

## VI. None Is Righteous

November 10/11/12, 2015

Romans 3:1-20

**Aim:** To affirm that no one is righteous in the eyes of a faithful and righteous God; as a result, we all stand condemned in our own works before our just judge.

### A. The Faithfulness of God (Romans 3:1-8)

Verses 1-4a reject the inference that the judgment under which disobedient Jews stand (2:17-29) means that the Jews have no advantage at all. Rather, Paul insists, they have a great advantage, in possessing the words of God (vv. 1-2). The widespread unfaithfulness of the Jews in no way annuls God's faithfulness to those words (vv. 3-4a). Then, with the quotation of Ps. 51:4b in v. 4b, Paul's argument takes a decisive turn. Here he shows that God's faithfulness, or 'righteousness,' is manifested even through the sin of His people, for God's words promise judgment for disobedience as well as blessing for obedience. Verse 5, then, is Paul's formulation of a Jewish objection to the effect that Jewish sin, since it manifests God's righteousness, should not be subject to the wrath of God. This inference Paul rejects, simply noting that it is incompatible with the biblical doctrine that God is a just judge (v. 6). The objector repeats his or her objection again, however (v. 7), and adds to it the claim that Paul's doctrine actually encourages sinning (v. 8a). Paul again curtly rejects this line of reasoning, announcing the justice of God's condemnation (v. 8b). Taken as a whole, the passage both reaffirms the continuing faithfulness of God to His covenant people and argues that this faithfulness in no way precludes God from judging the Jews.

What begins, then, as an attempt to answer an objection to Paul's ironing out of the distinctions between Jews and Gentiles (vv. 1-2) becomes a frustratingly brief discussion of the relationship between Israel's unbelief and God's righteousness and, ultimately, between human sin and God's purposes. In thus allowing the Roman Christians to 'listen in' on this dialogue, Paul warns his mainly Gentile audience that they should not interpret the leveling of distinctions between Jew and Gentile in terms of God's judgment and salvation as the canceling of all the privileges to Israel. As Romans 11:11-24 makes clear, Paul knows that the Gentile Christians, in Rome and elsewhere, need to hear this caution.

#### 1. God Is Faithful (3:1-4)

##### a) Jewish Advantage (3:1-2)

##### (1) Question (3:1)

<sup>1</sup>*Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?*

While it is possible that Paul 'quotes' a real interlocutor, it is more likely that he himself poses these questions to his readers. In other words, Paul is not so much reproducing for his readers an argument between himself and another person as he is posing questions and objections to himself in order to make his views clear to the Romans. Remembering Paul's own rich Jewish heritage, we might even regard the dialogue as one between Paul the Jew and Paul the Christian.

Paul's accusers continually charged him with teaching that the Lord's calling of Israel to be His special people was meaningless. If that were so, the apostle blasphemed the very character of

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God. Because many Old Testament passages testified to Israel's unique calling and blessing (e.g., Ex. 19:6; Dt. 10:14-15; 14:2; Is. 43:21), many Jews concluded that, in itself, being Jewish made them acceptable to God. But as Paul has pointed out, being *physical* descendants of Abraham did not qualify them as his *spiritual* descendants. If they did not have the mark of God's Spirit within their hearts, the outward mark of circumcision in their flesh was worthless (2:17-29).

In chapter 2, Paul has asserted that possession of the law and circumcision—in a word, being Jewish—makes no essential difference for the day of judgment. The question in verse 1 is therefore entirely natural: 'What, then, is the advantage of being a Jew, or what profit of circumcision?' This was not a frivolous objection. Today we would phrase the question differently: 'If being affiliated with God's people through such things as baptism and church membership will not save us, and if having the Word of God is not enough to ensure our salvation or holiness, what is the advantage of being under the umbrella of the Church and Christianity?'

If Paul were writing today, he might mention church membership or baptism as that which does not guarantee salvation. The church is a community where there are always tares growing alongside the wheat (Mt. 13:24-30). Jesus warned that people honor him with their lips but their hearts are far from Him (Mt. 15:8). Making a verbal confession of faith is no guarantee. What is in the heart determines our redemption.

### (2) Answer (3:2)

<sup>2</sup>*Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.*

Nevertheless, Paul continues, the advantage of being Jewish was 'great in every respect.' Although it did not bring salvation, it bestowed many privileges that Gentiles did not have (cp. 9:3-5).

'In every way,' if taken literally, claims an advantage for the Jew 'in every respect,' but Paul's meaning is more likely to be that the Jews' advantage extends to a significant number of matters. What specific matters Paul may have in mind, in addition to the one advantage actually listed in this verse, can be gathered from 9:4-5. That Paul intended to list more than the one item he actually includes is suggest by the phrase 'first of all.' Indeed, some think the word may mean simply 'chiefly,' or be used to single out that advantage which stands supreme among the other privileges, but it is likely that Paul intended to give a longer list, only to be forestalled by his concern about the Jews' response to 'the oracles' and its implications.

Paul uses the third person ('they') because, as in 9:1-5, he is thinking not of all Jews, including Jewish-Christians like himself, but only of unbelieving Jews. Paul sets forth as the greatest of Jewish distinctions the fact that God has spoken to them and entered, with these words, into a special relationship with them.

The word translated variously 'chiefly,' 'first,' or 'to begin with,' is a form of the word *protos*, which in Greek means 'first'—not necessarily in sequence but in the order of importance (cp. Mt. 6:33). The translator has it right when he renders it 'chiefly.' There are many advantages to being a Jew, but the main advantage is that Jews were given the oracles of God.

*Logion* ('oracles') is a diminutive of *logos*, which is most commonly translated 'word.' *Logion* generally referred to important sayings or messages, especially supernatural utterances. Although

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‘oracles is a legitimate translation (see also Acts 7:38; Heb. 5:12), because of the term’s association with pagan rites, that rendering seems unsuitable in this context. In many pagan religions of that day, mediums and seers gave occultic predictions of the future and other messages from the spirit world through supernatural ‘oracles.’ Paul’s point was that the Jews ‘were entrusted with’ the very *words* of the one and only true God, referring to the entire Old Testament (cp. Dt. 4:1-2; 6:1-2). God’s revelation of Himself and of His will had been entrusted to the Jews, and that gave them unimaginably great privilege as well as equally immense responsibility.

Belonging to a Christian church is much like it was to be a Jew under the Old Covenant. Outward identity with those who claim to be God’s people, even when they are genuine believers, is in itself of no benefit to an unbeliever. But such a person does have a great advantage above other unbelievers if in a church he is exposed to the sound teaching of God’s Word. If he does not take advantage of that privilege, however, he makes his guilt and condemnation worse than if he had never heard the gospel.

There is no greater advantage for anyone than to be within earshot of the Word of God. God has chosen the foolishness of preaching as His method of saving His people, and He has invested His power in the Word. The power is not in the preacher. The power is not in the program. The power is not in the liturgy. The power is in the Word because it is attended by the Holy Spirit. The Word can cut through our minds and hardened hearts; it can pierce our souls and bring us to Christ. There is much advantage where the Word of God is preached, just as there was advantage to the Israelites in possessing the oracles of God.

Having the written self-revelation of God was an immense advantage to the Jew, and it remains so for us today. First, because we have the written description of *God’s eternal nature*. The second advantage of having the oracles of God is that we have a written description of *the nature and purpose of man*. The advantage of being among God’s people, then, as an initiated Jew and today as a churchgoer, is tremendous. We have God’s Word. We know what God is like. We know what we are like. And we know what He requires for salvation.

Paul has now approached the question of the standing of the Jewish nation before God from three different angles. Their lives are worse than those of all the people around them who don’t have the Bible, therefore they are condemned (2:17-24); they observed the external rites as God directed, but it is not from the heart, therefore they are condemned (2:25-29); they knew about God, they had the Old Testament, but they didn’t believe it, therefore they are condemned (3:1-2).

### *b) Jewish Faithlessness (3:3-4)*

#### (1) Question (3:3)

<sup>3</sup>*What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?*

Being entrusted with the stewardship of God’s revelation is a great distinction. But in light of the sad history of Israel’s rebellion, a rebellion that has (largely) continued right up to the present time, it could be asked whether this distinction any longer has meaning. That is the question raised in verse 3.

The next objection Paul anticipated and confronted was that his teaching abrogated God’s promises to Israel. As any student of the Old Testament knows, God’s promises to His chosen

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people are numerous. How then, could Paul maintain that it was possible for a Jew not to be secure in those promises?

This is a strange objection that argues essentially: ‘Paul, how can you possibly say we Jews have so completely failed in our privileged position and still insist that we are an advantage people? If we have failed as you insist, God’s Word is powerless and He is unfaithful.’

Those who do not believe in no way diminish the value of the promise that God makes to those who do believe. If everyone is a covenant breaker, that does not destroy the integrity of God in His part of the covenant.

By using the words ‘be unfaithful’ and ‘unfaithfulness’ to denote the Jews’ failure, Paul creates an ironic antithesis to ‘entrust’ in v. 2: God’s ‘entrusting’ of ‘the oracles’ to Israel has not met with a corresponding ‘trust’ on their part. But, more importantly, these words point up the contrast between Israel’s ‘faithlessness’ and God’s ‘faithfulness.’ This faithfulness of God, a concept that Paul picks up from the OT, refers especially to God’s commitment to carry out the terms of the covenant with Israel. In contrast, then, the Jews’ ‘faithlessness’ will denote particularly their failure to meet their covenant obligations. We should include in this ‘unfaithfulness’ to the word of God the Jews’ failure to embrace Jesus as the Messiah promised by that word. Paul affirms that the failure of ‘some’ Jews to abide by the terms of the covenant does not ‘nullify’ God’s continuing care for and commitment to His people.

### (2) Answer (3:4)

#### (a) *By No Means (3:4a)*

<sup>4</sup>*By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar...*

The form of the question in v. 3 has already anticipated its answer; but Paul leaves no doubt. He uses a formula of emphatic rejection, most literally translated, ‘May it never be!’ The contrast in v. 4a between God’s being ‘true’ and the human being a ‘liar’ restates the contrast between Israel’s unfaithfulness and God’s faithfulness in v. 3. When the OT speaks of God being ‘true,’ it usually means not that He is honest but that He is reliable, or trustworthy; ‘true’ to His word. Just as ‘true’ characterizes God as being one who is reliable, so ‘liar,’ by contrast, designates human beings as ‘unreliable, perfidious, faithless.’ Not only is God faithful when ‘some’ are unfaithful, but He remains true *even if* every person should prove unreliable.

The accusers were right in contending that God cannot break His word. The phrase *mē genoito* (‘may it never be’) was the strongest negative Greek expression and usually carried the connotation of impossibility. ‘Of course God cannot be unfaithful to His promises or in any other way,’ Paul was saying. If the blessings of a promise failed to materialize, it was because His *people* did not believe and obey the conditions of the promise. But their unbelief could not prevent the salvation which God would ultimately bring to His promised people. But an even deeper truth was that, contrary to the thinking of most Jews, salvation was *never* offered by God on the basis of heritage, ceremony, good works, or any basis other than that of faith.

The Bible makes the condemnation that all men are liars. We are all promise breakers. God is the only perfect promise keeper. That is how we live as Christians: we trust that God is not like us. We break our promises and lie to each other, but God cannot lie because His eternal being and character are truth. It is impossible for God to lie.

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### (b) *As It Is Written (3:4b)*

*...as it is written, 'That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.'*

Paul uses his customary introductory formula – ‘just as it is written’ – to introduce a quotation from Ps. 51:4 that substantiates his point about the reliability and consistency of God. Paul quotes a verse expressing the faithfulness of God when He judges sin because the ‘truthfulness’ of God in v. 4a itself includes this negative aspect of God’s faithfulness to His word. ‘The oracles of God’ include warnings that God will judge sin as well as promises that He will bless His people.

Because God is perfect and is Himself the measure of goodness and truth, His Word is its own verification and His judgment its own justification. It is utter folly to suppose that the Lord of heaven and earth might not prevail against the sinful, perverted judgment that either man or Satan could make come against Him.

The faithfulness of God is expressed generally in v. 3 and would undoubtedly imply, to a Jewish objector as well as to the readers, a commitment on God’s part to maintain Israel’s special and blessed place in God’s purpose. In v. 4, however, Paul shows that God’s faithfulness must also be recognized when He judges His people’s sins. In 3:1-4, Paul reaffirms their special status by appealing to the invariability of God with respect to His word. But He also reminds us that this word includes warnings of judgment as well as promises of blessing.

## 2. God Is Righteous (3:5-8)

### a) *Is God Unrighteous? (3:5-6)*

#### (1) Question (3:5)

<sup>5</sup>*But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.)*

Paul is himself responsible for the formulation of this objection, as is clear from: 1) the transitional clause ‘what shall we say,’ which Paul always uses to introduce his own conclusion or question; 2) the form of the question; and 3) the ‘apology’ at the end of the verse for the ‘human’ way of putting the problem. The issue is the causal relationship between human sin and God’s righteousness.

Here God is accused of using the Jews to His advantage—showing His righteousness by their failure. Therefore He is unrighteous and cannot rightly judge those whom He has so used.

The third objection Paul anticipated was that his teaching attacked the very purity and holiness of God. Again, lest his readers conclude that he was expressing his own thinking, Paul immediately adds the parenthetical explanation that he was ‘speaking in human terms,’ that is, according to the human logic of the natural mind. He was saying, in effect, ‘Don’t think for a minute that I believe such perverted nonsense. I am only paraphrasing the charges that are often made against me.’

Even when we sin, our unrighteousness indirectly bears witness to the righteousness of God. How would we ever recognize sin for what it is if we did not have a standard by which to judge it?

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Paul's third question re-introduces the keywords of the letter, 'the righteousness of God' (see 1:17). 'God's righteousness' here designates God's faithfulness to His own person and word, particularly, as v. 4b reveals, as this is revealed in His judgment of sin. If human sin has 'manifested' something good – for even if God's righteousness is expressed in judgment, that righteousness is still good – it might well be asked if God is not 'unjust' when He punishes that sin. It is generally assumed that Paul uses 'unjust' with the meaning 'unfair,' 'acting against principles of justice.' Thus, the issue in verse 5 is the 'justness' of God's condemning Jews for sins that manifest His righteousness. This 'justness,' in keeping with the theocentric focus of Scripture, is not God's conformity to some external norm, but His acting in accordance with His character. Paul has already affirmed that the judgment of God will be just, being based on the works of each person. Now the question is posed whether this principle can still hold when the sinful works of God's people manifest His own righteousness. But Paul's concern to distance himself from any suggestion that God might be unrighteous leads him immediately to add the parenthetical 'I am speaking in a human fashion.'

### (2) Answer (3:6)

<sup>6</sup>*By no means! For then how could God judge the world?*

With his characteristic 'By no means,' Paul makes emphatically explicit what was already implicit in the way he formulated the matter in verse 6: God certainly does not act 'unjustly' if He inflicts wrath on His people. The point of this question is to draw out the absurd and clearly impossible consequences of the supposition stated in v. 5. It is certainly not the case that God is unjust to inflict wrath, for if it were otherwise (that is, if God were unjust), how could God judge the world? (cp. Gen. 18:25).

To intensify his disclaimer, Paul says again, 'May it never be!' Obviously God does not encourage or condone sin in order to glory Himself, 'for otherwise how will God judge the world?' If Jews understood anything about the nature of God it was that He is a perfect judge (Gen. 18:25; cp. Ps. 50:6; 58:11; 94:2).

If God is unjust for inflicting wrath, He would never be able to judge the world. Nothing could be more obvious than that, yet nothing is more repugnant to the culture and, in many cases, to the church than the idea that God is capable of judging people by pouring out His wrath. No one, says Paul, should forget the righteousness of God. It is because God is righteous that He is wrathful. His wrath is not a manifestation of a lack of righteousness; rather it is a manifestation of the fullness of the righteousness in Him.

### b) *Should Men Sin? (3:7-8)*

In verses 7 and 8 the apostle reiterates the false charges against him in somewhat different terms.

### (1) Question (3:7)

<sup>7</sup>*But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?*

In v. 7 Paul is restarting the basic objection heard already in v. 5. This being the case, his use of the first person singular is a rhetorical variant of the first person plural in v. 5. This objector is likely once again to be the Jew, who questions why God should treat him like other 'sinners' when his unfaithfulness has been the occasion for God's faithfulness and led to an increase of His glory.

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This objection is similar to the previous one. Here is a base argument: ‘What you are saying, Paul, is an incentive to sin. If being bad makes God look good, we will be bad so He looks good.’ This ridiculous argument disregarded the difference between good and evil.

This was clearly a charge of antinomianism (disregard of God’s law) of the worst sort. The critics were accusing Paul of teaching that the more wicked a person is, the more he glorifies God; the more faithless a person is, the more faithful he makes God appear; the more a person lies, the more he exalts God’s truthfulness.

### (2) Answer (3:8)

<sup>8</sup>*And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.*

These were not hypothetical misrepresentations, as Paul makes clear here. Paul’s enemies obviously had repeatedly charged that his gospel of salvation by grace through faith alone not only undermined God’s law but granted license to sin with impunity. In effect, they accused him of saying that, in God’s eyes, sin is as acceptable as righteousness, if not more so. Paul’s final response to his slanderous critics was short but pointed. Although he was not the least guilty of teaching antinomianism, he fully concurred that for those who do teach it, ‘their condemnation is just.’

Paul was accused of antinomianism, of so despising the law of the Old Testament and being so intoxicated by the primacy of grace and the sweetness of the gospel that he had completely dispensed with the law of God. Such a slander went around the community, where people said this Jewish teacher was denying the law of God. Paul never denied God’s law. He always understood the proper relationship between the law of God and the gospel of God.

Paul wants to say two things: that he (and other apostles?) has been accused of teaching the very doctrine that the Jewish objector claims is the logical conclusion of his viewpoint, and that such accusations are ‘blasphemous.’ Paul indicates that the objection to his teaching that he puts here in the mouth of a Jewish objector is one that he has heard before and one, more than likely, that the Roman Christians had also heard. Why, then, does Paul does not answer the objection? We must suppose that Paul intends the very absurdity of the objection to imply its dismissal. The viewpoint taken by the Jewish objector, that it would not be right for God to punish His people for their sins, is implied to be fallacious, and, indeed, blasphemous, by the absurd conclusion to which his objection leads.

There is no room in Paul’s theology for the carnal Christian, one who takes Christ as Savior but does not take Him as Lord. That would be nonsense to the apostle. We cannot put that slander at his feet. He never said, ‘Let us do evil that good may come.’ Paul never entertained the idea that the end justifies the means. Rather, he said, ‘Their condemnation is just.’ Those who twist his teaching, the apostolic word, and accuse him of teaching antinomianism will be condemned, and justly so.

In sum, the problem that Paul attacks in these verses is not confined to the people of God of his day. All too often we Christians have presumed that God’s grace to us exempts us from an concern about our sin. Particularly this is a danger among Christians who share the belief that God sovereignly maintains the regenerate in their salvation to the end. Too easily do we forget

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that God's ultimate concern is for His own glory and not for our blessing; that His righteousness is beautifully displayed when He judges as well as when He saves. We must not forget that God promises (in the NT as well as in the OT) to rebuke and chastise His people for sin as well as to bless them out of the abundance of His grace.

Think of the advantages we have had in northern Europe and North America. If the Jews were condemned because they didn't believe despite their advantages, what must God say to our 'Christian' nations today? If the Jews had an advantage, we certainly have more! If God condemned the Jews for their lack of response, may He have mercy on us! We who have the Bible today stand more condemned than people today who don't have the Bible—who have only the witness of their conscience. But we also stand more condemned than those who had the Bible in Paul's day. To have these advantages and not believe, to have these advantages and turn away from God, to have these advantages and yet to cause the name of the living God to be blasphemed. What excuse can we make? How do we expect to get away with it?

### B. The Guilt of Humanity (Romans 3:9-20)

Paul has talked about Gentiles being condemned before God (1:18-2:16); he has talked about Jews being condemned before God (2:17-3:8). Now he draws them both together and shows that all people everywhere stand in the same place in God's sight.

While the brief questions that opens v. 9 connect it with the dialogue of vv. 1-8, it is also clear that Paul is moving toward a summary and application of the teaching he has been developing since 1:18. He labels this long section an 'accusation.' In it, he charges all people, Jews and Gentiles, with being 'under the power of sin' (v. 9b). A string of loosely related OT quotations confirms the universality and describes the variety of the sin that so characterizes all humanity (vv. 10-18). Finally, in vv. 19-20, Paul draws out the implications of this universal bondage to sin: all stand condemned before the divine bar of judgment and are unable to escape that condemnation by anything they do. Thus is the way prepared for the proclamation of God's righteousness in Christ (vv. 21-26).

Men like to believe they are basically good and that belief is continually reinforced by psychologists, counselors, and a great man religious leaders. But deep in his heart, man knows there is a problem with the way he is, that something is wrong. No matter whom or what he may try to blame for that feeling, he cannot escape it. He feels guilt, not only about the things he has done that he knows are wrong, but also about the kind of person he is on the inside. Men *feel* guilty because they *are* guilty. The guilt feeling is only the symptom of the real problem, which is sin. All of the psychological counseling in the world cannot relieve a person of his guilt. Man's guilt has only one cause—his own sin—and unless his sin is removed, his guilt cannot be. That is why the first element of the gospel is confronting men with the reality of their sin.

We are not ready to hear the gospel until we first understand the indictment against humanity that comes down to us from God Himself. The view of humanity that we see in Romans 3:9-20 is on a collision course with everything our culture tells us about our natural condition. People today profoundly disagree with the apostle Paul's assessment of our condition, but we must not be caught up in what we as fallen people think of ourselves. What matters is God's assessment of our condition.

The apostle Paul was well aware of man's disposition to deny his sin. Therefore, from creation, from history, from reason and logic, and from conscience, Paul has already presented powerful

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testimony of man's sinfulness. Now he presents the ultimate testimony, the testimony of Scripture. Beginning with verse 10 and continuing through verse 18, Paul introduces before the court, as it were, the testimony of God's own Word as revealed in the Old Testament. Verses 9-20 summarize God's divine and perfect view of man and they continue in a trial motif.

### 1. The Charge (3:9)

<sup>9</sup>*What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin...*

The charge begins with two questions. The first is simply, 'What then?' The idea is, 'What is the point of further testimony? Paul has already condemned the immoral pagan, the moral pagan, and then both the moral and the immoral Jew. Anticipating what some of his readers would think, his second question asks rhetorically, 'Are we better than they?' That is, 'Do we have a better basic nature than those who have just been shown to be condemned? Are we made from a different mold, cut from a different piece of cloth than they?'

The ones to whom 'we' refers is not absolutely clear. Some commentators believe Paul is speaking of his fellow Jews. But he has already dealt in verses 1-8 with the questions most Jews would ask. Nowhere else in the epistle does Paul identify himself with his fellow Jews by the use of *we*. It seems better to take this 'we' to refer to himself and his fellow believers in Rome, both Jew and Gentile. The question would then mean, 'Are we Christians, in ourselves, better than the other groups of people already shown to be condemned before God?'

'Are we (Jews) better?' Answers Paul, 'Not at all,' adding dramatically, 'for we previously charged both Jews and Greeks to be *under* sin.' Paul is referring to the 'charge' against Jews and Greeks (Gentiles) that he has been making as from 1:18. Thus, verse 9 goes back beyond the sins of Jews (2:1-3:8 to the sins of the Gentiles (1:18-32). He concludes that Jews and Greeks are both 'under,' that is, 'ruled by sin,' 'under the heel of sin,' and 'slaves of sin' as he will say later (6:17, 20). Paul will justify this verdict by a series of Old Testament Scriptures.

The Jews have an unassailable salvation-historical advantage: God has spoken to them and He has given them promises that will not be retracted (vv. 1-2). But, as Paul has repeatedly emphasized in chapter 2, the Jews have no advantage at all when it comes to God's impartial judgment of every person 'according to his or her works.' And this is the issue that Paul is addressing in v. 9, as his explanation of his negative response indicates. Paul is referring to the comprehensive indictment of humanity in 1:18-2:29, as first the Greek or the Gentile (1:19b-32) and then the Jew (2:1-29) were brought before the divine bar and found wanting. We have, then, in this statement, Paul's own comment on his purpose in this section of his letter. All people who have not experienced the righteousness of God by faith are 'under sin': that is, they are helpless captives to its power. However arrived at, Paul's understanding that all peoples, Jews as well as Gentiles, were not just sinners but helpless pawns under sin's power, distinguished him sharply from his Jewish contemporaries.

*Proaitiaomai* ('already charged') was often used as a legal term to designate a person previously indicted for a given offense. *Hupo* ('under') was a common Greek term that frequently meant not simply to be beneath but to be totally under the power, authority, and control of something or someone. That is obviously the sense Paul has in mind here: every human being, 'both Jews and Greeks are all under,' completely subservient and in bondage to, the dominion of sin. Such an idea was preposterous to most Jews, who believed that they were righteous before God simply by

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virtue of being Jewish, members of His chosen race. On the other hand, Jews believed just as strongly that Gentiles were naturally sinful simply by virtue of being *non*-Jewish (see Gal. 3:15).

The force of the language here leaves no doubt about what is meant. The word is ‘sin’—not ‘sins’—and means ‘the dynamic of sin’ and ‘under’ means ‘under the power or dominion of.’ Everyone in the world is under the power of the dynamic of sin! What we have in this statement and in the following verses is the most explicit description of the total depravity of mankind in all of Scripture. This does not mean man is as depraved as he could be, but that there is always room for ‘deprovement’ because he is under the power of sin.

### 2. The Witness (3:10a)

...<sup>10</sup> *as it is written:*

Certainly Paul’s Jewish readers would have responded strongly against Paul’s assertion that Jews are no better than Gentiles in God’s sight. Paul anticipates their strong reaction and finishes the matter by quoting from their Bible, the Old Testament.

Paul now presents an appalling thirteen-count indictment against fallen mankind. To reinforce the inclusiveness of the indictment, he reiterates the fact that *all* of fallen humanity, Jew and Gentile alike, is under sin (see v. 9). In verses 10-18, he uses the term ‘none’ (and its equivalent, ‘not even one’) six times in referring to man’s absolute lack of righteousness before God. The indictment comes directly from Old Testament Scripture, to which ‘it is written’ refers. ‘It is written’ translates the Greek perfect tense, indicating the continuity and permanence of what was written and implying its divine authority.

‘Even as it is written’ is the formula Paul typically uses to introduce quotations of the OT. But nowhere else does Paul use a quotation so long or one drawn from so many different (at least six) OT passages. There are resemblances between this collection of thematically linked verses and what the rabbis called ‘pearl-stringing.’ Paul’s purpose in citing these verses is clearly to substantiate the accusation of v. 9, and, in particular, his claim that sin is universal.

Paul substantiates his charge by stringing a series of Old Testament texts together. This is called a *charaz*, which literally means ‘stringing pearls.’

While the collection appears at first sight to be haphazard, there is evidence of attention to structure and sequence. The first line (v. 10) is the heading of what follows, with the last line (v. 18) coming back to the same theme in an *inclusio*. Verses 11-12 develop the first line with a series of five generally synonymous repetitions of the theme ‘there is no one righteous,’ all introduced with ‘there is no,’ and with a reference to ‘all people’ breaking them up in the middle (v. 12a). The next four lines (vv. 13-14) describe sins of speech, each line referring to a different organ of speech. Verses 15-17, on the other hand, focus on sins of violence against others.

### 3. The Evidence (3:10b-18)

#### a) *Character Sins (3:10b-12)*

It isn’t just Paul who says that all humans are sinners. Quoting from Psalms 14:1-3 and 53:1-3, he shows that the Old Testament, the Bible of his Jewish readers, says it too.

#### (1) None Righteous (3:10b)

*‘None is righteous, no, not one... ...*

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The quotations begin with a series of phrases taken from Ps. 14:1-4 (Ps. 53:1-3 is almost identical). As is the case with most of the quotations in this series, Paul's wording agrees closely with the LXX. But there is one important difference: where the Psalms text has 'there is no one who does *good*, Paul has 'there is no one who is *righteous*.' Granted the importance of the language of 'righteousness' in this part of Romans (cp. 3:4, 5, 8, 19-20), the word is almost certainly Paul's own editorial change. It will thus carry with it Paul's specifically forensic nuance (cp. 1:17). What he means is that there is not a single person who, apart from God's justifying grace, can stand as 'right' before God. This meaning is not far from David's intention in the Psalm, as he unfolds the myriad dimensions of human folly.

Under the heading of what could be called character, Paul lists the first six of the thirteen charges. First, mankind is *universally evil*, there being absolutely no exceptions. Quoting from Psalm 14:1, Paul declares, 'There is none righteous, not even one.' Righteousness is a major theme of the book of Romans. It is not surprising, therefore, that the first charge Paul makes in his indictment is that of mankind's unrighteousness. Paul is using the term 'righteous' in its most basic sense of being before God, of being as God created man to be. We use relative terms for righteousness in respect to earthly standards, but the standard used here is the righteousness of God, which is perfectly manifested in the righteousness of Christ, and none of us comes close to that. Not one person, when judged against the standard of God's righteousness, can be seen to be righteous, yet our self-description of righteousness leads us to suppose that we can pass the judgment of God on judgment day based on our own performance. There is no exception to this universal judgment.

### (2) None Understands (3:11a)

<sup>11</sup>*no one understands...*

Second, man not only is universally evil but also *spiritually ignorant*: it follows irresistibly that 'there is none who understands.' Understand what? In view here is a failure to understand the things of God, the depths of the attributes of God. Sin makes this impossible. Even if men somehow had the ability to achieve God's perfect righteousness, they would not know what it is or how to go about attaining it.

### (3) None Seeks God (3:11b)

*...no one seeks for God.*

Third, in addition to being universally evil and spiritually ignorant, fallen man is *rebellious*: 'there is none who seeks for God.' Judging from the vast number of religions in the world with millions of zealous adherents, one would think that a great many people are diligently seeking after God. But Scripture makes clear, in this passage and in any others, that all religious systems and efforts are, in reality, attempts to escape the true God and to discover or manufacture false gods of one's own liking.

'No one seeks for God.' That is, no one by nature wants to know God. This is a verse that many Christians simply do not believe. Often we speak of someone we know who is 'really seeing after God.' [DSB: consider churches that have a 'seeker's service' or call themselves 'seeker-friendly'!] That just is not so! Mankind does not search for God or the truth. Rather, he suppresses it and finally turns to idolatry (1:18-23). There is one exception: if the Holy Spirit is truly working in one's heart, then there is an authentic seeking.

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No one in his natural condition seeks after God. Seeking after God is the business of the believer. The moment we become a Christian is the moment when our quest for God begins. Prior to our conversion we were fugitives from God; we fled from Him. Churches today structure worship, teaching, and preaching toward the pagan to help him find what he is desperately searching for but just cannot seem to uncover, but it is foolish to structure worship for unbelievers who are seeking after God when the Bible tells us there aren't any seekers. It manifests a failure to understand the things of God. If we understood the things of God, we would know that there is no such thing as unconverted seekers.

We are people searching for the things that we know can be found only in Christ, but we make the gratuitous assumption that because they are seeking the benefits of God, they must therefore be seeking God. That is the very dilemma of fallen creatures; we want the things that only God can give us, but we do not want Him. We want peace but not the Prince of Peace. We want purpose but not the sovereign purposes decreed by God. We want meaning found in ourselves but not in His rule over us. We see desperate people, and we assume they are seeking for God. But they are not seeking for God. We know that because God says so. No one seeks after God. Verses which discuss seeking—e.g., Luke 11:9; Is. 55:6; Mt. 7:7; Rev. 3:20—are addressed to the church. Jesus seeks believers, so it is believers who are called to seek the Lord. While we are living in unbelief, we do not seek God.

### (4) All Turn Aside (3:12a)

<sup>12</sup>*All have turned aside...*

Fourth, Paul charges that men are *naturally wayward*. Continuing to quote from the Psalms (14:3), he declares that 'all have turned aside' from God. 'Turned aside' is from *ekklinō*, and has the basic meaning of learning in the wrong direction. In a military context it referred to a soldier's running the wrong way, in other words deserting in the midst of battle.

The culture tells us there are many ways. God says there is only one (cp. John 14:6). If there are none righteous and no one understands and no one seeks after God, where would we expect people to go but out of the way?

### (5) All Are Worthless (3:12b)

*...together they have become worthless...*

Fifth, Paul charges that the natural man is *spiritually worthless*. 'Together,' that is, all of fallen mankind, 'they have become useless.' The Hebrew equivalent of the Greek term translated here as 'useless' was often used to describe milk that had turned sour and rancid, thereby becoming unfit to drink or to be used to make butter, cheese, or anything else edible. In ancient Greek literature the word was even used of the senseless laughter of a moron. Because no one has stayed on the path to God, they have become useless. They cannot fulfill their purpose as creatures made in the image of God.

### (6) None Does Good (3:12c)

*...no one does good, not even one.'*

Sixth, the natural man is charged with being *corrupt*, which is both a repetition of the first charge and something of a summary of the previous five charges. 'There is none who does good,' Paul says, 'there is not even one.' A good work must not only conform to the commandments of God,

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it must come from a heart committed to honoring Him, and no one habitually does this. *Chrēstotēs* ('does good') refers to what is upright, specifically to what is morally upright. But no human being has within himself either the desire or the capacity for the good that is holy, perfect, and God-glorifying by the divine standard.

From our perspective, there are good deeds, but if we define goodness the way God does, the verdict comes out a little differently. From a biblical standpoint, there are two aspects to a good deed. When God weighs our actions, He weighs whether they correspond outwardly to His law. We may have that external conformity to the law of God. However, when God evaluates our behavior, not only does He judge the outward action, but He also considers the work, the inward motivation. Therefore, for people to do good in God's sight, they not only have to do something that externally conforms to His law, but they also must be motivated in that action by a heart that is trying to please God, a heart that loves Him completely, with the whole mind. If that is the standard by which God is going to judge our deeds, then we see why Paul would say that nobody does good.

### b) *Communication Sins (3:13-14)*

<sup>13</sup>'*Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.*' '*The venom of asps is under their lips.*' <sup>14</sup>'*Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.*'

In the rest of the quotations, the focus on the universality of sin is abandoned in favor of a description of representative sins. Taken from three similar denunciations of the wicked in the Psalms, vv. 13-14 depict the sinfulness of human speech. The order of the quotations may intentionally reproduce the sequence of organs involved in producing speech: throat – tongue – lips – mouth. The LXX of Ps. 5:9 provides the source for the first two lines of v. 13. The last line of v. 13 reproduces the LXX of Ps. 140:3b. The last quotation in this sequence, in v. 14, is adapted from Ps. 10:7.

Continuing to quote from the Psalms, Paul illustrates the truths about a person's character as they are reflected in his conversation. In doing so, he adds four more charges to the divine indictment against the unregenerate man. The seventh charge of Paul's indictment is that by nature fallen mankind is *spiritually dead*, demonstrated by the metaphor of 'their throat' being 'an open grave' (cp. Ps. 5:9). A spiritually dead heart can generate only spiritually dead words. The throat is to the heart as an open grave is to the corpse within it.

The eighth charge is that by nature fallen mankind is *deceitful*: 'with their tongues they keep deceiving.' *Dolioō*, from which 'keep deceiving' is derived, has the basic meaning of luring and was used of baiting a hook by covering it with a small piece of food to disguise its danger. When a fish bites the food, thinking he will get a meal, he instead becomes a meal for the fisherman. The imperfect Greek tense of the verb indicates continual, repetitive deceit. For the natural man, lying and other forms of deceit are a habitual and normal part of his life.

The ninth charge in Paul's indictment of the unconverted man is closely related to the previous one. Quoting from part of Psalm 140:3, he says of ungodly men that 'the poison of asps is under their lips.' The adder, or asp, is one of the deadliest reptiles in the world. Not only is its bite fatal, as was in the case with Cleopatra, but it is exceedingly painful. The Bible describes our tongues as sacs of venom. We are like pit vipers. The words we use destroy, maim, and poison; they are vituperative.

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The tenth charge in the indictment continues the imagery of speaking, describing the ungodly as those ‘whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness’ (see Ps. 10:7). *Ara* (‘cursing’) carries the idea of intense malediction, of desiring the worst for a person and making that desire public through open criticism and defamation. *Pikria* (‘bitterness’) was not used so much in regard to physical taste as to describe openly-expressed emotional hostility against an enemy. Such is the obvious meaning in this context.

### c) *Conduct Sins (3:15-17)*

<sup>15</sup>‘Their feet are swift to shed blood; <sup>16</sup>in their paths are ruin and misery, <sup>17</sup>and the way of peace they have not known.’

The three lines in these verses are all taken from Is. 59:7-8a, with the LXX again being the source for the quotations. Verse 15 is an abridgment of Is. 59:7a. That this, rather than Prov. 1:16 (which has in common with Is. 59:7 the words that Paul quotes), is Paul’s source, is probable because vv. 16-17 continue to Is. 59. Verses 16-17, in contrast, contain almost exact quotations of the LXX of Is. 59:7b-8a. While Ps. 14, quoted in vv. 10-12, describes human beings generally and the Psalm verses cited in vv. 13-14 characterize the enemies of the psalmists, Is. 59:7-8a is directed against the unrighteous in Israel. Again, then, Paul implies that Israel as a whole must now be considered in this category of the ‘wicked.’

The last three charges in Paul’s indictment relate to the conduct of the natural man. The eleventh charge is that the ungodly are *innately murderous*: ‘their feet are swift to shed blood.’

The twelfth charge in the overall indictment, and the second one that is manifested in man’s conduct, is that of *general destructiveness*. ‘Destruction and misery are in their paths.’ *Suntrimma* (‘destruction’) is a compound word that denotes breaking into pieces and completely shattering, causing total devastation. ‘Misery’ is a general term that denotes the resulting harm that is always in the wake of man’s acts of destruction against his fellow man. His destructiveness inevitably leaves a trail of pain and despair.

The thirteen and last of the charges in Paul’s indictment of condemned man is that of his *peacelessness*: ‘and the path of peace they have not known.’ The apostle is not speaking of the lack of inner peace, but of man’s essential inclination *away* from peace.

### d) *Cause of Sin (3:18)*

<sup>18</sup>‘There is no fear of God before their eyes.’

The final quotation, from Ps. 36:1b, reverts to the introductory ‘there is not’ of vv. 10-12, acting therefore as a kind of concluding frame for the series. The text exposes the root error that gives rise to the manifold sins of humanity: lack of ‘fear of God.’ Paul’s wording is again very close to that of the LXX.

The scariest thing of all is that the pagan is not afraid of God. Of course, inherent in the fear Paul mentions is a sense of reverence. We are by nature irreverent people. We have no sense of awe, no desire to honor God or to glorify Him as God. We are not naturally afraid of God.

The motive for man’s sinfulness is his built-in godlessness. The basic sinful condition of men and of their spiritual deadness is evident: ‘there is no fear of God before their eyes’ (see Ps. 36:1). Because men’s ears are attuned to the lies of sin rather than to the truth of righteousness, they have an inadequate concern about and ‘no fear of God.’ Fearing God has both positive and negative elements. In a positive way, every true believer has reverential fear of God – an

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awesome awareness of His power, His holiness, and His glory. Proper worship always includes that kind of fear in the Lord. The negative aspect of the fear of God has to do with dread and terror. Even believers should have a measure of that kind of fear which acts as a protection from sinning.

### 4. The Verdict (3:19-20)

Paul is now drawing to a conclusion his case against the Jews; but, as he had since verse 9, he is broadening his analysis to include all mankind. Since no one, whether Jew or Gentile, is perfectly keeping the law, the only possible conclusion is that all humanity is guilty before God and subject to His proper judgment. With these two sentences, Paul concludes and summarizes the entire section begun at 1:18.

#### a) *The Law Speaks (3:19a)*

<sup>19</sup>*Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law...*

Paul now draws out the implications of the series of quotations for the position of human being before the divine judge. ‘We know’ introduces a circumstances that would be generally acknowledged by Paul and his readers. In this case, the circumstance is the applicability of ‘whatever the law says’ to those who are ‘in the law.’ The first occurrence of ‘law’ (*nomos*) refers to the series of quotations just concluded. Paul’s purpose is to insist that the OT passages quoted in vv. 10-18, while not all originally directed to Israel as a whole, are, indeed, ‘speaking to’ the Jews generally. They cannot be excluded from the scope of sin.

#### b) *Mouths Are Stopped (3:19b)*

*...so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.*

‘Shutting the mouth’ connotes the situation of the defendant who has no more to say in response to the charges brought against him or her. The Greek word translated ‘accountable’ occurs nowhere else in the Scriptures, but it is used in extra-biblical Greek to mean ‘answerable to’ or ‘liable to prosecution,’ ‘accountable.’ Paul pictures God both as the one offended and as the judge who weighs the evidence and pronounces the verdict. The image, then, is of all humanity standing before God, accountable to Him for willful and inexcusable violations of His will, awaiting the sentence of condemnation that their actions deserve.

*Oida* (‘know’) refers to knowledge that is certain and complete. This declaration allows no exceptions. Every unredeemed human being, Jew or Gentile, is ‘under the Law’ of God and ‘accountable to God.’ The final verdict, then, is that unredeemed mankind has no defense whatever and is guilty of all charges. The defense must rest, as it were, before it has opportunity to say anything, because the omniscient and all-wise God has infallibly demonstrated the impossibility of any grounds for acquittal.

But how is it that Paul can use accusations addressed to Jews (‘those in the law’) to declare that all people are guilty? Probably Paul is using an implicit ‘from the greater to the lesser’ argument: if Jews, God’s chosen people, cannot be excluded from the scope of sin’s tyranny, then it surely follows that Gentiles, who have no claim on God’s favor, are also guilty. We must remember that Paul’s chief purpose throughout Rom. 1:18-3:20 is not to demonstrate that Gentiles are guilty and in need of God’s righteousness – for this could be assumed – but that Jews bear the same burden and have the same need. It is for this reason that, while all people are included in the scope of vv. 19-20, there is particular reference to the Jews and their law.

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### c) *What the Law Cannot Accomplish (3:20a)*

<sup>20</sup>*For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight...*

Paul counters any Jewish evasion of v. 19 by explicitly denying that the law can offer any hope of defense. Paul alludes to the OT to make his point; for his words, while not a quotation, resemble Ps. 143:2b: ‘no one living is righteous before you.’ Paul’s most significant addition, of course, is his reference to the law: it is not ‘out of works of the law’ that a person is justified. There is no salvation through the keeping of God’s law, because sinful man is utterly incapable of doing so. He has neither the ability nor the inclination within himself to obey God perfectly.

If we are paying attention to the law, we know it will not justify us. We know we will never be able to get into heaven on the basis of our works, because the law reveals to us our filthiness. The law teaches us that by the works of the law, no flesh, no human being, will ever be justified in God’s sight. Why then do people continue to hope that their good deeds are going to be good enough to satisfy the demands of God? We must despair of that. We must not rest on our works as grounds for our justification because by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight.

Interpreters of Paul have traditionally thought that ‘works of the law’ refers to anything done in obedience to the law, particularly those ‘good works’ that one might put forth as a reason why God should accept a person. These interpreters then viewed ‘works of the law’ as a subset of the larger category of ‘good works’; and they understood this verse, and others like it, to be refuting the idea that a person could gain a right standing with God by anything that that person did. This general view is shared by virtually all the Reformers and became the hallmark of traditional Protestant interpretation.

Paul uses the phrase ‘works of the law’ instead of the simple ‘works’ because he is particularly concerned in this context to deny to Jews an escape from the general sentence pronounced in v. 19. But, since ‘works of the law’ are simply what we might call ‘good works’ defined in Jewish terms, the principle enunciated here has universal application: nothing a person does, whatever the object of obedience or the motivation of that obedience, can bring him or her into favor with God. The heart of his contention in this section of Romans is that *no one* is capable of doing *anything* to gain acceptance with God; this is why for *everyone* faith in Christ is the only possible way to God.

### d) *What the Law Does Accomplish (3:20b)*

*...since through the law comes knowledge of sin.*

The last part of v. 20 supports Paul contention in the first part of the verse by setting forth what it is that the law does accomplish (as opposed to that which it cannot accomplish). The law does not justify; rather, ‘through’ it comes ‘knowledge of sin.’ ‘Knowledge of sin’ does not simply mean that the law defines sin; rather, what is meant is that the law gives to people an understanding of ‘sin’ (singular) as a power that holds everyone in bondage and brings guilt and condemnation. The law presents people with the demand of God. In our constant failure to attain the goal of that demand, we recognize ourselves to be sinners and justly condemned for our failures.

‘Knowledge’ is literally ‘the intimate knowledge [the *epignosis*] of sin.’ *The first function of the Law is to unmask us and show us we are sinners, and this is our supreme advantage.* We understand at least to some extent our radical corruption.

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Paul's argument begun in 1:18 is straightforward. Regardless of whether we are Gentiles or Jews, we fail to do what we know is true. Gentiles stare at creation while their inner sense of morality approves right and condemns wrong. Jews have the unambiguous written Law of God, which they hear but which they do not do. They have had entrusted to them the words of God, especially the promises of the One who was to come, but these they have rejected. In other words, both Gentiles and Jews are 'under' sin' and 'under judgment.' By our works each of us in those racial groups prove ourselves, first, to be incapable of achieving God's 'righteousness' and, second, to be unwilling to do so. Only God can impute that righteousness as His gift, as Paul will now proceed to say.

We have come to the end of Paul's presentation of the 'first half of the gospel.' Paul has taken most of the first chapter, all of the second chapter, and a lot of the third chapter to show us that we need salvation. He hasn't yet told us how to be saved. The word *salvation* has occurred only once, in the theme verse (1:16). And you can just hear the cry, whether it's in the humanistic Greek and Roman world of Paul's day or whether it's in the humanistic twenty-first century: 'Why do I need salvation?' People may have all kinds of opinions about whether God exists or what He is like if He does exist, but when they are told that God says they must be saved, they will usually raise objections. However, Paul's charge still stands today. The entire human race—Jews or Gentiles, religious or irreligious, pious or pagans—is utterly depraved.

Verse 21 begins with one of the best words in the New Testament—*but*. It makes all the difference in the world. Those three letters, b-u-t, are the difference between heaven and hell. Finally, after this relentless indictment that we have had to endure, we are coming to where Paul finally says, 'But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed' (v. 21). It is time for the gospel. We have listened to the bad news so that we might hear the goodness of the good news.

For next time: Read Romans 3:21-31.