

# ROMANS

GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS REVEALED

## A DIAGNOSIS OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

**Text:** Romans 3:9-20

**Main preaching point:** The human condition under sin is dire and in need of the power and righteousness of Christ.

### INTRODUCTION:

At the end of every courtroom trial, each lawyer has a chance to present what is called "closing arguments." Here, Paul gives his conclusion to his indictment as to why mankind is under the wrath of God, and why we so desperately need the grace and righteousness provided through faith in Jesus Christ. In this section, Paul introduces us to the doctrine that theologians call: *total depravity*.

The doctrine of total depravity is important for several reasons. J.C. Ryle put this doctrine in perspective when he said, "*Wrong views of the corruption of human nature will always carry with them wrong views of the grand antidote of that corruption.*"

In other words, if we have defective or light views about sin and its effects, then we are liable to have defective views about the means necessary to bring salvation from that sin. So, it is important for us to see *sin for what it is* and the human condition for what it is, and then we will understand the glory of what Christ accomplished on our behalf.

**Let's start with a definition. What does total depravity mean?** When we use this term, it sounds like we are saying *there is nothing of value left in the human race*. But this is not the teaching. Total depravity does not mean *utter depravity*. Utter depravity means that every human being is as wicked as possible, but we know by experience this is not true. Every sinner is not as wicked as he or she could be.

Total depravity means that *sin has affected every aspect of our nature*. Sin has touched every part of human existence—*our minds and thoughts, our emotions or affections, our will or drives, our personality, our memory, our conscience, and our bodies*. Everything single element of the human life—body, soul, and spirit—has been affected. There is no tiny island of goodness that lies within the human condition. J.I. Packer put it succinctly when he said this,

"On one hand, no one is as bad as he or she might be, while on the other hand, no action of ours is as good as it should be."

In these verses, the Holy Spirit, through the Apostle Paul, gives us *a diagnosis of the human condition*. He spells out our real condition, and in doing so, he places us in a position of having heard this devastating indictment, we might feel the weight of our guilt before God and flee to the only refugee there is, *the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*.

## EXPOSITION:

As we come to the text, we have an easy and straightforward division.

### A. THE QUESTION (v.9a)

<sup>9</sup>What then? Are we better than they?

First, we see a simple question in verse 9, "*What then? Are we better than they?*" It is actually two questions that are designed to conclude with a stinging indictment. The first question can be translated like this, "*What then follows...or what is the case?*" The second question can be translated, "*Are we (the Jews or the religious person) better off than the Gentiles (those without religion)?*" Is there anything we can put forward in our defense?

Paul is asking: does the Jew have an advantage over the Gentile? Does the religious person or the person in church have an advantage over the irreligious person? Can anything be put forward based on our privileges? And his answer is clear in the text, let's hear the text speak.

### B. THE ANSWER (v.9b)

Not at all;

In other words, *by no means. In no respect.* Being a Jew or a religious person or having Bible knowledge does not mean that we are better off than someone else. No one possesses any favoritism because of *spirituality, heredity, or religious privileges.* Now, Paul gets to the conclusion pretty quickly. What is this conclusion?

### C. THE CONCLUSION (v.9c)

for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;

The question is *clear*, and the answer is *emphatic*. The conclusion is striking—everyone is "*under sin.*" Paul's conclusion is that mankind suffers from the same problem. Please note that Paul didn't say, "Yes, it is true that we are all sinners." He says, "*both Jews and Greeks are all under sin.*"

What does it mean to be "**under sin**"? It means three things: to be under *the power of sin*, under *the weight of sin*, and under *the judgment of sin*. Everyone is under sin.

**Think about it this way:** When we get behind in our schoolwork, home duties, or responsibilities at work, we begin to feel like we are not on top of things. You begin to feel burdened, pressured, and weighed down by the situation. That's the idea. Paul personifies sin as a cruel tyrant who holds down the entire human race in prison under guilt and condemnation. So being "*under sin*" means being weighed down by a heavy burden that is just seeking to crush us—and we can't *get rid of it*, we can't *get around it*, and we can't *get out of it*. We are just weighed down by it. This is the burden on every man's shoulders.

You know it's true; and if we are honest with ourselves, *we are unable to escape the crushing power and dominion of sin.* There are things we ought not to do, and we end up doing them.

There are things we say, "I will never do that again," and we end up doing it again. We are regularly under this inevitable, unpreventable, crushing burden, weight, and guilt of sin—no matter what.

Some say, "I'll just go somewhere else and get rid of it." That's what the monks tried, and they discovered they couldn't get away from sin because the sin was right there in their hearts. This is true of all of us, is it not? Some run from marriage. Some run from environments. Some run from relationships. Others run to church, activities, hobbies, adventures, and even indulgences, but no matter what we do, *sin is still there hounding us* like a black dog. Pogo got it right when he said, "We have found the enemy and the enemy is us."

Paul, the apostle and advocate of the Gospel, lays the charge out in plain, straight language so that no one is confused: everyone is under sin. Now, there are many in the world who will deny this. Some will say, "Man is not under sin, he's on a journey. Man is evolving. Man is getting better. And if you give him enough time, enough technology, even opportunity, man will get better and change the world!" Do you believe that? Friend, all you have to do is look at human history and you will see the same cycle and the same course every single time—death, destruction, misery, and the cycle continues.

Others might disagree with Paul, and say, "Man is not under sin, he's simply in need of right leadership. We need the right leaders and then we will be led to a better place. If we just had the right official, the right representative, the right politician who is just like us and understands our needs, then the economic package can be constructed, we will have enough jobs and enough money, and then certainly everything will be alright." Well, have you forgotten the civilizations that have flourished economically have been the ones who have failed the quickest?

Still, another group says, "What man really needs is the right environment. He needs to be free from stress, free from worry, and free from care." Do you know of any place on earth like that? You say, "I'll go to the Virgin Islands, the Seychelles, or some remote country, lie on a beach somewhere, and I'll be fine. Everything will be just right." Dear friend, you'll discover on that beach, worries will still invade your heart, and sinful thoughts will intrude your mind. Paul is right—we are all under sin.

Now, I know there are some of you listening who would still try to argue the case. You might even be so bold as to question Paul's authority on the matter. Anyone can make a case and marshal strong opinions and convictions, but on what authority is Paul basing this conclusion?

We move now from the *question*, the *answer*, and the *conclusion*, to the *authority*.

#### **D. THE AUTHORITY (vv.10-18)**

In verse 10, Paul begins with his authority, and he says...

<sup>10</sup> as it is written,

New Testament scholars remind us that the favored method of the rabbis was to string along several passages like a string of pearls to support their argument.

Now remember, Paul is a former rabbi. He was a Pharisee, and he employs this rabbinical style of teaching. He selects 10 passages drawn from the Old Testament—and he quotes from Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Isaiah. His conclusion is based on the Old Testament. He is seeking to prove to us that his conclusion is not his own thinking. A good attorney does not just quote his authority; he gives you his proof. And Paul now lays out the proof of his indictment. He starts with the general characteristics, and then he gets to the specifics.

Paul begins in verse 10 by making a general statement that is called a universal negative. Let your eyes drop to verse 10.

"THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;

Paul is quoting Psalm 14:3. He quotes Psalm 14:3 again in verse 12. This is Paul's initial charge—his summary statement if you will. He charges us in verse 9, and now he's going to crystallize it and clarify it.

John Murray, the scholar-president of Westminster Seminary of years gone by, once said,

"Righteousness is the criterion by which sin is judged. It is the divine standard, the divine ruler, and none of us measures up to it. Everyone falls short. Righteousness is the gold standard, and righteousness can be interpreted in this way: perfection in God's eyes."

Now we can all affirm what King Solomon wrote in **Ecclesiastes 7:20**—Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who *continually* does good and who never sins.

What Paul tells us in essence is this: no human being who has ever lived, except Jesus Christ, when judged by the standards of God's law, can be called righteous. Paul grabs another pearl in his string of Gospel arguments in verse 11.

<sup>11</sup> THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS,  
THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;

Paul quotes again from the Psalms, but this time he quotes Psalm 14:2 and Psalm 53:2. Now Paul moves from the general characteristics to how sin has affected us specifically. **He starts with the mind**—"THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS." When the Bible says there is none who understands, it means in the realm of our comprehension, sin has made us blind and ignorant.

What this means is that we take what is clear in creation and we misread it. We misunderstand it. I heard a false teacher say, "If you really want to know who God is, just go and ask a little baby and the baby can tell you who God is." I thought, "Oh, I wish I could talk to that fella." It's kind of like saying to a fish, "Where's Interstate 10?" He's never been there—he can't tell you. A baby can't tell you who God is. Why? Because all of us have been affected by sin and we don't understand naturally. This is why we must teach the Word of God and open the Scriptures. This is why we must be taught by God—because we don't understand naturally.

May I labor to be clear? The Bible does not speak of having an absence of knowledge about God, it just tells us that we misread that knowledge available to us in general revelation. Paul starts with the mind and tells us that sin has affected our thinking. We not only lack an apprehension of divine truth, but Martyn Lloyd Jones said, "We don't understand ourselves.

We have an ignorance about who we really are. We don't understand how bad sin is and its devastating effects. We don't understand eternity, life, death, and purpose." **Sin has affected our understanding.**

**Sin has also affected our will.** We see that in verse 11. Notice, "*THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS*"—that's the mind. But in the second line, Paul declares, "*THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD*"—that speaks of our will. What Paul means is that there is none of us who possesses a desire to be God. No man naturally wants to search for God. No one.

I hear something thinking, "But Pastor, that doesn't line up with what I've seen. I know people who are searching for God, and they just haven't found Him yet."

The Catholic Theologian, Thomas Aquinas, wrestled with this question, and he gave us this insight. I think it is very helpful.

"When we see people searching for such things as truth, and peace of mind, or eternal life, or happiness, they are searching for relief from their guilt. These are things that Christians know only God can give them, so we leap to the conclusion that since they are searching for those things, that only God can give them, they must be searching for God." Then he goes on to say...

"...but man's sinfulness is seen precisely in this, that he seeks for benefits from God while fleeing the person of God. And God's complaint is that we really don't seek Him. We seek stuff from Him, but we really don't seek *Him*. We don't make His glory our supreme concern. We don't set Him before us or have room for Him in our thoughts naturally. We do not love Him with all our powers by nature. This is our condition."

Dear church, this is the Word of God being placed before our faces like a mirror, and some don't want to look in this mirror, but if you will ever know the saving grace of God, you must look in this mirror.

Do you see yourself for who you are? Do you want a new heart and a new start? Then come up close and look carefully!

What is the result of this lack of seeking God? Paul tells us in verse 12,

<sup>12</sup> ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS;  
THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD,  
THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE."

There are consequences of not understanding who God is, not following after God, and not seeking God. The consequences are this: going our own way—spiritual declension. We turn aside. We deviate. We go in a bad way because we have voluntarily fled from the good way. And the devastating result is, "*TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS.*"

In the Hebrew language, the word for "*useless*" is picturesque. It carries the idea of corruption. Like milk that has spoiled or a piece of fruit that has rotten, it is no longer fit for use. It has lost its purpose. Once milk has gone bad, can there be anything done to redeem it? Can you just warm it up and make it fresh again? Can you freeze it and then thaw it and rejuvenate its usefulness? No. When milk goes bad, you've got to pour it down the drain. This is the picture the Hebrew is painting for us. The word "*together*" expresses there are no exceptions—"TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS."

Just as fruit has a purpose, man has a purpose in God's design. Our purpose is to know God, reflect God, love God, and live in obedience to God. But when sin entered the world through our first parents, it ruined the entire human race. And now, together, we resemble a caravan that has strayed off course. In our common misery, we face inevitable doom, unless God intervenes by His power and grace in Jesus Christ.

Let me remind you of the general characteristics Paul has set before us.

Sin has affected our minds, our wills, and our motives. We are contaminated by sin through and through. Now the Apostle moves to the visible, specific manifestations of it. And in verses 13-18, Paul gives very concrete examples. He stands on the authority of Scripture. He quotes Psalms 5, 139, 140, and Isaiah 59. And again, he strings all these passages together to prove the point that sin has penetrated our entire anatomy. He wants to teach us that God created these instruments to glorify Him, but now sin has ruined those instruments, and we now use them to harm people and rebel against God.

Take a quick glance at verses 13-18 and see if you can identify each body part.

- <sup>13</sup> "THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE,  
WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING,"  
"THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS";  
<sup>14</sup> "WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS";  
<sup>15</sup> "THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD,  
<sup>16</sup> DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS,  
<sup>17</sup> AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN."  
<sup>18</sup> "THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES."

He begins with the throat in verse 13, then he moves to the tongue, then the lips. In verse 14, the mouth. In verse 15, the feet. In verse 18, the eyes.

Let's look at each of these manifestations in our lives and our culture.

**First, in verse 13, the throat** is compared to "AN OPEN GRAVE." What does that mean? It is like a tunnel, as it were, that leads right to the heart. It is compared to an open grave—a place of corruption and infection. Imagine a grave that has a body in it, and there it lies decomposing. Putrefaction is happening in that grave and the stench that comes out assaults the nostrils of people for a mile. The throat of men is like an open grave—unsealed, uncovered, ready to defile, ready to contaminate—and Paul is telling us that man's condition is not on the surface, but it is deep-seated.

**Second, in verse 13, Paul moves to speak about the tongue**—"WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING." What does this mean? In the Bible, the tongue is seen as a member that has the power to direct big things and destroy many things. The writer of Proverbs said, "Death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Prov.18:21). Here, Paul points to the fact that the tongue is sugared. It's like an Egyptian Cobra—it has the power to charm, yet in the end, it deceives. It fractures the truth of God. This is how we are by nature. Oh, how we deceive with our tongues, and not just once, but we "keep on deceiving." You don't have to teach a young child to lie, and once we tell them to stop lying, they keep finding ways to lie. We are all the same by nature. This is the human condition. The throat is an open grave—contaminating. The tongue is sugared and deceiving.

**Third, in verse 13, the lip**—“*THE POISON OF ASP IS UNDER THEIR LIPS.*” The lips are pictured like a viper hiding bags of poison. Paul is actually being true to the very nature of things. And when the viper opens its mouth and punctures its victim with its fangs, it squeezes its jaws, and that bag of poison releases its venom into the wound. That’s the idea. Paul is saying our lips are like bags of deadly toxins that inflict pain upon people and even death. This reveals that our fallenness is manifested in the very poisonous things we say. You can see it in how people can criticize you or lie about you and inject a little poison to ruin your reputation and character. We see it in our entertainment, social media, sports, and society all around us.

First, *the throat*, second *the tongue*, third *the lips*, and now...

**Fourth, in verse 14, the mouth**—“*WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS.*” A person who curses and speaks with bitterness is often taken by those in our culture as someone strong and tough—someone to be feared and perhaps in some circles, respected. But biblically speaking, a cursing, bitter mouth is a sign of fallenness and corruption that has reached its peak in open hostility. But you say, “Pastor, I don’t cuss.” Well, that doesn’t mean those seeds of thought are not deep in your heart and mind. In fact, Titus says that before we were saved, we were “*hateful and hating one another*” (*Tit.3:3*). The fact that the mouth is “*FULL OF CURSING*” speaks of the ingrained habit it has become—woven into the very fibers of the individual’s character.

**Fifth, in verse 15, the feet**—“*THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD.*” This means that as sinners, we are quick to get what we want selfishly—even if it means running over and hurting others. Every human being contains within him this eager form of wrongdoing. And as a result,

**Sixth, in verse 16, their paths**—“*DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS.*” In other words, mankind has chosen the wrong path, and therefore life is filled with misery and destruction. Sin always destroys. It always corrupts. It always breaks and spoils. It destroys our character. It destroys our family. It destroys our society. It always breaks things down and divides. Satan would have us believe sin is pleasant and nice and it will benefit us by doing it. And to be sure, sin appeals to something in all our unredeemed nature. But God’s Word declares its wages is death (*Rom.6:23*). That’s all it pays. It brings nothing but destruction and misery.

Someone may ask, “Does sin result in destruction and misery?” And the answer is right in verse 17, “*THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN.*” That is to say, man by nature does not know the way of peace with God and peace with others. It is foreign to him. He doesn’t understand it. He is really not interested in it. And that’s part of his problem. We, by nature, are not interested in what separates us from God and each other. And here is the bottom line—verse 18, “*THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES.*”

**The last organ mentioned is the eyes in verse 18.** The eyes are the window to the soul. To say that there is no fear before man’s eyes means there is no fear in our thinking or perspective. Figuratively and literally, Paul is telling us that God is not the center of our thoughts. He is not the center of our calculations. This is what sin has done to us. There is no respect, no reverence, no awe, no love, no obedience. Paul is saying to us that the human race is an irreverent race with no profound respect for God. We see it all the time. You see it in the way we talk and use God’s name in vain. You see it on the Lord’s Day—men and women, boys and girls cutting yards, playing sports, running, and working rather than attending the Lord’s house on the Lord’s Day to worship God. You see this lack of respect for God all around.

Here is the indictment. Sin is universal. Sin is pervasive. Everyone is infected by it. It leads to revolt against God. We would dethrone God if we could.

Friends, is this what you believe about your human condition? I would suggest to you that if you do not see yourself in this contaminated condition, you have never come to experience the convicting and convincing work of the Holy Spirit and you have never come to know the saving grace of God.

## **E. THE SUMMATION (vv.19-20)**

Let's flip the script for a moment and ask the Apostle, why are you teaching these things? Why do we need to know these things? And Paul answers...

<sup>19</sup> Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God;

The reason we need to know these things is to shut our mouths, silence our excuses, and help us understand that we will all be accountable to God.

I hear someone crying out from their hearts, "So what shall we do?" Paul gives us two things in conclusion.

**First, according to verse 20, we should reject any attempt at self-salvation**—"because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight." Stop trying to save yourself by keeping the Law. You cannot do it. It will not bring salvation. If we could save ourselves by law-keeping, there would be no need for Jesus Christ.

**Second, know that the Law brings about the knowledge of sin**—"for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin." The Law is good. The Law is holy. The Law is spiritual. It shows us where we go around in our actions and our attitudes. In discovering what it says, we come to see that we fall short of it. But I love what Paul tells us later in Romans 10. He tells us that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom.10:4). The law operates like a tutor to bring us to Christ. It takes us to school, walks us to the door, and then points to Christ and says, "He is the Law-keeper and the Justifier. Go to Him! Go to Him in faith! He is the One who saves." But you must enter the door and trust Christ to save you.

Dear friends, face the facts. You are not a helpless victim. You are a responsible human being. Accept God's diagnosis of your condition. Self-esteem classes won't change you. Education won't save you. Blaming your condition on your family won't change it. You cannot blame your condition on others. There is only one thing left to do: arise and go to Jesus. A just judgment on our sin will happen, but Jesus has paid the price in full.

## **CONCLUSION:**

There is a hymn that I love to sing in church. The first time I heard it, I thought it was written just for me. Then I came to understand that hymns are full of theology, and they are written for all the people of God.

Listen to the lyrics and see if you can hear the message.



*Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,  
Weak and wounded, sick and sore.  
Jesus ready stands to save you,  
Full of pity, love, and power.*

*Come ye weary, heavy laden,  
Lost and ruined by the fall,  
If you tarry till you're better,  
You will never come at all.*

*Let not conscience make you linger,  
Nor of fitness fondly dream.  
All the fitness He requires  
Is to feel your need of Him.*

*I will arise and go to Jesus,  
He will embrace me in His arms.  
In the arms of my dear Savior,  
O, there are ten thousand charms.<sup>1</sup>*

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Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New American Standard Bible: 1960, 1962, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1975, 1977, 1995 by the Lockman Foundation.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Hart, *Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy*, 1759.