based perhaps on the prophecies of “second Isaiah,” i.e., Isaiah 40-55, that God would in due time bring Gentiles to worship with the people of Israel. Many of Paul’s contemporary followers of Jesus shared that belief, but worried about whether conditions were to be imposed on the Gentiles. Should they undergo circumcision and keep dietary laws (kashrut)? And if not, did that mean that God’s revelation to Israel in the Torah was obsolete? Such questions apparently worried the Roman Christian community as well. Underlying all of these particular concerns was a fundamental conviction that being a member of the people of Israel, whose Torah enshrined a rigorous moral code, guaranteed a certain moral superiority. Some of the Roman Christians whom Paul addresses seem to have shared that conviction, however it expressed itself in practice.

The Sinfulness of Gentiles (1:18-32): Idolatry Wrecks Everything

The first stage of Paul’s argument sounds very similar to denunciations of Gentile idolatry found in Jewish apologetic literature. God is knowable from the natural order (1:19-20), but human beings have rejected what reason and observation tell them and have worshipped creatures instead of the creator (1:21-23). As a result, claims Paul, they have fallen into all sorts of other sins, particularly sexual immorality (1:24-27), but sexual sin is just a part of a much larger whole, characterized by all the vices one can imagine (1:28-32).

What role the verses on sexual sin (1:24-27) should play in forming a contemporary Christian moral vision is a matter of considerable debate. At one end of the spectrum, some Christian readers state that Paul’s statements, reflecting prohibitions on same-sex relations in Leviticus, are clear and unequivocal and Christians today should take them seriously. Others demur and note that on other moral issues on which the Bible provides an apparently clear witness, e.g., the morality of slavery or usury, the reflection on human experience by communities of faith has led to new moral insights. For such readers, Paul’s rhetorical point might best be made by singling out some other sinful behavior, where contemporary moral judgments would be uniform: genocide perhaps. Whatever one’s views on sexual morality, it is clear that Paul is not developing a treatise on the morality but pointing to realities that his contemporaries would recognize as sinful in their Gentile environment.

We shouldn't pass by the very first verse of this section without recognizing that it begins in a way that troubles some twenty-first century readers. The body of Paul's magisterial Letter to the Romans begins with the phrase "the wrath of God." Mainline pulpits are full of preachers who take pains to picture a God sans anger, because judgment and wrath may be overstressed in some parts of the Christian world. However, it is important to stand back and wonder if we could really love a God who wasn't angry at the Inquisition, American slavery, the Nazi atrocities, or genocide in Rwanda. Attempts to make God mild and positive miss part of God's nature: when people destroy one another, God gets angry. When people turn from God, God gets angry. Or at least that's what Paul says in Romans 1:18.

This first section of Paul's argument would have reinforced the conviction of his Roman audience that through their acceptance of Christ and the Jewish Torah, they were on high moral ground. Paul's next step would be to undercut that certitude.

The Problem of Moralizing Judgment (2:1-16)

Throughout Romans Paul uses rhetorical devices common in first-century scholastic literature known as the "Diatribes." Among these devices are apostrophes or direct addresses to imaginary interlocutors, which therefore set up a dialectical situation into which the reader/hearer must insert him or herself. Paul uses that device at Rom 2:1, abruptly turning to someone who has just consented to the kind of argument that Paul has just made, condemning the sinfulness of the Gentile world. The kind of person envisioned here could be a Jewish preacher, or, as many recent commentators on Romans suspect, it could be a Gentile attracted to Jewish morality, but also steeped in the moralizing traditions of the Greco-Roman world. In either case, Paul's move is the same, to point to the hypocrisy of the judge (2:3). In what follows it appears that Paul is not concerned so much about individual hypocrisy as about claims being made for groups of people, Jews, Gentiles, and those who combine features of each. Paul's point is that generic condemnations certainly are erroneous. God judges individuals by their deeds, and there is no partiality in that judgment.

We should note how high the stakes are again in this section. If Paul's first move was to point out God's anger at idolaters, Paul uses the same language here to describe God's disposition toward the morally arrogant judge: those with "impenitent hearts" are "storing up [God's] wrath (2:5)." It seems that Paul sees no moral gradations that matter between the idolaters and the judges. Both have provoked heaven's anger.

Finally, Paul introduces here the mysterious category of righteous Gentiles who, though not having the Law, "do instinctively what the Law requires." The apostle identifies a cause for this unexpected phenomenon: God has written the Law on their hearts. We will soon discover that whatever right behavior these can muster does not rescue them from the human predicament. But the passage provides a window to Paul's wide view of God's activity in the world – not sectarian but universally reaching.

Jewish Judgment on Gentiles (2:17-3:8)

Paul continues his indictment of sin and the assurance of moral superiority by turning to a specific case of one who judges others, someone who identifies as Jewish (2:17). He makes the same general move that he made in the last section, noting that actions of sinners undercut any special claims to righteousness as a group (2:18-29). But then Paul pauses for a corrective. Following his line of reasoning to its logical conclusion might have led, as it did in the second century in the teachings of Marcion, to a rejection of all things Jewish and a rejection of the heritage of Israel. Paul here and emphatically in Romans 7, 9-11, resists that move. Here (3:1-8), he insists that there are “advantages” to be Jewish, irrevocable blessings that God has bestowed on his chosen people. If there is sin among those people it is not God’s fault, but their own.

Paul holds the chosen people are held to a high moral standard, and in this section, we learn a central reason for God’s anger at their sin. In verses 23 and 24, Paul quotes Hebrew Scripture to establish the problem: “You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? For, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’ (Isaiah 52:5)” Along with and additional to the human suffering and broken relationships that human sin causes (see Romans 1.18-32), Paul counts God’s honor at stake in it as well.

Summary: Sin is a Universal Reality (3:9-20)

Paul concludes his indictment of human sinfulness dramatically, by citing scripture, a combination of verses from the Psalms, all of which point to universal reality of human sin. Paul’s case has reached its climax. Like a good prosecuting attorney, Paul hammers home his point until at 3:20 every human being is without recourse. Indeed, these twelve verses may be the dreariest section in all of scripture. It is just at that moment, when all hope seems lost, that the courtroom scene radically changes for the guilty masses who sit in the dock.

The Solution to the Problem of Human Sin and its Implications (3:21-26)

If sin is the problem, then what is the solution? Was it the Torah that inculcated the lofty morality and inspired the condemnations of sin articulated in the previous chapters? No, says Paul, God’s response to the reality of sin is a new act of divine power, God’s gratuitous “justification” of humankind through “redemption” that takes place by the agency of Christ Jesus (3:24). The language that Paul uses here evokes several cultural presuppositions and institutions that will run through his argument. “Justification,” which might also be translated “vindication” or “acquittal” conjures a courtroom, in which guilt and innocence is at stake. We know that the accused are guilty, but God has somehow intervened to prevent the execution of the just sentence. “Redemption” recalls the institution of slavery common in the ancient world, a condition from which one could “redeem” or “purchase” one’s freedom,

usually with saved or borrowed money. How the agency of Christ produces the desired verdict or act of liberation is now specified, using yet another set of images drawn from the sphere of the sacrificial cult. God set forth Christ as a “hilasterion,” a word that probably refers to the “mercy seat” on the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple of Jerusalem, on which the High Priest sprinkled blood on the Day of Atonement to effect the expiation of sin. The image suggests that Christ’s death was accepted by God as atonement for all human sin. The results of that act offered to human beings for their acceptance, “by faith” (3:25). Paul’s wording here is dense, but the overall thrust is clear. By acting through Christ’s death, God has acted justly, punishing sin through Christ and thereby making the sinner just and righteous (3:27). What humans can do is to trust in what God has done and accept his gracious gift.

Paul’s final comments in this section (3:28-31) celebrate what he claims that God has done through Christ’s sacrificial death, an act of grace that benefits both Jew and Gentile who accept God’s benefaction “by faith.” He then asks a rhetorical question that sets up the next stage of the argument. Does this teaching abrogate the Torah? One might be tempted to think so, but Paul refuses to accept that conclusion. No, he claims, the teaching about “faith” does not abolish the Law, it confirms it! The next several chapters will be devoted to showing how that is so.

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