

The Purpose of the Law

Romans 3:19–20

Studies in Romans #12

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How many of you like legal drama television shows or movies? There's a reason why shows like *Law & Order* lasted twenty years on television and the movie *A Few Good Men* is considered a modern classic. We like the drama. We like the back and forth of prosecution and defense. We like putting ourselves in the jury box and asking, "How would I decide?"

Among the many kinds of images Scripture uses to describe sin and salvation, there is the legal imagery we find here in Romans. God is the Judge. There is a law he enforces. And we stand before him as defendants guilty. Like a prosecutor Paul has been making his case that all of us, whether Jew or Gentile, are in need of the righteousness of God as the only way God can acquit us and accept us (1:17). And now he makes his closing argument here in 3:19–20. He says, so to speak, "Your honor, **we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law** (and here's the purpose), **so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.** (How do we know this?) **For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight** (why not?), **since through the law comes knowledge of sin.**"

His closing argument is that the purpose of the law of God is to demonstrate our sins and not to declare our salvation, to account us as guilty and not to acquit us as innocent. What is the purpose of the law?

To Show Our Sin (v. 20)

The first and most important point Paul makes here about the purpose of the law is that it is meant *to show our sin*: **since through the law comes knowledge of sin** (v. 20). This wasn't always the law's job. In the beginning God gave a law to Adam. The threat for disobedience was death; the promise for obedience was eternal and heavenly life. If Adam would glorify God he would fully enjoy God forever (WLC, Q&A 1). But now that we live in the shadow of his fall, the law's purpose is to show our sin. This is what we call in theological terms the "pedagogical use" of the law. Like an x-ray, the law shows our brokenness. Can an x-ray heal a broken bone? Like an MRI, the law shows our. Can an MRI heal cancer? We know the answer.

But in my sinful pride, what do I do when I read that the law's purpose is to show my sin? "I know I'm a sinner, but what I really need to focus on is my self-esteem." Or, we blame shift: "I'm not responsible; I was born this way; I was raised this way."

Let's think a little more deeply about the law. Yes, it shows our sin. But why can't we be justified by our obedience to the law? There are two reasons. **First**, the problem is not the law; the problem is you. As Paul says in Romans 7, "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (Rom. 7:12). The law is a reflection of God himself, who is holy, righteous, and good. But the law cannot justify us because it is "weakened by the flesh" (Rom. 8:3). When we take God's good law and mix it with our sinfulness what is the result? Because of our moral depravity as seen in chapters 1-3 and because of our spiritual inability and unwillingness to serve God as seen in chapter 3, the law cannot do anything other than show my sins apart from Jesus Christ. **Second**, we

can't we be justified by our obedience to the law because the law requires what we as sinners cannot perform: personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience.¹ You *personally* have to obey the law. Your mom or dad cannot do it for you. Your pastor cannot do it for you. Your best friend cannot do it for you. Is this you? You *perfectly* have to obey the law. Every thought in your mind must positively love God and neighbor and negatively must reject sin. Every movement of your will must be away from what is evil and towards what is good. Every desire and inclination of your affections must be God-ward and neighbor-ward and not inward. Is this you? You *perpetually* have to obey the law. Every moment of every day of your entire life you personally must perfectly obey the law. It's not good enough that you obeyed one commandment this way in the past. It's not good enough that you obey each commandment at some point in your life this way. Is this you?

Now you know why Paul says, **by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight** (v. 20). Apart from Jesus Christ the law can only show you your sin.

Vain are the hopes the sons of men
On their own works have built;
Their hearts by nature all unclean,
And all their actions guilt.

In vain we ask God's righteous law
To justify us now,
Since to convince and to condemn
Is all the law can do.²

To Silence Our Mouths (v. 19)

What is the purpose of the law? Because it shows our sin it is also given *to silence our mouths: so that every mouth may be stopped* (v. 19). Children, the house rules

¹ See Westminster Confession of Faith, ch. 19.1; Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 20.

² From the hymn, "Vain are the Hopes the Sons of Men," by Isaac Watts.

state that the first thing you must do when school is done is to clean out your lunchbox or your lunch dishes. But instead, you run outside to play. Instead, you go get a snack. Instead, you go get a change of clothes. And then mom or dad says, “What are you supposed to do *first*?” “But I was...” “I know, but I needed to...” “Just a minute...” I know at least in our home at this point we say, “Silence!” Children, why would your mom or dad say, “Silence?” It’s because you’re guilty. You haven’t done what they asked but what you wanted to do. There’s no excuse that’s going to get you out of it!

As we stand in that courtroom, and prosecutor Paul has shown our sins, God the Judge asks for our defense: but we are silent. What are you going to say to all Paul has described in Romans 1:18–3:20? How are you going to get out of it? There’s a very powerful example of this in the story of Job. Turn to Job 38 with me. This is the point in the story where the Lord finally speaks. And what does he say? In effect, “Who are you, Job, to say anything back to me? I am the Creator; where were you?” The Lord humbles Job. And he continues to do so in chapter 39. Then right at the beginning of chapter 40 what does the Lord say? “Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it” (Job 40:2). So what was Job’s response? “Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth” (Job 40:4).

I don’t care who you are and I don’t care what you claim you have done. None of it matters to God. Who are you to talk back to God about your works when he says you’re a sinner? Who are you to demand God grant you entrance into his eternal kingdom?

To Sentence Our Guilt (v. 19)

And so here we are in court, before God the Judge. Our sins are shown to him. We are silenced with no defense. And then comes God's verdict. The law was given *to sentence our guilt: and the whole world may be held accountable to God* (v. 19).

But perhaps you think the phrase **whole world** doesn't apply to you? Perhaps you are the exception to the rule? "But I was born..." It doesn't matter where you were born, at what you were born, or into what family you were born. "But I have..." It doesn't matter how many times you've been nice, how much money you have donated, or how many hours you have volunteered. By **works of the law** you cannot expect a reward of eternal life because, as I said earlier, you must be personally, perfectly, and perpetually obedient or else.

If you have yet to give your life to Jesus Christ, I urge you acknowledge that he has shown you your sins. Put your hand over your mouth in silence. And accept his guilty verdict on you and your sins today. And instead of presenting yourself before God, trust in Jesus Christ, whom God sent to live a life of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience and to die in the place of sinners like you. When you trust in Jesus and not yourself, God takes away your unrighteousness that he must condemn and he gives you Jesus' righteousness that he must accept. As one hymn says,

Jesus, how glorious is thy grace,
When in thy name we trust,
Our faith receives a righteousness
That makes the sinner just.³

³ From the hymn, "Vain are the Hopes the Sons of Men," by Isaac Watts.

I want to assure you today if you are a believer but struggling with all kinds of doubts and fears. Some of you struggle with feeling accepted by God. Some of you struggle with mental illness that affects how you think and perceive reality. Some of you are struggling with the weight of your daily sins and don't know how you're going to get out from underneath them. It's good that you feel the weight of the law today, but I want you to know that Jesus has taken that burden from you. Hear this good news! Listen to how one hymn writer expressed the law and gospel:

The law commands, and makes us know
What duties to our God we owe;
But 'tis the gospel must reveal
Where lies our strength to do his will.

The law discovers guilt and sin,
And shows how vile our hearts have been;
Only the gospel can express
Forgiving love and cleansing grace.

What curses doth the law denounce
Against the man that fails but once!
But in the gospel Christ appears
Pard'ning the guilt of num'rous years.

My soul, no more attempt to draw
Thy life and comfort from the law;
Fly to the hope the gospel gives;
The man that trusts the promise lives.⁴

And to us as believers, let me exhort you that if you accept what God's says today about sin, then you know it is true of your family and friends. And as we move into the glories of what Jesus has done for sinners in Romans 3:21 and beyond, what better place to bring them than here to hear the message of forgiveness and freedom? Amen.

⁴ From the hymn, "The Law and Gospel Distinguished," by Isaac Watts.