

**Pastor Kyle Mercer**  
Sin, Grace, & God's Faithfulness

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Series: The Verdict

Romans 3:1-8

**BIG IDEA - HUMAN UNBELIEF DOESN'T NULLIFY GOD'S FAITHFULNESS, AND GRACE IS NEVER A LICENSE TO SIN**

I love that line. "This is a small church." In fact, this church is as small as you want it to be. By the way, good morning across all of our campuses. And, oh, by the way, happy belated Valentine's Day to all of you pagans who were celebrating that yesterday.

Guys, what a crazy few weeks it has been. A lot of stuff that has happened in 2026 was not on my bingo card, including having two weeks in a row where we were snowed in with no services. Then I wasn't here last week. I can't tell you the last time I've not been here for three weeks in a row. So let me just tell you this. Seriously, I miss you guys. It is so great to be back.

Let me ask you this. You're not going to like this question. How are your New Year's resolutions going? I think they say that right around the Super Bowl or Valentine's Day, 75 percent of people have given up. Don't worry; only 9 percent are going to make it to the end anyway.

Here's what I want to ask you, though. I think when we're snowed in, and your kids are there all the time, and all of the activities are closed... It felt like COVID again. Here's what that means. Sometimes, even in two weeks, you can start bad habits. You can fall. You can fail.

Listen. Here's the good news. I'm not preaching on this today, but here's the good news. The Bible says a righteous man or woman falls seven times but gets back up. The key is you just need to get back up one more time than you fell down. Why am I telling you

this? Because I want to tell you really quickly about what it means for you at Two Cities to take your first step or your next step.

Look. Just before this service, I was walking around here at the Winston-Salem Campus. I was walking around the lobby. More than ever... And I've been doing this for 10 years now. More than ever, there are people here who I've never seen before. There are so many... And I'm pretty good with faces, not the best with names. But there are so many new people here.

So, I want to tell you this. If you're new, you don't even need to pray about your next step. I know what your next step is. Your next step is to come to our Weekender. Next weekend... Don't worry. Some of you are nervous, and you're not early adopters. You click the "Maybe" button on Facebook that you're going to stuff.

I want to let you know that already over 60 people are signed up for this. This, guys, is your next step to get into the life of our church. No church can exist with more takers than givers, more consumers than contributors, more spectators than participators. We can't do it. So, I just want to invite you in at the beginning of the year.

Secondly...this is important...we have a parenting conference. This is our first ever parenting conference. We have, like, 500 parents signed up. But I have met some of your kids, and some of you still need to sign up. I love you, but you need to... Listen. It's okay. This is your opportunity to work *on* your parenting, not just *in* your parenting.

We're giving it to you. It's a *selah*. That's a phrase in the Psalms meaning rest and break. Sometimes, you're working in your job. You're working in your marriage. You're working in your home. You need to get out of it. You need to get above it, and you need to work *on* it.

Guys, if we're going to be centered and sent (I'm going to say that all year)... There is no healthy church apart from healthy families. So, I just want to ask you... We have hundreds of spots left. I want to ask you to sign up and show up in two weeks. We're bringing Adam Griffin from Dallas, Texas. He's going to be talking about some really important things. All right. Let's pray, and then we have a lot of work to do this morning.

Lord, right now we come to you in Jesus' name, and we pray, because as we're going to see today, we're going to deal with a tough text. Not tough because of the topics it deals with but tough just because it's hard to understand. It's a reminder to us, as we read the Bible, that the Holy Spirit is both the inspirer of the Bible and the illuminator of the Bible. So, we just come in humility right now, and we say, "We cannot understand the Bible if you don't let us, if you don't open up our eyes." Would you do that across all of our campuses? In Jesus' name, amen.

Open up your Bibles to Romans, chapter 3. Guys, we're going to be on this journey for so long, all year. If you're new, we're in a book of the Bible for an entire year. It's going to be awesome. I hope you've enjoyed it so far. But I want to ask you this question as we start today. Have you ever heard of theodicy? Not *The Odyssey*. That's a book by Homer you had to read in eighth grade. I'm talking about the word *theodicy*. You know, it's Sunday morning. Let's learn some new words together.

*Theodicy* comes from two words put together: *God* and *justice*. You're going to find this interesting. *I* find it interesting. I think *you're* going to find it interesting. There's an entire branch of theology and philosophy called *theodicy*. Here's what it is: the defense of God. Did you know that? There's a whole group of scholars, and what they're trying to do... I know. You might say something like, "God doesn't need to be defended." Agree. He can defend himself.

But here's what I mean. Everybody has questions about God. *Everybody*. The most common question of theodicy is the question of God and how a good God works in a world of evil and suffering. The question goes something like this: "If God is all-knowing and God is loving and God is good, then why is there suffering in the world?" That's a question most people don't care about until *they're* suffering. It's like, "Why is there suffering in the world?" Well, you don't really care unless you're in some philosophy class in college.

But let me tell you when you *do* care. When you can't get pregnant, and you're like, "I don't even know what to do here." That leads to a bunch of other questions, like, "Could Christians use IVF? What does God think about IVF?" All of a sudden, you're in theodicy. "Why would a good God not let a good couple that wants to be parents have kids?" I mean, there are all types of questions like this.

So, if you turn to Romans, chapter 3, today, we are going to deal with the most confusing part of Romans. This is not going to be the best sermon I've ever preached. It's not going to be the best sermon you've ever heard. My promise to you is I will never... I've preached some bad sermons; I will never preach an unprepared sermon to you. But this is the most... I don't know the last time it took me this long to write a sermon.

This text is tough. John Piper says it's the toughest text to understand in Romans. Martyn Lloyd-Jones... He was a famous guy who died a while ago. He pastored in London. He said it's probably the most confusing text in the entire Bible. I'll just read it to you. I'll read it to you, and then we'll talk about it. Just listen. I'm going to read it a couple of times.

**"Then what advantage has the Jew?"** Yep, we're going to talk about Jewish people today. **"Or what is the value of circumcision?"** No, it's not going to be another sermon...

You're like, "I can't handle one more sermon on circumcision." Don't worry. **"Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God."** Notice, by the way, Paul is asking and answering 10 questions here. I've already read two of them.

**"What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? 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.'" That's a quote from Psalm 51.**

**"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.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world? But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just."**

All right. Now you can see why most people are like, "I don't want to do expositional preaching. I don't want to just walk through books of the Bible, because what are we going to talk about?" Okay. The first thing here... This is a conviction Christians need to have. I want our church to have this. The Bible has the answers to people's questions. Paul is not afraid of people's questions. In fact, Paul knows the questions people are asking in light of what he has been saying and teaching.

The problem with most local churches... And if you know me (and some of you don't know me), I love the church, the "big C" church. I'm the pastor of *a* church and a pastor of *the* church, and I'm a kingdom guy. I get all that. But most churches are talking and answering questions nobody is asking. They're having goofy conversations about chairs or pews. Nobody cares. They're having silly conversations about styles of worship. Are you kidding me?

Every once in a while... Thank God it doesn't happen very often. But every once in a while, people in this church start asking goofy questions. It's always very clear to me. We are lacking something. I want you asking *this* question: "How do I reach my neighbor?" That's a good question. Or how about *this* question? "Why are all the youth having mental health issues?" That's a good question. Ask *that* question.

See, the problem with the church is we either don't know the questions people are asking or we don't know where the answers are in the Bible. We're going to work on this together today. By the way, we have to be passionate, and we have to be intellectual. Paul is super intellectual. He's a Pharisee of Pharisees, and he learned under this guy named Gamaliel. You can read about that sometime. He's a super-smart guy.

So, here's the first thing. I don't want you to be afraid of any argument. Don't be afraid of Darwinian evolution arguments. Don't be afraid of materialism or relativism. Who cares? I just want you to know we're not afraid of those. Come on. We have the resources. Christians have been thinking about this for 2,000 years. So, we're going to be intellectual.

By the way, this is why Christians... We love free speech, and we love rigorous debate, because if you can't debate about something with words, the only thing left is to fight with weapons, and we don't want to go there. But then you have to be passionate. These are preliminary thoughts to a very difficult text. Okay? I want you to see that Paul is intellectual and passionate.

Do you notice that twice... You know, he's asking a question, like, "Does our unrighteousness show God's righteousness?" and twice in there he says, "By no means!" The KJV translated it, "God forbid." The NASB said, "May it never be!" So, how can we be both passionate about what God's Word says but intellectually ready to have all of the conversations?

One of our goals is I want to be able to... Anyone who leaves our student ministry... We're going to send them off, and I'm not afraid if they end up in Bart Ehrman's class at UNC. You probably don't know who that is. He thinks it's his job to deconstruct the faith of freshmen in religion classes at UNC. We're going to build cities in the minds and hearts of our families so that we're ready to go through all of these arguments, and then, as well, to passionately go, "By no means. May it never be."

One other preliminary thought, then we're going to dive deep into the text. What do we do with difficult texts? How do we interpret them? There's no shortage of difficult texts. In fact, let me show you this. I don't normally do this. We're going to go to another verse. Second Peter 3:15-16: **"...just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you..."** This is interesting. Peter says, "The apostle Paul wrote to you."

**"...just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures."**

Isn't that interesting? First of all, Peter calls Paul's writing *Scripture*. But Peter, who walked with Jesus for three years and wrote parts of the Bible, says, "Some things Paul writes are hard to understand." That makes me feel a little bit better. So, let me tell you this, because this is helpful.

I want you to be a self-feeder, a self-reader. Yes, it is my role and job and a great honor and privilege to get up here every week and just take a small section and talk for 45 minutes. That's great. But we want you to be a self-feeder. Here's what happens. Here are four principles to deal with difficult passages. These are all C's. I just made these up. Some C's are better than other C's, but I'm going to give you four C's.

The first is *context*. In other words, you ask, "Okay, what is the context?" For example, why is Paul asking all of these crazy questions and answering them? Well, the context is he just said that all Jewish people and all Gentile people are equally condemned. So now there's this whole question about, "Well, does it even matter that I'm Jewish then? Is there anything good about being Jewish?"

You have to understand the book's context. You have to understand the historical context. You have to understand the context of the whole Bible. They say Bible reading and real estate have one thing in common. The most important thing is location, location, location.

The second principle is *clear passages help us interpret unclear passages*. I remember years ago... And I'm going to do this again, because we need it again at some point. Years ago, I was preaching through Song of Solomon, and I was talking about sex and romance and manhood and womanhood from Hebrew poetry. It was kind of a strange season of my life.

There were some people in our church... I loved them, and they loved me, but every once in a while, they'd give me a hard time about it. "You're talking about manhood from Hebrew poetry." They were basically saying, "It's kind of hard to see. Some of this is veiled, and I don't know if I really understand where you're going in this point."

I was like, "Listen. First, I'm interpreting this how the church has interpreted this for 2,000 years. Secondly, I'm not teaching anything out of Song of Solomon that isn't clearly taught somewhere else in Scripture." You always want to use the clearer passages to interpret the less clear passages.

Here's the third one: *community*. This is why we're like, "Get in a Community Group," because the Bible was meant to be interpreted in community. Every cult ever... Let me say this again. Every cult ever started with a guy alone with his Bible in the woods, very excited about two verses out of context. That's every cult you've ever heard of in your entire life. This is why we have 2,000 years of church history. This is why you use commentaries...all that.

Finally, *contemplation*. Let me read to you one other passage. Second Timothy 2:7. Paul writes this to Timothy. He says this about the Scripture: "**Think over what I say, for the**

***Lord will give you understanding in everything.***" Guys, I've had to learn this. In understanding the Bible, there is no shortcut. Sometimes you just need to go, "What does this passage mean?" and you just need to think about it. It creates a humility. I have to study, and I have to be dependent on the Holy Spirit.

So, to start out, the preliminary thoughts for today are we need to be like Paul, passionate and engaged in the intellectual questions people really have, not that we *wish* they had. Secondly, we talked about how to interpret tough texts. Thirdly, let's just get into the questions Paul asks.

Let's look at the first question. Verse 1: ***"Then what advantage has the Jew?"*** Let me explain this. If you've not been following along, go back and... This isn't self-serving. You really should not miss a message in Romans, because everything is logical and builds on itself.

In chapter 1, basically, Paul says, "The entire Gentile, rebellious world is lost and guilty." We'll just talk about Winston-Salem for a second. Think of Trade Street. I love Trade Street. I'll eat there or whatever. It's just worldly. It's worldly. You know it is. Think Asheville. Okay.

There are certain people who go, "Yeah, yeah! Give it to 'em! They're ungodly." Then Paul goes, "Yeah, yeah, but so are 4th Street and 5th Street where all of the old religious buildings are that everybody else paid for, and then most of those churches have forsaken the gospel. Yeah, they're all guilty too." We're like, "Wait a second."

Listen to this. Paul basically ends chapter 2 and goes, "You know what? Somebody could be a Jew inwardly." Then Paul says (we'll get to this in a second), "You know what? Circumcision doesn't mean anything. Your heart needs to be circumcised." Can you imagine all of the guys who got circumcised? They're like, "Well, I wish you would have told me that. Oh my gosh. Yeah, that'd be a lot easier. Circumcise my heart."

Let's ask this question, though, because we're going to answer it. What value is being Jewish? Well, if you look in history, it doesn't seem like much value. (I'm treading where angels fear to tread. You're not allowed to talk about Jewish people, but I'm going to do it for a second.) They have had a horrible past, through no fault of their own. They have been enslaved. I mean, that's the story of the Bible. They've been at war.

I told you I've been to Israel. I want to take a group of you to Israel. Maybe we'll go in 2027 or 2028. They have enemies everywhere. You just get up on this mountain area, and they're like, "That's Syria. Those are their guns, and they hate us." It's everywhere there.

The first time I went to Israel, I got stuck in the airport in Munich because there's a second TSA just to get to Tel Aviv. I'd never seen this in my whole international travel. You're like, "All right. I just went through TSA in Charlotte. Why am I going through TSA again in Munich?" Oh, because Israel has so many enemies they created their own checkpoint in Munich.

When you go to Israel, you don't get your passport stamped. They won't do that, because they know there are so many countries that hate them. They give you a little blue card you put in your passport. So you go, "What advantage?" By the way, do you know that 70 percent of religious hate crimes in the United States last year were against Jewish people? In America! Jewish people only make up 2 percent of America.

So, it's a fair question today. What's going on, and what advantage is there in being Jewish? Well, Paul is going to get there in a second, but he has to ask a second question, which we kind of talked about, but let's hit it. He says, "**Or what is the value of circumcision?**" By the way, he answers it. "**Much in every way.**"

It's like, "Paul, what are you doing? You just said we have to be circumcised in our hearts, and you say in other places it doesn't matter if you're circumcised or not. Now I'm asking you about circumcision, and now you're like, 'Oh, much value in every way.'" This is why people are confused about this passage.

Here's the question people have to ask: "What value is religious activity in my life?" Because as soon as someone becomes a Christian, they go, "You know what? You could be a Christian and not get baptized. So why would I get baptized? The thief on the cross wasn't baptized. I don't need to get baptized. What value is baptism?"

I've told our staff before... Sometimes I think we talk about baptism up here, and we tell everybody all of the things it isn't. You know, we get up here, and we're like, "Now, baptism doesn't save you." And it doesn't. "There's nothing special about this water." We use the water joke. "This is Forsyth County water," and everyone laughs. It's a great joke. No one laughed today either, but you know what I'm saying.

Listen. Baptism is of much value in every way. I've never met anyone who regretted getting baptized. It is a line in the sand. It is the way you celebrate the gospel going forward. There are some of you who, next week... You haven't decided to do this yet, but you're going to decide today to get baptized, because it is of much value in every way.

People can do that about the Lord's Supper. "What value is the Lord's Supper? What value is going to church?" It's like, "Much in every way." By the way, parents, you need to know this. You might say, "What value is student ministry? What value is kids' ministry?" I need to tell you something.

I'm still a fairly young dad, but for many of you, my kids are older than your kids. I need to tell you something that no one tells you. Your kids will love the church before they love Christ. You have to know that. Most kids are going to love the church before they love Christ. What value is kids' ministry? Much in every way. That's what Paul is saying. So don't throw all this away.

Then he's going to answer the question. Here's how he answers it. He basically says there is one great advantage the Jewish people had. By the way, this is what's confusing about Paul. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, he's going to stop talking about Jewish people after this section right here, and he's going to pick it back up in chapter 9 and tell us way more.

But here's what he says now. Here's the big blessing and benefit to the Jewish people. ***"To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God."*** Okay. I want you to follow the logic of Romans, where Paul moves from natural revelation to special revelation. I won't rehearse it all.

In chapters 1 and 2... Nate did a great job last week. You know, creation and conscience, natural revelation available to everyone. Then he says, "Guys, I have to tell you something. The main thing the Jewish people had was the Bible." There's no other nation on earth... It's interesting. Think about it. God did not give some of his Word to the Assyrians and some of his Word to the Babylonians and some of his Word to the Persians and whatever else.

God gave his entire written-down Word to the Jewish people. That is so unique, because as soon as you have the Word of God, you know things nobody else knows, because there are certain things that without revelation, all you would have is speculation. All of a sudden, you know how the world was created.

By the way, all of the questions people do have are almost always the same. There are some generational questions, but people have the same questions. "Why is there something instead of nothing?" Everybody asks that question. *Everybody* does. "What is the purpose of my life? Why do bad things happen to good people? What's wrong with me, and can it be fixed?" Everybody asks those questions all the time across their life. He's saying the Jewish people had the Bible.

Now, here's the thing. He says it was a blessing. Let me try to explain this. It was a blessing even to those who didn't believe. Why? The Bible tells you how to have eternal life, but it also tells you how to have a better life. Now, we don't want to just settle for a better life. We want to go all the way to eternal life. But you'll meet people. You've met these people. They're not really Christians, but they have prayed to receive Dave Ramsey

into their heart. All of Dave Ramsey's money management principles he got from the Bible.

There are people whose marriages have been restored by doing the respect and love pattern that's taught in Ephesians 5. The work ethic...all of these things. Paul says it's such a blessing. Now, this leads to a question that I think is a very modern question. Paul calls it an *advantage*. He says, "What advantage do Jewish people have?" Then he says the advantage is access to God's Word.

I hope I'm using this correctly. You might say having access to God's Word was a privilege. Isn't that interesting? We're having a big conversation in our society on what to do with our privileges. Here's what's interesting. I'll try to explain this. In other places, Paul says the more access you have to God's Word, the more accountable you are. Some of you are like, "I shouldn't have come to church today."

The most dangerous place to grow up is in a good Christian home and a good Christian church if you don't believe, because that is the place where you have so much knowledge that you have suppressed, and you have been around the things of God for so long. We've been having a conversation in our nation about privilege for a while now. A very famous book was written in 2023 called *The Two-Parent Privilege*. To have a mom and dad in the home is now called a privilege.

Here's a new one. I just found this out this week, because I was doing some research on this. There's now what they call the *pretty privilege*. You're privileged if you're pretty or handsome. They have all of these things that if you're over six feet and good-looking, you're more likely to get the job, and if you're prettier, you're more likely to get the job, and all that kind of stuff.

Here's what I want us to understand from a biblical perspective. What do you do with your advantages in life? What do you do with your privileges? Let me tell you this: You do not apologize for them. Never. I was in a room one time where a guy got up in front of a group of us and said, "I'm going to repent of my white privilege." There were only eight of us in the room or I would have left. I didn't want to be that rude, because I knew this guy.

I have multiple problems with basically every word he used and the order he put them in and all that. The biggest thing is you don't repent of privilege. You don't apologize for it. You are grateful for it, and you are responsible for it. You should be as generous and responsible as you have been privileged. What he's saying to the Jewish people is "You guys have had so much access to the Bible. Unfortunately, it's only going to make you more accountable to God in the end."

Here's the second question: ***"What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?"*** We need to talk about this. This is a big question that a lot of people ask. Let me tell you how it works for them and then how it works for us. The question Paul is answering... And he gets more explicit in Romans 9-11.

In Romans 9-11, he says, "Has God's Word failed?" Here's what he's saying. Let me bring the argument up. Paul is like, "If I'm telling you the gospel is the righteousness of God and Jesus Christ rose from the dead and he's the Son of God, then here's the question people are asking: Then why do so few people believe?"

One of the questions Christians have to answer is "Why is the Old Testament so horrible?" I mean, it's the Word of God. I believe that, and I love the Old Testament. What I mean is it's horrible in what it tells us about humanity and about Israel. It's depressing to read it. It's the stupid sin cycle again and again and again. They sin, God judges them, they repent, God is gracious, they say they'll never do it again, and then they do it again. It's what *you* do. It's what we *all* do.

So, there's this horrible history. There are three questions Paul is trying to answer, three types of people. First of all, he's asking, "Why were the Jewish people unfaithful?" They were supposed to be a holy nation, a kingdom of priests. Why didn't they take the gospel to others? He's going to answer that. Secondly, why were they so disobedient? Thirdly, why were they unbelieving?

Then, here's the question *we* have to ask...*Why do so few people believe?* That's what Paul says. He's like, "Does their unfaithfulness tell us something about God?" No, not really. It tells us more about people than it tells us anything about God. But here's a big area of failure in the Old Testament, and somewhat in the New Testament, but more in the Old Testament...the failure of spiritual leadership. I've heard it said that the number one problem in the American church is the American pulpit.

So, I want to talk about this for a second. God reserves his strongest language in the entire Bible to failed male leadership. There are four ways in which spiritual leaders fail. I don't think I've ever talked about this, but it arises in this text about the unfaithfulness of Israel and its leaders. And it really messes with people. It's one thing when your Christian friend from high school deconstructs their faith on Facebook. You can raise your hand if *that* has happened.

I've been doing this long enough that I know guys who I was in full-time ministry with... We raised our support together, and we were evangelizing the college campus, and they've renounced their faith, unfortunately. I have not unfollowed them on Facebook or anything like that. I've watched their life unravel. It's very sad.

Okay. Four ways that spiritual leaders fail. First, *spiritual abuse*. The phrase *spiritual abuse*... Let me just say this. I believe that there is emotional abuse, but it's such a vague category that when people use it, it's almost unhelpful. I've seen this in so many marriages. You know, "He emotionally abused me."

"Really? That sounds really serious. What happened?"

"Well, he watches football every Sunday."

"I'm sorry. That's not emotional abuse."

Then you talk to *him* about it. "No, actually, she emotionally abuses *me*."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, yeah. She goes to her room, and she just watches her show all night. She never pays attention. She's not sexually available."

I'm like, "Okay. Goodness gracious."

We're just all using the phrase *emotional abuse* however we want. Now, there really is emotional abuse, but you get what I'm saying. The same thing happens with spiritual abuse. The reason most pastors don't want to talk about this is because then some goofy person in the church will make up something and call it spiritual abuse.

Here's the thing. Spiritual abuse is when a leader uses his authority to get you to do something God doesn't want you to do. I was meeting with this awesome pastor. He was an executive pastor of a massive church in a different state. I don't want to give too much detail. The church fell apart. It was a crazy situation. Husband, wife, senior co-pastors...total mess.

Anyway, I asked, "What happened?" He said, "Spiritual abuse." He said, "When you're in a spiritually abusive environment, you don't know it. What happens is the line between what God is saying and what the spiritual leader is saying gets very blurred." Usually, in those kinds of situations, there's a lot of financial coercion.

The second is *betrayal*. This happens. We're all going to be betrayed at some point in our life. It happens to different levels. When you're betrayed, you never, ever, ever, ever, ever can see the person the same again. What happens when you're betrayed, always, is you no longer understand the past. You have to relearn the past.

You have to understand if you're betrayed by a spiritual leader, it can mess with everything in your life, because you're like, "Were they teaching the right things? Did they mean it when they said that? If they were living something differently..."

The third is *being shunned*. Being shunned is when, because you disagree with something or because you are struggling with a sin we don't want associated with the church, we silence you.

The fourth is *burnout*. It's being "volun-told" instead of volunteering. It's when spiritual leaders use their authority to make everybody just work all the time. It's an emphasis on doing over being.

I'm just telling you... We're going to come back to this at the very end, but the unfaithfulness of godly people in the past, especially leaders in your life...parents, pastors, professors...can really mess with you and make you ask a lot of questions about God. Usually, if someone is deconstructing their faith... I mean, one question I want to ask them is "What sin are you currently struggling with?" if they'll be honest, if there is something. The second is "Who hurt you?"

Well, here's what Paul says: "**By no means!**" I probably should read the question again. Here's the question: "**What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?**" What does it mean about God? "**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.'**"

Part of what you have to understand (this is a word to some of you) is humans are going to fail you. They are. Your husband is going to fail you. Your wife is going to fail you at times. Your kids are going to fail you. Your friends are going to fail you.

They did this long study on the number one most important thing in parenting. This was a non-Christian study. Across time, what's the number one most important thing in parenting? Do you know what they said? Learn to repair the relationship. Because you're their parent their whole life. There's nothing more important than learning to restore the relationship.

Here's what happens when you experience the unfaithfulness of somebody else. You go from being naive to being cynical, and you think that's great. Do you ever meet cynical people? They think they're so awesome. They really do. "Yeah, yeah, but you don't know that there are seven things wrong." It's like, "You just like being cynical. It's a way for you to distance yourself."

Now, being cynical is better than being naive. Actually, the more naive you are, the more likely you are to get hurt in life, because you're like, "Everybody is good." It's like, everybody is *not* good. "No one would ever hurt me." They would. You've just not met a malevolent person yet.

So, you don't want to be naive. Cynical is better than being naive, but the best is to courageously trust people again. Maybe not the same person. You don't have to trust the same person again. But what other option do you have in life? Remember, in the beginning of the book of Acts... We're always like, "Acts is such an awesome book, isn't it? I mean, Pentecost and..."

Get to Acts, chapter 6. Remember? They were doing the deacons, and the widows were overlooked. Guess what that is. You can write this in your Bible in Acts, chapter 6. It's the first time leadership failed. We're six chapters into the book of Acts. They already made a mistake. They already let some people down.

That leads Paul to ask a third question. This is the one everyone asks today. The first two we don't think about as much. ***"But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say?"*** In other words, he's like, "Well, hold on." This is why this is a hard argument. Here's what he's saying, and I'll tell you how we say this today.

He's basically saying, "Well, if when I'm bad, God looks good, then what's wrong with that?" By the way, we want to make up as many arguments as possible so we don't have to feel guilty before God. "Well, doesn't God just want me to be happy? God wouldn't give me these desires if he didn't want me to fulfill them." Right? All that kind of stuff.

Then Paul says this, and this is what I want to focus on. He says, ***"...what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world? But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?"***

Basically, this is the question everyone asks: "If God is gracious and is going to forgive me, what does it matter how I live?" I'm telling you, every Christian who really understands or at first is introduced to the grace of God starts to ask questions like that.

When you really begin to understand grace, you're like, "Wait. So, no matter what I do, I can go to heaven. The cross is big enough to forgive every bad thing in the past and also every stupid thing I'm going to do in the future. Well, then, what do I have to worry about?"

You'll meet certain churches, and they'll just talk about grace. Here's what happens in those churches. The pastor talks about grace, grace, grace, and then has a moral failure. Watch that. Churches that talk about "Grace, grace, grace..." Someone falls. I had a guy one time... He came to our church, and he said, "I really like being in this church." He said, "I was in a spiritually anxious church." His phrase, not mine.

I said, "What does that mean, 'spiritually anxious church'?" He said, "It was a church where every week the pastor just got up and told everyone they were okay and the grace of God covered it." Okay. Grace is one component of the gospel. Nietzsche, the greatest critic of Christianity... And I would listen to what he said, because we can learn a lot.

He said, "Christians like to emphasize faith in Christ so they don't have to live like Christ." Come on. Let's remove the fig leaf for a second. It's a lot easier to go, "Isn't it so great that no matter what I do I get to go to heaven?" Yeah, that *is* true, but if that's really true, that should change your life, and you should *want* to live for Christ, and you should be grateful, and you should try to live like Christ.

Here's the thing. Let's end with this. Verse 8: ***"And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just."*** So, here's what the whole section is about again. Paul is trying to answer... He's doing this all the way through chapter 3. He's trying to answer the question...*Is everybody guilty?* He's answering it with a resounding "Yes."

Again and again and again, people want to ask questions. They want to try to get to a place where they feel like, "God cannot judge me. There's no way God could judge me." What's interesting is in the gospel, the Bible says the righteousness of God is revealed. Righteousness is revealed by God two ways. This is important. Get this. I'm about to explain to you the very center of the gospel.

The righteousness of God is revealed primarily in two ways: in salvation and in judgment. I want to give you a thought I don't know if you've ever thought before. It's this: *God always saves by judging others.* Walk with me through the Bible. Noah. This could be your first day in church, and you know the story of Noah. Did you ever think about this? God saved Noah by judging others. What an interesting idea.

How about Israel coming out of Egypt? It's like, "God, you saved Israel." "Yes. While I judged Egypt." Wow. What's the story of salvation? God saves sinners by judging Jesus in their place. Then go read the end of the book of Revelation. At some point, I'll preach through the whole book of Revelation.

One of the most surprising things about the end of the book of Revelation is God judges the entire world while he saves the church. This is the very last couple chapters of

Revelation. Do you know what one of the last songs in Revelation is? It's the church singing and celebrating that God judged the world. What? Do you know why? Because of what Paul said. **"Let God be true though every one were a liar..."**

I'm telling you, there are things that people are saying right now that they know are lies, and when the judgment comes, God will be seen as true, and they will be seen as a liar. Every person who will ever be judged will know they're getting exactly what they deserve. They're not going to go, "I didn't deserve this."

They're going to say, "Why did I suppress everything I saw in creation? Why did I sear my conscience in middle school and high school and just the rest of my life?" If they grew up in a Christian church and a Christian home, they're going to know that they suppressed all the knowledge that was given to them in the Bible. That's why this passage ends with **"Their condemnation is just."**

But I want to give you another option. We can't get there today, but in Romans 8, Paul says, **"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."** Here's what I want to tell you. Because Jesus Christ was judged in our place for our sins, if you put your faith in him, there is no condemnation. But here's what there is, and this is what I want you to experience...conviction.

Condemnation is the word of the Devil; conviction is the word of the Father. Condemnation says, "Stay away"; conviction says, "You'd better get over here." I want to encourage you as we close. Listen. This whole setting has been literally... It's called a *diatribe*, this section of Scripture. It's a courtroom setting. Paul says, "I'll be the prosecuting attorney, and I'll be the defense attorney. I'm going to deal with all of the questions, and I'm going to put people on the stand, and all that."

We just did that for 40 or 45 minutes. As we close, and as we head into worship, we're going to leave the courtroom and head to the Father's house. I want to invite you to come forward. At our Winston-Salem Campus, we just put more of these kneelers in just to create some more space.

Here's the thing. Some of you are wrestling with God about something, and I want you to wrestle with it down here. It's okay, guys. Everybody wrestles with God. The word *Israel* means "He who wrestles with God." Some of you have been wrestling with God, and you're not winning, and you're tired. It's time to come down here and surrender.

You've been wrestling with God about a boyfriend. It's time to surrender. Break up. You've been wrestling with God about "Is this addiction okay?" It's not okay. Get down here and surrender. You've been wrestling about leaving your spouse. You need to get

down here and surrender. You've been wrestling with some terrible attitudes in your home. You need to get down here and surrender.

Secondly, there are some of you who have experienced so much church hurt. You're here physically, but you're not here emotionally. You're a thousand miles away in your heart. I want to encourage you to come down here and, as a sign of "I'm going to forgive..." By the way, when you forgive, you don't say it was okay. You say it *wasn't* okay. "I'm going to forgive that person, and I'm not going to let that person define how I view God." Let's pray.

Lord, across all of our campuses, we just went deep into theological questions and answers and arguments, but it's also practical, Lord. What advantage is being part of a church? Much in every way, because we get to see baptisms and changed lives next week. Because we get to sing next to our friends and family right now. Much in every way, because we get to hear testimonies of life change from prisoners we've never met.

We get to hear stories of men baptizing their children and getting connected to our church. Much in every way. Lord, would you give us the ability to wrestle with you but also to know when it's time to submit and surrender? Lord, would you protect our church? May this not be a place where there's much church hurt; instead, there's much hope, help, and healing. We ask this in Jesus' name.