

## Lesson 32 at StudyRomans.org

### Romans 3:4, Continued

**Romans 3:4** — 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.”

When we ended class two weeks ago, we were looking at Paul’s quotation from Psalm 51 in verse 4 — and we ended the lesson with a cliffhanger: Why is the language in Psalm 51:4 so different from the quoted language in Romans 3:4 in the ESV?

- (Psalm 51:4) ...so that you may be justified in your words and **blameless in your judgment**.
- (Romans 3:4) ...as it is written, “That you may be justified in your words, and **prevail when you are judged**.”

In Psalm 51 we have “blameless in your judgment,” but in Romans 3 we have “prevail when you are judged.” In the first, it looks like God would be blameless in whatever judgment God imposed, but in the second it looks like God would prevail when God was the one being judged. Those are two very different situations. Which is it? And how do we reconcile the two? I think there are two possibilities.

The first possibility is that the translation in the ESV is wrong. The Greek word translated “are judged” has the same form whether it is **passive** (“when you are judged”) or **middle** (“when you judge”). The ESV (and most English translations) adopt the passive form (“when you are judged”) but the correct translation could be the middle form (“when you judge”). And, in support of that possibility, we should

note that “when you judge” is much closer to how the same Greek word is translated in 1 Corinthians 6:6 — not when you are judged, but when you go to court.

Despite the popularity of the passive translation, I think the middle translation provides a much better fit with the verse from Psalm 51 that Paul is quoting here. King David was not talking about someone judging God, but instead King David was talking about God judging him. And God would be blameless and would prevail when he judged David because God’s judgments of King David would be proved right. Here is how one commentary describes the situation in Psalm 51:

“The sense of the original is that the Psalmist acknowledges the justice of God’s judgment upon him. The result of his sin is that God is pronounced righteous in His sentence, free from blame in His judging.” (Sanday and Headlam)

The second possibility is that the ESV is right. Yes, I think the middle form makes more sense, but what if the passive form is correct? What if Paul is, in fact, saying here that God would prevail when he (God) is judged? Can we make sense of that view? Yes, I think we can.

If that is what Paul is saying here, then I think the exact quotation from Psalm 51 ends with the phrase “that you may be justified in your words.” I think the second half would be an elaboration that Paul added (by inspiration, of course) after the quote from Psalm 51 — “and prevail when you are judged.”

And, in that case, sinful man would be the ones doing the judging. They would be saying that God’s judgments were not just — but Paul would then be telling them that, despite their allegations against God,

God would win that court case! Yes, some might accuse God of being unjust, but God would prevail against that charge. God would prevail when God was judged by sinful man.

I favor the first possibility — that the Greek phrase translated in the ESV “when you are judged” is better translated “when you judge,” and most commentaries agree with that view — although some commentaries argue that the second possibility is a better fit with the context of Romans 3.

But, with that background, we still have our question — how does that verse from Psalm 51 prove Paul’s point here in Romans 3? How does that verse from Psalm 51 prove that God is true even if every one is a liar?

Simple — just look at King David. He failed completely, but his failure did not mean that God was wrong. Instead, David’s failure proved the opposite — it confirmed that God was right. David’s unfaithfulness turned out to be, not a refutation of God’s truthfulness, but a demonstration of God’s truthfulness.

And if that was true about King David, we can be certain that it was true about every other Jew in the same position. That is how Paul reaches his logical conclusion in Romans 3:4 from Psalm 51:4 — “Let God be true though every one were a liar.” That is the logical conclusion of saying “Let God be true even though King David was a liar.”

But let’s take a step back and look more closely at Psalm 51. And here is a Bible study tip — whenever the New Testament quotes an Old Testament verse, we should always go back to the Old Testament to read the verse for ourselves — but we should not stop there. (And

here is the tip.) We should not just read that one verse, but instead we should read the entire chapter that contains that one verse. When the New Testament quotes an Old Testament verse, our study of the New Testament will benefit greatly if we closely examine the context of that Old Testament verse by (at least) reading the entire chapter that contains that Old Testament verse.

When we do that here, what do we find? What we find is that there are some truly remarkable parallels between what David wrote in Psalm 51 and what Paul wrote in Romans.

- **Both Psalm 51 and Romans are focused on sin.** Psalm 51 uses three different *Hebrew* words to describe sin (pesha in verse 1; avon in verse 2; chata'ah in verse 3) and Romans uses three different *Greek* words to describe sin (parabasis in 4:15; adikia in 1:18; hamartia in 5:12).
- **Both Psalm 51 and Romans are focused on the inner man.** In Psalm 51:6 we read, “behold, you delight in truth in the **inward being**.” In Romans 7:22 we read, “for I delight in the law of God, in my **inner being**.”
- **Both Psalm 51 and Romans are focused on the Holy Spirit.** We already know how often Romans mentions the Holy Spirit, but, in the Old Testament, the exact phrase “Holy Spirit” occurs in only two places — Isaiah 63:10-11 and right here in Psalm 51:11.
- **Both Psalm 51 and Romans are focused on a new creation.** Psalm 51:10 says, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me,” using the same word for creation

that is found in Genesis 1:1. And Romans chapter 8 mentions “creation” six times.

- **Both Psalm 51 and Romans are focused on cleansing and washing.** Psalm 51:2 says, “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!” And Romans 6 describes baptism as a process that creates newness of life, where we know that Paul understood baptism as the point where our sins are washed away (Acts 22:16).
- **Both Psalm 51 and Romans are focused on sacrifice.** Psalm 51:16-17 says that “the **sacrifices** of God are a broken spirit.” Romans 12:1 tells us “to present your bodies as a living **sacrifice**, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”
- **Both Psalm 51 and Romans are focused on truth.** Psalm 51:4 says to God “that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.” And Psalm 51:6 says “you delight in truth in the inward being.” And, of course, Romans 3:4 says, “Let God be true though every one were a liar.”
- **Both Psalm 51 and Romans are focused on teaching.** Psalm 51:13 says, “Then I will **teach** transgressors your ways, and sinners will return to you.” Romans 6:17 talks about “the standard of **teaching**,” and Romans 12:7 talks about the gift of **teaching**.

Those parallels are interesting, but are they more than that? Is there a reason why we see those parallels? Is there a reason why Paul would pattern his arguments in Romans around Psalm 51 — even to the point of quoting that Psalm right here in Romans 3? I think so. And I think

we see the reason when we compare, not Psalms and Romans, but David and Paul.

When Nathan turned to David in 2 Samuel 12:7 and said, “thou art the man,” that accusation was directed at the same man who was described in 1 Samuel 13:14 as a man after God’s own heart. David knew the greatest spiritual heights, and David knew the greatest spiritual depths. In fact, we see both the heights and the depths in the Psalms, with Psalm 51 perhaps showing us David at his lowest point. “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me,” King David writes in verse 3.

And Paul? Paul also knew the greatest spiritual heights and the greatest spiritual depths. The man who was caught up to the third heaven in 2 Corinthians 12:2 was the same man who called himself the foremost sinner in 1 Timothy 1:15.

Yes, David had murdered Uriah (2 Samuel 11:15), but Paul (then Saul) had Christians put to death (Acts 26:10), and worse — Paul (then Saul) had tried to make those Christians blaspheme (Acts 26:11). Both David and Paul experienced great regret.

And we know that both David and Paul turned on a dime — David after he was confronted by Nathan, and Paul after he was confronted by Christ.

And when David and Paul turned back to God, they each found mercy.

**Psalm 51:1** — Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.

**1 Timothy 1:13-14** — Though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

I think Paul likely identified very strongly with King David — not as an example of a Hebrew of the Hebrews or as an example of royalty, but as an example of someone with every advantage who nevertheless committed terrible sin but who then received unmerited mercy from God.

We have often said that we need to view the word of God as a mirror. I think we can see Paul doing that with Psalm 51. I think Paul spent a lot of time in Psalm 51.

Let's move on now to the next objection considered by Paul.

### **Romans 3:5**

**Romans 3:5** — 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.)

The objection that we see in verse 5 is this: how can God hold us accountable for our sin if God uses our sin to accomplish something good?

And, as we will see when we get to verse 8, this objection was more than just an objection — it was also an attack.

The opponents of Paul had falsely accused him of teaching that if God uses our sin to accomplish something good, then we should just sin more and more so that God can accomplish more and more good. Paul will refer to this same allegation later in Romans 6.

But, back to the objection, let's unwrap verse 5 more carefully to see how Paul describes what was being said by these objectors.

And, again, I do not think Paul is just making up theoretical objections here — things that people might say. Instead, I think Paul is telling us things that people did say — and were still saying. I think these are real objections that Paul heard from real opponents, likely when he was teaching in the synagogues.

And, again, I think that is something we will see when we get to verse 8 where Paul will refer to what “some people” were slanderously saying. Those people were real people, which means that these objections were real objections from those real people.

But, with that said, we should notice something important about the **pronouns** in verse 5 — Paul says “**our** unrighteousness” rather than “**your** unrighteousness.” Whose unrighteousness is being discussed here? Paul certainly included himself in the group, but who else? I think we have two possibilities.

First, Paul may be talking about the unrighteousness of all mankind — both Jew and Gentile. We know that is where Paul is headed with this entire discussion, and, in fact, that will be Paul's conclusion later in this same chapter in Romans 3:23.

And this broad view might be further supported by what we saw in the previous verse (“Let God be true though **every one** were a liar”),

and also might be supported by what we will see in the next verse (“For then how could God judge **the world**”). Paul seems to have expanded his scope in these verses.

But there is a second possibility. Paul may be talking here just about the unrighteousness of the Jews who, as a nation, had rejected God’s promised Messiah. This narrower view has the advantage of maintaining Paul’s focus on the Jews, which began in Romans 2. Also, this narrower view maintains a parallel between verse 5 and verse 3, which is certainly talking about the faithlessness of the Jews.

But, as to that parallel, again we should notice the pronouns. In verse 3, Paul talks about “**their** faithlessness,” while here in verse 5, Paul talks about “**our** unrighteousness.” Paul did not include himself among those in verse 3 who were unfaithful, but Paul does include himself among those in verse 5 who are unrighteous. So maybe that parallel isn’t as much of a parallel as it might seem.

So which is it in verse 5? The unrighteousness of all mankind, or the unrighteousness of the Jews? Commentaries are divided, but I lean toward the unrighteousness of all mankind.

Why? Because of the shift in pronouns, and because of the focus in verses 4 and 6 on every person and on the world. I think Paul is giving us a preview here of where we all know he is heading — showing that everyone is unrighteous. That we all have sinned. Both Jew and Gentile.

But, either way, the question is the same: how does the unrighteousness of man serve to show the righteousness of God?

Didn't we just see an example of that in verse 4 with King David? David's unrighteousness with Uriah and Bathsheba served to show the justice and the blamelessness of God. That is what Psalm 51:4 (which is quoted here in verse 4) told us.

But, of course, there is a much greater example than that one involving King David. There is also an example that involves every person on earth.

What is the greatest way in which God has shown his righteousness to the world? We all know the answer to that question. Paul gave us the answer in the very first chapter of Romans.

**Romans 1:16-17** — 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. **For in it the righteousness of God is revealed** from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ — the same gospel that is the power of God for salvation. And salvation to whom? To **everyone** who believes — both Jew and Gentile — which may be another piece of evidence suggesting that Paul has broadened his focus here to include everyone.

And why do we have the gospel? Why do we see the righteousness of God? Why did God show his righteousness to us? We can answer that question with two words: **sin and love** — the sin of man and the love of God. But man's part was sin. It was our sin that caused God to show his righteousness.

**Luke 19:10** — For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

**Romans 5:6** — For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.

**1 John 4:10** — In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

If we had never sinned, then Christ would never have come. Why? Because Christ would not have needed to come. He would not have needed to die on that cross. There would have been no need for the good news if there had never been any bad news.

But we have sinned. We have all sinned. We have all fallen short of the glory of God, as Paul will very soon tell us. And so God revealed his righteousness in sending his Son to die on the cross for our sins. The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But if our sin led to God's righteousness being revealed, then why are we being punished for our sin? In fact, isn't God being unrighteous when he punishes us for our sin? After all, God would never have had the opportunity to reveal his righteousness had we never sinned — so shouldn't we get some credit for the role that we played in all of that?

Paul will answer that question very forcefully in the next verse, but we get a preview of Paul's answer with the parenthetical at the end of this verse. "I speak in a human way." What does that mean?

I think what it means is that Paul is being ultra-cautious here. Why? Because Paul just used a phrase that one would never expect him to

ever use — the phrase “God is unrighteous,” and the only possible source for such a phrase is sinful mankind.

That is why Paul reminds us here of the source of that phrase — I speak in a **human** way, he tells us. And we see that same human way elsewhere in the Bible when sinful men blame God for their own sin and for their own predicament. In fact, didn't we see that accusation against God with the very first sin in the Bible?

**Genesis 3:12** — The man said, “The woman whom **you gave to be with me**, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.”

It was all God's fault! Isn't that what Adam was suggesting? And we also see the same attitude in the prophets.

**Ezekiel 33:17** — Yet your people say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just,’ when it is their own way that is not just.

God isn't right, God isn't just, God isn't fair. Those are statements that can come only from sinful men. Those are statements that can come only from the sinful world. Heaven, as we know, has a very different attitude toward God — as do the people of God, whose citizenship is in heaven.

**Revelation 4:11** — Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created.

**Revelation 5:12** — Saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

That is why Paul reminds us here of the source of this blasphemous argument against the goodness and justice of God. It is not from God or from the people of God — but it is instead from a lost and sinful world and from lost and sinful people who blame God rather than praise God.

**Romans 3:6**

**Romans 3:6** — By no means! For then how could God judge the world?

And here is Paul’s answer to the question of whether God is unrighteous to punish the unrighteousness of man — “by no means!” It is the same answer that we saw in verse 4 to the question of whether God is unfaithful to his promises — “by no means!” “God forbid!” “Absolutely not!” “Heaven forbid!” “May it never be!” “Never!”

And the evidence for that strong conclusion? Simple — if what those people were saying was true, then God could never judge the world.

And, again, we see Paul the master logician. If we want to know whether a proposition is true or false, we can look at the logical conclusion of that proposition. If the conclusion is false, then the proposition is false.

In the exciting world of mathematics, this technique is called proof by contradiction. To prove that some mathematical statement is true, you can assume that its opposite is true and then show that assumption leads to a contradiction. That is what Paul is doing here — proof by contradiction.

Is God unrighteous to punish the unrighteousness of man? Let's assume for the moment that he is. It would then follow that God, being righteous, cannot punish man for his sin (because that would mean God is unrighteous). And if God cannot punish man for his sin, then God cannot judge the world. But we know that God is going to judge the world.

**Genesis 18:25** — Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?

**Psalms 9:7-8** — But the LORD sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice, and he judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with uprightness.

And so, logically, whatever we assumed that led us to that false conclusion that God cannot judge the world must itself be false. And what did we assume to reach that false conclusion? We assumed that God is unrighteous to punish the unrighteousness of man. And so we have now proved the opposite — we have proved that God is **not** unrighteous to punish the unrighteousness of man. (I feel like I'm back to teaching math!)

### **Romans 3:7**

**Romans 3:7** — But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?

Here we see another objection to Paul's message, although it is very closely related to the previous objection that we saw in verse 5. In fact, I think we can say that the objections in verses 5 and 7 are two sides of the same coin.

- In verse 5, the objection is this: if God uses my sin for something good, then God is unrighteous to punish me for that sin.
- Here in verse 7, the objection is this: if God uses my sin for something good, then why am I still being called a sinner?

And, again, those two objections are really the same objection, just looked at from different directions. The first objection concludes something about God, while the second objection concludes something about me. But both conclusions are false!

Yes, God used my sin to bring about something good — but that does not mean God is unrighteous to punish me for that sin, and it does not mean that I am not a sinner for having committed that sin. In fact, the opposite is true — God is righteous, and I am a sinner — even though God used my sin to bring about something good.

And, again, these are topics that Paul will return to later in Romans, and we will return to them ourselves when Paul does.

But, before we move on, let's pause and look more closely at the phrase "my lie" in verse 7. What was Paul's lie?

The answer may be the same answer that we saw in verse 5 with "our unrighteousness." That is, Paul is talking about mankind in general (or perhaps the Jews in general) and their sin, and God used the sinfulness of mankind and the lies of mankind to reveal his righteousness in the gospel of Christ.

And that may be the correct answer — but again we should notice the **pronouns**! In verse 5, Paul said "**our** unrighteousness," but here

in verse 7, Paul says “**my** lie.” Why the change from first person plural to first person singular? Why doesn’t verse 7 refer to “**our** lie”?

Some commentaries argue that Paul in verse 7 is turning the Jewish objection back on the objectors. They said that they should not be called sinful if their sin brought glory to God. Paul then asks how they can call him a sinner if his “lie” has increased the truth of God. That “lie” in the minds of the objectors was the gospel of Jesus Christ, which the faithless Jews regarded as a lie.

If that is what is going on here, then we should think of “my lie” as having quotes around it. That is, Paul is referring here to “my gospel” (as he calls it in Romans 2:16) with the phrase “my lie” (which is what the Jews called Paul’s gospel).

Which view is correct? That “my lie” is mankind’s lies, or that “my lie” is the gospel, which the opponents of Paul called a lie? There is some pretty strong evidence for the second view — that “my lie” is, in fact, the gospel (which the Jews called a lie):

- Paul had two ways to say “my” in Greek — a short, unstressed form that attaches to the previous word, and a fuller adjective form that stands on its own. Paul chose the fuller adjective form here, which is sometimes used for emphasis, as it is, for example, in Galatians 6:11 (“with my own hand”).
- In the very next verse, Paul will refer to people who were slandering him in a way that would be expected from those who believe that the gospel is a lie.

- The Greek noun translated “lie” is used only here in the New Testament, perhaps suggesting that Paul is quoting someone else’s use of that very unusual word.
- The first person plural pronouns return in the next verse — from “**our** unrighteousness” in verse 5, to “**my** lie” in verse 7, and then back to “slanderosly charge **us**” in verse 8.

Although we can’t say for sure, I lean toward the view that Paul is quoting his opponents here when he uses this unusual form of the word “lie.” I think they were calling the gospel a lie — and Paul is using their own words against them.