

Week Two

Conversations with God

ROMANS 3–4

READ

Consider wise advice given to an employee about the new boss: “Get to know him. Find out what makes him tick.” Or on a different front, consider similar advice given to a young husband about his new bride: “Study your wife. Discover what makes her happy.”

Now consider Paul’s exhortation to the church in Ephesus.

Find out what pleases the Lord (Ephesians 5:10).

Assumptions are dangerous, especially in relationships. It’s dangerous to assume one knows what another wants. Far wiser is the person who asks, who seeks, who investigates the pleasures of another. Down through the ages many have assumed God’s pleasure. As with people, though, assumptions are dangerous.

Among other things, Romans is an exploration of God’s pleasure. Basic understanding of three concepts will greatly enhance this exploration in this week’s readings: Jews and Gentiles, law, and justification.

Jews and Gentiles

At its most basic level, Jews are those whose lineage traces back to Abraham through his son Isaac, and Gentiles are everybody else. The Old Testament is in large part an unfolding of the Jewish story. Why is this significant? Clarity is gained when combined with understanding of the second concept.

Law

In Romans, law refers to the “do’s and don’ts” of the Jewish community, but with an emphasis on the external law. Yes, Jewish law exhorted people of faith to “*Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength*” (Deuteronomy 6:5), but by the time of Paul’s letter to Rome, common perception of Jewish law was more like a religious checklist. This included laws like circumcision, dietary restrictions, resting on the Sabbath, and celebrating religious festivals like Passover. Such laws were sacred to the Jews. They were also impossible to keep with perfection, which leads to the third concept.

Justification

In Greek, justification and righteousness are essentially the same word. To be justified is to be declared righteous despite the reality of unrighteousness in a person’s life. A person’s history might be dark, twisted, and insufferable, but justification is available to them.

Why do these concepts matter? Clarity is gained when they are put together.

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The Importance of These Concepts

Consider where last week's Romans reading left off.

A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God (Romans 2:28-29, TNIV).

This is an epic-making statement to first century ears. Many thought they knew what pleased God. God had taken special interest in the Jewish nation. Clearly, to please God one must be a descendant of Abraham and then abide by the written requirements of the law. Gentiles who disregarded these laws, even if they didn't know them, were displeasing to God. Paul now challenges this view. It's not about ethnicity, and it's not about external performance. Something deeper is at stake.

In this week's chapters, Paul expounds. For starters, Paul establishes the common problem shared by all humanity, both Jew and Gentile.

There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:22-23, TNIV).

All humanity has departed from initial glory, not just Gentiles, as was commonly thought by those who strictly observed Jewish law. All were initially created in the image of God—glorious—but due to sin now fall short of that glory. Paul then goes on to tell us that not just the problem, but the solution is also not unique to one ethnicity over another. Both Jews and Gentiles are...

justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Romans 3:24).

How does this happen?

We maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from observing the law (Romans 3:28, TNIV).

Justification, the declaring of a person as fully righteous, happens by *faith*, or as we established last week, by *trust*. The mechanism of trust is profoundly simple, and although initially counterintuitive, it also makes sense. To trust God is to look to God for help. When Scripture tells us justification happens by faith, it is telling us that God will be trustworthy to those who trust him. He will provide a means for healing, or put another way, a means for justification. That means is the work of Christ on the cross.

As you read Romans 3 and 4 this week, talk to God about your own assumptions. What do you feel you must do to please God? Do you have your own external checklist that you must strictly adhere to in order to experience the pleasure of God? Your checklist may differ from the Jewish checklist, but is it an external checklist, or are you getting to the heart of the matter by entrusting yourself to God's goodness in Christ?

MEMORIZE

This week's memory verses:

2 Corinthians 5:17, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!"

Colossians 1:21-23, "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through

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death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.”

MEDITATE

Meditating is simply talking and listening to God. Your conversation with God will be inspired and informed by reading and memorizing Scripture, but your conversation should also be personalized. Carefully consider the passages, but don't *just* consider the passage. Talk and listen. Pour out your thoughts, concerns, frustrations, and joys. Or just sit in silence before God. Some talk best with God in a quiet room. Others prefer to talk with God while running or walking. Most importantly, engage God in a way that is authentic and personal.

Use the space below to record memorable thoughts or highlights from your conversations with God to share with your Small Group or Running Partners.



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