

A Study in the Book of Romans

10

Romans 3:19-31

Key Verse

‘ But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ’

In the last segment of **Romans 3**, Paul begins to identify how the Law of Moses fits into the equation of God’s salvation. After all, this was an important question for the Jews of his day, and is also an equally important question for us today.

In this lesson, we are entering the section where Paul brings home the third main revelation of the Gospel. In **1:18-2:16**, Paul brought the **first revelation of the Gospel** – *the revelation of God*. In **1:18-3:19**, overlapping with this first revelation, Paul also clarified **the second revelation of the Gospel** – *the revelation of man*. Now, in **3:20-4:25**, Paul is targeting **the third revelation of the Gospel** – *the revelation of righteousness*.

In **3:19**, Paul kicks off his description of this third revelation with these words:

“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.”

Introduction

▶ The Gospel’s Three Revelations ◀

The Gospel’s Three Answers

The Gospel’s Answer to Israel

The Gospel in Action

Conclusion

Let's take a look, then, at exactly what it is that the Law says and why it causes every mouth to be silenced and the whole world held accountable before God.

An Anatomy of the Law

The Law, given through Moses, was a divinely instituted code of life by which Israel was governed. It was in three sections:

The Commandments

Read Exodus 20:1-17

These covered the spiritual and moral code, and were the basis of the whole Law. They can be divided into two main categories. The first four dealt with Israel's relationship and attitude to God. The following six dealt with Israel's relationships and attitudes to one another.

Both Jesus and Paul summed up all Ten Commandments in one word – love (see **Mark 12:28-31; Luke 10:25-28; Romans 13:8-10; Galatians 5:14**).

The Judgments

Read Exodus 21:1-23,33

These guided their social life, and were an enlargement of the principle of their relationships and attitudes to one another. As well as being practical expressions of life for Israel, many act as a picture of spiritual life in Christ (note, for example, **Deuteronomy 25:4** and **1 Corinthians 9:9; 1 Timothy 5:18**).

The Ordinances

Read Exodus 25:1-31:18

These directed Israel's religious worship. They were detailed expressions of their approach and relationship to God. In God's ultimate purpose these acted as pictures of the sacrificial work of Christ and all it would accomplish.

These three sections of the Law – the commandments, the judgments and the ordinances – make up the legal basis of the Sinai Covenant made between God and Israel.

The Purpose of the Law

What was Paul referring to when he spoke of the Law in **Romans 3:19**? He was not just speaking of a particular section of the Law, such as the commandments, or the judgments, or the ordinances. When Paul speaks of the Law, he is referring to the *basis* of the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai – that is, if they *obeyed* and fulfilled all the Law's requirements – including the every commandment, every judgment and every ordinance – they would find right standing with God (note **Luke 10:25-28; Mark 10:17-23**).

Paul's purpose has been to prove that *no man* has ever kept all the Law, and therefore *no man* has ever found righteousness through the Law not because there was anything wrong with the Law itself, but because of the basic nature of sin that is within man (**Romans 7:7-14**). The Law presented God's standard of righteousness, but imparted no power to fulfil it, in the same way that the law of a nation can set a certain speed limit for driving, but has no power within itself to make a person drive at that speed. It can only convict the law-breaker.

What, then, is Paul's principle declaration concerning the Law of Moses, which is the basis of the Covenant of Sinai? The Law is powerless to give a man righteousness before God!

Let's walk through **3:19-20** and see exactly what Paul says.

- ☞ **“Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law...”** – The Law of Moses was only intended to be binding upon those who were principals in the Covenant of Sinai – namely, Israel and God. Although the Law of Moses has become the basis of the Western legal system – and we see in it a practical expression of the holiness of God – the Law is part of a covenant and technically applies only to those under that covenant.
- ☞ **“...so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God”** – In **1:18-32**, Paul has shown that the Gentile world has been held accountable before God for the downward spiral into godlessness and wickedness. Now Paul declares that the Law has included the Jew too in this accountability before God. The Law proves that all men – Jew and Gentile alike – are in desperate need of God's salvation. *Every* mouth has been silenced (from bringing any excuse before God) and the *whole world* held accountable before the holiness of God.
- ☞ **“Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law”** – This is Paul's principal premise and one of the most important things we need to understand if we are to appreciate God's solution in the God. Paul is declaring that it is impossible for any person to be declared righteous through his own self-effort or basic goodness. The same words – “no one” – that he uses in **3:10-18** to describe the utter lostness of man's condition, he now uses in **3:19** to make his conclusion – “...*no one* will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law”!
- ☞ **“...rather, through the law we become conscious of sin”** – Now Paul identifies God original purpose in giving the Law at Sinai. The Law does not *make* a person righteousness, says Paul. Rather, it makes a person aware of the unrighteousness that is already there!

God gave the Law to act as a mirror. When you look into a mirror and see that your face is dirty, you don't pick up the mirror and rub your face with it to try and get it clean. The purpose of the mirror is simply to show you that you need cleaning, but you go to another source – the water – to be made clean. This was the

purpose of the Law – to reveal to man his need for cleansing, and to point him to the one who could make him clean – Jesus Christ, the Water of Life.

The Fulfillment of the Law

Now it is important for every Christian to understand how the Law of Moses fits into the Gospel plan. Without this understanding, there will be a tendency to slip back into an Old Covenant mentality and miss out on the full provisions of the New Covenant that was established through the Cross of Christ.

In **Matthew 5:17-18**, Jesus declared:

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”

In Romans, Paul shows just how Christ’s work on the Cross fulfilled the Covenant of Law. In fact, in **Romans 10:4**, Paul writes:

“Christ is *the end of the law* so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”

The Lord Jesus made a very specific statement. He had not come to abolish the Law, he said, but rather to fulfill it. Let’s take a look at these two words and see exactly what took place at the Cross.

- **Abolish** – The Greek word that Jesus used has the meaning of “to destroy, demolish, overthrow, render vain, deprive of success, bring to naught.”¹ This is the same word that is used the enemies of the early believers when they said: “For we have heard...that this Jesus of Nazareth will *destroy* [the Temple] and change the customs Moses handed down to us” (**Acts 6:14**). It is also the same word that Jesus used then referring to the physical destruction of the Temple, when he said, in **Mark 13:2**: “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be *thrown down* [or abolished/destroyed].” The word “abolish” (NIV) and “destroy” (KJV) refers to a violent and total overthrow of something.
- **Fulfill** – The Greek word that Jesus used has the meaning of “to make full, fill up, fill to the full, consummate, make complete in every particular, render perfect, bring to realization.”² This word was used in the New Testament to refer to the fulfillment of a prophecy (**Matthew 1:22; 13:35**) and to the fulfilling of the Law of Moses through godly love (**Romans 13:8**).

The New Testament is absolutely clear that the Law of Moses ended at the Cross (see again **Romans 10:4**), but the way it ended was not by it being abolished, but by it being fulfilled in the Gospel!

In **Romans 8:4**, Paul explains the nature of Christ’s fulfillment of the Law with these words:

“For what the law was *powerless* to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, *in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us*, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.”

Every aspect of the Law is fulfilled in Christ:

- **The Commandments** – The general commandments of the Sinai Covenant (embodied particularly in the Ten Commandments) are now fulfilled through the enacting of the love of Christ (**Galatians 5:14**) and the empowering of the Holy Spirit (**Galatians 5:16-25**)!
- **The Judgments** – The specific commandments of the Law, dealing with the legalities of life in ancient Israel, are also fulfilled through the simple premise of the Gospel – that we are now called to “walk in the Spirit” (KJV) or “live according to the Spirit” (NIV). While we are, of course, required to abide by the law of our land (in matters such as speed limits, business dealings and paying of taxes, etc), the motivation of our lives is not in the meticulous observance of legalities but in our desire to live through the power of God’s Spirit. If we live in the Spirit, we *will* abide by the law of the land!
- **The Ordinances** – All the ordinances are fulfilled in Christ’s sacrifice upon the Cross of Calvary and in his resurrection (**Hebrews 7:26-8:6**). All the details of the Old Covenant sacrificial system and religious festivals find their complete fulfillment in the Gospel!

Christ is the mediator of the New Covenant in which God promised to put his Law in our minds and write it on our hearts (**Jeremiah 31:33; Hebrews 8:7-13; 2 Corinthians 3:2-11,18**). In other words, in the New Covenant, Christ imparts the *power* to fulfill all righteousness!

Read Romans 3:21

Up to this point in his letter, Paul has been carefully revealing the deplorable condition of mankind. His purpose has been to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is no way a person can be righteous and in right relationship with God by his own merit. One can almost hear Paul’s sigh of relief as he comes to the end of this dark revelation, and then with an exclamation of joy he declares:

“But now ... !”

These two simple words sound out like a great trumpet blast, announcing a dramatic turning point for mankind. God has not abandoned man in his helpless condition of sin! A new era has been ushered in! A new revelation has been given!

As the *New Living Translation* phrases **Romans 3:21**:

“But now God has shown us *a different way of being right in his sight* – not by obeying the law but by the way promised in the Scriptures long ago.”

The Revelation of Righteousness

Though man cannot find righteousness by his own effort, God has intervened and made it possible for him to come into right relationship with him. This righteousness that has been revealed has seven characteristics:

It is from God

Read Romans 3:21-22,24

This righteousness, Paul declares, is a free gift from God himself, which he bestows on the undeserving sinner.

Read Romans 5:15-19

Read Philippians 3:9

It is apart from Law

Read Romans 3:21

This righteousness has nothing to do with the original Covenant of Law that God made with Israel at Sinai. It is a totally separate, new covenant in which man's own merit plays no part.

It has been made known

Read again Romans 3:21

This gift of righteousness from God is not a hidden, secret truth shared only with a special, chosen few. It is good news for the whole world, available to every man and woman, boy and girl.

Read Colossians 1:25-29

Read Romans 16:25-26

Read Ephesians 3:2-9

It is testified to by the Law and the Prophets

Read again Romans 3:21

“The Law and the Prophets” was a term used by the Jews for their entire Scriptures. The whole of Old Testament Scripture – including the Law of Moses and all the prophetic writings – testifies to the free gift of righteousness would be made available to mankind through Jesus Christ. This was not a snap-decision by God, a sudden change in course direction, because he saw that his previous plan had failed. No, from the very beginning of Genesis, God had planned for the Gospel to be revealed in the coming of Jesus. This is why Jesus was able to say in **John 5:39**:

“...These are the Scriptures that testify about me...”

Read also Luke 24:25-27,44-47

It is through faith in Jesus Christ

Read Romans 3:22

Only one quality is now required of man – faith. But even this is not from his own effort. Men and women are born with this quality. It is God-given in human nature (**Romans 12:3**). Faith simply means having trust in another person, or that person’s words, and acting accordingly.

For example, when a person travels by airplane he is using faith. He trusts the engineers to be reliable workers and the pilot to be capable and well-trained. He trusts the words of the company who say they will take him safely to his destination. We use faith in many different ways every day. But the important issue is the *object* of our faith – *where* we put our faith. Not everything we put our faith in is trustworthy. The gift of righteousness is ours through faith *in Jesus Christ*. The Bible reveals that he is totally trustworthy. As men and women put their trust in him, and his words, righteousness is freely given to them by God.

Read John 14:1

It is to all who believe

Read Romans 3:22-23,29-30

This righteousness from God is available to *everyone* who puts his or her faith in Jesus Christ – Jew and Gentile alike. If, as Paul has proved, there is no difference between men in sin, then there is no difference in the way to find righteousness.

Read Ephesians 2:11-99

Read Ephesians 3:6

It is the result of Christ’s work

In **Romans 3:24-25**, we discover three words that describe the nature of the Gospel and the means by which God’s righteousness becomes ours:

- **Justification** – To “justify” means to “pronounce” righteous, or to “treat as” righteous. As we stand before the Judge of Heaven, everyone of us is guilty. However, when we put our trust in Jesus Christ, God, through his wonderful grace and mercy, declares us righteous (**Acts 13:38-39**).
- **Redemption** – To be “redeemed” means “to be bought back from captivity or slavery through the payment of a ransom.” We were in bondage to sin, Satan with no way out by ourselves. Jesus Christ himself is the ransom-price that has been paid to set us free (**Mark 10:45; 1 Corinthians 6:19-20; Acts 20:28**).
- **Atonement** – In the original Greek, this phrase “sacrifice of atonement” refers to a sacrifice that satisfies the righteous anger of God. God’s judgment on sin is death (**Genesis 2:16-17; Romans 1:32; 6:23**) – both physical and spiritual. Jesus died in the place of all sinners. He took upon himself God’s judgment on sin.

Read Isaiah 53:4-6
Read 1 Peter 2:24

The *New Living Translation* renders **Romans 3:23-25** with these words:

“For all have sinned; all fall short of God’s glorious standard. Yet now God in his gracious kindness declares us not guilty. He has done this through Christ Jesus, who has freed us by taking away our sins. For God sent Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to satisfy God’s anger against us. We are made right with God when we believe that Jesus shed his blood, sacrificing his life for us.”

Do you see the **total problem-total solution** approach of the Gospel? The Gospel first reveals that mankind’s problem is total and sweeping – *all* have sinned and are deserving of God’s judgment! Then, and only then, does the Gospel reveal that God’s solution is also total and sweeping – *all* may receive the salvation that comes through Jesus Christ!

It does away with all boasting

Read Romans 3:27-28

If it had been possible to attain the righteousness of God through his own works then man would have been able to boast of his achievements. But righteousness as a free gift from God, given because of faith in the work of another, leaves no basis for boasting.

Read Ephesians 2:8-9
Read 1 Corinthians 1:30

It is the true upholding of the Law

Read Romans 3:31

All the righteous requirements of the Law are satisfied by God’s own righteousness! He has given his righteousness as a free gift – so his own requirements are met in us!

Read again Romans 8:3-4

God Demonstrates His Justice

Read Romans 3:25-26

You probably have noticed that throughout this passage (and almost much of the rest of **Romans**), the issue of justice is foremost in Paul’s mind. According to Paul, God’s justice has been expressed in two different ways:

In the past

In **Romans 3:25**, Paul writes:

“He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished.”

In times past, God had “left the sins committed beforehand unpunished” until the Savior arrived on the scene of history. From the time of Noah, when God promised never to wipe out all of mankind again (**Genesis 8:18-22**), he has been forbearing with a world of sinners, waiting and preparing for the coming of his Son.

Paul himself rephrased **Romans 3:25** when he spoke to the philosophers of Athens in **Acts 17:30**. Having observed the rampant idolatry in Athens, he stood and declared:

“In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.”

In the present

Read Romans 3:26

In the past, God showed his patience with sin, because the coming of Jesus was still in the future. But with the arrival of Jesus, everything has changed. God’s justice has now been revealed in the Cross of Calvary.

Read 2 Corinthians 6:1-2

The Cross of Christ is the focus of God’s forbearance. Prior to the Cross, God acted patiently because Christ had not yet come. Now, on the other side of Calvary, God *continues* to act patiently (**2 Peter 3:9**) for exactly the same reason – because of the Cross of Christ!

In this passage of his letter – **3:19-31** – Paul has shown how the Law of Moses has been fulfilled in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Having painted a “total problem” in **3:10-18**, he has now provided God’s “total solution.” Indeed, the entire chapter can be summarized in just three verses – **3:22-24**:

“This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to *all* who believe. There is no difference, for *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and [*all*] are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

¹ *Thayer’s Greek Definitions*, excerpted from QuickVerse 6.0.

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