

Faith's Value

Romans 3:1-8

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There are many ways of reckoning value in life. One way is to look at monetary value. Some things (like jewels and precious metals) are seen as having immense intrinsic value to people. These things can be traded for other things that are seen as valuable as well. If you have a handful of gold you may be able to trade it for a new car or something similar. But that is not the only way to reckon the value of something.

Many of us understand that some things have sentimental value. You may have items that belonged to family members who have died that you treasure, even though no one else would see them as valuable. For you, the value of these things isn't in how much money you can get for them, but in the memories the items bring up in your mind. Just because something doesn't have value in one sense, it doesn't mean it has no value whatsoever.

This is the point Paul makes in our passage today. For the last several weeks, Paul has been systematically showing us that the things on which we might rely to prove our righteousness before God are wholly unable to save us. If we trust in our goodness or religious rituals to make us right before God, then we are fools. Last week, Paul pointed out that even being a Jew had no value in terms of making a person right before God. Religious ritual, on its own, does not accomplish anything.

As we move into chapter 3, however, Paul anticipates some of the arguments people will make in response to the case he has been building. The first one seems like a natural response to what we saw at the end of chapter 2. The question is, if being Jewish (or religious) doesn't save you, then what value is there in it? That's the first of several questions Paul will address in our passage today.

Jewish Value?

We see the question Paul anticipates and his response to it in verses 1 and 2,

Then what's the advantage of being a Jew? Is there any value in the ceremony of circumcision? ² Yes, there are great benefits! First of all, the Jews were entrusted with the whole revelation of God. (Romans 3:1-2, NLT)

Since neither circumcision nor Jewishness on their own can save a person, is there any value to these things at all? Paul reminds us that there certainly is! He begins with "first of all", indicating that there are likely other things in this list of advantages, but he only lists one here. (Paul apparently got sidetracked by these questions, but will speak more of the advantages of the Jewish people in chapters 9-11.) His answer is that the Jewish people were entrusted with the whole revelation of God!

Paul points to the fact that since the Jewish people had the scriptures, they were at a distinct advantage to everyone else. Notice how Paul describes the scriptures here. He

describes them as the revelation of God. Paul does not describe the Bible as the words of men. How we view the Bible will determine the value we find in it. If it is merely the words of men, then we will view it alongside other great works of literature, looking to it for wisdom we agree with and can glean for our lives. But if we view it as the word of God, it leads to an entirely different approach. The Bible is not alongside every work of men, it stands above them. The Bible is true, whether we agree with it or not. It is the standard of truth against which all other things must be measured.

Being given the Word of God was a supreme advantage for the Jewish people, and it continues to be an advantage for people who subscribe to the Christian faith as well. Even if a person does not ultimately follow Jesus, there is value in knowing God's Word. It serves to teach us a few different things.

First, it reveals the nature of God. Paul pointed out in the first chapter of Romans that the existence of God is clearly evident in the world around us. Some people choose to suppress that truth because they don't like it. Others recognize that there must be a God, but they come up with all sorts of different ideas of what that means. The Bible, however, reveals to us not only that there is a God, but what He is like. It is not up to us to determine what we think God is like; He has revealed Himself to us. We know who He is and what He is like based on what the Bible tells us. That is a huge advantage.

Second, it reveals the nature of mankind. There are all sorts of ideas about what human beings are. Some say we are merely highly evolved animals. Others say we are gods and goddesses unto ourselves. Most would say that human beings are basically good. The Bible, however, eliminates any confusion about these things. The Bible tells us that human beings are a creation of God, and are therefore subject to Him. It reminds us that our existence is not primarily about us, but it is about God! We are not the main character in the story! And it tells us that we are all hopelessly sinful and fallen. The good news is that the Bible also tells us that human beings are designed to live forever, and we will either experience eternal life with God, or eternal death separated from Him. These truths have a profound impact on the way we view ourselves and our world.

Third, it gives us a standard of truth. Our world today is terribly confused. The reason is that we have abandoned the concept of objective truth—the notion that some things are true for all people, whether you embrace them or not. Our society today has bought into the lie that truth is different for each person, and we must each determine what is true for us. This has led to confusion about what constitutes a man or a woman, confusion about what things should or should not be done, and confusion about nearly every other topic under the sun. All of these problems are solved when we recognize there is an objective standard of truth. The Bible tells us clearly what is right and wrong and what is true and false. If you believe something that contradicts what the Bible says, then that does not make it true for you—it makes you deluded! It does not matter how you identify yourself, what matters is what God says! God's Word gives us truth on which to base our lives and against which to measure everything else.

Finally, it is the power of God to salvation. The Word of God contains the words of life. The Bible reveals God's plan to save human beings from their sin. It is only by embracing God's Word that people can find forgiveness of their sin and be made right with God. God continues to speak to us, grow us, and mold us through His Word.

Paul's point is this: even though religious activity does not save a person, there is still great value in being in the Jewish (or Christian) community. A huge part of that value comes from being privy to God's Word. God's Word can guide us and lead us. Even if a person never comes to trust in Jesus, they are still better off by knowing God's Word and being led by it. They will still be condemned, but they will have earned less wrath for themselves by living according to the light of God's Word. But there is also the advantage that when person is around God's Word, they continue to hear the truth, and as long as there is still breath in their lungs, there is time for them to embrace that truth. The person who has the truth of God's Word is at a distinct advantage to the person who does not.

God's Promises

But this raises the next question Paul anticipates,

³ True, some of them were unfaithful; but just because they were unfaithful, does that mean God will be unfaithful? ⁴ Of course not! Even if everyone else is a liar, God is true. As the Scriptures say about him, "You will be proved right in what you say, and you will win your case in court." (Romans 3:3-4, NLT)

Paul is anticipating the charge that God failed in His promises to the Jewish people. The argument might go like this: God promised to bless and protect the Jewish people. If He is now abandoning them because of their lack of faith, then it makes God a liar! On its face, the argument seems valid, but the problem is that it misrepresents the facts.

Throughout the Old Testament, God made promises to His people. He promised Abraham He would make him into a great nation and that through his offspring, all nations would be blessed. He promised David that one of his descendants would sit on the throne forever. These promises were made without condition—in other words, God promised to do these things simply because He is God. And He kept His promises. All nations have been blessed by Jesus (a descendant of Abraham) coming into the world. Similarly, Jesus was a descendant of David and is a king greater than David could have ever imagined, and He will sit on His throne forevermore.

But there was another set of promises made to the Israelite people during the time of Moses. God gave the Jewish people the law and told them that if they would follow Him, they would be blessed. But He also told them that if they turned their back on Him, they would be cursed. In Deuteronomy 28, these things are laid out clearly. So, God's rejection of the Jewish people does not demonstrate a failure on God's part, but a failure on the part of the Jews! God keeps His promises. This is good news for us. We have ample reason to be confident that what God has said in the past will indeed come to pass. But it is also a reminder to us that many promises are conditional upon our obedience to Him. We cannot assume that simply because we know God's promises

they automatically apply to us. This was the problem of the Jewish people, and the problem of many Christians today. God will keep His promises. We must make sure we put ourselves on the right side of them.

The Value of Sin

Once more, Paul anticipates another argument that someone might make in response to the things he has said so far. This time it is about sin and the way God chooses to deal with it.

⁵ “But,” some might say, “our sinfulness serves a good purpose, for it helps people see how righteous God is. Isn’t it unfair, then, for him to punish us?” (This is merely a human point of view.) ⁶ Of course not! If God were not entirely fair, how would he be qualified to judge the world? ⁷ “But,” someone might still argue, “how can God condemn me as a sinner if my dishonesty highlights his truthfulness and brings him more glory?” ⁸ And some people even slander us by claiming that we say, “The more we sin, the better it is!” Those who say such things deserve to be condemned. (Romans 3:5-8, NLT)

This is a more theological argument than Paul has made to this point, and it takes a little bit for us to wrap our heads around. A common question people ask is why did God permit sin in the first place? If sin is evil, and God is good, why would He create a world where evil can exist? There are many ways to answer this question, but one answer is that God permits sin because we come to understand His greatness when we see Him in comparison to us. Because sin exists, we get to see God’s holiness, justice, wrath, mercy, and grace.

Paul anticipates that some people may argue that if God’s glory is revealed by our sin, then isn’t it unfair for Him to punish us? The second conclusion takes this a step further, stating that the more we sin, the greater the contrast between us and God and therefore our increased sin is actually a good thing! Paul doesn’t even indulge these arguments, simply saying that those who make them deserve the condemnation that is coming to them. But I think there is some value in addressing these arguments, because it is sometimes a source of confusion for Christians as they try to wrestle with these concepts, and it has been the source of some dangerous false teaching in the church.

First, let us address the argument that it is unfair for God to punish our sin. This argument can go in one of two directions. **First, is that since God is in control, if we sin, it’s His fault, not ours.** The scriptures make it abundantly clear that this is not the case. God is in control of all of history. He is working out His purposes. He has had a plan from before the creation of the world and He will see that it comes to fruition. But at the same time, the scriptures also say we are responsible for our actions. We are told that we must choose whether we will serve God or not. We saw this even with the Israelites in Deuteronomy 28, when God basically told them that their fate was in their own hands. They could stand with God, or they could rebel against Him. God said they were responsible for the consequences of their choices. Just because God knows what we will choose to do (which is to rebel against Him) does not mean that we are not responsible for that choice. I might know what choice you will make in a given situation,

but that does not make me responsible for your choice. You are. The same is true with the Lord.

The second is that since our sin ultimately leads to His holiness being highlighted, God should not punish our sin. Once again, this misunderstands an important truth. Just because God is able to bring good out of evil deeds, it does not make those deeds any less evil. Rather, it is a testament to the fact that even our evil deeds cannot keep God from accomplishing His good purposes. Evil is always evil—even when God uses it for a good purpose.

The quintessential example of this would be Judas' betrayal of Jesus. Jesus' death and resurrection was the greatest thing that has ever happened, and it was God's plan from before the creation of the world that it would happen. Does that mean Judas is not responsible for His decision to betray the Lord? Does it make what Judas did right? Absolutely not! Judas' actions remain despicable and evil, and yet, God used them to accomplish His good purpose in spite of them.

This is the argument Paul is trying to shut down. Some people wrongly surmise that because God is in control, or that because He is gracious, then we don't need to worry about whether we obey Him or not. They proclaim that we have license to live any way we want, because no matter what, God will ensure that everything is ultimately good. This is a deliberate distortion of the truth! Evil will always be evil, and we will always be responsible for our choice to rebel against God. But thank God, His plans and purposes are not thwarted by our evil and foolish actions. We must not confuse these two points in our heads: Sin is *always* destructive, and God is *always* good. The fact that He can bring good even out of evil circumstances does not negate these truths.

Conclusion

As Paul has been building his argument, he has been trying to point us to the fact that if we are placing our confidence in anything we do to save ourselves, then it is misplaced. No matter how good we think we are, no matter what good things we think we have done, none of them can atone for our sin. Paul does not want there to be any ambiguity about this fact. But in our passage this morning, he was trying to prevent people from taking things too far in the opposite direction.

While our religious acts cannot save us, that does not mean they are worthless. On the contrary! God has ordained these things to benefit us, but we must hold them in their proper place. Circumcision, baptism, the Lord's Supper, these are all good things that have great value—they just have no means of saving us. If we recognize the benefits of the religious opportunities God has given to us, then it should drive us not to place our trust in them, but to trust Him and embrace the benefits He has given to us as well.

With that, let's recap the lessons Paul teaches us in these verses.

First, we should see the value of having access to God's Word. God has spoken to us, to guide us and instruct us! Our world today is so lost that they have no idea which

was is up or down. There are myriad examples of this all around us. People have no concept of how they should approach life, what their purpose is, or even who they are, let alone having the first clue about who God is (or even if He exists). All of this is a result of people in a predominately Christian nation choosing to ignore the Word of God that had been given to them. This was the same thing that happened to the Jews. They had God's revelation, but they ignored it. As Christians, we must not allow that to happen to us. We cannot change what the rest of our nation does, but we can change what we do. We have access to God's Word in a way that no generation has before. So, we must look to it to guide us, instruct us, and inform all that we do. We must work to make sure our lives align with what the Bible says. And in the places where we see a variance, or where we disagree with what it tells us, we must remember that we are wrong, not Him. If we will do that, we will enjoy the supreme benefits that come from having God's Word revealed to us.

Second, is that God is faithful, even when we are not. This is a supreme blessing as well. If you understand the message of the gospel even a little bit, you can begin to grasp why this is an important truth. We look at what we are given in Christ and we realize that we do not deserve it in the slightest. On our good days, sometimes we feel like it's appropriate (though even then, we're still far short of God's standard), but on our bad days, we become painfully aware of how much we receive more than we deserve. The temptation is for us, in times of failure, to assume that God will keep His promises because of our failures. Notice what Paul says in these verses—God remains faithful in all things. Our faithlessness does not nullify His faithfulness. This should not make us complacent or cause us to presume upon God's grace but should give us confidence to trust His goodness in those times when we are overwhelmed by the magnitude of our failure. We can pick ourselves up and run to the Lord for forgiveness, knowing that God's promises are *always* true.

Third, sin is always evil and destructive. God is a master at using evil to bring about His will. However, that does not make sin good or valuable. Sin always leads us away from Him. Grace should never be taken for granted. For Christians to conclude that it doesn't matter if we sin because God is gracious or because God will turn our evil deeds into good things is a gross distortion of the message of scripture. We must flee from sin, understanding that it is *always* destructive.

We've waded into some heavy theological waters this morning. I hope you see that how a person views these things will determine whether they will walk with God or are drifting. Our world is aimless because it has turned its back on the standard of truth. The way to get the most out of life is not to abandon the standard of truth but to build your life on it.

Paul wants us to value these things as we should. They cannot save us, only Christ can do that. But they can guide us, give us strength and hope, and help us to enjoy life as God intended. If we can get these things straight in our heads and our hearts, we'll find the blessing God intended for us, and Paul wants for us as well.

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