

But now...

Romans 3:9-22

INTRODUCTION: Several years ago, the Deacons of this church suggested that, as fast as our church was growing, it might be a good idea for me, as the Senior Pastor, to complete an Executive Physical, in spite of my obvious physical prowess. I was able to do so in a world-class program at the Cleveland Clinic in Miami. They tested everything they could possibly test.

Now, I'm one of those guys who is a bit of a *hypochondriac*. If a commercial for a medication comes on, I have to turn the channel, or I will convince myself that I am dying of that particular ailment. So I was not looking forward to a thorough physical.

In this particular program, as soon as they got the results, it would show up on an app they provided. So all throughout the day, I was getting notifications - blood work - all clear, heart and lung capacity - near perfect, even my hearing was phenomenal. I couldn't believe it. The last test of the day was with the Psychologist - this is the one that worried my wife the most.

I sat down in the good doctor's office, and she said, "Well, Mr. Terry, how is your outlook on life?" I said, well, before today, I was absolutely certain I was dying, but now you tell me I'm going to live, it's pretty decent.

The diagnosis delivered at the end of the day said, considering my age, occupation, and life experience, things were in pretty good shape.

CONTEXT: In the first two chapters of Romans, Paul was playing the part of a **Prosecuting Attorney** indicting the entire world, both Jew and Gentile, as sinners before a Holy God. In chapter 3, he is playing the role of a **Spiritual Physician** examining the soul of humanity and delivering a grim diagnosis: sin has infected us completely, our condition is critical, and left untreated, the prognosis is absolutely terminal, without some sort of Divine Intervention.

Remember that the church in Rome was a mixed congregation — believing Jews and believing Gentiles sitting side by side, each with their own assumptions and prejudices. The Gentile believers, fresh from paganism, were tempted to look down on the Jewish believers as still tangled in their old ways. The Jewish believers, with thousands of years of covenant heritage behind them, were tempted to look down on the Gentile believers as latecomers.

Paul has just demolished the Jewish complacency in chapter 2. He has just told the Jew that physical circumcision does not save him — "a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter" (Romans 2:29 ESV). And anticipating the pushback, Paul has acknowledged in 3:1–2 that there is an

advantage to being a Jew — “to begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.”

But now, having granted the advantage, Paul will not let it become a refuge from judgment. The Jew is a sinner just like the Gentile. Worse, in fact, because he has had more light. So Paul tightens the noose.

1. The Diagnosis Delivered

TEXT: Romans 3:9–20 (ESV)

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,

The “all” is, of course, **emphatic**. So, Paul isn’t just referring to large swaths of people, but to each individual person. There are absolutely no exceptions.

- Regardless of the family into which you were born.
- Regardless of your intellectual or moral accomplishments.
- Regardless of the nice things others may say about you.

ALL - both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.

The Greek phrase Paul uses for “under sin” is ***hupo ha-mar-tian***.

The word ***hupo*** paints the picture of a tyrant — a powerful king or warden who has subjugated an entire population.

That’s the picture Paul gives, it’s not simply that we mess up occasionally. It’s not that we have good days and bad days. The image is that we are in complete **BONDAGE** to the cruel taskmaster of sin.

Charles Wesley captured the idea well with the lines - *Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night.*

ILLUSTRATION: In Greek mythology, there was a king of the Etruscans by the name of Mezentius. He was known by his contemporaries as a detestable, cruel, fearful man. It is said by the ancients that no torture which entered into his cruel mind was too horrible to gratify his vengeance. He would do anything.

One of his preferred methods of punishment was hard to imagine. He would tie a living person to a dead person, hand to hand, face to face, lip to lip, and leave the living person in that wretched condition until finally they died in that terrible embrace. Virgil gives us an account of this very practice in the Aeneid.

Some commentators believe that it is this very practice to which the apostle Paul refers in **Romans 7** when he cries out, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from

this body of death?”

That is the prayer Paul needs his readers to pray - before we can become candidates for God’s grace, we must recognize that we are absolutely, thoroughly, and completely destitute in and of ourselves.

Now, to prove the point, Paul does something brilliant. Remember, he was trained as a rabbi at the feet of Gamaliel. And one of the rabbinical teaching methods was something the rabbis called a “**string of pearls**” — you take a verse from here, a verse from there, a verse from yet another place, and you string them together to make a single, devastating point.

He reaches into the **Psalms**, into **Ecclesiastes**, into **Isaiah**, and he comes up with one phrase after another, each one a pearl, each one piercing.

¹⁰ as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

Eight times in three verses Paul drives the point home. Sin is universal. There are no exceptions. There is no one — not a single human being from Adam to the end of time — who falls outside this indictment.

ILLUSTRATION: **Loraine Boettner** wrote: “*This doctrine of total inability, which declares that men are dead in sin, does not mean that all men are equally bad, nor that any man is as bad as he could be, nor that any one is entirely destitute of virtue... What it does mean is that since the fall, man rests under the curse of sin, that he is actuated by wrong principles, and that he is wholly unable to love God or to do anything meriting salvation... He is an alien by birth, and a sinner by choice.*”

Notice what Paul says about us:

- **We are not righteous** — we lack the original righteousness in which God made man.
- **We do not understand** — we lack spiritual wisdom; the natural mind cannot grasp the things of God.
- **We do not seek God** — in fact we run from Him. The natural man is a God-avoider, not a God-seeker.
- **We have all turned aside** — we are like sheep, everyone going his own way (Isaiah 53:6 ESV).
- **We have become worthless**

That word “**worthless**” in verse 12 is a striking Greek word — *ach-re-ioō*. It was the word the Greeks used for milk that had **gone sour**.

ILLUSTRATION: Nothing is more distasteful than picking up a cold glass of milk, anticipating the satisfaction and refreshment it will bring, only to determine that it has

turned sour.

Not only the Diagnosis Delivered.... Notice secondly...

2. The Depravity Displayed

In verses 10-18, Paul takes that diagnosis and shows us where it manifests itself. He moves from the inner state to the outward expression.

And what is striking is how he organizes it — he gives us a head-to-toe anatomy of sin. He starts at the throat, moves down to the feet, and then climbs back up to the eyes.

It is as if Paul is saying, “You want to know what ‘under sin’ looks like? Let me paint you a picture. From head to toe, you are riddled with sin.”

¹³ “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.”

Notice the four organs of speech Paul names in just two verses: throat, tongue, lips, mouth. Why does Paul list every one? Because he wants us to see that every aspect of human communication is corrupted.

- ¹³ “Their throat is an open grave; have you ever smelled rotting, decaying flesh? I am told that the scent of a decaying human body is something a man never forgets. Yet that is the pronouncement - their throat is an open grave.
- “The venom of asps is under their lips.” This is one of the most precise zoological observations in all the Bible. The Old Testament writers knew exactly how a viper kills. Underneath the upper jaw of a poisonous snake, there is a small sac filled with poison. When the snake strikes its victim, it throws back its head, the fangs drop down vertically, and as the fangs sink into the flesh, they press the poison sac, and the venom is injected directly into the wound.

ILLUSTRATION: One of our members tells us that the young rattlesnakes found around this island are extremely dangerous, because the diamondbacks are known to release only some of the venom, but these young snakes keep injecting. Oh, what a picture! “The venom of asps is under their lips.”

- ¹⁴ “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” I knew a man once who worked in profanity as an artist works in acrylics - he could weave cursing into every sentence.

Oh, there are some who wouldn't dare utter a four-letter word, but the bitterness! The griping and complaining, the mocking and the jeering, gossip and talebearing. Don't you see, they come from the same depraved heart!

- ¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ in their paths are ruin and misery, ¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known.”

Now the Physician moves from the head to the toe - they aren't running from trouble, they run to it! Every President declares - no more war! We are done fighting here, we are done fighting there - but has there ever been one to avoid it? No, since Cain and Abel, we run to violence like a moth to a flame.

Now Paul turns his gaze upward yet again...

- ¹⁸ “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

This is the ultimate explanation of everything Paul has just described. Why is there a God-avoiding heart? No fear of God. Why is there a corrupted tongue? No fear of God. Why are there crimson feet? No fear of God. Why are there ruin and misery in our paths? No fear of God.

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Proverbs 9:10 ESV).

- Where there is no fear of the Lord, there is no wisdom.
- Where there is no fear of the Lord, there is no understanding.
- Where there is no fear of the Lord, there is no restraint.
- Where there is no fear of the Lord, there is no peace.

And the world we live in is exactly what the Bible says it would be — a world without the fear of God.

Not only the Diagnosis Delivered....The Depravity Displayed...

3. The Defense Dismissed

¹⁹ Now we know that 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. ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

“So that every mouth may be stopped.” There it is. That is the purpose of the law. Every mouth stopped. Every excuse silenced. Every objection dismissed. The Greek verb here is *phrassō* — it means to muzzle, to gag, to put a hand over the mouth.

ILLUSTRATION: Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the great British preacher of the twentieth century, used to put it this way: “*You are not a Christian until you have been made speechless.*” Until the law of God has come with such convicting force that every argument is silenced, every excuse evaporated, every justification dismissed — until you have nothing left to say to God except “Guilty” — you are not yet a Christian.

Have you ever been made speechless before God? Have you ever been silenced by the law of God? Have you been shown your sin so clearly, so personally, so devastatingly, that you had no words left to defend yourself? That is what the law is

designed to do. And until it has done that work in you, you have not yet seen your need for Christ.

ILLUSTRATION: D. L. Moody, the great evangelist, told this story:

“While I was occupying the Fulton Street pulpit in New York, the warden of the city prison asked me to come and preach to the prisoners. After I had preached, I went down to the cells to see how the men had received the gospel.

“At the first cell, the men were playing cards. I said, ‘My friends, what is your trouble?’ They said, ‘Stranger, false witnesses appeared against us. We are innocent.’

I thought, ‘Christ cannot save anybody here — there’s nobody guilty.’

“At the next cell they said, ‘We got in with bad company. The one who did the deed got off, and we got caught.’ ‘Christ cannot save anybody here either.’

“At the next cell, false witnesses had supposedly lied. At the next, mistaken identity.

I had never met so many innocent men in one prison in my life. It seemed the magistrates who sent them there were the only guilty ones.

“I began to get discouraged. But almost at the end, I found one man with his elbows on his knees and two streams of tears running down his cheeks. I said, ‘My friend, what is your trouble?’ He looked up with despair and remorse on his face and said, **‘My sins are more than I can bear.’**

“I said, ‘Thank God for that!’

“He said, ‘Aren’t you the man who’s been talking to us? You said you were our friend, and you’re glad my sins are more than I can bear?’ “‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Because if your sins are more than you can bear, then you will cast them upon the One who will bear them for you.’ “‘Who is that?’ “‘The Lord Jesus Christ.’”

And right there at the prison door, Moody preached Christ. And the man, like the publican in Luke 18, put his head on the pavement and cried, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

The law is not your defense attorney; the law is your prosecutor.

Reading the Bible cannot make you righteous, because the Bible tells you that you are not righteous. The Scripture is a mirror, not a magic potion. It shows you your face — it does not change your face.

ILLUSTRATION: Suppose a man looked into a mirror and noticed his face was covered with dirt and mud. Then suppose he sought to cleanse his face by rubbing the

mirror against his skin? It would not help his face, and it would simply dirty the mirror. That's not the purpose of the mirror - the mirror shows you the problem! But there is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins - sinners plunged beneath that flood, lose all their guilty stains.

CONCLUSION/INVITATION: Oh, young people especially, as you draw near to graduation, hear me - in the days ahead, you will hear dozens of people saying nice things about you. They will tell you how gifted and wonderful you are. And know this - relatively, that is true, there are many who do well, but some of you exceed them all.

But you must hear this truth as well.

Your heart is deceitfully wicked, who can know it!
 You are in bondage to a cruel task master.
 The body of death has been chained to you, and its rot is overtaking you.
 The curse of sin has touched your throat, your tongue, your feet, your mind, your heart.

ILLUSTRATION: Imagine that growing inside of you, at this very moment, is a tumor. It is a cancerous tumor — but it is treatable, if it is caught in time. So you go in for your annual physical. The doctor runs some tests you thought were both expensive and useless. A few days later he calls and asks you to come back in.

You sit down in his office. His face is grave. “I have to tell you something,” he says. “We found something. We sent the biopsy to the lab, and it came back. You have cancer.”

But before your heart can sink, he keeps talking. “I also want you to know this — we caught it early. It is treatable. We are going to go in and take it out, and you should make a full recovery. If we had not caught it for another year, it would have been too late. But we caught it. ***Now — is that good news or bad news?***”

It is good news. It is great news. To know your diagnosis while there is still time — that is grace.

The law is a theological MRI. It shows you the malignancy growing in your soul. It says, “There it is. That's the tumor. That is killing you. Without surgery, you will die.”

And then the Gospel comes and says, “But there is a Surgeon. There is a Great Physician. There is One who has come to do for you what you cannot do for yourself.”

Listen carefully to the very next words after our text.

Romans 3:21–22 (ESV) ²¹ ***But now*** the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: