



SCRIPTURE STUDIES: ROMANS 3:9-20

Brandon Sutton, Associate Pastor of The Journey Church in Lebanon, TN

Romans 3:9-20 (ESV) -- *What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written:*

"None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

A few years ago, I held a Q & A night at my church where I took pre-written theological and biblical questions from the congregation. I remember one young man stood up and asked, *"What does the book of Revelation say about the future of America?"* The congregation became silent as they awaited my response. I am afraid, however, I didn't give them the blockbuster answer they were looking for. I simply told the young man, I don't see anywhere in scripture where the USA is mentioned specifically.

Looking back on that night, however, I should have said, I don't just see the USA in Scripture. I see all men in Scripture. In Romans 3:9-20, every man, woman, and child who has ever or will ever walk the face of the earth is described, and it's not good.

Most people think that man is basically good. Sure, we make mistakes from time to time, but deep down inside, most of us are pretty good people trying to do our best. No one is perfect, but we're all good people for the most part.

The Bible refutes that idea strongly. Scripture doesn't affirm that we're good people who occasionally mess up. Rather, the Bible says we're bad people who can do nothing good whatsoever. In Genesis 6:5, **"The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."** Those are absolute statements. Man's heart is only evil all the time, and it's not much better today. This is why the prophet Jeremiah says that man's heart is **"deceitful and desperately wicked"** (Jeremiah 17:9). Apparently, we're born this way. David said, **"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me."** We're not sinners because we sin. We sin because we're sinners. It's in our nature to sin. It's who we are inherently, and there is nothing we can do (on our own) to change our nature. Jesus said, **"Every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit."** (Matthew 7:17-18). We bear bad fruit, and we cannot bear good fruit because our human nature has been corrupted with sin. Listen to these sobering words from the prophet. **"Can an Ethiopian change his skin or a leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil."** Jeremiah 13:23

All men are under the power and penalty of sin.

Romans 3:9 (ESV) -- What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin

- **Explanation.** Paul just dismantled Jewish arguments against his gospel (3:1-8), which brings us back to square one. All are under sin because all have broken the law. Paul, therefore, raises two final rhetorical questions (in this section). "What then?" In other words, is there anything left to say? Are we (Jews) better off than anyone else in the world? Do the Jews have any ultimate spiritual advantages? Paul answers no. Why? Because all mankind—both Jews and Greeks (all non-Jews)—are equally under sin.
- **Does this contradict verse 1?** This is not a contradiction to verse 1. It qualifies verse 1. The Jews do have spiritual advantages because of their access to the word of God and the fact they are God's chosen people etc. But, because of sin,

none of that gives them any ultimate spiritual advantage in terms of salvation. Why? As Paul has already made clear, both Jews and Gentiles are under sin.

- **Under Sin.** The entire human race—with no exceptions but the Lord Jesus Himself—is under sin. This not only states that all are guilty of sin and commit sinful acts (3:23). It states that all are under the power and penalty of sin. “Under” is the Greek word, *Huper*. It not only means beneath but to be totally under the power and authority of someone or something else.
- **Sin illustrated.** Think about an inmate in a one room cell. He is under the absolute power and authority of the jail; so, it is with man. Think about how the Bible describes sin in Romans alone. Sin reigns (5:21), it enslaves (6:6), it rules (6:12), and it exercises lordship (6:14).

Transition: So, what does it mean that we’re all sinners? What does it look like for all to be under the power and penalty of sin? Using a series of OT texts, Paul now defines and characterizes the sinner and shows how sin manifests itself in sinful acts.

Romans 3:10 (ESV) -- as it is written:

- **As it is written.** Paul makes his claim in verse 9—all men without exception are under sin. “As it written” or “As it says in the Bible.” Like Jesus before him, by using the phrase “as it written”, Paul is proving his point from Scripture. In doing so, he strings together a series texts from the Greek OT that characterize sinful man.
- **Jewish readings of these OT texts.** It’s interesting because the Jew who read the following OT texts would have understood them to apply to the Gentile. But Paul uses them to show they apply to the Jew as well.

Four marks of man the sinner

Mark #1-Man is universally unrighteous

Romans 3:10-12 (ESV) -- “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

- **None is righteous, no, not one.** No man¹ (not even one) stands justified in the eyes of God. If you're not righteous, it means you're evil in the sight of God. There is none who doesn't sin. Therefore, no man is righteous before God. This is what most people don't understand. Just one sin makes you unrighteous before God. There is not even one man who can claim to be righteous before God. God's standard is perfection. ***"You are to be perfect," Jesus said, "as your heavenly Father is perfect"*** (Matt. 5:48).
- **No one understands.** Through his conscience and creation, man understands some things about God, but no one truly understands God. They don't understand His ways, character, or works. They don't understand salvation. That's because man is spiritually blind and dead. He can't comprehend spiritual truth. Unbelievers are ***"darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart"*** (Eph. 4:18).
- **No one seeks God.** No one is even seeking God. This seems hard to believe with all the religions in the world, but all those religions are not people seeking God. Those are people rebelling against the One True God with their own religious beliefs/practices. God tells man that if he seeks Him, he will find God. But men don't seek for God. God must seek man to be saved.
- **Turned aside.** MacArthur notes, *"Turned aside' is from ekklinō, and has the basic meaning of leaning in the wrong direction. In a military context it referred to a soldier's running the wrong way, in other words deserting in the midst of battle."* Instead of seeking God, man has turned aside to his sin. Man desires to live his life apart from the will of God.
- **Worthless.** As a result, man has become worthless in the eyes of God. Does this mean man has no value as an image bearer? No, but it does mean man does nothing of spiritual worth.
- **No one does good, not even one.** This is another difficult claim. Is it really true that no one does good? Not even the billionaire philanthropist? No. Not unless it is a morally good deed done for the glory of God.
- **God's perspective.** It is important to note that everything asserted in this section is from the perspective of God. For example, I don't think all people are worthless. I don't see an unbeliever's good deeds as evil etc. But I am not God. I don't have the standard of God. From God's standard and perspective, all of the above is true.

¹ Why doesn't Paul mention Jesus here? He's a man who stands right before the Lord. True, but Paul is building a case here against man that will culminate in our need for the righteousness of Christ (3:21-26). He doesn't want to make his point too early.

- **Illustration.** God's standards are too high. Imagine if the goal for salvation was that you had to swim from the coast of California to Hawaii. Olympic swimmers might make it a few miles. Average people would make it less. And people who are really out of shape even less. Compared to the Olympic swimmers, you and I would really fall short. But in the grand scheme of things, we're all going to drown hundreds of miles from our goal. That's man's righteousness before God's standard.

Transition: From his unrighteous character and heart, man will manifest his wickedness first and foremost in his speech. Jesus said, ***"For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks."***³⁵ ***The good person out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure brings forth evil."*** Man speech is evil because man is evil. This is what Paul says in verse 13-14.

Mark #2-Man's speech is corrupt

Romans 3:13-14 (ESV) -- *Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness."*

- **Throat...Open Grave.** When we bury our dead, we close the casket and seal the grave. Imagine a dead corpse rotting for days in view of all. That's how Paul describes man's words, which flow from man's corrupt heart. And those words have a devastating effect.
- **Tongues deceive.** Man uses his words to lie and deceive others. Even his kind words are used to flatter for evil purposes.
- **Venom lips.** Paul colorfully envisions a snake's venom as man's speech. Snakes often hide their fangs within their jaw until they're ready to strike. Man can be the same way. He uses his words like a snake uses its fangs. You won't see it coming until he pounces, bite and injects his venom.
- **Curses and bitterness.** Our mouths are full of wickedness. Curses is speaking about someone in evil publicly. Bitterness describes the emotional hatred one has for others and expresses in his speech. Man uses his words as a weapon.
- **Christian speech.** As Christians, we need to be people characterized by good speech. ***"Set a guard, O LORD, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips!"*** (Psalm 141:3). Ephesians 5:4, ***"Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving."***

Transition: Human wickedness is not limited to speech. It is expressed in physical acts.

Mark #3-Man is violent

Romans 3:15-17 (ESV) -- "Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known."

- **Shed blood.** Man loves to kill, and we are quick to do so. One writer noted, "Murder and killing document [man's] existence in a world that has all too often turned toward barbarianism." (Schreiner). Man kills man because man rejects God.
- **Ruin and misery.** Paul is not speaking of the inner ruin and misery all men experience. He's speaking about the ruin and misery we cause in the lives of others.
- **Way of peace.** This not speaking of man lacking inner peace (though he does), it's speaking of man's disruption of peace with acts of violence.

Mark #4-Man is spiritually dead

Romans 3:18 (ESV) -- "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

- **No reverence.** Lest we're tempted to believe, because of verses 13-17, that man's problems are primarily outward or social, Paul reminds us that all of man's sinfulness stems one thing—a failure to revere the One True God.
- **No terror.** The other meaning of fear in Scripture is dread. He doesn't fear judgement for his sin. He doesn't fear the wrath of God.
- **Robert Haldane.** "It is astonishing that men, while they acknowledge that there is a God, should act without any fear of His displeasure. Yet this is their character. They fear a worm of the dust like themselves, but disregard the Most High.... They are more afraid of man than of God—of his anger, his contempt, or ridicule. The fear of man prevents them from doing many things from which they are not restrained by the fear of God.... They love not His character, not rendering to it that veneration which is due; they respect not His authority. Such is the state of human nature while the heart is unchanged." (Exposition of Romans, p. 121)

Conclusion

Romans 3:19-20 (ESV) -- *Not we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.*

- **Explanation.** Here is the final verdict. Paul explains it like this: All men are under the law's obligations. The law does not reveal man's righteousness. It reveals his sinfulness. It reveals what we have failed to do. Therefore, in the courtroom of God, the law serves to shut our mouths, because we have no more excuses. The law shows our sin and account ability before God, the Judge. We have no defense. Judgement is sure.

Transition: Why is this so?

²⁰ *For by works of the law no human being will be justified in His sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.*

- **Explanation.** We will all be judged by God because by the law, no man will be declared righteous in His sight. This is because all the law does for us is reveal our sin.
- **Schreiner notes.** "Paul had a darker view of human ability than some Jews in that the latter (Jews) believed that human beings had the capability to observe the law. Judaism acknowledged that all people without exception were sinners. But Paul thought that sin had wrapped its tentacles so tightly around human beings that they could not keep the law."

Application

- **Man is not as bad as he could be.** As bad as this text makes man appear, man is not nearly as bad as he could be. All men (even Hitler) are not as bad they could be. We could be far worse.
- **Man's is morally unable to respond to the gospel.** Total Depravity also teaches man's total inability to come to Christ. Because of man's sinfulness, and moral corruption, he is morally incapable of coming to Christ. His will is bound in sin. He always chooses his greatest desire and that is never Jesus but sin.

- **God must intervene if man is to be saved.** Why is fallen man so resistant to the gospel and the things of God? Because he sees them as a threat and not a help. He's like a wounded animal who will fight you when you try to help it. It will even die before it allows you to intervene because it is confused. Man is confused and will never come to God unless God supernaturally intervenes. And this God will do for His elect (Eph. 2:1-4). He makes the dead come alive.
- **The gospel solves the problem of man's unrighteousness.** Righteousness is a major theme in Romans (1:16-17, 18-23, 3:10, 3:21-26). This is the problem (man's unrighteousness) that the gospel solves, because in the gospel we receive the righteousness of Christ.