

# "The Kindness of Conviction" Romans 3:9–20

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[0:00] I'm going to read a quote from a Citizen article two and a half weeks ago. Philippe Hébert will serve no time in prison following his guilty plea to manslaughter in the homicide of his partner, his husband and partner for over 40 years, Richard Rutherford, a judge has ruled.

It's the first sentence of that article. Like I mentioned, it was written in the Citizen two and a half weeks ago. The title of the article was, quote, Don't let me down, sir. Judge gives man no prison time in mercy killing of husband.

If you read the story, it's very clear that Philippe Hébert faced hardship and turmoil. His partner was elderly and was dying.

It was COVID lockdowns and there was a lot of confusion of what was available for help. He was a primary caregiver. He was experiencing compassion fatigue.

He reluctantly promised his ailing partner that he would end his suffering when the time would come, when Richard Rutherford deemed it so.

[1:13] Hébert was living a very difficult life. A lot of stressors, a lot of difficulty. However, in the end, he killed a man.

It's in my notes, but I'm not going to describe how it's done. He killed a man. Call it a mercy killing. Take into account all the extenuating circumstances. Consider all the stressors and variables.

Do it all. In the end, Mr. Hébert committed murder. And he was not given jail time. He was essentially exonerated from his crime of murder.

I tell this story not to complain about the justice system, not to rehash COVID legislation, or even debate the ethics of assisted suicide. All legitimate things.

We're not talking about that today. Instead, I tell this story to highlight a deeply problematic reality that exists in our city, in our neighborhoods, in our homes, in our hearts.

[2:15] Everybody here struggles with this. And what is it? It's that we seek to excuse and avoid responsibility for our sin at any cost.

And we want to be exonerated without any recourse. As the Apostle Paul concludes his discussion of humanity, and specifically the human problem from verses, chapter 1, verse 18, to the end of our section today, Romans 3, verse 20, he makes an unmistakable point that all humanity is plagued with sin.

He sums up that entire section from 1, 18 to 3, 20. And in this summary statement, he pulls no punches. He is as clear as crystal about the problem with humanity.

We're going to jump right into it, looking at verses 9 to 20. And we're going to look at three aspects of what the Apostle Paul says about sin.

And I'll just say this before we get into it. We've been looking at sin and God's wrath and God's judgment for five weeks, more or less. And it's heavy. And the argument's going to shift in verse 21.

[3:43] If you're feeling like it's heavy and it's a bit much like I am, if I'm honest, stick with me for one more week. Because what we have here isn't just another week of Paul explaining how crummy humans are.

But it is the basis by which liberation will come. So, he's going to talk about sin. First, that sin is ubiquitous. It is everywhere. It touches everyone.

Second, that sin is penetrating. And then finally, and most importantly, that sin is ungodly. Look with me at verse 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. Verse 10. As it is written, none is righteous.

No, not one. If you were here last week, you'd remember Paul argued that the religiously observant Jewish person was just as much under God's just wrath as the pagan, as the non-Jew.

[4:54] Relying on the law and circumcision as the basis for right standing before God. It didn't serve them at all as a means of salvation, as a means of justification. So, what he does next is he continues the argument by anticipating those objections to what he said in the previous chapter.

And it's addressed in verses 1 to 8. They're important verses for the sake of time and focus. We're not going to discuss them today. But simply put, the Jewish people, despite having the privilege of being responsible for spreading God's word among the nations, are still subject to God's wrath because of their sin.

And this actually touches on this first point, the ubiquity of sin. How sin touches all. Paul has laid out this devastating truth. That whether Jew or Greek, pagan or Torah observant, licentious or very devoted, all people are equally under God's rightful wrath.

Because, as he says in verse 10, none is righteous. No, not one. He doesn't give an exception to this. He's making a very, very sweeping general statements.

We struggle, I think, in rightly, with people that make general statements. You never do this. You always do that. Early on in our premarital counseling, and something I've used for the people that I've married in premarital counseling, avoid saying such things.

[6:28] Avoid it. Don't say you always do this, because nobody always does that. It's super dismissive. You never do this. Do they really never do that? No. So, we avoid such sweeping comments.

Here, the apostle Paul is making a sweeping comment. There is no exception to this. Paul is quoting this none righteous, no, not one.

He's quoting from Psalm chapter 14. And it's not as if here that, and this is an important bit, because it's not as if Paul here has made this elaborate case that all have sinned, and this is some new revelation that God has beamed down to him.

God used to do things differently in the Old Testament, in the Old Covenant, but in this new dispensation, this new covenant, he's moved the goalposts, so to speak. He has changed the rules. He has raised the bar. Not at all. Throughout Scripture, again and again, we can see how God's most faithful servants, kind of the cream of the crop of God's people, constantly commit wicked acts.

[7:36] You think of Abraham. He flees a famine. He goes to another kingdom. He lies about his wife, being his wife, says it's his sister, all to avoid the possibility of getting murdered.

You think of Moses. What does he do? He, in a fit of anger and rage, takes it upon himself to provide for God's people, and as a result, it costs him the chance to see the promised land.

King David, we've talked about this actually a number of times in the past few weeks, he commits the most atrocious kind of adultery. Not that there's lesser kinds of adultery, but for him, it's followed by murder, and followed by cover-up, and complete deception.

You can think of Jonah saying to God, I'm not going to listen to you. You can think of the patriarchs, or the judges, or the kings of Israel. Fast forward to the disciples. What's the point?

That the best of God's people are constantly doing unrighteous things. No one is righteous. None. No, not one.

[8:48] Sin is the great tyrant behind all tyrants. The tyrants like the Kims in North Korea, or the Avatans of Stitzville.

Sin is the thing that is touching every human being. Just listen to this next part. Paul emphasizes how widespread this sin is. Again, no one.

No one. Not one. Altogether. No one. He is doubling down, tripling down on this. And at the heart of this unrighteousness, what do we see? We see a heart that is turned away from the Lord, that is cold towards the things of God.

I'll read verse 10 again, and then we'll read 11 and 12. 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. It is a knockout blow for the self-righteous person, which happens to be a lot of us this morning.

[9:56] And maybe you're here, and you are nodding, because you are like a very good churchgoer. Yes. Amen. The Bible is right. But deep down in your heart of hearts, you might be thinking, yeah, not me.

Yeah, little bits here and there. Okay. But am I really that bad? My good deeds are actually very good. I'm very kind. I have acts of kindness. I'm committed to those around me, to my friends, to my family.

If you have children, your children, to your spouse, if you have a spouse, to your coworkers. Actually, like, take a poll of the people in my life. I'm actually pretty solid. What Paul isn't suggesting here is that good cannot come from human beings.

If I was to say that, well, it doesn't matter about your goodness at all. It's not really good. That's not true. That's not what Paul is saying. What Paul is suggesting, however, is that no matter what we do, even our good acts, they can never be considered righteous by God's standards.

Why? Because they are stained and strained by the effects of sin. We've looked at this, I think about two weeks ago or three weeks ago, that even our motives of doing good are inherently self-satisfying, self-justifying.

[11:15] So yes, we do good, but our good is, again, stained and strained by the effects of sin. How so? God's glory, which is really at the core of what it is to be a part of God's people, it's not at the forefront of our decision making, at least not in a consistent way.

Faith that seeks to follow and trust isn't readily exercised. And again, the heart that isn't regenerated, isn't infused by God's help is the heart that is turned inward, never directed towards the Lord.

Let me give some proof. Isn't our tendency to excuse or downplay or nuance our sin? Is this not a reality that proves what the apostle is saying?

We all have personal kingdoms that compete with the kingdom of God. We don't want to show ourselves weak in a way that will inhibit or get in the way of what we're trying to build, the good things we're trying to build, the progress we're trying to make as a family or as an individual in my career.

So when we sin, when we do something contrary to God's law, by the way, that's why we read the entirety of the Ten Commandments during the Lenten season. It's to help us to understand the ways we've tripped up.

[12:42] One of the reasons why we read it. But anyways, what do we do? We don't readily admit our sins because in doing so that might hinder our progress.

It might mean we have to take a few steps back. It means we're maybe not as put together as we put forward to others. So what do we do? We excuse, we downplay, we nuance.

We have these pseudo-kingdoms we are compelled to defend. And these fortifications that we build, they must be reinforced and they must exist to guard against any threat even if that threat is God and his perfect word.

Oof. So what do we do? We diminish God's word. Right? We treat it in a way so that it is arbitrary and we just take its legitimacy down a notch.

Okay? Because if God's word isn't legitimate then it ceases to have claim on my life and then I can get away with things or I can just take the edge off or I don't have to truly repent.

[13:51] I don't have to truly come into agreement with God's good and perfect and holy will. It touches all of us in different ways but in many ways the same.

But how deep does this sin really run? Is it merely an issue of our motivations? Is it something that we can easily overcome with a bit more hard work, a bit more mindfulness?

Let's look at this next section and this brings us to our second point. The question before I read verses 13 to 17. How deep does sin go? How affected, how infected are we really?

Verse 13. 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 and their paths are ruin and misery and the way of peace they have not known. Paul here in these few sentences uses eight scripture references mostly from the Psalms and he gives seven observations about how deeply this sin penetrates and it goes all the

way down.

[15:06] It goes all the way down. It extends right into the depths of our being and what does it do? It influences our will, our volition, our words, our actions, all of which again are directed away from God towards the self and the self is elevated, the self is preserved, the self is justified.

It affects our realities, our perception of reality, our relationships, our goals, our values, everything that makes us who we are, sin touches and it's pervasive, it penetrates all the way down.

We are a church of the English Reformation but of the Reformation as well, a part of the Church Catholic and the reformers would call this total depravity and again it is not to say that humans are incapable of doing good but that every aspect of the human experience is touched by sin and it has been the case since the beginning when our first parents disregarded and obeyed God in the garden.

That's not the way God intended it. It's not the way God intended it. Our bodies and our minds they are gifts from God. This material world, a gift from God. He made our bodies and minds to enjoy all that he created.

We were created to bring him glory which means living lives aligned with God's ways through worship and praise which is like the focal high point of the human experience.

[16:45] We are also called to serve others ensuring our lives are directed to bless and support, helping rather than hindering. Additionally, we are to enjoy creation again using all of our senses but in a properly ordered way.

Only then can we truly enjoy these godly pursuits. What we see instead in this section is the complete opposite. No matter how hard we try to live this godly life in our own strength, we find ourselves constantly facing our own faults or those of others.

Our pursuits become hampered and hindered and we indulge in pleasures excessively, often at the expense of or the neglect of others.

Again, how can we mess this up? Like, unlimited ways. So, two examples from this list that the Apostle Paul gives.

The first is he mentions our words and how we use our words. You can read with me again verses 13 and 14. Their throat is an open grave.

[17:55] They use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. So, the first example, how we use our words.

Our words should be used to bless and encourage, to build up, to speak words of life to others. Yet, often, we use our words to deceive and justify others, but really ourselves.

We struggle with others when, sorry, we struggle when others enjoy what we want. So, even when we congratulate others, do we do so in a way that's fully authentic and happy for them? or do we do it with a tinge of jealousy and envy? Some bitterness maybe. Why am I not experiencing the blessings that they are enjoying?

Our hearts are not focused above but within. So, therefore, our hearts then will dictate what our mouths speak. The second example, I could have gone longer, but just for the sake of time, the second example, verses 15 and 16, their feet are swift to shed blood, and their paths are ruin and misery.

[19:11] The human experience has always been marked by conflict. I'm going to give two stats. Did I fact check them? No. Okay, so sue me. One was from the commentary I used.

It sounded good, and I'm going with it. It sounded legit, so here we are. In the last roughly 3,500 years of recorded history, only 268 years have been without war.

Okay, maybe it's more, maybe it's a bit less. It makes sense to me. That's 93% of the last 3,500 years have seen some kind of armed conflict between two groups.

So here's the other bit of unsighted statistics, and I use chat GBT. I'll be very honest with you guys. I resist on a daily basis, to be honest, using chat GBT, but I felt like this was a great question to ask. I asked chat GBT this question, again, pouring out of the first stat I gave you. How many rounds of ammunition were fired in 2025 across all armed conflicts worldwide?

[20:23] First thing it said, there's no way this stat can be fully known, but here's a best estimate, and the estimate was 10 to 30 plus billion rounds, billion rounds, in armed conflict.

I was very specific to say armed conflict, not like robberies, or not like, you know, murders in the streets, but armed conflict. Could it be? I mean, it seems, it seems likely that that's maybe even downplaying it.

Here's the point. whether or not you fact check all this, and I'm wrong or just off a bit, we are a warring people. We are a warring people. What we've experienced in Canada post-World War II is an anomaly.

An anomaly. We call our military up for domestic issues to clear the sidewalks and streets of Toronto because they're not strong enough, like us Ottawa people, to clear the snow.

That is what our military does domestically. Now, our military is an incredible unit, but all that to say is we don't have armed conflicts within our borders.

[21:41] And praise God for that. But understand that we live in the exception of exceptions that just prove the rule of how violent humanity is. We might believe we are immune, but we are certainly not.

Sin, it is not only ubiquitous, but it goes to the very depths of who we are as a human race. Maybe you want to push back.

That's okay. I think it's good to push back. Not everybody's like this. In fact, it's not the common person that starts the war. It is the power brokers.

It is the tyrants. It is the leaders of every generation. They are the ones that should have these accusations hoisted upon them.

And I think there is legitimacy to that. But Paul isn't just using hyperbole to make a point. He is really giving us the knockout blow of the human experience.

[22:47] and he really, really goes for the knockout blow in verse 18. And this will be our third and final point. Verse 18. There is no fear of God before their eyes.

The question is what lies at the core of all our human problems? How deep does sin truly go? Why are we unable to resist sin? Why do you find it impossible to live even one day?

Be honest. Okay? Why do you find it impossible to live even one day without thinking ill thoughts, saying hurtful words, or holding on to bitterness, or giving into temptation? Why?

Why? Why have you been unsuccessful even this morning? Verse 18 is the answer. There is no fear of God before their eyes.

There is no fear of God before our eyes. We have turned away from God and as a result we plunge headlong into sin. We effectively reject God's rule.

[23:46] Again, I've mentioned this just briefly in the other section, but we are the new king. We are upon our own throne. We effectively say we do not believe that the source of life is strong enough to sustain us.

No amount of money or possessions can satisfy us. For long we deny that true satisfaction can be found in worshipping and praising anyone other than ourselves. our desire for praise and glory is never fulfilled.

There is no fear of God before our eyes. In fact, you'll notice that the neglect of God is precisely what drives this entire section.

Notice that Paul, he frames this section at the beginning and at the end with this sentiment. Turn with me back to verse 11 and the second part of verse 11.

What does it say? No one understands. No one seeks for God. And then he ends the section, there is no fear of God before their eyes. It frames the whole thing. Okay?

[24:51] Sin at its very core is ungodly. It's ungodliness. And ungodliness isn't, again, just a neutral thing. It causes us to be less flourishing, less bright, less upright.

We are dull, we are bent, we are sputtering. It does not make us strong, it makes us weak. And not in the good kind of weakness where we, we'll see shortly, admits that we need help, but a type of weakness that parades itself around like ultimate strength.

The worst kind of weakness. When our heart is turned away from the fear of the Lord, virtues become vices.

good things are twisted into evil things. What Paul is saying here, and what he has said in verses 1 to 8, and what he has been saying from chapter 1 verse 18 all the way here, is that whether you are people of the law, the law given at Sinai, the Jews, or people who have the law written on their hearts, we saw that in chapter 2, which is to say a God consciousness, we are both Jew and Gentile, all people inclined to deny God's rule and standards, and what do we do?

We minimize, we downplay, we excuse our sin, and we are experts at this. We are experts at this, and in a way, we regularly commit, at least by way of a thought experiment, a kind of regicide against God.

[26:45] His judgments are so perfect and just that we have to find a way around them. But here's the thing, I can rail at the justice who all had exonerated Philippe Hebert for his partner's murder.

I can, and I think there's a place to rail against that kind of injustice. But I exonerate myself every day. I do. I do.

And maybe you do as well. Exonerate yourself every day by ignoring what God has said and who he is. How often do you say, as the justice said in his ruling, I've gone through too much, or the situation, I mean, like can you blame me?

I look to exonerate myself all the time. The reality is God is holy. And no matter how much self-exoneration I do, I, apart from him, am not.

Sin is incredibly ungodly, and that ungodliness at the very core of all our sin, that's the problem. So, sin, it's ubiquitous.

[28:04] Sin, it penetrates all the way down, and sin at its very core is ungodly. It is giving God the finger, saying to him, to hell with you.

Paul has presented us with this problem, and I believe he has done a marvelous job, because, again, I can only speak for myself and how I feel from this.

I feel pretty crummy. I'm kind of glad to move on from this in some way, which only shows that I'm very uncomfortable with my sin, and that really Paul has done a great job here.

The evidence has accumulated since verse 18 of chapter 1, the prosecution has finished, now it is our turn to defend ourselves. Verse 19, we're there, the prosecution has said everything, what are we going to say in our defense?

Verse 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.

[29:09] What can we say? The answer is nothing. What can we say that holds any weight against the damning evidence laid out before us? Can we appeal to our good behavior?

Can we self-justify? Can we simply work harder to uphold God's law? The answer is no. Paul concludes in verse 20, for by works of the law, whether that is from the Torah of Sinai or the morality that we know to be true in our hearts, for by works of the law no human being will be justified in God's sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

The verdict is in, friends, you're guilty. I'm guilty. But here at Messiah West, we don't like to end our sermons without hope.

Okay? So where is the hope? Even though we may have endured difficult childhoods, we struggle with self-esteem, we have challenges with school or had challenges with school, with society, with parents, with marriages, with friendships, with family, real problems, okay?

I don't want to downplay any of these things, and I'm sure you could fit in a few more things. Real problems, okay? Things that kind of put us on the edge of sanity, put us on the edge of what we can take.

[30:41] Nothing can justify sin. Sin is so heinous and sinister that it will take our deepest hurts and biggest struggles and use them as an excuse to justify behavior and to call sin something else other than what it truly is.

Sin is unbelievably deceptive. Because of this, we can never truly diagnose sin. And friends, if you can't diagnose a problem, there is no hope for a solution, okay?

You can't just see a lump and say, is it cancer, is it not cancer? Like, you need to have a full diagnosis before a solution can happen.

So this is why, here's the hope, the law, even though everybody is guilty under the law, it is a gift. Okay, the law of God is a gift to us. It was never meant to be the means for us to climb out of the pit, but rather it shows us how deep and dark that pit truly is, and how no length of rope or number of rungs can help us to escape.

It is good to know the problem before you, okay? It is never good to stick your head in the sand like an ostrich. What the law does, it reveals our nature, and more importantly, though, it reveals God's nature.

[32:07] And what is God's nature? That he is holy and he is perfect and we are not, but more that he is good and that he is patient and that he is mighty to save. Why? Because he is a God of love.

In fact, it says that God is love. So, with sin and the utter totality of depravity as the background, we then consider the gospel, the good news of salvation, that God will not leave us to wallow in hopeless darkness, but will save us.

And here's the thing, we know how deep the darkness is, and maybe it's even darker than we think, and God, what he doesn't do is just, you know, this God is fantastic, he knows how deep this pit is, so he has the length of rope needed to reach us.

So we climb out, he throws us the rope, he doesn't do that, okay, he doesn't just take this giant cosmic ladder and put it down the pit. What does he do? He belays himself down, okay, all the way down to the pit, from the top to the bottom.

We are there, we are blind, we are dirty, we are scared, we are hopeless, and what does he do? He attaches us to him, and then he brings us up, okay?

[33:26] He's the one who does the climbing, he's the one who gets us out of the pit, and what do we need to do? We need to cry out for help and then embrace him as he saves us from certain defeat and despair.

So you see, there is no amount of climbing we can do, but friends, it is to our benefit that we know how deep we truly are. So the law is good, and it's glorious, not for its intended purpose.

So read God's word. Become convicted of your sins. Don't try to cloak them, dissemble or cloak them before the face of Almighty God, but instead be very honest with your sins.

And yet more importantly, remember that even though you are a great sinner, that God is an even greater savior, and that he is not just willing, but he delights in salvation.

So remember that the gospel is the power to save all people, for in it the righteousness of God that we need, that we do not have, is being revealed.

[34:40] Praise be to God and his son Jesus Christ forever. Amen.