Questions for reflection:

In your experience, do Christians who boast of their moral standards actually behave better than other people do? When Christians boast of their moral standards and live wickedly, does the rest of the world tend to have contempt for the whole Church and its message? Does a need to judge others often come from a refusal to face one's own sinfulness? Do we sometimes praise virtue primarily to gain approval for ourselves? What would it mean to seek God's approval? Do you believe that God will condemn people at a final judgment? If so, what standard will God use, and what punishment will he impose?

11. Romans 3:1–8

So what is the benefit of being Jewish, or what is the advantage of circumcision? Great in every respect. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with God's revelations. What if some Jews were unfaithful? Their faithlessness does not undermine the faithfulness of God, does it? Certainly not. Let God be true although every human being is a liar. It is just as it is written, "That you may be proven right when you speak, and you may be victorious when you go to court" [cf. Ps. 51:4]. Now if our wickedness shows that God is righteous, what shall we say? God is not wicked when he inflicts his punishment, is he? (I am being presumptuous even to talk like this.) Certainly not. Otherwise, how will God judge the world? But if the truth about God rebounds to his glory through my lie, why am I still condemned for being a sinner? Why not say, "Let us do evil that good may result"? Some slander us by claiming that we say this. They deserve their condemnation. (3:1–8)

In the previous section Paul overemphasized the equality of Jews and Gentiles and now needs to qualify his earlier remarks. Earlier he claimed that ethnic Jews are not real Jews
and physical circumcision is not real circumcision. Real Jews are people who keep the commandments, and real circumcision is a spiritual state, not a physical one. Hence, in practice an uncircumcised Gentile could be a more authentic Jew than someone normally considered to be Jewish! Of course, such assertions are paradoxical and require explanation. They were probably also distasteful to Jewish Christians at Rome whose support Paul desired. Moreover, Paul had no wish to antagonize other Jewish Christians who might subsequently hear about this letter. On the contrary, as we shall see, Paul was planning to visit Jerusalem, which was the center of Jewish Christianity and wanted to be favorably received.

Paul must reply to three objections. First, why did God call the Jews into existence if nothing is gained by being Jewish? Second, since God did in fact call the Jews into existence and most Jews were faithless, should we conclude that God’s plan for the Jews has failed or that God has not been loyal to his chosen people? Finally, if God remains faithful and in control despite the sinfulness of the Jews, is this sinfulness God’s will because it enables him to show forth the glories of his goodness to the undeserving? Indeed, if people’s sins are God’s will and paradoxically make God’s infinite mercy manifest, why is there any point to repenting? Paul acknowledges that some of his critics claim that he himself advises people to sin in order that God’s glorious forgiveness may become greater still.

To respond to these objections will require the rest of the letter. As we shall see, Paul will keep returning to the role of the Jews in God’s plan and the advantages that the Jews have. He will also keep explaining how God’s plan continues to move forward and makes people righteous. Finally, he will show why, despite God’s forgiveness, refusing to repent leads to death.

Consequently, here Paul limits himself to a few simple assertions so his readers know what his basic positions are. Specifically, he insists that the Jews have at least a historical advantage since God entrusted them with his truth. Later, he will also argue that this historical advantage will guarantee salvation to the Jews as a whole. Paul also insists that God is being true to
his plan and loyal to his people. Finally, Paul makes it clear that he is not advocating moral irresponsibility, and anyone who claims he is will get the punishment they deserve. God will judge the world.

This section also continues Paul’s argument that the Jews are finally no better off than the Gentiles. Yes, the Jews were entrusted with God’s Word, but despite that fact most of them were unfaithful. God accomplished his will through the Jews despite their behavior—not because of it, and God is under no obligation to excuse their sins.

Questions for reflection:

Does the fact that according to the Bible the Jews are the chosen people make Christians nervous and defensive? Has this defensiveness helped contribute to anti-Semitism? Do Christians sometimes use God’s mercy as an excuse not to repent? What should we tell such Christians about God’s mercy? Does God sometimes accomplish his will through the church despite—rather than because of—the way that Christians behave?

12. Romans 3:9–20

What then? Are we better off? Not at all. We have already proved our accusation that both Jews and Greeks, that all are in sin, just as it is written, “No one is innocent, not even one. No one understands. No one seeks for God. All have gone astray and together are depraved. No one does what is right, absolutely none” [cf. Psal. 14:1–3]. “Their throat is an open grave. They have deceived with their tongues” [Psal. 5:9]. “The venom of asps is under their lips” [Psal. 140:3]. “Their mouth is full of cursing and hostility” [Psal. 10:7]. “Their feet are quick to shed blood. Destruction and misery result from their behavior, and
the way of peace they have not known” [Isa. 59:7–8]. “There is no fear of God in their perspectives” [Psal. 36:1]. (3:9–18)

Now we know that all that the Law says, it speaks to those under the Law so that every mouth may be muzzled and the whole world may become accountable to God. Because by trying to follow the Law no person will be set right before God, for consciousness of sin comes through the Law. (3:19–20)

Paul now brings the first part of his argument to a climax by emphasizing that without Jesus the Jews and well as the Gentiles are totally under the power of sin. In response to the rhetorical question of whether the Jews are better off than the Gentiles, he gives an emphatic “no.” Without accepting the salvation offered in Jesus, all are in sin’s dominion and, as a result, all continually commit sinful acts. To bolster his argument, Paul cites a series of scriptural quotes to prove that no one is righteous. In keeping with the overall structure of Romans, Paul ends this section by especially emphasizing the sinfulness of Jews and insisting that they are just as wicked as Gentiles. As we are seeing, in the first half of Romans Paul appeals to the Gentiles by arguing that the Jews have no right to despise them. Then in the second half he will appeal to the Jews by insisting that they still have some sort of priority in God’s plan.

Of course, Paul’s contention that no one can be righteous without following Christ is primarily a foil for his subsequent contention that through Christ all can become righteous. Paul’s searing condemnation of the world is primarily the dark backdrop against which he will now paint the glories of God’s mercy available through Jesus.

Perhaps because of the need for this dramatic contrast, Paul no longer allows for the possibility that non-Christians can to some extent be virtuous. Earlier, as we noted above, Paul allowed for the possibility that even the Pagans could by instinct know what was right and possibly even fulfill it and as a result escape God’s condemnation at the last judgment (2:14–16, 26–29). Here, by contrast, Paul allows no exception to the rule that without accepting Christ all are totally corrupt.
Nevertheless, as we shall see, Paul is consistent to the extent that he always holds that Jesus gives us a superior path to a greater righteousness. In the next section Paul will argue that thanks to Jesus we have a new and better access to God’s power, and this power will transform not only our actions, but also our thoughts.

In describing the desperate state of humanity without Jesus, Paul implies that sin corrupts each of our component parts and leads to fragmentation. It is noteworthy that Paul does not merely argue that human beings sin. Instead, he talks about different portions of our personality and suggests that, thanks to the power of sin, they have come to lead lives of their own. Thus, quoting the scriptures, Paul writes that our throat is a grave, our tongues are deceitful, our lips are poisonous, our mouth is vindictive, our feet are violent, our perspectives (literally, our “eyes”) are haughty. Later in the letter Paul will emphasize that through Christ—and only through him—we gain the power to deal with the sin in our “members” and bring them back into unity.

Even as he stresses that sin leads to fragmentation, however, Paul reminds us of his earlier contention that the origin of all sin is our proud refusal to be centered in God (1:18ff). After he has supplied us with a catalogue of vices, he summarizes the problem by saying, “There is no fear of God.”

Paul ends the section by mentioning some key points that he will now develop about the role and limitation of the law. The role of law is to humble people and thereby prepare them for God’s mercy. The demands of the law silence everyone who truly hears them and makes everyone liable to God’s condemnation and, as a result, in need of his undeserved goodness. The law cannot make us righteous because it primarily defines us as sinners. Through the law we come to think of ourselves primarily as people who are alienated from God, but, as we shall see, Paul will now argue that the only way we can truly overcome sin is by seeing ourselves as people who by God’s goodness are his adopted sons and daughters.
Questions for reflection:

Is it sometimes necessary to exaggerate to make a point? What are the helpful features of exaggerating the sinfulness of people who have not received Christianity? What are the dangers? What happens when we take such an exaggeration as an absolute fact and assume that non-Christians are fundamentally depraved? What happens to Christians if we think of ourselves primarily as sinners rather than as God’s adopted children?

13. Romans 3:21-26

But now God’s righteousness has been revealed apart from the Law, although the Law and the Prophets testify to it, the righteousness of God revealed through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for everyone who trusts. For there is no difference, since all have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. All are set right undeservedly by his gift through the emancipation in Christ Jesus. God presented him as the means to remove sin by Jesus’ faithfulness in shedding his blood. God demonstrated his goodness by disregarding previously committed sins. By God’s patience he demonstrated his righteousness in the present time so he could be righteous and set right everyone who relies on Jesus’ faithfulness. (3:21-26)

Paul offers a summary of his thesis that we are all saved through faith. Later he will explain in detail how faith overcomes sin and reconciles us to God. Here he merely states that faith allows Christians to be set free from the sin which otherwise enslaves every human being.

Although Paul does not discuss in detail how Jesus’ death overcomes sin, he clearly implies that it does so primarily by revealing who God is. The faithfulness of Christ reveals God’s infinite goodness, and this revelation invites us to trust and obey God and become righteous ourselves. Of course, Paul
assumes that without Jesus sinners cannot fully know who God is. We may recall that earlier he argued that when human beings refused to be centered in God they lost their knowledge of who God actually is, and practically the only thing they retained was a fearful awareness that they deserved for him to punish them because of their depraved actions.

In addition, as Paul makes clear elsewhere, Jesus' death overcomes sin by revealing who we as human beings are—both who we are in our sinfulness and who we can become through God’s grace. The cross reveals the utter wickedness of a fallen world which tortures to death God’s Son who came to save it (cf. e.g., 1 Cor. 2:8). At the same time, the cross reveals that through God’s grace we can become like the human being Jesus, who voluntarily suffered to save others and subsequently rose from the dead. Of course, by revealing both who we are and who we can become, the cross is the means by which we can find transformation.

Now that Paul has laid the theological groundwork, he gives a more balanced statement of the plight of human beings who do not know about Jesus. Such human beings must of necessity fall short of the glory of God. Earlier, as we have seen, Paul gave wildly divergent views of how good humans can be without knowing Christ. Thus, on the one hand, in 2:14-16 he argued that even Gentiles can follow the law by nature and perhaps be saved at the final judgment because of their deeds. Of course, this argument was designed to emphasize the sinfulness of Jews who do not know Jesus. By contrast in 3:9-20 Paul insisted that everyone who does not know Jesus is grievously sinful. Of course, this claim was designed to emphasize everyone’s need for Jesus. Now in 3:22-23 Paul gives a more nuanced statement of the condition of those who do not know Jesus. By necessity such persons fall short of the glory that God intended for human beings to have. Such glory is only visible in Jesus and can only be achieved through receiving his Spirit and thereby entering into the life of God himself. Hence, other human beings, no matter how good they may become, will fall short of this supreme splendor.
Significantly, Paul continues to emphasize that there is a single path to salvation for both Jew and Greek and, hence, the Jews have no advantage. Paul insists that in respect to sin and salvation there is no difference. “All” have sinned, and all will be saved by trusting in what Jesus has done. Accordingly, with the coming of Jesus, a new period in history has begun which relativizes everything that went before. “Now” in “the present time” full salvation is finally available.

Nevertheless, Paul also stresses that this common deliverance which is only now available fulfills what the Jews had expected because of their scriptures. The Jewish Law and the Prophets looked forward to this salvation. Here Paul is using “Law” to designate the first five books of the Bible rather than the specific regulations contained in them. The “Prophets” designates the following books. Hence, the “Law” and the “Prophets” means the Bible as a whole.

Of course, this balanced treatment furthers Paul’s goal of winning the united support of a Roman church in which Jews and Gentiles were at odds, and this balanced treatment would also avoid antagonizing any other early Christians who might hear about the letter. The Gentiles would have been pleased with Paul’s contention that all believers are on an equal footing and, by implication, that the Jews have no privileged status. The Jews would have been relieved that Paul nevertheless insists that Jesus somehow fulfills the Jewish Law and prophecies.

The solution to human sinfulness that Paul alludes to also vindicates both God’s justice and his mercy. On the one hand, God’s previous patience and forgiveness were in no way indulgent or permissive, but instead prepared for subsequent repentance. Prior to the coming of Jesus and also prior to Pagans hearing Paul preach about Jesus, God was merciful and did not punish people by excluding them from salvation. Instead, God was preparing for the coming of Jesus, which would allow all people to overcome their wickedness. Nevertheless, God’s patience also demonstrates his undeserved mercy. God was under no obligation to save sinners, because, as Paul argued previously, human wrongdoing was the ultimate result of having already
rejected the proper relationship to God. Human beings did not wish to worship God and thank him and, as a result, adopted false gods. From the worship of these false gods other sins originated. Hence, the Gentiles are ultimately responsible for their wickedness and have no claim on salvation. Of course, Paul has also insisted that even though the Jews knew the Law, they did not keep it. Hence, they in practice have no claim on salvation either. For Paul salvation is always a gift.

As we have noted before, the gift of salvation comes from trusting in the faithfulness of Jesus. Here Paul uses a pregnant phrase which literally means, “the faith of Jesus Christ” (3:22). I believe that it would be a mistake to try to specify precisely what Paul means. Instead, the phrase evokes Paul’s whole understanding of how salvation is possible. Salvation depends first on the faithfulness of Jesus. Through his voluntary suffering on the cross Jesus makes it possible for people to escape from slavery to sin. Nevertheless, this deliverance is impossible without people trusting in the love of God that the cross reveals. The faithfulness of Jesus is effective only for people who have faith in it and, therefore, allow it to transform their lives.

Accordingly, it is God who took the initiative; human beings can only respond. When humankind was hopelessly trapped in its own sin, God sent Jesus who suffered and died to save us. All we can do is trust in this gift and through that trust allow God to transform us.

**Questions for reflection:**

Is it possible for human beings to be both perfectly merciful and perfectly just? Does our difficulty in combining justice and mercy make it difficult to conceive that God is both merciful and just? Do you feel that the cross overcomes sin primarily by revealing who God is and who human beings are in our sinfulness and who we can become through God’s power? Do you agree with Paul that even though non-Christians may be good they must of necessity fall short of the full glory of God which is visible in Jesus and which ultimately we can obtain through him?

Then where is our basis for bragging? It is ruled out. By what standard? The standard of deeds? No, rather the standard of faith. We hold that a person is set right by faith without trying to follow the Law. Or is God only the God of the Jews? Is he not also God of the Gentiles? Yes, also of the Gentiles, if in fact there is one God. He will set the circumcised right by faith and the uncircumcised right through faith. Do we, therefore, eliminate the Law through faith? Certainly not; rather we establish the Law. (3:27–31)

Here Paul again emphasizes that there is only one salvation for both Jews and Gentiles and that, therefore, both groups are equal. There is no basis for bragging. Earlier in the letter Paul talked about the Jew boasting of being superior because of the Law (2:17–23). Hence, in line with the theme of the first half of the letter that the gospel is equally for the Greek, Paul is especially emphasizing here that there is no basis for Jewish bragging against Gentiles. We cannot be set right with God by trying to follow the Jewish Law.

Paul grounds the conclusion that there is only one way to salvation by appealing to a central doctrine of Judaism, namely, monotheism. A major difference between Judaism and first century Paganism is that Pagans worshipped a host of different gods and goddesses, whereas the Jews insisted that there was only one God and that he alone should be worshipped. Indeed, the first of the ten great Jewish commandments was to have no other god (Exod. 20:1–3). From the fact that there is only one God, Paul concludes there can be only one path to salvation. The same God is god both of Jews and Gentiles. Hence, these groups must come to him by a single path.

Consequently, salvation cannot be through the Jewish Law. In the Jewish scriptures (the Christian Old Testament)
the Law is precisely what distinguishes God’s chosen people from the rest of the world. God gives the Law in order to separate his people from other nations, and in Paul’s own day the observance of the Law helped prevent Jews from assimilating to the surrounding culture. By following the Law, the Jews preserved their cultural heritage, including such things as the distinctive way they dressed, ate, and worshipped. Consequently, once Paul has established that there must be a single path to God for both Jews and Gentiles, his conclusion that this path cannot be through the Mosaic Law follows of necessity.

An additional reason that salvation cannot be through keeping the Law is that such observance might lead to pride, and this pride would separate us from God and from other human beings. As long as salvation is God’s undeserved gift, we can only receive it with humble gratitude. Once salvation is earned through following legal regulations, however, we need no longer be grateful. Indeed, we can become vain and demanding. We can feel we are entitled to salvation as the merited reward of our superior deeds and become smug. Of course, earlier Paul argued that the proud refusal to thank and praise God was the origin of every sin. Later he will argue that in fact without faith it is impossible to fulfill the demands of the law anyway. He has already noted that the Law makes everyone guilty (3:19). Nevertheless, Paul’s primary concern is that pride in keeping the Law causes Jews to despise Gentiles. As E.P. Sanders has emphasized, Jews were well aware—in theory, if not always in practice—that salvation was a gift. God chose the Jews before they had done anything to merit his favor. Paul will make the same point later in the letter. In the first century, however, Jews were often openly contemptuous of the sins of Pagans. Keeping the Law caused the Jews to brag against others. Such bragging, of course, would lead to division in a mixed Christian community, and the sad results were already visible in the congregations of Rome and, indeed, in the rest of the early Church.

Nevertheless, in part to mollify his Jewish readers, Paul insists that he is not destroying the Jewish law. Instead, he is
establishing it. As the letter progresses, Paul will demonstrate how he can make this surprising claim. He first turns to the scriptural story of Abraham. Since the “Law” was not merely the regulations of Moses but the first five books of the Bible, if Paul can show that these books teach that we are saved through faith, then he can claim that salvation through faith upholds the “Law.”

Questions for reflection

If there is only one God, does it follow that there is only one path to salvation? Why or why not? Must this path include faith (obedient trust) in God? Do you know people who keep all the rules and act as if God owes them something and as if others are inferior? If so, how does this conviction affect their relationship with God? How does it affect their relationship to other people?

15. Romans 4:1–25

So, what will we say that Abraham, our ancestor by blood, obtained? For if Abraham was justified by deeds, he could brag—but not against God. For what does scripture say? “Abraham trusted God, and it was credited to him as righteousness” [Gen. 15:6]. Now for those who work, wages are not considered a gift but an obligation, but for those who do not work but trust in him who makes the wicked righteous, their faith is considered as righteousness. Similarly, David also tells of the blessedness of the person to whom God credits righteousness without deeds, “Blessed are those whose misdeeds are forgiven and whose sins are disregarded. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count” [Ps. 32:1–2]. So is this blessing on the circumcised and not also on the uncircumcised? For we say, “Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness.” Now how was it credited? Was he circumcised or uncircumcised? Not circumcised but uncircumcised, and he received the sign of circumcision as a mark of the