

Lesson 8: Closing Argument – Indictment of All Men

Romans 3:9-20

⁹ What then? Are we better than they? Not at all;
for we have already charged that **both Jews and Greeks are all under sin**; ¹⁰ as it is written,
“There is none righteous, not even one; (Psalm 14:1-3, 53:1-3 and Eccl. 7:20)
¹¹ There is none who understands,
There is none who seeks for God;
¹² All have turned aside, together they have become useless;
There is none who does good,
There is not even one.”
¹³ “Their throat is an open grave, (Psalm 5:9)
With their tongues they keep deceiving,”
“The poison of asps is under their lips”; (Psalm 140:3)
¹⁴ “Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness”; (Psalm 10:7)
¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood, (Isaiah 59:7-8)
¹⁶ Destruction and misery are in their paths,
¹⁷ And the path of peace they have not known.”
¹⁸ “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (Psalm 36:1)
¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law,
so that **every mouth** may be closed and **all the world** may become accountable to God;
²⁰ because by the works of the Law **no flesh will be justified in His sight**;
for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin.

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Paul as a Lawsuit Prophet

The primary role of the Old Testament prophets was to call God’s people back to covenant faithfulness. The prophets saw how princes, nobles, priests, business men and women, and normal men and women lived their lives. The prophets saw the hearts of the people veer away from God, and they saw how the behavior of the people followed. Lost relationship with God always results in a degrading of moral behavior. The opposite is also true. A degrading in our moral behavior results in loss of vision for who God really is. The prophets saw these problems in society and were tasked with holding people accountable to covenant relationship with God, warning them of dangers ahead if they continued on their road away from God and providing hope if they would return to enjoy the blessing of being in relationship with God. These prophets are known as lawsuit prophets. They make a case against the people for breaking covenant. You hear it in Micah 6:2, “Listen, you mountains, to the indictment of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth, because the Lord has a case against his people; even with Israel he will dispute.”

The scope of the lawsuit prophet was primarily in calling Israel back to covenant relationship. But God is not a regional, pagan god, tied only to one people in one locality. This, too, comes out in the prophets. Each of the major prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel contain prophecies targeting the superpowers of Babylon and Egypt as well as prophecies targeting the regional powers like Tyre, Ammon, Edom, Moab and Philistia. In the short prophecy of Amos, chapters 1 and 2 lead up to a prophecy for Israel by first aiming at six non-Jewish nations. Two of the other shorter prophets, Jonah and Nahum, both focus in on Assyria. My point is that the prophets of God understand that he is king, not only over Israel, but king over all the nations of the earth. The special covenant with Israel that came through Abraham and Moses does not set aside the universal covenants with all people established through Adam and Noah. All men, all women are accountable to God. We see this in the Old Testament prophets and we see it here in the first chapters of Romans.

Paul has taken on the role of covenant lawsuit prophet. We are in a courtroom, and he is the prosecuting attorney. He sees the path of men and women. He sees that path is taking them away from relationship with God. And he is calling us back universally. He is not just calling Jew. He is

calling Jew and Gentile. Paul sees God as king of all people. He has taken us to court and we have been studying the indictment. The Pagan person, the moral person, the religious person have all been accused. Now, Paul delivers his closing argument.

9 Paul clearly states the intent of his case so far.

Just in case we are not sure about what Paul was doing in chapters 1 and 2, he has summed it up clearly for us here in verse 9.

[Read Romans 3:9]

Paul is not setting up the Jew as better or worse. Paul is not setting up the Christian as better or worse. Paul's charge against mankind is universal. When he uses the term Greek here, Greek applies to Greek culture, not just the Greek person, and it was the dominate culture of the Roman Empire. Western culture might be a modern parallel to the concept of Greek or Hellenistic culture in Paul's day. To call someone Western is a broad span of culture. When Paul says, "Jew and Greek" here, it is like saying, "the Religious and the Pagan are all under sin," or like saying, "East and West are all under sin." It is a universal statement. Everybody. Paul continues the charge with a song of condemnation in verses 10-18. He is going to get poetic.

10-18 Paul embellishes his charge with a song of condemnation.

The composition of the song seems to be original with Paul, but the words are not. He is drawing mostly from the Psalms using poetry to drive home emotionally and rationally his charge that "there is none righteous, not even one." Depending on words of the Palms adds the weight of Old Testament authority to the indictment.

[Read Romans 3:10-18]

10-12 There is none.

The first stanza of the song in verses 10-12 contains two sets of three versets. To produce this stanza, Paul reworks the first three verses of Psalm 14 and possibly draws from Ecclesiastes 7:20 to bring in the word righteous, which works so well with Paul's courtroom language.

- "There is none righteous, not even one; (Psalm 14:1-3, 53:1-3 and Eccl. 7:20)
- ¹¹ There is none who understands,
There is none who seeks for God;
- ¹² All have turned aside, together they have become useless;
There is none who does good,
There is not even one."

The phrase, "there is none," occurs five times in this first stanza. (The last phrase "there is not even one," uses the same Greek, *οὐκ ἔστιν*, as the other examples.) Paul clearly emphasizes the universality of sinful human nature. The idea that everyone is basically good works in the Bible only until you get to Genesis chapter 3. It works for two chapters. From there on, the Bible teaches that all people are fundamentally sinful, made good in God's image, but twisted, fallen, distorted. Every human being is affected by a sinful human nature. The result: "There is none righteous, not one."

13-14 The witness of our words

The second stanza in verses 13-14 is a little shorter, comprised of two sets of two versets, composed from Psalm 5:9, Psalm 140:3, and Psalm 10:7.

- ¹³ "Their throat is an open grave, (Psalm 5:9)
With their tongues they keep deceiving,"
"The poison of asps is under their lips"; (Psalm 140:3)
- ¹⁴ "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness"; (Psalm 10:7)

Each verset here emphasizes the sinfulness of our words. Before Paul, Jesus taught that our words reveal darkness inside. In Matthew 12:33-37 Jesus said,

- ³³ "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. ³⁴ "You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good?"

For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart... ³⁷ "For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

You here that text in Paul's language. What person has not said things they wish they could take back; words that reveal a self-focus or bitterness or anger or jealousy that exists in the heart; words, which we say we did not mean, but, in reality, we only wish we did not mean them. Because our words reveal our heart.

15-18 The witness of our actions

Like the second stanza, the third stanza in verses 15-18 contains two sets of two versets. The first three versets come from Isaiah 59:7-8. The concluding verset comes from Psalm 36:1.

¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood, (Isaiah 59:7-8)

¹⁶ Destruction and misery are in their paths,

¹⁷ And the path of peace they have not known."

¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Psalm 36:1)

This stanza moves from the words of the second stanza to action. We have not only spoken forth evil words from our heart, but have walked down paths of selfishness, immorality, greed and anger. The last verset declares, "There is no fear of God before their eyes." It is a very poetic way to say that we have this attitude in our hearts, "I will do what I will do. I do not care what God thinks about it." We have all said this, "Forget it God. I am going to do what I going to do." If we have not said it in so many words, we have said it with our choices, we have said it with our actions.

Back in the early-80s, Mike Wallace, host of the news show 60-Minutes, interviewed a man named Yehiel Dinur. He was a concentration camp survivor. Dinur had been scheduled to testify at the Nuremburg trials in 1961 against Adolf Eichmann, an officer in the SS and one of the principal architects of the Holocaust. Upon entering the courtroom and seeing Eichmann for the first time since Auchwitz, Dinur broke down in sobs and fainted. Later in this interview, Wallace asked Dinur why he broke down. Was it fear or loathing? What did you feel when you saw Eichmann? Dinur gave a sobering explanation. He was not overcome with fear or hatred. Instead he realized upon seeing Eichmann that this man was not a superman; he was not godlike; he was an ordinary man. Dinur told Wallace, "I was afraid about myself. I saw I was capable to do this. I am exactly like he." Those words stunned Wallace into silence, and a moment later he finally summed up the interview with this statement "Eichmann is in all of us (Chuck Colson *Who Speaks for God*, p. 137)."

The ugly truth about sin is that it is a universal condition. We are not basically good. That is a false band-aid we put over our conscience to sooth our soul into believing everything is all right. But we are not basically good. And it helps no one to pretend that they are. If a man has cancer, he needs to know the truth, so that he can seek a cure. Sin is a cancer of the soul. It does no good to pretend we are not sick, much worse, if we do not know we are sick, we will not even try to seek a cure.

19-20 Paul gives his closing argument.

Moving from the song of condemnation in verses 10-18, we come to 19-20. This is Paul's closing argument against mankind. So, let's read this. Romans 3:19-20.

[Read Romans 3:19-20]

Paul argues that what the law says, it says to those under the law, "so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God." What's the logic there? How is it that speaking to a select group results in holding the whole world accountable. The more popular argument you usually hear from people is, "How can God hold accountable those who do not know about his law."

Paul is saying here that if we hold those who do know accountable, that covers everybody. About holding people accountable who do not know, we addressed that idea in chapter 2. Those under the law and those not under the law, are both aware of a natural moral law. We each have some moral standard we live by. There is a moral principle in all of us. And none of us lives up even to our own

moral standard. Sometimes our conscious defends us and sometimes it condemns us. We all know guilt. It is a human reality. In the end, every human being is accountable to what we could call general moral revelation.

Paul makes a different point here. The point here is about special revelation, the revelation of God's moral will through Scripture, specifically through the law of Moses. Who has the best chance to live in accordance with the moral will of God? The Jew does; the one who has access to the revealed will of God has the best chance of living out the will of God. And yet, every single Jew has fallen short of the moral will of God. Every Jew will be declared guilty in the moral court. Paul is not degrading the Jewish person here. Paul is saying that the Jewish person, of all people, has the best chance in God's court. Without the law of God teaching us his will, we have no hope of living up to his standard. But if no Jew, who has the special revelation of God, has ever lived up to the standard of God, how can anyone without special knowledge of God's moral will, hope to have live up to that standard? So, consider who we may be talking about, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Daniel, Mary. No Jew, even with the possession of the Bible, has ever lived up to the moral will of God. And if those who know God's will cannot live up to God's will then clearly those who are not even trying to live according to God's expressed will cannot live up to it. As a result, "every mouth is shut and the whole world is accountable to God."

Paul's closing argument ends here. No pagan man or woman, no moral man or woman, no religious man or woman who stands before the court of God and says, "Judge me by what I have done," will be declared righteous. All will be declared guilty. As Paul says, "By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in his sight." Moral law cannot justify. Human religion is an attempt to ignore the cancer inside, to hide the fact that we are at the core sinful, to dress ourselves up on the outside in the hopes that God will not see through the charade.

In our last session, I introduced the two questions of covenant. A covenant is an agreement that clarifies the history and the expectations between two parties. When we enter into a covenant relationship with God, there are two essential questions we need clarified. The first question of covenant is this, "What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?" Using Paul's courtroom language here we could also ask it this way, "What makes me righteous so that I might be in relationship with God?" "What makes me righteous? What makes me acceptable?" I asked you to think about this question in terms of what is your part and what is God's part. Your part we are calling "law". Those are the dos and don'ts you are expected to do. God's part we are calling grace, which is what God gives to you. We need to clarify the first question of covenant by asking, "What percentage of the answer involves grace, God's part, and what percentage of the answer involves law, my part? What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God? How much of that is grace and how much of that is law?"

Paul's closing argument invalidates law as an option for making anyone acceptable in the eyes of God. "By the works of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight for through the law comes the knowledge of sin." So, I am not made acceptable before God by my religious and moral works. Not only me. No one. Not Abraham, not Moses, not Mother Teresa, not Martin Luther King, and not Billy Graham, no one is acceptable before God on the basis of good deeds. And if none of these, then certainly not me.

We are getting closer to the answer of the first question of covenant, "What makes you acceptable to God?", but we are not there, yet. We have to wait until the verdict. That comes in our next lesson. I will go ahead and give you the second question of covenant, so you can think about it. Having become acceptable to God, in however we end up answering that first question, I then ask the second question. "How do I live in a way that is pleasing to God?" This is not asking how I establish relationship with God, but rather, how do I live out the relationship with God that I already possess. And here again, we can try to clarify by asking how much of this involves grace and how much involves law. What percentage in how I live for God depends on what he does for me or in me and how much depends on what I do? I will also leave the answer to that question until next time.

For now, though, consider Paul's words in verse 20 and how those words relate to each of the two questions of covenant. Paul has concluded, "by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight; for through the law comes the knowledge of sin." Is Paul saying that the only point of the Mosaic law is to show us that we are sinful? Is that the only use of the law? Does the law have no pedagogical purpose to teach us, for example, about the nature of God? Or does the law have no moral value to spur us on to live in a way that is true and good? The answer depends on which question we are dealing with. Are we here dealing with the first question of the covenant or are we dealing with the second question of covenant? Is this about becoming acceptable before a righteous God? Or is this about me living in such a way that is pleasing to our God?

We are not yet addressing issues related to the second question of covenant. In fact, the objections raised in 3:1-8, "What about sin in the life of the believer?" and "What about the Jew?", both of those questions relate to the second question of covenant, "How do we live out our relationship with God? How do we please God with our lives?" That is why Paul put off his more detailed answers to those questions. Before moving on to issues of the second question of covenant, "How do we live out relationship?", we have to clearly answer the first question of covenant, "What makes us able to have relationship in the first place?" This courtroom scene that Paul has created in Romans 1-4 is designed to solidly establish the gospel answer to the first question of covenant, "What makes me acceptable or righteous in God's eyes?" And so, Paul's answer in verse 20 stands. The law does not help you at all in answering the first question, because the only assurance you have with the law is that you are going to break it. If this first question depends on the law, you are eternally lost.

This does not mean that there is no value or usefulness for the Christian in the law of God. This means there is no help from the law in answering the first question. But there was never meant to be. In relation to the first question the law was only ever intended to reveal to us the insurmountable problem of our own sin nature. The law teaches us that we cannot live up to God's standard of righteousness. Paul is clear. No works justify. The law shows you your sin. But we do not want to jump ahead of Paul's argument. Paul has eliminated the law as an answer to the first question of covenant, but he has not yet addressed the question of the law's role in the second question of covenant. That will begin in chapter 5. So, it is left to you for now to think about it. What percentage does law play in fulfilling the second question of covenant, "How do I live out my relationship with God in a way that is pleasing to him?" And then also, how much does grace play in answering that question?

Let's end up our consideration of Paul's closing argument by being crystal clear about the problem Paul has charged humanity with.

My brother lives in Texas. Everything is big in Texas. Well not everything. I heard a Texas pastor tell a story once of a family that went beach down in Galveston on the Gulf of Mexico. While on vacation, they found a small, wet, half-starved dog that was apparently abandoned by its owner.

As kids will do, the kids asked to keep it. The parents, losing their minds, said, "Yes." So, they took it home with them back from their vacation. They gave the dog a bath and fed it. They named it Sparky and even put a blue ribbon around its neck. Sparky lived happily with the family for a couple of days, until they came home and discovered their cat dead and half-eaten in the back yard. This made the family worry about Sparky. Could he have eaten the cat? So, they took Sparky to the vet to find out if anything was wrong with him. The vet responded, "There is nothing wrong with your dog, except that he is not a dog. It's a gigantic African rat." Apparently, the rat had travelled aboard a cargo ship from Africa, swam ashore in the Gulf of Mexico, and was found by this nice family.

The moral of the story is that you can take a rat home, clean it up and even put a nice blue ribbon around its neck. But that does not change the fact that a rat, is a rat, is a rat.

Here is my problem. The only way for me to believe that I can be justified by the law is to not take the law too seriously. If the law means going to church occasionally, being decent most of the time, taking out the trash without being asked, and saying a prayer at night, then I maybe I will be able to

feel okay about myself. It also might work if, when I look at God's will in the Bible, I only apply it to other people. This is how my neighbor should behave, this is how my wife should love me, this is what my children should do to be obedient. I am all for this. But as soon as I look intently into the law of God and try to apply it to myself, I am in trouble. "Love your neighbor as yourself." I am lost right there, but let's go a little further. "Love your enemy. Love your wife as Christ loved the church. Love God with your heart, mind, and soul. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouth but only what is useful in building others up." Enough, that's enough. I don't do it, okay. "By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in his sight *for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.*"

Honest, open-eyed pursuit of holiness, according to God's definition of holiness, is a mirror into my true condition. You can wash me. You can dress me up in religious clothes. You can teach me to say, "Please," and "Thank you." You can give me a new circle of friends. And you can tell me that I am a basically good person. Just do not ask me to live a holy life of love. Keep the mirror away. As soon as I truly try to live the law with internal honesty and sincerity, that law reminds me that a rat, is a rat, is a rat. I am not basically good. There is a principle in me that moves me to do what I ought not do and resists doing that which I know I should do. It is the sin nature. The harder I try the more apparent that sin nature is.

Let's be honest. I have a cancer of the soul. Let's not try to pretend otherwise. You have it, too. We need a cure that is outside of ourselves. It is not within our capacity to cure ourselves of this cancer. We cannot save ourselves. Without a cure we are hopelessly and eternally lost. The moral defense before God can never work. Paul has brought us to the very end of ourselves. If we are to be saved from ourselves, we are going to need a miracle.

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, strange, confusing or interesting in Romans 3:9-20?
2. How does Paul's song of condemnation (3:10-18) strike you? Do you see yourself in Paul's words or do you feel this is too negative to describe you? What stands out to you in this song?
3. The popular worldview of Western society typically makes the claim that people are basically good. What are some reasons we want to believe that people are basically good? How does the biblical point of view expressed here by Paul make you feel?
4. Describe your experience with the Law of God. How has the Law of God served as a mirror to show you your own sin? (You do not have to think about this with the Old Testament exclusively in mind. You can also think about the commands of the New Testament, for example, you can think about the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5-8 or about the commands Paul gives in Romans 12-14. When you consider these commands in relationship to your own life, do they have the result of bringing to you the knowledge of sin as Paul writes in verse 20?)
5. Consider again this question from the last lesson: What percentage would you assign to the role of grace and law in answering the first question of covenant, "What makes you acceptable to be in relationship with God?"

What percentage is grace, God's part?

What percentage is law, your part?

6. Now consider the second question of covenant. What percentage would you assign to the role of grace and law in answering the second question of covenant, "How do I live out my relationship with God in a way that is pleasing to him?"

What percentage is grace, God's part?

What percentage is law, your part?