

Romans 3

Today we come to one of the great chapters in the Bible – a passage that really formed the bedrock of the Protestant Reformation.

It comes on the heels of chapter 2 (that we studied last week), where Paul is hammering on the Jews in the Roman church on how they have made the outward appearance more important than what God does in the heart.

(His point being - God changes us from the inside out, not outside in. To experience salvations, you have to let God do spiritual surgery on your soul). It's only when we do that we experience real transformation.

We're going to get into chapter 3 (and I'll be honest, if you read chapter 3 it's a little tough to digest). (I appreciate some of your guys that are really trying to get your arms around this letter. It's good that you are wrestling with it to understand it). What I want to do today is take it and put it in the real world for us today – that's my hope.

Here's what we're going to talk about today – **the fact that every single one of us has fallen short and needs a savior**. And that may sound simplistic, but the narrative of culture right now is:

- “You're good.” Look inside yourself
- Follow your heart
- Surround yourself with people who see reality just like you do – who form a hedge of agreement for your own thoughts and actions, no matter how damaging they are to you or your marriage or your children or your health – just stay away from anyone who would call you out.
- We live in a world where we believe we have our individual truths – “I know my truth”
- We are told that we are inherently good (which is exactly the opposite of what the Bible says)
- Or we get on some moralistic pursuit – some cause, and because we think we're fighting for the right cause (and somehow that makes us the righteous ones).

The Bible makes it very clear that we're not all that. Doing so makes us an idol unto ourselves. We become our own gods (which is a very poor god at that).

But the good news is – if we acknowledge God, who truly is God, as sinful as we are, God sent his Son to redeem us, to save us – and that's the Gospel. And we'll talk about that today.

So – at the end of chapter 2 last week, Paul hammered on rule keepers and Jewish people who thought they were more favored by God because they were given the law or had the mark of circumcision, writing:

²⁸A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God (Romans 2:28-29).

The Jews at Rome had trouble buying that. So when we come to chapter 3:1-8, we have this extended Q and A between Paul and the Jews who objected to Paul's message that we are not saved by heritage alone, who believed they were especially favored because they had the mark of circumcision and the fact that God had given them his law.

(Now, we're not going to look at all of these - but I want you to at least see the first one, in which Paul offers a little clarification).

¹What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? (that's their question – if being a Jew gives us no advantage, what's the point? It's like they are saying, “Surely growing up in church counts for something.”) To which Paul replies:

²Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God. (Romans 3:1-2).

So – notice his argument.

Is there an advantage to being a Jew? Paul says, “Of course there is. The first advantage is that the Jewish people held a special place because they were the first to receive the scriptures.

Many people wonder the same thing about church attendance, Bible reading, small groups. Paul's answer is that growing up in church has many advantages. Kids at camp, mission trips, retreats.

However, growing up in church doesn't get a free ticket to heaven, because in chapter 2 he says “there is no favoritism with God.”

But all people must act on the knowledge of Christ and respond. Nobody gets a free pass.

So there are advantages, but there are no golden tickets.

Some people are more privileged in life, but that doesn't mean God loves them more than people who don't.

2. Here's the other point – if you have more privilege, God's going to hold you accountable for that. **Luke 12:48** (not Spider Man)

We may have more benefits, but we are still under sin.

3. Here's another advantage – even though they had been very faithful in the past, God had made a promise to Abraham that the Jewish would experience the favor of God – through them all nations of the world would be blessed.

God always keeps his promises. But just because God is faithful doesn't mean we have a license to sin and abuse his grace (**Romans 3:8**)

Deitrich Bonhoffer calls this is “cheap grace.” It's when we receive the grace of God but live unrighteously. And that dishonors God.

Just because God is good doesn't mean we can do whatever we want.

All of us are called to live holy lives – nobody gets a pass.

We come to God so that he might change us, not to ask him to affirm our sinful decisions.

If we are still sinning, we can't expect God to transform us (which is the reason you may not have experienced real and lasting change).

That's true in all areas of life. With money, people say, “I can never get ahead.” Well, are you giving, are you living within your means, are you greedy? Have you given your finances to God? Malachi says when you are selfish with your resources, your finances are cursed.

Same is true for marriage – do you respect your husband? Well, no. Do you, guys, treat her like Jesus treats the church? Well, no.

We cannot expect the blessings of God if we are not living according to his will.

Unless we are fully submitted to him, he cannot completely transform us.

God doesn't want part of you, he wants all of you.

But for transformation to happen, we have to start at the right place – and that's to first recognize our sinful condition.

And so in the next section he's going to show how all of us – from the most privileged to the least – are under Sin. (Step one to transformation is to understand how we all – from the greatest to the least – are utterly powerless, utterly guilty before God).

Jews, Greeks, pagans, moralists, rebels, rule followers, church people and bar-hoppers are in the same boat – under sin.

And understanding that should keep us from becoming judges of other people. The only judgement we need is our own, right? I've got enough to deal with in my own heart! None of us are righteous.

9-10

Paul says, “all of us fall short.” (That means that we're worse than we ever thought imaginable).

Just because we have more knowledge, just because we experience prosperity in this nation, does that mean we're better?

Verse 10 – there is no one righteous, not even one. All are under sin.

This does not mean that every person is as sinful as every other person. It means that our legal condition is the same. We are all lost, and there are no degrees of lostness.

Imagine three people try to swim from **Hawaii to Japan**. One cannot swim at all; he sinks as soon as he gets out of his depth. The next is a weak swimmer; he flounders for sixty feet before drowning. The third is a championship swimmer and swims strongly for a long time. But after thirty miles he is struggling; after forty he is sinking; after fifty miles he drowns.

Is one more drowned than the others? No! It doesn't matter at all which swam further; none were anywhere near Japan, and each ends as dead as the others. In the same way, the religious person may trust in morality and the pagan indulge in sensuality, and neither comes close to a righteous heart. They are equally lost, equally condemned to perish.

You see, sin is not so much an action as it is a condition.

Many of us think of sin as only something we do – stealing and lying. Yes, that is sin. But Paul’s analysis is much more devastating. The sin we do is because of the heart we possess.

And so – verse 9 - Jews and Gentiles alike are under Sin (3:9).

That is under sin’s power. Sin is a power, an active force in the world.

Verse 11- So far in Romans, Paul has given his own observations about sin.

But in 10-18, he pulls out all of the stops with a number of OT texts – from the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Isaiah – to show that he’s not making this stuff up.

He goes back to the OT, and he uses their own Bible to show them how sinful they are. Speaking to the Jews he says, “Here’s what your Bible says about you.”

One writer has called this a “hymn to sin.” And they show us the pandemic of sin that we are under.

Read 11-18

Verse 11 – no one who understands. We are “darkened in our understanding . . . because of the ignorance that is in us due to the hardening of our hearts” (Eph. 4:18).

Hard heartedness causes a lack of understanding, and therefore ignorance on our part. And what that means is this: our self-centeredness and desire for self-justification leads us to filter out a lot of reality as a form of denial. (We don’t want to believe our judgements are as often bad as they are, or we don’t want to be corrected, or we don’t want our mistakes pointed out – and so we live in denial.

We are blind to many truths – to actual reality about ourselves and others – and our thinking does not compute data as it should. So our thoughts, our judgements, or self-assessment, is jaded and the harder our hearts are, the farther away from reality.

Verse 13 talks about our tongues (interestingly, speech takes up more than half of the scriptural citations). The image is that of a grave with rotting bodies in it, our sinful words (or the very tone of those words) being a sign of decay. Cursing and bitterness.

Jesus connects our words to our character in Matthew 12:34 when he says that “the heart speaks what the mouth is full of.” That means that spiritually dead people can only produce death with their mouths.

Our speech and our actions are violent –

He says the evils we commit involve our minds (11) as well as all of our body parts (13-18) – we are literally sinful head to toe.

The world says, “I’m good.” Paul says, “No, we are all under sin. All have fallen short. That’s why we need a Savior.”

And look – Paul is not telling us this because he wants to make us feel bad, Paul is saying this to highlight the fact that we all need God in our lives.

He’s doing this out of love.

Any good parent in this room, if your child is about to run out into traffic, you stop them because you love them – you may have to get hold of their back end – but you do it out of love. You don’t want them to get hit by a car.

Jesus does the same thing with us when he says the wages of sin are death. It is from understanding that we find freedom and salvation.

Another thing – the rules don’t set us free.

Read 19-20

What’s he saying?

The purpose of the law was not to correct sin, but to reveal sin. That’s what Paul means when he says, “Knowledge of sin comes through the law.” The law shows me how messed up and spiritually rotten I am.

We could describe it like an xray. You break your leg – they do an xray to see the severity of the break. The xray reveals the severity of the injury – but it is powerless to do anything to fix it.

The law is like an X ray that shows us how spiritually broken our hearts are, but powerless to fix it.

No one can be justified by works of the law. **The purpose of the law is to diagnose, not repair.**

The law is like railroad tracks, pointing us toward the direction to go, but powerless to move the freight (our salvation) along the tracks.

And so in and of ourselves, we are incapable of following the law.

All the 10 commandments do is tell us what we should and shouldn't do – they are guard rails, but they point toward the one who can save us, and that is Jesus. The entire OT and NT are pointing us to Jesus.

So that's hard stuff. We're sinners. We can't keep God's perfect law by ourselves. So what is the answer?

Chapter 2 says we deserve death – we have no hope of saving ourselves.

And if we stop there we're doomed, but in verse 21 Paul drops the 2 word bomb – “But now.” (say with me – turn to your neighbor and say) . . .

21-22

For 2.5 chapters Paul has been laboring to get us to see our absolute hopelessness apart from Jesus – our inability to save ourselves through law keeping. But now, because of what Jesus has done, there is hope.

The good news is we have an answer to sin – to our addictions, our bents and sinful tendencies, our impatience and our anger and our selfishness. And the answer is Jesus.

The key to salvation is **faith** in Him – for anyone who believes – 22 who puts their trust in Him.

And the good news is – all”

If you stumble with sin, with pornography, with addiction, with anger – you're in good company. You're among friends.

All of us have fallen short. The preacher has fallen short – the elders have fallen short –

And so here's the good news – sin doesn't have to isolate you (which is one of Satan's tools, right? You feel so hopeless, so guilty, so defeated, you just detach from everybody and everything meaningful). You don't have to isolate because of your sin – you're among friends.

22-26

And notice – we are redeemed – verse 24

Redemption is a word that goes back to OT Israel. In that agricultural society, it did not take much to get into debt, into having to sell yourself into slavery. But it did take much – your whole life, perhaps – to get out of it.

So God's law made provision for a redeemer (called a “kinsman-redeemer” – someone from your family who had a concern for you) to buy you out of that debt and slavery so you could live free again (Leviticus 25:25).

So here, Paul says that through Jesus, to all of us who are slaves to sin and death and judgement – to all of us who can never pay the debt that we owe – to us is offered redemption.

You see – when God created humanity, sin came into the world and stole us away from God briefly.

But through Jesus Christ we were bought back. The ownership now belongs to God, not our sinful lifestyles.

Some of you here – you know what it is to be bought back. Time stole you away. Life stole you away. Addiction stole you away. The court system had to take you away when you were young, because sin had gotten in the way of the people in your life who should have loved you not being able to love you. But thanks be to God, somebody did.

But now – you have been redeemed – bought back – by the blood of the Lamb.

For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons and daughters (Romans 8:15, NASB).

Verse 25 uses the word “atonement.” That's a big word for the fact that a price had to be paid for you and me.

We owed a debt we could not pay, because sin was so out of control in our lives. We were so messed up.

But Jesus came to pay the price, to shed his blood for our sin to straighten out what we made a wreck of. (And that's what shows his righteousness and his goodness. While we were sinners, Christ died for us.

In Christ, the debt we owe that we could never pay, has been paid.

We deserved death, but we don't have to experience that, because he tasted death for us.

And so we take that seriously – since we have been saved by grace, we should pursue the God who loves us and not take grace for granted.

Okay – last part – 27-31

What does that mean? It means there is no room for arrogance. We have no right to be boastful about something we never earned. God gave it to us freely. So Christians should be humble people, always.

There's nothing more off-putting to non Christians than arrogant, judgment Christians.

I love verse 31 – do we get rid of the rules because we have grace? No. If we do that on the highway we'll all run off into the ditch and ditch the guy in oncoming traffic.

No, in Jesus – because I love my neighbor – I should try all the harder to be a good driver.

So – I want to close with this – because this is the CRUX of the Gospel:

Romans 3:23-24

This happened in Tarrant, Alabama, in the suburbs of Birmingham (a city that has as many wealthy but also very many poor people). *Birmingham is an old coal mining city.*

A woman who was 47 years old - Helen Johnson - taking care of five children under three years old. (She is very poor, she is waiting on a Social Security check that got lost in the mail two days prior, and not a single one – neither she nor the five children she is lovingly taking care of - have any food.

She finally scrapes together pennies (by the way this is not 1870 this is 2015) - she scrapes together some pennies and goes to the local Dollar General where she gets a carton of eggs, and when she gets to the counter, she realizes she's \$0.50 short of the \$1.25 necessary to buy the carton of eggs.

She takes the carton back (her children haven't eaten in two days) and she takes five eggs - not six - not one for herself, just five - for the children, puts them in her pocket and walks out.

Unfortunately, she's not a good thief, and the eggs break, and as she walks out the cashier sees it and calls the police.

Now let me ask you a question: what should we do about this woman? L

Let me ask you, “Are you OK to say there's no justice needed here?”

And if you're OK saying that she doesn't deserve justice, at what point does the person deserve justice? When do we decide, “OK well that doesn't require justice, maybe the next one doesn't either” - at what point does justice kick in?

The answer is, if she doesn't face justice, one day nobody will. So something has to be done about this.

PIC - So they call a police officer in, William Stacy, who comes up, and he sees the woman in the parking lot and he confronts her and she confesses, “I stole the eggs, I have five children at home we haven't eaten in two days,” and she starts to cry.

And Stacy goes in - now what's justice here? What's justice?

He goes in and he talks to the manager and says, “Can I pay for her crime, and can I buy her the eggs?”

And the manager says, “We will forgive her.”

PIC - Stacey buys the eggs, he brings the eggs back, he takes the woman home, he gives the eggs to the woman.

So let me ask you: “Has justice been served?” Yes, the eggs were paid for, a price was paid.

The manager got involved, the police officer got involved, justice was served.

But now – what about the poor woman whose circumstances led her to think, “I have no other choice?”

Well - justice was served, but so was grace.

In fact so much grace was given, that when he got back (and the rest of the police force found out about it - Stacey wasn't even promoting himself, he was doing what so many awesome men and women in our police force do every single day - he was just doing what was right),

someone posted the story online, and the president of the United States finds out about it within two weeks.

And two weeks later, two trucks (I mean 18 wheelers) pull up with food to give to this woman, and her house wouldn't even hold all the food.

So what has happened in our story?

Brothers and sisters what has happened?

Justice was served - but with more grace than anyone could ever have dreamed

And what's gonna happen with us who put our faith in Jesus Christ is that HE will pay our penalty, and we will receive truckloads of grace from a God whose primary orientation is not wrath – it is love.

That's the Gospel – and for that, can we give God praise?