

XV. Romans in Biblical Perspective
The Gospel of God
“True Religion—Advantage or Disadvantage?”
Romans 3:1–6
Dr. Harry L. Reeder III
June 20, 2021 • Sunday Morning Sermon

Let’s look at Romans 3. It’s God’s Word, inspired, inerrant, and infallible. This is our 15th study of the Gospel of God expounded by Paul in this letter to the Romans. Romans 3:1–8 says [1] *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. [3] What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? [4] By no means! Let God be true though everyone were a liar, as it is written, “That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.” [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? [8] And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.*

The grass withers, the flower fades, God’s Word abides forever and by His grace and mercy may His Word be preached for you.

The Apostle Paul continues to bring us to the reality of the Judgment Seat of God – the reality of our sins, our helplessness and our hopelessness. Ten of the 15 studies we have done on Romans have addressed the issue of judgment – from Romans 1:16 through Romans 3:23, so we’re not at the end of this yet. Paul continues to relentlessly bring the reality of the Judgment Seat and Divine indictment against everyone who stands in the Divine court of judgment and everyone will stand there, unless their names have been written in the Book of Life because they have come to Christ as their Lord and Savior to save them from their sins.

Paul has already given us a taste of what he will start unfolding in Romans 4 – those positive statements of the saving power and grace of the Lord Jesus. It is the Good News of God. He gave us a taste in Romans 1:16–17 which says [16] *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. [17] For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”* We are not saved by works but by faith in Christ for His righteousness, His work is what redeems us – His power to raise dead sinners to life. But the Good News isn’t going to be understood until the occasion for God’s wrath to be revealed which begins to be revealed starting in Romans 1:18. So Paul begins to tell us why this is Good News.

I want to give you some context for Romans 3:1–8 of the Gospel foundation that reveals there is none worthy of the new heavens and the new earth for we are all worthy of God’s judgment. Who will hear on the Day of Judgment ‘enter in to the new heavens and the new earth’ instead of ‘depart from Me (to Gehenna, the lake of fire)’? I want to try and frame Romans 1:18 to Romans 3:23 and framing has four sides.

The first thing is that Paul is relentlessly bringing us the reality that God’s wrath is being revealed now with measure as a warning of the Day to come, when God’s wrath will be revealed without measure. One reason Paul is doing this is because Jesus spoke more about the Judgment Day than anyone else in the Bible and Paul realizes the doctrine of the judgment isn’t simply

what one needs to understand to appreciate the Gospel, but this doctrine is foundational to the Gospel because you will not ever be brought up to be saved by grace until you're brought down to see you are helpless, hopeless sinner under the wrath of God. Now the grace of God that is greater than our sin is amazing. We all tend to try to attempt to deny this appointment as if it's not coming. Hebrews 9:27 says [27] *And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment.* this judgment has multiple purposes for it reveals who is the in the Book of Life, who is not, it will deal with the stewardship of believers and is doxological where it shows how much we have been saved – to the praise of God. It shows the reality of sin. There is one judgment with multiple dynamics and one Judge.

The second piece of the frame is that Paul is operating like a prosecuting attorney. He shows us that God is bringing everybody before the Divine bar of judgment to hear the verdict – guilty. There is none who is innocent or righteous, no not one. Romans 3:23 says [23] *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* Paul is doing this because he knows that unless you know that you will try to fix things yourself, instead of giving up on yourself, dying to yourself, confessing your sins and coming to Christ who saves us. I John 1:9 says [9] *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.* However, you won't confess until you know you're a sinner, you can't save yourself and that Christ who hates sin, loves to save sinners to be His people. That is why Paul, this prosecuting attorney is working every case against every one of us.

The third part of this frame is Paul is dismantling every false defense strategy that we may come up. He tells the pagan Gentile (those with the religion of irreligion) who thinks they don't have enough information that they live in the IMAX theater of God's glory in creation that shouts it out and pours it forth daily. Their problem isn't the lack of information but it's a heart problem for they suppress the truth in unrighteousness, for we were made to give Him glory and honor. Then Paul confronts the moralistic Gentile with the false man-made religion and exposes their hypocrisy. Their man-made religion will be the condemnation of them. Paul then confronts the Jew who is circumcised and know they are apart of the only nation that has a covenant with God. They know they have the ministries, signs and seals of true religion and there is this group plan they are depending on, bounded by true religion, but it only condemns them because they are looking to religion to do what it can't do, instead of looking to the One who gave them the true religion to lead them to Him. It is not the artifacts of true religion that saves you but the Architect of true religion and you must come to Him.

There are many in our day that are doing what the Jew here was doing in Paul's day thinking. James talks of true religion in his book. There are people who think they are a member of a certain Bible believing church saves them. There are those who think because they are baptized they are saved or because they have shared the Gospel with someone, or taught a Sunday school class or kept the nursery and all of those things can be wonderful evidences of your salvation where true religion provided the conduit but if you think the privileges and engagement of true religion saves you, then you are deceived unto condemnation. Look at me. I'm not going to heaven because I preach sermons from the Bible or have family devotions or lead a small group or even shared the Gospel with people and they have come to Christ. I can only go to heaven if I have come to Christ, confessed my sins and personally put my trust in Christ alone and that's what true religion is designed to do. Those privileges and ministries of true religion don't save you.

The fourth piece of the frame is that Paul is pointing you to the only Advocate and Defense Attorney for you – Jesus. Jesus cast down the accusations and the accuser of the

brethren. In Christ there is no charge. Romans 8:31–37 says [31] *What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?* [32] *He who did not spare his own Son but gave Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him graciously give us all things?* [33] *Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.* [34] *Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.* [35] *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?* [36] *As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”* [37] *No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.* Paul is doing this, not that you go to hell, but that you flee the wrath to come and that you don't go to irreligion, false religion or true religion to save yourself, but to go to Christ alone. That is why Joseph was told by the angel to call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.

I Timothy 1:15 says [15] *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.* Christ didn't just send a religious protocol that was true. He sent the religious truth and paradigms to bring you to Christ – to nurture you in Christ and to send you out to serve Christ.

I gave an illustration at the end of the last study I did on Romans from George Whitfield and I remember giving this same illustration in a small Presbyterian church I was speaking at. I got to the part when Lucifer was asked if there were any Presbyterians in hell and he said ‘Oh yes...’ and a little lady in the third row shouts out, ‘that's not right!’ Thankfully I had the opportunity to talk with her after the service but there is within many of us who think that if we're trained in evangelism and share the Gospel with people that we are saved. It's so amazing how easy it is for us to think what we do in false religion or true religion will save us. If it could His Son would not have gone to the cross for He would just say ‘buck up, do better.’ Now Paul knows the Jew and the Christian of today will say ‘then what advantage is there to having a good church or having true religion.

I want to share something that helped me. I am deeply appreciative of Charles Hodge, John Murray and Sinclair Ferguson's insights on this passage so I want to acknowledge that and give it to you in my own words. Why and how does Paul know every false strategy and false hope people are looking to? There are three reasons. Number one, he knows what they are because he knows the Word of God and in that Word people have had those strategies ever since the Garden – ignorance, false religion, or trying to make true religion a savior, instead of an instrument to lead us to the Savior.

Secondly, Paul has the Spirit of God inspiring him and thirdly, Paul is a good detective. I love this detective series that lasted four seasons and in over 500 cases I only know of one he didn't solve and he said ‘I haven't given up yet.’ It is interesting to note why he was so good as a detective and the give away was in the way they presented it. When he got to a crime scene he would put himself as the doer of the crime – where would I go, what would I do, what did I do. Then he knew how to track the criminal down. That is what Paul is doing. Paul knows the strategies because he knows himself. I love to connect the dots.

Who was the first martyr of the church? Stephen is the first martyr. He gives an incredible sermon in Acts 6. He appeared before the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees and all the Jewish ruling counsel. The Bible says in Acts 6:8–10, [8] *And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people.* [9] *Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians, and of the Alexandrians,*

and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen. [10] **But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.** Stephen dismantled every argument the Pharisees brought and the Pharisees were trusting their religion for their salvation. At this time, who was a part of the Sanhedrin, trained, ordained and was one who could not refute Stephen? It was Paul. Paul was more than happy to get Stephen killed and what Stephen did to Paul, Paul is doing for us relentlessly so that we would be brought down in order to be gloriously brought up in Christ alone.

Paul gives his testimony five times in the Bible and for different reasons he uses it. Here is what Paul says in Philippians 3:4–8, [4] *though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: [5] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; [6] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. [7] But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. [8] Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.* Paul basically had thought his true religion, ministries and circumcision would save him but now he counts it as loss in terms of saving himself. He now wants to know Him in the power of His resurrection. This is why Paul knows the Jew and where their tendency is. He is trying to tell them they are trusting in the wrong thing. He also knows they are thinking ‘if true religion can’t save the Jew then what good is it being a Jew or having true religion and what’s the advantage?’ I want to answer this by looking at our text of Scripture for this study in Romans 3.

Romans 3:1–2 says [1] *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.* Paul is telling us here that true religion is not the problem. The problem is what you think it can do instead of using it for what God intends it to do. The phrase ‘to begin with’ doesn’t mean first in sequence but first foundationally. How do you know the signs, seals, privileges and ministries? It is because God has given His people His Word. That is why the Reformation was so powerful because it understood sola scriptura – the Scriptures alone in supremacy, efficiency, inerrancy and infallibility of it as our only rule of faith and practice. Because of that we can now understand what we have and the value in true religion in every way when you’re based upon the Word of God.

What did Jesus say about the Word of God? He said in John 5:39–40, [39] *You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about Me, [40] yet you refuse to come to Me that you may have life.* The Word of God that brings us the sacred way of life in its accuracy, is there to bring you to Christ and that’s the purpose of it. Then he points out the Jews who put their faith in religion instead of Christ as he goes on.

Romans 3:3–4 says [3] *What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? [4] By no means! Let God 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.”*

Paul says God’s promises are true in Romans 3:4 and then goes to a quote from Psalm 51 written by King David which is merely highlighting the glory and majesty of God and His faithfulness. When He shows me my faithlessness that is not His lack of faithfulness for it’s His faithfulness telling me that I must be right with Him. Would anyone more than Paul know that? Paul is talking to the Jewish audience in particular taking someone they would be very familiar,

the great King David who was a great sinner. He commits adultery and through conspiracy murders the husband of the woman whom he is committing adultery with. David is in the midst of true religion with the blessings of God's providence, his victories and his being delivered from Saul. Then instead of humility he rises up in arrogance. To get rid of the guilt he won't confess, he'll just get rid of the man. What does God do in true religion? God has preachers – who know they don't get saved by their fame or true religion but by confessing your sins and casting yourself on Christ, the God of grace. God used this non-descript preacher named Nathan to come to David. Nathan ends his sermon to David with this illustration in II Samuel 12.

II Samuel 12:1–7a says [1] *And the LORD sent Nathan to David. He came to him and said to him, "There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. [2] The rich man had very many flocks and herds, [3] but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. And he brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children. It used to eat of his morsel and drink from his cup and lie in his arms, and it was like a daughter to him. [4] Now there came a traveler to the rich man, and he was unwilling to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the guest who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him."* [5] *Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man, and he said to Nathan, "As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die, [6] and he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity."* [7a] *Nathan said to David, "You are the man!"*

Nathan preached the Word and there is the blessing of true religion. The wonderful blessings of true religion can't save but they do what they ought to do which is to point you to the Savior. The blessings of true religion can't save you but they can nurture you when you get off track. David ends up writing the greatest statement of repentance in the Bible which is Psalm 51. He acknowledges the righteousness and truthfulness of God. He confesses his own sin and doesn't say 'God patch me up.' David says in Psalm 51:9–10, [9] *Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. [10] Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.* God gloriously redeems and restores David. See the advantage of true religion used truly for the artifacts bring you to the Architect.

Then David writes another great Psalm – Psalm 32. You can almost feel it for David starts out in Psalm 32:1–2, [1] *Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. [2] Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit.* In that Lord is life evermore. Some of the advantages of true religion are those small groups, those accountability groups, those congregational communities, the preaching of God's Word even with all the inadequacies of the preacher there is the Spirit of God, the worship of God in spirit and in truth, the confession of sin and all of those things. These are all designed to bring you to the Savior, grow you in the Savior and send you for the Savior and those are the advantages which are great. Then Paul goes on to finish his thoughts in a personal way by his use of pronouns.

Romans 3:5–8 says [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? [8] And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.*

Paul is speaking to us here from personal experience and he saw this through Stephen. Paul's hope used to be in true religion instead of the God who designed true religion to bring you

to Himself. Paul saw what others were going to say because he used to be the criminal and he said and then God showed him his hope was in the wrong the place. As the hymn writer says;
*My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus blood and righteousness
I dare not trust the sweetest frame
But wholly lean on Jesus' Name*

*On the Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand,
All other ground is sinking sand.*

Paul says we were saved by grace in Christ and it's not our obedience that saves us. Paul is really saying 'just go sin if you want to because God's grace is greater than sin.' If there is a bucket of sin God has two buckets of grace and then Paul says in response to that 'how can we who have died to sin still live in it.' The answer to get your obedience intentional is not to make you think your obedience saves you but for you to know your obedience is being given to your sufficient Savior who alone saves you.

Here's the takeaway. True religion is a gift from God for His people and therefore an advantage in every way unless it is used the wrong way, for then it becomes a tragedy – a disadvantage, if your hope is in a religion. The artifacts of true religion are crucial to bring you to Christ and grow you in Christ, but they can't be Christ – only Christ can save you. True religion brings us to Christ as Lord and Savior, it matures us in Christ, it mobilizes us for Christ, but it can't do what Christ alone can do and that is save you from your sins.

In 1983, Briarwood sent me as a church planter to Charlotte, North Carolina with 38 others and that became Christ Covenant. I remember a man asking me when I got there 'who is your target for this church – the church or unchurched?' I said 'What? I'm going after sinners.' In Charlotte, a lot of people are churching but they're just not saved. I'm not talking just about false churches but it's possible to get into a true church that is being faithful to Christ and you can get inoculated in the churchianity just enough to keep you from Christianity – Christ.

If you belong to Christ by faith and repentance then you are saved from your sins. If you do not belong to Christ by faith and repentance, whether you're inside or outside of a Bible believing church, you are lost and you need to come to Jesus. The church is there to pray for you, call you and plead with you to come to Christ. I thank God for the glorious true religion that is manifested in New Testament faithful churches – God-glorify, Christ-exalting, Bible preaching, discipleship teaching, praying consistently churches. These churches are an advantage so be in them as members with one another but don't make them a disadvantage by thinking they can save you. They cannot for only Christ can save you.

I was saved out of a drug problem for I was drug to church every Sunday morning, every Sunday evening and every Wednesday evening. My grandfather was on the Billy Graham team. My dad and mom went forward with me in their arms at the first evangelistic Billy Graham Crusade in Charlotte. I had all of this all around me but I just didn't have Jesus and at age 20 God broke into my life. I don't know how old you are but if you think being in the orbit of true religion is going to save you I'm praying God will break into your life before the Day of Judgment when there is no opportunity for salvation. I don't want you to get there thinking that is your defense. Your defense is that you know Christ and by Christ's blood you are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. That's why we have true religion and why we are engaged in it – it's to come to Christ, grow in Christ and then go for Christ. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. If today you have not yet come to Christ and you would like to talk and/or pray with someone, please call us here at Briarwood at (205) 776-5200. Perhaps God has broken through and you know whether it was inadvertently or purposefully, self deception has made you think you're saved because you're in a church. We get saved because the church points us to Christ in Christ and may I call you to that Savior today. Praise the Lord Briarwood is a true church, not perfect but true, trying to grow and wants you to grow, but the first thing Briarwood is here to do is to point you, not to us but to Him. Come to Christ this day, we are here to pray with you. God, also help Your people grow. Help us to be faithful in the pursuit of true religion which never offers itself in place of Christ, but gives ourselves to bring men and women to Christ, to grow them in Christ and to send them out for Christ. Thank You for the blessed advantages to be with Your people, in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

Life Takeaways

True Religion is a gift from God for His people and therefore an Advantage in "every way" unless it is used the wrong way, then it becomes a tragic Disadvantage.

True Religion is designed to bring us to Christ as Lord and Savior; mature us in Christ and mobilize us for Christ.

But true religion cannot do what Christ alone can do—save you from you from your sins.