



Catalog No. 659

Romans 3:1-20

Sixth Message

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November 8, 1987

GETTING DOCTORS TO TAKE THEIR OWN MEDICINE

Several years ago I performed a wedding in which both the bride and groom were cardiologists from Stanford University Hospital. The reception was attended by heart surgeons as well as many of the patients who had received transplants. What was particularly amazing to me was the fact that at the reception there was more cigarette smoke floating around the room than in most ballrooms and pool halls! Here were patients who had submitted to radical surgery and were now under a strict diet and behavior modification surrounded by surgeons violating all the rules they had given. It was obvious these surgeons thought themselves immune to the very disease they try to cure. It is difficult for doctors to take their own medicine.

Israel, which had been chosen to be Surgeon General for the nations, faced the same problem. She attended medical school at Mt. Sinai where she received the scalpel of God's word to probe deeply into the heart. Then she did a forty-year residency in the wilderness where she learned all about proper diet. After completing seven years of specialized internship under the surgeon Joshua, she graduated as a cardiovascular surgeon.

All of this training was designed to equip her to root out the deadliest heart disease know to man, the sin of idolatry. Because this disease is so destructive to the human heart, the only valid procedure is a heart transplant in which God actually creates a new heart in man through his word and the Spirit.

In Romans 3, Paul makes the claim that Israel as a doctor was not immune to this disease. And rather than submitting to radical heart surgery herself, she substituted topical cures which let the disease go unchecked, like putting a band-aid on a cancer. This failure and her continued hypocrisy were evident to the Gentile nations around her and caused them to question her God and the credibility of her methods.

Have you taken the role of heart surgeon for others without having had a heart transplant yourself? Have you substituted the topical cures of baptism, church attendance, Bible study, or any other religious activity for actual conversion? If you can say yes, then this is your trial.

In chapter 2, we saw that Paul indicted Israel, claiming that she was just as guilty as the Gentile nations and was not immune to the disease of sin. In chapter 3, Israel raises a series of objections to protest her innocence. Paul overrules her four objections in the first part of the text. Then he substantiates his indictment from the Old Testament and from experience.

Let us look at the objections which Paul overrules in verses 1-9.

I. Objections of Innocence Overruled (3:1-9)

All four of these objections relate to one issue: Israel's misunderstanding of the relationship between divine election and human responsibility. It is difficult for believers to hold this great paradox in balance. Error and ungodliness result when one truth is stressed over

the other or when one is taught to the exclusion of the other. This is what Israel had done.

The first objection is found in the first two verses:

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. (Rom 3:1-2 NASB)

In the last chapter, Paul had said that though Israel had been chosen to be the Surgeon General of all the nations she had emphasized the outward signs of her Judaism to the neglect of the internal reality. Then he defined a Jew not as one who is a Jew outwardly but as one who is a Jew of the heart. Circumcision was always meant to be of the heart. Only the spiritual issues matter. The objection then presented is: "Well, if being a Jew is solely spiritual, there is no advantage to being chosen as part of the physical race of Israel!"

Paul says there is an advantage to election, for it secured a great privilege. As one commentator said:

The Jew had an advantage, a priority, a privilege, a preeminence, which is in every respect great and important...It is the fact of God's special choice of Israel...that the redemption of the world was to be made...The Jews were given God's self-revelation in trust to treasure it and to attest and declare it to all mankind (Cranfield).

John Calvin said, "The Jews were firstly keeper of the oracles of God and secondly stewards." This is Paul's argument. It was a great advantage to be elected Surgeon General. They were given the scalpel of God's word to bring forth redemption to the nations.

The second objection is addressed in 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 you enter into judgment."**

This objection centers not on God's election but on human responsibility. Many of the Jews dropped out of the school of medicine because they were faithless. Thus, the Jews want to know: "Can the faithlessness of man overcome the sovereignty of God in election?" Israel had not proved faithful to the trust, for they had not treasured God's oracles or presented them to the nations. Therefore, what advantage was there to being a part of the nation? Paul overrules this objection by saying, "God remains faithful even when all men are faithless. Every man will be shown to be a liar, but God will still bring about his purposes in election and will redeem the world."

This is clearly seen in the Old Testament. Every time God made a covenant of faithfulness with his people, it was followed by their faithlessness. But the covenant always stands! God always remains faithful to his promises. After God gave Adam the universe to rule,

Adam immediately sinned. Then came the flood, and God made a covenant with Noah. In the very next scene, Noah got drunk. When God made a covenant with Abraham and promised that his seed would be a blessing to all nations, Abraham immediately lied and sold his wife. Then God covenanted to bless the seed of David as the line of the kings. This is followed by David's sins of murder and adultery.

Even the New Testament verifies God's faithfulness. Immediately after the new covenant was inaugurated in the upper room by Jesus, all the disciples denied him. This is the testimony of history. Every man will be found a liar, but God will be faithful.

Human failure cannot overcome the sovereign election of God. The Psalm quoted in the text was written by David after he had committed his sins. When he returned to God, he said, "Against Thee and Thee only did I sin, (I say this) that Thou might be vindicated when You judge." In other words, he was saying, "O Lord, I am a failure, and anything you give me I deserve. You will be vindicated in your righteousness." He knew he could return to the loyal-love of God for hope after he had failed.

Having overruled the second argument, Paul presents the third objection in verses 5-6:

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?

The objection is if sin serves as a backdrop for God's righteousness and makes his righteousness shine all the brighter, how can God justly judge the sinner? Here is the other side of election and responsibility. Even though the human heart refuses to take responsibility for its sin, Paul says, "You will take responsibility! If God were not just and exact in his retribution for sin, how could he be the Judge of the world?" For God to be judge, all humans must be responsible for their own sin.

The final objection is found in verses 7-8:

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.

This argument always arises when election and grace are taught: Why not continue to sin if it brings God's glory? The end justifies the means; therefore, man should not be held accountable. Paul says the argument is so void of reason it needs no rebuttal. In fact, it only needs a word of condemnation. Paul will expand this argument in chapter 6, but here he overrules it and dismisses it as faulty logic.

His conclusion to these four objections is given in verse 9:

What then? Are we [the Jews] better than they [the Gentiles]? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin [under the dominion of sin]...

This would be like telling doctors in an AIDS clinic that they are not immune to the disease they have been treating. Imagine telling them, "It does not matter how everyone else got it, whether from immorality or intravenous drug use. You caught it even though you are innocent." The death sentence still stands even though they may have been innocent in contracting the disease.

Paul says the same thing to these Jews: "You surgeons are not immune to the disease. You too need to submit to the only cure, radical heart surgery, as found in the oracles you possess." To substantiate the claim of this indictment, because it is indeed radical, Paul must convince these doctors that they too are under sin. Thus, he turns to the medical journal of the Old Testament to document his conclusion with case studies.

II. The Indictment Substantiated in the Old Testament (3:10-18)

What follows is poetically arranged material in which Paul uses references from the Old Testament to prove two points. The first is that no one is exempt from the disease of sin. In verses 10-12, Paul spins the globe to see if he can find anyone on the face of the earth who had not been affected by the disease. After that, he places one individual on the operating table to do exploratory surgery to examine how much of this life is affected by sin. In the first case, he looks at the breadth of sin in humanity, in the second case the depth of sin. How depraved are we?

Let us look at verses 10-12 to see the breadth of sin:

...as it is written,

**"There is none righteous, not even one;
There is none who understands,
There is none who seeks for God;
All have turned aside, together they have become useless;
There is none who does good,
There is not even one."**

His theme comes across in the words which frame the beginning and end of this passage—"not even one." None are righteous—not Ghandi or Mohammed, not one guru or professor. No one on the face of the earth is exempt from this disease.

Paul uses the same order of expression as he did in chapter 2 when he looked first at the heart and then at the deeds of man. There he described how God will judge all humanity first according to their motives and then according to their deeds. We saw that if anyone sought glory, honor, and immortality they would be given eternal life. Here he says no one understands, for none seek God. No one has the proper motives. Of their deeds, Paul says, "All have turned aside and have become good for nothing." When they all turned away from God and pursued idolatry, they became useless. The doctrine of original sin is clearly stated here, for all are affected.

A few months ago, the television show *20/20* interviewed people representative of our singles culture. Even though they were successful in their careers, many expressed the desire to find a mate. Since they were disappointed in the singles bars, they had opted for a computer dating service. As part of this service, they wrote descriptions of the kind of person they wanted and of themselves. From the written responses to their descriptions, they selected dates. One successful businesswoman in her mid-thirties said, "I wanted a tall, good-looking man who would be sensitive and caring, who would take an interest in me. I received hundreds of letters, but every man I went out with turned out to be a jerk!" Her conclusion was, "I found none I liked."

If she had read Romans, she could have saved herself some money! She was looking for a man immune to the disease of sin, but he does not exist. We are all selfish and insincere. None of us knows how to carry on an interesting conversation about someone else. We

are all insensitive bores. This is the conclusion this single woman had to face.

Now Paul looks at the depth of sin. This heart disease spreads and touches the entire life of the individual. In this section, Paul uses poetic couplets in which the first line gives a metaphor and the second explains the reality. The first two couplets talk about the heart. The third couplet talks about the deeds, and the last one summarizes Paul's views by linking the heart and deed together.

Let us look at the heart of man in verse 13:

**“Their throat is an open grave,
With their tongues they keep deceiving,”**

Here the throat, the vehicle of speech, is compared to an open casket or grave. An open grave contains nothing but death, uncleanness, and corruption. A man's speech reveals his heart, and whenever he speaks he brings forth deception.

The next couplet carries this idea even further:

**“The poison of asps is under their lips;
Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness;”**

This metaphor says our speech is like the deadly venom of snakes. Not only is our speech wicked, it desires to infect others and to lash out at others. We take every opportunity to spread its deadly venom around the community, for our speech is full of cursing and bitterness.

While waiting to pick up my daughter from school recently, I had the opportunity to observe the speech of elementary school children. There was one particular group of boys playing football who interested me. They were verbally assaulting one another with words filled with cursing, bitterness, and anger because they were all jockeying for position. This is not learned behavior. It is natural symptom of the disease of sin in the heart.

After the first service, a nurse shared with me one of her experiences with speech. As part of her nurse's training, she had worked in several hospitals and had observed many surgeries. One time she spent four hours in surgery with doctors who told the dirtiest jokes she had ever heard. When not telling jokes, they were talking about the nurses or speaking in sexual innuendos. Yet, when they took off their surgical masks, they replaced them with masks of respectability.

These doctors were no different than the “macho” boys playing football. The disease of sin does not change with age. Paul says our speech reveals a corrupt heart. Every time we use our tongue, it pours forth wickedness and depravity.

In the next couplet, Paul moves from the heart to the deeds of man:

**“Their feet are swift to shed blood,
Destruction and misery are in their paths;”**

Paul says our affections are so polluted and corrupted by death our feet run to evil to prey upon the innocent, leaving behind a path of devastation and horror.

On the front page of the San Francisco *Chronicle* recently, there was an article about child abuse in our nation. Child psychologists are now recognizing a unifying theme in many of these cases—Satanism. When interviewed, these children reveal horrifying stories of being forced to drink the blood of animal sacrifices and eat human excrements. They then are forced to listen to the prayers of Satan himself. In fact, in my own home town of Encino in Southern Cali-

fornia, one psychologist said she had interviewed sixty children with similar stories.

This is a path in which those diseased are preying on victims and leaving behind them devastation and destruction. But remember this text was not written solely about these sinful pagans. It was written to examine the Jews, the doctors of their disease. Paul wants us to see that sin, even in the worst forms of devil worship, child abuse, pornography and homosexuality, is the same disease which affects us. This passage takes the arrow of accusation and turns it away from those outside to aim it at the doctors' hearts.

In the last couplet, Paul links both the deed and the heart together:

**“And the path of peace have they not known,
There is no fear of God before their eyes.”**

In the path of their deeds and lifestyle, these doctors have not been intimate with *shalom*—peace. They are not acquainted with it because their heart does not fear God. “Fearing God” is not equivalent to “fear of the Lord” which is an understanding of and submission to God's written revelation. “Fear of God” simply refers to submission to the basic ethical standards to which most pagans adhere. Paul's point is that when this disease takes over the body and runs its full course, all the basic ethical standards which bind even the most pagan societies together are destroyed. There is no respect for the laws of God whatsoever.

Thus, Paul is able to substantiate his indictment from the Old Testament. Because of the breadth and depth of sin, no one is exempt. Every area of our lives has been touched by this disease. You can imagine the response Paul would get in teaching this to a Jewish audience! They would say to him, “How can you interpret the Scriptures this way?” Look at what he says in verses 19-20.

III. The Indictment Substantiated in Experience (3:19-20)

Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

The Jew would have said Paul took these passages out of context, for all of them had specific historical contexts. For example, one was addressed to the fool who says in his heart, “There is no God.” Another looked at the wicked and ruthless people in Israel who fight against the Messiah. Another addressed the pagan nations. All of the passages refer to specific enemies.

The Jews would normally have interpreted this material as distinguishing two types of people—us and them. The “them” are all the wicked outside of the covenant who are ruthless and idolatrous. The “us” are the godly remnant in Judaism. Paul tells the Jews, these doctors, that they are equivalent to the wicked.

How can he universalize these passages? Paul, the Jew of Jews, had an experience which changed his viewpoint. One day, while zealously persecuting the church, he came face to face with the risen Christ who said to him, “Saul, why are you persecuting me?” On that day, the scales fell from his spiritual eyes and he said, “I am the wicked. All the texts which talk about the enemies of God were written about me; I'm no different than the Gentiles. All my external religion did

nothing to remove my sin." On the road to Damascus, Paul saw a new way of interpreting the Old Testament.

If you study the theme of the godly remnant in Scripture, you will see that the remnant starts as a small group, but then it almost disappears. In Micah 7:2, the prophet looks for the remnant and exclaims, "The godly person has perished from the land, and there is no upright among men."

The remnant finally finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He alone is godly and can say, "You vindicate me according to my righteousness." None of us can say that. The Old Testament declares that all of us are the wicked and only Jesus Christ is righteous. The remnant is one person.

I watched an interview of a Jew who had survived the treatment of Adolf Eichmann during the holocaust. During the show, the scene was shown when this man came face to face with the author of his persecution. As Eichmann walked into the courtroom, the Jew fainted. While interviewing this man, the newscaster asked, "Did the terror and evil of Adolf Eichmann overwhelm you and cause you to faint?" The Jew honestly replied, "No, what I was expecting to see in Adolf Eichmann was an ugly monster. Instead I saw a man just like me." What horrified him was the fact that the evil in Eichmann was the same disease which occupied his soul. In other words, he was capable of doing the same thing.

This is the way to read our Bible. It does not talk about us against them. Rather, it is all of us against the man Jesus Christ. We are told the Old Testament was written to those under the Law. It was written for us about us. Every description of evil is a description of our own hearts.

Paul adds that the Law not only describes us it was also written to give us an experiential knowledge of sin. He says, "Through the Law comes knowledge of sin." This word is intensified in the original Greek to mean "experiential knowledge." When Paul repeats this theme in the rest of Romans, he amplifies it. Romans 5:20 says, "And the Law came in that transgression might increase." In Romans 7, he says:

I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from Law sin is dead. And I once was alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died.

The Torah, the Law, did not save him. Rather, it further escalated the disease of sin which was dormant within him. God's purpose in giving the Law was to make the doctors see that they have the same fatal disease and to escalate the disease until fatality occurred. Only then they can see their need for the gospel of Christ. He says, "The Law came so that every mouth may be shut, for no flesh will be justified from works of Law."

If you have any excuses left and if you think you can stand face to face with this living God as righteous, you have not yet felt the escalation of the disease. As time goes on, God will bring more pressure to bear through the Law until the dormant disease which you think is under control will bring death. Then you will realize that you have

no excuse. We must all say, "I am a sinner and a slave to sin. It is fatally attractive to me." Apart from radical heart surgery there is no hope for any of us.

As a master prosecutor, Paul takes away every excuse and overrules all objections from those who might consider themselves free from the power of sin. It takes a monumental effort to convince doctors that they are sick! Even though they are chosen as spiritual surgeons, they are not exempt from the disease they were sent to cure. He substantiates his indictment from both the Old Testament and their own experience.

Last week, I spent three hours in the emergency room with my daughter who had run through a plate glass window. First one doctor cleansed her wounds and then a plastic surgeon treated her internal injuries. In order to do that, this surgeon had to open the wounds even wider, and then she put her finger about two inches into the wound to probe even more deeply. As my daughter practically came off the table in pain, I thought, "What are you doing?" She said to me, "A glass injury is far worse than a stabbing because the glass travels. I can't sew up the flesh if there is still glass inside the wound." Thus, she went through this painful process to make sure there was no glass left in the wound.

Spiritually, I can do no less for you. These messages have not been easy for me. Yet we must lay our hearts open to the hands of the Master Surgeon, the Lord himself. It would be an awful crime if I chose to close the wound over your heart without allowing the blood of Jesus to cleanse you. As Charles Spurgeon said in his autobiography over 100 years ago:

A spiritual experience which is thoroughly flavored with a deep and bitter sense of sin is of great value to him who has had it. It is terrible in the drinking, but it is most wholesome in the bowels in the whole of the afterlife. Possibly much of the flimsy piety of the present day arises from the ease with which men attain to peace and joy in these evangelistic days. We would not judge modern converts, but we certainly prefer that form of spiritual exercise which leads the soul by the way of the weeping cross and makes it see its blackness before assuring that it is clean every whit. Too many think lightly of sin and therefore think lightly of the Saviour. He who has stood before God convicted and condemned with a rope about his neck is the man to weep for joy when he is pardoned, to hate the evil which has been forgiven him and to live in honor of the Redeemer by whose blood he has been cleansed.

When we come to this deep sense of our own depravity, then the possibility is open for salvation by grace. The good news is that "apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested...even the righteousness through faith."

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