

# **ROMANS**

Part 6: “The End of Human Righteousness”

Romans 3:1–20

By David A. Ritchie

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## **Scripture Reading**

*“Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, “That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged.” But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) By no means! For then how could God judge the world? But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just. 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” (Rom 3:1–20).*

## **Introduction**

Romans is the longest and arguably the richest letter that the Apostle Paul writes in the New Testament canon. This letter is carefully composed of several distinct sections—almost like separate movements in a symphony.

For the last few weeks, we have been exploring the first movement of that symphony. You could argue the best way to understand the first movement of Romans is like a courtroom drama. Paul is presenting to us a legal case that includes three essential pieces: 1.) the charges being made against the accused, 2.) the defense and counter-arguments against those charges, and, finally, 3.) the verdict that is reached.

However, all of this courtroom drama is meant to confront us with one central and startling truth that is at the very foundation of Paul's letter to the Roman church—and that truth is we must see and confront **"The End of All Human Righteousness."**

## **Exposition**

### **1.) The Charges**

Let's review the charges that have been laid out in chapters 1 and 2 of Romans.

Paul has told us that even those who have not known the God of the Bible have within themselves and innate knowledge of God; that God has revealed his reality in and through all creation; that he has revealed himself in and through our hearts (Rom 1:18–20).

However, rather than acknowledging God as God, humanity has chosen to live according to selfish desire. We have actively suppressed the knowledge of God, and our foolish hearts have become darkened (Rom 1:21). We have exchanged the glory of God for petty god-substitutes (Rom 1:23). We have worshipped creation rather than the creation (Rom 1:25). As a result, we have fractured the world with sin and suffering, and deserved to be held accountable for the brokenness we have caused and the cosmic rebellion in which we have indulged.

But what about those who worship God? What about the Jews, God's chosen people? Well, as it turns out they are estranged from God in a different way.

Rather than living in willful sin and active rebellion, those who are religious have used the word of God to bolster their own sense of self-righteousness. They have usurped the place of God by casting judgment on those around them (Rom 2:1). They wear hypocritical masks of holiness, all the while living lives of secret sin (Rom 2:17–24). They are legalists who look to external emblems of religiosity for their right standing with God, all without actually truly loving God from their heart (Rom 2:29).

And in making these charges, Paul is saying all have sinned. All have missed the mark. All need salvation that can only come from outside of themselves.

Both Jew and gentile, both the religious and the irreligious, possess a desperate cosmic need before God.

All of this, of course, is meant to build a sense of tension within us. It is meant to make us yearn for a sense of relief and resolution.

Paul has told us the bad news so that when the good news is finally revealed it will be relished in all of its glory.

But before we move on too quickly, let's stop for a moment to feel that tension by listening to how Paul's charges might be countered in a legal defense.

We've heard the case of the prosecution. Now, let's hear from the defense.

## **2.) The Defense**

When we are confronted or exposed by the word of God, there is a strong temptation to avoid that sense of conviction and become defensive. Thus, the defense's case is composed of several questions that are designed to either distract or deflect from a sense of guilt that we might feel from the charges Paul has established in the previous chapters.

Let's go back to today's reading to examine these questions one by one. Paul asks, "*Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?*" (Rom 3:1).

The idea is, well, if even Jewish people cannot be saved by their righteous works, if all they have done is reduce the law of God to an instrument of self-righteous pride, *what point or value is there of even being a part of the people of God?*

Paul answers his own question: "*Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God*" (Rom 3:2).

The Jewish people matter deeply, not because there is anything intrinsically better or more deserving than other people groups. They matter because, through their heritage and history, God has revealed himself to the world! Through this one people, God has launched his rescued mission for all of creation!

Through the Jewish people, God has made and kept the promises of his covenant, which has revealed his faithfulness. Through the way he has interacted with the Jewish people throughout history, he has revealed his goodness, his power, his mercy, and his perfect justice. Through his words to the Jewish people, he taught about the temple and the sacrifices, which were signs pointing to his desire to ultimately redeem and to dwell among his people. Through the prophets, priests, and kings, he showed that he is a God who speaks, a God who atones for our sin, and a God who reigns.

But what about all those moments when the Jewish people fell into sin? What about all the times they fell to live up to the call of being God's holy people? Or, as Paul writes, "*What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?*" (Rom 3:3).

To make it even more relevant for our own cultural moment, we might ask, "*What, then, of the faithlessness of the church? What about the dark chapters of church history that are filled with sordid sin, hypocrisy, compromise, and complicity with injustice? Does the faithlessness of God's people nullify the faithfulness of God?*"

By no means!

Written on the pages of the history of Israel and the history of the church is the truth that, even when we are faithless, our God is faithful (cf. 2 Tim 2:13).

Even in our constant failure are the indelible marks of God's faithfulness and grace, the ever-present testimony of his ability to draw straight lines with crooked sticks, and his power to shine the light of his glory through his imperfect people.

So, no, the unrighteousness of the people of God does not disprove the reality of God. Indeed, our pervasive unrighteousness testifies to *the whole point of the Bible!* We cannot save ourselves—we need Savior!

But even this provokes a rebuttal from the defense: *“But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way)”* (Rom 3:5).

The pushback here is, *“Well, if my sin commends the righteousness of God, does that mean God is actually unrighteous to hold me accountable for my sin?”*

On the surface, it seems like a rational question. But Paul can barely get it out before he must clarify that such a question could only come from the limitations of human logic.

Something I used to say often, as a minister to college students, is that it is okay to ask big questions about God. God is not afraid of our questions. And indeed, I believe if we pursue the answer to our big questions with honesty, integrity, and sincerity, we will only discover that Christ is deeper still!

However, when we are swimming in the deep end of the pool, we must understand that *there are no right answers to inherently wrong questions.* And to presume that we could ever stand in judgment over God is about as flawed a premise as human logic could ever devise.

God is holy, transcendent, and incomprehensible! We can no more comprehensively contain the truth of God in our minds than we could contain the oceans of the world in the palms of our hands. We are finite creatures; he is the infinite Creator!

So, do we dare—in our deeply flawed, culturally biased, selfishly formed views of right and wrong—pronounce moral judgment against a God who is the standard and definition of goodness and justice and beauty and truth?

How do you think it would work out for you in a human court of law if you were accused of a crime, and then you chose to hurl legal and moral accusations against the judge presiding over your case? Thankfully, I have never been in that position. But I've seen some YouTube videos—and, I have to say, it doesn't work out well for the accused.

So if we would never hurl an accusation against a human judge, why, Paul asks, would we ever cast judgment upon the One who will one day judge the world (Rom 3:6)?

So, no, God is not the author of our unrighteousness. He does not justify evil. But, as we will see later in this letter, he is powerful enough to bend the power of evil to his glory and our good. He is a sovereign God, and he delights in bending the powers of sin and death back upon themselves.

Okay, if God is not evil but God, the defense asks, *“Why don’t we go on doing evil that good may come?”*

But to ask this question is an exercise in missing the point. To see the kindness of God as an opportunity to go on sinning is to deny the righteousness of God. To sin by presuming God’s forgiveness and grace is to deny God’s holiness and justice; it is to fail to grasp the holy hatred God has for sin and the death it causes. To arrogantly abuse God’s patience and presume his moral indifference to our injustice is a grave sin.

So, in the final analysis, are the Jewish people better off? No. Paul has shown us beyond a shadow of a doubt that we can earn no righteousness before God on the basis of our ancestry, our race, our culture, or our religious performance.

Here, both the prosecution and the defense will rest their cases that a verdict may be rendered.

### **3.) The verdict**

What is the verdict? Verse 9: *“all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.”*

Both Jew and Greek, religious and irreligious, have been enslaved under the cosmic tyranny of Sin.

And how is this verdict justified? What is the rationale given for this judgment?

Paul presents a barrage of Scriptural evidence of a variety of biblical authors.

Are there any who are righteous? *“as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one’” (Rom 3:10).*

But do people understand their predicament? Are they at least trying to make things right with God? No, *“no one understands; no one seeks for God” (Rom 3:11).*

What about the human religion? Even in our religion, *“All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (Rom 3:12).*

What about the very best of human words and wisdom? *“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” (Rom 3:13–14).*

What of the very best of human moral effort? *“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”* (Rom 3:15–18).

Even the best of human righteousness has been tainted and stained by sin because we are estranged from God. In theology, we call this doctrine “original sin” or “total depravity.”

This is not to say that we are as bad as we can possibly be. The authors of Scripture who wrote these words knew the goodness and nobility of humankind. They knew we are capable of both wonderful good and horrific evil.

Total depravity simply refers to our radical inability to be perfectly righteous; it means we are radically unable to save ourselves. We all have a vision of what is moral and true, yet we are fundamentally powerless to live up to that standard. Original sin means that, as verse 20 says, *“For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight”* (Rom 3:20a).

No human effort will make us be in right standing and relationship with God. The verdict is in—the world is guilty before our holy and righteous God.

And this is not a new indictment, by the way. It is an ancient truth pronounced centuries ago through the words of the Old Testament Law itself.

Our moral inadequacy, the radical inability, and brokenness of men are not propositions that must be proven by logic. Human depravity is a cold fact that undergirds the sad story of human history.

There is one thing that all the prophets and apostles and sages and philosophers and poets and reformers have agreed on, and that is the sad truth that something has gone profoundly wrong in this world. The presupposition of all human philosophy and political theory is that the way that the world is, is not the way that it should be.

All religions have agreed that the world is spiritually broken. The most honest and enduring of religions agree that *we* are broken; that we are estranged from one another; that we are estranged from God.

Outside of Christ, we are under the cruel dominion of Sin, the cosmic tyrant. Sin’s dominion manifests in and through our corporate sin. It metastasizes and is systematized into anti-god powers and structures that when woven together throughout human culture and in the world. The power of Sin perpetuates evil, death, brokenness, and rebellion against God.

There is, therefore, now no escape from this judgment through our own rationality, our own morality, our own will-power. And, for a moment, the Apostle Paul wants to truly know how hopeless our condition is outside of Christ.

## Conclusion

Recently, I've been re-reading *The Divine Comedy* by the medieval poet Dante Alighieri. It's an allegory of the Christian life, in which Dante the pilgrim travels down through the Inferno (or Hell), which represents the suffering and punishment that comes from sin. He climbs Mount Purgatory, which represents growth in Christian maturity and sanctification. And, finally, he comes to Paradise, which represents the eternal joy and bliss that comes from being united to God forever and ever.

The structure of the *Divine Comedy* is meant to show us that only when we know the depths of sin—the truth of its consequences and the horror of the suffering it brings—will we be able to know the glory of salvation.

One of the most famous scenes in the whole poem is when Dante and his guide stand before the gates of hell. Over the somber gates are inscribed the haunting words, “*Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter.*”

It is a haunting visual image that shows us that this is where the best of human righteousness brings us—utter hopelessness. This is where Romans 3 brings us as well.

Paul is saying, “See the judgment that we deserve! See the inescapable tyranny of sin! See where human righteousness alone will bring you! Behold this uncomfortable truth in the eye!”

*For it is only when we come to the end of all human righteousness that we will put all our trust in the righteousness of God alone! It is only we see the end of all earthly hope so that we may embrace with all abandon our heavenly hope!*

But how can a just God possibly end the power of sin without ending us who are clearly complicit with sin?

The answer is only Jesus—only his death on the cross, only the victory of the resurrection, only his ascension over all powers of darkness, only the promise of his return to make all things new—only Jesus can save us!

But how does Jesus's death accomplish so great a salvation? The answer to that question will show the wisdom and glory of God's plan for redemption. But the unfolding of that answer will have to wait until next week.

Until then, Redeemer Christian Church, let us see the end of all human righteousness. And may we cast all our hope, all our longing, our all trust in Christ alone!

AMEN.

## **Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities**

- 1.) Romans 3:1–20 marks the end of what we might call the first movement of Romans (Rom 1:18–3:20). Spend a moment reviewing the charges that Paul lays out against both the gentiles and Jews within this part of Romans. What are the big ideas that we have learned up to this point? What is the case that Paul is building?
- 2.) Look at the questions Paul asks in Romans 3:1–8. How are these questions attempts to distract or deflect from a sense of guilt or conviction that might be caused by the word of God? Are there ways that you attempt to avoid conviction in your life?
- 3.) In Romans 3:9–20, Paul quotes several different Scriptures from the Old Testament in a row. Why does Paul choose these verses? What do they all have in common?
- 4.) Why is it so crucial for Christians to see that human righteousness is unable to save us?