

Shut Yer Mouth!

Romans 3:9-20

June 11, 2017

Introduction:

Parenting is one so those grand adventures in life that takes you through many seasons. For example, when you kids are really young, and just beginning to learn how to walk and talk, you can't wait for them to say their first word. I still remember when Savannah was a little less than a year old and while we were visiting some friends of ours, she pointed at their pet and uttered the word, "Doggie." We were just thrilled as every parent is when you hear your child speak for the first time.

Fast-forward to a few years later and you're taking a road trip with you kids and after a few hours down the road, Dad looks back in the rear-view mirror and says, "Hey kids, how about we play the quiet game? Whoever can stay perfectly quiet for the longest will win a prize." Have you ever needed to play the quiet game with your kids? The thrill of hearing them say their first word has long worn off and you just wish God had installed an on/off switch on them, or at least at volume control knob.

Then you reach the teenage years where your kids can really test the boundaries of your patience with their words. For example, you tell them they need to be home at a certain time yet they're late or there is some chore they need to do but then it doesn't get done and when you confront them about it, it's one excuse and complaint after another. Oh what fun it is to argue with your teenage daughter! So if you're like me, it doesn't take me long to get to the point where in exasperation I say, "Enough! I don't want to hear any more excuses. Shut yer mouth. We're done."

In our passage today, we're going to find that God wants to silence the lips of all who, like a teenager, would try to make excuses for their disobedience. As we draw this first major section of Romans to a close, Paul's point is to demonstrate that we all, both Jews and Gentiles, are without excuse and therefore there is no room for complaint, excuses, or negotiation before God. As a result, Paul is effectively saying, "Shut yer mouth! You are guilty for violating God's law and as a result God is absolutely just to punish you in his wrath for your sinful disobedience."

Won't you please join me in seeing how Paul lays this out for us by opening your Bibles to Romans 3. If you need a Bible to follow along in - and I would highly recommend that you do so because I want you to see where I'm drawing my points from - you can use one of the pew Bibles where you should be able to find this morning's passage on pg. 940. In particular, we will be focusing on v. 9-20 of Romans 3, which we'll read first in its entirety and then afterward we'll examine it part by part so we grasp the important teaching it has for us. So then, please follow along as I read, starting at v. 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."

Ever since the middle of chapter 1, the apostle Paul has been making a case for why God's wrath is being revealed against mankind. Much of chapter 1 dealt with the case of humanity in general and the Gentiles in particular who had the revelation of God given to them through nature but nevertheless didn't give God the honor or thanks he deserved. Then in chapter 2, Paul turned his gaze towards the Jews, pointedly reminding them that even though they possessed the law and had been chosen as God's covenant people, they still disobeyed the law and sinned just as the Gentiles had. Now we come to the conclusion of what Paul has been saying throughout the first few chapters. Our passage today sums up the point Paul's been making and sets the stage for how Christ saves us from God's wrath.

So then, I have four points to make that sum up what Paul wants us to understand in these verses and the first of those is this:

1. We are guilty as charged: All have sinned

First off, look at v. 9 with me once again. **"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..."** Throughout chapter 2 and into chapter 3, Paul has been addressing the Jews in order to demonstrate their guilt under the law. The Jews thought they would escape God's judgment because to them came the law and the covenants. While that did give them an advantage over the Gentiles who did not possess them, it still didn't help them avoid sin. If I might recall to your mind an illustration I used last week, in regards to a class that needed to pass a final exam but only a portion of the class received the study guide. Those who had the study guide and knew exactly what the teacher was going to test them on - did they have an advantage over those who missed class that day? Of course! But if they didn't study it, then it was of no benefit

to them. They were no better off having the study guide they didn't look at than those who didn't have it at all. In the end, both failed the test.

That's the idea here when Paul asks, "**Are we Jews any better off?**" Did having the law help them? Did it make them more righteous and lead them into obedience? "**No, not at all,**" Paul says. It didn't do them any good because they didn't obey it. They fared no better than the Gentiles who didn't have the law: either way, they both sinned. So Paul goes on to say, "**For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin...**"

The reason the law didn't help the Jew is because they, like the Gentiles, "**are under sin.**" This is the first of many places throughout Romans where Paul speaks of sin not merely as something we do but as a power that we're subjected to. Elsewhere Paul speaks of us being "enslaved" to sin, calling sin our "master," and saying that we're in bondage to it. It's important for us to recognize that mankind is not morally neutral. It's not as if in our decisions we stand at a fork in the road, with one road labeled "sin" and the other road labeled "righteousness" and we objectively weigh our options, equally free to choose one path as well as the other. Our desires are bent inward and away from God. When at the fork in the road, we'll take the path of sin over righteousness because we want to. Our desires compel us to choose disobedience over obedience. We always do that which we desire the most and our natural state as unregenerate men and women is to desire sin over righteousness, so we will always choose sin. We're enslaved to sinful desires that lead inevitably to sinful choices.

This is why the Law didn't help the Jews: it didn't change their desires. Going back to our example about the final exam: if none of the students desire to study for the test, it doesn't matter if one student has a study guide and the other didn't. The teacher could just as well hand out a sheet with all the exam answers filled in for them, but if they don't want to study it, it won't matter. What is needed then, and what Paul is leading us up to, is we need the power of sin broken in us. God has to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, because without God changing our heart and liberating us from the enslaving power of sin, we can never come to him.

So we are all under sin and have failed to obey the law of God. And in case anyone questions Paul's teaching here, he then fires off in machine gun style a litany of Scripture passages to prove that his teaching is in agreement with what the OT says. It's as if Paul is saying, "Doubt me? Do you think I'm teaching something new here about our sinfulness? Then consider what God's Word says about us."

We can group these verses into three clusters. The first cluster contains passages that demonstrate the universal sinfulness of all people. Look at v. 10-12 with me in your Bibles. He says, "**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.'**"

Now we might be tempted to object at this point and say, "Now wait just a minute. I know lots of people who do good, even if they aren't Christians. How can anyone

really say “**no one does good, not even one.**” I’m don’t know if I can agree with such a pessimistic picture.”

The problem with this objection is that true righteousness is more than merely outward actions. What truly makes a good work virtuous in God’s eyes is that it’s done out of faith in and love for him. Paul will say later on in Romans that “whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.” So if you’re unbeliever, you can’t do anything good because you can’t do anything in faith because you have none. You may do good things for other reasons, but those reasons are always self-serving and not out of genuine love and trust in God, and thus they are sinful. Good deeds must be also have the right motive in order for them to be truly good.

C. H. Spurgeon often told the following story to help illustrate this point,

“Once in a kingdom long ago there was a gardener who grew an enormous carrot. He took it to his king and said, “My lord, this is the greatest carrot I’ve ever grown or ever will grow; therefore, I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.” The king was touched and discerned the man’s heart, so as he turned to go, the king said, “You are clearly a good steward of the earth. I want to give a plot of land to you freely as a gift, so you can garden it all.” The gardener was amazed and delighted and went home rejoicing.

But there was a nobleman at the king’s court who overheard all this, and he said, “If that is what you get for a carrot, what would I get if I give the king something better?” The next day the nobleman came before the king, and he was leading a handsome black stallion. He bowed low and said, “My lord, I breed horses, and this is the greatest horse I’ve ever bred; therefore, I want to present it to you as a token of my love and respect for you.” But the king discerned his heart and said, “Thank you,” and took the horse and simply dismissed him.

The nobleman was perplexed, so the king said, “Let me explain. That gardener was giving me the carrot, but you were giving yourself the horse.”¹

So that’s what good works are without faith and love for God: they are done for us and our benefit, and thus aren’t God-honoring but rather sinful. So then, Scripture says none of us have done the good God requires of us. All our good deeds are really evil deeds, selfish deeds, if they aren’t motivated by a genuine love for God. This is then fleshed out in terms of how we speak. Look now at the next cluster of verse regarding the use of our words, starting at v. 13. **“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.”**

The overflow of our hearts spills out of our mouths. Words are so easy to speak and therefore so easy to lead us into sin. I don’t think I need to prove to any of you just how true this is for all of us.

Then the final cluster of verses concern the results of our slavery to sin. Look back in your Bibles at v. 15-18. **“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.”**

We have a long and inglorious history as a race of murder and war, of ruin and misery brought about by our sin. Rather than fearing God and submitting to his Word, we’ve all gone our own way, seeking after glory, honor, riches, and fame for ourselves. This is a true in secular history as it is of Jewish history. The OT is full of stories that these verses describe. Even God’s covenant people were not immune. The brutal reality of sin is true of everyone, men and women, Jew and Gentile, young and old alike.

Having presented his case, now Paul makes his final summary in v. 19-20. I have three points I want us to see from this, but they’ll move much quicker than our first point. So our next point - point number 2 - is this:

2. The law speaks to all those under the law

Look back in your Bibles with me now to just the first half of v. 19. **“Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law...”** Paul is primarily referring to the law in terms of the Mosaic Law, given to the Jews. He just got done quoting rapid-fire from Scripture and the whole focus of his argument since the start of chapter 2 was to demonstrate that the Jews, even though they possessed the law, we’re guilty of breaking the law and thus were still under God’s wrath. So he’s saying in effect: the Jews don’t sit above the law by virtue of having been given the law. They are under the law in that they have to obey it as much as anyone else.

Back in the Roman world, there was a famous Latin phrase called “Rex Lex.” If any of you have ever taken Latin you should easily be able to translate it, but for those of you who didn’t have such an opportunity, it means “The king is law.” It was once understood that kings and emperors made the laws but were not themselves subject to those laws: they were above the law. The Jews needed to understand that possessing the law of God didn’t free them from being under its commands; they weren’t above the law. What the law said, it said to them, and they were responsible to obey it.

But we need to remember the law had come to the Gentiles as well, just not the written Law of Moses, but rather the law written on their hearts, their consciences. As way of reminder, look back at v. 14-15 of chapter 2. Paul said this about the Gentiles,

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them...”

So then, everyone is under the law. The Jews have the written Law of Moses and the Gentiles have the law written on their hearts and so all are **“under the law”** they have

been given and yet, all have failed to do what the law has said. So then, that brings us to our third point...

3. **Since we are all under the law, no one can claim ignorance or innocence**

Look back at v. 19 once again, but this time we'll read it all the way through to the end of the verse. **“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.”**

The imagery here of every mouth being stopped comes from a courtroom where a defendant has no response to the charges brought against him or her. The evidence is so clear, so compelling, so undeniable that the accused simply has nothing to say. So the image here, as one commentator puts it, “is of all humanity standing before God, accountable to him for willful and inexcusable violations of his will, awaiting the sentence of condemnation that their actions deserve.”²

Since everyone knows what they should have done - whether they became aware of it through Scripture or from their own conscience - but haven't done what they knew that should have, there is no excuse. No one will be able to plead ignorance - that they didn't know better; and no one will be able to claim innocence - that they never disobeyed the law of God. When God calls humanity to judgment, nobody will be raising any objections. The accusation against us for our sin will be unanswerable. Every mouth will be silenced because our guilt will be clear and inexcusable.

We need to let this reality sink deep into our minds. We are all accountable to God and because we've all violated the law God has given to us, we all stand guilty. There will be no exceptions. You are guilty for sin. I am guilty for sin. Your parents are guilty. Your Sunday school teacher is guilty. That nice elderly lady who lives across the street from you is guilty. All your friends at school are guilty. Every man, woman, and child living in Mexico and France and Egypt and Brazil and New Zealand and everywhere else on this planet is guilty. Paul says **“every mouth”** will be stopped. Not some, not most... every mouth. He says **“the whole world”** is held accountable to God. Not just those living in Muslim countries or secular Western countries or third world countries. The whole world: that's everyone who is living, has lived, and is yet to live. All stand under the righteous wrath of God for their sin and not one of them will utter the slightest word of defense on that day God calls us to account. Every mouth will be silenced as we will all recognize the just wrath of God is what we rightfully deserve for our sin.

Since this is the case, let me give you word of advice: get right with God now. Deal with your sin, cry out to him in repentance, look to him for mercy and forgiveness right now because you will not be able to do so on the last day. The final judgment is where God says in effect, “Shut yer mouth!” and only he will be speaking, either saying “Enter into your rest” or “Depart from me.” That day is coming and the time for talking and boasting and making excuses will come to a sudden end. So don't wait. Don't put it off. The time to speak to God words of confession and repentance is today because such an opportunity will have passed once you die and stand before his righteous throne.

Well, there's one more point we need to make it and it serves as the final capstone on everything Paul has been saying. In light of all this talk about the law and God's wrath against us, Paul closes this section of Romans by drawing this conclusion...

4. **Therefore, no one can be justified by means of the law because the law only reveals sin**

Look back in your Bibles at v. 20. Paul says, **“For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”** Having been a devout Jew himself, Paul knows the heart of his Jewish brethren. He knew they thought that obedience to the law was the means to be justified in the eyes of God because Paul himself once ran that race. When describing his former self in his letter to the Philippians, Paul said “as to righteousness under the law” he was “blameless.” Paul pursued perfect obedience to the law only to discover that he couldn't keep it. Even he, the Pharisee of Pharisees, fell short.

But this isn't just a Jewish problem. Ask any person this question: “If you died today and were standing outside the gates of Heaven and God asked you, ‘Why should I let you in?’ what would you say?” You will commonly hear something to the effect that God should let me in because I was a good person. I didn't cheat on my spouse or my taxes, I treated others with respect, I was hard-working, and I never murder anyone. In short, the person is saying, you should grant me eternal life because of what I did.

But that answer is flat-out wrong. When Paul says **“no one can be justified by means of the law”** he is saying salvation can never come by our good works. There is no amount of good deeds one can do to earn heaven. If that is what you're relying on as your admission ticket into heaven, you will be denied entry. It is invalid. So let me read this again - in fact, look back in your Bible so you see it. Paul says, **“For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight...”** No one. None. You will never please God by your works. You can never appease God's holy wrath against you by having your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds.

But why? Why is obedience to the law ineffective to justify us in God's sight? Well, besides the obvious fact that we've all failed to keep it perfectly, the other answer is that the law was never meant to save anyone to begin with. That wasn't its purpose. What does the second half of v. 20 say as to why no one will be justified by works of the law? It says this: **“...since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”**

All the law was ever meant to do is show us that we were sinners. The law makes us aware that we sin; it was never meant to be a means by which we could check off all the boxes and claim, “God, give me what I've earned.” The Ten Commandments are there to show us what God expects of us and thereby show us how far short we've fallen from doing his will.

I remember a long time ago I learned a little acronym that helped me to keep in mind what Paul is teaching here and it uses the letters S.O.S. The term is used at seas as a distress call and so it's very fitting because we're all in distress because of our sin. So

how it goes is this: the law (S.O.S.) shows our sins but the gospel (S.O.S.) shows our Savior. That's exactly what Paul is telling us here at the end of v. 20. **"Through the law comes knowledge of sin."** We read the commandments and all the things God says throughout Scripture in regards to our thought and words and behavior towards other and as we read them we're to reflect on ourselves and come to the realization that, "I haven't done that as I should have. My words were hardly what God said they should be in that passage. My thoughts have been less than pure and loving towards my co-worker. I've sinned in all kinds of ways."

That's the purpose of the law: not to be a do-it-yourself manual to earn heaven but to show us how desperately we need to be saved. The Jews were misusing it and so Paul needs to correct them. But even today, we still misuse it because we so often think that we can merit heaven by our good deeds. But nothing can be further from the truth. The law can only show us our sin, sins that have not earned us heaven but rather only the wrath of God.

Conclusion

So with that, Paul is set up to reveal to us the answer to our problem. Paul started this section by saying the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men and now that we've come to the end of the section, we're no better off than we were when we began. Paul has laid out his case that God's wrath is due to everyone without exception because we're all guilty. Everyone stands under the righteous wrath of God for our sin and there is nothing we can do to escape it. Not our nationality, nor our ancestry, nor our ignorance, nor any supposed amount of good works we can muster can serve to excuse us or earn us God's favor. All are justly under God's wrath for our ungodliness and unrighteousness.

So who can rescue us from the wrath of God? If we can't, if we are totally unable to save ourselves, who will do it on our behalf? Thanks be to God for Jesus Christ our Lord! Come back next week and we'll learn how God did for us what we could not do for ourselves by sending us his Son to suffer God's wrath in our place, so that by faith in him, and not by our own works, could we be made righteous in his sight. Until then, let's close our time with a word of prayer. Let's pray.

Endnotes

1. Keller, Timothy. Romans 1-7 For You. The Good Book Company: 2014
2. Moo, Douglas. NICNT; The Epistle to the Romans. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, 1996.

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