

\* These notes are provided for personal devotional and study purposes only. They may not be published, distributed, or disseminated to others without the permission of the author.

**Religion: Privilege and Presumption**

**Romans 3.1-8**

**Series: The Pure Gospel**

**Rev. Andrew Hawkins, Ph.D.**

**The Village Church**

**August 13, 2023**

I. Introduction

A. Do you talk to yourself?

1. Really, do you have conversations with yourself?
2. It's ok, really
  - a. You're in good company
  - b. Most people, whether they admit it or not, talk to themselves
3. And most people debate with themselves
  - a. They say, "I should do such and such"
  - b. "But if I do such and such, this or that may happen, and that won't be good"
  - c. "So if I do this other thing, it may turn out better"
  - d. "But there are risks for doing this other thing"
  - e. "So maybe I'm safer and better off in the long run if I do such and such"
  - f. And the debate goes on
4. And for some people, the verbal processors among us, have these debates out loud!
  - a. And that's ok too!
  - b. In fact, the Bible encourages that kind of self-talk
5. **Psalm 42:5-6 (ESV)** —
  - a. 5 Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?
  - b. Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation 6 and my God.
  - c. My soul is cast down within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar.
6. So, you have your pastor's permission to talk to yourself

B. It's ok even to argue with yourself

1. Especially if you are a believer
  - a. Because you have the Spirit of God dwelling in you
  - b. But you also have the flesh, the residue of the sinful nature operating in your members as well
  - c. So every Christian ends up arguing with yourself from time to time
2. Just make sure the Spirit of God wins the argument
3. So it's ok to talk to yourself, and even to argue with yourself

- C. It pushes the envelope a little bit, however, if you talk to your imaginary friend
1. Do you have an imaginary friend?
    - a. That can get a little creepy
    - b. There are psychological conditions, aberrant states of mind, that have clinical diagnoses if you really do have imaginary friends
  2. But sometimes, when your mental state is rooted in reality, it's appropriate to pretend, at least, that you have an imaginary friend
    - a. Or even an imaginary enemy
    - b. And that you imagine what you would say to your imaginary friend, or imaginary enemy, when certain topics of conversation come up
    - c. That if your imaginary friend or enemy would say this, then you might respond and say that
    - d. And you might imagine that your friend or enemy would then say this in response to you
    - e. And you would respond and say this other thing
    - f. And on the conversation would go on
  3. As long as you know your friend, or enemy, is imaginary – and that you can easily return to reality – that's ok
    - a. In fact, that's the way we work out a lot of our positions on issues
    - b. By having these debates with our imaginary friends, or enemies
- D. In fact, Paul, who is the author of Romans, the book we're studying together, has developed conversations with imaginary friends and enemies into a literary art form
1. And we see it used in Romans in spades
    - a. And it emerges most notably in today's passage
  2. Back in Romans 2 Paul has assiduously (carefully, diligently) argued that everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, are under sin
  3. **Romans 2:12** (ESV) —
    - a. 12 For all who have sinned without the law [Gentiles] will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law [Jews] will be judged by the law.
  4. **Romans 2:28–29** (ESV) —
    - a. 28 For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.
    - b. 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.
  5. Then Paul has a conversation with an imaginary friend
- E. **Romans 3:1–8** (ESV) —
1. Friend: 1 Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?
    - a. “Wait! I’ve been a Jew all my life. I’ve followed the practices, observed the feasts and festivals. I’ve been circumcised. What was the point of all of that if we’re no different than the Gentiles?”

- b. That's not Paul saying this
  - c. That's Paul's imaginary Jewish friend saying this
  - d. Paul's imagining that this would be the response of most of his Jewish friends
  - e. So he puts the words in the mouths of his imaginary friends
2. Paul: 2 Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.
- a. This is Paul's answer to his imaginary Jewish friend
  - b. You have an advantage as a Jew
  - c. You had the oracles of God
  - d. The Gentiles didn't have that; you do
3. Friend: 3 What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?
- a. Paul's imaginary Jewish friend is a good Jew; he knows the Jewish history
  - b. It's not always been pretty
  - c. The Jewish people have gone off the rails from time to time over the years
  - d. They were exiled for it
  - e. They failed in their responsibilities to the covenant
  - f. It's all recorded in their own scriptures – the oracles of God that Paul mentions
4. Paul: 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."
- a. Paul actually quotes the oracles of God – Psalm 51 to be exact – to answer his imaginary Jewish friend
  - b. And affirm that no matter what the people of God did in response to the covenant, God is still God
  - c. His word is still trustworthy
5. Friend: 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.)
- a. "But since our disobedience, our unrighteousness reveals the righteousness of God, doesn't that mean that God is unjust if He punishes us?"
6. Paul: 6 By no means! For then how could God judge the world?
- a. Paul says, that's silly; God is still always the judge
  - b. God will judge the world
  - c. And He'll judge the unfaithfulness of the Jewish people just as He will judge the sin of the Gentiles
7. Friend: 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.
- a. "But when we sin, we're just helping God show His glory"

- b. “Why should He condemn us for showing His glory?”
    - c. “In fact, why should we keep doing evil so even more glory would be revealed?”
  - 8. Paul: Their condemnation is just.
    - a. Here he channels John McEnroe
    - b. “You can’t be serious!”
- F. That’s Paul’s conversation with his imaginary Jewish friend
  - 1. And that’s our text this morning

## II. Paul’s Problem

- A. Paul’s problem is that he has argued too well
  - 1. He has demonstrated that both Jew and Gentile are alike under the judgment of God
    - a. The Jew – judged by the Law of God given through Moses
    - b. The Gentile – who have their own law, the works of which are written on their hearts, and which reflect in large measure the same moral requirements as the written Law of God – will be judged by their own law
    - c. And each will be found wanting
- B. But Paul – the Jew – is writing to a church
  - 1. A church that is made up of both Jews and Gentiles
  - 2. Remember, at this stage of development, Christianity was largely Jewish
  - 3. And he anticipates an objection
    - a. An objection from one, a Jew, he imagines voicing this objection
  - 4. Why then was it important for me to be Jewish?
    - a. What was the point of all the synagogue worship?
    - b. Why did we have to observe all the feasts and festivals?
    - c. Why did we sit under the teaching of the rabbis?
    - d. What was the point of our religion?
  - 5. If we were no better off than the Gentiles, what was the last 1,500 years since Moses all about?
- C. But Paul’s problem is not just a Jewish problem
  - 1. It’s a problem that we have
    - a. That we have right here in this community
    - b. That we have, not just with our Jewish friends
    - c. But that we have as Christians
  - 2. Because there are lots of Christians here
    - a. At least lots of people who say they are Christians
    - b. Lots of people who have attended church all their lives
    - c. Lots of people who have been baptized – the Christian covenant sign just like circumcision is the Jewish covenant sign
    - d. Lots of people who have served in the church
    - e. They have sung in their choirs
    - f. They have worked at their church suppers
    - g. They have been involved in the local food pantries

- h. They have even gone to mission trips to help victims of, say, Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Sandy
    - 3. They have done lots of churchy things
- D. But Paul is saying that doing churchy things, religious things, don't really save anyone
  - 1. If you think that by doing religious things, that that somehow earns you credit
    - a. And that credit is enough to get you to heaven
    - b. He says you're sorely mistaken
  - 2. If I was to ask you this question, "If you died tonight, and you met" – not Peter at the pearly gates, forget that nonsense – but "Jesus"
  - 3. "And He asked you, why should I allow you into My heaven?"
  - 4. What would you say?
- E. Would you start to list your qualifications?
  - 1. Would you, while acknowledging that you aren't perfect (everybody, pretty much, acknowledges that)
    - a. That you're pretty good
    - b. At least above average
    - c. (The Lake Wobegon assessment: Where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average)
  - 2. Would you then tell Jesus how you've been faithful to your church
    - a. You've been a baptized member for 20, 30, or 50 years
    - b. That you've given your tithes and offerings faithfully
    - c. That you've served on the church board; or were even an officer of the church, like treasurer
  - 3. Maybe you've even been a pastor
    - a. You've visited the sick
    - b. You've encouraged the weak
    - c. You've admonished the straying
  - 4. Would you tell Jesus that you're a religious person
    - a. That you've faithfully attended the worship services
    - b. That you've even led worship services
  - 5. Is that what you'd tell Jesus if He asked you why He should let you into heaven?
- F. **Matthew 7:21–23** (ESV) —
  - 1. 21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.
  - 2. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?'
  - 3. 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'
  - 4. Many people – doers of religious works
    - a. Jesus will say, "I never knew you..."

- G. Paul's problem is not a Jewish problem
  - 1. It's a problem of religion
  - 2. And the Law of God will judge the religious person
    - a. And nobody measures up to the Law of God
  - 3. **Romans 3:20** (ESV) —
    - a. 20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight...
- H. So you see, Paul's problem is not their problem
  - 1. It's our problem
  - 2. A problem of religious people thinking their religion somehow gives them a leg up, an advantage, an "in" with God
- I. So Paul anticipates the objection
  - 1. If that's the case, what has been the advantage in being religious?

### III. **One Chief Advantage**

- A. He says there's one chief advantage
  - 1. Actually, he says there's more than one advantage
  - 2. **Romans 3:2** (ESV) —
    - a. 2 Much in every way. To begin with...
  - 3. "Much in every way... To begin with [first, chiefly]..."
- B. He's saying there are a lot of advantages to being religious
  - 1. And that you get the impression that he's about to list a bunch
  - 2. But in this passage, he only lists one
    - a. One chief advantage
- C. Now later – in Romans 9 – he lists more
  - 1. **Romans 9:4-5** (ESV) —
    - a. 4 They are Israelites, and to them belong
    - b. the adoption,
    - c. the glory,
    - d. the covenants,
    - e. the giving of the law,
    - f. the worship,
    - g. and the promises.
    - h. 5 To them belong the patriarchs,
    - i. and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.
- D. But in this passage he just picks one
  - 1. And that one is huge
  - 2. **Romans 3:2** (ESV) —
    - a. 2 Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with **the oracles of God.**
  - 3. The oracles of God – the very words of God
    - a. He's referring to the Hebrew scriptures
    - b. To Paul, it's impossible to underestimate the value of the Word of God

- c. The Gentiles don't have the Word of God
- d. But the Jews have the Word of God
- 4. But this advantage of the Jew is also the advantage of the religious Christian
  - a. Because even if you do not trust Christ alone and His righteousness alone for your salvation
  - b. If you have attended church regularly – you've had the Word of God too!
- 5. Even if you did not belong to a church that did not preach the gospel – and there are many churches that do not preach the gospel! –
  - a. You very likely heard the Word of God in your services
  - b. Many of them were liturgical – where they had an OT reading, a gospel reading, an epistle reading, a psalm, usually using a lectionary of some kind
  - c. And most likely you observed with regularity the Lord's Supper
  - d. And even if a church didn't believe in the atoning work of Jesus on the cross, you still observed the time when someone took bread, broke it, and recited the words of Jesus: "This is My body, broken for you"
  - e. And someone took the cup, and said, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood which is shed for you"
- 6. That is an enormous advantage
  - a. Because the non-church-going person today – and there are huge numbers of people today who have never darkened the doors of a church – has no clue about anything God has said
  - b. And no clue about the person and work of Jesus
- 7. But you do!
- E. Why is that an advantage?
  - 1. Why is it a great advantage to have received the oracles of God?
  - 2. Because out of all the people of the world, God has spoken to you!
    - a. The scriptures are the oracles of God
    - b. The scriptures don't contain the word of God as some scholars today argue
    - c. The scriptures don't refer to the word of God
    - d. The scriptures are the very words of God – the oracles of God
- F. Why is it an advantage to have heard the word of God?
  - 1. James Boice identifies three advantages – even if you have never trusted Christ alone for your salvation
    - a. Even if you're still presuming that you are good enough in and of yourself to qualify for heaven
- G. First: "Even if God never saves you by drawing you from the darkness of your sin to saving faith in Jesus Christ, **you will at least sin less** because of these advantages and therefore be punished less severely."
  - 1. What? Whoa! What are you saying?

2. When you hear the Word of God, especially the Law of God, your conscience is quickened
  3. And the Word serves to restrain your sinful impulses
    - a. And in the midst of temptation, you know what the Word says
    - b. And you, at least to some degree, avoid sinning as much as you would
  4. And the Bible teaches that there are degrees of punishment in hell
    - a. Based on the sins of those who are not saved by Christ alone
    - b. Already seen this in Romans: **Romans 2:5** (ESV) — 5 But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.
    - c. Jesus: **Luke 12:47–48** (ESV) — 47 And that servant who knew his master’s will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. 48 But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.
  5. The Puritans used to say that the sinner in hell would do anything and more if the number of his sins would be one less
- H. Second: “Going to church and listening to the preaching of the Word of God, if you are in a good, Bible-believing church, will at least **cause you to know the way of salvation**, even if you do not respond to it.”
1. Do you realize how much of an advantage that is compared to the person who never darkens the door of a church?
    - a. How you know how you could be saved – and there are a multitude of people who have no idea how to be saved
    - b. You, at least, have the opportunity, and the knowledge, that should you be so inclined, could bow the knee to Jesus and be saved
    - c. You know the oracles of God
  2. Now there are dangers in this
    - a. If you know the gospel, know how to be saved, but in your pride, fail to respond in faith and obedience to the gospel, you are in greater danger than if you remained ignorant
    - b. Biblical principle – judgment is based on knowledge
    - c. In fact, sometimes being a good, church-going person, you might get to thinking of yourself as a pretty good Christian specimen
    - d. You presume that you’re supposed virtues count in the divine economy
    - e. But your presumption is based on your spiritual pride
  3. It doesn’t need to be this way
    - a. Your knowledge of the Bible ought to lead you to a profound humility
    - b. Leading you to cast yourself on the mercy of God



- c. Not pretending you're somehow righteous enough for eternal fellowship with Altogether Holy and righteous God
  - 4. That's why we do Study with the Pastor
    - a. To so root ourselves in the Word of God that we find ourselves humbled every time we open the Word
    - b. In fact, every time I open the Word if discover yet more ways I fall short of the glory of God
    - c. And find myself constantly confessing my sin, constantly repenting of my sin
    - d. Casting myself on His mercy
  - 5. You can do that too – you know the way of salvation, because you have the oracles of God
- I. Third: “The third great advantage of regular church attendance and, above all, faithful adherence to the preaching and study of the Word of God is that, although you cannot claim this as a right from God, it is **through the reading and preaching of the Bible that God is most likely to save you.**”
  - 1. That's how God naturally and normally does it!
    - a. That's how He saves you
  - 2. **1 Peter 1:23–25** (ESV) —
    - a. 23 since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through **the living and abiding word of God**;
    - b. 24 for “All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls,
    - c. 25 but the word of the Lord remains forever.” And this word is the good news that was preached to you.
- J. John Wesley: I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God and returning to God, just hovering over the great gulf 'till, a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing – the way to heaven, how to land safe on that happy shore.
- K. Wesley: God has condescended to teach me the way. For this very end he came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book!
- L. Wesley: At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: Here is knowledge enough for me. Let me *homo unius libri* [a man of one book]. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone. Only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book – for this end, to find the way to heaven. Is there a doubt concerning the meaning of what I read? Does anything appear dark or intricate? I lift up my heart to the Father of Lights: “Lord, is it not thy word, ‘If any man lacks wisdom, let him ask of God’? Thou has said, ‘If any be willing to do thy will, he shall know.’ I am willing, let me know thy will.”
- M. One great advantage – Jew or Gentile Christian
  - 1. The oracles of God
- N. Now, for the rest of the conversation that Paul has with him imaginary religious friends...

IV. **Two Stupid Questions**

- A. University professor for 30 years
1. Every year, every semester, I began every class the same way
    - a. To encourage class discussion
  2. “You can ask me any question. There is no such thing as a stupid question.”
  3. But sooner or later... somebody asks a stupid question
    - a. Now I don’t say, “That’s a stupid question”
    - b. I very respectfully answer the question
    - c. But it’s still a stupid question
  4. The remainder of this conversation involves Paul anticipating additional questions
    - a. And while it may be going a bit far to call them stupid questions
    - b. They are the kind of questions that when you actually articulate them, you realize how silly they are
    - c. And how they are without foundation
  5. And by the way – while I say that Paul is having this conversation with his imaginary friends
    - a. They weren’t altogether imaginary
    - b. He had certainly had these conversations with others
    - c. He routinely went into every new city, entered their synagogues, and entered into conversations with the Jewish people
    - d. Even as he engaged in debate with the Gentiles in places like the Areopagus in Athens
    - e. So these questions aren’t imaginary – even if he addresses them as if from imaginary people
    - f. He’s heard them all before
  6. And while there are actually five questions in the remaining verses, they boil down to two questions
- B. **The Faithfulness of God**
1. **Romans 3:3** (ESV) —
    - a. 3 What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?
    - b. He Jews had the Word of God, the oracles of God
    - c. And yet many did not believe and did not obey the covenant
    - d. Does that cast doubt on the value and trustworthiness of the Word of God?
  2. **Romans 3:4** (ESV) —
    - a. 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.”
    - b. It’s silly to think that God’s word could be called into question because people reject it!
  3. In fact, Paul quotes David in his famous prayer of repentance following his sin with Bathsheba – **Psalm 51**

- a. So it is the Word of God itself, that even in the event of the disobedience of one of the great figures in Jewish history – King David – that David uses to affirm the truthfulness of God
  - 4. Religious people have the Word of God
    - a. What if people do not obey it?
    - b. That doesn't make it any less the Word of God
    - c. "Let God be true though every one were a liar!"
  - 5. Silly question! Even a stupid question!
- C. **The Judgment of Sinners**
  - 1. And then Paul has evidently heard an even more silly argument from his religious friends
    - a. The second question – even in its multiple parts – boils down to the same question
    - b. Since our sin gives God the opportunity to show His glory, why should we be judged?
    - c. Shouldn't we be congratulated for contributing to God's glory?
  - 2. **Romans 3:5–8 (ESV)** —
    - a. 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? ...
    - b. 7 But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?
    - c. 8 And why not do evil that good may come?—
  - 3. Paul's answers are short and to the point
    - a. "... if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God...?"
    - b. "By no means! For then how could God judge the world?"
    - c. God will certainly judge the world – and your unrighteousness is why He will judge the world!
    - d. To even say that question out loud reveals its silliness
    - e. "But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?..."
    - f. Paul (even shorter!): "Their condemnation is just"
    - g. In other words, "That's a stupid question!"
- D. So Paul's conversation with his imaginary religious friends follows this outline
  - 1. Paul's problem
    - a. What's the value of religion since both the religious Jew and the non-religious Gentile are guilty before God?
  - 2. One Chief Advantage
    - a. The chief value is the Word of God – the oracles of God – that the religious person has that others do not
  - 3. Finally, two stupid questions
    - a. If religious people don't obey the oracles of God, does that diminish the truthfulness of the Word and of God's faithfulness?
    - b. Of course not! That's silly!

- c. And if our unrighteousness merely provides God opportunity to show His glory, why are we still guilty?
- d. That's just stupid! "You can't be serious!" (McEnroe)

V. Conclusion

- A. Those are stupid questions, really
  - 1. But you know what question isn't stupid?
  - 2. It's the question I raised before
- B. **If you died tonight, and you met Jesus, and He asked you why He should let you into heaven, what would you say?**
  - 1. If you tried to talk your way into heaven, by touting your accomplishments and moral rectitude, you would get nowhere
    - a. Perhaps this parable that Jesus told will help you figure out the only answer that will satisfy
- C. **Luke 18:9–14** (ESV) —
  - 1. 9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:
  - 2. 10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.
  - 3. 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.
  - 4. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'
  - 5. 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'"
- D. Which person do you most identify with
  - 1. The religious guy – the Pharisee
    - a. The Pharisees knew their Bibles
    - b. But sought to justify themselves – touting their own supposed accomplishments
  - 2. Or the sinner
    - a. Who casts himself on the mercy of Jesus Christ
  - 3. 14 "I tell you, this man (tax collector) went down to his house justified, rather than the other (Pharisee, the religious guy). For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."
- E. Not is this not a stupid question
  - 1. It's the question every human being must answer