

The Argument(s) of Romans

Before one can explore the arguments Paul makes within the Book of Romans, one must first understand the methodology of his argumentation. The method Paul uses within this epistle is an ancient form of rhetoric known as the diatribe, in which a teacher would fashion a debate with an imagined opponent (Fee 319). By using the diatribe method, Paul is able to anticipate and refute possible objections to his arguments. This methodology is used throughout the Book of Romans and is evidenced by passages such as Romans 2:1-5:

¹⁹One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?" ²⁰But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" ²¹Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? (NIV)

It is clear in the above mentioned passage that Paul is debating an imagined interlocutor. As Paul uses this tactic of debating imagined Jews and Gentiles throughout the Book of Romans (Fee 319), it is to the reader's advantage to familiarize oneself with the method.

The thesis statement of Paul's letter to the Romans is revealed quite early in the text. In Romans 1:16-17, Paul writes, "¹⁶I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹⁷For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith (NIV).'" It is from this thesis that Paul advances the main thrusts of his arguments; namely, the universal need for salvation from sin, that faith in Christ accomplishes what the law could not, the faithfulness of God, and what righteousness apart from the law looks like (Fee 319). In this paper, each of these arguments will be examined in detail.

First, Paul establishes what universal mankind has in common. In specific, Paul writes that the invisible attributes of God have been made obvious to all men through His creation. These attributes are so obvious, in fact, that no man has an excuse for not recognizing there is a God (Rom 1:21). Douglass Moo writes that Paul is making it clear that all people have access to the truth of God through the form of natural revelation (Moo 56). In addition, Robert Mounce writes that, "Seeing the beauty and complexity of creation carries with it the responsibility of acknowledging the Creator both as powerful and as living above the natural order" (Mounce 78). It is this natural revelation seen in God's creation that should lead mankind to God's door; however, sin has so damaged the perceptions of man that they can no longer find their way to God devoid of the special revelations found in Christ Jesus (Quest 1610). Paul writes that in their wickedness mankind has suppressed the knowledge of God and replaced His glory for idols (Romans 1:22-23). It is for this reason that God has given mankind over to their sinful desires; idols, sexual impurity, lies, and depravity (Romans 1:24-28). Paul continues to paint a graven picture of mankind by describing them as "full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice" (Romans 1:29 NIV). Paul's argument is that mankind is wicked to the core. Despite the natural revelations available to all men, humanity continues to practice and approve all forms of sin (Romans 1:32). It is for this reason that the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against "godlessness" and "wickedness" (Romans 1:18). Anticipating that the Jews would feel that the law would save them from the wrath of God, Paul argues that the law is no consequence concerning salvation. Utilizing his diatribe methodology, Paul asserts that Jews have no reason to brag because of the law (Romans 2:17). Paul argues that many Gentiles follow the law by nature while many Jews still break the law (Romans 2:12-29). It is for this reason that no man can be saved by the law or circumcision; rather, mankind, Jew or Gentile alike, must experience an inner change in their spirit to experience salvation – or, as Paul calls it, a circumcision of the heart (Romans 2:29).

The next step in Paul's argument is to establish how one may attain righteousness if not by the law; however, he first had to explain to his Jewish audience what advantage they had in the law if not salvation. Paul writes that it was to their benefit to have been "entrusted with the very words of God" (Romans 3:2 NIV). In his commentary, Matthew Henry writes:

The Jews had the means of salvation, but they had not the monopoly of salvation. Now this he mentions with a *chiefly, prōton men gar* - this was their prime and principal privilege. The enjoyment of God's word and ordinances is the chief happiness of a people, is to be put in the *imprimis* of their advantages.

Having firmly established that the law did not make the Jews exempt from the need for salvation, Paul then presents God's universal plan for righteousness apart from the law. In what Martin Luther referred to as "the chief point, and the very central place of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible" (Moo 82), Paul writes that this "righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (Romans 3:22 NIV). Paul argues that this righteousness offered from God is available to all men because, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23 NIV). In his Explanatory Notes, John Wesley writes that this passage reveals a plan that is identical in need and manner for believing Jews and Gentiles alike. Paul then strengthens his argument that works have no bearing on salvation by demonstrating that none other than Abraham's righteousness was credited to him due to faith. Paul points out that Abraham received righteousness from God *before* he was circumcised (Romans 4:10). Douglass Moo writes that this argument was important because it established that "circumcision [the law] did not establish Abraham's righteousness; it put the capstone on that experience" (Moo 93). Just as Paul argued for the universal depravity of man, he then develops his argument to assert that God's plan for righteousness is also universal. Paul accomplishes his goal by comparing the righteousness available through Christ to the condemnation of all men through the trespass of Adam. In Romans 5:18 Paul writes, "Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was

justification that brings life for all men” (NIV). It is the universality of sin that puts all mankind in the position of needing Christ and the universality of God’s offer for righteousness that Paul is stressing. According to Paul, all men are in the same boat.

After establishing the universal need for righteousness and God’s plan for salvation, Paul develops his argument to contrast the unfaithfulness of the Jews with the faithfulness of God (Fee 322). In Romans 9:2-3, Paul reveals his anguish for his fellow Jews who have failed to accept Christ as their savior, “²I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race” (NIV). In contrast to the unfaithfulness of the Jewish people Paul writes that it “is not as if God’s word had failed” (Romans 9:6 NIV). Paul then refers to the Old Testament to establish that “... it is not the children by physical descent [of Abraham] who are God’s children, but the children of the promise are considered seed” (Romans 9:8 HSCB). In Romans 9:30-33 Paul sums up his lament concerning the failure of his Hebrew brothers to accept Christ Jesus by comparing them to the Gentiles. Paul writes that in the Jews’ failure to embrace righteousness through faith in Christ in favor of works, they had stumbled over a stumbling stone (Romans 9:32). This concept of a stumbling stone is referring to the fact that the Jews were scandalized and offended by the gospel of salvation in Christ Jesus (Cravens). Paul sums up this passage by clarifying that not all Jews are lost, “Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious (Romans 11:11 NIV). In effect, Paul is revealing a reciprocal relationship between Jews and the Gentiles. In following Paul’s logic, one finds that while the gospel has been delivered to the Gentiles through the Jews, the Jews will be saved in return through their envy of the Gentiles. In other words, “Paul argues that God’s new remnant people include both Jew and Gentile; both have served, in different ways, to help bring the others in” (Fee 322).

Having revealed the complementary nature of Jews and the Gentiles, Paul then caps off his arguments by providing examples of what a diverse community of believers who have found

righteousness in Christ should strive to look like. In Romans 12:1-8, Paul urges the believers in Rome to form a unified body in Christ. Paul implores the Romans to refrain from following the patterns of the world and to be transformed by the renewing of their mind (Romans 12:2). Beginning with verse 9 of Chapter 12, Paul delivers a “rapid-fire, somewhat random” list of commands for the Roman church (Moo 181). It is a list of commands that would be impossible if not for the arguments laid out by Paul beforehand. These commands are perhaps best summed up by the first one on the list, “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good” (Romans 12:9 NIV). With their differences laid aside, Paul sums up his arguments with directions to help the Roman church thrive internally and in the world.

The more I study the Book of Romans, the more I realize I may never fully grasp its theological depth. It is a wonderfully rich and complex epistle that is impossible to explore fully in a short paper such as this. However, I submit that Paul’s chief arguments are developed as set forth in this paper. First, Paul argues that the problem of sin is universal and thus so is the need for salvation (righteousness). Secondly, Paul argues that the righteousness that is impossible through the law has been made available to all mankind through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. Paul then contrasts the faithfulness of God to the unfaithfulness of his fellow Jews and explores how Jews and the Gentiles complement each other in leading the way to God’s righteousness. Finally, Paul provides clear instructions to the Roman church in an attempt to help them realize their full potential in service to God. It is a pattern that the modern day church would do well to follow.

Works Cited

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