

A Study in the Book of Romans

9

Romans 3:1-20

Key Verse

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 his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

In the last lesson (dealing with **Romans 2**), we saw how Paul went straight for the jugular in his argument that all of mankind – both Jew and Gentile – are equally under God’s judgment and equally in need of the Gospel.

But Paul knows that his Jewish readers will raise objections to what he has just said in **Romans 2**, and so, in **Romans 3**, he addresses those objections.

Introduction

The Gospel’s Three Revelations

The Gospel’s Three Answers

The Gospel’s Answer to Israel

The Gospel in Action

Conclusion

The Jew’s Objections

Having once been a Jewish scholar and propounder of the Law, Paul understands perfectly the kind of objections the Jews will raise to his statements in the previous chapter – that the Jews are as guilty as the Gentiles in God’s sight, and that God is interested in man’s heart, not his outward religious observances.

As though he is having an imaginary debate, he sets out to answer the three main objections they would raise. If we freely paraphrase verses 1-4, the debate would

go something like this...

Objection No. 1

“If what you say is true – that the Jew and Gentile are in the same position before God – then what you are saying is that there is really no advantage in being a Jew!” (**verse 1**).

Paul’s answer (verse 2)

God had separated the Jews, says Paul, for a very specific purpose. Through them He was going to send the Savior and reach a world estranged from him. Not only did the Jews possess God’s moral Law (**Exodus 20:1-17**), but through the prophets and in the picture-form of their worship God had revealed his complete plan of salvation.

In **Hebrews 8:15**, the writer explains:

“The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man. Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices...They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: ‘See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.’”

Read Hebrews 9:1-11,22-24

Read Hebrews 10:1-22

It had all been recorded in the written Word of God in the Old Testament. The Jews had not fully understood it, and had misinterpreted it, but nevertheless it was their possession. They had been “entrusted” with the words of God. And this “entrusting,” by the very definition of the word, meant that God had given it to them for a reason – for a purpose.

The Jews *did* have a special place in God’s plan, but it was a place of *responsibility*, not favoritism. Indeed even today, the Jews are special to the plan of God, as Paul will explain in greater detail in **Romans 9-11**.

Objection No. 2

“Well, maybe it’s true that some of the Jews have been unfaithful and haven’t believed, but God still gave them special promises. Are you saying that God is breaking His promises to them? That would make God unfaithful too!” (**verse 3**).

Paul’s answer (verse 4)

A covenant is a *two-sided* contract. God’s promises to the Jews were mostly conditional – in other words, he promised to bless them *if* they kept the provisions of the covenant. We see this in **Deuteronomy 7:11**, when God says:

“...If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the Lord your God will keep his covenant of love with you, as he swore to your forefathers.”

Read also Deuteronomy 7:9-26

The people of Israel had received different promises through four sources:

Through Abraham

The primary covenant that God made with Israel was through their ancestor, Abraham.

- **The promise** – Salvation, blessing and the inheritance of a Heavenly City through Abraham’s “Seed” (**Hebrews 11:8-10; Genesis 15:5-6; Galatians 3:6-9**).
- **The condition** – Faith (**Romans 4:1-3**).

This covenant was fulfilled in Christ and the New Covenant he initiated (**Galatians 3:16,26-29**).

Through Moses

God made a secondary covenant with Israel at Sinai – a covenant designed to protect them from the assault of idolatry around them.

- **The promise** – inheritance of the earthly land (promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in **Genesis 12:7; 13:14-17; 15:7-8; 17:8**), blessing, and victory over their enemies (**Exodus 6:6-8; 23:20-33; Acts 7:2-7**).
- **The condition** – obedience to God’s commandments (**Exodus 19:5-6; Deuteronomy 5:32-33; 8:11-20; chapter 28**).

This covenant went through two pendulum swings. It was continually broken by Israel prior to the Babylonian exile, and then, by Jesus day, the pendulum had swung in the opposite direction, with the Pharisees over-legalizing the covenant by adding their own man-made commandments to the body of God’s Law.

Through David

God extended his covenant with Abraham with additional promises to David.

- **The promise** – An eternal throne and dominion (**Psalms 89; 2 Samuel 7:8-16; Isaiah 9:2-7; Jeremiah 33:17-26**).
- **The condition** – Unconditional (**1 Kings 11:6-13,32,36**).

This covenantal extension was also fulfilled in Christ (**Jeremiah 23:5-6; 33:14-16; Isaiah 9:6-7; Luke 1:32-33; Revelation 22:16**).

Through the Prophets

Down through Old Testament history, God “filled in many of the blanks” concerning the future fulfillment of the Abrahamic and Davidic Covenants through his prophets.

- ☞ **The promises** – Most of the promises were concerning the coming of the Savior (eg. [Isaiah 7:14](#); [9:6-7](#); [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#); see also [Luke 17:20-24](#); [19:11](#)). Some were promises of the return of the Jews (the “sand of the seashore”) to their earthly inheritance – the Land ([Isaiah 11:11-12](#)).
- ☞ **The condition** – God’s promises through the prophets were factual statements of what would happen in the future, and are therefore were mostly unconditional.

In all these promises God is *faithful*. As Paul states in Romans 3:4:

“Let God be true, and every man a liar...”

Paul then quotes from [Psalm 51:4](#):

“So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.”

The full text of that verse is:

“Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.”

Paul’s Jewish readers would have been familiar with that Old Testament quotation. For indeed Old Testament had proven time and time again that it was against God that Israel had sinned and that God was proven right in his judgments against Israel. And, Paul is saying, now is no different. Once again, God’s character is untarnished. God has, as always, been proven true in his dealings with mankind.

Objection No. 3

“From all you’ve said, it seems that our disobedience and sin serves a good purpose. It makes God’s righteousness stand out even more. Isn’t God being unfair, then, to punish us when our sins are enhancing his goodness?” ([verses 5-8](#)).

Paul’s answer (verse 8-9)

Paul’s response to that objection is quick and straightforward: “Their condemnation is deserved!” Anyone who has an understanding of God’s nature – who have not “suppress[ed] the truth by their wickedness” ([1:18](#)) – could never bring such an allegation against God.

Paul now brings his imaginary debate to its conclusion. His answers to the Jew’s objections are irrefutable. He has shattered every conceivable point they have brought in their defense and self-justification. Now he brings home once again the fact he proved previously. As the *Living Bible* puts it:

“All men alike are sinners, whether Jews or Gentiles.”

The Divine Court-Room

Paul has brought mankind to stand on trial, as it were, before the judgment-bench of Heaven. He has revealed God as a righteous Judge (2:6-16) and established the five principles by which God acts in his judgment of mankind:

- Man will be judged by the way he lives, regardless of his identity as Jew or Gentile (2:6-10).
- Possessing or hearing the Law is not the issue, but instead whether a man is a *doer* of the Law (2:12-13; James 1:22-25; Matthew 7:24-27).
- God judges with absolute impartiality (2:11).
- Man will be judged according to the understanding he has received (2:12).
- Not just a man's acts, but the motives of his heart will be judged (2:16; 1 Corinthians 4:5; Matthew 5:21-48).
- God has declared the final Day of Judgment (2:16) - a day set by God at the end of the ages, when men will stand before his Judgment Throne (Hebrews 9:27; Ecclesiastes 12-14; Matthew 12:36; Revelation 20-11-15).

The Case Against Man

Like a masterly lawyer, Paul brings forth his witnesses one by one to testify and prove his case against man.

The Witness of Man

So far, Paul has presented the actual history and experience of man himself – Jew as well as Gentile –

God's Judgment Expressed on the Cross

Two attributes of God's nature are revealed in the Cross of Jesus Christ:

- His righteous judgment (Psalm 94:3-10)
- His love (Exodus 34:6-7)

Many people find it difficult to reconcile these two seemingly opposing characteristics of God. Some bring strong emphasis on one and ignore the other – producing on the one hand, the concept of God as a hard, unmoving Judge, or, on the other hand, a soft benevolent God who turns a blind eye to sin. But the Cross of Christ reveals these two characteristics in perfect balance. God, the righteous Judge, pronounced us guilty because of sin, but his love sent his Son down to the earth to meet the demands of his own justice.

We see this balance between God's love and his righteousness in Jesus' own words in John 3:16-18:

"For God so *loved* the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe *stands condemned already* because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

Read John 12:47
Read 1 John 4:8-10

to testify against him. He has dealt with the attitudes of three groups of people – and these still apply today:

- ☞ **1:18-32** – People who have never been influenced by the message of the Gospel.
- ☞ **2:1-6** – Educated people who consider themselves good-living people.
- ☞ **2:17-3:8** – People who have a form of religion and perform the outward ceremonies, but have no reality of experience with God in their hearts (**2 Timothy 3:5**).

Each gives testimony to the same fact – all *have sinned!*

The Witness of God

Now Paul brings forth his final great Witness to testify against them – a witness the Jews cannot deny – the Word of the Lord himself (**3:9-20**). Paul says:

“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*” (**verse 19**).

Though the “law” Paul refers to is specifically the Law given by God to Moses, none of the quotes he uses are actually from that written Law. Instead, he quotes from the Psalms, Proverbs and the Prophets – for the principle of God’s Law was contained in the whole of the Old Testament.

Paul cites authority after authority to prove his case:

- ☞ Eleven statements against them from David, Israel’s greatest king (**verses 10-14, 18 – Psalm 14:1-3; 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; 36:1**).
- ☞ One from Solomon, the wisest man (**verse 15 – Proverbs 1:16**).
- ☞ Two from Isaiah, the greatest Old Testament prophet (**verses 15-17 - Isaiah 59:7-8**).

David and Solomon spoke at the height of Israel’s national history – the time of Israel’s glory on the earth. They show that at his *height* – even at his very best – man is still declared a sinner.

But through these scriptures Paul takes his case even further. He has proved, through the witness of man himself, that all men have sinned. But now he proves that not only have men *sinned*, but that their very *nature* is corrupt! For in **verse 9**, he declares:

“All are *under sin*”.

In the original Greek language in which Paul wrote, the word “under” used here has the meaning of being “under the authority of” or “in the power of.” In other words, Paul is saying that man is under sin’s power – helpless to escape from it, for it is in control of his life. And Paul’s final indictment, quoting from **Isaiah 64:2**,

is stinging:

“All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.”

In **Romans 3**, Paul lets us know the exact nature of the sin problem. He reveals sin on four levels:

- **Sin in motivation** – a corrupted character
- **Sin in words** – a corrupted conversation
- **Sin in action** – a corrupted conduct

Using God’s Word as his witness, let’s walk through Paul’s discourse as he step by step reveals the deplorable condition of mankind:

Sin in Motivation

Paul shows three areas where this core problem of sin reveals itself:

A corrupted nature

Read Romans 3:10

Paul quotes from **Psalm 14:1-3**: “There is *no one* righteous, *not even one*”. Righteousness is not a matter of just doing outward good deeds. It is the very condition of the heart. It is a state of being. No matter how a man or woman may try to keep the outward Law of God, they are still by *nature* unrighteous.

In **Ephesians 2:-13**, Paul describes this inward condition with great clarity:

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”

A depraved mind

Read Romans 3:11a

Paul is still quoting **Psalm 14:1-3**: “There is *no one* who understands”. The result of a corrupted nature is a mind totally void of the knowledge of who God is and what he is like. The wisest of philosophers and most intelligent of men cannot fathom the nature of God. This can only be understood by the spirit and through the Spirit of God (see **1 Corinthians 1:18-31; 2:14 1; John 8:43-47; Matthew 13:11-15; Isaiah 6:9-10**).

A perverted heart

Read Romans 3:11b

Paul continues quoting **Psalm 14:1-3**: “*No one* who seeks God.” The desires of men’s hearts are misdirected. They seek everything but God himself.

Paul then sums up this corruption condition in **Romans 3:12a**: “All have turned away, they have together become worthless”. The word “worthless” literally means “to render useless.” It has the same kind of meaning we use when we speak of something going bad – or milk going sour. Human nature outside of God has become rotten or soured – a useless thing. For just as righteousness is a state of being, so is sin.

The second half of **3:12**, Paul ends the quotation: “There is no *one* who does good, *not even one*”. What an indictment! All the evil actions that Paul has described in **Romans 1:18-32** are simply the result of a corrupted nature within.

Note the emphasis throughout these quotations. The Scripture uses the expression “*no one*” four times, and “*all*” once. This passage begins with the statement of man’s corrupted nature and declares “*not even one*” is righteous, and ends with the outward results in man’s evil actions, stating that “*not even one*” is good.

Sin In Words

Read Romans 3:13-14

The words a person speaks are a product of what is hidden with that person’s heart. The Lord Jesus put it plainly in **Matthew 12:33-37**:

“Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.”

In his use of the witness of Scripture, Paul describes four types of sin-inspired words:

Destructive words (verse 13b)

Paul now quotes from **Psalm 5:9**: “Their throats are open graves. There is tremendous power in the words we speak. People’s lives are affected by what we say to them (**Proverbs 18:21; James 3:1-13**). Like an open grave expelling the stench of death, men destroy one another by their words.

To Paul’s Jewish readers, however, the phrase “Their throats are open graves” had an even deeper meaning. To the Jew, an open grave was a place of defilement. Any contact with a dead body meant immediate ceremonial uncleanness (note **Haggai 2:13-14**). Thus this scripture is describing words that are not just destructive but that are also defiling. The words spoken by such people contaminate the spirits of others.

Deceitful words (verse 13b)

“Their tongues practice deceit,” quotes Paul. Lying has now become the native language of mankind, as it is the native language of the devil. As the Lord Jesus himself stated in **John 8:43-44**:

“Why is my language not dear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

A deceitful heart will, by its very nature, produce deceitful words (see also **Psalm 101:7; 120:2; 109:2; Jeremiah 9:3-6; Ephesians 5:6-7; Colossians 3:9-10**).

Poisonous words (verse 13c)

Quoting **Psalm 140:3**, Paul writes: “The poison of vipers is on their lips.” Gossip and slander are like poison injected into the mind of someone against someone else (see **Proverbs 20:19; Psalm 101:5; Proverbs 10:18; Colossians 3:7-8**).

Blasphemous words (verse 14)

Quoting from **Psalm 10:7**, Paul writes: “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.” In their cursing men speak evil against God himself, and in their bitterness express blasphemy (see **Job 2:9; 1:5; Leviticus 24:15; Matthew 5:22; 1 John 2:9, 11; 3:10-15**).

Sin in Conduct***Read Romans 3:15-17***

Now Paul begins to wind up the long list of indictments brought against mankind. These indictments so far have focused on man’s inner nature of sin, and on his verbal expression of sin. Now Paul targets the actions of sin that prove once and for all his premise that “*all* are under sin.”

Quick to destroy (verse 16)

Quoting **Isaiah 59:7-8** and **Proverbs 1:16**, Paul writes: “Their feet are swift to shed blood...” People are always ready to take hold of every opportunity to hurt other people (this is the opposite of love).

Imparters of sorrow (verse 16)

“Ruin and misery mark their ways.” Everywhere people go they leave unhappiness in their trail (this is the opposite of joy).

Instigators of turmoil (verse 17)

“...and the way of peace they do not know.” People cause turmoil, strife and war everywhere (this is the opposite of peace).

And what is the final charge in Paul's long list of indictments? In **Romans 3:18**, quoting from **Psalms 36:1**, he concludes: "There is no fear of God before their eyes." This sin is the grandfather of them all, and the cause of all the others.

Read Romans 3:19-20

Thus Paul shows that the very Word the Jews gloried in as being their priceless possession, and the very Law they boasted in as separating them from the world, has testified against them – and pronounced them guilty! The Scriptures have revealed man's inward condition, and have proved that all men are sinners, not only by their acts, but by their very nature.

The Prosecutor's Conclusion

In the previous 19 verses, Paul has taken the part of a prosecutor presenting his case against mankind. He has proved their guilt beyond any reasonable doubt – both in outward acts and in the inward condition of their heart – and he has used the very Word of God as his major witness against them. Now he presents his summation in **3:20**:

"Therefore..." (in other words, everything he has presented to this point has been to prove the fact he is now about to disclose) "*no one* will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law..."

The very foundation of the Jews' faith was that righteousness could be obtained by observing the Law. Paul has pulled their foundation from under them and left them floundering in the knowledge of their sin. The Law has declared them guilty; therefore it is impossible for that same Law to declare them righteous. If a man is caught robbing a house and is sentenced to a prison term, no good work he may do after will alter the judgment upon his guilty act. He cannot undo his evil act by doing something good. In the same way, no matter how many good works we may try to do, our guilty position in the eyes of God's Law is not changed – for the Law has revealed us all as sinners. People's concept that their "good will outweigh their bad" will no more be accepted by a righteous God than it would be by a judge in an earthly court (see **James 2:10**).

In the first 20 verses of **Roman 3**, Paul has presented his case. The jury of Scripture has returned a clear and resounding verdict: Man is guilty before God. No one has escaped the indictments – neither Jew nor Gentile. This is the bad news of the Gospel, but it is only in understanding the full extent of the bad news that we can truly appreciate the good news that Paul is about to declare in the rest of his letter to the Romans.