

# Romans 2:25-3:10 - Resisting Grace

---

## ROMANS SERMON #7

**October 22, 2017**

If you'd turn to Romans 2 today.

God is a God who is actively at work among us. He isn't a God who has abandoned humanity, or even who is taking a vacation from humanity until He comes back some-day and re-engages. He is actively at work among us today.

And the main work He is doing is creating new people for Himself, and creating a new people for Himself.

He is creating people who are new: who have come to know and trust Jesus and as a result have been forgiven of sin and made sons and daughters of God.

And He is creating a new people: people who, despite being very different in our backgrounds, cultures, and races, have now been united as the new people of God - a new human community that is bounded not by race or social status or educational achievements but by relationship with Christ.

But to make us new people and a new people, He has to do the painful and gracious work of pulling from our hands anything else we were hoping in to make us OK, to give us our identity, to give us our meaning, or that we trust in to make life worth living.

And he has to put down all self-righteousness and superiority that might separate us.

So He works through circumstances to both woo us to Himself, and to cause us to let go of everything we cling to in His place. He empties our hands so that we have the empty hand necessary to turn to Him to receive Christ and all of his benefits.

He'll make us poor in spirit so we can receive the kingdom of heaven.<sup>1</sup>

Which sounds great until he starts taking stuff away.

When God takes away from us the things we had hoped in, we tend to think He is not good, and not being faithful to His promises. This is because many of us have believed the subtle lies of prosperity preachers that teach that when God is working for our good he is filling our hands: with health, wealth, great relationships, perfect families, and victorious lives. We think that a good God must always give us everything we want and affirm us in our pursuits.

So we take that false view of God and those false promises of man, call them God's promises, and then when they don't pan out, we think God is not faithful. That He isn't true to His promises.

So we can become bitter against God because we think He took something good from us. All the while, He is being good in taking something that will hurt us away, and working to over-fulfill his promise. He takes things away from Christians only and always to give us something better in Himself.

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:3

And in Romans chapter 2, God is taking away something that is very precious to people: their hope in their religion. Nothing is more important to a person than their religion. Particularly when religion and culture and family are so closely tied together. This is striking at the heart of who a person is.

But remember, He is doing it to empty hands so they can cling to Christ and be made new people and a new people. He tears down to build up.

So far in Romans, Paul has indicted all of humanity and showing that everybody is desperately in need of Jesus. He shows us our idols that we have made to substitute for God, He shows us how all of humanity gets twisted and broken when sub Him out for something else. How we exchange his glory for some other glory and it takes away the flourishing of humanity. He holds a mirror up to us to bring us all to the realization that we have no hope but Christ.

Now when humanity is indicted for its evil, religious Jewish people are tempted to say, "Yeah that's right. Good thing God chose us to be his people and gave us his laws, gave us circumcision as a sign to set us apart, and made us different!" They thought we are the righteous ones, we are right, we are the answer to this problem.

Our nation, our people, our traditions, our religion are the solution. We are humanity's instructors, the guides to the blind. God gave us his law, and because we have it we are the solution.

But Paul, in order to erode their confidence in anything other than Christ, and to tear down the walls between Jews and Gentiles to make one new

people, says, "No, you are the problem too." Because you have a law that you don't keep, and your circumcision, a sign given to the Jews to set them apart as different, means nothing if your heart is unchanged:

**Romans 2:25 For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision. 26 So, if a man who is uncircumcised keeps the precepts of the law, will not his uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? 27 Then he who is physically uncircumcised but keeps the law will condemn you who have the written code and circumcision but break the law. 28 For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. 29 But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.**

He essentially says, "Your religion can't be the answer if you don't keep it! Your having the written code does nothing if you're not true to it. You need to be a whole new person internally, not just a good religious person on the outside.

Paul is offering incredibly good news here: you can be redeemed, you can be saved, but it won't be by outward observance. It's by trusting in the one true Israelite, Jesus, who came to pay for your sin. This is great news because it's free, just turn to Him and open the empty hand of faith and He is yours, with all of his benefits, all of his promises. Lay all of your religious efforts down and find something so much better in Christ.

But religion is one of those things we cling to that keeps us from embracing Christ and being made new. We forsake our own joy, our own freedom, our

own true righteousness because we don't want to let go of our religious achievements. Our clinging keeps us from freedom.

*There's an episode of the Simpsons where Homer gets his hand stuck in a vending machine trying to get a can of pop out of it. And a guy comes by to help him get it out and says, "Homer, are you just holding onto the can?" He says, "Your point being?"<sup>2</sup>*

To receive Christ and all of his benefits, you can only do it with an empty hand. You have to let go of everything else you are trusting in to be OK with God. And if you are clinging to religion as your righteousness, you won't cling to Christ.

But imagine how difficult it would be to get people to let go of religion. Because it means that the thing you have been most committed to and that you have given your life for doesn't get you anywhere. And those who haven't made the sacrifices can be right where you are.

*Imagine you set out to pay off your student loans. You started with \$100,000. in loans and over the last 10 years, you've worked side jobs, given up vacations, limited going out to eat, you've sold plasma and had garage sales and driven clunkers because you are fixed on that goal, managing every dollar to that end. Then finally, after 10 years of hustle, you write the last check and put it in the mailbox - you've worked hard and sacrificed for a significant season of your life to achieve something significant. That's a great feeling.*

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Simpsons*. "Marge on the Lam." Season 5 Episode 6. Directed by Mark Kirkland. Written by Matt Groening and James L. Brooks. Fox, November 4, 1993.

*And you go back in the house, turn on the news, and the first story they run is that a law has been passed that all student loans in the USA have been cancelled.*

*This means that the people who took a few vacations a year and posted them on instagram, ate out alot (posted their food on instagram), lived it up (posted their parties on instagram), and barely paid at all, defaulted on their loans, now have the exact same status you have. 10 years of hard work and sacrifice and you are no better off at all. Your efforts got you nowhere.*

*You would feel cheated. All of your work was for nothing, and now the hard workers and the hard partiers alike all have no student loan debt.*

*You would object to grace like that.*

And when the message of God's grace is preached, it says everyone who comes to Jesus has their debt cancelled. All of your moral efforts, and all of your religious observance didn't get you any closer to God than someone who was immoral or irreligious. But you just spent a significant portion of your life trying: trying to behave, going to church, reading the bible, praying, not indulging in sin. You've been straight laced, you've been disciplined. You've been noticed for your goodness, you were the all-star youth group kid, a person of integrity, an influential leader in your church. You've worked and achieved something.

And your neighbor, who spends his weeks wearing the beer helmet and his bathrobe, has cheated on his taxes and his wife, cuts corners on integrity, he's not refined, he doesn't speak Christianese or follow the rules Christians have made up, he keeps calling you bro. But hen repents and comes to faith

in Christ and his status with God is exactly the same as yours on day 1. No efforts, no resume', no history in church, no tenure and he is right there with you.

That kind of grace seems unfair. He shouldn't get what you get.

Or if you've been working at the company for 20 years and have a masters degree, and they just hired a high school kid on the same level. No!

GRACE STINKS when you think you've achieved something and deserve something.

Because of what you perceive to be your own good works, your own special place in God's plan, you might object to grace.

The people who are most afraid of the radical grace of God are the religious people who seem to have a decent spiritual resume'.

And Paul knows that preaching the good news of Jesus isn't always met with a celebration. It's often met with opposition - people who are looking for reasons that the message should be dismissed, because then their efforts, their heritage, their traditions are worth a lot more.

Paul knew this first-hand. He spent time talking to people. He would go to synagogues to preach Jesus, and he would say, in synagogue, "Your religion doesn't make you any better off with God." And he knows that religious people don't just eat up that message. It's met with defensiveness, anger, and questions. The news that we can have redemption without our good deeds isn't good news to everybody.

And having preached and debated in synagogues, Paul knows the questions he will get from the Jewish religious people when this Gospel is preached. And he spends the next few verses answering them.

Some of this for a few minutes will involve some complex arguments, some heady stuff, but we will come out of the weeds and show you how practical it is after that.

**FIRST QUESTION: *Romans 3:1-8* "Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? 2 Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.**

So if being a Jew makes us no better off on judgment day, what advantage is there in being a Jew? Why did we give our lives to what God called us to do in the Old Testament? Why the whole Old Testament? The nation of Israel? The laws, the customs - these were God given! What advantage are they if they don't make us better off with God or exempt us from judgment.

Paul says, "There are good things about being Jewish. And he says, "To begin with" or "first of all" like he's going to give them a list, but he only mentions one thing.

That's because he picks up the rest of the list in chapter 9. He is making a long drawn out argument here. So here he says it is great to be a Jew because you do have the oracles of God. They were given the word of God, the Old Testament. And, used rightly, that book showed them Jesus. It showed them who the Messiah would be, so it would be Jewish people who first recognized Him as the promised one. They had a Bible to point them to

Jesus - that's a tremendous gift, not to be taken lightly, and that was given to the jews.

When Paul completes the list in Romans 9 he says<sup>3</sup>:

**Romans 9:4-5 "They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. 5 To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen."**

From your people came Christ. That's the point of judaism! God gave you law, and you used that law to become self-righteous and feel like you don't need a savior. But used rightly, it points you to the savior. It points you to Jesus, and nothing is better than Jesus. So because you have been uniquely blessed with all of these pointers to Jesus, it's great that you're jewish.

Likewise with our religion. If we use all of our learning of the Bible the right way, to lead us to Jesus, then that's a great thing! But if we use it to become arrogant, or even just to feel the burden of laws and regulations without the relief that grace gives, then it will crush us.

So Paul is saying, "Your being a Jew has a lot of blessings that can come from it."

***SECOND QUESTION: 3 What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? 4 By no means! Let God***

---

<sup>3</sup> Piper, John. "Let God Be True Though Every Man a Liar" [desiringgod.org](https://www.desiringgod.org) (accessed 10/4/2017). <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/let-god-be-true-though-every-man-a-liar>

***be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, "That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged."***

So their question is this. Paul, you are saying that our being jewish by itself won't save us. Being a jew, being religious, doesn't make you right with God. But that sounds like God being unfaithful to Israel.

How could He ever judge them if he has promised to be faithful to them? Still you are saying that God gave his word to some people, He gave them circumcision, and then, even though they have those things from God, they haven't obeyed and God is going to judge them and they're going to be away from his presence forever. Isn't that God being unfaithful to them?

How could there be jewish people judged by God - how could that be a thing - if God is faithful to Israel.

Paul quotes from Psalm 51 in verse 4 here. ***"That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged."***

Psalm 51 was a Psalm of David. David was the truest Israelite there was, a man after God's own heart. Not only did he have the oracles of God, he got to write some. He's not just any jew, but the jew. The Tom Brady of judaism.

But David sinned horribly. He stole his friend's wife and slept with her, and to cover it all up he set it up so his friend, Uriah, would be killed in battle. It doesn't get darker than this. You can't be more self-centered, more deceptive, colder, or more cruel. The truest Israelite proves to be very very false.

**Psalm 51:1-4 "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my**

**transgressions.2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment."**

David prays, "God I've sinned against you. I've done what is evil, you can see it clearly, and when you judge me, if you condemn me, you are completely justified. You have not been wrong here, I have. You don't bear the blame here, I do. You are right to judge me."

And if God would be right to judge and condemn the truest Israelite, he wouldn't be wrong to judge any other Jews either. So when Paul is asked in the synagogue, "How can you say God is faithful if he will even condemn some Jewish people?", Paul answers with "David said God would be faithful to condemn him, and you don't get any more Jewish than David."

God is shown to be more true, more righteous, in judging a sinning religious person, not less righteous.

*When we see prominent Christian leaders fail, there are a couple of reactions. One is that people say, "You see, here's the guy who says God is faithful and that it's worth it to live for God and give up your idols. But obviously God isn't that glorious, otherwise he wouldn't have embezzled the money." God obviously wasn't that great to him. It can call into question the faithfulness of God.*

*But in reality, it proves the faithfulness of God. Others look at the same situation and say, "Look how faithful God is. He didn't let even him get away*

*with it! He exposed him, he judged him, he didn't show any favoritism, being a big name religious leader means nothing to God and God makes sure your sin will find you out! Praise God! God is true even though that guy was a liar."*

In the same way, David's sin actually showed how righteous God was! God didn't let him get away with it. God didn't play favorites. God wasn't going to do a cover-up and some image-management for the king that represented him - "this makes me look bad David, let's hide it." God judged it! God showed his glory in exposing David's sin. God is not less glorious when he judges a sinning Jew, but more glorious! In that way, even our sin brings glory to God's perfect holiness and justice.

So their hearts resist grace, they argue, and Paul gives a good answer. God is right to judge even a Jewish person, He is no less faithful when He does so.

Which brings up the next question. And these questions actually get more and more unreasonable.

When you're defending what is precious to you that God is taking away from you, you might start with logical questions and keep your cool. But when you run out of arguments, you get more and more unreasonable with them. There've been a number of times over the past years where we have been sitting across a table in an uncomfortable meeting confronting someone with a clear sin, and it begins with a conversation, with that person defending the actions or making a case for them. And then it collapses into them storming out of the room.

It becomes more emotional and less reasonable, exposing that it isn't reason that made you defend your position, it's a heart attachment. Anger and irrational explanations always show that we are defending something

precious, not just looking for the truth. They expose that we just want what we want.

So the next question is:

**THIRD QUESTION: 5 But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) 6 By no means! For then how could God judge the world? 7 But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?**

So their response to Paul's previous answer is "If God gets glory even when he punishes us for being unfaithful, is it right for God to punish us, if the thing He is punishing us for brings Him glory?"

The Jews had high hopes that God would one day come and judge the gentile world. The "day of the Lord's wrath" was a big part of their Bible, their narrative for where history was going. And they loved that he would judge in righteousness and set things right.

And Paul's answer to their question is, "You know he'll judge sinful people, you know that will glorify Him, you want him to be the judge. And if he can't judge people for sin because he is glorified when he judges sin, then there will be no judgment at all. So your argument stinks."

Not only that, Paul says, "But you are arguing against me right now, which means you think I'm lying. Would God be unjust to condemn me in my lies? You definitely think God would be right to judge me for the things I'm saying now, even though in your little argument my sins would glorify Him when he judged me. So you don't really believe your own argument."

And that would lead to the fourth question:

**FOURTH QUESTION:**

***8 And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.***

If God can be glorified when we sin, and would be wrong to judge us for something that glorifies him, why not just sin like crazy?

And Paul has had enough. He essentially says, "You can't be serious." Their condemnation is just. He doesn't even make an argument here. It would be like making a logical argument against a toddler throwing a temper tantrum at this point. He says, "I'm not gonna engage with that one." Paul refuses to descend into their chaos.

When people aren't being rational, a rational argument won't do the trick.

***FIFTH QUESTION: 9 What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, 10 as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one"***

Does religious observance get us any closer to God? No.

Because we are all under sin, none of us keep our standards. So just possessing the standard won't give us a leg up on judgment day. Your religion doesn't get you to God because even though you possess it, you are just as sinful as the irreligious people. In fact, in the Bible you have - in Psalm 14, it says there isn't anyone righteous.

Now I know that to us, this whole argument is foreign. Some of the reasoning is complex and the dialogue Paul has here was clearly driven by a

situation in the Jewish world when it was first being introduced to Christianity. We are in a different time and circumstance so this may not seem like the most relevant of passages to us.

But here's what hasn't changed: our religious hearts are often just as resistant to the message of grace. It is so counter-intuitive and contrary to the message we'd expect, even in church.

This message says that God loves both the duty-bound hard working moral people *and* the utter failures. He loves the go-getters and the couch-sitters

On a day when you wake up and read your Bible, pray, sing on the drive to work, witness to a co-worker at lunch, give blood on the way home, hop out of the car with a smile and play with your kids, Christian you are loved and accepted by God in Christ.

And on the day when you hit snooze too many times, get angry on the drive, blow your testimony with your co-workers, get home, are short-tempered with the family - you are loved and accepted by God in Christ.

It is Christ's righteousness that makes you right with God. His death that took your punishment.

And that doesn't seem right to us when we think we're having a decent day.

The message of the Gospel, of us receiving God's grace undeservedly in Jesus, means that all of history is not the story of God rewarding the good and punishing the bad. But coming to redeem the bad, because there is no one righteous. Every blessing we have from God is not a deserved blessing,

but it is grace. It is totally unmerited, undeserved blessing from God.

It's the message that, while loving our neighbors and pouring ourselves out for others is the calling on our lives, it isn't that doing that makes us OK. We are forgiven in Christ - and so, we are loved, and accepted, and received, and even rewarded because of Christ.

But we often show that we are resistant to that message, that we don't want to let go of our religion that tells us that we achieve and get rewarded and deserve something.

**1. You can see our resistance to grace in our envy.** We see someone prospering, at work, at church, in relationships, and we feel that's wrong and can't rejoice with them. Because they don't deserve it. And I do. **Am I no better off because of my efforts? Don't I deserve something from God?**

**2. You can see our resistance to grace in our smugness and arrogance.**

People who believe they've achieved can become proud. And when we think that our moral achievements makes us pretty good with God, we'll look down at others and hold our noses up. **Am I not better?**

**3. You can see our resistance to grace in our discouragement and dejection.**

We tend to think that God won't bless us, or love us, or use us anymore after we've failed. Something we've done or something we left undone will put us outside God's grace, will put distance between us and his church, or

will leave us feeling that there is no longer a use for us. We can't bring ourselves to believe in his rich and free and lavish and scandalous salvation that restores sinners like us and makes enemies sons and daughters. **Don't I need to do something to fix myself?**

**4. You can see our resistance to grace in our fear and anxiety.**

We believe that God won't be good to us in the future because we need to do more to earn that confidence. **I haven't been good enough to be confident that God will be for me tomorrow, or that He'll be there tomorrow.**

**5. You can see our resistance to grace in our living under constant religious pressure.**

The pressure to get it right in that one area of your Christian life:

- I have to be the best mom or dad
- I have to have the best kids to impress everybody
- I have to be the best scholar to always have the answers
- I have to be known as the best teacher

*I still vividly remember Superbowl 25 - 1990. The Bills are down by 1, they're driving. A bunch of scrambles and Thurman Thomas runs take them down to the Giants 29 yard line to set Scott Norwood up for a 47 yard field goal attempt with 8 seconds to go. This is the biggest moment in the history of Buffalo Sports. I know that's not saying much. But its a big deal.*

*There is, at this moment, immense pressure on Norwood.*

*If he makes this kick, seconds from now he is going to be hoisted up onto his teammates shoulders, interviewed for weeks, a hero in Buffalo, the stuff of legends.*

*If he misses, I'm going to be a crushed twelve year old kid trying to hide the*

tears.

*EVERYTHING RIDES on NORWOOD.*

*They line up, he makes the kick, Al Michaels with the call, "No good, wide right." And for years he struggled as he relived the moment, as his name became synonymous with that failure, as his identity was shattered by his failure under pressure.*

And for many of us, we just couldn't bare to think what it would mean for us if people knew our sins and failures, if people thought less of us because we didn't succeed as a mom, if we lost the house or lost the job or lost the popularity.

We live under tremendous pressure to succeed and keep up an appearance. And we just know we're going to fail and hear Al Michael's voice in our heads, "No good."

BUT GRACE - takes you very low and says, "You've already failed, you've already missed the kick. No good indeed"

But then it says, "And that's not who you are anymore."

It gives you a new identity that can't be achieved or lost based on your achievements. It gives you a guaranteed future. It gives you God as Father who will only always be for you - always, even in what He takes away from you, working for your good and his glory.

And the successes that matter are the successes of Christ. And they are yours.

Grace takes all the pressure off.

It says that just like Israel, we are untrue. We fall short. All have sinned.

But God is faithful. He became the one "true Israelite" Jesus to bring redemption. God's plan to save marched forward. Jesus is the hero.

And his redemption is free to anyone who will empty their hands of any other hope, and trust in Him.

This is counter-intuitive, but this is the message of the Gospel.

**Luke 18:9-14 "He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: 10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but he beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."**

Bulletin Notes:

Romans 2:25-3:10

Resisting Grace

- I. Emptied of Self-Righteousness (Romans 2:25-29)
- II. Arguing Against Grace (Romans 3:1-10)
- III. Our Resistance of Grace (Romans 3:1-10)

Discussion Questions for Small Groups

(Some Questions Adapted from John Stott's The Message of Romans)

1. Can you think of any magical charm or ceremony that people rely on today to exempt them from God's judgment, as some of the Jews in Paul's day relied on their circumcision?
2. If religious observance has no value in protecting from God's judgment, what value does it have?
3. What are the dangers inherent to religious observance?
4. What are some of the ways we demonstrate a failure to believe in God's radical grace?