

Romans: The Revealing of Righteousness (part 9 of 9)

How Bad Are We?

Romans 3:9-20

Mark Vroegop

“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, as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.” “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” “Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.” “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” 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. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” (Romans 3:9–20, ESV)

Today we bring to close the first section of our two-year study of the book of Romans. We have reached the conclusion of Paul’s argument regarding the revealing of the righteousness of God. We started our journey eight sermons ago by looking at the first seventeen verses as they laid out a vision for the gospel that was based upon faith. Verse 17 captured the essence of the heart of this book:

“For in it {the gospel} the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”” (Romans 1:17, ESV)

After establishing the premise that God gives righteousness as a gift, Paul moved into a blistering analysis of the sinfulness of humanity. For the last six sermons we have examined the depravity of mankind from multiple angles. We have seen the underlying problem of unbelief, that sin is a failure to honor God as God (Rom. 1:21) or an exchange of the glory of God for lesser glories (Rom. 1:23). We also saw the expression of unbelief in the “pagan world” through a darkened understanding, idolatry, sexual impurity, homosexual activity, and all kinds of other sinful behavior.

In chapter two Paul turns his attention to his Jewish audience who might have been inclined to think that they were better than the Gentiles because of their possession of the Law and circumcision. Paul dismantled any excuse or self-justification that Jewish people might have used, helping them to see that there is no partiality with God (Rom. 2:11). Both Jew and Gentiles are in the same spiritual condition.

Last week I introduced the issue of the fairness of God. Paul anticipated that some people might suggest that God’s plan – i.e., gifting righteousness apart from works and holding us accountable for sin that ultimately gives Him glory – is not fair. We walked through Paul’s complicated

argument in 3:1-8, and we saw how he appealed to the character of God in judgment as his answer to the gap between God's actions and our sense of fairness. Hopefully last week helped you to at least see how often we are affected in our understanding of the Bible and God's ways by this matter of "fairness."

Now our next section in Romans will take us through chapter four, and we will see Paul develop the idea of a righteousness that saves by grace. He'll use the story of Abraham's faith in God's promise as a central part of his argument.

Our text today serves as the conclusion of what Paul has been saying in this first section.

The Proposition: "All Are Under Sin"

Verses 9-10 serve as the thematic introduction for the entire section, and this flows out of what Paul has just addressed in chapters 1-2. Namely, that "*both Jews and Greeks are under sin*" (v 9). This is further repeated in verse 10 with the phrase "*None is righteous, no, not one.*" Everything through verse 20 is supporting, illustrating, or summarizing the proposition that "all are under sin."

Before we unpack that theme, notice that Paul responds to another rhetorical question regarding Jewishness: "*What then? Are we Jews better off?*" (v 9). This should sound familiar because in 3:1 Paul addressed the objection that, in light of what he was saying in 2:17-29, Jewishness was not important at all. Verses 1-8 highlight that there was and is something advantageous about being Jewish since the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God (3:2). So their advantage was related to the promises of God for them.

However, those promises did not give them a pass on judgment for their guilt, and that is what 3:9 is all about. The Jews have the advantage of promises but not freedom from guilt. There is a great Old Testament passage in Amos that captures this same theme:

*"You only have I known
of all the families of the earth;
therefore I will punish you for
all your iniquities." (Amos 3:2, ESV)*

The first three chapters of Romans were designed to drive home this singular point regarding the impartiality of God and universality of sin. That is why Paul says, "*For we have already charged...*"

Now what does it mean that all are "under sin"? Paul will unpack this further for us in verses 11-20, and he will use the Old Testament as basis for his charge (thus: "*as it is written*"). This term will be an important theme in the rest of the book of Romans as the gospel will be seen as the means by which human beings are delivered from their position of being "under sin." The power of God in salvation (1:18) conquers the power of sin and the actions that spring from it. So to be "under sin" means that sin has a power over people.

Additionally, there are specific expressions of the power of sin that Paul talks about in other parts of Romans.¹ For instance:

- Sin is described as reigning. *“So that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”* (Romans 5:21, ESV)
- It enslaves people. *“We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.”* (Romans 6:6, ESV)
- It reigns over people. *“Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.”* (Romans 6:12, ESV)
- It dominates. *“For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.”* (Romans 6:14, ESV)

You could summarize all of this by simply saying that to be “under sin” means that you are “a slave to sin.” To receive and believe the gospel means that there is a fundamental change in position – from being “under sin” to being “in Christ.” To believe the Good News means that you have become delivered from the slavery of sin and you have become slaves of righteousness.

“But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.” (Romans 6:17–18, ESV)

This is a very foundational concept for understanding the gospel and God’s righteousness. It means 1) that the problem with our humanity is not just what we do, but it is who we are, 2) sin has a strangle-hold on humanity such that the Bible calls it “slavery,” and 3) deliverance through the gospel means a greater power has taken hold of the human heart.

For Paul and the message of the Bible, the starting point of the gospel is the dark, enslaved, evil-doing reality connected with being “under sin.” And there is no one who is immune from this basic and damnable condition. Humanity is not morally neutral. We are in great spiritual danger because we are “under sin.”

The Effects: Ruined Relationships

Paul next turns to the effects of this proposition and the way this spiritual condition affects humanity’s relationship with God, people, and society. Paul’s aim is to show the widespread consequences of our human depravity by identifying the problems with humanity and grounding those charges in six texts in the Old Testament.²

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998). 164.

² Psalm 14:1-3, 5:10, 140:3, 10:7, Isaiah 57:7-8, and Ps 36:1. All of the citations are from the Septuagint so the wording will be somewhat different from English translations.

1) With God

Notice that verses 10b-12 use “not one” five different times: *“not one is righteous. . . no one understands. . . no one seeks for God. . . no one does good. . . not even one.”* Paul uses this formula in order to drive home the point about the universality of our rebellion. This repetition is intentional, and it communicates that the failure of humanity is not just a corporate issue, but it is personal and individual.

There is an interesting parallel to this list and what Paul says in Romans 1:18-28. Let me illustrate it with this chart:

The Issue:	Romans 1:	Romans 3:
Unrighteousness	v 18 – “. . .the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. . .”	v 10 – “None is righteous, no, not one.”
Failure to Glorify God	v 21- “they did not honor him as God. . .”	v 11 – “no one understands, no one seeks for God.”
Idolatry	v 22 – “. . .exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man. . .”	v 12 – “all have turned aside. . .”
Corruption	v 24 – “God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies. . .”	v 12 – “together they have become worthless”
Wicked Deeds	v 28 – “God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. . .”	v 12 – “no one does good, not even one.”

It seems that Paul may have been providing a shortened version of what he said previously. He is diagnosing the condition of humanity, and the picture is not pretty when it comes to our relationship with God. There are a few things worth noting here:

- “None is righteous” – No one stands before God in a spiritually right condition; every single person is guilty.
- “No one understands” – Our primary failure is spiritual hostility toward God and our natural orientation is not toward seeking God.
- “All have turned aside” – Our depravity expresses itself in turning away from God and to other objects of affection and worship.
- “they have become worthless” – The effect of this turning is that humans become “worthless” or “corrupt,” which is why William Barclay said “human nature without Christ is a soured and useless thing.”³
- “No one does good” – Their evil deeds follow a foundational spiritual issue.

Being under sin means that humans have ruined their relationship with God. But that is not all.

³ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans, The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995). 99.

2) With People

Verses 14-15 identify one of the most apparent expressions of our sinfulness: how we talk to other people. To be “under sin” means that our sinfulness is expressed vividly by virtue of what comes out of our mouths. Just think of how destructive our words can be to relationships around us and how much of our world revolves around trying to determine what people really mean.

Paul begins by connecting the throat, which is seen as the source of speech, to an open grave (v 13). There is nothing attractive, beautiful, or sweet about an open grave. It is meant to be a metaphor that creates revulsion since it would be connected with a smelly, decaying body.

Then he says, “*they use their tongues to deceive*” (v 13a). The Greek word here carries the idea of beguiling through words that are negatively untrue (think: a lie), and the word can also refer to flattery, something that is very nice but just as false. I love Tim Keller’s distinction between gossip and flattery. He says that gossip is something you say behind a person’s back but you’d never say to their face while flattery is saying something to their face that you’d never say behind their back. Just think about how complicated relationships with other people are simply because you have to always interpret what they are really saying. This is part of the brokenness caused by being “under sin.”

Paul is not done. He says that our words are deadly and have a poison-like quality to them. What’s more, he gives us a picture of poison that is just lurking behind our lips, almost as if we are ready to spew out deadly poison at any minute. This fits what we know to be true, doesn’t it? How many things have you said only to wish you could take them back? Or I’m sure that many of us can remember some terrible thing that someone said to us, and you can still remember it as if it were yesterday. Ever wonder why people can be so cruel? It is because we are all “under sin.”

Finally, these sins of the tongue are regretfully frequent. Life is full of relational conflict, verbal injury, and double meaning because the “*mouth is full of cursing and bitterness*” (v 14). The mouth is overflowing with sinful things because mankind is “under sin.” Our relationship with God and with other people is ruined.

3) With Society

Paul extends his diagnosis even further with verses 15-17 which speak to the way our entire culture is affected by the condition of being “under sin.” Paul lists a series of sins that have a dramatic effect on our society as a whole.

Murder, aggression, and the shedding of blood are all directly related to the displaced spiritual condition called “under sin.” From world history to family history you do not have to search very hard to find that our culture can turn very quickly into a very ugly and dangerous place, and that is why the text says “*their feet are swift to shed blood*” (v 15). We are prone to inflict pain on each other.

The next phrase, *"in their paths are ruin and misery,"* is not a statement about the personal state of mind or condition of individual people. Rather it is a statement about the wake of destruction that human beings leave behind. Put enough people together and some level of conflict is guaranteed. The path of human history is filled with self-destructive ruin and misery.

Finally, peace is usually illusive because the stage is set for conflict – *"the way of peace they have not known."* The more typical pattern for human history is the path of war, conflict, and violence. The gravitational pull in our human culture is always away from peace and towards conflict. And this happens at every level of humanity. Internationally, it creates the situations like we are observing in Crimea. Nationally, just think of moments when law and order break down. What do people do? In our own city, law enforcement is scrambling to do what they can to tamp down the level of violence in the Indianapolis area. Or think about how quickly a fun family time can turn ugly and sinful. It can happen so quickly.

The Bible has a diagnosis for this condition: *"all are under sin."* The effects of this condition are sweeping on every level of relationship – from God, to people, and to society. The tragic irony of being a human is that we take this fundamental brokenness because of sin into every arena of life. Even the very best joys in life or the happiest moments or the greatest pleasures are never truly whole or complete. Our lives, at every level, are compromised by curse of sin. In other words, sin ruins everything.

Now do not forget that this is only half of the story. Paul's main point in this book is to point us toward a righteousness that comes to us from God. The hope and the power of the gospel is that God can, through the righteousness of Christ, change a person's heart, change their relationships, and even change the culture. The righteousness that God gives addresses the core issue in humanity that has spread its deadly poison into every arena of life. The gospel places us "in Christ" when we were "under sin." The gospel has the power to renew what sin has ruined.

The Summary: No Fear and No Exceptions

That leads us to Paul's summary and his conclusion to this entire section. His summary is twofold. First, he identifies the theological problem underneath everything he has written from 1:18 on. Second, he dismantles any hope that there are exceptions to accountability before God. Paul wants us to see the problem and its scope in summary form.

Verse 18 is the conclusion of Paul's analysis in verses 9-11 and this section in Romans. He says, *"There is no fear of God before their eyes."* The idea here is more than just being emotionally afraid of God because of who He is or what may happen to you. Paul is showing us here that sinful actions and attitudes at every level have a theological root, and the basic problem is a refusal to reverence or "fear" God. It is the same thing that Paul said in Romans 1:21-23 – *"...they did not honor him as God... they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images..."*

Humanity does not just have a sin problem; we have a worship problem. We love the wrong things, and we express our disregard for God by doing what we want to do. John Calvin said, "All

wickedness flows from a disregard of God." Sin is living as if God does not matter. And this noticeable absence of fear of God is the hallmark of humanity. It is our greatest problem.

The second summary statement that Paul makes here relates to final judgment. Once again (v 19) he references the law, but in this context he mentions it as the basis of complete and total judgment.

"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." (Romans 3:19, ESV)

What does this mean? Paul is saying that the Law was given to the Jews to demonstrate God's righteousness, and the failure of the Jewish people to keep God's law and the failure of everyone to keep God's law means that there will be no excuses and everyone will be held accountable before God. There is coming a day when God will convincingly demonstrate His righteousness and our lack of righteousness. The contrast between His righteous standard and the disobedience of each individual will be so clear that "every mouth will be stopped." There will be no arguing because the case will be so clear and so obvious. The whole world will be accountable to God, and there will be no excuse.

The final judgment will be based upon the fact that human actions are not able create true righteousness; human activity only results in more failure. That is point of 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." (Romans 3:20, ESV)

The message is bleak: human beings, by virtue of their law-keeping, cannot justify themselves because they continually fail. The condition of being "under sin" is not only breath-taking in its scope, but it is also depressing in its hopelessness apart from Christ. Paul's message to Jews and Gentiles is now complete: "There is no spiritual hope in yourself."

The natural condition of humanity is no fear and there are no exceptions.

The Hope of Hopelessness

Now, I do not want to leave you here for seven days because next week Paul will quickly turn the corner, and you will hear this great and beautiful verse:

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

I have tried to make it plain through this first section that Paul is saying these negative things in order to point us toward belief in Jesus. But the first step toward believing in Jesus for the first time or applying that belief in a fresh way after you have received Him is embracing the hopelessness of living *by* you and *for* you.

The good news of the gospel is that you cannot create your own righteousness. Coming to faith in Christ means that you have walked away from trying to earn God's favor or trying to create your own righteousness. Becoming a Christian means that you saw the hopelessness of yourself, and you turned to belief in Christ.

But it does not stop there. The hope of hopelessness means that the same equation – turning from trusting self to trusting Christ – can be applied to every relationship and every arena of life. It means that making God your treasure and glorifying Him has the power to transform how you see yourself – including your successes and your failures. It means that the gospel transforms your relationships between friends, spouse, and children. The gospel can repair broken marriages, heal wounded families, and unite unreconciled friends. And when this takes root in a cluster of people, it changes what they see in their neighborhoods, their community, and their city. When the gospel takes over a city or a nation can be radically changed.

You need to see that the gospel is the means by which true and lasting change takes place. The gospel, by changing our condition from “under sin” to “in Christ,” has the ability to radically change everything.

And that is why Paul said, *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...”* (Romans 1:16).

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