

How Bad Is It Really?

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Preacher: Rev. Keith Ganzer

[0 : 01] Our text this morning, as we hear from the living God again in his word, is Romans chapter 3, verses 9 to 20.

We've been navigating the opening chapters of Romans now for the past three months. And in talking with a few of you in just this past week, I've heard this common refrain, that Romans is hard. It's hard to understand at times, and it's hard to deal with when you do understand it. So I want to encourage you by agreeing.

Romans is hard. Reading this book, studying it, hearing it preached week by week requires of you a disciplined application of your mind.

But even more, it takes a humility of heart to really hear and understand and respond. Now, of course, we're in fine company if we find Paul a little difficult at times.

[1 : 13] In the catechism class this week, we came across the Apostle Peter's words about Paul's letters in 2 Peter 3. Do you know them? There are some things in them, that is Paul's letters, that are hard to understand, Peter says.

We decided as a class that that was rather comforting to us. But this week, I've been thinking it's a bit scary, too, because if a first-century apostle has a hard time of it, does a sleep-deprived father of a two-week-old stand much chance at all?

Probably not. But let me encourage you that the issues we wrestle with in Romans, issues like sin and law and justification and righteousness, these are at the heart of our identity as Christians. I know of nothing more practical to the Christian life than to wrestle with these matters. They shape you. And they'll drive your life if you get them into your brain and into your heart.

And so, once again, here we go. Hang in there. Romans 3, 9 to 20. It is the first stopping point we've come to since Paul launched his argument in chapter 1, verse 18.

[2 : 46] I think, as do most other students of this letter, that chapter 1, verse 18 through chapter 3, verse 20 forms one large unit. I'd like to take a moment and turn back to chapter 1.

If you have your Bibles out or if you would grab the Pew Bible and go to page 939, you can track with me. I want to back up and reread chapter 1, verses 16 and 17, because I think those two verses are the roadmap for the opening chapters of Romans.

Chapter 1, verse 16. For Paul says, I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. From that thesis statement, if I may put it that way, Paul then moves on in verse 18 of chapter 1, to begin to lay the groundwork needed to show that the gospel is the power of salvation for all, Jew and Gentile alike.

In fact, thus far, he's not really gotten to the positive side of the gospel, has he? That's coming up next. Just around the corner in chapter 3, verse 21, when Paul picks up on the righteousness of God that he introduced in chapter 1, verse 17, and runs with it full speed ahead.

[4 : 23] But he's not there yet. To get there, Paul has to show that the Jew and the Gentile are indeed on the same footing before God. The issue would have loomed large in the first century church.

He needs to show that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. Chapter 1, verse 18. He needs to show that you have no excuse, O man. Every one of you who judges, you who judge and yet practice the very same things. Chapter 2, verses 1 and 2. He needs to show that God shows no partiality.

Chapter 2, verse 11. For all who have sinned without the law will perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. Whether within the law or without it, sin leads

to its terrible end.

So by the end of chapter 2, Paul has firmly established that being a Jew ethnically is of no avail. And in a shocking turn of phrase, he says in chapter 2, verse 28, no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.

[5 : 41] But a Jew is one inwardly. And circumcision is a matter of the heart by the spirit, not by the letter. Not the letter.

Meaning, you recall, not the law all by itself. There were some who misunderstood this. Who thought that being born into the Jewish people, into the old covenant, somehow granted one a special status with God.

It doesn't, Paul says. Such things don't matter. Except, of course, that they do matter in a way. And so Paul responds to his interlocutor there in chapter 3, verse 1.

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Valid questions. To which Paul gives a clear answer.

Much in every way, he says. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. In the history of redemption, the scoreboard reads, Advantage Jews.

[6 : 52] But to what end? You know your Old Testament well enough, I think, to know that despite Israel's declaration in Exodus 19 that they made when Moses presented them with the covenant of God, when they piously said, all that the Lord has spoken, we will do.

They didn't. Israel as a people broke the covenant of God, and they would keep breaking it all through their history. Read sometime the prophet Ezekiel in chapter 20 of his book, who would much later on lament Israel's history from the Exodus all the way to the exile, as testifying to the fact that although she had been delivered from slavery in Egypt, she had not been delivered from slavery to sin.

The words the Lord spoke to Moses after Israel made the golden calf in that horrific moment of Exodus 32 would be true all through her history. I have seen this people, the Lord said, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people.

The advantage was theirs. But in the end, where did it get them? What then, Paul says, in verse 9 of chapter 3 in the start of our text this morning, are we Jews any better off?

No. Not at all. The advantage was ours, but did it leave us any better off in the end? Not at all.

[8 : 32] Why not? Finish the verse. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.

Paul moves very carefully here. The back end of verse 9 is, I think, Paul's summary of the argument he's been making since verse 18 of chapter 1, but it's more than just a summary.

It's also an interpretation. Here, for the first time, the significant noun sin occurs in Romans. And notice the wording. Paul doesn't say what we might expect.

He doesn't say, we have already charged that everyone has sinned. That would have been true.

He'd listed the sins in chapters 1 and 2, and he'd applied them both to Gentiles and to Jews.

But here, Paul goes further in the argument. We have charged that all are under sin, he says. Some other translations capture what I think Paul means in that choice of preposition.

[9 : 40] He means that all are under the power of sin, under the control of sin. With one little word, Paul introduces a major theme of Romans.

That of sin as a personified force and of the slavery of all mankind to it. Sin in Romans refers not just to individual acts of sinning, of missing the mark.

It's more than that. Sin takes on a malevolent life of its own, exercising power over people and over communities.

It dominates all humankind. It gives rise to the unrighteousness, the pride, the selfish ambition, and the disregard for truth documented so thoroughly in chapters 1 and 2.

As one New Testament scholar puts it, sin is for Paul a state which embraces all humanity. All participate in it.

[10 : 46] And from its dominion, they are not able to escape without outside exposure and intervention. And indeed, when Paul does come later to chapter 6, he will say to Christians there in verse 20, you were slaves of sin.

But now, now you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God.

But Paul's not there yet in chapter 3. For now, he makes simply this point, that all Jew and Gentile alike are under the same domination.

And what then follows in verses 10 to 18 is, as one commentator puts it, the final nail in the coffin. Like a practiced rabbi, Paul strings together a powerful set of quotations from the Jewish scriptures to make the point.

In these verses, he alludes and or quotes from Ecclesiastes 7, Psalm 14, Psalm 53, Psalm 5, Psalm 140, Psalm 10, Isaiah 59, and Psalm 36.

[12:05] We could spend weeks looking at the context of each of those texts and seeing just how masterfully Paul has assembled this set of quotations.

And if we did that, we would see that simply through his selection and arrangement of those quotes, the point Paul draws out in verse 19 has already been made for us.

That the law speaks to those to whom it was given and in so doing, the whole world is accountable to God. Just what does the law, meaning here the entirety of the Old Testament, just what does it say?

Verse 10, 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.

The repetition hammers the point home.

[13:16] The condition is universal. There is no fear of God before their eyes, verse 18 says. John Stott summarizes by saying that the essence of sin is ungodliness.

God's complaint is that we do not really seek Him at all. Being under sin is first and foremost a ruined relationship with God.

Sin resists God. Suppresses the truth about God. And sin does more. It affects every part of our human constitution and it ruins relationships with other people.

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. In their paths are ruin and misery and the way of peace they have not known.

[14:21] Throats, tongues, lips, mouths, feet, eyes, the bodily limbs and organs created and given that we might serve people and glorify God now used instead to harm people and live in open rebellion against God.

Under sin, we all speak death and act in violence, Paul says. That is our nature.

Since, according to Paul, who speaks according to the scriptures, sin has twisted and tainted every part of our humanness. So it's not difficult to see the point.

No defense remains. Whatever distinction between Jew and Gentile, whatever is the advantage of the Jew, it does not apply at this level.

When these scriptures assert that no one is righteous, no one understands, no one seeks for God, no one does good, no one fears God, they mean no one.

[15:38] There are no exceptions. There are no extenuating circumstances. There is no one. Because all are under sin.

Verse 19 then reinforces the point, in case it wasn't sufficiently obvious. 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 held accountable to God.

When the law speaks its condemnation from which not even one can escape, it says it above all to those under the law, the people in the law, quite literally.

It's actually not the same preposition as Paul used for under sin. Paul means here the Jews, Israel, those who lived within the law's jurisdiction.

And then Paul says we see the purpose of it all. Why it was that the law was given. And I find this to be a bit startling at first.

[16:54] The law was given, verse 19 says, in order that the whole world might be silent. That every mouth be stopped, as Paul puts it.

To put an end to all protest in any attempted self-defense. To make it clear that all the world without exception is answerable to God and liable to judgment.

These are not new thoughts to us, having read Romans through to this point. Paul's not saying something new. He's thundering forth with the resounding conclusion of the opening section of his letter that's going to set up the unveiling of the good news in just another line or two down the page. In verses 19 and 20, Paul means to say as clearly as he can that the people of Israel cannot distinguish themselves from the rest of the world or claim some righteousness that makes them any

less liable to judgment.

But don't just stop there. Because the larger point is that if the Jew can make no plea for special consideration, no one can. Every mouth is stopped.

[18 : 11] The whole world held accountable to God. The law may have been written for one people directly, but the point of the law is to stop every mouth and make the whole world accountable.

Accountable not in some neutral sense, Paul uses a technical legal term there that's employed only when the defendant has no evidence left to plead for his innocence.

Israel is the lesson book to the world. Israel is the example to all the nations of our universal sinful rebellious disposition.

The law directly given to Israel nevertheless reveals that all people deserve and await God's judgment. Jew or Gentile, the situation is the same.

The only evidence that can be produced is evidence of sin. The defendants have no more to say. They stand in the dock awaiting the verdict and it can only go one way.

[19 : 16] guilty. They stand in the dock guilty. And this is so because 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.

Let's take that verse backwards. Okay? Through the law comes knowledge of sin. What does that mean?

It's not just information about the law. Not just that the law tells us about sin. It's much more than that. Paul means that when the law meets a person who is under sin, whose heart is hard and unregenerate, the law's effect on that person is to reveal the rebellion of our hearts.

It makes our sin known. It brings it out. Dormant and unrecognized though it may have been, it brings it out and sin shows itself in its full color in face of the law.

[20 : 29] When any person under sin encounters the law of God, the law can have only one effect to bring knowledge of sin. That, I think, is the point of the end of verse 20.

And that stands as the ground. The reason why the first part of verse 20 is true. By works of the law, no human being will be justified in God's sight because through the law comes knowledge of sin.

Now, if you have your Bibles out and particularly if you have the ESV Bible in your hand, you will see the smallest little footnote after the words no human being in verse 5.

It's tiny to put your glasses on. And at the bottom of the page, in the bottom left-hand corner, that footnote is there and the editors tell you that the Greek word that Paul uses there that Paul uses that they translate as human being is the word usually translated flesh.

Flesh. Flesh is a very important term in Romans. It's used by Paul to signal humankind seen as physically corrupt and morally rebellious.

[21 : 50] And I think it's important to see that Paul selects that term here because the principle Paul establishes is that no flesh can ever, ever, ever, ever be justified by doing the works of the law.

Why? Because, as he will say later in Romans chapter 8, verse 7, the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God.

For it does not submit to God's law. Indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God, Paul says.

Everywhere the law meets an unregenerate heart, it awakens resistance, not faith. It doesn't overcome sin.

It cannot overcome sin. Hear this well. If, to this point, you've not tracked with anything I've been saying, then let it all go and hear this.

[23 : 05] That the problem at the end of this first major unit of Romans, the problem to which verse 21 and following of chapter 3 is addressed, the problem that remains the universal problem today is not the law.

It is sin. All are under sin, enslaved to sin, and the law is powerless to deal with it.

Sin is our pre-existing condition. We are under it and we need to be rescued from it. We need to be rescued from it.

The law can't rescue us. In that first part of verse 20, Paul's statement that by works of the law no human being will be justified is a recognizable echo of one more Old Testament text.

Psalms 143 in verse 2 which reads that no living person will be justified in your sight. Paul simply says what any reader of the Jewish scriptures should know very well that the law was never meant

to be the rescue agent for the people of God.

[24 : 30] Never. But that the good news, the glorious message that Paul now finally will begin in verse 21 of chapter 3 is that there is a rescue agent and it's not the law.

It's God himself. Psalm 143 begins this way. You heard Dan read it at the beginning of the service. The psalmist says, Hear my prayer, O Lord. Give ear to my plea for mercy in your faithfulness. Answer me in your righteousness.

righteousness. The psalmist knew and Paul in alluding to that psalm knew and reminds us that our only hope is found in God's righteousness, God's faithfulness, the faithfulness of the God who made great promises to his people, promises to be their God and that they would be his people, promises to deliver them not just circumstantially from slavery in Egypt, but from slavery to sin and death. Promises of an eternal kingdom in which righteousness dwells and the promise to finally write the law on their hearts. To give them a new heart and to put his own spirit within them to cause them as Ezekiel will say, to cause them to walk in his statutes and to be careful to obey his rules.

[26 : 10] The question at the end of this section of Romans is the same one posed in verse 3 of chapter 3. Does their unfaithfulness nullify the faithfulness of God?

By no means, Paul says. God's no liar. His promises are true. But if all are under sin and the law can only condemn, sin, if no one living is righteous before God, as the psalmist says, how can God save them?

How can God do what he's promised to do? Where do we see the faithfulness of God? Oh, it's just around the corner.

Glance at verses 21 and 22. They're not my text. I'm not allowed to talk about them. But how can I keep from speaking of them? I can't. We have to at least read them.

But now, Paul says, but now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.

[27 : 25] Thanks be to God. Although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, where is it? Where is it found? Well, it's found, dear friends, in Jesus.

The old covenant with its commands could not solve the problem of sin. The answer to the problem of sin is Jesus. God solved the problem.

Romans 8.3. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, God condemned sin in the flesh.

He condemned it Himself. There is nothing more practical in all of life than to believe that.

Do you believe it? Do you really believe what you believe? Do you believe that everybody in the whole world is guilty before God?

[28 : 49] That I am guilty? That you are guilty? That everybody in your family is guilty? Everybody at your school and workplace is guilty?

Everybody on the bus is guilty? Everybody you see walking down Granville Street is guilty?

Everybody in the round the world is guilty? Do you believe that no mouth anywhere in the world, educated or not, will be able to raise a legitimate objection against God's judgment?

Every mouth will be stopped. Oh, men boast as if it isn't true. Where is God, they say, and go on their way?

It's all short-lived. All people will perish and meet Him, and their mouths will be stopped. Do you believe then, finally, that were it not for the cross of Christ and the power of the regenerating Holy Spirit in us, that you and I, Christian, would be just as rebellious as any person in the world?

If you do believe these things, then let this text make you love the gospel and leap for joy that you are not just a sinner, but a saved sinner.

[30 : 19] And let it make you an evangelist, will you? A bringer of that good news. Or if perhaps you are really hearing and believing these things for the first time this morning, then please, while there is still time, turn to Christ and trust Him for your rescue from sin.

And in two weeks' time, the first Sunday of Advent, come and hear of the righteousness of God revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.