

Romans, Part 13 7-10-22

Advantage Card

Today we get to move into chapter three of the book of Romans, but the subject and focus does not shift until we get to verse 21. So, we will continue with some similar lines of thought as we have been in recent weeks. Romans 3:1-8 *Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? ²Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God. ³What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? ⁴May 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.” ⁵But 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.) ⁶May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world? ⁷But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner? ⁸And 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.*

In his second epistle, the apostle Peter mentions the author of Romans – Paul. He calls him a beloved brother, but then also says he teaches some things that are hard to understand. Today’s passage is probably one of those hard portions. In it, the apostle carries on an imagined conversation with a Jewish antagonist – maybe a heckler who is arguing with him in a synagogue. To understand it we kind of have to enter into that world, and even the mindset of the religious Jew, first century variety, who is encountering the gospel through Paul. Let’s call our imagined Jewish friend, Eli. At the end of chapter two Paul told Eli that his circumcision did not make him a true Jew. He told him that his Jewish heritage did not protect him from God’s judgment, and that his disobedience to the law of God left him in precisely the same jeopardy that a Gentile would be in. Eli doesn’t like hearing this. He is offended by it. It differs from what he has been taught and so he shoots back. 1a *Then what advantage has the Jew?* How many of you have one of these? This is a Giant Eagle Advantage card. Living in the North Hills requires this card. At Giant Eagles and Get-Go stations, this card will get you discounts on overpriced food and gasoline. When I go to Giant Eagle and seek to buy eggs, what does the computer lady ask me to do? Scan the advantage card. Yes. Then the computer voice says this – I love this. It says, *your advantage card*

has been accepted. Sometimes, when I am feeling down I will just go by Giant Eagle to scan my card and hear those comforting words. I have an Advantage card. If you don't have one – well – it stinks to be you. But me? I have an advantage. Now, Eli figured he too had an advantage. He got his card, so to speak, when he was eight days old. And it has been with him ever since. His teachers explained and the Scriptures confirmed that he was part of a special people who had obtained favor from the almighty. He was a descendant of Abraham, a Jew. And when Paul says that, even still, Eli was in hot water with God because of his failure to keep the law, Eli pulled out his advantage card and said, *Oh yea, what about this? How can you, Paul, explain this?* Eli knew that God made a covenant with Abraham and his offspring. He saw clearly that the Lord had built His temple for and with a particular people group of which he was a part. He saw that God had given them special laws, special holy-days, special graces that the Gentiles did not have. Some of the best-known Jewish teachers taught that disobedient Jews would miss out on certain blessings, but that none of them would perish eternally because they were and are the seed of Abraham. Now, here is this crazy apostle telling Eli that his advantage card would not be accepted on the day of judgment. Come on Paul!

So, Paul engages Eli's objection and carries on an imagined debate with him that clarifies some things relevant to ancient Jews and modern Americans. In doing so, the apostle makes four points we will discuss together. The first of those is the qualified advantage. Paul says to Eli that his Jewishness is, in fact, a significant advantage. In chapter nine Paul will list several such advantages, but here he mentions maybe the primary one. The Jews were given and had the oracles, the revelation, the written word of God Himself. This was the traditional and consensus understanding of what the Old Testament was – the very word of God. Growing up Gentile – you missed out on that. Now – we who grew up Christians – at least Evangelical – Bible-lovers. We had the same privilege, didn't we? My family didn't read the Bible, but at church we did. Even at school we did – a little bit. I, like many of you, have had Christian privilege. Thank God! That is real and substantial, and insufficient. What? Real, substantial, insufficient. In various places in life, you and I might have certain advantages depending on our race, our family, our education. Those can be huge. But can we still make a mess of life? Absolutely! And we always do to some degree. Paul tells Eli that what counts are the choices you make and you made some really bad ones that dishonored God. Your advantages are real, but qualified.

He is saying that being Jewish is not enough. Not enough to what? Not enough to compensate for the guilt of personal sin, of violating the holy law of God. Paul preached that individually, each person, Jew or Gentile, must repent, must look to Christ to be saved. And the pious Jew was offended by this. In Acts 21 they tried to have Paul killed. They tried to stir up hostility against Paul and accused him saying Acts 21:28 *Men of Israel, come to our aid! This is the man who preaches to all men everywhere against our people and the Law.* That was the spin. Paul says that Jews are sinners needing to repent. *He is against us and the word of God.*

Curiously, soon after I came to North Park Church I had a conversation with a brother who told me that Jewish people don't have to be born-again. He said that was only necessary for Gentiles. I found this a rather strange teaching. I pointed out to him that when Jesus said in John 3 that a man had to be born-again he said it to Nicodemus who was a ___? A Jew. There is no difference on this point. But so many get set up for disillusionment by bad teaching. Prosperity preachers in these days tell folks that if they do the Christian life right, they will be running over with health and wealth. But God never said that. Some churches say that if you let them baptize you or if you just check the "Christian" box when you enter the hospital, all is well with your soul. God would be unfaithful to His word not to give you entrance into His rest. But no way. Many try to hold God to promises He never made. Just as God never told ancient Jews that they were free to sin with impunity because *Ancestry.com* links them back to Abraham. They had the advantage card. But there were limits to the advantage. Paul says to Timothy that he had advantages as a Jew. II Timothy 3:15 *From childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.* Big advantage – but notice, that the Scriptures are able to give wisdom leading to salvation. But it doesn't happen automatically. You may have the advantage of a treadmill in your basement, but if you don't turn it on and use it – the advantage is nullified. And who is to blame for that?

Look at our fourth verse again. Some would say that if God doesn't give me a fast-pass to glory He hasn't kept His word, since I am a Jew 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."* That last part is a quote from David's prayer of repentance in Psalm 51. Paul points us back to David. Good example. David was a Jew. David had received promises from God. Yet, when David sinned grievously in the Bathsheba case, he faced some stiff

consequences. And what did David say about God and his justice? He said, *whatever You do Lord is right*. The NLT translates verse 4 (NLT) *You will be proved right in what you say, and you will win your case in court*. God always does. An axiom of theology is that whatever God says is true. Whatever God does is right. David saw that the only unfaithfulness was his. And he did not expect his Jewishness or his kingliness to spare him.

Alright – let’s move on to our second observation from our text. This is the self-justifying nonsense of Eli. Eli represents the sinner who chooses self-delusion over repentance. This time I read from the NLT which may be easier to follow 5-7 (NLT) *But,” some might say, “our sinfulness serves a good purpose, for it helps people see how righteous God is. Isn’t it unfair, then, for him to punish us?” (This is merely a human point of view.)*⁶ *Of course not! If God were not entirely fair, how would he be qualified to judge the world?*⁷ *“But,” someone might still argue, “how can God condemn me as a sinner if my dishonesty highlights his truthfulness and brings him more glory?”* Okay – sin leads us to think and say some crazy stuff. And this is pretty bad. The imagined argument is one that utilizes the logic or illogic of the ends justifies the means. It is that my badness highlights God’s goodness. Thus, He is glorified and I am off the hook as a result. If God judges me, His righteous justice is on display. If God forgives me, His great mercy is on display. In any case, God is the winner and I, in all my badness, made a contribution to that. Therefore, if I get punished, it would be for making God look good, which is our ultimate aim anyway, right? Well, right? No. NO, no, no. This is just a sample of the insanity that comes from sinners desperate to excuse themselves. We see it every day. Eli is thinking that his sin results in praise to God and he should, if anything, be rewarded. I remember a meeting of Presbytery when a middle-aged pastor had to confess to a practice of physically abusing his wife. Now, if that pastor was thinking like Eli, he might have said this to his fellow-elders. *Brothers, consider how my conduct makes you look better. Your church can say, “Oh, Pastor Jim is boring, but he’s nice.” Or your wife can now say, “My husband isn’t around much but at least he doesn’t hit me like that other pastor.” You should thank me, not discipline me.* You follow that? By this logic the heroes of faith include Judas and Herod and Pilate. Their sin turned out to promote God’s purposes. So, condemnation would be unfair. These folks tie a logical knot that makes your head spin, but provides them with some measure of comfort and cover. Watch yourself, lest you fall into this temptation from hell. Repentance is God’s way. Not, excuses. Watch for the self-justifying nonsense that the devil will gladly provide for you.

Third major observation is that we must remember the concept of the true Jew. This was our focus last time. Romans 2:28-29 (NLT) *You are not a true Jew just because you were born of Jewish parents or because you have gone through the ceremony of circumcision.* ²⁹ *No, a true Jew is one whose heart is right with God. And true circumcision is not merely obeying the letter of the law; rather, it is a change of heart produced by the Spirit.* Romans 9:6 *They are not all Israel who are descended from Israel.* Both of these passages tell us that what really counts is not biological descent, but spiritual descent. When we get to Romans 4 we will read that the real heirs of Abraham and his covenant are those who, like Abraham, put their faith in the Lord and His word. Jews today? Some share Abraham's faith, but most do not. Most who are Jewish ethnically are irreligious. The religious ones, Conservative and Reform Jews, don't believe the Old Testament is God's word. The orthodox Jews, who do take it seriously, tend to bury it under mounds of extra tradition and legalism. The "completed" Jew – who has believed the word, who has embraced the Messiah, is fairly rare anymore. But Paul, the consummate Pharisee, once converted, opens up the Abrahamic covenant with all of its promises and blessings to us Gentiles who are now, indeed, the true Jews who walk in the faith of Abraham. We put no confidence in the flesh, in ceremony, in family, in rule-keeping. Our boast is in Jesus, the righteous heir of Abraham's promise. Turn to your neighbor and say, *Shalom and mazel tov.*

Having seen again the teaching about a true Jew, we finish today by focusing on our true God. That is a refreshing change. Enough with all the corrupt humanity. We have a perfect, holy, beautiful Lord. Paul says the notion that God somehow broke his word is ludicrous and worthy of condemnation. Ours is the God of truth. 4 *Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar.* The veracity of God is under examination. Eli thinks that maybe God is at fault. He made promises to Jews. Now, Paul says some of the Jews will be condemned. God is breaking his word. That is one angle on the situation, but the apostle rejects it out of hand. God made a promise for sure. We can't doubt that. But here are a couple of ways to look at it. First, the promise came with conditions. Conditions which the Jewish people as a whole and many individual Jews violated, spat upon and repeatedly broke. In Malachi we read that God hates divorce, but Jeremiah says He actually filed for divorce from Israel because of their spiritual adulteries. One angle here is that God was and is faithful, but His bride was not and He has grounds, obvious grounds for judgement upon His privileged people who made vows to Him and broke them extensively. That's one angle that preserves God's veracity. Another is

that God's promises were to the spiritual, not physical children of Abraham. Well this would be interpreting the Old Testament apostolically. This is the angle Paul and the other apostles actually take as we have seen. The doctrine of the true Jew preserves our confidence in a true God.

Let me end with this – let God be true – that is, trust him, even if every single human takes the other side. We live in a day when almost anyone can offer their opinion about every subject imaginable. Right? Suppose you posted on Twitter and 5,000 people respond with disagreement and even contempt. And no one sides with you. If you posted that the Pirates would win the World Series I could understand that, but if you posted something that you got from the word of God, something that represents His mind, His values, His truth – well, what is 5,000 Twitter users compared to the creator of the ends of the earth? Here is a line we have heard in recent years – *you people, you troglodyte Christians who say that homosexuality is wrong, you who say that God made them only male and female, you, you are on the wrong side of history.* I find this an odd argument. Well, it's not an argument, just kind of a threat. But think about it. First, of all, who knows where history is going with these ideas? And secondly, who cares? Why should I? I am more interested in being on the right side of eternity. You see, I believe in that. There is a judgment day ahead. When God has spoken, the opinions of the bosses at Twitter or YouTube or even Washington DC carry very little weight. The only Fact-Checker that matters is sitting on heaven's throne. You can tell me how outnumbered I am, as if I am supposed to tremble before the mob – but no – my mind is made up and I have decided that the grass withers and the flower fades but the word of my God endures forever. Six billion humans can lie. But the one true God? Never. As Luther said, *my conscience is captive to the word of God.... Here I stand, I can do no other.* But thankfully, when we stand on the word, we stand with the God who is truth. In a world drowning in lies, the true Jew stands with the true God. Will you?