

THE BEST IS A BUST

End of a career

As a college freshman, I played on the junior varsity baseball team. Although the pitching mostly overmatched me, I began hitting the ball better toward the end of the year. During one of our last games, I hit two balls as hard and as far as I could. In each case, I rounded first base, thinking that I had stroked at least a double, only to look up and see the centerfielder glide into position at the base of the warning track for an easy catch.

Those two at-bats portended the end of my baseball career. At the end of the year, I hung 'em up, as they say. My best wasn't good enough. The Jews, the best of humanity, sinned and fell short of the glory of God, just like the Gentiles. Whatever we consider the best—the best of humanity, the best in ourselves—will only demonstrate our need for the gospel.

Paul's purpose in Romans 1:18-3:20 is to demonstrate to Jewish and Gentile believers in Rome their mutual need for the gospel: the story and announcement concerning the lordship of Jesus Christ. Thus far he has demonstrated both Gentile need and Jewish failure to address the need. Now, in Romans 3:10-20, he demonstrates Jewish need. This is the sad story of the Jews, which mirrors the sad story of the Gentiles. In that Jewish sin is shown to be just like Gentile sin, the passage gives everyone a picture of himself.

But first, in Romans 3:1-9, Paul deals with questions arising from Jewish failure to meet the Gentile need.

Romans 3:1-20:

¹Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? ²Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God. ³What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? ⁴May 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.”**

⁵But 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.) ⁶May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world? ⁷But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner? ⁸And 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. ⁹What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;

¹⁰as it is written,

“THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;

¹¹**THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS,**

*THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;
¹²ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE,
 TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS;
 THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE.”
¹³“THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE,
 WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING,”
 “THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS”;
¹⁴“WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS”;
¹⁵“THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD,
¹⁶DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS,
¹⁷AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN.”
¹⁸“THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES.”
¹⁹Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God;
²⁰because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.*

Flawed reasoning

Paul’s argument in Romans 2, which challenged Jewish superiority, leads naturally to his questions in Romans 3:1. If possession of the Jewish Law and the identity marker of circumcision in and of themselves do not advantage the Jews, is there any advantage at all in being a Jew? Paul answers by singling out one such advantage. He will speak of other advantages beginning in Romans 9:4-5.

The Jews were “entrusted with the oracles of God.” God gave the Jews the law—indeed, all the scriptures—so that they would live in such a way that the rest of the world would experience God’s salvation. However, as Paul noted in Romans 2:24, God’s name was dishonored among the Gentiles because of the Jewish hypocrisy. Paul’s question in verse 3 concerns not Jewish unbelief *per se* but Jewish unfaithfulness to bring God’s salvation to the world.¹

Jewish unfaithfulness will not nullify the faithfulness of God to save the world from the horrible consequences of human rebellion against him. If “some” Jews were unfaithful, and even if “every” Jew, not to mention every other human, were a “liar,” or unfaithful, God would still be faithful to save the world. In fact, Jewish unfaithfulness serves to justify God’s judgment of Israel; he’s not judging people who are faithful.²

Jewish unrighteousness, which is akin to unfaithfulness, therefore demonstrates by contrast the righteousness of God: his faithfulness to save the world. If this is the case, isn’t God unrighteous, or unjust, to judge Jews? God would supposedly be ruling in his favor against those who have helped his cause. Some Jews might argue in this manner. But those same Jews would expect and want God to judge the world, and if they impugn his justice in one sphere, they’d be impugning his justice in every sphere, particularly the sphere in which they crave his justice.

If the Jews’ lie (their unfaithfulness and unrighteousness) not only demonstrated the truth of God (his faithfulness and righteousness) but also caused it to abound and brought him glory, then some might argue that he has no cause at all to judge them. Those who argue in this way might even endorse the doing of evil in order to promote God’s faithfulness and righteousness.

Paul has all along been debunking the line of reasoning that ends in this assertion. Such reasoning is articulated “in human terms,” according to flawed reasoning. It is so absurd that finally Paul doesn’t even refute it and says that God’s judgment of those who argue this way is quite obviously just.

In verses 3-8, Paul defends the righteousness and faithfulness of God. In Romans 3:21-26, he will show how God put his righteousness and faithfulness into action through the Jewish Messiah.

Rationalizing unfaithfulness

Paul engages in the intellectual arguments against the gospel. In an age when emotional experience is the measure of all things, we must still use the minds God gave us to think through the gospel and how it penetrates the issues of the day. Some of us will be on the front lines in this battle, but none of us is excused from service. If you excuse yourself from service, you’re excusing your mind. And if you excuse your mind, your mind may become a casualty.

What might the argument that Paul refutes look like today? The position of the Jews of old might be similar to the one that some in the church would put forward today. If the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God, followers of Jesus are entrusted with the entire word of God, culminating in the gospel, the message of salvation. We are charged, and empowered by the Holy Spirit, to live out the story of Jesus, loving the world as God loves it and even suffering for that love.

God has indeed put his righteousness and faithfulness to save the world into action through Jesus the Messiah, and now through the Spirit of Jesus in his people. It should comfort us that God will save the world even if we fail to live out the story of Jesus. He will even transform our failure into his glory.

Therefore, we should sit back and do nothing, right? Therefore, we should be unconcerned with failure to love, right? Therefore, we should even advocate failure, in that God’s faithfulness will be all the more evident against the backdrop of our unfaithfulness, right?

Those of us who are inclined to answer yes to such questions then need to proceed to another line of questions. Do we want God to judge tyrants? Do we want God to judge evil? Do we want God to right all wrongs? If we answer yes to these questions, and yes to the questions in the previous paragraph, we’re playing fast and loose with the justice of God. We want God to deal with evil elsewhere, but not in us.

We humans will go to outlandish lengths in order to justify ourselves. When we do so, we demonstrate that we’re not actually interested in the truth, only in pressing its borders in order to defend ourselves. Our arguments that rationalize unfaithfulness are refuted by the absurdity of their own logical conclusions.

We, the people of God, have a great advantage: We have been entrusted with the very oracles of God, culminating in the message of hope. Let’s not look for creative ways to be unfaithful to this trust. Instead, let’s look for ways, be they straightforward or creative, to be faithful to the task that God has given us.

Each of us has a part to play in living out the story of Jesus, and each part is a different one, according to the leading of the divine Director. We must therefore be sensitive to him, responding to his love, and not our guilt, as he moves us into place.

The case against all of us

Just as he did in verse 3, Paul starts verse 9 with the words, “What then.” Just as in verse 3, the question proceeds from the advantages that Paul claimed for the Jews in verse 2. If the Jews have advantages, Paul, speaking as a Jew, now asks whether the Jews are “better than” the Gentiles. The Jews are no better than the Gentiles concerning their relation to sin. All are subject to its power. Everyone sins and can’t stop sinning. Paul’s descriptions of both Jewish and Gentile sin in Romans 1:18-2:29 made that point.

His characterization of Jewish sin, however, was in the background. His main point, when speaking of the Jews, was that they failed to solve the problem of Gentile sin. So Paul closes his case against the Jews by directly accusing them of sin. Just like the Gentiles, they have rebelled against God. Paul calls the Jews’ own scriptures as witnesses against them, using the Psalms and Isaiah to compose a poem of three stanzas: verses 10-12, verses 13-14 and verses 15-18. Because Paul makes his case against the Jews in a universal way, mirroring his earlier case against the Gentiles, this is description of us all.

The first stanza demonstrates that we are violators of the most important command: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” The second and third stanzas testify that we are violators of the second most important command: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:30-31). Or, to put it in Paul’s terms, the first stanza highlights “ungodliness” and the second and third stanzas highlight “unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18).

The first stanza concerns relationship with God. In the climactic center, Paul pinpoints the essential problem: No one truly worships God, and all have turned to other gods. We’ve dethroned God and become the rebel rulers of our own lives. This explains our condition. It’s no wonder, then, that our understanding of truth is lacking and that we are unable to implement God’s good purposes out of love for him. The characterizations that open and close the stanza are apt: None is righteous, and no one does well.

Where relationship with God is an issue, relationship with others will be an issue. Because we reject what we were made for—God’s love for us—we embark on a desperate and idolatrous mission to meet our needs. Other people, then, are no longer viewed as being made in the image of God but as objects that meet needs. They fail us, of course. They block our agendas. They frustrate our desires.

Paul takes up human relationships in the second and third stanzas. Conflict among people results from rejection of God. The second stanza concerns speech. A throat that is an open grave—and the deceptive, poisonous and hateful words that come out of it—reveals the corruption in the heart.

If we think of ourselves as nicely put together, sooner or later our mouths will give us away. We’ll lie outright, or use more subtle forms of deceit. We’ll boast discreetly, hoping to win an admirer. We will flatter in order to better our position. If humility is valued, we’ll pretend to be humble. We’ll interject poisonous put-downs. We’ll gossip and say we’re speaking out of love. When more subtle forms fail, we’ll resort to outright cursing and bitterness.

Paul features paths of violence in the final stanza. Angry words, if they don’t achieve their aim, often give way to angry actions. Violence has marked human history from the beginning, with no end in sight. And if we ourselves have not committed

murder, Jesus reminds us that he who is angry with his brother is guilty (Matthew 5:21-22).

Depth of sin

Paul's description of Jewish sin, and human sin, is comprehensive: All are subject to the power of sin in a head-to-toe way. His case inveighs against sensibilities that have eliminated the whole concept of sin from the modern mindset. Categories such as good and evil don't register with today's world. Of course, we must learn to live in today's world, communicating the gospel in ways perhaps less traditional and more focused on the story and announcement concerning the lordship of Jesus. Nevertheless, there is such a thing as sin, even if we could learn to talk about it in different ways.

Paul's case also undercuts a shallow view of sin that confines it to isolated incidents and patterns. As scholar Richard Lovelace puts it, sin "is something much more akin to the psychological term complex: an organic network of compulsive attitudes, beliefs and behavior deeply rooted in our alienation from God."³

It's not a pretty picture, and every once in a while, God puts a mirror in front of even us nice church-going folks. We must see sin, and even sin in ourselves, for what it is.

Scholar N.T. Wright notes, "But, of course, if humans are not deeply sinful, the gospel is no longer astonishing; indeed, it is not good news at all, since there was no problem to which it was the shocking, startling answer. Tragically, just as those who do not understand history are condemned to repeat it, so those who turn a blind eye to wickedness are always in danger of perpetrating it. If there is no disease, why worry about the precautions, let alone the cure? If the human race is morally sound (no doubt with a few glitches here and there), we should eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we shall live."⁴

Summary statement

In verses 19-20, Paul summarizes his case against the Jews. His case derives from the law—not just the commandments or the first five books of the Old Testament, but the entire Old Testament. The passages from the Psalms and Isaiah testify against the Jews, "those who are under the law." A defendant closed his mouth, or it was closed for him, if he had no defense. Paul has already closed the mouths of the Gentiles and shown that they are "accountable to God," or guilty before him. He did not use the law to do this. On the other hand, he has used the law to show that the Jews too are in the dock. Therefore, "all the world" is guilty before God.

The works of the Jewish law, particularly circumcision, Sabbath keeping and food laws, were presumed by many Jews to mark them out as God's people over against the Gentiles. God does not, and never did, justify the Jews, or declare them to be his people, based on their adherence to the law. The law, if appealed to by the Jew as evidence of right standing with God, will only illustrate for them that they are guilty of sin just like the Gentiles. In fact, Paul just illustrated it for them in verses 10-18.

Paul's summary statement picks up themes from all three stanzas. The first stanza testified against the comprehensive nature of sin, so Paul speaks of "every" mouth, "all" the world and "no" flesh. The second stanza testified against open mouths, so Paul says

that the law closes every mouth—that no one can make a defense before God. The third stanza testified against paths of violence, which people traveled because there was no fear of God before “their eyes,” so Paul says that no one will be justified in God’s “sight.”

Paul is not saying that the Jews are worse than the Gentiles; he’s saying that they are no “better” than the Gentiles. His poem against the Jews matches his indictment of the Gentiles. The Jews also “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18). They also turn aside from God and worship idols (Romans 1:21-23). They also engage in antisocial behavior (Romans 1:28-32). Paul brilliantly describes sin in such a way throughout Romans 1:18-3:20 that neither Jews nor Gentiles at any point can say, “You’re guilty of that and we’re not.”

What might be considered the best of humanity—the Jews, who themselves tended to think of themselves as the best of humanity—have the same problem as everyone else: sin. And if they have the same problem, they will not be able to help the rest of the world with it. God will have to be righteous and faithful to save the world from sin in another way.

Paul gives evidence that he his thinking of another way of salvation in the texts that he employs. The wider contexts of psalms 14, 5, 140, 10, 36 and Isaiah 59 all depict desperate plights and appeals to God for deliverance. The appeals are made based on God’s righteousness, loyal love and faithfulness. For example, in Isaiah 59:15-20, God sees that he is the only one who can save his people from their plight. So he acts in righteousness to judge, to save and to renew his covenant with them.

Are we better than they?

If the Jews considered themselves the best hope for humanity, those in the church, Jews and Gentiles alike, might think that the torch has been passed to them. In one sense, it has. We carry the presence of God with us into this world. But we do so with the same problem that everyone else has: sin.

What undermines the gospel more than anything else is if we think and act as if we don’t have a problem, or as if our problem is smaller than everyone else’s problem. Followers of Jesus today are often immediately assumed to be hypocrites. Such a perception is not only sustained by moral failure among believers but by failure to acknowledge moral failure.

Are we better than they? Not at all. Every mouth is closed. All the world is accountable to God. We have no reason to feel morally superior. If anything, we have reason to feel morally inferior, because of our personal awareness of the weight of sin that would otherwise crush us if not for the gospel.

I have a friend whose neighbor often complained about the parking habits of both my friend and his visitors. When the neighbor’s son was visiting and could find no place to park, my friend offered his driveway. He realized later that his offer was not what it seemed—a “turn-the-other-cheek” gesture of kindness—but a stab of pride that conveyed the message, “I’m better than you.”

Sin is deep, pervasive and subtle all at the same time. And it’s in all of us. My friend’s neighbor needs the gospel. My friend, who believes the gospel, continues to need the gospel. We all need the gospel.

We've got a problem

If you've read from Romans 1:18-3:20, you know humanity has a problem. And you know what it is: sin. And you know that you're part of the problem, however you might otherwise judge yourself.

Paul's final sentence in verse 20 evokes two verses in a psalm in which David prays to God, "Answer me in your faithfulness, in your righteousness! And do not enter into judgment with your servant, for in your sight no man living is righteous" (Psalm 143:1-2).

In making his final case against humanity, Paul is hinting that the solution is close at hand, and that it is to be found in God's faithfulness and righteousness. Indeed, the solution is as close as his next sentence: "But now apart from the Law, the righteousness of God has been manifested ... "

Scott Grant / 2-5-06

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¹ The word translated "did not believe" (*apisteuo*) can also be translated "were unfaithful." The word translated "entrusted" in verse 2 (*pisteuo*) is the same word, but in a passive rather than active voice and without the letter that indicates negation. Untrustworthiness concerning what was entrusted is the point. The word translated "faithfulness," in connection with God, is also *pisteuo*.

² Paul quotes from Psalm 116:11 and Psalm 51:4 in verse 4. In Psalm 116, the psalmist accuses his persecutors of being liars. Paul sees God in the role of the righteous sufferer who faces false accusations. In Psalm 51, David, the Jewish king who represented Israel, acknowledged that God was justified in judging his sin.

³ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, © 1979 by InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Downers Grove, Ill. P. 88

⁴ N.T. Wright, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, © 2002 by Abingdon Press, Nashville, Tenn. P. 463.