

# All People Need The Gospel

Romans 3:1-20

**Call:** Ps 92:1-2; Ps 95:1-2 (NIV)

**Scripture:** 1 John 1:8-2:2 (NIV)

## I. Introduction

### A. Introduction

Good morning! We enter back into Romans this morning where we are at the end of Paul's argument explaining humanity's need for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

All people need the Gospel because all people are *sinful*. Yet, in the modern world, sin is a bad word. Actually, sin is not even a word used in the modern world. If you put "sin" into modern devices, it many times gets changed to "sun" by helpful digital assistants. As Fleming Rutledge once said, "Sophisticated people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century long since gave up talking about sin – we talk about obsessive behavior, or neurotic patterns, or deviance, or pathology, or disorder, or whatever else, but not sin" (Rutledge, 176). Years ago, famous clinician Karl Menninger wrote a book called *Whatever Became of Sin?* In it, he also laments the removal of sin language from Western society. A few possible reasons are:

- That most people see themselves as basically good and simply victims of political, economic or social forces.
- Or that the modern western world just wants to feel good, so sin is simply not a thing. Most dictionaries call this hedonism.
- Or people don't ask questions of "ought" anymore. If there are no "oughts" there is no sin.

Paul, on the other hand, was not afraid to tell it like it is. So, since chapter 1, verse 18 of Romans, Paul has been pointing out how sinful everyone is, that all people need the Gospel.

### B. Review

From a high level then, a structure for these verses might be this:

- **1:18-32: The Darkened Gentiles:** Paul made the point that the Gentiles are up to their necks in idolatry, causing all kinds of darkness and sin.
- **2:1-29: The Judgmental Jews:** In chapter two then, Paul rebuked the Jews who were looking down on the Gentiles, and reminded the Jews that they were no better.
- **3:1-20: All People:** Today's text where Paul will conclude his argument, particularly in the second half of our text.

### C. Preparation

In the first half of our text, we pick up with a Jewish interlocutor, an imaginary discussion partner, once again posing questions to Paul, mostly questioning God's overarching plan of salvation. In these verses, it's probably not far from the mark to imagine that this interlocutor is

Paul himself, Paul the former Pharisee, asking the same questions he asked before becoming a Christian. So, in these first few verses “Paul the Pharisee” debating “Paul the Christian.”

So, I invite you into our text today, beginning in chapter 3, verse 1.

## **II. The Question of God’s Covenant (v 1-2)**

*1 What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? 2 Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.* (NIV)

### **A. Introduction**

After hearing chapter two, where Paul levels the playing field regarding Jew and Gentile, the interlocutor begins by questioning God’s plan of calling the Jews to be His people. Much of what Paul covers here will be elaborated on later in chapters 9-11.

### **B. Circumcision and Jewishness?**

The first two questions have to do with circumcision, the primary identity marker of being a Jew. As we said last time, circumcision was the sign of God’s covenant with Israel from the very beginning. But, it was always tied to the spiritual circumcision of the heart. It was always to be an outward symbol of an inward renewal of the heart.

### **C. The Argument**

So the argument here is this – if what Paul said in chapter 2 is true – that saving faith is a matter of the heart and external rituals count for nothing – then what about God’s special relationship with the Jews? According to the Old Testament, out of all the nations on earth, God had called Israel to be His treasured possession. So why did He do this if there is no value in being a Jew, as it seemed Paul argued in chapter 2.

### **D. Paul’s Answer**

Paul’s answer here is that yes, it actually is a great privilege to be a Jew. *“Much in every way!”* Paul says. Most importantly, they were entrusted with God’s special revelation, His Word. The Jews had received His Word, the very truth of the Living God! They were entrusted with all of it, as the Psalmist says, *“He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation... Praise the LORD”* (Ps 147:19-20). The Jews possessed the truth! What a great privilege!

Now, remember, Paul has already said that everyone possesses some truth. Since every single person is made in the image of God, everyone has some knowledge of who God is and what right and wrong is. No one lives in total darkness. Everyone has some light. It’s just that the Jews had more light. They had God’s special revelation, the knowledge of His character and His will, that no other nation had. So, this gave the Jews a tremendous advantage!

Yet, it does not imply salvation just by having it. It actually implies responsibility. The Israelites were to be a kingdom of priests to turn Canaan into a new Eden, and to share the truth in love. God had planted them in the middle of all the great empires of ancient history in order that

those nations would look at them and say, “Oh, so that’s what it’s like to live with Yahweh,” and be attracted to their lifestyle, then clamor to get in! The Israelites were to be lights in a dark world, drawing the nations to them. Instead, as the prophets lamented, they ended up looking like the nations and failed in their responsibility.

Next question, verse 3.

### III. The Question of God’s Faithfulness (3-4)

*3 What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God’s faithfulness? 4 Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written:*

*“So that you may be proved right when you speak  
and prevail when you judge.” (NIV)*

#### A. Introduction

The question this time is essentially this: If some Jews were unfaithful, doesn’t that make God unfaithful? Or maybe better, since the Jews have failed to keep up their end of the bargain, doesn’t that really mean that God has failed?

#### B. Paul’s Response

Paul responds very strongly, *“Not at all!”* This is a very strong denial. It could very well be translated, “Not in a million years” or “That’s absurd!” Paul is totally disgusted by the thought!

He then quotes from Psalm 51 (Ps 51:4). Psalm 51 is David’s poem of repentance after his sin of adultery with Bathsheba. It begins like this,

*1 Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions.  
2 Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.  
3 For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me.  
4 Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight;  
“So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.”*

Paul’s point is that since David recognizes God’s declaration of his sin establishes that God is right. Therefore, God’s faithfulness shines even in the face of sinful humanity. God has been faithful all the way along.

And God continues to be faithful regardless of human unfaithfulness. As someone has said, “In a world of uncertainty, here is utter certainty. In a world without foundations, here is a rock-solid foundation” (Moo, 108). God is faithful. Back in Exodus when God revealed His character to Moses, He says this, *“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, 7 keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty”* (Ex 34:6-7). For those who are willing to turn from their sin, they will find a steadfastly loving Father who is utterly faithful to keep his promises of grace and forgiveness. The promise-maker is the promise-keeper always. God is faithful always. Ultimately, God has fulfilled all his promises in

Jesus, as Paul says in Corinthians, *“For all God’s promises find their Yes in [Jesus]. That is why it is through [Jesus] that we utter our Amen to God for his glory”* (2 Cor 1:20).

### C. Yes and Amen

*Great is His Faithfulness!* It is because of Jesus that we can say our yes and amen to God’s faithfulness. I’ve done this before, but I’d like to do it again. Since all God’s promises find their yes in Jesus, I’m gonna read four sayings of Jesus and, if you are able, have you say, “yes and amen” after each one.

- *Jesus answered and said, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”* (John 3:3). Can you say yes and amen to him?
- *Jesus said, “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life”* (John 5:24). Can you say yes and amen to him?
- *Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”* (John 8:12). Can you say yes and amen to him?
- *Jesus answered, “Amen, amen, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. ... But if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed”* (John 8:34). Can you say yes and amen to him?

Yes and amen indeed. All God’s promises find their yes in Jesus. God has been faithful all the way along.

Next question, the question of God’s justice, verse 5.

## IV. The Question of God’s Justice (v 5-8)

*5 But if our unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) 6 Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? 7 Someone might argue, “If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?” 8 Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—“Let us do evil that good may result”? Their condemnation is just!* (NIV)

### A. Introduction

Paul seemingly now moves from talking about the Jews to becoming one of them, as he includes himself in the argument.

### B. Verse 5-6: A Bad Argument

And, his argument essentially is, if our badness makes God look good, shouldn’t we continue to be bad? In other words, the worse the criminal is, the better the judge looks (Stott, 97). God should be thankful that we are making him look so good! So, we can keep on being really bad.

Paul’s response is actually the same strong denial as above, but this time he adds, almost embarrassingly, that this is a really bad human argument.

### C. Their Condemnation is Just

In verses 7-8, another question is raised, but along the same lines. How can a sinner be condemned if his sin brings glory to God? Paul doesn't even refute it; he simply says, "*Their condemnation is just.*" End of argument.

From the very beginning, judgment for disobedience was a part of the covenant. From the very beginning! Evil never brings glory to God!

### D. Summary

Doug Moo helpfully summarizes these verses for us:

"Taken as a whole, then, the passage both affirms the continuing faithfulness of God to his covenant people and argues that his faithfulness in no way precludes God from judging the Jews... God's faithfulness ... remain[s] true to his character and to all His words: the promises of judging for disobedience as well as blessing for obedience" (Bird, 97).

### E. Transition

We now move to Paul's conclusion of human sinfulness: the final charge, the final evidence and the final verdict of his entire argument. Verse 9.

## V. The Final Charge (v 9)

*9 What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin.* (NIV)

### A. Introduction

If you've been following the text this morning, this verse is probably quite confusing.

It appears that Paul completely contradicts himself relative to verses 1-2. Verses 1-2 say, "*What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew...?*" Answer: "*Much in every way.*" And here in verse 9, "*Do we have any advantage?*" Answer: "*Not at all!*"

People tend to flip out on Paul over this. But, in the Greek, the words behind *advantage* in both verses are different words. Furthermore, in English, the difference can also be explained in how we understand the word *advantage*. If by *advantage* we mean privilege, then the Jews had much advantage. God had entrusted them with His special revelation. They had the truth of the living God. That's a great privilege. But, if by *advantage* we mean favoritism regarding judgment and salvation, then no, the Jews have none. God is impartial in His judgment.

### B. The Final Charge

Paul then restates the final charge clearly in the end of verse 9: all people "*are under the power of sin*" (3:9). The case Paul has been arguing since 1:18 is summarized, all are under sin.

### C. Sin As A "Cosmic Tyrant"

It's interesting that *sin* is singular here. This is Paul's first use of this noun in the singular. To be "*under the power of sin*" is to be under its authority and dominion, even enslaved to it. It really should be capitalized, because Paul personifies it throughout this section of Romans. "'Sin,' singular and capital S, is a power, an active force in this world... Sin is humanity's slave master and evil ruler" (Gorman, 110). One (French) translation actually calls it "the empire of Sin." That's a pretty good description. Matthew Croasmun calls it "The Cosmic Tyrant" (Croasmun, 1). Sin is the basic and all-encompassing opposition to God being God in our lives. That's Sin, choosing to be our own God instead of choosing God to be God, which is how we are made.

God, our creator, made humanity in his image to be dependent on Him. That's how we're made. As Genesis 2 shows, we were made for right relationships beginning with our relationship with God, harmony in four right relationships to be exact. Harmony in all of life. But, when Adam and Eve disobeyed God, ie. chose to be their own god, capital "S," Sin, infected the human race. And, when the relationship with God fractured, the other three relationships fractured as well. Everything broke down as humanity fell under the "cosmic tyrant of Sin," resulting in death for all of us.

Paul will spend much more time on this in chapter 6, so we will come back to it then. For now, Paul moves onto evidence for his charge, verse 10.

## **VI. The Final Evidence (10-18)**

10 *As it is written:*

*"There is no one righteous, not even one;*

11 *there is no one who understands;  
there is no one who seeks God.*

12 *All have turned away,  
they have together become worthless;  
there is no one who does good,  
not even one."*

13 *"Their throats are open graves;  
their tongues practice deceit."  
"The poison of vipers is on their lips."*

14 *"Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."*

15 *"Their feet are swift to shed blood;*

16 *ruin and misery mark their ways,*

17 *and the way of peace they do not know."*

18 *"There is no fear of God before their eyes." (NIV)*

### **A. Introduction**

Well, the playing field is officially leveled. As Michael Gorman says, Paul offers a "jackhammer indictment of human sinfulness" in these verses (Gorman, 109). We're all in it very deeply! Up until this point, Paul was presenting his own observations and analysis, though he did have texts from which he was drawing. But, now, he shows that his indictment is really God's indictment.

It's as if he's saying, "I'm not making this stuff up," as he provides nine different Old Testament citations that substantiate his claim:

- Verse 10: Eccl 7:20
- Verses 11-12: Ps 14:1-3, 53:1-3
- Verse 13: Ps 5:9, 140:3
- Verse 14: Ps 10:7
- Verses 15-17: Isa 59:7-8; Prov 1:16
- Verse 18: Ps 36:1

## B. Exploring the Citations

Exploring the citations then, we see in the beginning and the end, verses 10-12, 18, that people live without reference to God. This of course reflects how Paul explained the beginnings of idolatry in chapter 1. And, a God-less society is always an inhumane one. When people forget God, they forget how to treat one another. All relationships break down. No one is righteous.

The middle verses, verses 13-17, highlight two things:

- First of all, the **violence** done to one another through speech and actions. God's shalom is simply not known. We're seeing this all over the world right now, aren't we? And, we can thank the Lord for IJM fighting the violence of trafficking.
- And, secondly, the evils we do involve **all parts of our bodies**, from our minds to our mouths to our feet. In other words, we are sinful from head to toe. Sin has contaminated everyone, AND every part of everyone. Every single cell of our body urges us to be our own god.

Gorman again, "Humans are as creative in inventing forms of violence as they are at manufacturing idols. If anatomically, we are sinful from head to toe, chronologically we are violent from womb to tomb: abortion and infanticide, child abuse and spousal/partner abuse, verbal and emotional abuse, sexual abuse... mass shootings... persecution and oppression... war, elder abuse and euthanasia. Humans even utilize violence to solve human violence!" (Gorman, 116). An example might be a pro-life person killing someone in the name of being pro-life!

Meanwhile, Jesus, the Prince of Peace, blesses the peacemakers, those who risk to make peace.

So, now, after the charge and the evidence, Paul gives his final verdict, verses 19-20.

## VII. The Final Verdict (v 19-20)

*19 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. 20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. (NIV)*

### A. Introduction

Paul's long argument from verse 1:18 now reaches its conclusion. All people are in the grip of Sin. And, it is confirmed that God is right to judge all people, and there's no valid argument against it. The whole world is accountable to the living God, both Jew and Gentile.

## **B. The Law**

Paul goes on to say that no one will enter back into right relationship with God through the law. All of humanity are under sin and judgment, and regardless of how one defines the law here, it cannot fix humanity's predicament. The law is good and does make us conscious of our sin, as Paul says in verse 20. But, the law is unable to deliver people from the evil within ourselves because keeping the law does not reach the heart. And the one thing the last two chapters have shown us is that the heart is the root of the problem. Jeremiah nailed it centuries ago when he said, "*the heart is deceitful above all things*" (Jer 17:9). Calvin followed by saying that the heart is an "idol factory," leading us away from God. Our hearts are desperately sick, the root of our Sin from head to toe and from womb to tomb. And, we need something outside of ourselves to fix it!

## **C. The Solution**

So whatever solution Paul proposes will need to deal with all of our sins, small s. Plus it will have to deal with our Sin, big S. It will have to break the power of Sin, and our slavery to it. As we know, Paul's solution will be the Gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord!

I hope you can now see how powerful the Gospel is. I hope you can now see why Paul is so eager to preach the Gospel. I hope you can now see why Paul is not ashamed of it. Because it is the only thing powerful enough to break through the power of Sin that has rooted itself in our hard hearts. The Gospel is indeed dynamite!

## **VIII. Implications**

Well, that's our text today. We finally made it through all the bad news of these last two chapters. Thanks for slogging through with me. So, what do we learn from this text that we haven't already said in previous weeks or today?

**A. The Human Plight:** What strikes me from these chapters is that Paul saw the human plight so clearly. Humanity is in the grip of sin, evil and death, and we cannot fix it ourselves. And, yet, we live in a world that refuses to believe that this is the problem. Oh, everyone knows that death is a problem of course, but when death is finally faced, we continue to defy our creator with the Frank Sinatra Syndrome. *I Did It My Way* is the most common song sung at funerals.

Meanwhile, sin and evil simply aren't acknowledged, as I said in my introduction.

The truth is that until we acknowledge the real problem, that we all are sinful and in need of Jesus, our solutions will be faulty. We will place our hope in the products of the enlightenment, the potential of humanity or the potential of technology, even in AI. But, those things will not solve the problem.



The problem is sin pure and simple, choosing to be our own God, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the only solution. Yes and amen. As John the Baptist said when he pointed at Jesus, “He is *‘the lamb of God who takes away the Sin [singular and capital S] of the world’*” (John 1:29). Only He is the solution that will work.

- B. The Call to Good-Newsizing:** And, so, with the knowledge of the human plight, and the knowledge that the only solution is Jesus, I think this should motivate us to be good-newsizers, to use our faith and knowledge of the truth to share His love for the world, with the world. To use Michael Bird’s words from last time, we should use our faith as life preservers for the world to get in the boat, not for beating people over the head. Good-newsizing: Sharing the good news. But, you could call it “humanization.” Loving and building relationships, seeking the best for others, helps everyone become more human. That’s what we’re all about!

At the very least, this text should cause us to get on our knees for our neighbors, cities, country and world.

- C. The Call to Authentic Community:** Lastly, these last two chapters are a call to authentic community. We’re all desperately sick. We’re all “crooked timber,” as Kant said. We’re all in this sin stuff together, which means we all need to help each other through it. We simply cannot go it alone. This is why small groups are so important. We desire every person at PBCC to be in a connection group.

In his small, but incredibly powerful book, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer shared this very thing. We need to be in authentic small groups in order to, among other things, confess our sins. We’re not going to end with a confession today, as we’ve done in our last two Romans studies, but I want us to consider confession from Bonhoeffer’s perspective: confession to one another.

Bonhoeffer says this, “Those who remain alone with their [sin], are left utterly alone” (Bonhoeffer, 108). He then lamented the fact that the church typically operates inauthentically. “We are not allowed to be sinners. Many Christians would be unimaginably horrified if a real sinner were suddenly to turn up” (Bonhoeffer, 108). Sin likes to stay silent, but sin that is spoken and confessed has lost all of its power (110). And, when this happens, there is a breakthrough to new life (112). Repentance of sin brings true freedom as Christ is faithful to make a new beginning for us. That’s what we call grace. Grace means you can start over again. The people of God operate with grace, grace from God, and grace for each other. And, with a culture of grace, we no longer need to pretend. We can be our true, broken selves within an authentic community. Because we know that God is *“faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 Jn 1:9). I want to encourage us to build a culture of grace here at PBCC. Amen.

## **Benediction**

*Jesus answered, "Amen, amen, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. ... But if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed"* (John 8:34). Can you say yes and amen to him?

Go now in the assurance that Jesus is faithful to set you free. Amen. Have a great week!

## **Resources**

Bird, Michael, *Romans (The Story of God Bible Commentary Book 6)*

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Life Together*

Croasmun, Matthew, *Sin: The Cosmic Tyrant*

Gorman, Michael J, *Romans: A Theological and Pastoral Commentary*

Menninger, Karl, *Whatever Became of Sin*

Moo, Douglas, *Romans: The NIV Application Commentary*

Rutledge, Fleming, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*

Stott, John, *Romans: God's Good News for the World*

Thielman, Frank, *Romans (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)*