



GUILTY AS CHARGED

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

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Romans 3:1-20

Sixth Message

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Hans Christian Anderson's classic, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, is a tale about an emperor who loves clothes and is very conscious of his appearance. He is easy prey for some con men posing as weavers, who offer to make him a very expensive magic garment that would be invisible to everyone except the wise and pure in heart. The delighted emperor commissions these crooks to make the garment despite the extravagant cost. And so the con men get started, pretending to weave at the empty looms.

The curious emperor sends his chief ministers to monitor the progress of this wonderful project. They can't see any cloth on the looms but, because they don't want to be thought of as unwise and impure, they return and give a glowing report of the beauty of the cloth. Upon hearing this, the weavers ask for even more money. The emperor sends another official to check things out. He gives an even better report. Finally, the emperor goes down himself to check on the progress. Though he can't see anything he doesn't want to be thought a fool, so he lavishes them with praise and even gives them medals.

When the day comes for the grand parade and the unveiling of this magic garment, the con men dress the emperor in his nakedness and skip town. As the emperor parades through the town *au naturel*, the whole population praises the garment. They don't want to be thought of as fools. The absurd parade continues until one little boy cries, "The emperor has no clothes!" and suddenly everyone knows the truth. The innocent words of a little boy who didn't know any better strips away the hypocrisy of the whole town.¹

Anderson's classic reveals our universal tendency to remain quiet in the face of deception, because we don't want to appear foolish. In the second chapter of the letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul charges that the Jews imagined themselves to be clothed with a righteousness that really didn't exist, thus they deceived themselves with a sense of false religious confidence. They fancied themselves as guides, lights, correctors and teachers, but Paul strips away their deception, telling them that having God's word was no guarantee of life, and that their superstitious confidence in circumcision would not save them. John Stott put it this way: "The Law and circumcision guaranteed neither Jewish immunity from the judgment of God nor Jewish identity as the people of God."² Obviously, Paul's words would arouse their strident objections. He seemed to be

undermining the very foundations of Judaism, questioning God's covenant, promises and character.

In the opening verses of chapter 3 Paul anticipates the Jews' response. That is what he has been doing all along, anticipating and answering questions that would naturally arise from his argument. To accomplish this, all he would have to do was recall his own frame of mind as an unconverted Pharisee.

At this juncture the apostle raises and answers three important questions. First, What advantage has the Jew? or, What is the benefit of circumcision? Here is what Paul has to say. Chapter 3, verses 1-2:

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God. (NASB)

The apostle responds by saying that the Jew has a great advantage, because he has been exposed to and entrusted with the truth of God; he has heard the utterances from Sinai. The Psalmist says, "He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws..." (Psa 147:19-20) The Jews knew the truth. That is the great advantage of being a religious person—he has been exposed to the truth.

Remember Paul has already declared that everyone possesses some degree of truth. And further, he has shown that everyone is under law. Even people who have no knowledge of the Bible or the Ten Commandments still have the Law written in their hearts. Nobody is without a moral standard. No one lives in total darkness. Everyone has light. But the Jews had an additional degree of light: they had God's word written on tablets of stone. Thus they had knowledge of the mind and will and character of God that other people did not possess. This gave them a tremendous advantage. Translating this to our day, we might ask, What is the advantage of being raised in a religious home? Some who are raised in Christian homes reject the truth when they go to live on their own. What is the advantage of being raised in such a home, especially if they had that truth, or even had extra-Biblical rules forced upon them? It is that though they might have rejected the truth, they had been exposed to it. They might not have believed it, but they couldn't get away from it.

Paul's second question concerns God's faithfulness. Verses 3-4:

What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, "THAT THOU MIGHTEST BE JUSTIFIED IN THY WORDS, AND MIGHTEST PREVAIL WHEN THOU ART JUDGED."

The argument is as follows: "If we Jews have so totally failed to keep our part of the covenant, doesn't that cast God in a bad light, making him seem unfaithful since we are unfaithful? After all, a true covenant is enacted when both parties keep their part of the agreement."

Paul responds to this argument in verse 4, saying, in effect: "May it never be! How can man's unfaithfulness to his part of the covenant possibly imply that God will in any way be unfaithful to fulfill his part? God will never break his covenant." Paul will further develop this truth in chapters 9-11. For all of time, God has been a faithful husband to Israel. He even sent Jesus Christ to fulfill man's portion of the agreement when Israel totally failed. God remains faithful even when man is unfaithful. In fact, even if every single human being were a liar, God would still be true to his word, because that is who he is. Then Paul quotes Ps. 51:4, David's acknowledgment that he had sinned and done evil in God's sight in his affair with Bathsheba, thus affirming God's justice and proving that God remains faithful and true no matter how individuals may sin.

Next, Paul deals with a third argument that attempts to impugn God's justice and character. Verses 5-8:

But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.) May it never be! For otherwise how will God judge the world? But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner? And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say), "Let us do evil that good may come"? Their condemnation is just.

The point is, if their being bad makes God look good, then aren't they doing him a service by being bad? God ought to be grateful for their making him look good! If evil behavior causes good consequences (because it manifests God's gracious character and promotes his glory), then let's increase evil so as to increase good. Paul doesn't even answer this ridiculous argument. He takes up this topic later, in chapter 6. If the end justifies the means, one could do evil so that good could come of it. That would be like telling a judge after we are caught in a crime that we broke the law to show everyone how merciful he was. Paul doesn't bother to refute this silly argument. He simply says, "*Their condemnation is just.*" Evil never promotes the glory of God.

Having dealt with all the objections, the apostle comes to the conclusion that everyone is guilty. Verse 9:

What then? Are we [Jews, religious people] better

than they [those who would never even come near a church]? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;

It is an inescapable fact that we are all sinful. We have to deal with this. Every time we try to do something about society's problems or our own personal problems we have to reckon with the fact that there is a deadly defect that runs through every one of us. That is why Paul says we "*are all under sin.*"

In these chapters the apostle has divided people into two groupings, the religious and the irreligious. The irreligious live for the weekend. Life for them is having a good time. That is the limit of their morality. If life were a baseball game, their batting average would be about .025. The religious person is the Bible reading, church going man or woman. They do a little better, batting around .225. But God is not impressed by either one, because he bats 1.000. That is the standard of righteousness that he holds up before us. If we are trying to win our way into God's heart by being good, then we are in big trouble, because we are "all under sin."

In his book, *Whatever Became Of Sin?* Karl Menninger pointed out how our view of sin has changed over the years. It used to be that the priest dealt with sin, because everyone realized that sin was a moral problem. Then sin was put solely in the hands of the police, because it was seen as a civil problem. Society began to hold the view that anything that was not illegal was moral. Then sin was taken out of the province of the police and put in the hands of psychiatrists and psychologists, and man was no longer held responsible. We were told that sin was a disease, like cancer. So we have tried to do away with sin.³

But Paul says we cannot do that. We are "all under sin." We try to justify it, to protect ourselves and hide behind our objections and facades, to no avail. It doesn't matter whether we are a religious, church going, Bible reading person or one who cares nothing for God or the church. The holy and righteous God is unimpressed with our righteousness. We stand condemned before him.

Paul goes on now to quote the Law. He is addressing religious people, those who know the Law, thus he quotes the Bible. In these verses he follows the practice of the rabbis of that time, stringing together a number of verses to make a point (they called it a "string of pearls"). He takes a number of verses from Psalms, Isaiah and Proverbs to powerfully drive home his conclusion that all mankind is under the power of sin. Verses 10-11:

as it is written,

"THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;

There is not one righteous. Lest someone say, "What about me?" Paul adds, "Not even one."

**THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS,
THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;**

There may be some who casually search for God, but no one really hungers after God.

There is not one righteous. If we evaluate ourselves by God's standard we all fall short of his glory. God is the only one who is righteous. If we were to illustrate this in terms of a compass, God is due North. Some are going due South, and there may be some who are going Northeast or Northwest, but no one is going due North.

Verse 12:

**ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS;
THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD,
THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE."**

Paul is not saying that no one on earth has ever done a good deed. What he is saying is that no one exclusively or habitually does what is good. We may occasionally do some good things, but even our best actions are tinged with evil.

Listen to these words from Malcolm Muggeridge:

It is precisely when you consider the best in man that you see that there is in each one of us a hard core of pride or self-centeredness that corrupts our best achievements and blights our best experiences. It comes out in all sorts of ways, in the jealousy which spoils our friendships, in the vanity we feel when we have done something pretty good, in the easy conversion of love into lust, in the meanness that lets us depreciate the efforts of other people, in the distortion of our own judgment by our own self interest, in our fondness for flattery and our resentment for blame, in our self-assertive profession of fine ideals which we never begin to practice.⁴

That is our problem, and that is why our deeds are worthless: We are self-centered. And that is what sin is—the revolt of self over God.

So what is Paul saying in this passage?

In 10b-12, he indicts everyone. We are all affected by sin, everyone in the world. No one is untouched.

We don't have to be a genius to understand what he is saying:

v. 10: *There is none...not even one.*

v. 11: *There is none...There is none.*

v. 12: *All...There is none...There is not even one.*

We are sinful in our origins. We come into the world with a proclivity for doing wrong. This is what theologians call original sin. They are not saying that we sin in original ways. We all sin pretty much the same way. Our life is like a baseball with a spin on it. Sooner or later it breaks, and it always breaks away from God.

The clearest statement on original sin that I have ever read comes from the report some years ago of the Minnesota Crime Commission, a totally secular agency. They came to this frightening and factual conclusion:

Every baby starts life as a little savage. He is completely selfish and self-centered. He wants what he wants when he wants it—his bottle, his mother's attention, his playmate's toy, his uncle's watch. Deny him these wants, and he seethes with rage and aggressiveness, which would be murderous, were he not so helpless. He is dirty. He has no morals, no knowledge, and no skills. This means that all children, not just certain children, are born delinquent. If permitted to continue in the self-centered world of his infancy, given free reign to his impulsive actions to satisfy his wants, every child would grow up a criminal, a thief, a killer, a rapist.⁵

In verses 13 -18 Paul shows that not only are all of us affected by sin, but every part of our being is affected. Sin is pervasive. This is what theologians call total depravity. We don't like to hear that phrase. It doesn't mean that we are as depraved as we can be. It means that we are depraved in the totality of our being. If sin were a color we would be some shade of that color all over.

Notice how Paul demonstrates this. He lists certain parts of the human body to show how pervasive sin is. Sin affects every part of us: our minds, our emotions, our wills, our sexuality. We can't get away from it.

Verses 13-14:

**"THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE,
WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING,
"THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS;"
WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS;"**

The apostle covers the whole realm of human speech. Sin begins deep down in the throat, then it proceeds to the tongue, then the lips, then the whole mouth, from the inward parts to the outward parts. "*THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE.*" They are corrupt. That is why corruption comes out of their mouths, as if someone had opened a grave: all the garbage, all the corruption comes out. This explains people's obsession with four-letter words, sexual innuendoes and profanity. All this is a manifestation of what is in their hearts. Jesus said that the mouth simply speaks out of what is in the heart. And not only vulgarity, but hypocrisy: "*THEIR TONGUES KEEP DECEIVING.*" He is speaking of the facades we put up, the white lies we tell. "*THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS.*" We poison with our words, slandering reputations. We use caustic words to put people down.

Next, Paul moves to deeds. Verses 15-17:

**"THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD,
DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS,
AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN."**

Wherever man goes ruin follows. Do we need any more documentation of this? Will Durant wrote in his book, *Lessons from History*: "In the last 3,421 years of recorded history only 268 have seen no war."⁶ The search for peace goes on unabated, because we don't know the way to peace. Ray Stedman used to say that verse 17

would be an appropriate slogan for the United Nations: "The path of peace have they not known."⁷ Man is helpless to stop the constant wars because he does not know the way of peace.

Next, Paul identifies the cause of all this war and turmoil. Verse 18:

"THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES."

At the root of all our sin lies the fact that we do not fear God. We do not respect him. And, as Paul said earlier in chapter 1, when we reject God, we lose everything.

Verse 19:

Now we know that whatever the Law says [i.e., the verses from Psalms and Isaiah that he has just quoted in verses 10-18], it speaks to those who are under the Law [i.e., people who are religious], that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable [guilty] to God;

In other words, if we have to be approved before God on the basis of our goodness, we don't have a chance. We are guilty. We have heard the word of God spoken to us and we stand condemned before him, because we have not lived up to the truth that we have.

Verse 20:

because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

Paul introduces an idea that he is going to develop later in the book, namely, that the Law was never given to save us. God did not expect Israel to keep the Law and thereby win their way into his heart. He knew they couldn't keep it, but they thought they could. They said to Moses: "Give us the Law. Tell us what God says and we will do it." But before Moses ever got down from the mountain Israel was breaking every commandment.

The purpose of the Law is to indict and condemn, to drive people back to grace. It is designed to reveal how sinful we really are. Once we had a vague notion that we were sinful but, having read the Law, now we know how really sinful we are. That is the purpose of the Law—to make us take a good look at ourselves so that we can see just how bad we are, that we might rely on God's grace and his power to keep it.

If we are basing our relationship with God on our own efforts we will never get to know him. We have to live up to the light that we have and never falter, not even once. But we have not, we will not, and we cannot keep the Law. When we finally come to accept this we are driven to grace.

And so God's word strips away our emperor's clothing of self deceit, displaying our nakedness. The world may say that we are doing fine and that our clothes are beautiful, but God's word reveals our wretchedness.

In Revelation 3:17-18, the apostle John wrote these words to the church at Laodicea:

"You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see."

The only answer to the predicament of sin is the cross of Christ. That is where our Savior took upon himself the wrath that was justly ours to bear. As we stand before that cross, naked, guilty, and devoid of any righteousness, let us resolve today to cling to Christ, who fulfilled the Law on behalf of sinners like us.

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1. R. Kent Hughes, *Romans* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991) 71.
2. John Stott, *Romans* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994) 95.
3. Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became Of Sin?* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1973).
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5. Ray C. Stedman, *What Every Child Should Know* (Discovery Publishing, 3505 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto CA). Catalog No. 3023, 2/11/1973.
6. Will and Ariel Durant, *Lessons From History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968) 81.
7. Ray C. Stedman, *From Guilt to Glory*, Vol. I (Waco, TX: Word, 1981) 66.