

## Why God Needs to Step In

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Unshakeable: Romans / Romans 3:1-20

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When I was about 10 years old, I made a really foolish decision.

There was a kid in my class I didn't get along with, and in my 10-year-old wisdom I decided the best way to solve that was to pick a fight with him after school.

Now what I conveniently ignored in all of this was that he had two older brothers.

And apparently, I thought I could take all three of them.

So we met after school. Words were exchanged. It didn't take long before fists were flying. And at one point I stumbled. I fell. And before I knew it all three of them were on top of me — kicking, punching.

And I remember thinking two things very quickly,

1. "This was a bad idea."
2. "How in the world am I going to get myself out of this?"

I had picked a fight I couldn't win.

And then — completely unexpectedly — I saw something I'll never forget.

One by one those boys were literally lifted off of me.

I looked up, and my grandfather had just happened to be walking by at that moment. He stepped in. He pulled them off. He stood between us.

What I could never have done for myself, he did for me.

Now here's what makes that memory stick with me.

I wasn't a victim.  
I wasn't innocent.  
I picked the fight.

I found myself completely unable to handle the consequences of my own foolishness.

And someone stronger had to step in.

[Romans 3](#) is Paul bringing humanity to that same realization.

Humanity has picked a fight with sin that we cannot win. We're like me, curled up in a ball, taking hit after hit, waiting for it all to be over.

We are under sin.

And we need someone stronger, more powerful to step in and rescue us, from ourselves.

Paul has been wrapping up the trial of humanity in the first few chapters of Romans and here's what we find when it comes to the end of it all.

When the verdict is rendered, no one can stand in their own righteousness.

That's why God needs to step in. He needs to step in and do for us, what we cannot do for ourselves.

And by the end of our time this morning, my hope is that you and I are grateful He has stepped in.

So let's read the passage together.

Romans chapter 3, verses 1 through 20.

We're three chapters into our journey through Paul's letter to the Roman church, and these have been challenging chapters.

They're meant to be. But not in a condemning way. Paul is not trying to crush his readers; he's trying to awaken them.

If you don't know Jesus, if you don't have a relationship with Christ, then the hope is that as we moved through these chapters the Holy Spirit is awakening you to your need of the good news of Jesus Christ.

And for those of us who do know Him, who have trusted in the finished work of His death and resurrection, these chapters are meant to stir gratitude in us, praise in us, worship in us for the One who paid it all.

The hinge of this whole thing, if you remember, is back in chapter 1, and we have to keep that in mind as we walk through this.

[Romans 1:16-17](#) — ***“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes... for in it the righteousness of God is revealed...”***

That's the hinge this whole section swings on.

That's the anchor, which keeps us grounded.

The gospel — the good news of Jesus — is the power of God to save everyone who believes. The good news is only about forgiveness of sin; the gospel reveals and provides righteousness.

God makes righteousness available to those who trust in Christ.

And the question we've been wrestling with for the last couple of chapters is why?

Why do I need the gospel? Why do I need salvation? Why does it matter that Jesus took my sin on His shoulders and died in my place? Why does it matter that He rose from the dead? Why do I need a Saviour?

Chapter 1 answered that by showing us we need the gospel, we need Jesus because humanity stands under the wrath of God. We've rejected Him. We've replaced Him. We've worshiped created things instead of the Creator.

Chapter 2 showed us we need the forgiveness and righteousness of Christ because we are in danger of the judgment of God. Every one of us — Jew and

Gentile alike — will stand before Him and give an account, and apart from Christ the verdict is guilty.

What's becoming clearer and clearer is that if God does not step in and save us, we are doomed.

And that's really where Paul is heading in chapter 3. He will get to God stepping in — that's verse 21 and following — and no one will be more relieved to get there than me — but before he gets there, he wraps up his argument.

It's almost like the courtroom scene that's been building now comes into full focus.

In chapters 1 and 2 the evidence has been presented against humanity. The case has been laid out.

And now, in verses 1–8 it's as if the defence stands up and begins to object. Is God unfair? Is God unjust? Is He unfaithful to His promises? Paul has been preaching this message for over twenty years at this point; he knows the objections people will raise.

In verses 9-18 Paul will give his final argument, and then in verses 19-20, we'll deal with the final verdict.

Verses 1-8 we here from the defence, that's important to note, because when confronted with our sin, that's our default reaction isn't it?

Rather than dealing with our sin, we defend ourselves. We question God. We push back. And that's exactly why God needs to step in.

Because try as we might to defend ourselves, we cannot justify ourselves before God.

## **JUSTIFY OURSELVES**

Notice the defence they're trying to make. Look at verses 1–4 with me.

[Romans 3:1-4](#)

***“Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though everyone were a liar, as it is written,***

***‘That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.’”***

Do you hear what they’re saying?

Their argument is this — Paul, what you’re saying makes God out to be unfaithful.

How? Because he just spent the last part of chapter 2, showing us that Jews are just as much in need of the gospel as the Gentiles.

But, if Jews are still under wrath, still under judgment like everyone else, then what about all those promises God made to Israel? What advantage is there in being a Jew then? What about circumcision? What about the Law? What about the oracles the Word of God?

They’re assuming that covenant privilege should guarantee covenant security.

And Paul says — much in every way. There is advantage. There is blessing. The Jews were entrusted with the very words of God.

And we need to acknowledge that. From Israel we received the Scriptures. From Israel we received the Messiah. There is real privilege there. And later in Romans Paul is going to make it clear — God is not finished with Israel.

But here’s what Paul has been saying since the end of chapter 2. Just step back for a moment and look there with me.

[Romans 2:25](#)ESV

***“For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision.”***

And then verses 28–29:

[Romans 2:28–29](#)

***“For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.”***

Do you see what Paul is saying? Being part of God’s covenant people is not merely an outward reality. It’s a matter of the heart.

Circumcision of the flesh means nothing without circumcision of the heart. Circumcision was a symbol that Israel was spiritually set apart for God, but that circumcision means nothing if you are not living set apart from God.

God did entrust the Law to Israel, but having the Law means nothing if you do not obey the Law from the heart. God has entrusted His Word to them, but having the Word is not enough. Being entrusted with the Word is not the same as obeying the Word.

The question is — are you living it?

The question isn’t has God made promises to Israel, that question is are you trusting in the promises of God?

And we need to see how this applies to us. Because we can make the exact same mistake.

We can assume that because we’re in church, because our parents or grandparents served the Lord, because we’ve been baptized, because we know Scripture — that somehow gives us an advantage before God.

The church has been set apart for the purposes of Christ, but are we living set apart? We’ve been entrusted with and hear the Word of God regularly, but are

we living that Word, we've been giving great promises in Christ, but are we trusting in those promises?

Paul is saying you've been entrusted with truth. That's a privilege.

But it does not justify you.

The faith of your family cannot save you. Sitting in church cannot justify you. Knowing the Word does not make you righteous.

Now look again at verse 3 and we see the defence.

[Romans 3:3](#)

**“What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?”**

That's the charge. If Israel is judged, does that mean God broke His promises?

They are charging God with unfaithfulness then.

And Paul answers — by no means.

This is where we have to understand the Old Covenant. Have you read it?

When God entered into covenant with Israel, it wasn't just promises of blessing no matter what. Go back to [Deuteronomy 28](#). Go back to [Leviticus 26](#).

If you obey — blessing.

If you turn away — curse.

Blessing was tied to faithfulness. Judgment was tied to unfaithfulness.

God told them that plainly.

So when Israel is judged, that is not God being unfaithful. That is God being faithful to His Covenant.

He is keeping the Covenant exactly as He said He would.

God's righteousness is displayed not only in His grace, but also in His judgment.

The promises were never for those who presumed on covenant privilege — “We’re Abraham’s children, we have the Law.” The promises were for those who trusted in the promises of God.

God is not unjust to judge covenant breakers. He is faithful.

But there’s one more argument the defence makes here.

It’s almost like they say — alright Paul, let’s follow your logic for a minute.

If my sin actually makes God look good... if my unrighteousness highlights His righteousness... if my unfaithfulness puts His faithfulness on display... then why judge me? If my lie somehow makes His truth shine brighter, why am I still condemned as a sinner? And why not just do evil that good may come?

That’s the argument in verses 5–8. You can see it there in the text.

**Romans 3:5–8 ESV**

***“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.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world? But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come? —as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.”***

And Paul shuts that down quickly. “By no means.” If that were true, then God could not judge the world at all. And he even says some people were slanderously accusing him of teaching that very thing — “Let us do evil that good may come.” And Paul says their condemnation is just.

But do you see what’s underneath that argument?

This is what sin does to us.

It’s not just that we defend ourselves — we justify ourselves.

We rationalize.

We minimize.

We rename sin so it doesn't sound like sin anymore. We call it poor judgment. A mistake. A shortcoming.

We explain it away. It was my upbringing. It was my culture. It was the environment I was raised in. Don't blame me — blame society. Blame my parents. Blame anybody but me.

That's what's happening here.

Rather than confess guilt, we twist logic. Rather than repent, we argue.

It's like confronting your child with their wrong and they say it wasn't my fault, but they started it, but she said, but he did it... it's never me, it's always someone else.

Like our father Adam in the garden it wasn't me, it was this woman you gave me...

And that is exactly why God needs to step in.

Because try as we might to defend ourselves and justify ourselves.

But we cannot justify ourselves before God.

We follow that courtroom scene. We've heard from the defence in verses 1–8. And now, in verses 9–18, Paul gives his final argument.

And in this final argument, he wants us to see just how far-reaching the impact of sin truly is.

Like a disease that spreads and infects the entire body, sin has spread and affects every part of human life and experience.

That's why we need God to step in.

### **SIN REACHES EVERY ONE OF US, AND EVERY PART OF US.**

As we read these verses, we see that the impact of sin is universal — it reaches everyone. It's internal — it's not just our actions, it's what's going on in here.

But then it moves outward — into our words, our actions, our relationships.

It impacts every one of us and every part of us.

Look at what Paul says in verse 9.

[Romans 3:9](#)

***“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.”***

Do you hear that? All. Jews and Greeks. Everyone.

Verse 10 — none is righteous.

Verse 12 — all have turned aside.

No one does good, not even one.

It’s universal. We are all guilty. Race doesn’t matter. Gender doesn’t matter.

Wealth doesn’t matter. Class doesn’t matter. All are under sin.

That word “under” in verse 9 is important.

To be under sin means under its power, under its rule, under its dominion. Not neutral. Not just influenced by it. Under it. Sin is like a cruel ruler exercising authority over us.

And if we’re honest, we feel that don’t we? We know what it’s like to want to do better and yet fall short. To know what is right and still choose what is wrong. That internal pull — that’s what it means to be under sin. Not free from it. Under it.

And when Paul says none is righteous, he doesn’t mean that every person is as evil as they possibly could be. It means that every part of that person has been touched and tainted by sin.

And because of that, sin affects how we respond to God.

Look at what he says — ***no one understands.***

Understands what?

It means that because of sin, you and I in our own strength are incapable of rightly understanding the truth of God. Paul says elsewhere that the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.

The natural person does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. They are spiritually discerned.

Left to ourselves, we don't see it clearly.

Which is why the Holy Spirit must open our eyes. He must convict us. He must awaken us. Apart from God's work in us, we do not naturally understand the things of God.

We don't understand God and so Paul points out that no one seeks for God.

Humanity is not neutral when it comes to God. Most people assume neutrality — that people just need more information, more convincing. But that's not the picture here.

Given the choice between sin and God, humanity instinctively chooses sin.

That's why God has to step in. Because left to our own choices, our own desires, our own devices, we would never choose Him — unless He first shines the light of the gospel into our hearts.

Sin impacts our ability to respond to God.

If you're sitting here today and you love Jesus, and you desire Him, and you want to follow Him — that is not because you were smarter than everyone else or better.

It's not because you figured it out on your own. It's because God was merciful and opened your eyes. He stepped in.

The impact of sin is far reaching, that we may realize, it infects even the good that we try to do.

***Verse 12 — no one does good, not even one.***

You think, but I've done good things. My neighbour is a good person.

Paul doesn't mean no one ever does anything outwardly kind or helpful. He means no one does good in a way that is perfectly pure and righteous before God.

Even when we do good, it's often mixed with selfish motives. We help — and it makes us feel good. We give — and it makes us look good. We serve — and we like the affirmation. The good we do is still tainted by sin.

Sin reaches every one of us and every part of us.

But notice the progression in the passage.

Paul moves from the inside outward.

**Verse 13 — “their throat is an open grave.”**

The throat is the gateway to what's inside. And what is inside is death. The throat is this two-way street. What goes in and out is only death.

Sin starts within. It begins as desire before it ever becomes action.

Jesus said, out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.

That's where sin starts.

If we're honest, we don't have to look very far. Think about a sharp word spoken in frustration. Think about bitterness you've held onto. Think about a judgmental thought no one else ever heard. It started in here long before it came out there.

And then it flows outward — into our words.

***They use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouths are full of curses and bitterness.***

Think about what we do with our words. We can build up or tear down. Speak life or speak death. And how often do we deceive? How often do we mislead? How often do we wound?

Jesus said, out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.

The infection spreads from within outward into our speech.

And then into our actions.

***Verse 15 – their feet are swift to shed blood. In their paths are ruin and misery.***

Sin moves from words to deeds. It affects our actions, our relationships, the direction of our lives. It leaves ruin and misery behind.

And then he summarizes it — the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.

That's the root.

No fear of God. No true reverence. No right view of Him.

You have to see what Paul is doing. This is his final argument.

After laying out all the evidence, he is showing us why we cannot save ourselves. There is not a crevice, not a crack in the human heart that sin has not touched.

And maybe you're tempted to say — well that's just Paul's opinion.

But look closely at verses 10–18. These are not Paul's original words. He is quoting from the Psalms and the prophets. [Psalm 14](#). [Psalm 5](#). [Psalm 140](#). [Psalm 10](#). [Isaiah 59](#).

He is saying, this is what God's Word has been testifying all along.

This is humanity without Jesus.

Dead in trespasses and sins. Walking the course of this world. Following the prince of the power of the air. Living as slaves to our desires. By nature children of wrath.

That's what we're left with.

That's why God needs to step in.

That's why we need the gospel.

We've heard the defence. We've seen the final argument.

What's the verdict?

Every mouth is silenced before God. There is no defence, nothing to say.

That's why we need God to step in.

## **THE VERDICT**

Because when the verdict comes, every mouth will be silenced.

You can feel Paul bringing this to a conclusion. In verse 19 he says, "Now we know..." It's like he's saying, alright, what's the conclusion to all of this? What's the verdict after the evidence has been presented?

And we see it there. Verse 19.

***"Whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God."***

Paul wants us to understand — this isn't just his opinion. This isn't Paul's private verdict. This is God's verdict.

God isn't just the offended party in this courtroom — He is the Judge.

And it is God's Word that does the judging. That's why he says whatever the Law says. Not whatever I say. Whatever the Law says.

And that word "law" there isn't just the Mosaic commands — it's broader. It's the testimony of God's Word as a whole. The Scriptures themselves bear witness.

That's why Paul quoted all those Psalms and prophets. He's saying, God has already spoken. The evidence has already been entered.

And when the verdict is handed down, every mouth will be stopped.

Can you imagine that moment? Standing before God with nothing left to say. No more explanations. No more "yes, but." No more shifting the blame. Just silence.

To have your mouth stopped means there is no defence left. No rebuttal. No final argument. The defendant has nothing more to say.

And "held accountable" — that means answerable. Liable. Guilty under prosecution.

And if we're honest, we've felt that as we've moved through these chapters.

That's why they're uncomfortable.

It's like standing in front of a mirror and seeing a reflection you'd rather not see. You might not like it, but you can't deny it.

You don't get angry at the mirror. You don't argue with it. It just shows you what's already there.

We've rejected God in countless ways. We've replaced Him with other things. We've seen not only the consequences of our sin, but the ripple effects of sin in this world. We look around and see the brokenness — but we also know, if we're honest, the problem isn't just out there. It's in here.

And the more we look at God's Word, the less excuses we have. The arguments fade. The justifications fall apart.

Every mouth stopped.

The whole world held accountable.

And maybe at this point we start thinking — alright, then what can I do? There must be something. Some way to make it right. Some way to atone. To repair the damage. To fix it.

But that's not what the Law is designed to do.

Look at verse 20.

***“For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”***

The Law does not tell you how to fix your guilt. It tells you that you are guilty.

The Law does not tell you how to become righteous. It shows you what righteousness looks like — and how far short you fall.

The Law is not a ladder to climb into God's favour. It is a mirror that shows you the stain on your face.

And even if from this moment forward you could live perfectly — which you can't — you would still have to answer for every violation that came before.

That's how law works.

If you break a law one day, it doesn't matter how many laws you keep afterward. Justice still demands payment for the one you broke.

And that's Paul's point.

And let that sit for a moment.

The verdict is guilty.

Not mostly guilty.

Not slightly guilty.

Guilty.

Every mouth stopped.

The whole world held accountable.

And if that is where the story ended... that would be devastating.

If Romans ended at verse 20, we would walk out of here with no hope.

But thank God it does not end there.

Because the very next words in this letter are some of the most hope-filled words ever written.

“But now...”

But now.

After the evidence.

After the verdict.

After the silence.

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested...”

God has made a way; God has provided a path to righteousness...

Do you see what Paul is doing?

He takes us as far down as we can go so that when he says, “but now,” we feel it.

The Law exposes our sin — but it cannot save us.

The verdict is guilty — but God steps in.

He reveals a path to forgiveness through Jesus, He shows us that way to righteousness by faith in His Son!

That’s the gospel.

And that’s why we had to walk through this.

Because if you don’t understand the verdict... you will never cherish the grace.

If you don’t feel the weight... you will never treasure the relief.

But now — God has stepped in.

That’s the gospel.

Where we could not justify ourselves, Christ justifies us.

Where we were under sin, Christ came under the Law for us.

Where the verdict should have fallen on us, it fell on Him.

On the cross, Jesus took the guilt we deserve. The judgment we deserve. The wrath we deserve. And He died in our place.

And three days later He rose from the dead, proving that sin was paid for and death was defeated.

That's why this matters.

And if you're here this morning — and you feel the weight of this passage — that weight is not meant to crush you. It's meant to lead you to grace.

Stop trying to justify yourself.

Stop explaining it away.

Stop blaming someone else.

Come to Christ.

Right where you're seated you can do that. You can pray and say, "Lord, I'm guilty. I can't save myself. I believe Jesus died for me and rose again. I'm placing my trust in Him."

And if you're here this morning and you are in Christ, you've placed your faith in Christ. Then praise God, praise Him this morning for His wonderful grace and mercy towards you.

Praise Him this morning for your salvation, that you are no longer under the bondage of Sin, no longer under wrath, no longer facing judgment. Praise Him that by faith in Jesus you are forgiven, redeemed, restored, saved by His grace.