

Please keep your Bibles open at Romans, chapter 3. We've come at last to the closing arguments in Paul's careful statement of the human condition. Imagine a magical mirror, the kind of thing you might see in a classic Disney fairytale movie. This magic mirror does not reflect your outward appearance. Instead, as you look into it, this mirror reveals the true condition of your soul. That is what it will show you: who you really are underneath. There is a sense in which Romans, chapters 1-3, is like that mirror. Paul has been holding it up before us, forcing us to see who we really are, to discover the true state of our moral condition. Really, since verse 18 of chapter 1, Paul has been relentlessly pressing upon us the need to face ourselves honestly. And the picture has not been pretty. Our sin condemns us and no one is exempt.

Well, here in the second half of chapter 3, Paul draws his argument to its climax. Here is the point of all that he has been showing us about ourselves. Now that we see clearly how spiritually needy we really are, we are, at last, in a position to grasp the wonder and the glory of God's grace held out to sinners in His Son, Jesus Christ.

Now one way to help us get at Paul's argument in this passage is to see the double difficulty that our sinful condition creates. In verses 9-20 Paul explains that sin creates a problem for *us*. And in verse 26, if we might put it this way, from our point of view, sin creates a problem for *God*. Of course, sin does not present a real difficulty for God to overcome, but from our point of view, human sin forces a dilemma that God must resolve if He is to be both just *and* a savior. So there is the double dilemma: *our problem* in verses 9-20 and *God's "problem"* in verse 26. And in verses 21-26, between those two poles, we will see how God has acted to resolve that double difficulty.

First of all, look with me, please at verses 9-20. Verse 9 opens with Paul dealing with the objection, often hurled at Christians, that we think we are morally superior. How many times have you had the alleged hypocrisy of the church thrown at you as a reason for the rejection of the Christian faith on the part of some friend? How many former church members give this as the great reason for their absence? Maybe you even secretly feel that way yourself. "They are all so 'holier than thou'!" Look

how Paul deals with that objection here, “Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin.”

To back up his point, in verses 10-18, Paul strings together a series of six quotations taken from the Psalms, and one from Ecclesiastes, that demonstrate the various facets of human depravity in the sight of God. ***First***, Paul says the sin is ***universal***. “There is none righteous, no, not one,” he reminds us. There are no exceptions. This is your problem and mine. Suppose we were to go from here and move down the street together to the next church we found, or suppose we headed down to the mall, bustling with shoppers. Wherever we turned, both inside and outside of the church, we would not find anyone free of this universal sin problem. “The best man,” writes Lloyd Jones, “the noblest, the most learned, the most philanthropic; the greatest idealist, the greatest thinker, say what you like—there has never been a man who can stand up to the test of the law. Drop your plumb-line, and he is not true to it, he is not straight, he is not upright, he is not pure, he is not blameless. ‘There is none righteous, no, not one.’ ” (Lloyd Jones, *Romans, Vol II*, 198)

The problem of sin is ***universal***. Then ***secondly***, he says the problem is ***pervasive***. Look at the passage again. As Paul characterizes our sin, he describes it in terms of how we use our bodies. Verse 13: our ***throats*** are an open grave, the poison of asps is under our ***tongues***. Verse 14: our ***mouths*** are full of cursing and bitterness. Verse 15: our ***feet*** are swift to shed blood. But then Paul moves from the outside in. It’s not just a matter of externals of surface behavior. Verse 16-18: “Destruction and misery *are* in their ways; And the way of peace they have not known...There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Sin is a matter of the heart, of what we know and fear and choose. This is the doctrine often called total depravity. We are not sinners in some areas only, as though sin were an infection that might be contained. No sin stains every part and faculty and power of our humanity so that we are nowhere free of its pollution.

And ***finally*** he says sin ***distorts*** and warps our humanity. It debases the image of God in us. That is why he describes sin not merely in terms of moral failures or inner attitudes but in terms of our bodies. He wants us to see that sin is bestial and brutal and disfiguring. It mars the beauty of the reflected image of our Creator that has been stamped on our constitutions as human beings.

Now go back again to verse 9 for a moment. Go back to Paul's response to those who object that the church is full of people who assume the moral high ground and take on superior attitudes and consider themselves better than others. Undoubtedly, there *are* people like that in every church, but for Paul they are anomalies. "How can *anyone* think themselves superior to any other in the light of the truth about the human condition?" he would answer. Look in the perfect mirror of scripture and see the truth about yourself unmasked and *then* attempt your foolish boasting. It can't be done! Christians ought, of all people, to be the *most* humble because they know the *true* dimensions of the ruin of their own souls. Christians ought, of all people, to be *most* moved, not with arrogant superiority, but with compassion and concern for others because they have come to face what most of us delude ourselves concerning. They know how universally wretched our true condition really is. The study of these verses is a great antidote to pride. It is the biblical "pin" that will burst the bubble of our foolish and prideful egos. *This* is who we all are. There is no one righteous, no, not one. In the presence of the holy God, before whose face we all live our lives, *the ground is utterly even.*

Now look at verses 19-20. If *this* is our condition, then it places us into the grip of a terrible dilemma. Take a look with me: "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin."

Jewish people in Paul's day, like religious people in every age, reading verses 9-18, would have most naturally assumed that the condemnations of sin found there apply to the nations, the Gentiles, the wicked pagans "out there." So Paul reminds them that God's law addresses *them* too. Indeed, it addresses them in particular, "Whatever the law says, it says to those under the law." It says to us, like the prophet Nathan said to King David when he was caught in adultery. and yet David thought Nathan was referring to someone else, "No, no, *you* are the man!" It's you, who is the guilty one, God says. R. C. Sproul tells the story of a neurologist friend of his who remarked on the complexity and sophistication of the human brain that far exceeds the abilities of the most sophisticated of computers. Every thought and word and deed of ours is recorded in our brains. "I think that in the last day," he said, "God is going to take our brain out of our head, put it on a table there in his courtroom, plug in a recorder, and punch rewind. We are going to have to sit there and listen to our brain

replay everything we have ever done, said and thought. The prosecuting attorney doesn't have to say a word." (Sproul, *Romans*, 94) Every mouth stopped! No excuses! No defense possible!

Before the law of God, before God's exposé of our sin, we have nothing to say, nothing we can say in our own defense. And here is our problem. The law condemns us all, "so that every mouth may be stopped and all the world may become guilty before God." Sin, you see, is not just a behavior problem. It is not a matter of amending our behavior so that our actions and lifestyle fit more accurately God's preferred standard. It's not just recognizing that there is something wrong, that you are not yet all you might be. That's not it at all. No, sin leaves us **guilty** in His sight. We stand before Him **guilty**. We have been convicted in His law court. The hammer has fallen. That's the verdict over every single human heart without exception. Guilty as charged! That is our real predicament.

And it is critically important that we understand that there is nothing we can do to alter that verdict; no way to offset our offenses. Verse 20, "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin." The law of God is the mirror that shows you yourself as you really are. It alerts us to our real moral condition. We find out the truth and see the true ugliness of what sin has made us. But attempting to keep the law cannot fix the problem, for **this** reason: **we can't do it.** By nature we are ***not capable of obedience***. That has been the whole thrust of Paul's discussion of our moral state since chapter 1:18. We suppress the truth in unrighteousness. We exchange the truth of God for the lie. That's who we are.

So here is our dilemma, do you see? We are guilty in the sight of God, and we have no possibility of working our way out from under that terrible verdict. By the works of the law, no flesh will be justified in His sight. It can't be done. What are we going to do? Is there any hope? That is our great dilemma.

But then **secondly**, sin not only creates a difficulty for us, a terrible difficulty, it creates one for **God**. At least, it creates a difficulty for God **from our point of view**. From God's perspective, sin is no difficulty. God's response to sin has been planned from the beginning. But from **ours** there is a dilemma. Look with me, please, at verses 25-26. Jesus came "to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God

had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

Here, from our perspective at least, is the dilemma for God. How can God be just, how can He remain faithful to His own law, His own standards, the exposition He has made to us of His own character, how can He be *just* in the face of my sin and guilt and not condemn me in His heavenly courtroom? My sin demands one verdict alone. There is no way out from under it. I am guilty. Condemnation is what I deserve. Yet we are repeatedly told that God wills to save sinners. He is not willing that any should perish. He has no delight in the death of the wicked.

In the Old Testament scriptures God forgave sinners. Did he simply look the other way? Was His forgiveness the unjust illegal excusing of sin? Does He merely overlook the sins previously committed and leave it at that? How can God be just and a justifier of the ungodly? That’s the dilemma.

So now, you see the double difficulty created by our sin. On the one hand, there is the difficulty of *our guilt*. What hope is there for any of us before the relentless holiness of God? And on the other hand, there is the difficulty of *divine justice*. If God does not, in fact, condemn me as I deserve, how can He remain faithful to Himself, to His law, to His own righteous character? How can He be just and a justifier?

It is this double difficulty that verses 21-26 answer. They are among the most precious and important verses in Holy Scripture. Look at them with me, please. In verse 20 Paul has just told us that the Law can only show us what God requires and expose how far short of that standard we fall. It is utterly powerless to relieve us of our guilt as law breakers. By the works of the law, no flesh shall be justified.

“But *now*,” says Paul. Now something has changed. These twin questions created by our sin has gone unanswered, the double difficulty has remained unresolved down through all the long ages of human history. Unanswered and unresolved that is, until *now*. *Now*, “the righteousness of God *apart from the law* is revealed, being witnessed by the law and the prophets.” The Old Testament scriptures, the Law and the Prophets, pointed forward to the things Paul is about to tell us, they

anticipated them, and in hope of them, the saints of the Old Covenant were saved, but the full revelation of this great news has waited until now. Now, he says, the righteousness that is *not* based on law keeping has, at last, been fully revealed. Another way has been provided for sinners to obtain justification.

Before we go any further, it may help us at this point to explain what Paul means by the important term, “justification.” In Greek, the words “righteous” and “righteousness” on the one hand, and the words, “justify” and “justification” on the other, all share the same root. They are actually different forms of the same word. So when he says in verse 20, “that by the works of the law no flesh shall be *justified*,” the word “justified” means “declared righteous.” That is the verdict God’s law demands. It is *not* a “not guilty” verdict. God does not simply require that we be found innocent of law breaking. He requires a verdict of *positive obedience*. We need to have *kept His law*. We need to have *done* the law and *lived* the law. It is a *righteous* verdict that we need. But our problem, remember, is that we *can’t* do the law? We *can’t* live the law. And so, Paul says, that “righteous” verdict has been made available to us *by another route*.

It is, verse 22, “the righteousness of God which is *through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all who believe*.” Instead of a righteousness we *earn* by our own obedience, a righteousness now forever out of our reach, Paul says God Himself has made righteousness available to us *in Jesus Christ*. And how am I to qualify for this verdict? What work do I perform, what standard do I meet, in order to have God declare me righteous, to justify me, in Christ? *There is no work to do* is Paul’s wonderful reply. All you need to do is believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. It is through faith in Jesus Christ to all and on all who believe.

Adopt the beggar’s posture, he says. Sit with hands outstretched and call on God for mercy. Look to Jesus Christ alone. Not to yourself. Not to your religion. Not to philanthropy, or charity, or intellect, or reputation. Look to Christ *alone*. And for Christ’s sake, God will count you, or reckon you, to be righteous in His sight.

But we have not yet dealt with the divine side of the dilemma. We still need to know “How is that just? How can God legally count me righteous when I am not righteous at all? I am a guilty and depraved sinner deserving His utter condemnation.” Look at verses 22-25, “...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being

justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth *as* a propitiation by His blood, through faith.” Paul is not saying that God merely looks the other way. Yes, verse 25, “God passed over the sins previously committed” in the Old Testament era, but the time would come when He would demonstrate His righteousness in doing even that.

You see God is not like human judges who, from time to time, bend the law or even break it. They make exceptions when none is allowable. They bow to corruption or blackmail. They twist the rules. That is what human beings do. But God does not do any such thing for us. He is able to count us righteous in His sight *without winking at our sin*. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” Paul says, facing the dilemma squarely, “and are justified, declared righteous, *freely by his grace*.” How? On what legal basis? “Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, who God set forth to be a propitiation by his blood.”

God does *not* look the other way at sin, he *punishes* it. Human sin is *always* paid for. The demands of God’s law are *always* met. Justice is *always* done. Sin *will be paid for* either by you in hell forever or by Jesus Christ on the cross in your place. Propitiation is a word that means the offering of a sacrifice to satisfy God’s wrath. Dear friends, here is the gospel. We are hopelessly, utterly lost in our sin and guilt. The verdict over us is “guilty as charged.” But God Himself has acted to provide a righteousness to cover our offenses. He stepped between us and the fury of divine justice *personally*, in Jesus Christ. Christ embraced your hell that you might be embraced by heaven.

How could God save anyone and still be just? He passed over the sins previously committed, but did he simply overlook them, ignore them, pretend they never happened? No, says Paul, Jesus came and demonstrated the righteousness of God. God keeps His own law. The judicial sentence is met. The debt is paid. And *because* the debt is paid for, *because* justice is done, God can be just *and* the justifier of the ungodly. *That* is how the double difficulty caused by our sin is answered. The justice of God and the need of humanity are *both* met in full by the cross of Jesus Christ. He is obedient even to the death of the Cross, satisfying the justice of God, obeying the law of God, not for Himself alone but for everyone who believes.

Which means that the only escape route open to you is the one opened for you by God himself in his great love and mercy. You must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. He has paid for sinners the debt they could not hope to pay. So you must rest your confidence entirely to Him who obeyed for sinners and died for sinners that God might accept sinners as righteous in his sight.

And it means, if you do believe, that you have nothing to boast about. That is what verse 27 says, isn't it? "Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but the law of faith." You don't get to boast in your status. You don't get to claim the moral high ground. You don't get to boast. No, you should know, of all people, the depths of your own depravity and mourn and the wonder of grace, unearned and unmerited, freely given in Christ alone, and rejoice. You have nothing you have not received as a gift. Therefore, rejoice in the Lord, weep for the lost, and cling to Jesus Christ.

Amen.