

Romans 3:9-24 “How Can I Follow a Jesus Whose Followers Do So Much Evil?”

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama.! Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

! This summer's series that we're starting this morning, I want to share one thing from our time in Ireland the past few days.

So many beautiful places and people there, like our mission partners, the Lewis family. So wonderful to be with them. But this one particular piece of papyrus, which doesn't look all that impressive perhaps, in a museum that we went to there, is dated to the year 200.

It's an 1800-year-old copy discovered in Egypt of the book of Hebrews. This particular piece that happened to be on display when we visited of the very end of Hebrews, the last passage that I had preached before getting on a plane to fly over to Ireland.

And there it is, 1800 years old. And we had just finished this series through Hebrews. And I was just reminded, and I wanted to encourage you, just the gift of God's Word, right?

[1 : 36] To have that, to be able to look back to how long God has preserved it for us. To our commitment to God's Word, our need for it.

The hundreds and thousands of years now that the Bible has been showing us how to have relationship with the God who made us. He's revealed Himself to us, especially in His Word. What a great gift. It just reminded me of that this past week. And that is why we almost always preach through books of the Bible here at Southwood.

This summer will be a little bit different. Still the Bible, not changing that. But instead of going through one book, we're going to be bouncing around the Scriptures, Old and New Testaments, a little bit.

As we seek to explore eight questions that people often ask about God, about faith in our lives.

[2 : 38] And so I want to say up front that whether it is you or a neighbor, perhaps, who is presently wrestling with any of these questions, please know this, I am not hoping to give exhaustive answers to each one of these questions, as though in 30 minutes I could dispense with what people have wrestled with for centuries.

That's not the goal. My heart, rather, is that we would look to the Bible together to see some of the ways that God speaks, that His Word addresses these matters.

And then also for us after this time, each week, to have time to address your perspective, to hear your comments and discuss with you how these impact you, how it impacts your life and your faith and relationships.

So please invite your friends, your neighbors with whom you have conversations like this, to join us as we are discussing issues of eternal importance.

Or consider these sermons as ways to further those important conversations that you're having on your own when you leave here. That's my heart in looking at these things together.

[4 : 04] But remember, we go back to the Bible. One week we'll actually talk about why and about trusting the Bible specifically. But each week we'll go back to the Bible as the authoritative Word of God, where we find what we need to know.

He tells us what we need to know. Even if it's not the full answer, exactly what we thought we were seeking, He gives us what we need. But if you're here this morning and that's not how you see the Bible, you don't know for sure if God is speaking when the Bible is open, don't let that stop you from listening and from engaging with us.

Even if you're not sure that it's God's Word, it is at least, isn't it, the essence of Christianity. It is what this historical figure of great importance named Jesus and the people associated with Him, it's what they would have to say about these questions that we're pondering.

So join us in that, even if you're not sure what it is that we're reading. These questions can be difficult, okay? They are for me.

This is outside of my comfort zone. Appreciate your prayers. They also can be emotional for different ones of us for various different reasons.

[5 : 34] So I want to pray for our hearts before we start this conversation today about how can I follow a Jesus whose followers do so much evil?

Will you pray with me? Father, for any of the questions that are on our hearts, you are the one that we need to hear from.

We want to hear your voice speaking to us. We want to know your heart more than anything else.

We want to be shaped more by you, not just by ourselves.

So would you speak to us? Would you teach us? Would you even reform us? Even this morning. In Jesus' name.

Amen. I like your Christ. I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.

[6 : 39] The famous words of Mahatma Gandhi. Novelist Walker Percy has one of his characters in a book, Quip, or one might even become a Christian if there were few, if any, Christians around.

I'm not sure, honestly, that there is a complaint that I've heard more often, more consistently from friends and neighbors not following Jesus than this idea we're talking about this morning of how can I follow a Jesus whose followers do so much evil? And we're not going to be able to cover all the reasons people feel that, but people feel this way for a wide range of different reasons.

For some, that perspective or concern is historical, like violent atrocities committed by Christians during the Crusades centuries ago, or the support of so many American Christians and theologians and churches for the institution of slavery in the early days of our country.

For others, it's not so much in the past, it's more a present issue, like the moral failures of pastors and religious leaders they've watched, or the things done and said by political leaders appearing to represent or be supported by Christians. Current issues. And then I've heard from many others for whom this is profoundly personal. Like in their own lives, they've had friends or parents who are one way at church and another way with them. Or they've experienced what they'll call church hurt from an interaction with a Christian leader or leaders where they felt unloved, specifically unwelcome due to their sexual orientation, their lifestyle choices, or their struggles with faith. They ask questions and these questions or views, they're just not welcome, they've been told.

If you're here this morning and I'm not articulating your particular concern along these lines, please come share it with us if you'd be so willing in the discussion afterwards. We would love to hear from you, even if it's hard to hear. But the concern that so many have is, Jesus seems like such a good guy. I like so much of what Jesus seems to be about. But you people who represent him claim to be so loving, so moral, so good, but you're not better than anybody else.

[9 : 38] You just so often do things that don't match up with this. I want us to start by looking at Romans 3 today.

This is one of the letters from the Apostle Paul, this one to the church in Rome, where he's telling them about God's judgment against the wickedness of mankind. That's where he started.

And then he turns to discuss God's very people, the Jews, and their standing in light of this.

Romans 3 at verse 9, listen now to God's word.

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. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law.

[11 : 31] 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, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Amen. Some of you still remind me of this local news spot. It was here about 15 years ago when local ordinances were being passed to outlaw texting while driving.

Just down here at the corner of the airport in Whitesburg, there were signs reminding us of the new ban, and the news cameras panned to cars at the intersection right down here with distracted drivers, and then one of them was this pastor that some of you recognized way more quickly than one would have wished.

Now, certainly not my greatest failure. Okay? Don't hear me wrong.

But most of them are not broadcast on live TV. And even then, even in that moment, I remember thinking, Ah, great.

[13:00] I've blown it. I need to own this. There's so many excuses or clarifications that could be made, but the pastor caught breaking the law on camera.

I'm sorry. That's where I want to start in answering this question this morning. I'm sorry.

I may not know your personal story yet. Some of you have shared some of them with me. But I'm sorry. I don't deny the ugly truth.

And neither does the Bible. God actually agrees with your premise. The people of God are, like others, guilty of evil.

That's actually what's being explained here in Romans 3 with this lengthy quotation from the Psalms, from the prophet Isaiah.

[14:08] Many of these hard words originally describing the wicked. Only some of them kind of including the people of God on the side.

But now they're applied directly to God's people to make clear that all are guilty. No one is entirely good.

Their words are used to deceive. Their feet have run toward violence. And they have caused much harm in God's world by not living in His ways.

And when you've been impacted by that, when you've been hurt or discouraged by Christians acting unlike Christ, I don't want to defend us.

I want to repent for us. I'm sorry. It's not okay. Please hear me.

[15:12] We have blown it. Historically. Blown it. No matter what may be said about the context on the other side, many in the Crusades lost sight of the words of Jesus.

And in the name of Jesus did ungodly harm to Muslims, to Jews, to women, to children, among others. Our African-American neighbors, our homosexual neighbors, and our children are among those churches have sinned against.

Some of you have grown up being dragged to church by fathers and told to listen and learn how to love only to return home and find them not loving your mother when they got there.

Many of you have listened to pastors talking about sexual ethics or how to live for Christ at work only to watch them be unfaithful to their wives or abuse their power in ways that have hurt you in spite of what they said.

Most of you have seen powerful people claim the name of Jesus when it benefited them politically and mock everything that Jesus is about when out of the spotlight.

[16:45] I'm sorry. Sadly, we have proven quite well the Bible's assertion that all are under sin.

None is righteous. There's no fear of God before their eyes. We don't live as those in relationship with God ought to live. The Bible doesn't hide from that.

Now, it's also important to say, lest I be confusing, I don't want to dismiss any of that, but it's also true Christians are often wonderful people.

Many are so loving, so gracious, so generous. Christians have led the way in building hospitals and developing health care for centuries, especially with the care of children in ways no one else was doing.

They've transformed science and math and blessed many with their art and music. They have fought to outlaw slavery, human trafficking, defend the rights of all people made in God's image.

[17:51] So grateful. In fact, New York Times journalist Nicholas Kristof, who himself is not claiming at all to follow Jesus, wrote in defense of Jesus' followers in our day.

Some self-appointed evangelical leaders seem homophobic, and many who claim to be pro-life seem little concerned with human life post-uterus.

Those are the preachers who won headlines and disdain. But, in reporting on poverty, disease, and depression, I've seen so many others.

Evangelicals are disproportionately likely to donate 10% of their incomes to charities. More important, go to the front lines at home or abroad in the battles against hunger, malaria, prison

rape, obstetric fistula, human trafficking, or genocide, and some of the bravest people you meet are evangelical Christians who truly live their faith.

He writes, I'm not particularly religious myself, but I stand in awe of those I've seen risking their lives in this way, and it sickens me to see that faith mocked at New York cocktail parties.

[19 : 06] That's true too, okay? And I'm thankful for it. There are many good examples of Christians living like Christ. But the Bible says that the point, it's not a contest of the moral performance of Jesus' followers versus that of others.

That's not the game. The truth of Jesus does not rise and fall on the rise and fall of your pastor's life and his moral performance.

Thank goodness for that. Because the biblical message is that we are all guilty to all of us.

Importantly, though, Jesus addresses the evil of his followers. Listen to 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.

Accountability for every person, for every word, every action, every thought. That's why Jesus says from the earliest days of his ministry, I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

[20 : 32] Repent, he said. Turn from your wicked ways. It's the call of the prophets over the centuries now echoed by the greatest prophet, Christ himself.

Repent. That's why even the apostle Paul can write later in Romans that he, as a follower of Jesus, as a leader in the church, writing a book of the Bible, battles to do the right things that he wants to do.

He often loses and he doesn't do them. As a result of this struggle that Christians have, every single New Testament letter, including seven specific ones in the book of Revelation, addresses sin among God's people and calls us back to Jesus.

This is really important, y'all. Our struggles, our failures, are not unexpected to God. They don't catch him by surprise.

And when I say that, I'm not glorifying or excusing our failures. No, far from it. Jesus doesn't do that. But I am reminding us that our sin is a part of the Bible's story.

[21 : 48] It's not something that God doesn't see coming, that God can't account for. He calls us to account for it. In fact, I'm gonna get tough here, where Jesus specifically addresses our hypocrisy.

Not denying it, notice, but calling it to account. Verse 20 here says, for by works of the law, no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

In other words, no one gets an award from God for coloring in the lines. He's not impressed.

Christians sometimes come across as saying, we are holier than thou.

Jesus says, no one gets holier through performing better than the next guy. Remember, no one is righteous. religious leaders in Jesus' day, they seem to think they could perform well enough in light of God's law to be acceptable to God while others were not.

To be closer to him while others were further away. They thought they could pretend to be holy outwardly, even when they weren't any different at their core.

[23 : 11] I should have listened to just some of Jesus' just excoriating words to the Pharisees. For they preach, but do not practice.

They tie up heavy burdens hard to bear and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. Now he addresses them directly, woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites.

These are the religious leaders. For you tithe mint and dill and cumin and have neglected the weightier matters of the law. Justice, mercy, and faithfulness. These you ought to have done without neglecting the others.

You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites. For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence.

You blind Pharisee, first clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites.

[24 : 19] For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

How does Jesus feel about hypocrisy? He hates it as much as you do if you've been hurt by it. He cuts right to the heart, and He calls us to consistent living, to wholehearted loving. See, maybe I could follow this Jesus.

Maybe you could follow this Jesus who hates hypocrisy as much as you do. Who doesn't come to tell you that He's drafting the best performers onto His team, and so you're probably going to be left out and unwelcome.

Who holds the leaders of His people along with the rest of them to higher standards, just like you want. Who calls them to account. Maybe, maybe He's someone you could follow, but I'd like to tell you there's something even better than that.

[25 : 39] As important as it is that Jesus calls out the evil in His people, there's something even more hopeful that I don't want us to miss, because Romans 3 doesn't leave us unrighteous before a holy, righteous God.

It doesn't leave us accountable to God, unjustified, out of relationship with Him. That's not where it stops. Listen to the hope that He gives. Something entirely different enters the story.

But now, verse 21, 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, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Jesus actually offers unique hope for all those guilty of evil. That's what we've got to see. What's that hope? It's not that one day they're going to get it together and finally perform well enough for God to accept them.

[26 : 58] That's not the hope here, is it? No, it's that there's a righteousness, a moral perfection before a perfect God that comes not through your performance, but through a replacement.

It's what Martin Luther called alien righteousness because it comes from outside of you. Alien righteousness.

It's actually, Romans says, God's righteousness. Ah, perfect righteousness. That's what we need. Through faith in Jesus' performance.

Not your own, because, verse 23, all religious and irreligious have sinned and fallen short of God's glory.

None of us can work our way all the way to God, but we can be made right with Him. How does it say? By grace, as a gift, receiving something we don't deserve through the redemption of Christ Jesus.

[28 : 07] What happens is Jesus lives the perfect life with no hypocrisy at all, right? And then He dies the death that we deserve so that we who were not righteous could be made righteous forever.

See, the Bible is honest about our sin, about evil. Not to glorify sin, but to glorify Jesus, the one who knows what to do with it, the one who knows how to handle it.

That's Jesus. Jesus. Would you imagine with me for just a minute every single thought, everything you've ever done or said or texted being put on the local news for everyone to watch.

Not just one thing. All of them. That's scary, isn't it? Just for other people to see.

Think about God seeing all of it. Then I want you to imagine the next segment of this local news episode. It's the story of Jesus' life being played out.

[29 : 31] When He's tempted to live for Himself, He quotes Scripture and obeys His Father. When appealed to exercise His power over the people, He slips away and finds the lonely and left out woman that everyone else has overlooked.

When told He's too important, He welcomes the little children. When tortured and falsely accused, He refuses to speak ill of others and instead humbly suffers for others.

The good news of Jesus is not first that you can be more like Him. Although we can, we will one day. The good news is that precisely because we couldn't be like Him, He takes our news clip of all of the things that we've thought and done and said and He puts His name beneath it rather than ours.

And He goes to the cross to pay the penalty for our cosmic crimes. even when we knock off our microphones in excitement.

Jesus does two things and that's just the first. He takes our clip and puts His name on the bottom of it. He goes to the cross to pay for those things and then He takes His clip, that perfect life, and He

throws our names at the bottom of it so that we go to heaven, the home of the righteous where He alone deserved to be.

[31 : 09] And friends, that gives you unique hope because it's not like other religions where you have to keep performing well enough to be accepted by God. No, it's the other way around.

You're accepted by God. You're with God because of Jesus which eventually, by the way, will be the thing that makes you like Him. Being with Him is what's going to make you like Him.

But it's eternally secure because it's not hanging on how you do this afternoon. Jesus is eternally perfect in your place and that won't change even if you blow it again tomorrow.

Amen? So listen, if you're here today and you're wondering about following Jesus and you're asking, how can I follow a Jesus whose followers do so much evil?

One answer is you can follow Him if you admit that you're as desperately in need of saving as His failing, struggling, hypocritical followers.

[32 : 22] Friend, you may even think that you're better than most of the Christians that you know in many areas of life. You may be right.

But are you good enough? Do you want to stand before God on your own with your own newsreel, with your own record?

Or do you, like me, need the perfect righteousness of Jesus in your place? That's what He offers to you. If you're a follower of Jesus like me, let me remind us that we often think that we need to win debates about our goodness and rightness when the good news is not our goodness, goodness.

But Jesus' goodness. We ought to become more like Him over time, yes. And we ought to rejoice when we see Christians reflecting more of His image in this world, for sure.

But that's not our hope. So don't be like me and sometimes think that Jesus' kingdom, the only way forward for the kingdom of Jesus is when the Christian athlete wins the Olympics and thanks God on TV, now we're winning.

[33 : 46] When the Christian politician wins the election and fixes everything, that's how it always works. Even when the Christian kid is nicer to his classmates than the bully, listen, those may be good things.

They may even be evidences of God's kingdom coming, but the hope of the kingdom is that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Not you or me. We're not the ones that need the good record. Matthew 16 is very clear on that. Our mission, as we know Him, is to declare His excellencies, not our own, 1 Peter 2.

One last thought as we close. As I was wrestling with this, I thought, man, I would really understand people hearing this message and thinking, that's a really nice thought.

But honestly, Pastor, it doesn't fix my hurt. My relationship, my offense, what I've lived through. Jesus' followers have broken so much in my life, my family, my world over the years.

[35 : 01] If that's true, and it often is, I think it's really important to ask if Jesus can fix what His followers have broken.

Can Jesus fix what His followers have broken? And I've pondered that and I've wrestled with that because I don't want to minimize the things people are feeling. But I keep coming back to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

He's been betrayed. He's being arrested by a group coming with swords and clubs. And one of His very best followers, one of the key leaders in His church, one of His 12 closest disciples named Peter, lashes out in violence against the will of Jesus.

The story is in Luke 22. And when those who were around Him, Jesus, saw what would follow, they said, Lord, shall we strike with the sword?

Without waiting for an answer to that question, Peter acts. One of them, we find out elsewhere, it's Peter, struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his right ear.

[36 : 24] He might have been swinging for his head. But he cuts off his ear. That's a big deal personally. It could have become a big deal publicly if these two groups had turned arms on one another into great bloodshed.

But Jesus said, no more of this. And He touched His ear and healed him.

Jesus touched His ear and healed him. Listen, Jesus heals what His followers break.

Jesus fixes what His followers fracture. Jesus redeems His followers' mistakes and promises to right all of the wrongs that we perpetrate, not just this one.

Misguided Peter fights to save the kingdom. But Jesus understands the better way. Jesus goes to the cross for all of us where Jesus will purchase forgiveness for Peter.

[37 : 40] Where Jesus will plead forgiveness even for the soldiers nailing Him to the cross. So you can come to Jesus and find out that there is no evil too great committed by His followers or you or anyone else that He can't and won't make whole today in His world or in your life and forever with Him.

there is your hope. Let's pray. Jesus, would you forgive us? Especially those of us, your people, who should know better for making life about ourselves rather than you, for living in our own ways rather than yours, for preferring our own wisdom to yours.

Forgive us. forgive us for the hurt we've caused and the havoc we've wreaked at times. And turn our hearts, all of ours, to you again that we might that we might see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

That we might have our hope firmly fixed on the one who will never let us down. Help that to be our hope that you are coming indeed, Jesus, to make all things new.

And we long for that. We look forward to it. We place our hope in your great name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.