

**Romans 3: 1-20**—<sup>1</sup>What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? <sup>2</sup>Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God. <sup>3</sup>What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? <sup>4</sup>Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge." <sup>5</sup>But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) <sup>6</sup>Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? <sup>7</sup>Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" <sup>8</sup>Why not say—as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say—"Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is deserved. <sup>9</sup>What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. <sup>10</sup>As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; <sup>11</sup>there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. <sup>12</sup>All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." <sup>13</sup>"Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." <sup>14</sup>"Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." <sup>15</sup>"Their feet are swift to shed blood; <sup>16</sup>ruin and misery mark their ways, <sup>17</sup>and the way of peace they do not know." <sup>18</sup>"There is no fear of God before their eyes." <sup>19</sup>Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. <sup>20</sup>Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

**<sup>1</sup>What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?**

- This is a natural question for Paul to raise because he has just spelled out the fact that being a Jew was no guarantee of entrance into the kingdom of God.
- He asks two questions:
  1. What advantage is there in being a Jew?
  2. What value is there in circumcision?
    - We would expect him to say (in light of his previous argument) that there is no advantage. But that's not what he does say.

**<sup>2</sup>Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God.**

- This answer is surprising given what Paul has just been saying in chapters 1 & 2.

- More than any other people, the Jews owed their existence as a people to God. That is one of their undeniable advantages.
- The singular advantage that Israel enjoyed over all other nations was of having in the possession of the Old Testament.
  - He was not left to learn of the things of God merely from natural law.
  - Question: Is there any advantage in being a church member if you are not a sincere church member? Answer: Yes
    - Part of the visible church not the invisible church.

**<sup>3</sup>What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness?**

- Paul is calling attention to a difference between God and Man.
  - Should we project on to God our own shortcomings and weaknesses?

**<sup>4</sup>Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge."**

**Achtemeier:** "We have seen that the Jews have not been faithful as a people to their covenant promise. God's wrath is universal, and the Jews have become a source of blasphemy rather than blessing in God's name (2:24). They have not been faithful to their covenant promise. Does that mean God will break his promise, as he has every right? To put it as Paul does, will human faithlessness to the covenant cause God to abandon his covenant promise (3:3)?"<sup>1</sup>

**<sup>5</sup>But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.)**

- There were those who argued that God is absolutely perfect, and when we sin, our sin, in a certain sense, bears witness to the greatness of God, for the more we sin, the more righteous god appears by contrast. In a sense the more we sin the more righteous God is seen to be...drawing attention and glory to him. So are we not doing him a favor?
  - **Ills. Judas:** God brought about the greatest act in human history through his actions. So couldn't he claim that God was indebted to him for such actions?

**<sup>6</sup>Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? <sup>7</sup>Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" <sup>8</sup>Why not say—as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say—"Let us do evil that good may result"? Their condemnation is deserved. <sup>9</sup>What shall we**

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Achtemeier, *Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Romans* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1985), p. 54.

**conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin.**

- He doesn't say that both Jews and Gentiles are all sinners. He has already said that manifestly. They are all *under* sin.
  - Under the judgment of sin, under the weight of sin, under the power.
- "There is no one righteous, not even one."
- Universal negative
  - *Ills.* Man on the University of Washington.

<sup>10</sup>As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; <sup>11</sup>there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.

- "There is no one righteous, not even one."
- "There is no one who understands"
- *Barth*: "We assume that ... we are able to arrange our relation to him as we arrange our other relationships... We dare to deck ourselves out as his companions, patrons, advisers and commissioners... We confound time with eternity. This is the ungodliness of our relation to God."<sup>2</sup>
  - No one really understands what righteousness involves.
  - If no one understands, no one can be righteous
  - Our lack of righteousness affects our understanding
    - Our very minds have been infected by unrighteousness
  - If we don't understand true righteousness, what would be the consequence?
    - Answer: no one would seek God
- **No one seeks God**
  - People who claim to be seeking after God, but are having profound difficulty in finding him. Who is right? Paul or them?
  - Those who are believers have the capacity to seek God, but outside of faith, outside of belief, nobody seeks God.
    - A pagan seeking God???
  - Aquinas ~ when we see people searching for such things as truth, peace of mind, eternal life or happiness, they are searching for relief from their guilt. These are things that Christians know only God can give them. So we leap to the conclusion that since they are searching diligently for those things which only God can give them, they must therefore be searching for God. But it is precisely this in which man's sinfulness con-

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translation by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 44.

sists, that man seeks for the benefits of God, while fleeing from the Person of God.

- Does God really play hide-and-seek?
- God is pursuing us, while we are the fugitives fleeing from him.
- If there is nobody righteous, then there is certainly nobody who understands. And if nobody understands, then no one ever really seeks for God. **Or** reversed:
- If no one seeks for God, it is obvious they will never understand who God is, and if they never understand who God is, they will never come to a real understanding of righteousness.

<sup>12</sup>**All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” All have turned away, they have together become worthless**

- That is with respect to righteousness we have become useless.

**There is no one who does good, not even one.**

- Paul is not merely saying that there are none who are perfect or none who are righteous, **but that there is no one who even does one thing good.**
- **Original Sin:**
  - *Sproul*: “What is original sin? [It] refers to the result of the first sin, not the first sin itself. Original sin is not a specific sin, a particular act of disobedience; it has to do with the nature of mankind...It is not that we are sinful because we sin, but rather that we sin because we are sinful. The activity of sin flows out of a sinful nature, a fallen nature.”<sup>3</sup>
- **Total Depravity:** The expression total depravity means that **the totality of a person’s being has been adversely affected by sin.** There is no area of man that is left untainted. Total depravity (or as it is sometimes referred to, pervasive corruption) leads to **the problem of total inability.** That man is completely unable to do anything good, is perhaps one of the most frightening realities found within the Bible (John 6:44; Romans 3:10-18, 8:7-8; I Corinthians 2:14; etc.). If this is so, then what is meant by the expression free will? Does man possess any true liberty/free will?
  - *Isaiah 64:6b-7a*: “...all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf and like the wind our sins sweep us away. No one calls on your name or strives to lay hold of you...”
  - *Jeremiah 13:23*: “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil.”

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<sup>3</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Romans*, (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications Ltd, 1994), 103.

- **Romans 8:6-8:** “The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God.”
- **1 Corinthians 2: 14:** “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”
  - **Carson:** “This human inability to understand spiritual things is a culpable inability. It is not that God makes us constitutionally unable to understand him, and then toys with us for his own amusement. Rather, he has made us for himself, but we have run from him. The heart of our lostness is our profound self-focus. We do not *want* to know him, if knowing him is on his terms.”<sup>4</sup>
- **John 6:44:** “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”
- **John 3: 19:** “This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.”
- **Free Will:** Perhaps, the best way to understand the term free will is that all men act in accordance with their nature. If a man’s nature is good his actions will be good. If, however, his nature is evil then his behavior will always be evil. Either way, he will willingly choose according to his greatest desire—it is his nature. “The ability to fulfill one’s destiny to function in terms of one’s ultimate goal, to function in terms of one’s own nature.”
  - Achtemeier uses the example of letting a criminal into your house and then having no power to evict him.
    - In the same way, sin, once in control, prevents us from removing it.
- **Boettner:** “As the bird with a broken wing is ‘free’ to fly but not able, so the natural man is free to come to God but not able. How can he repent of his sin when he loves it? How can he come to God when he hates Him? This is the inability of the will under which man labors. Jesus said, ‘and this is the judgment, that light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their works were evil,’ John 3:19; and again, ‘Ye will not come to me, that ye may have life,’ John 5:40. Man’s ruin lies mainly in his own perverse will. He cannot come because he will not.”<sup>5</sup>
  - **Ills.:** Someone who has fallen into the water and drowned. They are floating face down on the top of the water. If you call to them they don’t respond. Even if you throw them a life ring they won’t grab onto it. It

<sup>4</sup> Carson, p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932 p. 62.

may float right around them, even bumping into them but they will not grab on because they have no capacity to do so. Even so the non-Christian is spiritually dead. They have no ability to make themselves alive. Even when the life ring of the gospel bumps into them all they do is stay face down in the water of their spiritual death. We can even shout to them and say “Hey! Just grab hold of the life ring. That’s all you have to do, nothing more.” But once again, shouting at a dead person will do absolutely no good. It is only *after* we have been made alive by an external force that we are able to respond to the call of salvation.

- **John Stott:** “It must even be said that our evangelical emphasis on the atonement is dangerous if we come to it too quickly. We learn to appreciate the access that Christ has won for us only after we have first seen God’s inaccessibility to sinners. We can cry “hallelujah” with authenticity only after we have first cried ‘woe is me for I am lost!’”<sup>6</sup>
- **Loraine Boettner:** “The inability under which [the non-Christian] labors is not an inability to exercise volitions, but an inability to be willing to exercise holy volitions.”<sup>7</sup>
  - *Ills.* Once when I was teaching this course to a group of about 40 adults, at about this point in the lecture one of the students raised their hand and objected, “Jeff, if what you’re saying is true...well, then,...well, it just seems so *severe*; so *permanent!*” I asked him to repeat what he had said so that everyone could hear. Then I said, “I could not agree with you more. In fact, I especially like your choice of words, “severe” and “permanent,” because this is precisely the condition that mankind is in. It is a *severe* condition; it is a *permanent* condition.
- Paul is saying that unless a person is a believer in Christ, he will not ever do a good deed.
- He now gathers citations from the Old Testament to draw the picture of the human anatomy.
- <sup>13</sup>“**Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.”** “**The poison of vipers is on their lips.**” <sup>14</sup>“**Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.**” <sup>15</sup>“**Their feet are swift to shed blood;**
- He mentions the *throat*, the *tongue*, the *lips*, the *mouth*, the *feet* and the *eyes*.
  - Lips are compared to poison that can kill
    - We can inflict unbelievable pain and destruction
      - i.e. condemnation
  - James 3:1-13

<sup>6</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), p. 109.

<sup>7</sup> Boettner, p. 62.

- Biblically the cursing mouth, the bitter mouth, is a sign of human fallenness.
  - It was made to be an instrument of blessing
- Picture a person whose tongue is full of lies, whose lips are poisonous and whose mouth is filled with cursing and bitterness—what kind of person is that?
  - Answer: hostile
  - Hostile people are in a hurry for violence
- <sup>16</sup>**ruin and misery mark their ways, <sup>17</sup>and the way of peace they do not know.”**
  - What else could be the consequence of this kind of humanity?
- <sup>18</sup>**“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”**
  - Paul is saying that the human race is an irreverent race; that humanity has no profound respect for God
- <sup>19</sup>**Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.**
  - Sometimes when the New Testament writers speak of the Law, they are referring to the books of Moses, sometimes specifically to the book of Exodus, sometimes to the Ten Commandments and sometimes to the many laws that we find throughout the Pentateuch.
  - Who are “those who are under law?”
    - Verse 9, “...Jew and Gentiles alike are all under sin”. They couldn’t be under the judgment of sin unless first they were under the pronouncement of the law.
      - The point he is making is that every human being is under the law of God to some degree
- “...so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.”**
  - **Ills.** Courtroom. “How do you plead?” As you start to give a defense, suddenly the judge cuts you off in mid sentence and says, You may not speak?
    - The indictment against us will be so clear and the evidence so overwhelming that it would be futile, foolhardy, to even protest our innocence.
      - The time for excuses and explanations will be over
    - **Sproul:** “The only appropriate response to his judgment is either silence or wailing.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Romans* (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications Ltd, 1994), p. 74.

<sup>20</sup>Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

- A universal negative
- Event total fulfillment of the law would not have been sufficient
- **Ills.** The Reformation and indulgences.
  - What must I do to make up for one sin if the standard is perfection?
  - If I sin once, I cannot undo the transgression. I may try to compensate for it, make retribution for it, apologize for it; *but I cannot undo it.*
- **Achtemeier:** “If one gets the impression here that forces are in command of our lives over which we have no control, one will begin to understand the dimensions of what Paul sees as the ‘human predicament.’ While it is clear that we are responsible for what we do, it is equally clear that we are not, indeed cannot, be saved by what we do.”<sup>9</sup>
- **Jesus:** “So you also, when you have done all that is commanded you, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” (RSV)
- Sin is the pit we have fallen into and from which we cannot escape.
- It is the quicksand from which we cannot extricate ourselves.
- Trying not to sin by simply asserting your desire to stop is very much like trying not to breath. Holding your breath will only last so long and then you’ll breathe more than ever.
- What can the law do?
  - Spotlight how far short of God’s standard of perfection we actually fall
  - It brings intellectual awareness
  - Inward conviction
  - Dread
  - Guilt
  - Shame
- It is only when a man knows the law and tries to satisfy it that he realizes he can never satisfy it. The law is designed to show a man his own weakness and his own sinfulness.
  - **Luther:** “The principal point of the law is to make men not better but worse...”<sup>10</sup>
  - The problem is that the acts which uphold the law are acts which uphold a relationship that was corrupted by sin, and hence, while they can be called ‘righteous,’ they are not the kind of righteousness that has any validity before God.

<sup>9</sup> Achtemeier, p. 61.

<sup>10</sup> Luther, *Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians* (1531; James Clarke, 1953), p. 316.

- It is not precisely true that one cannot fulfill the law.
  - Paul says as a Pharisee he did just that (Phil. 3:6b).
  - It is because even when one does fulfill the law, one does so in terms of one's subjugation to the lordship of sin and thus within a relationship corrupted by sin.
  - Because sin has overpowered the law, the law offers no way to freedom from sin's power.
  - **Achtemeier:** "Trust in one's ability to come under God's lordship by means of the law is thus an illusion, since it excludes trust in God's act in Christ and thus it has no validity before God."