

None Is Righteous: Romans 3:9-20

Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church

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We come to the conclusion of a major section in Romans this morning. Let me start by reminding you of the structure of what we've covered so far in this letter. Paul began the letter with a greeting and some personal words about his desire to visit the church in Rome. Then he stated his major theme that encompasses everything he wants to communicate to them. "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" (Romans 1:16-17)

That's what this letter is all about—the Gospel, the Good News of God's power to save, the Good News that those who believe will be counted righteous in God's sight. This is what we're going to learn much more about in the remainder of chapter 3, and into chapters 4 and 5. But in order to understand this Good News, we must first understand the bad news about our sin. So following the glorious statement in 1:16-17, Paul then launches into a lengthy discussion of human sinfulness. He addresses Gentile sinfulness and Jewish sinfulness. He addresses the libertine who plunges headlong into all kinds of perversity. And he addresses the judgmental legalist, who prides himself in keeping rules while looking down his nose at "those sinners." Paul says, "You're all sinners—Gentiles and Jews alike. Nobody is off the hook."

This morning we come to the end of this section which has been so focused on human sinfulness. We come to Romans 3:9-20.

Under Sin (verse 9)

This passage begins with another question. Continuing in the style of the previous paragraph, Paul continues this dialogue with those who object to his teaching. He is raising the questions that others have posed, and he's anticipating the questions of his readers. And it may be confusing to us when we look at the statements he makes about whether or not the Jews have any advantage. In 2:25 he said, "circumcision indeed is of value." But then he totally leveled the playing field between Jews and Gentiles saying that what really matters is circumcision of the heart. Then

in 3:1 he raises the question, “what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?” And the answer is, “Much in every way.”

And now, in 3:9, he asks again, “Are we Jews any better off?” But now he says, “No, not at all.” Does this seem confusing? Does this seem contradictory? Do the Jews have an advantage or not? As I said last week, I don’t think he’s contradicting himself at all. He’s making two distinct points, and each are valid and important. Yes, there is value to being a Jew, because they are exposed to the Word of God. God made promises to Israel. He revealed Himself to Israel in a special way. But Jews are still in the same place as Gentiles in terms of sin. There is an advantage in terms of revelation, but still Jews and Gentiles are equal in their sinfulness, and therefore equally in need of salvation through Christ.

Paul reiterates that now in 3:9 by saying that “all, both Jews and Greeks, are *under sin*.” That’s a haunting phrase—under sin. And it really speaks to our fundamental condition as human beings.

Let me ask you: What is your view of human nature? Many view humankind to be essentially good. We are born innocent, and we all have a disposition to do good and to be kind to others and to live honest and sacrificial lives. That would be a very optimistic view of human nature, and very naïve as well. There is such a thing as common grace, by which God restrains sin and often causes even unbelievers to lead peaceful and helpful and sometimes even heroic and sacrificial lives. What we need to understand, biblically, is that any good thing that is done by a believer or an unbeliever, is a result of God’s grace. We are not essentially good. We are not spiritually healthy.

If you were to go out on the street and ask people, “What are the main problems in the world?” what kind of responses do you think you would get? Well, people need more education. If they just knew more, they would be able to make a better life for themselves. Or, people need better health care. If we could just find cures for certain diseases, and find ways to bring those cures to the masses, then the world would be a much better place. Or, we need more jobs so that everyone can work and make a good living. Or, we need better ways of producing and distributing food around the world to all those who need it. Or, we need better security measures so that terrorists can’t harm us.

We can point to many problems in the world, and we can think of many ways to address those problems. But what I hope

you can realize is that these problems I've mentioned, and many more that we could list, are only the fruit and result of something much deeper. You see, our fundamental problem as human beings is not lack of education or lack of health care or lack of jobs or lack of food or lack of security. Our fundamental problem is sin. Sin affects each and every one of us. It's part of our human nature from birth, and it's far more serious than we would like to admit.

In fact, the Bible describes our sinful condition as death. We are dead! That's the predicament of the human race. We are "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1). We are spiritually dead. The reality of human nature is that we are not spiritually healthy. We cannot run or jump or walk. In fact, it's not even the case that we're lying on a sickbed in desperate need of good medicine. The truth of the matter is that we are in the tomb. Cold and lifeless. That's what the Bible says about our spiritual condition.

In Psalm 51 David cries out to the Lord concerning his own sin: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. [That's the verse Paul quoted in Romans 3:4, if you remember from our study last week. But then listen to the next verse in Psalm 51] Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me."

That last verse makes a profound statement about our sinful nature. And David is not talking about his mom's sin there. The whole passage is about his own sin, and what he's saying in verse 5 is that he was a sinner even from conception. Even before he was born, while he was still in the womb, he was already sinful. So the sinful nature is present within each of us even from the time we were in the womb. We are not born innocent. We're born sinners. That's our nature from the very beginning of our lives. We have a sinful nature, and that nature produces sinful actions and attitudes.

We all understand this to some extent. Anyone here who is a child, or remembers being a child, or has children, we all know that nobody needs to teach us how to sin. You don't have to sit down with a 4 year old, or 3 year old, or 2 year old, and say, "If you ever want to make one of your friends feel really bad, here are a few things you could try . . ." Or, "If you ever feel like disobeying Mom and Dad, here's a list of ways you could do that .

..” No, not that we would ever want to give that kind of instruction anyway. But when kids do mean things to their siblings or to others, or when they disobey their parents, we don’t stand there dumbfounded wondering where they learned to do such things—because it’s our nature to sin. It’s part of who we are as human beings affected by the Fall. This is the corrupt nature we inherited from Adam.

It’s this sinful nature that produces the specific acts of sin in our lives. It’s not the other way around. We don’t become sinners because we commit sins. It’s not as though we’re born innocent and then become sinners when we commit a sin. Rather, the reason we sin is because we are sinners. We are sinners from the very beginning of our lives. And because we are sinners, we inevitably sin.

There’s another point I want to make about our sinful nature, and it’s from Romans 8:5-8. This is all part of describing what Paul means by “under sin.” Paul writes, “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” What I want you to notice from this passage is how deeply the sinful nature affects us. The theological term for this is Total Depravity. Because of the sinful nature we inherit from Adam, we are totally depraved, we are completely corrupt, meaning that every part of who we are is corrupted by sin. Our intellects, our desires, our emotions, our physical bodies, and our wills. Everything is affected by the Fall. Every part of who we are as human beings is corrupted by the sinful nature. That’s what we mean when we talk about TOTAL Depravity.

Now, Total Depravity does NOT mean that we are all as bad as we could be. This is where common grace comes in. God bestows common grace upon believers and unbelievers alike. It is grace that restrains sin and causes even unbelievers to do helpful and noble things for the benefit of society. So Total Depravity does not mean that we are as bad as we could be.

But it does mean, as this passage states in verse 7, that “the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot.” Have you ever noticed that little phrase at the end of verse 7? “indeed, it cannot.” This means that the power and imprisonment of sin is so complete that the unbeliever not only refuses to submit to God’s law, but he is not

even able to do so. In our sin, we cannot submit to God's law. There is a moral inability that keeps us in bondage to sin and keeps us from submitting our lives to God. That's how drastically the sinful nature affects the human will. We can't just decide whether or not to submit to God. The will is in bondage to sinful desires, UNTIL God pours out His sovereign grace in our lives to overcome those sinful desires; to overcome that rebellion and imprisonment. And when God takes out the heart of stone and gives us a heart of flesh, when He regenerates us, when He circumcises the heart, when He causes us to be born again, when He raises us from the dead spiritually, then we can submit to God's law. And we WILL submit to God's law. We desire to submit to God's law. But until God works that miracle in us, we remain completely under the power of sin.

So in 3:9 when Paul speaks of all, both Jews and Greeks, being under sin, he is referring to this imprisonment in sin. And when he says in verse 11 that "no one understands; no one seeks for God," this is what he means. Nobody, in their sinful human nature, has any desire to know God or seek Him. All are in bondage to sin until God sets us free.

Sinning against God (verses 10-12, 18)

One thing I want to point out in this list of Old Testament quotations (mostly from Psalms and Isaiah) is that Paul emphasizes the fact that our sin is most importantly an offense to God. It's certainly appropriate for us to think in terms of our sin hurting other people. Our sin *does* hurt other people. Our sin distances us from other people, and brings harm to our closest relationships. But the weightiest effect of our sin is in terms of our relationship with God.

Verse 11 and verse 18 make references to this. Verse 11 says that "no one seeks for God." And I think the surrounding statements should be seen in light of that reference to God. "No one understands." No one understands what, or whom? No one understands God. Because of sin, because of unrighteousness, by nature we don't want to know anything about the true and living God. And then verse 12. "All have turned aside." Turned aside from what, or whom? All have turned aside from God, and thus have become worthless. Like Isaiah 53:6 says, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way."

The point is to see our sin in terms of our relationship with God. Ever since Adam and Eve fell in the garden, there has been something fundamentally broken about our relationship with our

Creator. Instead of enjoying Him and reflecting His glory, we turn away from Him and seek our pleasure in rebellion against Him.

Verse 18 speaks to another aspect of this rebellion. “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” This is the pinnacle of folly. This is the height of arrogance. And this is the dangerous predicament of every person who has not bowed the knee to Jesus Christ. To continue down that path of rebellion, whistling on your way, enamored by the pleasures of the world, running and skipping toward your destruction. That’s what will happen to those who have no fear of God, no reverence of God, no thought toward God, no thought of His judgment that is coming.

Our sin is, first and foremost, an offense to God. And our sin, in the end, will be dealt with by God. When we meet Him on judgment day, He will either say, “You are condemned to hell for these offenses against my Name.” Or He will say, “You are forgiven by the blood of My Son, and I accept you into my presence because of Him.” All sin will be punished. Either it will be punished in hell for all eternity, for those who do not repent. Or it was punished on the cross, where Jesus died on behalf of all those who repent and believe.

Friends, I pray that these verses will instill in us an appropriate fear of God. I pray that we will seek Him and turn to Him and know Him and fear Him. May we have a knowledge of our own sin such that we put no hope in our own achievements, but hope only in Christ.

Sinful Words (verses 13-14)

Verses 13-14 focus on sin as it is manifested in our speech. “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” These words remind us of some of the things James writes in James 3 about the tongue.

“How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” (James 3:5-8)

We all know the feeling—the feeling of wanting to take back something you just said. Sometimes the feeling comes upon us immediately, sometimes it’s days or weeks or even years later.

But we all have said things—many things—that we wish we had not said. And if we could rewind time we would erase those words. We would have said it differently, or in most cases, not at all. There are certainly times when our words simply make us sound stupid. And when we realize how stupid we sounded, we're embarrassed. But the problem is much worse than that. Our words not only reveal our ignorance, but our words reveal the much more serious and pervasive problem, which is our sin.

If you're not convinced that you're a sinner, just think about your words. Just rehearse in your mind some of the things you have said in the past week—words you spoke to your spouse, or to your children, to co-workers and friends, even words that nobody else heard, that you just mumbled under your breath or in solitude. What do your words reveal about you? What if we had this morning a recording of every word you have spoken in the past month, and we were to play that recording for all of us to hear? That's a scary thought, isn't it? Each and every one of us would be ashamed, embarrassed, convicted. It would be plain to all that *I am a sinner!*

Sinful Actions (verses 15-17)

Then verses 15-17 refer to sinful actions, and we're reminded of the list of sins at the end of Romans 1. There is murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are haters of God, inventors of evil. As it says here, "Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known." To summarize, they are eager to destroy, and they leave in their wake broken relationships and broken people.

So Paul gives us these summary descriptions of human sinfulness. It is universal and pervasive. All are under sin. None is righteous, no, not one. All have turned aside. No one does good, not even one. Sin is evident in our speech and in our actions. And humans continue in sin because they do not acknowledge God. There is no understanding of God or seeking after Him. And there is no fear of Him, as there ought to be.

And with these quotations from the Old Testament Paul presents this stunning and agonizing picture of depravity.

The Whole World Accountable to God (verses 19-20)

Coming, finally, to verses 19-20, we find this final point which summarizes this whole section on sin. The first part of verse 19 makes an important statement about the Old Testament quotes in the previous verses. Paul is aware that in some of those

quotations, in their original context, are speaking of “the wicked,” in contrast to “the righteous.” So the Jews who know those texts so well might respond to Paul and say, “Well, yeah, sure, what you’re saying is certainly true of those wicked Gentiles. But those things aren’t true of us. We’re the righteous ones.” But Paul is doing something radical here. He’s placing the Jews in the category of the wicked. And he makes this point in verse 19 by saying, “Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law.” He’s referring to the quotations from the law (from the Old Testament) which he just cited, and he’s saying that those quotations speak to the Jews, those who are under the law.

He used that same phrase in 2:12, distinguishing Gentiles and Jews. “For all who have sinned without the law [Gentiles] will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law [Jews] will be judged by the law.”

And now he’s making the point that these Old Testament quotes about the wicked apply equally to Gentiles *and* Jews. These descriptions of human sinfulness are not only true of the Gentiles, but also of the Jews.

The purpose of this accusation is “so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.” We’ve already seen this in the broader scope of this section in Romans. Stretching back to chapters 1-2, Paul has spoken of the knowledge of God that everyone has, in one way or another. Through creation, through conscience, through Scripture, and therefore nobody has an excuse. Nobody will be able to raise an objection in the courtroom of God. Every mouth will be stopped. Every person will be held accountable to God. That’s verse 19.

And then verse 20 puts the final nail in the coffin of self-achievement. For anyone who thinks they may have something to offer in their defense in the courtroom of God, something to commend themselves to God, Paul completely dashes that hope. To support the statement that the whole world will be accountable to God, he clarifies the purpose of the law. The Jews must not cling to the law, thinking it will justify. None of us should cling to rule-keeping, thinking that we can be justified before God by our obedience.

What the law should cause us to do, rather, is look to Christ. The law shows us our sin and how far we fall short, and so it should point us away from any hope in ourselves, and point us instead to Jesus Christ, who is our only hope.

Martin Luther wrote, “The principal point . . . of the law . . . is to make men not better but worse; that is to say, it shows them their sin, that by the knowledge thereof they may be humbled, terrified, bruised and broken, and by this means may be driven to seek grace, and so come to that blessed Seed [*sc.* Christ].”¹

So don’t look to the law as a way of getting right with God. Don’t look to any list of rules as your chance at getting on God’s good side. The law is there to humble us, terrify us, bruise us and break us down, so that we won’t put any hope in our own achievements.

Look away from yourself, then, and look to the righteousness of God that comes through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe, which is the wonderful and comforting truth we get to look into further next Sunday.

The application that we should all take from this morning’s text is the fact that we are more sinful than we think we are. It’s true, friends. Your sinfulness is much worse than you think! My sinfulness is much worse than I think. And the closer we get to God, the more clearly we will see our own sinfulness. It’s a very interesting thing in the Christian life, that we do grow in holiness, and as we grow in holiness we also grow in our awareness of our own sin. And our awareness of sin should continually send us fleeing to Christ, because He is our righteousness.

James Montgomery Boice, who was a well-known pastor in Philadelphia, told the story of counseling a young man who was distraught because of his sin. The man was actually burdened by his own sin. And Boice used an illustration that he had heard from Donald Grey Barnhouse. He told of a man who was wearing his finest clothing and on his way to a social gathering one evening. But as he was walking along, a car sped by and splashed through a mud puddle on the side of the road. The man was drenched, although in the dark of the evening he didn’t think there had been much damage. So he continued on his way. As he approached a streetlight, he could see that there were some stains on his clothes, but he decided to continue. Finally he found himself standing directly beneath the streetlight, and he could see that the damage was much worse than he had imagined. And he said, “There’s no way I can go to the party in these clothes. I must return home and change into clean clothes.” And as James Boice shared this illustration with the troubled young man, the man said, “But I don’t have any clean clothes.”

¹ Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, quoted in Stott, *Romans*, page 104.

That, friends, is precisely the point. I don't have any clean clothes. All of my clothing is in much worse shape than I can even imagine. And that's why I must look to another to clothe me. Jesus Christ must clothe me in His perfect robe of righteousness, and I will be clean.