

No One is Righteous

Week 1 of Series Romans 3-8

Romans 3:1-20

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I. Introduction

[Greeting]

Intro the Series

I'm excited to step back into the book of Romans with you today! Back in the fall we began a slow walk through the book of Romans. We started in the beginning of October and by the time we got through the month of November, we'd made it through the end of chapter two. So now this spring we're back in Romans and we think we'll make it to Romans 8 by summertime. And if you think that's a little slow or monotonous, let me say two things. First, there's one well-known pastor who famously took twelve years and 366 sermons to get through the book of Romans. So if a couple months in the same book sounds a bit dreary, I guess just be grateful because it could be worse! But second, and more seriously, when we embark (or re-embark) on a journey through a book of the bible together it's always a good time to remind ourselves that this is what we're about as a church. At the core of who we are, followers of Jesus are a people of The Book because it is here, in the pages of scripture that God has made himself most clearly known. So if we want to be people who love God, if we want to be a people characterized by the culture of God's kingdom, then we will marinate ourselves in His Word. Which means we don't get together each week to hear a Ted Talk with some Bible verses sprinkled in. Our aim is to look at The Book and let the Word shape us, which is why our main diet as a church will always be working through portions of scripture and digesting whole books of the Bible over time.

One of the benefits to teaching through books of the Bible is that it doesn't allow us to skim over parts of scripture that are inconvenient, or offensive, or boring, or hard to understand. Instead it forces us to grapple with the Word of God in order to conform our hearts to God's truth and train our hearts to love it!

Where Are We Going?

Incidentally as we get back into Romans, here at the beginning of chapter three, we're getting a chance to press into a text that is just straight up hard to understand. In my preparation this week, I ran across two pastor-theologians who are kind of giants in my world - John Piper and Martyn Lloyd-Jones - who called the beginning of Romans 3 one of the most difficult-to-follow passages in the whole Bible. So if you felt your brain fuzzing a little bit as we were reading the text, don't worry! You're not alone! But it's ok, we're gonna work through it together.

So with that in mind, here's where I want us to go as we look at these twenty verses in Romans 3 today. Four movements to the message that will take us through these twenty verses:

1. First, I want to look at Paul's argument in verse 1-8 to try and clear some of the brush and grab hold of Paul's train of thought.
2. Second, I want to go beyond just cognitively following Paul's argument and take us to what I see as the heart of the passage in verse 9.
3. Then, third, we'll get into verses 10 - 18 in order to make that core truth from verse 9 more vivid and serious and meaningful for us.
4. And finally, as we come to the end of our portion of scripture for today, I want to shine a light on our utter dependence on God. And I'm praying that God's word through God's Spirit will cut us to the heart.

Now with that direction in mind I want to get into the text, but before we do, let's ask for the Lord's help.

Father, today your word is difficult. It is both difficult to understand and difficult to hear because the truth we find here is serious and sobering. Holy Spirit, we need your help to see and understand. Lord, the psalmist says the Law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. Today as we press into your perfect Word, would you please do the reviving work? Revive us so that we might see the beauty of your righteousness. Revive us so that we might see ourselves and be humbled before you. Revive us so that your name might be worshiped and glorified here and to the ends of the earth. Amen.

II. Grasping Paul's Argument (3:1-8)

So first let's spend some time getting our heads around what Paul is saying here in the beginning of chapter 3. And I really want to encourage you to be looking at your bibles while we try and clear the brush away and get a grasp on Paul's train of thought.

A Conversation in Full Swing:

Verse one begins with, "1 Then what advantage has the Jew?..." And if it feels to you like we've just stepped into the middle of a conversation that's already in full swing, then you have good instincts because that's exactly what's going on! The thesis that Paul has been preaching to his readers since Romans 1:16 is that the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, for Jews and for the Gentiles. And with that as his foundation, he gets to work making the case for *why* we all need salvation.

So Paul makes the case in the back half of Romans 1 that the irreligious gentiles who are far from the things of God justly deserve God's wrath for their sin and need the gospel. And then he turns around in chapter 2 and is quick to make clear that the Jews - the religious people who live in close proximity to the promises of God - are also under God's judgment and need the gospel. No matter who you are, Jew or Gentile, you have no grounds for being right in God's sight. Now if you're a Jew Paul is turning your worldview upside down because the Jews pointed to their status as a member of God's chosen people, their keeping of the OT Law, their circumcision and they leaned on these things as indicators of their right standing before God. But by the end of chapter 2, Paul is arguing that those who rely on their being Jewish are no different from gentiles, and that uncircumcised gentiles who understand the

Law at a heart level are more Jewish than Jews who do not inwardly grasp the gospel. So, Paul's point so far has been, Jews and Gentiles alike need the gospel.

Paul Has Debated This Before

And here in the beginning of chapter 3 Paul shows us that he's debated about these teachings before, because he pauses his teaching to anticipate some objections that his hearers might be thinking. And to do that he creates a sort of Q&A session where he himself asks questions that objectors listening to him might have and then he himself answers the questions he asks. And this pretend back and forth is part of what makes this section of scripture difficult to follow.

The Q&A Session

So verse one is the **first question** from Paul's pretend objectors: ¹ "Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?" In other words Paul, are you saying Jewish people aren't God's special, chosen people? Doesn't the whole OT tell us that the Jews have a special proximity to the promises of God? Are you saying there is no value in practicing biblical religion? And then verse 2 is Paul's answer: ² "Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God." In other words, no I'm not saying there isn't any value in being Jewish. There is great value in being Jewish because the Jews have been given the gift of God's word and knowing his promises.

In verse 3 Paul sets up the next (2) objection: ³ "What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?" So here Paul's imaginary conversation partner is making the same argument that many people today are making: since religious people have shown themselves to be unfaithful and false, doesn't that show that God and his promises aren't trustworthy either? This is a common refrain from those who have deconstructed and left the church, right? The church hurt me, so how can God be worth following? Maybe some of us have wrestled with that reality... But Paul comes back strong: ⁴ "By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar!" You see, to Paul the idea of God being unfaithful is unthinkable! God is so supremely righteous that even if all people fall away, even if every person is unfaithful to God, even if every man proves false, God must be true. In fact, Paul says that all that the unfaithfulness of human beings does is reveal how unwavering and steadfast and good and true God is in his promises. God is revealing his faithfulness when he judges Jews who have been unfaithful.

He makes this point when he pulls a quote from Psalm 51:4, where David is writing a confession of sin to God after his adultery with Bathsheba. Paul quotes part of the psalm in Romans 3:4, but let me read you the whole verse from psalm 51:

Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment

So David is saying God is right and just and blameless when he judges him because he has sinned against God. Paul's point is that David - the Jew of all Jews - sinned, but his sin doesn't nullify the goodness of God. Instead David's sin makes God's judgment justified and righteous.

Paul's imaginary detractors **speak up again (3) in verse five.** ⁵ "But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? In

other words, if our sin makes God's judgment righteous, then does God need our sin to show off his righteousness? And if he does need our sin to show off his righteousness, where does he get off casting judgment on us if he's *using* us? And again, Paul comes back strong in verse six, "By no means! For then how could God judge the world?" So here Paul is assuming a common conviction that he has with his Jewish detractors: we both agree God should judge sin and on the basis of your argument, God wouldn't judge anyone.

And finally, in verse 7 and 8 we come to **the most audacious objection yet (4):** "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?" In other words, am I doing God a favor by making him look good when he judges my sin? How can God judge me then? Can't I just sin all the more so that God can keep looking good? And Paul's answer in verse 8 is basically, "This is what people accuse me of teaching, but it's not what I teach! And asserting that your sin is permissible because it will bring about good is an attitude that is worthy of judgment from God. That's why he says, "Their condemnation is just."

The Point of These Verses

Now I wouldn't be surprised if this first part of Romans 3 has felt foreign to our sensibilities. Paul is arguing with objections that rise up out of a different culture and a different context... People asking different questions than we might naturally ask. But the point of these first eight verses is for Paul to underline to his hearers that God's judgment of both Jews and gentiles does not contradict his faithfulness. There is wrath and condemnation and there is justice and righteousness. They work in concert.

Now if you're still feeling a little foggy as you look back over the verses we've just covered, that's ok! Remember, biblical scholars have said it's difficult to follow Paul's train of thought in these first eight verses. We've just worked through them because I want to encourage you not to skim over parts of scripture that require wrestling and prayer, and hard thinking, and dependence on God to understand. Those passages and those wrestlings *also* form us as followers of Jesus into the image of Christ!

But if you're feeling foggy at this moment the good news is that Paul is about to get crystal clear in what he wants you to understand.

III. The Heart of the Passage: All Are Under Sin (3:9)

When we get to verse nine, Paul stops arguing with his detractors and steps back into his flow of thought. He takes us to the conclusion that he's been trying to hammer home since he began talking about our sin and God's wrath in chapter 1. Look down at verse nine. This is the heart of the matter: "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..** Everyone. Jew and gentile. Religious and irreligious. All people, everywhere are under sin, which means that we are all deserving of God's wrath for sin.

This is the hinge point of the passage today. Paul is going to spend the rest of our passage arguing that no one is righteous. Not one. **And every human effort toward a righteousness that would make us right with God only leads to deserved condemnation.**

All are under sin. All need saving.

A Fundamental Truth

This is one of the most fundamental, load-bearing truths for how followers of Jesus see the world; and it is contrary to so much of what is fed to us today. Everybody can agree something is wrong, something is broken, there are problems in the world. But the unbelieving world is latched onto the idea that the problem is “out there.” This is why we have a culture obsessed with technique, ideology, and strategy that says if you would just change the way you are being taught, or the way you eat, or the way you approach your problems... If you could just process your trauma, what’s been done to you... If the other people who are making problems in the world because of what they believe, or how they behave, or who they support would just stop... you and I would be on our way to rightness in the world.

But God says, at the root of it all, the problem is not out there, it's in here. The problem is me. And the problem is you. We are not naturally good. We are naturally bent toward evil. Christianity says that if every external component of reality were transformed into some sort of ideal utopia, but human beings were in it, it would be corrupt and broken and wicked. Because all are under sin. All need saving.

Every Person Has the Same Standing Before God

And in saying that, Paul is not just confronting those who live immoral, irreligious lives full of debauchery that don't acknowledge God. He's saying that Gentiles *AND* Jews are under sin. So the person who works hard to live morally upright, who roots their identity in their religious practice... they are also under sin, not in right standing with God.

Now Paul isn't saying that everyone sins in the same way, or sins to the same degree. Every person isn't as sinful as every other person, but every person has the same standing before God.

One analogy I read might be helpful here: it's like if three people set out to swim from Hawaii to Japan. One doesn't know how to swim and drowns immediately. Another isn't a strong swimmer, so they struggle for a mile or so, but eventually drown. The third person is an olympic swimmer. They make it 30 or 40 miles. But eventually they too drown. And no matter how far they got in their own strength, none of them came even close to Japan. None of those swimmers is more drowned than the others. And in the same way, one person might trust in their morality and another person might indulge in every wicked desire, but in the end they are equally lost, equally condemned, equally under sin.¹

A Kind Diagnosis

Now, hearing that truth doesn't feel good. In the same way, hearing “your tumor is cancerous” doesn't feel good. But while a doctor may or may not have a cure for your disease, when the Bible says, “you are under sin, deserving wrath” it is always offering a cure. So in the following verses, as Paul

¹ Keller, “Romans for You”

supports his claim and gives color and detail to our unrighteousness, you have to hear him as if he is a careful and kind physician making sure you know the extent of your diagnosis before he tells you the cure for your illness.

IV. The Nature of Our Unrighteousness (3:10-18)

So in verse 10-18, Paul is supporting his claim with scripture. By my count, he strings together eight quotes from the Psalms and the prophets to paint a picture of how sin affects sinners. Let's work through these verses:

"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."

Ruined Relationship with God

This is the great tragedy of sin: at its core sin ruins our relationship with God and from that core, it spreads to ruin everything else.

This is why it misses the mark so badly when people try to say something like, "I'm not perfect, but I try to be a good person." They mean they don't steal or kill or commit adultery, or lie too much, but the question underneath it all is, do you love God? Do you seek after God? Have you come to God through Jesus Christ and submitted yourself to him or have you turned aside to your own way? The whole universe was made and is held together by God, there is no other being more fundamental, or glorious, or powerful, or worthy than God and everything we are rises and falls on whether we are in right standing with him! And his standard says that nice things done to people **without love** for him are not truly good. Not in a sense that matters for eternity! They are worthless things.

Let me read this quote from another pastor to you: "Sin is, first and foremost, a resistance to finding joy in God. And that resistance results in a darkened mind that then suppresses the truth and does not understand God. So the mind that is "under sin" does not seek God and does not know God and does not fear God. And it doesn't matter what we do for people; if we treat the King of the universe with such disdain, we may know that we are profoundly 'under sin.'"²

Ruined Relationships with People

And the terrible truth is that when our relationship with God is ruined, it spreads down to our relationships with others.

¹³ "Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive."

"The venom of asps is under their lips."

¹⁴ "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness."

² John Piper, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/all-jews-and-gentiles-are-under-sin>

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.”

Sin destroys our words, sin spoils our actions, sin leads to bloodshed and ruin and misery, and the opposite of peace. Were it not for God’s kindness to hold back our sin in the world, the world would burn from the anarchy of our unrighteousness.

V. Humbled Dependence (3:19-20)

So remember the four movements to the message. **(1)** We’ve tried to grasp more clearly Paul’s argument in 1-8. **(2)** Then we’ve gone the heart of the matter in verse 9. **(3)** Then we’ve let Paul paint a more vivid picture of the seriousness of our unrighteousness before God. And now **(4)** as we come to the end, I want to shine a light on our utter dependence upon the mercies of God.

Nothing to Say

Verse 19 says, 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.

It reminds me of the story of Job in the OT. Job accuses God of being unjust in all of Job’s suffering. And God then God speaks to Job and reminds him of his eternity, and power, and glory and supremacy in all things. God says to Job...

“Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty?
He who argues with God, let him answer it.”
³ Then Job answered the LORD and said:
⁴ “Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you?
I lay my hand on my mouth. (Job 40:2-4)

We have nothing to say before a righteous God. We are like David: Against you and you only have I sinned...so that you are justified in your words and blameless in your judgments! We have no arguments to make before the Judge.

Not A Hopeful Ending

Our passage ends with Paul summarizing everything he’s been trying to get across to his readers: ...by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

It’s not a particularly hopeful ending. No one can justify themselves. All that the law does, the only advantage you Jews have in having the oracles of God, is that it shows you how all have fallen short of God’s glory.

VI. Conclusion: Utter, Joyful Dependence

But friends, remember that God, through Paul, is playing the role of the doctor who is giving you an honest diagnosis. It is not enjoyable to hear about our utter guilt and unrighteousness. But, thanks be to God, the doctor has a cure!

The good news of the gospel is that the righteous God who perfectly sees our unrighteousness, loves us still, and has pursued us in his Son. And Jesus Christ has born our unrighteousness in his body on the tree and to those who repent and believe in him he has given his perfect righteousness in a great exchange so that we may be saved.

My prayer is that the Holy Spirit would allow the heaviness of our text for today, the grimness of our sin to bear down on our souls - **not to drive us to despair, but to drive us to dependence!** To see clearly - maybe for the first time - that we cannot dig ourselves out of this pit. We are totally reliant on the mercies of God in Jesus Christ!

We can't make ourselves righteous, but now the righteousness of God has been revealed and made available through faith in Jesus Christ! All have sinned and fallen short. And all may be justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that comes from Jesus Christ who paid for our sin with his blood. If you will believe in Jesus Christ, and turn from your sin, and renounce all the ways you seek to save yourself, the power of God for salvation will be yours.