

An Honest View of Sin
Romans 3:9-20

When Brenda and I got married in 1983 it never occurred to us to write our own vows. But today writing your own wedding vows is fairly common. Usually they're honest and touching and sometimes funny. But occasionally they go bad. Mark Batterson was a pastor in Vancouver for many years, and he always asked to review ahead of time the vows that couples had composed for their wedding. On one occasion, one couple submitted vows that included a line that "stopped him cold": "I promise to be true to myself." Batterson's reply (*Your God is Too Safe*, p. 72):

"Um. . . I'm pretty sure you don't want that in the vow."

"I'm pretty sure we do," the man said.

"Maybe you're different from me," I said. "There's a part of me, I'm glad to say, that is joy-filled, generous, trusting, trustworthy. But there's another part of me - maybe the larger part - that's slothful, lustful, greedy, miserly, apathetic. I could go on. Which part should I be true to?"

Batterson pointed out that in the traditional vows you're basically pledging that you **won't** be true to yourself. You will be true to another and you will be true to God. But you will often have to deny yourself and all your sinful impulses. The couple that was ready to vow, "I promise to be true to myself," didn't have a very accurate view of their own sinfulness.

If you and I are going to live our lives well, we need to take an honest view of our own sin. We need a healthy, biblical view of our sin for about a dozen different reasons: so we'll be sober about our capacity to hurt others, so that we'll avoid our tendency to hide from God and others when we've sinned, so that we'll be able to deal with the shame and self-condemnation that often accompanies sin, etc.

If you read the book of Romans, you'll noticed that Paul spends two solid chapters (1:18-3:20) talking about the sinfulness of humanity. Today we come to one more passage about our sinfulness before Paul explains the gospel in great detail. In you want to think about it in medical terms, sin is the diagnosis and Jesus is the remedy. Unless we're convinced of our sinfulness, we won't hear the gospel about Jesus as the good news that it is.

In Romans 3:9–20 Paul frames up his argument using the imagery of the courtroom. He presents the charge, lays out the evidence, and then the verdict. This passage urges us to take an honest look at sin so that we'll be drawn to Jesus as our only hope.

The Charge: All are under the power of sin. (*Romans 3:9*) In verse 9 Paul asks whether he and his fellow Jews are "better" than Gentiles.

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;

Even though being Jewish had great advantage, it didn't make them inherently "better" than the Gentiles spiritually. In 2:11 Paul stated unequivocally that "there is no partiality with God"; He judges both Jews and Gentiles on their works (because our works are an accurate reflection of our faith). Paul's entire argument beginning in 1:18 has been moving toward the conclusion stated here: "both Jews and Greeks are all under sin."

To be "under sin" means more than that we commit sins. To be under sin is to be under the dominion of sin - to be enslaved by sin. In 6:14 Paul says this to the believer in Jesus:

14 For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

In 6:17 Paul continues this imagery of sin being a master:

17 But thanks be to God that though you were slaves of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed,

Before coming to Christ, they/we were "slaves of sin." That's what Paul meant when he wrote in 3:9 that "both Jews and Greeks are all under sin." The charge is that every person is enslaved to sin. The charge isn't that we're not trying hard enough or that we're not sincere enough; the charge is that we're enslaved to sin without any way to liberate ourselves. Why would Paul say this? Let's listen to the evidence . . .

The Evidence: The Law itself testifies to universal sinfulness. (Romans 3:10-18)

Beginning in verse 10 Paul quotes passages from Ecclesiastes, Psalms, Proverbs, and Isaiah to support this claim. He cites passages that describe how **universally** and **creatively** people sin. Sin is the norm, not the exception. Just as **all** have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, Paul will argue declare that salvation is available for **all** who believe.

We'll move through these passages quickly, mainly noticing the pervasive nature of sin. Paul first cites Psalm 14:1-3 (which is almost identical to Psalm 53:1-3). In Psalm 14 David is describing "the workers of wickedness" who oppress the righteous.

10 as it is written,
"There is none righteous, not even one;
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."

Interestingly, when you read Psalm 14, you have to conclude that David wasn't claiming that there were no righteous people whatsoever. In Psalm 14 David even speaks of "the righteous generation" (verse 5). David's point in these verses is that outside of a relatively small number of righteous, there is no one who seeks after God. Here in Romans 3 Paul applies this principle to everyone (both Jews and Greeks) and argues that "apart from God's justifying grace" (Moo, p. 203), not a single person is right with God.

Verses 13 and 14 cite passages in the Psalms that describe how people commonly sin with their words. Jesus pointed out that our mouths speak whatever fills the heart (Luke 6:45). Therefore, sins of the tongue are really sins of the heart; we're only giving voice to what is already in our hearts (the command-and-control center of our lives). Paul strings together verses from Psalm 5, Psalm 140, and Psalm 10 in these verses. Notice the progression from the throat to the tongue to the lips:

13 "Their throat is an open grave,
With their tongues they keep deceiving,"
"The poison of asps is under their lips";
14 "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness";

Words are supposed to bring life and truth to others; but our words often accomplish the opposite. An open grave signified defilement and danger and death. Instead of speaking truth, their words were deceptive: "with their tongues they keep deceiving." Instead of bringing healing, their words were venomous: "the poison of asps/snakes is under their lips." Instead of bringing blessing, their words brought curses: "whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness." Nobody can really deny how destructive our words can be at times.

In verses 15 through 17, Paul moves from the mouth to the feet. He quotes from Isaiah 59.

15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood,
16 Destruction and misery are in their paths,
17 And the path of peace they have not known."

It's not as if they wander into sin innocently. They run into sin intentionally: "their feet are swift to shed blood." Instead of experiencing a life full of peace, they experience "destruction and misery" every step of the way. This description reminds us of Psalm 32:10 which states that "many are the sorrows of the wicked. . ." Sometimes sin is glamorized in popular culture (and in our own minds), but it ultimately bring heartache and turmoil into our lives.

Paul concludes this string of OT verses by citing Psalm 36:1 which says:

18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

The root problem was that there is no “fear of God” before their eyes. They really didn’t care what God thought about their lives. They weren’t at all concerned about the consequences of ignoring or offending God. Biblically speaking, this is the most foolish way a person can live his/her life. If God really is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, and if humanity really was created in the image of God and given the mandate to spread that image throughout the earth, to reject Him and His authority over one’s life is a radical expression of rebellion.

The Verdict: Guilty as charged; we are all under the power of sin. (Romans 3:19-20)

Paul begins verse 19 with a statement with which his readers would have readily agreed.

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;

“Now we know” - everybody agrees on this - “that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law.” Just as my parents’ rules were binding only on my three brothers and me (they didn’t apply to the next door neighbor kids), the Law was binding on those under the Law, namely the Jewish people. “Whatever the Law says” is a reference to the quotations given in verses 10 through 18.

Paul depicts a courtroom scene when he says that the result of these Scriptures is that “every mouth may be closed” and “all the world may become accountable to God.” The testimony of God’s word is so compelling that the defense is speechless. The verdict is beyond dispute: the Jews were guilty as charged; they had sinned with their mouths and eyes and feet. When they heard these Scriptures, the result was that stood accountable before God with no defense.

My oldest brother, Mikey, is an attorney in Hattiesburg, MS. I emailed him this past week, asking him for an example of a court case in which the prosecution was so convincing and the evidence so compelling that he was left speechless and couldn’t mount a defense. His reply was, “One of the problems with the question you ask is the assumption that anyone can leave a lawyer speechless.” Maybe that’s the point: lawyers always have something to say - just like the rest of us. We all have a good explanation for our sinfulness (our circumstances, our family of origin, our genetics, etc.). . . but before God we’re left speechless. We really don’t have an excuse.

Paul is arguing from the greater to the lesser: if the Jewish people - with all their spiritual advantages - stand guilty before God, then certainly the Gentiles do also. Remember that Paul is supporting the statement that “both Jews and Greeks are all under sin.”

Notice Paul’s concluding statement in verse 20.

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.

Paul states that neither Jew nor Gentile will have a right standing before God based on “the works of the Law” - the things that were done in obedience to the Law. The works of the Law were never meant to be a means of earning God’s favor; they were meant to be an expression of devotion to God. Paul’s point here is that nobody can ever claim that the works of the Law have given them a right standing before God. He will argue in the rest of chapter 3 and throughout chapter 4 that we are justified by faith alone.

Remember that in chapter 2 Paul addressed the Jewish opponent who might argue, “Since we have the Law/Torah, our relationship with God can’t be challenged.” In light of this passage N. T. Wright points out that, “To appeal to the Torah is like calling a defense witness who endorses what the prosecution has been saying all along” (NIB, pp. 459-460). Paul has just cited passages from the Law that depict how universally and creatively the Jewish people have sinned.

Therefore, Paul concludes that “by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in God’s sight.” If the Law cannot justify us before God, what can it do? The Law does the opposite: “for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.” Paul isn’t merely saying that the Law has given us information about sin that we didn’t have. He is saying that **the Law exposes just how sinful we are**. When we read in the Word that we’re supposed to honor God with our thoughts, words, and actions. . . and then we see how often we do the opposite. . . we have fresh, first-hand knowledge of our sin.

Instead of being justified by the works of the Law, we find ourselves “guilty as charged”: we have all sinned with our thoughts, words, and actions. The verdict leaves us speechless and defenseless before God.

Implications . . .

If you have never put your faith in Christ, this discussion of sin might be troubling to you. You might be feeling the weight of your sin for the first time. Maybe you’ve tried to ignore your sin or cover your shame and guilt in all sorts of ways. Maybe you’ve dismissed your sinfulness by saying, “I know I’m not perfect, but I’m not as bad as _____.” If you’re feeling the weight of your sin, I’d urge/beg you not to ignore it. Don’t dismiss the diagnosis that you are enslaved to sin or else you’ll miss the best news that you’ll ever hear.

The diagnosis is NOT that you would be pleasing to God if only you tried harder. The diagnosis isn’t that you’re not smart enough or sincere enough. The diagnosis is much more serious: you (like every other human being) are in bondage to sin and there is nothing you can do that will bring you freedom from sin. You need a Deliverer. You need a Savior who can free you from sin. Next week we’ll see in Romans 3:21-26 that Jesus is that Deliverer and Savior. Through faith in Jesus guilty people can be right with God. It’s not something you earn or deserve; it’s a gift that God freely gives to all who believe in Christ Jesus.

I talked with a friend who became a follower of Christ later in life (late 50s). I asked him about his experience of being convicted of his sin before he put his trust in Christ. Here's some of what he said . . . He said that when God started convicting him of sin, he resisted it. He actually had trouble seeing his sin. He was an honest person; never stole from people; Christians looked like hypocrites. . . . Always found somebody who was worse than him. Felt like "the sin thing" was something that the church used to try to control people. Very much in denial.

Interestingly, he read Sermon on Mount and couldn't believe what he was reading (Beatitudes were just foolish); he couldn't believe that Jesus really taught that you should love your enemies and turn the other cheek. He actually thought that people had mistranslated Jesus' teaching because it was so counterintuitive - the opposite of what he had believed his whole life and the way the world worked. For him, conviction of sin didn't come quickly or easily. But he kept reading the gospels and talking with people about Jesus. He eventually fell in love with Jesus and is forever changed.

If you are seriously considering your own sinfulness for the first time, I'd encourage you to give it some time. Pray and ask God to show you what is really true about yourself and about Jesus.

For those of us who are already believers, this discussion of sin is not irrelevant. It is relevant in at least a couple of different ways. **First**, it is always good to remember how we entered into a relationship with God through Jesus. Paul never got tired of remembering his own conversion. This is how Paul described it in 1 Timothy 1:12-16.

12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, 13 even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; 14 and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus. 15 It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all. 16 Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life.

Paul's life illustrates the truth that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." My life illustrates the same thing; and so does yours if you're a believer in Jesus Christ. This remembrance brings us back to a place of humility. We came to God empty-handed and unworthy.

In a few minutes we're going to celebrate the Lord's Table in which we remember the body and blood of Christ through the bread and the cup. This is a time to remember that our sinfulness demanded a remedy that was more costly than we could have ever imagined. God sent His one and only Son to die as our substitute.

Second, this discussion of our inherent sinfulness has implications for how we approach the Word. Paul pointed out that “through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.” Of course the Scriptures do much more than expose our sinfulness; they also teach us and train us in the ways of righteousness. But the Scriptures do expose our sinfulness - even after we have come to faith in Christ. Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16 that the Scriptures are profitable for “correction and reproof.”

But sometimes we don't really want to be confronted about things in our lives that should be different. Sometimes we avoid reading the Scriptures because we're afraid that we will end up feeling guilty and condemned. Have you ever thought, “I'm already feeling crummy about myself. . . why would I want to read the Scriptures and feel even worse?!?!”

In Christ everything is different. We don't have to fear what we'll read in the Word because in Romans 8:1 Paul will write that “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” The Holy Spirit will convict us of sin, but He has no interest in condemning us. The condemnation that we deserved fell upon Jesus as He hung on the cross. When God uses the Scriptures to expose our sin, He is doing so with a view toward refining us and molding us into the image of Christ.

Because God is a good, kind, patient heavenly Father, we should be eager to hear His voice through the Scriptures. We don't have to be like the kid who covers his ears and says, “I can't hear you so I don't have to do what you say.” We can grow up and have adult conversations with our heavenly Father. One of the primary ways we listen to Him is by going to the Word for an honest, biblical view of our sin.