

## ***The Faithfulness of God***

### ***Romans 3:1-8***

This morning's passage is Romans 3:1-8. In this passage Paul writes about the faithfulness of God. In August Brian gave a message entitled "God is Faithful" to wrap up the summer series on the attributes of God (see podcast for August 3). In that message Brian cited Wayne Grudem's statement about the faithfulness of God:

God's faithfulness means that God will always do what he has said and fulfill what he has promised. (*Systematic Theology*, p.195)

Because God is faithful He will always do what he has said and will always fulfill what he has promised. Today's passage challenges us to think about how God's faithfulness relates to our unfaithfulness. How do we experience God's faithfulness when we are unfaithful?

This is a relevant issue because at one time or another we all have a deep sense of being unfaithful to God. Sometimes there's habitual, repeated sin that dominates our lives. The Old Testament imagery of spiritual adultery describes it well: we're in covenant with God but we're cheating on Him with other gods, whether it's money, sex, pleasure, or power. Other times our unfaithfulness isn't so much a specific sin; it's more of a general apathy toward God. Instead of loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength, we're lukewarm.

If you find yourself unfaithful (due to disobedience or apathy), how should you think about the faithfulness of God? First, does it mean that God hasn't really been very faithful to you? Maybe if He had been more faithful, you would be more obedient and more zealous for Him? Second, does your unfaithfulness really matter? Maybe His faithfulness is so overwhelming that you really shouldn't even notice your unfaithfulness; you're saved and sealed and all is well.

In Romans 3:1-8 Paul gives us a perspective that allows us to think carefully about God's faithfulness as it relates to our unfaithfulness. At the end of chapter 2 Paul argued that even though they had the Law and circumcision, the Jewish nation failed to live out its calling as a light to the Gentiles. God is now fulfilling His purposes through those who come to Him through the new covenant, through those who have the law written on their hearts and who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. In light of this argument Paul anticipates certain objections that involve God's faithfulness. Romans 3:1-8 suggests two overarching principles about God's faithfulness in relation to human unfaithfulness.

***God's faithfulness is not compromised by our unfaithfulness. (Romans 3:1-4)***

In verse 1 Paul asks a couple of questions that might be asked in response to his argument of chapter 2 that the Jews failed to live out their calling.

1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? 2 Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.

In light of Israel's disobedience and subsequent judgment by God, is there really any advantage to being Jewish, having the Law and circumcision? A sarcastic person might say, "A lot of good it did them being in covenant with God!" Paul's quick response to the question of "What advantage has the Jew?" is "Great in every respect." If you thought that Paul was saying that the Jews would have been better off without the Law and without circumcision, you have misunderstood what he was saying.

The first (and only) reason he gives here is that "they were entrusted with the oracles of God." This is a reference to the statements and words that God spoke to the nation. The oracles would include the entirety of the Hebrew Scriptures. There was great advantage in being entrusted with God's oracles: for all who took them to heart, the oracles of God communicated how they should live and what they should expect from God.

In chapter 9 Paul will speak at length about the advantages of being Jewish by birth. There he writes this about his "kinsmen according to the flesh":

4 who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, 5 whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.

There was great advantage in being in covenant relationship with the one true living God. The last thing Paul mentions here is that "the Christ" - the promised Messiah! - was born in their midst and walked among them and paid for their sins. Being Jewish had **great** advantage.

Remember that the reason Paul is discussing all of this is because some might charge that being Jewish didn't do them any good. In verses 3 and 4 Paul anticipates the charge that Israel's unfaithfulness was really God's fault: that if God had been more faithful they wouldn't have been so rebellious. Let's try to follow Paul's logic here.

3 What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? 4 May 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."

Paul is being generous when he allows, "If **some** did not believe. . ." In chapter 9 Paul will point out that most Jews failed to believe the ultimate revelation of God in Christ Jesus. The verb translated "did not believe" could also be translated "were unfaithful": "If some were unfaithful, their unfaithfulness will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?" In other words, did their lack of faithfulness keep God from being faithful to His Word? The charge seems to be that if He were **really** faithful to the covenant with Israel He would have kept them from apostasy and from abandoning their calling.

Paul's response to this charge is quick and decisive. This is the first of nine times in the book of Romans where Paul asks a rhetorical question and answers it with an emphatic

“May it never be!” This is Paul’s way of screaming “Noooooo!” “Rather,” Paul writes, “let God be found true, though every man be found a liar.” Here again we see the contrast between God and humanity. This statement echoes the contrast in verse 3: even though Israel was unfaithful, God was faithful.

Significantly, Paul supports his argument by quoting from Psalm 51:4. This is a verse in which David is making this same contrast between himself and God; he (David) is guilty and God is blameless. You may remember that in Psalm 51 David is confessing to God his sin with Bathsheba. David had seen Bathsheba bathing on the roof of her house one afternoon and desired her. He sent for her and slept with her. When he found out she was pregnant he set in motion this plan that ultimately involved having Bathsheba’s husband being killed on the battlefield.

Here’s what David wrote in Psalm 51:4.

4 Against You, You only, I have sinned  
And done what is evil in Your sight,  
So that You are justified when You speak  
And blameless when You judge.

Even though David had sinned against Bathsheba and against her husband Uriah, ultimately his sin was against God. He acknowledges that God was personally wronged when he had said through his actions, “You are not Lord of my life; I am!” David admitted to God, “I have . . . done what is evil in Your sight.” Then he adds, “So that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge.” He was acknowledging that God couldn’t be faulted for what He said and did in response to David’s sin.

God was justified when He send Nathan the prophet to confront David about his sin with Bathsheba. God could not be blamed for judging David the way He did. In 2 Samuel 12:9-14 you can read the sentence that God pronounced on David and his household as a consequence of his sin. Even though the sentence was severe - involving public shame and even the death of his child - David declares that nobody could bring a valid charge against God.

When you think about it, David might have been tempted to accuse God of all sorts of injustice and unfaithfulness: “God, why did you allow me to see Bathsheba bathing on her roof in the first place? God, you knew that women have been a huge weakness of mine for a long time! And why didn’t you shield me from the consequences of my sin? Why did Bathsheba get pregnant and why was her husband so upright and moral that he wouldn’t fall for the cover-up? Why didn’t you intervene before I hatched a plot to have him killed?” David didn’t go down the road of accusing God of being unfaithful. He understood that God was faithful the entire time.

It turns out that one aspect of God’s faithfulness involves judging/disciplining His people for their sin. That was true for David, for the Jewish people in the old covenant, and for believers in Jesus Christ in the new covenant. Part of God being “true” to His word

involves disciplining His people when they disobey. This is reflected in passages such as Hebrews 12:4-6.

4 You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; 5 and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, Nor faint when you are reproved by Him; 6 For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, And He scourges every son whom He receives."

When we're being disciplined, we might misinterpret our heavenly Father's faithfulness as harshness (children of all ages do that). But that would be a mistake because **God is always faithful even when His people aren't**. God's faithfulness isn't compromised by our unfaithfulness.

Think of a way in which you either have been or are unfaithful to God. Perhaps you've been cheating on God in some way. . . or perhaps you've just been apathetic. Maybe you've even accused God of being less than faithful to You: "God, I've cried out to you to remove my sinful desires and You haven't answered my prayers. . . I'm not seeing your faithfulness." It may be that you need to look for God's faithfulness in new ways. Perhaps you need to see how God has been faithful to discipline you as a son/daughter of His. It may be that God is faithfully doing something in your heart that is much deeper than you imagined.

Honestly, when I think about "the faithfulness of God," I tend to think about God being faithful to provide for me, to fight my battles (and defeat my enemies), and generally to make my life more comfortable. When I'm in difficult or stressful situations, I tend to grumble and complain and wonder, "God, where are you?" But in retrospect, I have to say that God is in the middle of those very situations. In those situations He is faithful to humble me and teach me things I need to learn. In other words, that's when I experience His faithfulness in some deep ways.

In verses 5 through 8 Paul makes a complimentary point to the one he's already made in verses 1 through 4. This point anticipates a misapplication of the truth that God is faithful.

***God's faithfulness never enables our disobedience. (Romans 3:5-8)***

In verses 5 and 6 Paul writes this:

5 But 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.) 6 May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world?

In verse 5 Paul acknowledges the possibility that "our unrighteousness" might demonstrate "the righteousness of God" in the sense of "bringing it out more clearly" (NIV) by way of contrast. The logic Paul is refuting is rather twisted, but it seems

to be that someone is claiming, “Since my unrighteousness exposes just how righteous God is, it’s not such a bad thing. . . Since my sin puts God’s holiness in such bold relief, maybe I’m doing Him a favor. . . and He really shouldn’t judge me for my sin.” Paul almost apologizes for putting forth this way of thinking when he says parenthetically, “I am speaking in human terms” (i.e., I’m not speaking the mind of Christ).

His response is, “May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world?” In the Hebrew Bible it is a “given” that God is the “judge of the world” (Gen. 18:25). That was not even up for debate, and so any logic that suggested that God didn’t have a right to judge people for their sin could be dismissed out of hand. Nevertheless he puts forth a similar possible objection in verse 7:

7 But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner?

Before answering this question, Paul adds another related question that he rejects out of hand:

8 And 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.

Apparently this was an actual accusation that people had made against Paul’s “gospel of grace.” Some accused Paul of telling people, “If you do evil [i.e., if you sin], it will result in good.” We can understand how people might mistakenly misinterpret Paul because the gospel of grace was radically different from prevailing thoughts about how to know God. For example, in Romans 5:20 Paul will write:

20 The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,

Transgression increased under the Law in the sense that it magnified and even stimulated sinfulness. But when sin increased, grace super-increased. The grace of God that came in Christ Jesus far surpassed the sinfulness of humanity.

Some people charged that Paul’s gospel would lead to “moral anarchy” (Kruse’s phrase): If you teach people that Jesus has paid for all their sin, they’ll think they can live however they want! This is a variation on the question, “If God is faithful to forgive my sin, does it really matter if I’m faithful/obedient?” In Romans 6:1–2 confronts this misapplication of God’s grace very directly:

1 What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? 2 May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it?

I can hardly wait until we get to Romans 6. In this chapter the dominant image is that sin is slavery. Jesus died and rose from the dead so that we might be free from sin, not so that we might indulge in sin without consequence. Paul argues very compellingly that

the gospel doesn't lead to moral anarchy; it leads to obedience. Any other conclusion is a misunderstanding and misapplication of the faithfulness of God.

If you have ever thought, "This is a great set-up: God is good at forgiving people, and I'm good at sinning. We're a great match. . ." then you're not thinking rightly about God's faithfulness. I hope it's clear that God's faithfulness in no way enables our unfaithfulness. God is faithful to provide a way of escape when we're tempted (1 Corinthians 10:13); God is faithful to discipline us as our heavenly Father (Hebrews 12); and God is faithful and just to forgive us our sin and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Back in Romans 2:4 Paul warned us against presuming upon the riches of God's "kindness and tolerance and patience"; we need to remember that "the kindness of God" should "lead to repentance."

**Conclusion.** Romans 3:1-8 expands our understanding of God's faithfulness and ultimately opens us up to the possibility of experiencing God in new ways. When Philip Yancey was writing his book *Disappointment with God*, he interviewed people in some pretty desperate situations (physically and emotionally and spiritually) in order to understand how people become disappointed with God. One man he interviewed had been involved in a car accident years earlier that had left him disabled physically (he was impaired in his walking and in his vision). One of his biggest losses involved reading; whereas he used to be a voracious reader, he was now limited to recorded books (limited selection and much slower pace). On top of it all, his wife's cancer had returned.

When Yancey met this man for breakfast, he expected to find someone who was disappointed with God and (likely) angry with God. When Yancey asked him about his disappointment, this is what he replied:

To tell you the truth, Philip, I didn't feel any disappointment with God. . . The reason is this. I learned, first through my wife's illness and then especially through the accident, not to confuse God with life. I'm no stoic. I'm as upset about what happened to me as anyone could be. I feel free to curse the unfairness of life and to vent all my grief and anger. But I believe God feels the same way about that accident - grieved and angry. I don't blame him for what happened. . . .

I have learned to see beyond the physical reality in this world to the spiritual reality. We tend to think, 'Life should be fair because God is fair.' But God is not life. . .

I love the perspective that we shouldn't confuse God and life. That informs how we think about God's fairness; it also applies to how we think about God's faithfulness. No matter what we experience in this life, God is faithful. When we are unfaithful, God remains faithful.