The Advantages Of Religion
Romans 3:1-8

Introduction

Religious people are the most difficult people to reach with the gospel of grace. Why? Because religious people are often content with being religious. Religious people think of themselves as basically 'good' people. Religious people don't even mind talking about religion. Just make sure it doesn't get personal. To paraphrase Matthew 22:14, "Many are cold and few are frozen". Mark Twain put it this way, "Having spent considerable time with good people, I can understand why Jesus liked to be with tax-collectors and sinners". But even sinners get uncomfortable when Jesus begins to deal with their sin.

Like the woman at the well with Jesus. When Jesus started to focus in on her circumstances she wanted to argue about religion. Religious people think or imagine they are exempt from judgment. The Jewish people thought they were exempt because they were Abraham's children (Jn.8:22 "We are Abraham's seed"). Because they possessed the law. Because they were circumcised (performed a religious ritual).

The influential theologian Karl Barth said, "Religion is unbelief. It is a concern, indeed we must say that it is the one great concern of godless man. . .It is the attempted replacement of a divine work by a human manufacture". In other words religion is man's attempt to answer the questions and satisfy the longings of a sinful heart by any means other than God's revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Simply put-religion is man's attempt to find God or perhaps to even try to be God. Christianity by contrast is God's attempt to rescue man and in Christ deliver man from his sin and reconcile him or her to his or her Creator.

Blaise Pascal wrote; "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction".

In Paul's day, the Jewish people were perhaps the most religious people in the world! In the beginning of the book of Romans Paul is trying to demonstrate that the whole world is guilty before a holy and a righteous God. Everyone knows bad people are guilty before God. But what about good people? What about moral people? What about religious people?

How can Paul say his own Jewish people were guilty before God? Disobedience to God was the one sin the vast majority of Jewish people were unwilling to confess! The one sin religious people are unwilling to confess is being bad! The other sin religious people are reluctant to confess is guilt before a righteous God.

Paul has marched into the courtroom four witnesses to prove the guilt of the Jewish nation. The first witness was the Gentiles (2:1-3). The second witness was God's blessing (vv.4-11). The third witness was God's law (vv.12-24). The final witness was circumcision (the covenant of relationship)(vv.25-29).
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In Paul's hypothetical debate he asks and answers three important questions. Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe puts it this way:

1. What advantage is it to be a Jew? The answer; every advantage since they possessed the Word of God.
2. Will Jewish unbelief cancel God's faithfulness? The answer: absolutely not--rather it establishes it.
3. "If our sin commends His righteousness, how can he judge us? The answer: We do not do evil that good may come of it. God judges the world righteously" (see TBEC vol.1 p.521).

Some of you may remember the story of the Emperor's new clothes. A certain Emperor was so fond of clothes and appearances he commissioned some clever philosophers (con men) to make a new wardrobe. They offered to weave him a rare and costly garment. The unique thing about this garment--it would be invisible except to the wise and pure of heart. The delighted emporor sat them down before empty looms and watched as they pretended to weave invisible thread. Soon the Emperor became curious and sent his chief counsel to assess the progress. Not wanting to be thought unwise or impure he pretended to see the invisible cloth! After a while the weavers wanted more money, so the emperor sent another advisor to access the progress. This man came back with an even more enthusiastic report. Finally the Emperor went himself. He saw nothing. But he did not want to appear stupid so he proclaimed the new clothing excellent and then gave the fake weavers medals. Finally the day was set for the grand parade and the con men dressed the emperor in his nakedness and then skipped town. As the Emporor paraded before the populace in the buff--sky clad--nude--the whole populace praised the Emperor's clothes--because they did not want to be perceived as fools. The absurd parade continued until finally a little child was heard to say, "The emperor has no clothes!" At once everyone knew the truth. The innocent and honest remark by a small child who did not know enough to keep her mouth shut stripped away the hypocritical pretence of the entire nation (see Kent Huges illust. Pp.71-72 Romans commentary).

Keep this story in mind as we pause in chapter 3 of Romans. Who is Paul's audience? Jews who have converted to Christ, Romans who have come to Christ, Jews and pagans who are investigating Christianity and Christ. Many of these people had varied religious backgrounds. Many Jews and pagans imagined themselves to be clothed in righteous garments that were non-existent. Some were deluded with false religious confidence. So Paul, like the little girl--has the nerve to say they are really naked. Paul is stripping away the layers of religious delusion. They believed because they had the Word of God they were safe. "They saw themselves as guides to the blind, correctors of the foolish, teachers of the immature"(Rom.2:19-20)(Kent Hughes p.72).
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What does Paul do? He strips away their religious robes. Paul proves having God's word is not the same as obeying it—and is therefore no guarantee of eternal life. Paul also peels back the layer of religious ritual and religious affiliation. But we are not immune. What Paul does to his fellow Jews—he does to us—he strips us of our false confidence in religion, ritual and affiliation.

The Advantage Of Being A Jew (vv.1-2)

What is the advantage of being a Jew (religious person)? What value is there in circumcision (being baptized, religious ritual)? We might phrase the question a little differently. What advantage is there to religious affiliation, or baptism or church membership? If Church membership can't save us, and if simply having the Bible can't save us—what good is it to go to church or read a Bible?

Are there advantages to being raised in a Christian home, a Christian church?

There are solid—substantial advantages to being raised a Jew—and being raised in a Christian home. Paul addresses those advantages in verses 1-2; 3-8 and verses 9-20 (which we will look at the next time we study together).

(v.2) "Much in every way!" Paul reminds them—the biggest reason—the oracles of God were committed to them!

What are the oracles of God? I believe Paul is making reference to the entire Old Testament. The Greek word for Oracles is *logion*—the diminutive form of the common word *logos*. He may be referring to the prophetic element—the oracles concerning Jesus Christ the Messiah. The Jews ought to have known Jesus when he showed up on their doorstep. Their very advantage became their disadvantage! Why? Because they did not believe in Jesus Christ when he came!

We have the revelation of the identity, nature, and purpose of God! "Show me God!" "Show them Jesus". What kind of God does the Bible reveal?

We have the revelation of the identity, nature and purpose of man. We are told about the problem of sin and God's solution. The Bible reveals our radical corruption and God's radical righteousness. The ultimate advantage of God's oracles—we have written directions as to what is required of mankind—to have a right relationship with God.

Matthew 22:37-38; "Jesus said to him, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." 38 "This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself". On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."
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Mark 12:30 adds "strength". The quote is from Deut. 6:5, part of the shema (Heb. For hear") Deuteronomy 6:4; “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!

Jesus then quotes Leviticus 19:18; ‘You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD’.

We measure our love for others by what we wish for ourselves--hence--do to others as you would have them do to you (the golden rule Matt.7:12).

Jesus declares the whole moral duty of mankind is found in two categories, love for God and love for one's neighbors (the first four commandments) love of God (and love for mankind (the last six in the decalogue).

These arguments raced through his lawyer's mind, he had heard all the objections before. In other conversations in other places Paul had gotten into deep trouble. These kinds of words had gotten him beaten in Phillipi and stoned in Lystra. There is an old saying among lawyers; "if the law is in your favor, argue the law, if the facts are in your favor, argue the facts, if neither the law or the facts are in your favor, argue. And that's what religious people do--they argue--because the neither the Bible (the law) or the gospel of Jesus Christ (the facts) are in their favor!

The Advantage Of Unbelief (vv.3-4)

Now Paul must deal with a few more objections. "What if some people did not have faith?" Does Jewish unbelief cancel out God's faithfulness? This may sound like a kind of wild objection! Let me try to make it a little clearer. In Paul's imaginary dialogue--he is basically saying, wait a minute--if we Jews have failed so miserably as God's chosen people--how can you say it is an advantage to be a Jew? Does the fact that a few Jews rejected the Messiah--cancel out the advantage of having the oracles? Doesn't God have to keep his promises--even if we don't?

We might say--if I have failed so miserably as a Christian--what advantage is their to being a Christian? If we have failed like you insist--then God's word is powerless and he is unfaithful. Have you ever said that? God's Word is powerless. God is unfaithful. He said He would change me--but he didn't. I'm still the same.

(v.4) Paul's answer-- No way Jose. Not at all. Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written, "So that you may be proved right in your words and prevail in your judging". Do you know who Paul is quoting? He is quoting the repentant words of David after his sin with Bathsheba. David affirms God's justice and gives proof God remains faithful--no matter how unfaithful we are! The objection is illogical. But it is also wicked--and clever. The Jew took the Scripture--twisted it out of shape and made a
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terrible thing. If our unrighteousness makes God look better--can we be blamed for our sin?

You are wrong. God is always right.

Job 40:6-8; "Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said:7 “Now prepare yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer Me:8 “Would you indeed annul My judgment? Would you condemn Me that you may be justified?

The Advantage Of Sin (vv.5-8)

Paul now lists another objection the reader might be thinking! "If our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unjust who inflig you acts wrath? If our sin--demonstrates or commends his righteousness--why then does God judge us? Do you understand the accusation? God is accused of using the Jew to his advantage!

Do you ever think God is taking advantage of you to make a point? Is God using you as an example of what it means to be a failure--just to prove His righteousness? In other words--God is accused of unrighteousness and has no right to judge!!!

We might translate verses seven and eight this way;

Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" Why not say--as we are being sladerously reported as saying and as some claim that we say--'Let us do evil that good may result?" Think about how base this argument is--"What you are saying Paul--is an incentive to sin. If being bad makes God look good, we will be bad so he looks good".

The slander---the gospel of grace leads to license. If you really believe in faith and grace alone--why--people will take advantage of it--and use it as an excuse to sin like drunken sailors on leave.

You would think most people would recognize the absurdity of this argument. The person who makes such a claim simply disregards the difference between good and evil. Paul doesn't even answer it, but rather simply says, "Their condemnation is deserved".

Paul takes their argument to its logical conclusion. "The end justifies the means". It does not matter what you do--just so long--in the end--everything turns out good!

Anybody that stupid deserves to burn. These are foolish irrational arguements. But sin makes you stupid. What is Paul's point?
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(v.8) "as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm we say". Why did Paul say that? What does it mean? Paul taught salvation by grace alone, faith alone, in Christ alone. Grace apart from works. So the Jews used this doctrine against Paul. In effect they were accusing Paul of teaching the more you sin--the more good that comes out of it, the more you sin, the more grace God must lavish upon you. Paul turns their argument back on them! Whose condemnation is just?

Conclusion

What are we to make of all this? Argument can't save you. Legalism can't save you. License to sin can't save you. Many well meaning Christians want to keep the Law. Many well meaning people want to impose the Law on Christians. Their argument--"if you don't teach people to keep the Law they will run around and sin like sailors on leave. The very Jews who rejected Christ continued to accept the Law and depend on the Law and religious ritual.

So it is with the Christian. The Christian who trusts in being born in a Christian home, having Christian parents, going to a Christian church, engaging in Christian rituals, like baptism and communion. You might think--"I've kept the ten commandments" (no you haven't you have broken every one of them--because if you have broken one--you have broken all). There is no refugee for the sinner in keeping the law, in church rules, in human birth, no matter how good you think you are. Paul's conclusion--all are under sin.

Now we can praise God! Why? Because there is a solution for our sin and a refugee for ourselves--Jesus Christ the Lord. He is the way of escape.

Can faith in Christ and grace produce righteous? The answer is yes!

There are people who do not want us to be free. They don't want us to be free before God, accepted just as we are by his grace. They don't want us to be free to express our faith originally and creatively in the world. They ... insist that all look alike, talk alike and act alike, thus validating one another's worth. Without being aware of it we become anxious about what others will say about us, obsessively concerned about what others think we should do. We no longer live the good news but anxiously try to memorize and recite the script that someone else has assigned to us. We may be secure, but we will not be free.

Eugene Peterson

There's a little Pharisee in all of us. Harmful though it is, we find a lot of security in our iron bars and solid walls.... Tragically, this ball-and-chain mentality keeps us from giving ourselves in fresh, innovative ways to others.

Charles R. Swindoll (1934- )
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