



## Everyone is Under Sin

Romans 3:9-20

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This morning we will be looking at Romans, chapter 3, verses 9-20. This is the conclusion of the first section of Paul's argument in the book of Romans. He is putting a capstone on all he has been saying in Romans, chapters 1-2. So please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative, and the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient. Romans, chapter 3, beginning at verse 9.

*"What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.' 'Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.' 'The venom of asps is under their lips.' 'Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.' 'Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.' 'There is no fear of God before their eyes.' Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."*

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. Heavenly Father, we ask this morning that by the power of your Holy Spirit you would open up your Word to us, that we would learn in your Word who you are, who *we* are, what duty you require of us, and of our great hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

As we come to this point in the book of Romans, Paul has been telling us what we don't want to hear. He has been telling us that God is a perfectly holy and just Judge. He has told us that God will judge all of the earth without exception and that we cannot plead ignorance in that judgment, that we cannot plead our standards of morality, that we can't plead our insider standing or our religiosity. Now it gets worse.

Paul finishes off the first section of his argument and goes beyond telling us we are no better than others. He tells us just how bad sin is and what it looks like. This is important for us to hear today. If you are here this morning and you do not know the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior, if you have not placed your trust and faith in him, then you need to hear Paul's words about how bad sin is and how it destroys lives and burdens those who do not know Jesus.

If you know the Lord Jesus Christ, then you need to hear this just as well. Don't sit there and say, "Well, I

know Jesus, so sin really doesn't matter to me." Yes, it does. Because you know Jesus, you have to all the more kill sin. How will you tell others about Jesus if you can't tell them about their need? Paul lays out for us the horror of sin.

I'd like us to see this in three parts this morning. First, we see the *depravity of sin*, just how bad sin is. Secondly, we see the *display of sin*, how sin manifests itself in the lives of sinners. Then thirdly, we see the *devastation of sin*, the harm and heartache sin causes. The depravity of sin, the display of sin, and the devastation of sin.

## **The Depravity of Sin**

Let's begin, then, by looking at the depravity of sin. Paul begins in verse 9 saying, "What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one...'" This is really what we don't want to hear. If we're honest, virtually everyone is willing to admit they're not perfect. It kind of takes a special part of arrogance to say, "I'm perfect, even if no one else is."

We're all willing to admit and to go that far, but just because we're willing to admit we're not perfect doesn't mean we are not under the impression we have everything under control. There may be some cloudiness on the edges, there may be some fraying, but in the main we have things under control. We may admit we have flaws, but we're not without goodness. As a matter of fact, most people think the good they do outweighs the bad they do.

We may think we don't know everything, but we don't think we're incapable of spiritual understanding. We may admit we wander off the road sometimes, but we won't admit we're on the wrong path or that we don't know the way to get back on the path, but that's exactly what Paul says. He tells us we are much worse than we think. What Paul is doing here is describing depravity.

There are three basic views about human nature, and there *have* been throughout all of the centuries. The first basic view is held by, I would say, most people in the world today, and that is that people are basically good. This is especially true when we think about ourselves, because we want to be basically good. The problem with this is the only way to hold that view is to basically ignore the whole world around you, to ignore all of the abuse we see in the news, the murders, the thievery, the lying.

You'd have to basically ignore everything that's going on around you to say, "People are all basically good and do the right thing most of the time." Well, some say, "No, people aren't basically good. Really, it's like they're sick. People need help." You have to understand, for most people, when they say people are sick they don't have in mind a kind of sickness like cancer that involves incredibly difficult treatments and perhaps sorrow and heartache.

No, they mean something more like, "People are in need of a good diet. They may need some rehab. Of course it's painful at times, but if you skip a day here or there, it's not the end of the world. You just need to think positively and do what you can and hope things work out for the best." Paul shows us the Bible's view about people, *God's* view, that people are dead in their sins, that sin has made us guilty before God. "None is righteous," Paul says.

We are guilty before a holy God. We are worthy of judgment, and that's what the first two chapters of Romans are all about. Now, when we say we are guilty, we have to understand this on a fine point. When we use the word *guilt*, I don't mean that feeling you get in the pit of your stomach when something has been done that's wrong. You're afraid someone is going to ask you about something, and you get a little bit queasy and think, "Oh, this isn't really the best."

That's not what we mean by guilt. By guilt we mean deserving of punishment. A pronouncement has been made. I want you to think less about your emotions and more about the law courts. A judgment has come down. Sin has brought us under its power. Every human being descended from Adam is under the power of sin, and what that means is we are unable to fight against sin. All our life, every part of it, is the outworking of sin...our thoughts, our words, our actions.

Sin has made us incapable of doing good. We are, as Paul says in verse 9, under sin. We are under its dominion and power and under its all-pervasive manifestation. So when we stand before God, we have no righteousness to trust in. That's where Paul starts. Paul starts with the heart and with its condition. As far as God is concerned, we have no righteousness. None at all.

Paul is very emphatic. He uses the negative over and over again. He says, "No one is righteous, not even anyone. No one." Paul wants to make sure we get the picture. He is talking to us as if to children. You've had this experience when you speak to the littlest of children, haven't you? You try to explain that no, they can't do this. What happens when you say no? They say, "Well, but..."

"No. I said no."

"Well, what if...?"

"No. No 'ifs.' No."

"Well, what about...?"

"No. Listen to me. It's not a hard or long word. N-O. No. Do you get that?"

That's what Paul is saying. There's no exception to this rule. Don't think that somehow you've found the secret loophole to Romans, chapter 3. You haven't. None are righteous, not one. Paul is not making this up either. It's actually not even new to Paul. All Paul is doing is quoting the Scriptures. He's quoting, in fact, from Ecclesiastes, chapter 7.

He's quoting Psalm 14 and Psalm 53 where the Bible says basically this exact thing. It's a little bit of a paraphrase, but it's very close to exactly Paul's words. "None is righteous, no, not one." Paul wants us to understand that what's important is God's standard of righteousness, not ours. We can think we've done enough, but we don't get to substitute our standards.

I like to think about how when I was younger one of my chores was to mow the lawn. Perhaps some of the teen boys can commiserate with that. I would mow the lawn, and I thought I did a pretty decent job. Of course, there were clumps of grass here and there, and I didn't like to take the edger out and do that, but, you know, it got done. Right? I mowed the lawn. I would go inside and be done, and my father would come and say, "I thought I asked you to mow the lawn."

"Yeah, I did."

"No, you didn't."

"I sure did. I went out there."

"No, it's not done. Look at all that grass that's over here. That's going to die and leave brown spots. Look at all this edging that's left undone. Seriously. I asked you to mow the lawn. I want you to mow the lawn."

It's a silly illustration, but think about it. You don't get to substitute what *you* think is enough for someone else's standard. That's what Paul is telling us. Just because *you* think you've hit the mark doesn't mean you've met God's standard. Paul has been telling us that over and over again in the beginning of Romans. Or maybe it's like *this*. Perhaps I could invite a few of you to my house one evening to play a rousing game of Monopoly, and you do well.

You get Park Place *and* Boardwalk and all four railroads, and you start to build all kinds of hotels, and after a two- or three-hour game you emerge victorious. You break the bank. You have all the money. Everyone else is broke. I say, "Okay, it's time to clean up now. We have to put the game away," and you look at me and say, "No way."

"Why?"

"If you think I'm giving you this money back, you're nuts. I'm taking it home," and you shove it all in your pockets and go home. The next day you walk into the bank and say, "Mr. Banker, I'd like to open an account and make a deposit."

"Oh really? How much would you like to deposit?"

"Oh, I have a tidy sum, at least a million."

"Well, come over here to the nice big table with the comfy chair. Let's get the deposit slip out."

"Okay."

"How are you going to deposit this?"

"Well, I have the money right here. Look. Here are the yellow ones. Here are the orange ones. Here are the blue ones."

What's the banker going to say to you? If you're lucky he'll just say, "Get out. You're nuts." If you're not lucky he'll call the cops, because, you see, you can't substitute something for reality. That's what Paul means when he says, "None is righteous." You may feel you have some righteousness, but before God it is insufficient. Paul has been telling us that.

The second thing Paul says is that no one understands spiritual things. He says, "No one understands" in verse 11. By this Paul does not mean complete ignorance. It's not as if no one could understand the principles involved from the Scripture. What he means is no one accepts them. No one sees them as coming from God or is changed by them apart from a work of God.

Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 2: "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." Do you remember what the cause of this ignorance is? We saw it in chapter 1. Paul said the cause of this ignorance is that we suppress the truth of God. We refuse to believe it.

This is not the kind of ignorance that can be dispelled by information or by experience. It's not like now... I don't know why, but all the rage whenever you buy a new electronic device is they come without manuals. When I was growing up, you liked that piece of paper so you could see, "If I press *this* button it does *that*, and if I press *this* button it does *this*."

Now we don't have that at all. Kids these days. They just want to do and get their hands on. Well, it doesn't really matter whether you're a manual reader or a "try-it-outer." You can learn about that device, but that's

not the kind of ignorance Paul is talking about here. This is an ignorance born of a rejection of God and a turning away from him. It is not a lack of information; it is a lack of understanding that is rooted in sin, Paul says.

That meets us with a problem. How can we solve this? We need to know God and his Word to defeat sin, but because of sin we can't know God. What do we do? Well, after having indicted our hearts and our minds, he then moves on to our will in verse 11. He says, "No one seeks for God." Most people like to think of themselves as open-minded. They're people who seek God or at least some kind of higher power, and if they don't believe it's because God hasn't sufficiently proven himself to them.

That's where we get the origin of the term *agnosticism*. "God's job is to prove himself to me, and if I'm not satisfied, then I don't have to believe." We imagine ourselves on a path toward God and toward what is good. This is the state of much of even religion today. People imagine themselves looking for a God who looks more and more like *they* do, and when *they* change, guess what happens: God changes. The truth is much blunter from Paul. He says, "None seek God."

Just as the heart has no righteousness and just as the mind has no understanding, so the will has no desire to truly seek God. Paul could not be clearer. *No one. All* have turned aside. *No one* does any good. No, not even one. Left to ourselves, sin has us in its grip. It's not just that we *cannot* do these things, we *can't* be righteous, we *can't* know God, we *can't* seek after God. The truth is we don't *want* to. That's the depravity of sin.

## **The Display of Sin**

Paul then begins to get specific about what the manifestation of that depravity of sin looks like, what sin is on display. He says, "Listen. This is not just my theory. It's not something that we need to have extensive testing so we can figure out what this looks like." He says it's obvious in the lives of sinners. If the heart is captive to sin, it will show that in the way we live. He starts with what we might think is the easiest thing to control: the tongue.

He says, "Their throat is an open grave, and they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." If we think about it, actions are hard to control. Just stop for a moment and think about all of the self-help books you have seen. We need all of these resources to help us do what we want to do and we know is good.

Think about dieting and diet books and the failure that comes from that. We know we're supposed to only eat certain things, not eat other things, eat at certain times, and what does it usually end in? Failure. Actions are hard to control, but we would say we *could* control what we say. That's a lot easier. Instead, Paul shows us the truth of what Jesus has already said: it is out of the heart the mouth speaks.

If we have a heart that is controlled by sin, the picture of the mouth is not pretty. Paul makes these four statements that show our speech condemns us. Now let me be clear here. Paul is not saying your speech is bad so you need to fix your speech. Paul is saying that, as a sinner, *you* are bad and it manifests itself in your speech. You see, we must look at the root, not just the fruit.

The first phrase Paul uses is, "Their throat is an open grave." He says this in a way that we would know our language betrays us. It shows that we are sinners, that we are without hope apart from God, that we are dead in our trespasses and sins, but it also reminds us that language kills. Stop for a moment and think about every difficult relationship you have been in, every one that has caused pain and sorrow and heartache. What is always at the heart of that difficult relationship? It's the way we use words, isn't it?

It's the way we speak to each other. It's the way we promise to do things and not deliver. It's the way we say things and hurt others. It's the way others say things and hurt us. It's amazing what the mouth can do. I will tell you the biggest liar in the history of the world is the man who came up with the phrase, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me."

He's a liar, because there are many occasions where I'd rather have someone break my arm than say certain things to me. The mouth is an avenue for sin. The second thing Paul says is "They use their tongues to deceive." It's not just harsh words that are sinful; it can be sticky sweet words that are sinful as well. We put the best possible face on words, and we do that to deceive others, to take advantage over them.

Do any of you parents ever take the opportunity to teach your children to lie? I don't think so. Right? Therefore, none of your kids ever lied, ever. Right? You didn't bother to teach them, so they all told the truth every moment of the day. I don't think so. If they're anything like *my* kids, if they're anything like *me*, lying just comes out of them. You don't need to teach people to lie; it's a part of the fruit of sin.

Thirdly, Paul says, "The venom of asps is under their lips." This is describing the venom of one of the most poisonous snakes in the world, a deadly snake. He's just saying something we all know, that words hurt others, that words are dangerous, that they're harmful. Finally, he says, "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." What he means by this is that we express our selfishness, our sinfulness, our lack of love for others through our mouths. This is all in the context of something we think we can control and keep a handle on, and Paul says, "Good luck with that, trying to control sin."

Next Paul moves to our actions that flow from our hearts, because it's not just words that come from our hearts; it's also actions. What Paul is showing here are concrete examples of his indictment of the depravity of man. He says, "So you don't think people are depraved? You think you can ignore how people speak? Well, how about the way they act? Can you ignore *that*?"

He says in verse 15, "Their feet are swift to shed blood." The Bible uses feet not just to describe the parts of our bodies we stand on. The Bible uses feet to describe the way we live and go. That's why the Bible is always talking about our *walk* as our way of life. We walk with the Lord or we're *not* walking with the Lord or we walk in righteousness. Our feet are a part of that.

Not only is our way of life disposed to evil, but do you see what Paul says? We are swift to run to it. "Their feet are swift to shed blood." We might acknowledge that sometimes, maybe, reluctantly, we do things we shouldn't and hurt people, but that's not what Paul is saying. What he's saying is sin makes you eager and swift to hurt others. That's what sin does.

Next in verse 16 he says, "In their paths are ruin and misery..." What Paul is saying here is this isn't just a once in a while thing. "In their paths" describes where we are all the time, regularly. This is a central part of the sinful heart. The sinful heart manifests ruin and misery, both for others and for me. Then finally he says, "...and the way of peace they have not known."

The final evidence of a heart that is sinful is that it does not seek peace. It is disinterested in peace and reconciliation. This shows itself on a personal level. Selfishness breeds conflict. It breeds animosity. We can even see it in the history of the world, on the stage of the world. How can anyone deny that mankind is predisposed to war rather than peace?

Sin displays itself in wicked words and in wicked actions, but it also displays itself in wicked judgment. Paul uses an interesting phrase in verse 18. He says, "There is no fear of God before their eyes." It is actually a quote from Psalm 36:1. We might ask ourselves, "What does this mean? Why is it so bad not to be afraid?" After all, from the earliest days of our lives we're being trained over and over again not to be afraid. Right?

When you're very young, your parents say to you, "We're going to shut the bedroom light off. Don't be afraid." "You're going to go off to school. Don't be afraid." "You're going to have to go live on your own. Don't be afraid." Fear is something to be avoided in our lives. So why does Paul use this as condemnation, that there is no fear of God before their eyes? It's because what's meant here by the *fear of the Lord* is having the Lord before us consciously as our only goal in life.

The Bible says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," and if we understand who God is, what he requires, and our relationship to him, then everything else just falls into place. If we care more about God than anything, then we will not fail to love our spouse. We will not fail to love our children. We can properly respect our superiors. We can properly benefit our inferiors. When God is at the center of our lives, we are conscious of our dependence on him. Sin displays itself ultimately and most damaging in an unqualified godlessness, in a belief that we do not need God.

## The Depravity of Sin

Sin is a state of depravity that shows itself in the wickedness of the life of the sinner, and finally, sin has harmful effects upon the sinner, devastating effects. Paul wants us to understand the warnings God gives to us about sin.

So he says in verse 19, "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God." When Paul uses the phrase *the law* here, he is not just talking about the Ten Commandments. He's not even just talking about the first five books of the Bible that are often called the books of the Law. No, what Paul is talking about is the whole of God's Word.

We know this because, previously, Paul has been quoting from all over the Bible. He quotes Ecclesiastes. He quotes Isaiah. He quotes the Psalms and David. What he is saying is that the Word of God, the law of God, shows us what sin is like. This is just what we've seen. The Word of God speaks about the devastation and the destruction of sin, and these warnings come to those who are under the law.

Now, our first thought is "Paul, this isn't much help. I don't *want* to be under the law. I want to be under grace. As a matter of fact, Paul, you're going to say that in a few chapters. I read ahead." But that's not what Paul means when he's talking about being under the law. It's actually a different preposition in the Greek. In chapter 6 it's to be *under* the law as a system of salvation. Here the preposition is *in* the law.

You say, "How do I get inside the law?" That's not what Paul means. What he means is in the *sphere* of the law, in the *hearing* of the law. That's why Paul can say in chapter 1 that the Gentiles who have not the law are a law unto themselves, because the law of God is written on their hearts. God has given them his revelation. Paul is saying all who know the will of God, even those who suppress it, know the judgment that will come on sin.

Sin is devastating because it leaves the sinner with nothing to say when judgment is pronounced. Every mouth is stopped. You'll notice it doesn't just say *some* mouths, the worst mouths, the stuttering mouths. No, every mouth is stopped. There are no extenuating circumstances. Anyone who has ever confronted someone with wrongdoing knows how this goes or you've seen it in a crime drama. "You're guilty."

"But, your honor, you don't understand. I *had* to do this. Let me tell you about all of the things from my childhood. Let me tell you about all of the things that were going on. Let me give you every circumstance as to why I shouldn't be guilty." Or the lawyer says, "Your honor, you can't convict this man, because I have found a little used law from last century, and it applies only in this instance on a Tuesday. This is a loophole that my client must be acquitted." You see that on crime dramas.

That won't be available before God. What God has said applies to everyone, no extenuating circumstances, no loopholes. Notice how Paul says this. He says that the law *speaks*. Words in the Bible are important. He doesn't say the law *spoke*. God's Word is not something from the past that we blow the dust off of and look at like a history lesson. No, God's law speaks today to you and me. God's Word is powerful and active and alive, and it is relevant to you and me today.

What God said through David, what God said through Isaiah is relevant for you and me today. Then Paul reminds the sinner that he not only has no words; he has no hope in his sinful estate, because the whole world, Paul says, is accountable to God. Now this word for *accountable* is only used *here* in the New Testament. It is a special legal, technical term. What it means is someone who has lost all possibility of disproving the charge. All that remains is the pronouncement of judgment.

It's crystal clear. There's no more arguing. There are no more witnesses to call. It's not just a probability. All possibility is gone of being acquitted of the charge. The charge God has brought against sin in his Word is such that the sinner is struck dumb and unable to respond. He's completely unable to mount a defense. All that is left is to wait for the sentencing. The trial is over. The guilt is proven.

God does this to strip away from us our tendency to think there's something we can do. "There has to be a way out of this." You experience this when you get into a sticky situation. Your mind starts racing a mile a minute, trying to think if there's anything you can do, anything you can say, anyone you can bring in. "How can I make this situation go away?" Right? God says, "Don't even think about that. It's gone. Don't waste your time. You're burning energy. You're away from the central issue. There's no hope for the sinner apart from God."

Then finally, in verse 20, sinners are left with no excuse. "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." This first word in verse 20 could even be translated *because*. It's a strong word. Verse 20 tells us *why* there are no words, *why* there is no hope. It's because all of our efforts to be justified before God on what we do are impossible.

When we are confronted with our sin, our tendency is to provide the answer that we've done good and the good we've done outweighs the bad. This should be enough for God, we think, but the Bible tells us it is not, that no one will be justified by God grading on a curve. All that the law does is to show us our sin and the need for something we do not have: a perfect righteousness to stand before God.

We have no words to defend ourselves. We have no hope to refute the charges. We have no excuses to lean on. Our lives are marked by wickedness in what we say, in what we do, and how we treat God. We do not seek after God. We are unable to understand the things of God. Our hearts are marked by righteousness. Where, then, is our hope? Our hope is outside of ourselves.

That's what Paul has been saying these last three chapters. Our tendency is to look to ourselves to find a solution. Maybe we don't want to bother other people. Maybe we don't want to admit we need help. Maybe we think we can handle the problem, but Paul wants you to know that will not work. The law can't save you, Paul says. Your actions can't save you. Your only hope is outside of yourself.

Paul tells us, and he's going to tell us in much more detail in weeks to come, that our hope is Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who by his life and death paid the penalty for our sins. We no longer need to answer the charge. We don't even need to try to disprove it. We can acknowledge that it is true, that we are guilty, but the debt has been paid. The penalty has been satisfied in Christ. Because of Jesus' work, we have a new heart that no longer shows itself in wicked words, wicked actions. It is a work in progress.

Jesus has sent his Spirit to work in us. You cannot seek God. You cannot understand God's ways by yourself, but through the power of the Holy Spirit and the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, God has sought *you* in Christ. Will you trust in him today? That's where your hope lies. As black as sin is, grace is more powerful. As hopeless as the estate of the sinner is, there is every hope found in Jesus. Paul wants us to know we are hopeless by ourselves not so we wallow in our hopelessness but so we give up ourselves and seek Jesus. That is the hope of every person on earth.