
Why God Given Religion Doesn't Work

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Notes

3:1-8 God's faithfulness and the Jews. In his attack on Jewish pretension in ch. 2, Paul wrote as if there were now no more difference at all between Jew and Gentile (see *e.g.* vs 9-10, 26-29). But this would be to misunderstand his argument. Paul's purpose was to show that Jews have no advantage with respect to Gentiles in the judgment of God simply because they are Jews. Paul, experienced preacher that he was, knew that his argument could be misunderstood, so he added a detailed discussion on to the end of his exposure of Jewish sin in which he both affirms Jewish privileges and delineates the nature and limitations of those privileges. This issue would, of course, be of particular concern to Jews and Jewish Christians; but in that it raises questions of God's own consistency and reliability—for circumcision and the law, it must be remembered, were given by God to the people of Israel—the matter would be of interest to Gentile Christians as well.

C. H. Dodd claimed that the logical answer to the question Paul asks in v 1 is 'No'; there is no more advantage in *being a Jew* or in *circumcision*. He thought that Paul's opposite answer—*Much in every way!*—stems from his emotional commitment to his 'kinsmen according to the flesh'. But this is to misunderstand Paul's carefully balanced theology of Israel. The Jews do not possess a saving relationship with God as a birthright; but they do have undeniable advantages, the greatest of which is the fact that *they have been entrusted with the very words of God*. The *First of all* at the beginning of v 2 suggests that Paul was going to continue to enumerate other privileges, but became sidetracked and so never finished the list (*cf.* however, Rom. 9:3-5). Israel's greatest gift is the Scriptures, *the very words of God* (Gk. *ta logia*, 'the oracles', used twenty-four times in Ps. 119 of the word of God). True, *some* Jews have not proved faithful to this word: they have neither obeyed the law nor embraced Jesus in faith. But human unfaithfulness can never detract from the faithfulness of God (3). Even when a person is a *liar*, God is still *true* (4a). Most scholars see in these verses a positive affirmation of God's continuing faithfulness to his people Israel who, as Paul makes clear in Rom. 11, have not been rejected by God (11:1-2) and who will

one day be saved (11:25–26). However, while the positive aspect of God’s faithfulness is certainly present, v 4b suggests that there is a negative side to this faithfulness as well. Paul here quotes David’s affirmation from Ps. 51:4 that God is just in his punishment of him, for he has indeed sinned (in his relationship with Bathsheba). The point is that God is just when he *judges*. In the light of this, we should understand Paul to be affirming in vs 3–4 God’s faithfulness to all aspects of his word to Israel. And that word both promises blessing for obedience and threatens judgment for disobedience (see, Dt. 28; 30:11–20). God’s faithfulness, then, to his word does not preclude judgment of the Jewish people for their sin (see, for similar emphases, Ne. 9:32–33; La. 1:18; *Psalms of Solomon* 2:18; 3:5; 4:8; 8:7).

But this assertion raises a further question: if God’s righteousness becomes even more evident through human unrighteousness, how is it fair for God to judge that unrighteousness (5)? Some (*e.g.* Murray) think that Paul is raising this as a question about God’s dealings with human beings generally. But the context of Jewish argumentation makes it likely that he is still thinking of Jewish *unrighteousness* specifically. *God’s righteousness* cannot mean here what it did in 1:17—God’s saving righteousness—but must refer, as the parallel words *faithfulness* (3), *true* (4) and *truthfulness* (7) suggest, to his faithfulness. The OT frequently uses the word ‘righteousness’ (Heb. *šēdeq* or *š’dāqā*; translated in the lxx with the same Greek word Paul uses here, *dikaiosynē*) to refer to God’s faithfulness (*e.g.* Pss. 31:1; 36:5–6; Is. 38:19; 63:7). Scholars often claim that this faithfulness refers to God’s commitment to carry out his positive covenant obligations to Israel. But many texts suggest a more basic concept, in which God’s faithfulness is to his own person and word; and in some of these contexts God’s ‘righteousness’ is displayed in his fair and just judgment of his people’s sins (*e.g.* Pss. 67:4; 94:15; Is. 5:16; 10:22). Since v 4 has proclaimed God to be ‘right’ (*dikaiōthēs*) in his punishment of sin, this more basic idea of God’s righteousness must be present in v 5. The Jews’ failure to obey God’s word has brought upon them judgment, and so highlighted God’s faithfulness to his word of threatened judgment for sin. But, whatever the positive result of sin might be, God is never unjust to punish it. He will *judge the world*, and do so in strict justice (see Gn. 18:25; Jb. 8:3; 32:10–12). Vs 7–8 repeat the objection of v 5 in other terms, but v 8 sheds new light on the nature of this issue for Paul. As he here suggests, he himself has been accused of preaching a doctrine that leads to a ‘*Let us do evil that good may result*’ conclusion. Paul’s assertion that God is ‘righteous’ even when he judges Jewish sin is taken by some Jews to mean that sin is therefore justified. Paul engages in no logical defence of his position here, but simply pronounces a condemnation on those who suggest so blasphemous a conclusion (8b).

3:9–20 The guilt of all humankind

Although the brief questions opening v 9 connect it with vs 1–8, it is clear that Paul begins here a summary and application of the argument he began in 1:18. He has demonstrated that God’s wrath justly falls on both Gentiles (1:18–32) and Jews (2:1–3:8). Thus, Paul

concludes, all people are 'under sin'. Paul bolsters this conclusion with an OT proof (10–18) and then applies the principle to Jews (19–20).

Paul's assertion of continuing Jewish privilege in 3:1–8 (especially vs 1–3) stimulates his question *Are we [Jews] any better?* His answer, *Not at all!*, is not intended to retract what he has said in vs 1–3, but to guard against the conclusion that God's gifts to the Jews give to them any advantage in God's judgment. Paul makes this point by reminding his readers that he has *already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin*. To be 'under sin' means not only 'to be a sinner'; it means to be a helpless slave to the power of sin (*cf.* 6:15–23).

Paul underlines his conclusion about universal sinfulness with a series of OT quotations. Such collections of thematically connected quotations were popular with the rabbis, and some have thought that Paul may here be quoting a pre-existing Christian collection. The purpose of this series is especially to illustrate the 'all' of v 9: note the repeated *there is no-one* (vs 10, 11, 12) and the return of the all-embracing theme in vs 19–20: *every mouth, the whole world, no-one*. The texts appear to be arranged haphazardly at first sight, but there is evidence of some attention to structure and sequence. The first line, *There is no-one righteous, not even one*, is the heading, with the *there is* in v 18 harking back to it to round off the series. Vs 11–12 develop the first line with five generally synonymous repetitions of the theme 'there is no-one righteous'. These quotations are all from Ps. 143:1–3. Paul continues to mine the Psalms (5:9, 140:4; 10:7) in the next four lines (13–14), each of which features sins of speech. Vs 15–17, on the other hand, use quotations from Is. 59:7–8 to depict sins of violence against others. Significantly, while some of the OT passages Paul quotes describe the enemies of Israel, others (*e.g.* Is. 59:7–8) refer to sins of the people of Israel. Paul thus subtly again makes the point that Jews must also be counted in the category of 'the wicked'.

Paul's application of the teaching of vs 9–18 (and indirectly of 1:18–3:18 as a whole) in vs 19–20 reveals again his preoccupation with the status of the Jews. He reminds his readers that his quotations have been taken from *the law (nomos)*, the word here referring to the Scriptures as a whole (*cf.* also 1 Cor. 9:8–9; 14:21, 34; Gal. 4:21b). But this law is directed especially *to those who are under the law*, that is, the Jews (see 2:12; 3:2). From this Paul concludes that *every mouth* is now *silenced*—no-one has any defence to offer before God (see Jb. 5:16; Pss. 63:11; 107:42)—and *the whole world* is *accountable to God*, awaiting the sentence of condemnation. Paul can validly draw such a universal conclusion from the scriptural proof of Jewish sinfulness because, in demonstrating the sinfulness of God's own covenant people, he has proven the most difficult part of his case. If even the Jews are condemned, then no person can escape the same sentence.

This means, in turn, that *no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law* (20a). The fact that all people are 'under sin's power' (3:9) means that no person can ever obey God's law sufficiently as to merit a right standing before him. In putting it in terms of

obedience to the law, Paul is again thinking particularly of the situation of the Jew. But Jewish obedience to the law is one instance of human obedience to God's moral rules. In dismissing Jewish 'works of the law' as insufficient to attain salvation, Paul implicitly condemns all human 'works' as similarly inadequate. The power of sin holds all people in its inexorable grasp, and nothing that *we* do can ever release us from it. What, then, is the purpose of the law of Moses? It functions to make people *conscious of sin*. By setting forth God's will in great detail, the Mosaic law makes absolutely clear that it is the living God whom we offend when we sin. It thus gives to humanity a clear understanding of its 'accountability' (see v 19) before God.

Note. 20 The niv *observing the law* translates *ergōn nomou*, 'works of the law' (see also Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10). Traditionally, this phrase has been understood to mean anything that a person does in obedience to God's law. This is the interpretation adopted in the commentary above, and we think there are sound reasons for accepting it. While the phrase appears nowhere else in Greek, a parallel Hebrew phrase occurs in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and it is reminiscent also of the frequent rabbinic references to 'works' and 'the commandments'—all of which refer to doing what the law demands generally. But scholars have suggested several other interpretations in recent years. James Dunn's is probably the most popular and significant. He thinks that 'works of the law' refers to those areas of the Jews' life that marked them out as God's people, especially circumcision, dietary laws and observances of feasts. Paul, then, in v 20, would be denying that the Jewish covenant identification is able to justify. While Paul does indeed teach this, it seems as though this verse is saying more than that. Throughout 1:18–3:20, Paul's focus has been on 'works' in a general sense (see, with reference to the Jews, 2:2–3, 6–10, 21–23, 25–27) and there is no good reason, then, either in the general use of the phrase or in the context, to restrict its meaning to certain works, or to works done in a certain attitude.¹

b. the *faithfulness* of God—3:1–8

A brief word on the literary device known as **diatribe**. Douglas Moo explains:

"Paul utilizes here, and sporadically throughout the letter, a literary genre called the *diatribe*. In this genre, an author gets his point across by engaging in an imaginary discussion or debate with a student or opponent. Elements of this style include frequent questions, posed by the author himself to his conversation partner or by the conversation partner, emphatic rejections of possible objections to a line of argument using *me genoito* ("May it never be!"), and the direct address of one's conversation partner or opponent. Romans 3:1–8 is a particularly clear example of this dialogical style; and chap. 2, while not containing any true dialogue, is similar to those parts of the

¹ Moo, D. J. (1994). [Romans](#). In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), *New Bible commentary: 21st century edition* (4th ed., pp. 1126–1128). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

diatribe in which the 'teacher' rebukes his conversation partner by exposing his presumption and inconsistency (cf. 2:1: 'you have no excuse, O man'; 2:3: 'Do you suppose, O man'; 2:17: 'If you call yourself a Jew,' etc.)" (124–25).

1) the first objection raised—v. 1

2) the first objection refuted—v. 2

One can almost hear Paul's Jewish friends thinking to themselves:

"If physical circumcision does not contribute to salvation, if being a descendant of Abraham does not guarantee blessing, if the Law brings a knowledge and conviction of sin, and if we Jews are as liable to judgment as Gentiles, *What good is there in being a Jew at all?*"

By the way, the word translated "benefit" is *opheleia*. Its verb form was used in 2:25 and there meant "saving advantage." It is likely that the same connotation is present here. Paul's question, then, is this: "Is there any *saving* advantage in being a Jew or possessing physical circumcision?" More on this below.

C. K. Barrett explains the force of the objection:

"If the OT is to be believed God *did* choose the Jews out of all mankind and *did* bestow special privileges upon them. To reduce them therefore to the level of other nations is either to accuse the OT of falsehood, or to accuse God of failing to carry out his plans. It is this theological objection to his thesis that Paul is bound to meet" (62).

On Israel's unique status, see Deut. 7:6–8 and Amos 3:1–2. When Paul turns to consider Israel's prerogatives, "one item tops all others, namely, the fact that to the Jews, and to no other nation, was accorded the unique privilege, the high honor, of being the custodians of the oracles of God, that entire special revelation to Israel which consisted not only of commandments, but also of predictions and promises" (Hendriksen, 109). See esp. **Ps. 147:19–20; Deut. 4:8**. This phrase, "oracles of God," may well refer to the entire OT scriptures. However, Schreiner contends that "the promises of salvation for Israel are uppermost in Paul's mind. The advantage should not be restricted merely to the possession of the Scriptures and the stewardship required because of their possession. This would scarcely advance the argument beyond chapter 2 since the possession of the law by Israel, although an advantage in some respects, ensures only that Israel will be judged because of their failure to obey it. Rather, Paul declares something more profound about the 'saving advantage' that ethnic Israel possessed: they had promises from God ensuring them of future salvation" (149; see esp. chp. 11).

It is here that we expect a long list of advantages and blessings that God bestowed on the Jewish people during the age of the OT (cf. his “first of all” in v. 2a). But he mentions on the one (the “oracles of God”), breaks off his argument, and resumes it at 9:3–5.

3) the second objection raised—v. 3

4) the second objection refuted—v. 4

Virtually all of Romans 9–11 is designed to answer this (v. 3) powerful and confusing objection.

5) the third objection raised—vv. 5, 7, 8

6) the third objection refuted—v. 6

3. Sin and Condemnation of all Mankind—3:9–20

a. the *charge*—v. 9

It would appear that Paul asks the same question within the span of a few verses and then proceeds to provide contradictory answers. To the question in 3:1, “what advantage has the Jew?” he answered, “great in every respect” (3:2). But to the question in 3:9, “Are we (Jews) better than they (Gentiles)?” he answers, “not at all” (3:9). How can we avoid this discrepancy? “Only by clarifying what benefit or ‘advantage’ he has in mind,” notes Stott. “If he means privilege and responsibility, then the Jews have much because God has entrusted his revelation to them. But if he means favouritism, then the Jews have none, because God will not exempt them from judgment” (99).

The word translated “charged” (NASB) is rendered “proved” in the KJV. But Paul has not proven the universal guilt of the human race. He has indicted or charged or accused the human race. The proof is found in vv. 10–18.

b. the *confirmation*—vv. 10–18

Note Paul’s emphasis on the **universality** of sin: no fewer than 8 times in the first 3 verses he uses words like “none”, “all”, “no, not even one” in order to make his point. These are what I call *emphatic universal negatives*, i.e., no exceptions allowed! Here we encounter the supreme irony in human life:

“The supreme irony of the human situation in every age is that the one thing, and only thing, in which all mankind is concretely at one is *sin*. And the irrational paradox of it is that it makes any other sort of unity impossible. The unity for which men strive in various ways is always being negated by the unity for which they never need to strive—their unity in sin” (D. R. Davies).

[Note the structure of this list that follows in vv. 10–18. Verses 10–12 describe the universality of sin similar to what we saw in 1:18–23. Verses 13–14 focus on sins of speech. Verses 15–17 focus on sins in society at large. Verse 18 identifies the ground and root cause of all the sins just noted: the failure to fear God.]

1) man's character—vv. 10–12

Paul goes out of his way to emphasize the universality of sin. Five times he uses the Greek phrase *ouk estin* = “there is none”. The one line that lacks this phrase has instead the Greek word *pantes* = “all”, which points to the pervasiveness of sin. Again, in vv. 10 and 12 he uses the words *oude heis* = “there is not even one” and *heos henos* = “not even one.” Point made!

a) men don't obey God—vv. 10, 12b

Is there any sense in which unrighteous, unsaved people can be said to do *good*?

b) men don't understand God—v. 11a

Cf. esp. 1 Cor. 2:14. Why do they not understand? It isn't because they lack sufficient mental ability nor is it because of a lack of evidence (cf. Rom. 1). It comes from a **willful refusal** to keep God in their thinking.

c) men don't want God—vv. 11b–12a

How does the statement, “**There is none who seeks for God**” affect the subject of *free will*? If none seek for God, how is it that anyone ever gets saved?

But what about all those people who appear to be “seeking” God; those who are “searching” for more? R. C. Sproul answers:

“We see people searching desperately for peace of mind, relief from guilt, meaning and purpose to their lives, and loving acceptance. We know that ultimately these things can only be found in God. Therefore we conclude that since people are seeking these things they must be seeking after God. [But] people do not seek God. They seek after the *benefits that only God can give them*. The sin of fallen man is this: Man seeks the benefits of God while at the same time fleeing from God himself. We are, by nature, fugitives.”

2) man's conduct—vv. 13–18

c. the *conclusion*—vv. 19–20

Here in v. 19 Paul says that the Law of Moses was given to the Jews so that “every mouth,” including “Gentile mouths,” might be closed, and so that “all the world,” including the “Gentile world,” may become accountable to God. But how could Jewish possession of the Law make the whole world liable to God's judgment? Paul's point appears to be that “if the

Jews, who had the privilege of being God's covenantal and elect people, could not keep the law, then it follows that no one, including the Gentiles, can" (Schreiner, 168).²

Advantages of the Jew (3:1-8)

Chapter 3 begins with a question: **What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?** This is a natural question for Paul to raise because he has just spelled out the fact that being a Jew was no guarantee of entrance into the kingdom of God, and even the covenant sign of circumcision was no guarantee of getting into heaven. Therefore, he asks these two questions: What advantage is there in being a Jew? What is the value of circumcision? We would expect him, in the light of his previous argument, to say that there is no advantage in being a Jew and no real benefit from circumcision. But that's not what he says. In fact, he says just the opposite: **Much in every way!**

First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God (verse 2). The singular advantage that Israel enjoyed over all other nations was of having in their possession the Old Testament Scriptures. Every Jew had proximity to the Word of God, he was not left to learn of the things of God merely by an examination of nature.

Is there any advantage in being a church member if you are not a sincere church member? Now, of course, the church does not extend membership to those who profess to be unbelievers; the church only has on its roll those who make professions of faith, those who claim to be believers. But we know that not everyone who professes to believe in Christ really does believe.

This is one of the reasons why theologians have made the distinction between the visible church and the invisible church. The visible church is an institution composed and comprised of all the members listed on its rolls. The invisible church refers to all those members within the visible church who really do believe in Christ. It is called 'invisible' not because people are invisible, but because their hearts are invisible to us. If a man says that he believes, I have no right to deny that profession of faith. Only God knows if it is real.

What advantage does a person who is not a true believer have in being a member of the visible church? We can use the illustration of three concentric circles. The outer, larger circle represents every human being. The middle circle represents all those who are members of the visible church. The inner circle represents all true believers.

To use the language of both the Old and New Testaments, those in that second circle (who are not also in the inner circle) are members of the covenant community. They have made their profession, they have gone through the rites of entrance into the community. In

² Storms, S. (2016). [Biblical Studies: Romans](#) (Ro 3:1-20). Edmond, OK: Sam Storms.

the Old Testament they would have been circumcised Jews who were not true believers, and in the New Testament be baptised Christians who were not true believers in Christ.

Now the question is, Is there any advantage to being in that second circle? Certainly there is nothing which could be compared to the inner circle of true believers who have the advantage of redemption. But yet in that second circle we do have the means of God's grace. What are the means of grace? This is a classical term that has reference to the benefits and instruments given to the church which God uses to bring about people's salvation: the preaching of the Word, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, prayer and so on. They are by no means restricted to the visible church, but they are concentrated there.

There was a great advantage, then, in being a Jew, because they were entrusted with the Word of God.

Paul continues by raising another question: **What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness?** (verse 3). Paul here is calling attention to a difference between God and man. As human beings, we are by nature covenant breakers. We do not always tell the truth. We do not always keep our promises. Does that mean that we should project on the character of God our own sinfulness and suggest that he might from time to time break his promises? To ask such a question is to answer it. No wonder the emphatic tone of Paul's writing at this point: **Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar.** It is utterly unthinkable that God would ever break a promise.

As it is written: "So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge." The point the apostle is making is that God is always righteous, both in his judgments and when he speaks. David wrote a majestic psalm of penitence, perhaps the most lucid example of genuine repentance that has ever been written by human hand (Ps. 51:4). In it he begs God to deal with him, not according to justice, but according to mercy and lovingkindness. But in so doing, David acknowledges, 'O God, you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge.' That's the point David is making in the psalm. He is acknowledging the fact that God had every right to condemn him.

But again, another objection is brought forth. As the Jews reply, **But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.)** What is behind this very difficult question?

There were those who argued that God is absolutely perfect, and when we sin, our sin, in a certain sense, bears witness to the greatness of God, for the more we sin, the more righteous God appears by contrast. So there is a certain sense in which by sinning we are exhibiting the righteousness of God. Our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God. And if God shows his righteousness by exposing our unrighteousness, are we

not—and here's the distortion—doing God a favour by continuing in unrighteousness? Are we not adding to Divine glory by sinning?

Again, to ask such a question is to answer it, and how does Paul answer it? **Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world?** (verse 6). If our unrighteousness were justified on the grounds that it makes all the more clear and vivid the righteousness of God, then God would have no reason to judge us. Instead he should reward us, compliment us.

But again, **Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?" Why not say—as we are being slanderously reported and as some claim that we say—"Let us do evil that good may result"?** (verses 7–8). There is a clear teaching in Scripture that God has a remarkable ability to bring good out of our evil. For example, he brought the redemption of the world through the treacherous act of Judas. Can Judas stand at the judgment seat and say, 'God, give to me a great reward because no one has ever done a greater kindness to the human race than I. I delivered Jesus to be crucified and if it wasn't for me there would have been no atonement'?

Paul concludes this brief section by simply saying: **Their condemnation is deserved.** Judas has no basis upon which to claim a reward from God. His act was altogether wicked. His condemnation at the hands of God is perfectly just, in spite of the fact that God was able to overcome his evil. It is an irrational distortion of truth to conclude that, because God's righteousness is enhanced indirectly by our unrighteousness, we are to continue doing evil that good may come.

The doctrine of total depravity (3:9–12)

Orthodox theologians teach that man is so corrupt he is said to be totally depraved. Usually that doctrine of Total Depravity is linked to the names of the sixteenth century Protestant Reformer, John Calvin and the fourth century Church Father, Augustine. As one who stands in the Reformation tradition, I hold to the doctrine of the total depravity of mankind, though very much aware of the misunderstandings and caricatures of that doctrine which abound. There is a distinction which I have found to be helpful: total depravity does not mean utter depravity. Utter depravity would mean that every human being is as wicked as it is possible to be, and we know that this is not the case. As much as we sin, we can always contemplate sinning more often, or more grievously than we presently do.

Also, the term 'total depravity' sounds as if there is absolutely nothing of any value left in the human race. I am involved in a ministry called *The Value of the Person* and it might be asked how anybody who believed in the total depravity of man could speak of the value of human beings? It sounds paradoxical and ironic, but I have lectured on many occasions saying that the Christian faith in general, and Calvinism in particular, has the highest, most

exalted view of man of any anthropology. The very fact that Calvinists take sin so seriously is because they take the value of human beings so seriously. It is because man was made in the image of God, called to mirror and reflect God's holiness, that we have the distinction of being the image-bearers of God.

But what does 'total depravity' mean? Total depravity means simply this: that sin affects every aspect of our human existence: our minds, our wills and our bodies are affected by sin. Every dimension of our personality suffers at some point from the weight of sin that has infected the human race.

This is what the apostle is expounding in verse 9: **What shall we conclude then? Are we any better?** Of course he is referring to Jews and Gentiles. Are Jews better than the Gentiles? Not at all. What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? **Not at all!**

In chapter 1, Paul gave his attention primarily to the sinfulness of the Gentile, the pagan who is outside the camp of Israel. In chapter 2 he turned his attention to the sinfulness that is present within the community of Israel, and so the conclusion follows inevitably: **We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin.**

Notice, he doesn't say that both Jews and Greeks are all sinners. He has already said that manifestly. He says here that Jews and Greeks are all *under* sin. Does this mean under the judgment of sin, under the weight of sin or under the power of sin?

We speak this way, somewhat metaphorically. When we get behind in our work, or behind in our payments, or whatever, when we have lost that sense of being on top of things, we say we are underneath it all. Being 'under' suggests the metaphor of being weighted down by a terrible burden, a heavy obstacle that seeks to crush us. We think, for example, of John Bunyan's imagery of the pilgrim, Christian, who goes through life stumbling underneath the dreadful weight of sin that is crushing him. It is only when he comes to the foot of the cross and meets the Saviour that the burden rolls off his back and he is able to stand upright, free, once again. Paul is saying that everybody, Jew and Gentile, is under sin.

Then follows this lengthy citation from the Old Testament to corroborate his statement that all men are under the weight of sin: **As it is written: "There is no-one righteous, not even one; there is no-one who understands, no-one who seeks for God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless. There is no-one who does good, not even one."**

This is one of the most radical and extensive indictments of the corruption of man ever to appear in print. Let's look at it carefully so that we can catch the full flavour and the full force of the apostolic indictment.

He begins with what we call, in terms of propositional analysis, a universal negative: **There is no one righteous, not even one.** How are we to understand that? The apostle is saying that no human being who has ever lived (apart from Jesus of Nazareth), when judged by the standard of the law of God, can rightfully be called 'righteous'.

Then he says: **there is no one who understands.** Understands what? Obviously, though it is not stated, he means that there is no-one who really understands what righteousness involves. The righteousness of God is the theme of this epistle. There is a sense in which these statements flow sequentially out of each other. If there is none righteous, no one understands. Or, to reverse it, if no one understands, no one can be righteous.

Our lack of righteousness affects our understanding, because if we are not righteous, we don't have the capacity to understand the fullness of what righteousness is. Our very minds are infected by unrighteousness.

Now if we do not understand true righteousness, what would be the consequence of that? **no one who seeks God.** This statement has been a source of much controversy and confusion. How many times have you heard it said of somebody who does not claim to be a Christian, 'Well, that person is not a Christian, but he is seeking, he is searching for God.' In fact, there are people who claim to be seeking after God, but are having profound difficulty in finding him. If they are right, Paul must be wrong, because the apostle Paul says that no one in his natural condition seeks God.

Doesn't the Bible appeal to people to search after God? Why did Jesus say, Seek first the kingdom of God (Matt. 6:33), or, Seek and you will find (Matt. 7:7)? Keep in mind that when Jesus gave those instructions and admonitions he was giving them to believers. He was speaking to his disciples, to those who had already embraced him. Those who are believers have the capacity to seek God, but outside of faith, outside of belief, nobody seeks God. So it is improper for us to speak of the pagan seeking after God.

But why does it seem to us that people do search after God? The great Roman Catholic theologian, Thomas Aquinas, wrestled with this particular question. He gave us this insight: when we see people searching for such things as truth, peace of mind, eternal life or happiness, they are searching for relief from their guilt. These are things that Christians know only God can give them. So we leap to the conclusion that since they are searching diligently for those things which only God can give them, they must therefore be searching for God. But it is precisely this in which man's sinfulness consists, says Aquinas, that man seeks for the benefits of God, while fleeing from the Person of God.

Do we really believe in a God who plays hide-and-seek, a God who hides himself from those who would search after him? Is it our task to find God, or is it God who is searching after us? The whole of Scripture, from the Garden of Eden in Genesis to the conclusion of

the book of Revelation, describes the great God who is searching for and seeking to save that which is lost. God is pursuing us, while we are the fugitives fleeing from him.

Look at this quotation in descending order again: if there is nobody righteous, then certainly nobody understands. And if nobody understands, certainly no one ever really seeks for God. On the other hand, look at it in ascending order: if no one seeks for God, it is obvious they will never understand who God is, and if they never understand who God is, they will never come to a real understanding of righteousness.

So Paul can then say: **All have turned away, they have together become worthless** (verse 12). If we are fleeing from God the first thing we want to do is to get our feet off the path that would lead us to God, so we all turn aside. This image is found repeatedly in Scripture, that, like sheep, we have turned aside (cf. Isa. 53:6). No one follows the straight and narrow path that leads to God, rather we are moving helter-skelter all over the place as we seek to flee from the presence of God. All have turned aside and together we have become worthless. That is, with respect to righteousness, we have become useless.

Then Paul brings the first portion of this lengthy citation to a conclusion: **There is no one who does good, not even one**. Think about the extent of this indictment. Paul is not merely saying that there are none who are perfect, none who are righteous. Yet didn't he earlier say that the pagan does by nature the things of the law? Yes, but Paul was very careful there in his choice of words. He did not say that they did the law, he nowhere ascribes to the unbeliever the performance of a single good deed. How is that possible? Is Paul saying here that unless a person is a believer in Christ, he will not ever do a good deed? That is precisely what it means. It may seem outrageous, but nobody ever does a single thing that is good, we are so corrupt that our sin infects even the best of our deeds.

When God examines an action, he considers it both in terms of its external action and its internal motive. For example, the law requires that we don't steal. If I refrain from stealing, I have done half the good deed, the external part. But the Bible teaches that a truly good deed is motivated by a heart that seeks to honour God, by a heart that is loving God. That's the internal dimension of the good deed. Though my outward acts may in fact conform to the external demands of the law, if they do not spring from a heart that loves God, then they are motivated by selfish desire. It is in that high sense of goodness that nobody outside of Christ ever does a good deed.

What's the point? Not just to have an abstract theological discussion of goodness, but something very practical. Paul is speaking to those who really believe that they can stand before God at the last day and depend upon their good deeds to get them into the kingdom of heaven.

John the Baptist called the Pharisees a 'brood of vipers' (Luke 3:7). He likened them to poisonous snakes. It sounds like harsh language, but there is a sense in which Paul applies the same kind of description to all of us.

The apostle gathers quotations from the Old Testament in such a way as to build a picture of the organs of the human body which God designed to be used for righteousness but in fact have become tools of wickedness. **"Their throats are open graves; their tongues practise deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know." "There is no fear of God before their eyes."**

There is mention of the throat, the tongue, the lips, the mouth, the feet and the eyes. The body that God has given them, is used by sinful people for purposes of evil.

Paul starts with the description of the throat, and says that the throat is an 'open grave'. Doesn't that remind you of Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees, when he said that the Pharisees were like 'whitewashed tombs' (Matt. 23:27)? Very carefully painted and whitewashed on the outside to give a picture of placid tranquillity, of purity and cleanliness. But they cover up the decay and deterioration, said Jesus, of dead men's bones.

Keep in mind how strict the Jews were with respect to dealing with corpses. Not having the advanced means of disposing of dead bodies that is customary in the modern world, there were quite stringent restrictions about coming in contact with a corpse, lest one become defiled. The biological danger was also great, as disease was easily transferred from the corpse to a live person. Therefore, it was a matter of health regulations in the ancient world, that burial sites be heavily covered.

Paul says that the throat of fallen man is like an unsealed and uncovered grave. The throat is the tunnel, as it were, that leads to our hearts, to the inside of man. Jesus said it is out of the heart, out of the inner core of man's being, that we are corrupted.

Their tongues practise deceit. The tongue comes in for quite a lot of discussion in the New Testament. James gives almost an entire chapter to the tongue, and its capacity for destruction (James 3). He says that the tongue is a little member that boasts of great things. The tongue is likened to the rudder of a ship, the very small piece that determines the course of the large vessel. How difficult is the tongue to control. It is like a spark, with the capacity to set forests ablaze. So many sins that the New Testament speaks of are sins of the tongue. Think how we wound other people with unkind remarks, with slander, insult and unnecessary criticism; how we use the tongue to blaspheme God, to tell lies and desecrate the sanctity of truth. This is the specific use of the tongue to which Paul calls attention here. Fallen man has revealed the deadly corruption of his heart by use of the tongue for lies. Satan is the Father of Lies, one who was a liar from the beginning (John

8:44). The fracturing of truth is characteristic of fallen man and sets man apart from God who speaks no lie.

Paul moves from the tongue to the lips: **The poison of vipers is on their lips** (verse 13). The lips are compared to poison that can kill. The power of a poisonous snake to kill is well known to people who live in India and Africa. The metaphor is a strong one and is emphasising the fact that we can inflict unbelievable pain and destruction and wounds upon people by the words that we speak.

He then says: **Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness** (verse 14). Cursing is usually perceived in our culture as a sign of masculinity. It is as if by filling our speech with cursing, with caustic cynicism and bitterness, that somehow we will bring a degree of respect to ourselves as strong or mature. But biblically the cursing mouth, the bitter mouth, is a sign of human fallenness. The mouth was made to be an instrument of blessing, to be an instrument of healing, to be a vehicle for words of kindness and of truth.

Picture a person whose tongue is full of lies, whose lips are poisonous and whose mouth is filled with cursing and bitterness—what kind of a person is that? In a word, he is 'hostile'. This describes the hostility that fallen man has against God, and not only against God, but against his fellow man and even against himself.

It is only after men are filled with bitterness that **Their feet are swift to shed blood** (verse 15). The hostile person is in a hurry for violence. He enjoys inflicting violence and even sometimes just seeing violence, the sight of it, the thrill of it. The book of Genesis (6:13) tells us that when God destroyed the earth by the flood, one of the reasons for that judgment was because the world was filled with violence. A mark of the fallen man is that he is quick to engage in violence.

Ruin and misery mark their ways (verse 16). What else could be the consequence of a humanity accustomed to deceit, to poisoning each other, to bitterness and to violence? We have been able to conquer all kinds of obstacles to the lifespan of mankind: diseases, safety factors and so on, but it is as true today, as it was in the first century, that destruction and misery are in the pathway of humanity.

And the way of peace they do not know (verse 17). It is not simply that they have not followed the pathway of peace, they haven't ever really understood it. Peace was the ultimate hope and desire of the ancient Jew. So deeply embedded in his consciousness was this desire for peace, that instead of saying Hello and Goodbye when he met a friend on the way, he would say Shalom! (Peace). This is the desire of the child of God, to know peace, because the world is not a peaceful place.

Finally, he concludes, **There is no fear of God before their eyes** (verse 18). We talk about that which is before our eyes as that which comes into our field of vision. A more

abstract word for 'before their eyes' may be 'perspective'. Each one of us has a perspective on life, how we look at things.

Paul, in describing fallen man, says, There is no fear of God before their eyes. How does a person look at things who has no fear of God? We can take that word 'fear' in two ways. Sometimes we think of fear as that which frightens us, hence Paul is saying that nobody is afraid of God any more. There is a certain sense in which that is still true. We live as if there were no God; we live as if we never had to stand before God; we live as if God couldn't possibly hurt us or do anything to cause us grief if he wanted to.

But of course, the deeper meaning of the fear of God in Scripture is not a servile fear that causes us to tremble in fright in the presence of God, but rather a fear born of honour. It is 'filial' fear, fear to offend one whom we love, adore and respect. Paul is saying that the human race is an irreverent race; that humanity has no profound respect for God.

Paul summarises in verse 19: **Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law.** Sometimes when the New Testament writers speak of the law, they are referring to the books of Moses, sometimes specifically to the book of Exodus, sometimes to the ten commandments and sometimes to the many laws that we find throughout the Pentateuch.

Who are those who are under the law? Look back to verse 9, where Paul says, 'We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin.' They couldn't be under the judgment of sin unless first they were under the pronouncement of the law because, as the apostle labours in this book, where there is no law, there is no sin. The point he is making is that every human being is under the law of God to some degree, **so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.**

Paul is drawing a courtroom scene, and God is sitting on the bench. The indictment is being read to the defendant—fallen man. Can you imagine being brought into a courtroom, having an indictment read and then having the judge say to you, How do you plead? As you start to give a defence, suddenly the judge cuts you off in mid sentence and says, You may not speak! There is a certain sense in which the judgment scene of the human race will happen like that.

In Psalm 46, the Psalmist says, Be still, and know that I am God. That passage is often cited as if it were an invitation to enter in to a quiet and tranquil mood of peacefulness, in which one can contemplate the wonders and majesty of God. But that's not the force of this psalm. The Psalmist is using, in Hebrew, very strong language. What he is having God say, literally, is, Shut up! Be quiet! Stop it! and know that I am God.

On numerous occasions in the teachings of Jesus we are told (or it is hinted) that at the final judgment there will be a profound silence. Why is that? When we stand before the

judgment seat of God, the indictment against us will be so clear and the evidence so overwhelming that it would be futile, foolhardy, to even protest our innocence. The time for excuse-rendering, for explanation and rationalisations, will be over.

God never offers false charges against people. It is foolishness to speak against the indictment of Almighty God. The only appropriate response to his judgment is either silence or the wailing, piercing cry for mercy. To debate one's guilt, to deny one's sin, is futile. The best lawyer in the world would be a waste of money for that particular hearing. The law of God says to those who are under the law that every mouth may be stopped for all the world is guilty before God. That's the verdict at the ultimate tribunal. Each of us is guilty before God.

Why does Paul labour this point of the universality of human guilt? Is he one of those preachers who seems to enjoy wallowing in the corruption of the human race, giving us a bad self-image, paralysing us with guilt feelings? That is not his intent at all. But it is impossible to really hear the gospel, until one has first heard the gavel crash and the verdict sounded unequivocally—Guilty! As long as we delude ourselves by attempts at self-justification, or try to make light of, deny, or shift to somebody else's responsibility or blame, the sin that is a reality in our lives, we can never really hear the gospel. Unless we understand the justice of God, how can we possibly know anything of his mercy or his grace. Grace and mercy depend for their very meaning on the background of the reality of justice.

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law. If we were to apply the rules of logic to this text, we would recognise immediately the presence of what is called a 'universal negative'. This is a negative that encompasses every individual. God says that no-one shall be justified by observing the law.

This is what the Protestant Reformation was all about. Anyone who is trusting in his own merit is committing the ultimate folly.

What does Paul mean by the word 'justified'? It is very simple. The problem of mankind is this: God is just, fallen human beings are not just. How can those of us who are unjust ever be justified? Excuses for real sin never justify the sin. If I sin once, I cannot undo the transgression. I may try to compensate for it, make retribution for it, apologise for it; I can do all of those things, but I cannot undo it. I cannot make the imperfect, perfect.

The 'universal negative' of the preceding verse is counter-balanced by this significant positive assertion of what the law can do: **rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.** While the law cannot save, it does serve to spotlight how far short of God's standard of perfection we all fall. As this manifestation of God's standard it points us to Christ, who alone saves.

FAILURE

WHY YOUR RELIGION WON'T WORK

VENTURE
DARE TO DO SOMETHING

Study Notes

The knowledge it brings is at least intellectual cognition, and more. The law has the capacity to bring inward conviction, dread, guilt and shame. Its power is linked to its sure ability to persuade in a convincing manner that trusting in one's own righteousness will only lead to condemnation; as such the law functions as a forerunner of Christ, preparing for the reception of the good news of the gospel.³

³ Sproul, R. C. (1994). [*The Gospel of God: An Exposition of Romans*](#) (pp. 58–72). Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications.