

The Power of Sin and the Power of God

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 04 June 2023

Preacher: Rev. Jonathan St. Clair

[0 : 00] We hope that you enjoy this teaching from Christ Church. This material is copyrighted and no unauthorized duplication, redistribution, or any other use of any part is permitted without prior consent from Christ Church.

Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's reading is from Romans chapter 1 verses 16 to 18 and chapter 3 verses 9 to 20.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith.

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all.

For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. As it is written, there is no one righteous, not even one.

[1 : 24] There is no one who understands. There is no one who seeks God. All have turned away. They have together become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one.

Their throats are open graves. Their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood.

Ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes. Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.

Therefore, no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law. Rather, through the law, we become conscious of our sin. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Good morning, Christ Church, and thank you for that reading. One of my favorite scripture readers in our church, my daughter Constance.

[2 : 32] Pastor Andrew and I had the privilege this week of going to New York City and doing what you do there, which is to not sleep for several days. And we gathered with a group of about 50 church leaders, just grappling with these questions of how to sustain flourishing and fruitful ministry in this new cultural context we find ourselves in.

And we look forward to sharing more about that and what we learned there. But we had the privilege of learning from two rock star scholars. One is a guy named James Davison Hunter at the University of Virginia, who's a sociologist there.

And the other is a guy named N.T. Wright, Tom Wright, who's a biblical theologian at the University of Oxford. And it felt like the whole time we were sort of listening to these dueling prophets.

You know, one was a prophet of despair and the other a prophet of hope. You know, one was a prophet of judgment and the other a prophet of salvation. We had the sociologist, and he was basically saying, look, you know, our culture no longer has consensus around the five major questions of, you know, what is reality?

How do we know reality? What's a human being? What's right and wrong? And what's the purpose of it all? Where's it all going? And because we don't have consensus on these things anymore, life's going to be kind of rough in the Western world for a little while.

[3 : 52] Yikes. This is not a very hopeful message, sir. And then you had the theologian come up, and he said, yes, from a human point of view, things are quite hopeless.

They feel pretty hopeless. But God, he would say. But God. Look at what God is doing through Jesus Christ and through the Holy Spirit and through his church.

And it struck me as I was listening to these two scholars, talking about these two mutually compatible truths, that that's kind of what's happening in this epistle to the Romans.

Romans chapter 1, 2, and 3 is telling us two things. That number one, all of humanity is under the power of sin. And yet, it's also telling us that through Jesus Christ, we can experience the power of God.

And I want you to think about that as we look at this text today. We're talking about the power of sin and the power of God. And I think most of us would agree that there are times in life where we need to be cruel in order to be kind.

[4 : 57] We need to be cruel to be kind. My brother's a medical doctor. Some of you are doctors. And you know that when you're dealing with people that have illness or disease, you need to be cruel to be kind. Some of you are parents, and you're trying to train up a child to become a fully orb'd human being.

And you know what it means to be cruel in order to be kind. Conditions may be such that it's the best interest of that child, the best interest of your patient, is going to be served by causing them temporary pain.

And causing pain, that's a difficult task. We take no pleasure in it. But if we have the real interest of the other at heart, we must be cruel to be kind and cause this temporary pain.

It's always much more pleasant to soothe and to comfort people than it is to cause them pain and arouse unpleasant reactions. But merely palliating symptoms, rather than dealing positively and actively with the disease, it's not going to help your patient.

You don't want your doctor to treat you that way. Amen? So Romans chapter 1, 2, and 3 speaks this word to us and this word to the world that's actually quite painful. It involves a word of judgment.

[6 : 16] And Paul, the apostle, is being cruel to be kind. Because if he's going to help us, he must first probe the wound and probe the disease to reveal our trouble.

This cannot be done without causing pain and offense. It may lead, Paul knows, to being unpopular and to being disliked. And he knows that if he wants to be popular and he wants to be liked, he could just soothe people and ignore our problems entirely and palliate our symptoms.

But Paul, the apostle, along with all the apostles, are very good physicians of the soul. And so he gives us a painful diagnosis and a painful prognosis in order that we might fully appreciate the treatment he prescribes and the cure that comes through that treatment.

So what is Paul's prognosis? What's his diagnosis? He says in Romans 1, 18, we've been considering this verse, it says that the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth in their wickedness.

And there's really no passage in Scripture that describes so accurately our world today and the cause of all of our troubles. He says that our main problem, our central sin, our greatest sin, is our godlessness and our ungodliness.

[7 : 40] And he says from that central human reality flow all manner of various types of wickedness and unrighteousness. And Paul's been unpacking this in Romans 1, 2, and 3.

He's just been unpacking that one statement in Romans 1, 18. And he's really begging this question, you know, why is the preaching of the gospel such an urgent matter? And why do we need a salvation from God that's entirely by faith?

And why will nothing less than the power of God and the power of God's salvation meet the situation that we're in? And so here in this text in Romans 3, he brings us to the climax of this argument we've been considering the past few weeks.

And it's one of the strongest statements that the Bible gives us about what's wrong with the world and this diagnosis of the human heart. And what Paul is saying here is that sin's power is devastating and its effects corrupting, but God's power is saving.

That's Paul's point, that sin's power is devastating and its effects corrupting, but God's power is saving. First of all, he says sin's power is devastating.

[8 : 58] Look at verse 9. He says, what shall we conclude then? He's bringing this argument to a conclusion. Do we have any advantage? Not at all. We've already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin.

The condition of every human being you meet, including the one you see in the mirror every day, is that we're a people who are under the power and the penalty and the pollution of sin.

And then what does Paul say next in verse 10? He says, as it is written, and Paul is this guy who's well-versed in the Scriptures and he's committed so much of the Bible to memory. An example to us all, if you've not done any of that, I encourage you to begin memorizing Scripture.

Paul begins to marshal his memorized Bible to substantiate the claim that sin's power over us and over our lives is devastating.

And so he goes in verses 10 through verse 18 to show us the devastating power of sin. And what does he say first? He says, it is written, there is no one righteous, not even one.

[10:11] Again, Paul's begging the question, why is it necessary that God should act and intervene in the world and in our lives? Why do we need a power that comes from God before we can be saved?

And why is a righteousness that comes from outside of us, that comes from God, absolutely essential for us? Because Paul says, all of us universally, without a single exception, good people, even the best and nicest people that you'll ever meet, including the worst and the most vile people, are under the power of sin and therefore all of us are going to die in a state of unrighteousness before the judge of all the earth.

It's a strong first statement. And Paul begins to arrange these scriptures, mostly from the Psalms, a little bit from the prophet Isaiah in this logical order. And he says, there's no one righteous, not even one.

There's no one who understands. There's no one who seeks God. All have turned away. They've together become worthless. There's no one who does good, not even one. Paul says, that's our actual state in sin and that's the result of being in this state and condition of sinfulness.

And some of us might hear that and say, well, Paul, you're flat out wrong because I know people who are righteous. I know people who seek God and people who do good. And Paul would say back to us, well, who's defining your terms?

[11:38] Whose definitions are we using? Because the biblical definition of righteousness is to be upright in thought and life. It's to be blameless with respect to God and our neighbor.

To be righteous does not mean to merely be good or moral or respectable in the eyes of other people. Because when Jesus summed up the law of God, he said that we were made to love the Lord our God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind and all our strength.

And out of that love for God, we're to love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus starts with our relationship with God and then he moves out to our relationship with everyone else.

And righteousness means living as God desires us to live with respect to God and with respect to each other. And so Paul would put the question back to us, do any of us live in perfect conformity with God's law of love?

And Paul is saying that since the fall of humanity, there's not been a single righteous person. Not Abraham or Moses or David or any of the prophets, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah.

[12:48] These are some of the best people who've ever lived. He said none of them have been upright. All of them have failed in their relationship with God and their neighbor. Think of the best people you know, the noblest people, the most learned people, the most philanthropic people.

If you drop this plumb line of God and his law of love, you'll see that we're actually not true. We're not straight. We're not upright and pure and blameless.

And Paul would say, are you the solitary exception to this rule? He says, no, we're not the exalted creatures that God made us to be. And be very clear that being just a little bit better than the next person, as we sort of think about who's sitting around us this morning, being just a little bit better than the next person is really quite irrelevant in light of God's ultimate standard of being absolutely upright, like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, before the power of sin entered the world.

So Paul says, there's no one righteous, not even one. And then he goes on and he says, there's no one who understands. In Ephesians 4, Paul says that we've become darkened in our understanding.

And that means that we're lacking the apprehension of spiritual truth, the apprehension of divine things. Of course, from a secular and human perspective, we have all kinds of understanding of the arts and the sciences, of politics and business, and all the things that we've become experts at.

[14:22] But he says, because of the power of sin, God is just simply not in our thoughts. He's not in our understanding. And because we don't understand God rightly, we don't understand

ourselves.

We don't understand our souls and what it means to have a relationship with God. And because we don't understand God and ourself and the way sin has alienated us and corrupted us in our relationship with God, we don't understand our precarious position under the wrath of God. And therefore, we don't understand that we need a righteousness from God to save us. And Paul would say, because we don't understand all of these things, we therefore don't understand what it means to be truly happy.

We don't understand all the things that pertain to our eternal destiny. He says, no one understands. There's no one righteous, not even one. There's no one who understands.

And then he says, there's no one who seeks God. If there's no one righteous and there's no one who understands, then what does that mean? Follow the logic. Paul says, because we're unrighteous, we lack understanding.

[15 : 31] And because we do not understand, we therefore do not seek after God. To seek God is to desire God. It's to want to know God and to enjoy God and to worship God and seek God in prayer and to want to know the will of God so that we can obey it.

But Paul says, because all of us have come under the power of sin, we, whether we're trying to or not, we just ignore God. We neglect God. We avoid God.

Instead of trying to seek to be close to God, we're actually moving away from God. And you might say again, Paul, wait a second. I know people who seek God. I know people who are spiritual seekers who say their prayers.

And Paul would say, yes, but which God are they seeking? Is it the God of the Bible or is it the God that we've made in our own image and that conveniently conforms to all of our values and our preferences?

Is that the God we're seeking? Or are we seeking the God who's revealed himself here? And are people truly seeking God for God? Or are they seeking God for the things that God can give them?

[16 : 41] Because many of us seek God for his blessings. We seek God for answered prayers. We seek God for forgiveness. But Paul would say, no one seeks God for himself rather than his gifts.

To seek God means to desire God above everything and everybody. To seek his glory and to be anxious to promote his glory to everybody we see. To seek God in a biblical sense means that God is the center of our thinking and that the supreme object of our lives is to know him and love him and live for his glory.

And Paul says, no one by nature and left to himself or herself has ever sought God for God's sake. Remember that parable we talked about two weeks ago from the Gospel of Luke.

Jesus tells us about this Pharisee and this tax collector. And the Pharisee comes to God and he says, God, I thank you that I'm not like everyone else and I thank you for all the amazing things that I do.

That is a man who thinks he's seeking God. But really he's just telling God what a wonderful person he is rather than telling God what a wonderful God he is. Right?

[17 : 53] He's coming to God, speaking about his own excellencies rather than coming to God and telling God all about his excellencies. And can we not see ourselves in that man?

Seeking God in order to exalt ourselves is not seeking God at all. If anyone is truly seeking God, there's only one explanation for it and that is that God has first sought us and he's justified us by his grace, he's regenerated us by his Holy Spirit and he's enabled us to seek him.

But the scriptures tell us that left to ourselves, we would never seek God and we would remain permanently at enmity with God and totally unreconciled to God.

That's what Paul is bringing to our attention with these scriptures. He says, sin's power is devastating in terms of what we were made for. And he goes on and he says, sin's power is devastating and its effects are corrupting.

Since power is devastating and its effects are corrupting, Paul is basically saying in verses 10 and 11, this is who we are in the state of sin and then he says in verse 12, now these are the effects and the results of being in that condition.

[19 : 11] And he says in verse 12, all have turned away. We were again created to walk in God's way, to journey on this true path that God marked out for human beings and yet we've all turned our backs and gone in the other direction.

This is what the prophet Isaiah says in Isaiah 53, he says, we all like sheep have gone astray and each of us has turned to our own way. Every person born into this world since the fall of Adam and Eve have deliberately gone our own way, walking not in God's ways that lead to him and glorifying him and enjoying him but rather the lead on this road of separation from him in this life and on into eternity.

Paul says, all have turned away and they have together become worthless. Holy and simultaneously, without exception, Paul says, we become worthless.

He's so cruel. He's being cruel to be kind. That word worthless means unprofitable. It's a word that is used for when milk has spoiled and has gone sour and of course we know that milk is meant to be food for us.

It's meant to give us satisfaction but when it's soured, it has no value anymore. It's useless and it's good for nothing but to be thrown out.

[20 : 38] Paul says, we've all become worthless and at this point again, you may object and say, Paul, you're too harsh. Paul, this is too sweeping of a statement. You're overdoing it because I know people who are good.

They're good citizens. They're involved in good causes and Paul would say, yes, well the Bible doesn't say we're as bad or as rotten as we could be and from the standpoint of secular morality, yes, we probably do know some virtuous people but what about from the standpoint of God? From the standpoint of God's salvation, Paul says, every single one of us apart from the grace of God and Jesus Christ have become totally unprofitable. I think about the prophet Isaiah where he says in Isaiah 64, he says, all our righteous acts are filthy rags and that's striking because we would have expected him to say all of our unrighteous acts are filthy rags but what does he say? He says, all of our righteous acts are filthy rags. Paul says something similar in Philippians chapter three when he's talking about himself and he says, you know, I was a Hebrew of Hebrews, I was a Pharisee of Pharisees and as it pertains to righteousness according to the law, I was completely faultless but when I saw the glory of Jesus Christ, I realized that all of that righteousness was a complete loss.

In fact, the word he uses, I won't translate it exactly because we're in church this morning but he says, all my righteousness was absolute dung, completely worthless and useless to save me.

[22 : 18] That's what Paul's getting at when he says we've all become worthless. He's not saying that his righteousness wasn't quite good enough, he calls it total garbage. It's not that we need to be just improved a little bit or helped a touch or topped off just a skosh.

Paul is saying that our righteousness is so pitifully worthless that it was necessary for God to become a human being and to die on a cross and if God has to die, our righteousness must be pretty worthless.

All have turned away, they've together become worthless and there is no one who does good, not even one. And again, this isn't goodness in our eyes which tends to lead us toward self-righteousness.

It's goodness in the eyes of God and God can see that our goodness is invariably self-centered. We probably all have that experience where you're kind to other people and you serve other people but really, it's kind of to please yourself.

And Paul is saying that even our goodness is tainted with this self-interest because it's polluted at the very source and at this point you might be saying, okay, enough. Enough, Paul.

[23 : 38] I can't handle it anymore. I've heard your diagnosis and you're being way too cruel to us and you're absolutely relentless. I need a little relief. And so I'm going to give you some relief, okay?

We're going to skip over verses 13 to 14 where Paul talks about the sin of our words and what we do with our mouths and we're going to skip over verses 15 to 17 and the sins of our deeds, what we do with our feet and with our hands and we're going to skip over verse 18.

The cause of all these things is what we do with our eyes, what our eyes are looking at or actually not looking at and we're going to jump to the point and ask this question, why is Paul so relentless in showing us the power of sin in our lives?

Why is he so relentless? Well he says in verse 19, now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.

So that the whole, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Paul is saying, look, imagine a court of law and you are the criminal in the dock and the judge

looks at you and asks you, do you have anything to say in your defense?

[24 : 59] And Paul says, our mouths should be silenced. We should be saying nothing at all in our defense because when our mouths are silenced, your guilt is proved and you cannot justify yourself at all.

And Paul's point is that God wants to put an end to all of our talking. He wants us to put a hand over our mouth when it's anxious to defend itself so that the whole world is rendered speechless before God.

Go back to our Pharisee and our tax collector. The Pharisee says, God, I thank you and then he just pours out all these eloquent words describing himself and telling God what a good man he is and how unlike this tax collector he is and what he does and what he does not do and he just talks and talks and talks and talks about himself.

But how does the tax collector come? It says that he stops his mouth and he silences his heart and if he says anything to God at all he just says, God, have mercy on me a sinner.

That's something we need to learn to say. Can we say that together? God, have mercy on me a sinner. What about you? Has your mouth been silenced?

[26 : 16] Have you stopped speaking in the presence of this holy God? Have you given up self-justification and quit arguing against this charge and this verdict that you are under the power and penalty and pollution of sin?

Or do you still say, God, look at all I've done and aren't you impressed by all the things I've not done? Paul's saying, look, you're never going to receive God's salvation that's described for us in Romans chapter 3 verses 21 and following and I promise you we're going to get out of all this bad news next week.

But he says, you're never going to receive God's salvation unless you shut up spiritually and unless your mouth is silenced with no more excuses. If you're still saying to yourself, God, I know that I did wrong but I can do better next time.

And God, I see that my motives are not right but I think I can turn it around, you've not shut up and therefore you're not ready for salvation. You've got to realize that you cannot fix yourself and that every effort to fix yourself and put yourself together and be a better person and try harder in an effort of self-salvation and self-sufficiency is just making you worse.

Paul says, you need to be quiet. You need to come to the end of yourself and learn to be sorry. Not only for all that you've done wrong but even for the reasons you've done everything right and to see that your righteousness is totally worthless, it's filthy rags, it's dung and say, God, it's true.

[27 : 56] I have nothing to say. I give up and I give in. We must admit that there's this terrible force, this mighty active power called sin which is alienating us from God and it's only as we face this and realize the true nature of our problem, how devastating and how corrupting the power of sin is that we can come to see the one power alone, the sufficient and adequate to deal with our situation and that's where I want to close.

Sin's power is devastating and its effects corrupting but God's power is saving. God's power is saving. I hope you can understand now given Paul's argument about the power of sin why he says in the thesis of this letter in Romans 1.16 I'm not ashamed of the gospel because it is what?

It's the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes. Paul uses these two negatives to express a positive. He says, I'm not ashamed meaning I'm proud of the gospel, I glory in the gospel, I boast about the gospel and you have to remember that Rome is a very proud city.

It's the proudest city because it's the great metropolis of the world. I was in New York this week, I know how proud these people were. They boasted of great wealth and power and learning and culture.

They attracted the best people and the finest goods. All that was prized and valued most came to Rome. All the religions, all the schools of thought, structures of law, systems of government, all their amazing buildings.

[29 : 35] Any of you been to Rome? Okay, you know. In Rome, human culture and human progress seem to have reached its zenith and it was the very embodiment of pride and human greatness and the boasting of human achievement and Paul comes along and he says, I am proud and I boast but I boast in none of this Roman power.

No, I boast in the power of God. Power was everything for Rome. Right, they didn't consider anything unless it worked, unless it had power, unless it produced results and Paul comes and he

