

# None Righteous Before God, Only One

## Romans 3:9-20

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Our teaching series here at Bethel is going through what is arguably the most famous book in the New Testament: Romans. While not a message about mothers, I will try and incorporate that theme as much as I'm able and the text allows.

What a text we have before us! Its scope is universal and its conclusion devastating from one perspective and the most hopeful possibility from another.

Listen as I read the text as there is a string of quotations from the Old Testament, the longest of its kind in the New Testament, which Paul uses to prove his point that no one is righteous before God, not one.<sup>1</sup>

*"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." (Romans 3:9-20 ESV)*

Here Paul is drawing together two separate threads he has developed so far in Romans. The first has to do with non-Jews, Gentiles, or he sometimes calls them "Greeks," a label that applies to most of us today. These he describes as not under the Old Testament law because they never had it or heard it, therefore weren't morally responsible to it. Yet they had a moral law that God wrote on their hearts and affirmed by the majesty and grandeur of the created world. These speak to the Gentiles the sufficient truth about God and his moral requirement that men are without any excuse before God.

But the Jews knew God through the Old Testament stories and commands. They had far more light of truth than the Gentiles and many thought they were righteous before God because of it. *Hey, we're Jews. We have the Torah. We hear the Torah every day. We memorize the Torah.* Paul says in chapter 2, congratulations, but having and hearing the Old Testament doesn't make you right before God, you must do it. How well? Perfectly, without a single fail throughout your entire life. The problem is that no human being could ever do so. *Why not? Why can't we just obey it all and earn our way to God?*

Here is perhaps the clearest explanation in the Bible for mankind's inability to fulfill God's requirements and live morally good enough to merit eternal life. It also counters the pervasive belief in our society that man is basically good.

*"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." (Romans 3:9)* Chapter 1 shows all Gentiles are under

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<sup>1</sup> Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans: New International Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 110.

God's wrath. Chapter 2 shows that despite incredible privileges, all Jews are under God's wrath. Here is the summary, Jews and Greeks are "under sin." What does that mean? It means, all of us are under the domination of sin and are in the eternal sphere of God's condemnation for our sin.

Even Christians will tend to think of our sinfulness as a doing rather than a being. *I'm a good person who sometimes does bad things. My nature is good. My actions are sometimes bad.*

Romans 3 crushes this error. How? By showing that we are "under sin" and identified as sinners because it is our very nature to sin. Or to say, we are not good people who sometimes do bad things, but are sinful at our very core. When we sin, we are doing what is in our nature. Why do bears hibernate, geese fly south in winter, and 2-year-olds throw tantrums? It's their nature to do so. They are hibernating, south-flying, tantrum-throwing by nature.

When we sin, it is because it is our nature to sin. We are sinners by nature and by action. There is a theological word used for this: **Depravity**.

Depravity is like a child who is outside playing in the mud. He is covered in mud from head to toe. But then he thinks, *I'm going to help Mommy clean the living room.* So, he walks in tracking mud everywhere. He folds the white blanket, resets the white pillows on the sofa, tries to wipe dust from the white walls. Was what he did good?

Yes and no. Even the good he did was tainted and dirty because in everything he did, the mud went with him. Our moral deformity<sup>2</sup> and inward rebellion against God goes everywhere we go and taints everything we do. Depravity is why even our good works we think should earn salvation with God don't merit any favor. Everything we do is corrupted.

*"Adam and Eve were created completely righteous, and they lived in perfect harmony with their Creator. Yet by their own choice they rebelled against the moral law of God and fell from their sinless state. Because of Adam's disobedience, all people have lost their innocence before God and are inherently corrupt. Every person is therefore a sinner by nature, by choice, and by divine declaration." (Bethel Church Doctrinal Statement)*

Note the underline. We are sinners by nature, by choice, and by divine declaration. It is this *sinner by nature* that Paul is developing in Romans 2 and he draws upon a string of Old Testament quotations to prove that even the Old Testament said Jews (and Gentiles) were sinners by nature. Here he pulls from Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Isaiah.

*"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." (Romans 3:10-12)*

I like MacArthur's description here:<sup>3</sup>

<b>Universally Evil</b>	<b><i>None Righteous (3:10)</i></b>
<b>Spiritually Ignorant</b>	<b><i>None who understands (3:11)</i></b>
<b>Rebellious</b>	<b><i>None who seeks for God (3:11)</i></b>
<b>Wayward</b>	<b><i>All have turned aside (3:12)</i></b>
<b>Spiritually Useless</b>	<b><i>Together they have become useless (3:12)</i></b>
<b>Morally Corrupt</b>	<b><i>There is none who does good (3:12)</i></b>

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<sup>2</sup> See J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *The Vanishing Conscience*, p. 93.

Notice the repetition of "none" and "all." Just in case someone might think they are the exception to all of humanity, he adds in verse 12, "not even one." None are righteous before God. None stand as morally acceptable. All have turned away. None on their own seeks God.

This week me and my 2-year-old daughter Madeline were hanging out alone at home. She said to me, "Daddy, let's play hide and seek." I said, "OK, you go to the garage door and count and I'll hide." She said, "No, I want to hide with you." I said, "If you hide with me, there's no one to seek. You know, it's hide and seek." She didn't understand.

But it's a picture for us. With respect to God, all of us are hiding and none of us are seeking. No one seeks God. That doesn't mean nobody is religious or spiritually-minded, but it does mean on our own, apart from God's grace, none of us are God-seekers.

He moves on to how this godlessness plays out in real life, specifically our speech. "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." (Romans 3:13-14) Jesus said from the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks (Luke 6:45). What comes out of our mouth? Lies. Deceit. Blasphemy. Yes, "I love you" and nice things too, but not always. Often angry words. Filthy words. Slanderous and gossipy words. Like an open grave. What would an open grave smell like? Filth. Nasty. That's what our words are often like. Then he moves to how we relate to others.

"Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known." (Romans 3:15) Miserable relationships. Murderous intent. Not peace but conflict. The story of human history is war, murder, betrayal, and incredibly painful actions done against one another. That's not just world history but our family histories also. Who here has a perfect family tree? No skeletons in the closet? Always harmonious family gatherings? Most families can't get through doing the dishes on Thanksgiving without strife. Anyone? No not one?

Here is the summary? "There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Romans 3:18) The Bible says "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." (Psalm 111:10) To know God is to fear him in the sense of awesome reverence. It is to value him as the greatest and most important being in all the universe. It is to be in a worship relationship to God. But ever since the Fall, man has irreverence for God. Rebellion against God. We work daily to dethrone God so that someone else could be enthroned in each of our hearts. Who?

"Sin is the revolt of the self against God, the dethronement of God with a view to the enthronement of oneself. Ultimately, sin is a self-deification, the reckless determination to occupy the throne which belongs to God alone."<sup>4</sup> (Stott)

This is what is revealed when we sin. Who is our God? God or me as the functional god of my life? Theologians describe this as *total depravity*, which doesn't mean we are as bad as we could be, but means even the good we do is tainted by sin and therefore in God's eyes is still sinful.

Ravi Zacharias tells the story of Malcolm Muggeridge who was a famous British journalist and TV host who converted to Christianity. Muggeridge related a story from his life in which he was in India on assignment. One night he decided to go for a swim in a nearby river. As he eased into the water he saw on the far bank that an Indian woman was taking a bath in the river. Muggeridge was filled with temptation and the allurements of the naked woman overwhelmed him. He had struggled with this temptation for years and had fought it with commitment to his wife Kitty. Yet being in the foreign land dulled his conscience and he swam for the woman as fast as he could. He came to within feet of her and emerged from the water. The moment

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<sup>4</sup> John Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*, p. 100.

shattered him. His words, "She was old and hideous...and her skin was wrinkled, and worst of all, she was a leper...This creature grinned at me, showing a toothless mask." The sight caused Muggerridge to mutter, "What a dirty, lecherous woman!" *But then it dawned on him—it was not the woman who was lecherous; it was his own heart.*<sup>5</sup>

Can you relate? How often do we see our attitudes and think, *where did that come from?* Or we do something and quickly think, *why did I do that?* We try desperately to explain it away, *I didn't sleep well; I wasn't myself there.* Actually, it was a clear glimpse into my heart. My real heart. The real me.

It is like a bottle of ketchup. What do you get when you squeeze a bottle of ketchup? Ketchup. What do you get when you squeeze a human? Sin. What's inside comes out.

## The Verdict

*"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." (3:19-20)*

The Jews trusted in the Law to save them. Instead, it serves to condemn them, and us too. If even the chosen people of God are under his condemnation, then the whole world is. The Law shows the moral line God requires and how far short of it we all fall. He will summarize this in a few verses, *"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* (Romans 3:23)

Think of how a laser level works. Construction guys use a laser level when they want to know where plumb is. Where straight is. Where flush is. That's what that line is. It's a decisive line. If you're building something and you put the laser level up and you realize that the wall you're building is off, you can say that the problem is the laser level. *I'm gonna play with my laser level so my wall looks better.* And then you're promptly fired.

Construction guys who stay in the trade are the ones who see the line and they see what they're doing according to the line. Human being, listen to me. If you're going to somehow be righteous before God, the entire Law of God, all 613 commands must be fulfilled perfectly your entire life in action and in attitude; that's the line. You must morally be at the line. But there's none who make it to the line. Not even one.

And the result is that when the Law is laid out before us, it shuts us up. *"Every mouth may be stopped."* (Romans 3:19) The scene is like a courtroom where such overwhelming evidence is presented so that the accused has nothing to say. Or like a mother who finds her child with a face full of chocolate yet denying any culpability for the cake or cookies being gone. *Did you do this?*

In my time as a pastor I have had a few instances where I am in the room as overwhelming evidence of adultery or theft is presented. I've seen the head drop as the person realizes their gig is up; there are no more excuses or lies that can be said. They have nothing to say. We all stand before God as guilty. The law shuts our mouths. *"For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."* (Romans 3:20)

There's much more on this in Romans, but suffice it to say that the reason no human being will be justified by the Law is that no human being can do it. The Law condemns us, but it can't save us. There is none righteous, no not one.

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<sup>5</sup> Ravi Zacharias, *Can Man Live without God?*, pp. 136-137.

But Pastor Steve, you entitled your sermon, "*None Righteous Before God, Only One.*" Why? If we stopped at 3:20 we're all under condemnation. We are all under God's wrath. We are all rightly judged as sinners, and we are all going to hell.

Here we are going to just glimpse to the next verse as verse 21 is one of the great moments in the New Testament. "*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.*" (Romans 3:21–22)

This the best news we could ever hear. A righteousness is available apart from the Law which is great because our depravity makes the Law a no-go. We desperately need an alternative route. An alternative righteousness. God provides it through his Son Jesus Christ.

What is the laser line? It's the Law on my heart. And what does it do? It condemns. It doesn't save me. It condemns me as being guilty. But what did Jesus do? Jesus perfectly obeyed and fulfilled the Law—He was the only one—and then he died under the Law for my guilt. He took the punishment we deserved. He met the plumb line on my behalf and then says *all who trust in me, I will forgive your sins. And I'll do so forever.* It's so simple. This is why the gospel is called good news. Great news!

Salvation doesn't come by doing, but rather comes by trusting. It comes by faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus, God's son. God's saving message is to stop all our efforts to earn a salvation by a Law we can't fulfill and trust in Jesus who did what we never could. By trusting in Jesus, God declares us righteous despite our sins. He gives us what all our moral efforts never could. Righteous standing before a holy God forever. And with it, eternal life.

This Mother's Day, like so many other days, has Christian mothers praying for their young children and adult children, hoping that they will embrace the Christian gospel, trust in Jesus, and be granted eternal life. How about you?

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