

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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THE PROSECUTION RESTS

Romans 3:1-20

Do you enjoy a good courtroom drama or legal thriller? I do, something of the John Grisham variety, for example, the kind that draws me in to see how – or if – justice will play out in a high stakes trial. To be honest, I often find fiction, whether it is a movie, TV show, or novel to be more captivating than reality.

It is interesting to me that more often than not, at least in fictional courtroom dramas, defense attorneys occupy the spotlight much more than prosecutors. For example, pretty much everybody knows that Atticus Finch was Tom Robinson's defense attorney in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Finch, played by Gregory Peck in the movie, is perhaps the most famous defense attorney of the last century, in fiction or real life. But how many people can name the prosecutor in *To Kill a Mockingbird* without googling it, as I had to do? His name is Horace Gilmer. Not exactly a household name.

Here are a few other fictional defense attorneys you may have heard of:

- TV's Perry Mason and Ben Matlock (played by Raymond Burr and Andy Griffith, respectively)
- Vincent "Vinny" Gambini, the title character in *My Cousin Vinny* (played by Joe Pesci)
- The characters played by Tom Cruise and Demi Moore in *A Few Good Men*, Lt. Daniel Kaffee and Lt. Commander JoAnne Galloway
- Jake Brigance, from John Grisham's *A Time to Kill* (played in the movie by Matthew McConaughey)

Probably the most famous real-life defense attorney in America today is Johnnie Cochran, who got O. J. Simpson acquitted of the murder charges against him 20 years ago.

Aside from the often-changing cast of the *Law & Order* TV series, prosecutors aren't in the limelight nearly as much as defense attorneys, at least in the world of fiction.

But in the opening chapters of his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul has been functioning as a prosecuting attorney, relentlessly presenting the case that all of humankind – you and I and every person who has ever lived, with the exception of Jesus – stands guilty before God and justly deserves His condemnation because of our sin. In 1:18-32, he makes the case against unbelieving Gentiles, who have rejected God and the truth He has made known to them about Himself, in order to follow their own desires and go their own way. In 2:1-16, he presents the case against the self-righteous whose mantra is: "But I'm not as bad as other people" or some variation on this theme. In 2:17-29, he demolishes the claims of the super-religious, the most devout of all devout Jews, arguing that physical circumcision – the outward sign of God's covenant with the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – is

ultimately of no value if it is not accompanied by the spiritual circumcision of the heart, a heart that truly loves and trusts God and seeks to honor Him in all of life.

Now, in the opening verses of Romans 3 (verses 1-8), Paul answers objections he anticipates from Jews who take issue with his arguments, and then, in verses 9-20, he presents, as it were, his closing argument before the prosecution rests its case against all of humankind, Jew and Gentile, religious and irreligious alike.

OBJECTIONS

Let's look first at the objections, each of which is overruled in the courtroom where God Himself sits as the just and righteous Judge of all the earth. Each objection is raised in the form of a question.

The first objection is this: If what matters to God is circumcision of the heart (2:28-29) and not physical circumcision, is there any advantage in belonging to the Jewish nation (3:1)? At this point, after the convicting and convincing argument he has made in Romans 2, you might expect Paul to say: "No. There is really no advantage at all for the Jews."

But that is not what he says. Instead, he says the Jews are greatly privileged. Chief among their privileges or advantages is the fact that they were the custodians of God's Word (3:2). It was to the people of Israel that God entrusted His holy Word. To them was given the law of God. To them was given the message of God through the prophets. To them was given God's revelation of Himself, His promises, His will, and His unfailing love, including the promise of the coming Messiah, the Savior who would be born of the Jewish race.

To be entrusted with God's Word was an honor given to no other nation or people. But with the honor, with the promises and privilege, came great responsibility. They were to order their lives according to God's Word, to live by it, and to share the blessing of God's Word and His love with other peoples and nations. In this they failed again and again and again.

Like the Jews, we who belong to Christ and His church also have advantages over unbelievers. *We* have God's Word. *We* have the message of the gospel. *We* have the means of grace. *We* have the promise, presence, and power of the Holy Spirit at work in us. But none of these blessings is due to any merit or inherent goodness or righteousness in us. None of it is deserved. It is all by grace. It is all a gift of grace, which, as I hope you know, comes free of charge to people like you and me who don't deserve it and never will.

The unfaithfulness of the Jews did not and could not negate the faithfulness of God, just as your unfaithfulness or mine can never cancel out His faithfulness. Listen to what Paul says in 2 Timothy 2:13: "If we are faithless, (God) will remain faithful, for He cannot disown Himself." In other words, God will not and cannot be untrue to His own character. Unfailing faithfulness is part of God's character.

The Message renders Romans 3:3-4 this way: “Do you think (the Jews’) unfaithfulness cancels out God’s faithfulness? Not on your life! Depend on it: God keeps His word even when the whole world is lying through its teeth.”

The bottom line is that human faithlessness – the Jews’, yours, mine – can never alter God’s faithfulness or defeat His sovereign purpose. God’s faithfulness is bigger and stronger, more powerful and effective, than our failures to follow Him faithfully. His plans and purposes for us, for the church, and for the world will not fail. No matter how frequently we make a mess of things. And no matter how many enemies are arrayed against Him. Including, in our day, ISIS or Al Qaeda. And the spiritual forces of secularism at work in the world.

Paul responds to another objection in verses 5-8: If my faithlessness – my unrighteousness – serves to magnify God’s faithfulness and righteousness, why should God be upset with me? Am I not really doing God a favor? Doesn’t my unrighteousness actually benefit God by displaying His righteous and holy character more clearly? Isn’t it a case of the end (God’s glory) justifying the means (my sin)? Under the circumstances, isn’t it wrong of God to punish me?

Paul will have nothing to do with this. It is ludicrous. Absurd. God’s judgment is always righteous and just. He dismisses the logical corollary of this line of thinking, too: If my sin showcases God’s glory, why not cast off all restraint and do evil that good may result? It is like saying: Since fires and other disasters give firefighters and other first responders the opportunity to demonstrate their remarkable courage and skill, why not set more fires and cause more crisis situations so they will have more opportunities to show how extraordinary they are? (Adapted from Charles Swindoll, *Insights on Romans*, 67-68).

It is a ridiculous argument, as anyone can see. As Charles Swindoll points out, “Far from glorifying God, sin grieves Him.” It is “an affront to His character, (to) all that He is and everything He desires.” There is no way to “justify ... willful sin with such twisted logic” (Swindoll, 68). Amen? Amen.

THE CLOSING ARGUMENT

Having answered these objections, Paul now proceeds to his closing argument in verses 9-20. He has established his conclusion beyond any reasonable doubt. Really, beyond any shred of doubt. His conclusion? That all of humankind is guilty of sin and rebellion before God. All the differences between people you can enumerate – distinctions of age, sex, race, language, color, class, culture, creed, or anything else, such as Redskins fans, Cowboys fans, Steelers fans – all these things notwithstanding, we are all, without exception “under sin” (3:9). We are all sinners who have failed to carry out the requirements of God’s law.

No one is excluded from this charge. Not even Jews. Paul has just said in verse 2 that there is great advantage in being a Jew. But now, in verse 9, he says that the Jews are no better and no better off than anybody else. They – and we – are all subject to the just and righteous judgment of God, and all equally in need of God’s grace.

To hammer home his point that nobody is exempt from God's judgment, in verses 10-18, Paul strings together a series of quotations from the Old Testament like pearls in a necklace – one from Ecclesiastes (7:20), five from the Psalms, and one from Isaiah (59:7) that is echoed in Proverbs (1:16). All of these verses combine to paint a damning but accurate picture of the ugliness, ungodliness, pervasiveness, and universality of sin.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q. 14) defines sin as “any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God.” That is a good definition. It includes both our “falling short”, our failure to live up to God's law, and our acts of disobedience, whether intentional or not, to God's commands and instructions for life in this world.

John Stott amplifies the Catechism's definition when he says: “Sin is the revolt of the self against God, the dethronement of God with a view to the enthronement of oneself. Ultimately,” he writes, “sin is self-deification, the reckless determination to occupy the throne which belongs to God alone” (Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 100). Do you see how that is true? Sin of any kind is an act of treason against God and an attempt to replace the kingdom of God with the kingdom of me.

Sin is not just something we do. It is something we do because of what we are. We are not sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners. All of us. That is the point Paul is making here.

In one of her books, Kathleen Norris writes about a child who emerged from a noisy, chaotic Sunday school classroom one morning to inform the adults who heard the commotion and had come to investigate: “We're being bad, and we don't know how to stop” (Norris, *Acedia & Me*, 16). Doesn't that really describe the condition of the world – of humankind – apart from the saving, transforming power of the Lord Jesus Christ? We are being bad – we *are* bad – and either we don't care and want to keep on being bad, or we don't know how to stop.

In these Old Testament quotations, Paul shows that every part of our being, from head to toe, inside and out, body, mind, and soul, is affected by sin. He specifically mentions our throats, tongues, lips, and mouths (3:13-14), our feet (3:15), and our eyes (3:18). Our words show what is in our hearts, as Jesus pointed out when He said: “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). You see, no part of our life is untouched or untainted by sin.

Listen to what John Stott has written about this: “These bodily limbs and organs [of ours] were created and given us so that through them we might serve people and glorify God. Instead, they are used [to serve ourselves,] to harm people and in rebellion against God. This is the biblical doctrine of ‘total depravity’ ... [which] has never meant that human beings are as depraved’ – as utterly wicked or evil – ‘as (we) could possibly be The ‘totality’ of our corruption refers to its *extent* (twisting and tainting every part of our humanness), not to its *degree* (depraving every part of us absolutely).” Stott then quotes J. I. Packer, who says that on the one hand, no one is as bad as he or she could be, while on the other hand, nothing we do is as good as it should be (Stott, *Romans* 101).

Reaching the climax of his closing argument, Paul declares in verse 19 that “every mouth is stopped, every excuse silenced, and the whole world, having been found guilty is liable to God’s judgment” (Stott, 102). No one will be declared righteous (justified) in God’s sight by observing and obeying all the commandments in God’s law, because no one can do it. No one can obey it fully. Everyone stands guilty before God.

With this, Paul says: “The prosecution rests.”

This is truly the bad news of the gospel, the bad news you have to understand and accept in order to be ready to hear and accept the good news of the gospel of God’s great mercy and grace – His forgiving, redeeming, saving love in the Savior He Himself has provided for us, His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

OUR DEFENSE ATTORNEY

On God’s behalf, Paul the prosecutor has presented an airtight case against us. Not to leave us in rebellion against God, resentment, or despair. Instead, it is simply to show us our need and drive us to our Savior – who, amazingly, also serves as our defense attorney. Listen to what the apostle John says in 1 John 2:1-2: “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not keep on sinning. But if anybody does sin” – or *when* anybody sins – “we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”

Jesus is your advocate before the bar of God’s justice. He is your representative before the court. He is your defense attorney. And He is better than Perry Mason or even Atticus Finch. Who could ask for more?

But there *is* more. Your defense attorney is also your substitute. He took your place. He took the punishment for your sin upon Himself. He took responsibility for all your sins. He took your guilt so that you could be found not guilty and be declared righteous – in the right – with God forever.

Accept Him, receive Him, trust in Him, give thanks to Him, follow Him. Let Him be to you all that He truly is. Lord, let it be so in each of us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.