

Protesting Against God

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like to thank you for your warm welcome and for the privilege of being here. It's a real blessing to come and to worship with you and to share God's word together.

Although we are miles and miles away from you in Carlyway, we are so excited by all that God has been doing in Edinburgh here and among the other congregations. And when we see the work of church planting that's going on and the other activities that you're involved in, it just thrills us and we are so excited at all that God has been doing here in recent years.

So for me it's a great privilege to be here and we're really, really thankful to God for all that he's doing. So we pray that that would continue among you in the months and years to come.

Well, we're going to turn back together to Romans chapter 3 and we're going to look at the verses, the Derrick read, verses 1 to 8. The words are on the screen, I won't read them through again because we're going to be going through it bit by bit together.

So we will probably end up reading it all together as we go through. Romans is an amazing book, but it is one of these books that when you're reading it, as you go through it, you think, what exactly is Paul saying and what exactly is going on?

[1 : 19] And I remember for many years, people would say to me, Romans is amazing and I would think, yeah, it is, and then I would go and read it and I'd be like, I don't really understand it and I don't really know what's been said.

And sometimes that can make us feel like there's something wrong with us because you're reading it and the language can be so dense. And Paul is, has this wonderful gift, Paul who wrote this letter, has this wonderful gift of saying a lot in a few words.

And that means that as we go through it, it's good to do it slowly because it's pretty much impossible just to blast through a passage like this and grasp it at one reading.

So we'll go through it bit by bit and we'll see what Paul is saying. In terms of understanding this passage, we need to remember what the whole of the letter is about. And in many ways, the great theme of Romans is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ.

Paul is explaining how the gospel message works. And back in chapter one, there's a couple of verses that really sum up the whole of the letter. Paul says, I'm not ashamed of the gospel, but it's the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

[2 : 31] And that's really the theme that Paul unpacks in the rest of the letter. He explains how the gospel works. But as I'm sure you'll have seen over the last few weeks, before Paul explains the good news of the gospel, he explains the bad news.

And he goes into a lot of detail expanding on the problem of sin or the fact that we, as the human race, have turned away from God.

And these verses in chapter three that we're looking at today are part of a big section that runs really all the way from chapter one verse 18 all the way through chapter three verse 20.

That's a big, big section where Paul presents this long detailed argument outlining the problem of sin. He highlights the fact that we humans have rebelled against God, even though we are created by God, even though we know that we are His, we have suppressed the truth.

And we've become futile in our thinking. We've turned away from the Creator and God as a result has allowed us to go our own way and He's given us over to our own desires.

[3 : 50] Paul reminds us in chapter one of the Great Truth that if we keep pushing God away, eventually God will say, okay, go your own way and do your own thing.

And that's what Paul has, Paul's explaining. Now, throughout this whole section, Paul is forcing us to think about our worldview. Now, a worldview is just really a gentle conception of the universe around us, but it's a really important thing because everybody has got a worldview, even if you don't

really think it through.

We've all got one, and it all shapes the way we think and the way we live our lives. Everybody has a worldview. If we are Christians, then it's really, really important that we have a biblical worldview. And Paul is forcing us to think about what our worldview is in this section. And in this part of Romans, Paul brings before us a key distinction that lies at the heart of a biblical worldview. And that's what we call the Creator-Creation distinction. And I'm putting a diagram up here, I should probably warn you, before I became a minister, I was an engineer, so I love diagrams and I love pictures and all that kind of stuff.

[5 : 06] Please remember, all diagrams are simplifications. They don't explain the whole truth, but they do help us to understand a bit more clearly. Certainly they help me. I suppose I'm better with pictures than I am with words.

Biblical worldview. What is Creator? We are creation. And there's a distinction between the two. And this diagram is helpful because when you look at that we circle, the whole of created reality, the whole of history, the whole of the universe, the whole of matter is in that we circle. And we must never forget that that's tiny compared to God. And if you think about you and me, we're in that we circle and we're just tiny specks, tiny.

And Paul explains in chapter one that at the heart of humanity's problem is the fact that we have rejected the Creator and we've started worshiping and serving the creation instead.

[6 : 22] So that's the kind of worldview that shapes what Paul is saying. He then goes into chapter two and he highlights an incredibly important point at the start of chapter two, namely that God is judge and we are not.

And that's a very obvious statement. And when you look at that Creator creation distinction, it makes perfect sense. Of course God is judge. He's the Creator and we are made by Him. And yet we spend a lot of time judging people, don't we? And that's a really important thing to recognize because very often we use our worldview to judge other people.

Like we said, everybody's got a worldview and we use that worldview to judge others. So somebody who's maybe got a worldview that's entirely based on understanding things from a scientific perspective, what you'd call a naturalistic worldview that does not allow for anything beyond what we can see and test and analyze.

Someone with that kind of worldview might judge somebody who cares about art or philosophy or theology and they might think, well, they're wasting their time thinking about these things.

Somebody with a skeptical worldview might think that anybody who has any sort of belief has just been stupid and more specifically we can have a kind of mindset towards issues that can make us judge other people.

[7 : 43] So somebody who's anti-Brexit might judge all those who said remain. And even in other ways, somebody who supports Hibbs might hate the people who support hearts.

Why anybody would support Hibbs? I don't know anyway. Anyway, we'll go down that road. But we use our worldview to judge others.

And most of the time, we think that we are right, don't we? But a true biblical worldview is not so concerned about judging other people.

A biblical worldview is far more concerned with the fact that we are going to be judged. The biblical worldview is that God is Creator, God is Judge.

We are the creation, so we will be judged. But if I ask myself the question, how often do I judge other people? The answer is very often. And then if I ask myself, how often do I think about the fact that I'm going to be judged?

[8 : 48] The answer is not often enough. And that's when I realized that I'm not very biblical in my thinking and I need to change. God is Creator, therefore God is Judge.

Chapter 2 highlights the fact that God's judgment is always fair. God is never, ever, ever unfair. And God's judgment is always informed.

He judges even the secret hearts of people. And the fact that God is Judge can prompt two responses from people, two different responses, and Paul talks about both of these in the second half of chapter 2 and the first part of chapter 3.

The first response to the fact that God is Judge is to try and impress God. That's what the second half of chapter 2 talks about. Paul, in these words, was challenging his readers who thought that through their outward obedience and their outward rituals that they would impress God.

And that's something that we can think that we can impress God by our church attendance, impress God by our heritage, impress God by the stuff that we do. Paul says, don't think for one minute that you can impress God.

[10:10] Because God knows very well that despite your boasting, in reality, you are a lawbreaker because everybody is.

I listened to Corey, his sermon on the first part of chapter 2, and he said something brilliant. He said that God's law is terrifying and beautiful at the same time. And that's an excellent description because God's law is beautiful, but at the same time it's terrifying because it's a standard that we can't meet and it's something that we should have a holy reverence towards.

It's a reminder that boasting before God is not really a very wise thing to do. And again, that makes perfect sense from the Creator creation distinction. Can a tiny speck in that we circle say, hey, hey, hey, look at me?

Of course not. Makes no sense at all. We can't come before God trying to impress him because as Paul says in chapter 2, he can see right into the secrets of our hearts.

Often we can impress other people by concealing our secrets. That's something we do quite a lot, we try to hide kind of the mucky stuff in our lives. We can't do that with God.

[11:24] He can see right through it all. Boasting before God is a bad idea. It's not something that we can do. That's one response to the fact that God is judge.

But there's another response, another option that people turn to when it comes to responding to God's judgment. Some people try to impress God, other people protest against God.

And that's what we have in chapter 3, verses 1 to 8. And that's something that people often do.

People criticize God. People accuse God.

People even blame God for the fact that things are not the way we want them to be. It's something that we see all around us. It's something that we do ourselves.

So as we come to these verses, which as Derek said are not the easiest verses to go through, that's really one of the great themes that Paul is touching on. The fact that people protest against God with questions and with sometimes almost accusations against God or against the way God is doing things.

[12:35] So let's look at that in a wee bit more detail just for the next 15 or 20 minutes together.

Here in these verses, we find four common protests against God.

We'll look at them together. So number one is in verses 1 and 2. This is the protest that says, why didn't God just leave us alone? What then, what advantage has the Jew?

What is the value of circumcision? That was the sign that was placed on Jewish people in the Old Testament to identify them as God's people. What's the advantage of these things?

That's the kind of a protest that people have. That's the view that it says, well, when it comes to bad news, ignorance is better than knowledge.

And examples today might be the people who come to church and say, well, I don't want to be told that I'm a sinner. I don't want to be told that I've done something wrong. What's the point in going to church if they're just going to tell you that there's things that are going wrong in your life?

[13:31] And that's a hugely appealing protest to the world of today that wants to distract itself from obligation and responsibility, because all too often we want to bury our heads in the sand and pretend that problems aren't there.

Marshall just said that there are perhaps hundreds of millions of children on the street. Now, why on earth is that not the headline on the news tonight and every night until it's fixed?

We just pretend it's not there because we don't want to be told bad stuff. And the same applies to God's law. People protest against God.

And in Paul's day, people who are no doubt saying, well, what's the advantage of being a Jew?

People might say today, what's the advantage of being a Christian if all it does is highlight that there's something wrong with you?

Paul's response is to say there's much in every way that is the advantage of being a Jew. God's law, knowing God's law has huge benefits.

[14:34] You can see the words there, much in every way. And he gives one example. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. And it's like it's just one example. It's the tip of the iceberg of all these blessings.

Now when you read a we phrase like that, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. It's the kind of phrase that's easy just to blast through and to not really take in. But you go back to that diagram, creator creation.

Remember that the Jews were a tiny speck in the we circle, tiny. And yet the God who is creator of everything has revealed his truth, his commands, his priorities, his desires in the words of the Old Testament Scriptures.

And that is an astonishing privilege. That tiny speck we're able to say, God has spoken to us. No wonder Paul says, much in every way. And the protest against God that says we'd be better off not knowing is so desperately short-sighted and foolish.

[15:48] And if someone was to come in here today and say, man, I don't like this place, this is saying that I'm a sinner, this is saying that things are wrong, I would just rather not know.

I'd rather go back out and just distract myself with all the fun of the city and life and all the things that that can offer me. If you come in and think like that, then you are trying to pretend that the biggest problem you will ever face doesn't actually exist.

Is that a good idea? It's a bit like someone saying, what's the point of the NHS if it's just going to tell me that I'm sick? It's a crazy way to think.

If we are going to be judged, then God forbid that we ever bury ourselves in ignorance and distraction, only to wake up on the day when the Creator judges His creation and find that we are not ready.

Verse number two is in verses three and four. This is the protest that says, why did God let us get into this mess? What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?

[17:01] This is the view that basically says, well, if God gave His laws to the Jews, if God gave the Jews these Old Testament scriptures, surely the fact that they were unfaithful is a failure on God's part.

Surely it's God's fault. And today, people protest against God in the same way. They say, why didn't God stop me from sinning? Why doesn't God take away the bad desires that I have?

Why did God let this happen? Why is God doing this to me? And Paul responds by saying that sin is never, ever, ever something that we can blame God for.

He uses the example of lying. So supposing everybody in the whole world is a liar, that does not mean for one second that God is.

And the key point is that sin undermines us, not God. And the reason for that is because sin involves doing the opposite of what God has told us to do.

[18:07] That's what sin is. Disobeying what God has told us to do. Not fulfilling the instructions that He has given. That's why if we sin and find ourselves in a mess and we protest against God and we say to God, why didn't you tell me not to do this?

God can respond and say, I did. I've told you again and again and again not to do this. That's what God's law is. God's law is not this kind of horrible restriction that's spoiling our lives and stopping us from doing things.

God's law is a wonderful protection to keep us and guard us against getting into a mess.

Why did God give us His laws? Was it to restrict us? Was it to confine us? Was it to control us? No. God gave us His laws to be good to us.

You read Deuteronomy 6. It'll tell you that. God gave us these commands for our good. That's why the God's law is a wonderful thing. When we sin, we are doing the very opposite of what God has told us to do and we're doing the very things that He has warned us against.

[19:19] That's why sin is rebellion. It's not doing God's will. It's opposing God's will. Therefore if God judges us, He's perfectly justified, as Paul says, that you might be justified in your words and prevailed when you judge.

If God has said to us, don't do it, and then we do it, who's to blame? And I look at my own life and I look at everything that I regret in my life and for every one of these things, God has said to me, don't do it.

Verse number three is in verses five to six, this is the protest that says, where's God's justice? This is a favorite one of many people.

Paul writes, 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, Paul says that I speak in a

human way to say that this is kind of a human protest.

This is the way we think. He's almost, well, I'm assuming that he's almost ashamed to be writing it when he says that because it's just such a human way to think.

[20 : 34] It's a protest that says, where's God's justice? It follows on what Paul has just said. He said, okay, if our sin shows us the fact that God was right all along, where's God's justice in terms of the mess that we find ourselves in?

And as I said, it's a very common, very popular protest against God today. People find themselves in a mess, and often in situations, people are both victim and villain.

That's a very important thing to remember. So people do things that are wrong, but at the same time, they get hurt in the process, and likewise, they hurt other people. They respond by hurting others.

The whole thing becomes a horrible mess. It can happen in families. It can happen at work, and it can even happen in churches. And in the midst of these situations where sin has just wrecked friendships and relationships and congregations and caused deep scars in people's lives, people will say, where's God's justice?

When sin causes chaos, people protest against God. They say, where is God's justice in all of this?

[21 : 45] Okay, those of you who will have studied chapter one, I hope you can see that there's something very, very wrong with that protest. Can you see what it is?

Well, if you go back to chapter one, just in your minds, there it says that Paul's wrath is revealed against unrighteousness.

And so when God sees the muck of sin in life, so it's almost like he's looking at the world, he sees the mess, and that provokes in God a response, a just response.

And his judgment for now is that he gives us over, well, the words, I'll read the words out literally, he gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

In other words, God says, okay, okay, you keep pushing me away, I'll let you go. I'll let you do your own thing. This is, which is a commentary on the world today and has been ever since the words were written by Paul.

[22 : 48] The key point is this, when you see chaos in your life because of sin, that is not an absence of God's justice.

It is a demonstration of God's justice. Sin causes chaos. Sin is not what God wants.

Sin is totally incompatible with God. So if we keep sinning and we keep pushing God away and we keep saying, I don't want your law and I don't want your instructions and I'm not going to do what you say, then he will let us go our own way and he is totally justified doing that.

When sin causes chaos in our lives, that is justice. Now, if you don't agree with that, and you might not, but if you don't agree with that, I would say that you don't have an adequate understanding of sin.

It's vital that we recognize the immense seriousness of sin. We think that sin is a plaything. We think that immorality is something that we can dip into for a bit of pleasure and that it's not that bad.

[24 : 14] But sin is not this little error that we can dip into. It's not kind of a bit of naughtiness. It's not something that we can dip into. Sin is a brutal, hideous slave master that wants to capture you and destroy you.

Sin wants to wreck you and to wreck your relationship with God. And if we play with sin, if you play with sin in the week ahead, then you are aligning yourself with the most destructive and hideous force in all creation.

Sin is lawless anarchy. That's why the world is in that horrible mess and it's not getting any better despite all our advances. And a just response from God, at the very least, is to leave us to ourselves.

And of course, ultimately, and Paul talks about this in chapter 2, ultimately, sin provokes eternal separation from God. That's why we should never come before God and say, show me justice.

Because our sin means that we would justly be condemned. We do not go to God demanding justice. We go to God and we say, please have mercy.

[25 : 53] People protest against God and say, where is your justice? The last protest is in seven and eight.

This is the protest that says, well, if my sin shows up God's goodness, why am I in trouble? But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?

Why not do evil that good may come? This is the view that really is the very opposite of what Paul was talking about at the end of chapter 2. End of chapter 2 is really talking about the legalist, the person who thinks that by obeying their laws they can earn God's favor and get a relationship with God because of what they are doing.

This is now the opposite of legalism, which is what we call antinomianism. So there you have, again, diagrams. God's law in the middle, one extremist legalism that says you must keep every single thing that God is saying if you want any hope of knowing God.

That's a heresy. At the other end of the extreme is another heresy, which says God's law doesn't matter. You can do whatever you like.

[27 : 05] You can sin as much as you like. God will fix it, and the verse there basically sums that up, well, if I lie, then it just shows that God is too because I'm just highlighting his glory.

And I can do evil because good will come of it because God will fix it. Paul's talking about the person who's saying, well, my sin is going to show up God's truth and God's justice, therefore it's a good thing.

Why not do evil so good may come? And people think like that today. People think I'm forgiven, so I can really, I can do what I like.

And I can sin, but it's not that serious. God's grace and forgiveness will abound. And as you come into chapter six and seven, Paul returns to this theme in more detail.

The key point that Paul makes, again, is actually very, very simple. He says, if we sin, all we do is justify our condemnation.

[28 : 08] Their condemnation is just. When sin manifests itself in our lives, it's not a sign that things are good, it's a sign that there's still a lot wrong with us.

Sin is never something we should be glad about. It is something that should make us mourn. For long before we ever try to make out that our sin highlights God's goodness, we should be far, far, far more concerned about the fact that sin confirms our personal guilt.

So there's four protests that people rail against God. And Paul throws them all out. None of them have a foundation, none of them stand up.

We can't claim ignorance. We can't blame God. We can't demand justice. And we can't play down the seriousness of sin. We cannot protest against God.

And go back to your diagram. That makes perfect sense, because every one of these protests is an attempt whereby a tiny speck in that we circle is saying to the Creator, hi, hi, hi, you should do what I say.

[29 : 24] A tiny speck is trying to manipulate the Creator of the universe. And I can imagine Paul coming to the person who's doing that and saying to them, are you crazy?

Because we can't do it. God is Creator. God is judge. And we've got to be very, very, very careful if we think that we can shake our fist against God and protest.

And I have to ask myself, am I protesting against God? When things go wrong in my life, do I get angry with Him? When things aren't how I want them to be, do I blame Him?

When I look at the state of the world, when I look at Syria, do I criticize Him? Do I criticize God? When all the time, I should be looking at myself.

We should not protest against God. I wanted to say very briefly that that doesn't mean that we can't ask God questions. The book of Psalms is full of wonderful examples of asking God questions.

[30 : 37] We can ask God questions, and that's a good thing to do, but we should never cross the line into protesting against God. So that raises the last question that really, I hope, brings it all together.

What should we do when we see all the chaos in the world around us caused by sin? What should we do when sin mucks things up in our own lives?

Is the answer that we should just make sure that we toe the line and never get on the wrong side of God? Is that what the Bible says? That God is created.

He can do whatever He likes, so don't you dare question Him. And if you want to be on His good side, then you better make sure that you do what He says. Is that what the Bible is saying?

No. That is not what the Bible says. In fact, that view that God can just do whatever He likes and that you must toe the line is actually a lot closer really to how Islam would portray God.

[31 : 45] And that's something that Muslims take very, very, very seriously, but it's not the biblical teaching about God. So what does the Bible say?

What should we do? Well, the Bible teaches us that God is created, that has to be at the core of our worldview. The Bible teaches us that God is holy and righteous, totally incompatible with sin. Sin is the very opposite of God. Always put God and sin as far away from each other as you can because they are antithetical, opposites. But the Bible teaches us more about who God is. The Bible teaches us that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding instead fast love.

So in terms of our worldview, we can look at God and when we look at that diagram, we realize that we are absolutely nothing before Him. We are tiny. We cannot boast.

[32 : 44] We cannot protest. We cannot claim anything before Him. It does that mean that God looks down on you and he says, fall into line, you pathetic little creature, and don't ever cross me again.

Does God say that? No, He does not. God looks at tiny specks like you and me and he says, I love you.

And I want you as my child and I want to be the perfect Father to you for all of eternity.

And that is why He sent His Son. That is why Paul can go on to talk about the wonderful good news of the Gospel in the rest of this letter.

God sent His own Son, Jesus Christ, not to hammer us but to save us, not to condemn us but to restore us. And the extraordinary truth of the Gospel is that God gave His precious, beloved Son to save a world that was vehemently protesting against Him.

[34 : 05] That is why the grace of God is amazing. That the tiny specks in that little circle who are shaking their fists against God, God says, I'm not giving up on you.

In fact, I will come and die in your place. And that's why when we find ourselves in the midst of a horrible mess that sin causes, the answer is never to protest against God.

The answer is to run to Him, to run into His arms, to find grace and help in time of need.

So when sin mucks up your life, don't protest against God. Run to Him.

Let's pray. God our Father, we thank you for your mercy.

[35 : 13] And we confess that sometimes we blame you, sometimes we criticise you, sometimes we protest against you and we think that we know better.

Please forgive us for being so foolish. And oh God, thank you that you are not only the God who rules, not only the God who is created, but you are the God of perfect fatherly love, showing such perfect love to tiny wee specks like us and transforming us into your own children.

Oh God, we thank you. And we pray that you'd have mercy on the world around us that is protesting against you. Please just open our eyes and throw us back to you.

Thank you for everything that you are and everything that you've done for us. Amen.