

The Whole World Condemned

📖 Romans 3:9-20

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Today will not be a popular sermon in modern Christian culture where the popular message is that you're alright and I'm alright so let's just overlook sin. Joel Osteen, Rick Warren and all the other mega-church pastors would never preach this sermon because they want to grow big numbers and you can't grow big numbers by preaching the Bible. You can only grow big numbers by preaching Satanism.

This is Paul's frightening conclusion to the first major division of Romans; condemnation. That's a terrible word, especially when the verdict is issued by God. To be guilty of failing to live up to an obligation and thus sentenced to an eternal separation from God has been Paul's subject from Romans 1:18-3:21. I truly wish the chapter divisions set by Stephen Langton when he was a professor in Paris, France in the early 13th century AD,¹ would have set them between 1:18 and 3:21. Even though that would make it a very long chapter, it would consolidate the section as having one primary theme; the just condemnation of every man, Jew and Gentile. 1:18-32 shows that pagan Gentiles are condemned because they had the crystal clear revelation of God through creation and yet they did not acknowledge Him as God or give thanks, but became futile in their speculations. They failed to live up to the light of God in creation and are therefore condemned. 2:1-16 shows that moral Gentiles are condemned because they had crystal clear revelation of God through conscience and yet they did not live up to their conscience but condemned others when they did the same. They failed to live up to the light of God in conscience and are therefore condemned. 2:17-3:8 shows that Jews are condemned because they had the crystal clear revelation of God through the canon and circumcision and yet they did not live up to the canon or the true intent of circumcision. They failed to live up to the light of God and are therefore equally condemned.

Three things are critical to glean from this section before we move to Paul's conclusion. The revelation of God is multifaceted, clear and undeniable. First, by multifaceted I mean revelation of God comes through the four facets of creation, conscience, the canon of Scripture and circumcision. And while not all men receive all four facets of revelation each is an independent and sufficient means of condemnation. If a man only has creation then that is sufficient to condemn him forever. Yet no man

only has creation, all men also have conscience. Therefore all men are condemned at least on the basis of creation and conscience. The Jew also had the canon and circumcision and so this only adds to his condemnation. Second, by clear I mean the revelation of God through these four facets is flawless. If you have ever seen a diamond with flawless clarity you have seen by analogy the kind of clarity with which each man sees God. Creation, though fallen, still provides a flawless revelation of God. This means that even the ambiguities that have been introduced into creation through the Fall are themselves revelations of God. The conscience, though fallen, still provides a flawless revelation of God. This means that even though people's consciences are informed by culture and education they have still not at all eradicated the conscience's self-condemnation. We could go on but the point is that the revelation of God through all four facets is flawless. Third, by undeniable I mean that the knowledge of God attained through any of these four facets will be undeniable before God in His court. Any and all of these four facets make all men without exception liable to God's judgment. Therefore no mouth will be open at the judgment. Every mouth will be closed and a disturbing silence will overwhelm the court as the God of all wisdom and majesty pronounces the perfectly just verdict of condemnation.

For Paul's conclusion in 3:9-20 we come to one of the most penetrating and frightening sections of all Scripture. It tells each and every one of us who we really are in the depths of our being apart from the mercy of God. You may rebel against this section. You may say this is not who I was apart from the mercy of God. The picture could not be this dark. And yet you would be lying to yourself and further contributing to the darkness. The section also explains all the world's problems in a nutshell. According to this section what is the most basic problem in the world from which every other problem stems? Some argue that the problem is the environment and that if only our environment was better, then the world would not be such a terrible place filled with famine. Others argue that the problem is the government and if we didn't have government to solve our problems then we would be much better off. Others argue that the problem is religion and if we didn't have all the religions then the world would enjoy peace. Paul argues that there is one problem that is the source of all these other problems. Man. That man is terrible and if left to himself he will remain terrible.

There are two words that provide the overwhelming emphasis in these verses. Scan the verses. What are they? "None" and "all". In verse 10 there are how many righteous? "None". In verse 11 there are how many who understand? "None". How many who seek God? "None". In verse 12, how many who do good? "None". Four times it is stated there are "none". Twice it is emended by the phrase "not even one." In verse 9 how many are sinners? "All". In verse 12 how many have turned aside? "All". In verse 19 how many mouths are closed? "Every". How many are accountable to God? "All". The expressions "all sinners" and "none righteous" sum up God's indictment against the entire human race. McClain says, "This section sums up all that has gone before, in order that Paul may bring the whole world to the judgment bar of God and leave them standing there—trembling and silent!"²

The picture Paul paints by the language used is of a courtroom. We are being invited to enter into God's courtroom at the final judgment, what is known in Rev 20:11-15 as the Great White Throne Judgment. In every courtroom there are four elements in the case and here we see all four elements. First, the charge, verse 9 is the charge, second, the indictment, verses 10-18 are the indictment, third, the defense; the defense is verse 19 and fourth, the verdict and the verdict is verse 20.

Transitioning to the courtroom in Romans 3:9, Paul asks, **What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin.** This is the charge and it is a charge leveled at **both Jews and Greeks**, the two basic divisions of the condemned human race. You will note that the Church is not present because though the Church is composed of **both Jews and Greeks**, the Church is not condemned along with Jews and Greeks because we have the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to our account through faith alone in Him. However, left to ourselves, apart from Christ we would be condemned with them.

The expression **what then?** (*τι ουν*) is used eleven times by Paul in the Book of Romans (3:1, 9; 4:1; 6:1, 15; 7:7; 8:31; 9:14, 19, 30; 11:7). Paul uses it to raise a question about what he has just taught in order to clarify. **What then** the Jews asked ask, meaning, "What are you saying Paul? **Are we better than they?** Are we Jews better than Gentiles? However, the original Greek does not say this. The original Greek translated "are we better than they" is one word, *προεχομεθα*. The word troubles translators because it comes from a word that refers to "a shield" that one might hold to protect himself. What are the Jews asking Paul? "Are we shielded?" Shielded from what? From the wrath of God. The Jew considered the Law a shield that protected him from the wrath of God. But Paul did away with that shield. The Jew considered circumcision a shield that protected him from the wrath of God. But Paul did away with that shield too. The Jew then used argument to shield him from the wrath of God but Paul refuted the argument. So now that Paul has removed all the things the Jew considered a shield that protected him from the wrath of God he is asking, "Are we shielded?" It is a desperate question. Paul's answer is devastating. **Not at all.** With those words, for the first time in the Jew's life, he comes face to face with the terrifying realization that he is standing before God completely naked and subject to the wrath of God. Why? Because Paul says, **we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin.** Here the Jew is put in the same boat with the Greek. He is **under sin** as the Greek is **under sin**. Where has Paul **already** made this **charge**? In 1:18-3:8. Whether by creation and conscience, which all Greeks had or by the addition of the canon of Scripture and circumcision, which all Jews had, none lived up to the flawless revelation of God. Therefore the startling realization is that they **are all under sin.**

The expression **under sin** is critical to understand. In the Greek it is *υφ αμαρτιαν*. The *υφ* is the preposition meaning "beneath" or "under." *Αμαρτιαν* is the accusative noun referring to "a destructive evil power." Paul is saying that all men are under a destructive evil power. When the preposition under

is with the accusative it is “a marker of that which is in a controlling position.” “Paul thinks of sin almost in personal terms...” as a ruling despot that controls all his subjects. His picture is that Jews and Greeks are under the power, controlling influence and domination of sin. They are thus in bondage to sin and obligated to sin as the Hebrews in Egypt were held in bondage and obligated to Pharaoh. They are slaves to sin which is their master and they can do nothing other than obey their master. This is a grave situation indeed.

For another passage that gives the same picture turn to Galatians 3:22. Here is the exact same expression, *υπο αμαρτιαν*, and we noted when we taught Galatians that the theme of Galatians and Romans parallel to a large extent, though Romans goes beyond the scope of Galatians. In Gal 3:22 what does Paul say that parallels Romans 3:9? “But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin.” It’s the same phrase, *υπο αμαρτιαν*, “under sin,” again meaning everyone is under the power, controlling influence and dominion of sin. This is how we are conceived in our mother’s womb. Conceived under the control and dominating influence of sin, our master, whom we serve willingly and we will continue to perfect our skills at living sinfully if our course is not interrupted by the grace and mercy of God.

Turn back to Romans 3:9. The charge is complete. What is the charge? That both Jews and Greeks are all under the master of sin whom they obey willingly. Can those who are sinners be admitted into fellowship with God? No. God is Holy and can have nothing to do with sin in any respect.

Romans 3:10 turns to the indictment to give evidence that the charge is in fact true. There are fourteen counts in the indictment. They all come from where? The OT. This is, as a point of fact, simply a sampling showing that man is under sin. The most thorough picture can be gleaned only by reading the full contexts of the six passages quoted here; Ps 14:1-3; Ps 5:9; Ps 140:3; Ps 10:7; Isa 59:7ff and Ps 36:1. The first passage cited in Rom 3:10-12 is Ps 14:1-3.

There are six counts in this section. Each is a condemnation of man because of his depraved *character*. The first count against man’s depraved character is he is not **RIGHTEOUS**. “**THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE**. The Greek word for **RIGHTEOUS** (*δικαιος*) means “to be in accordance with high standards of rectitude, *upright, just fair*.”³ Contextually the high standards refer to the character of God. His character is the standard for what is right. No one conforms to the character of God. The slang in our language for this quality is “genuine, excellent.”⁴ There is none excellent, no not one. Turn to Eccl 7:20 to get the sense of what God requires and see if there is even one who meets this criteria. “Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who *continually* does good and who never sins.” Is there anyone who continually does good and never sins? This is what God requires of man. He does not require a relative righteousness, relative to other men. He is not looking at men as they compare with other men. He is looking at men as they compare to Himself. When looked at from this standpoint there is **NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE**.

The second count against man's character is in verse 11, **THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS**. The word **UNDERSTANDS** (*συνιημι*) means "to have an intelligent grasp of something that challenges one's thinking or practice, *understand, comprehend*."⁵ The word really refers to a failure to detect or see the significance of something. No one has seen the significance of God. They know Him through creation and conscience and the Law but they do not see the significance of Him. Luke 18:34 provides a good example of failing to see the significance of something. Jesus, after explaining to the twelve what was going to happen to Him at Jerusalem; handed over to the Gentiles, mocked, mistreated, spit upon, scourged and killed only to be raised the third day, and the text says, "But the disciples understood none of these things, and *the meaning of this statement was hidden from them, and they did not comprehend the things that were said.*" Just because you hear something does not mean that you grasp the meaning or significance of what was said. In the same way, there is not one human who ever grasped the meaning or significance of God. **THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS**.

This is due in part to the third count, **THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD**; perhaps if men did seek for God they might in fact come to realize His significance. The word **SEEKS** (*εκζητεω*) means "to exert effort to find out or learn something, *seek out, search for*." Prefixed by the preposition *εκ* makes it the intensive form of the verb. We would say there are none who diligently seek for God. There are passages which use the non-intensive form by way of command, such as "seek the LORD." Therefore, there may be some who seek for God with a curiosity but there are none who seek for Him diligently, even though God has made Himself readily available so that man would (Acts 17:27). God may be a point of interest for some but there are none who exert effort to find Him out. C. Gordon Olson recognizes the distinction between seek and diligently seek and seeks to resolve the tension by saying that Paul here "is giving a generalized statement about the human race as a whole...not intended to be all-inclusive."⁶ This statement is unbelievable to the student who actually reads this text. How many times must Paul say "none," "not even one" to convey that he does intend it to be "all-inclusive?" Olson may be correct in saying that people sometimes seek God as a curiosity, but his analysis of this verse is off the mark. Tom Constable's reconciliation seems better when he says, "The statement that "there is none who seeks after God" (v. 11) means that no one seeks God without God prompting him or her to do so (cf. John 6:44-46)."⁷ I would agree essentially. I think that there is no one who diligently seeks God, though there are those who for curiosity sake do seek Him. So if a person is diligently seeking Him it is because God is drawing him to Himself through the Spirit of God working in conjunction with the word of God. Left to themselves no one seeks for Him.

The fourth count against man's character is in Romans 3:12, **ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE**. The word **TURNED ASIDE** (*εκκλινω*) means "to keep away from, *steer clear of*." It's not that they are not confronted with Him always and everywhere, but that they do all they can to steer clear of Him. It's a turning away from engaging God and His interests. I think it is fascinating how clearly this word explains what often

happens when we try to talk to people about God. When they immediately turn you off and get quiet or show no interest you are seeing them turn aside. They don't enjoy talking about Him and they have other interests above him. Therefore they steer clear of Him. God says **ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE**. Therefore if someone does not turn aside then it is because God is actively drawing him to Himself. Left to themselves they will continually turn aside.

The fifth count against man's character is **TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS**. The word **TOGETHER** means that as a whole, the mass of humanity, **THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS**. The word **USELESS** (*ακρειω*) means "a liability to society, because of moral depravity, *become depraved, worthless*." God did not create them to be a liability to society but due to their sin they **HAVE BECOME** a liability. The reason we do not see all unbelievers this way is because we have never seen the kind of society God originally intended. If we were to see that kind of society we would agree with God that they are an extreme liability. They have become corrupt and worthless for any good. Your entire politics should be informed by this section of Scripture. Andy Woods says that the fundamental difference between conservatism and liberalism is your view of man. Man is fundamentally evil. We are not progressing toward a utopia; we are descending into a dystopia. **TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS**.

The sixth count against man's character is in verse 12, **THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE**. This is a grave report of humanity. The word **GOOD** (*χρηστοτης*) means "uprightness in one's relations with others, *uprightness*" or "quality of being helpful or beneficial, *kindness*." As with none righteous, no not one, so with none who does good. God is not looking at men as compared with other men. From that vantage point some men look good and others evil. God doesn't look that way. He looks at men as compared to Himself. When looked at from that standpoint **THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD**, and to get the point across he adds the amplifier, **THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE**. Friend, if you think this analysis by God is wrong you are deceived terribly. Interestingly, the word is that used of God in 2:4 of His giving men time to repent and of Christ in Eph 2:7 in His redemptive grace toward us and of what we are to put on as those saved by His grace in Col 3:12 and as a fruit of the Spirit in Gal 5:22. This goodness is not something anyone of us intrinsically is. It is something that God is and is produced in this world exclusively by God. If there is one ounce of goodness in this world it is from God. This is a most humbling notion. Left to ourselves, **THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE**.

There are your first six counts. They all come from Ps 14:1-3 and each is a condemnation of man because of his depraved *character*.

There is none righteous, not even one

There is none who understands

There is none who seeks for God

All have turned aside

together they have become useless

There is none who does good, There is not even one

Let these things weigh heavy on your heart because they are the impetus for us giving thanks to God for His mercy toward us, they are the incentive for us to continually live by grace and they are the motive for us to give the gospel to others that they may be freed from the shackles of sin.

The seventh count is in verse 13. Along with verse 14 it is a condemnation of man because of his depraved *speech*. Verse 13 is a quote from Ps 5:9. It is a condemnation of depraved speech. **THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE**. What comes out of an open grave? The stench of a dead corpse. What comes out of their mouth? Filth. Where does that which comes out of the mouth stem? From within them. Within them they are dead spiritually and therefore **THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE**. Be careful around them lest you stumble and fall into the path of their open grave and are swallowed up a victim of their filth. James says we must learn to control the tongue and that it is a vile evil and an enigma and that if we can bridle it we can bridle the whole body as well. May we strive not trip into the open grave of the world's filthy speech. It condemns them. It would not be consistent for us to follow in their footsteps.

The eighth count is also a condemnation of man's depraved speech, **WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING**. The verb is in the imperfect, **THEY KEEP DECEIVING**, meaning they deceive and deceive and deceive, one deception leads to another in a string of deceptions. Their entire lives are characterized by deceptive speech. The verb is never used elsewhere but the noun refers to the use of the tongue to take advantage through craft and underhanded methods. They may speak nicely to you while craftily taking advantage of you. Paul means the world is not at all trustworthy.

The ninth count is another condemnation of man's depraved speech. **THE POISON OF ASPES IS UNDER THEIR LIPS**. The **POISON** of an **ASP** is stored in a small bag under their lips. It cannot be seen but it can be felt. They may speak nicely many times but they may suddenly bite back with poison. When they do the speech is deadly.

The tenth count is in verse 14 and rounds out condemnation of man because of his depraved speech. **WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS**. The verb **FULL** indicates not that the mouth is always pouring forth profanity and animosity, but that his mouth is full of it, in the sense that it could come forth in a stream of profanity if the man let it. A man may never let it but it is there nonetheless and that is Paul's point. Sometimes a person will hold it in all his life and then when he is older a stream of profanity will suddenly stream forth. It was there all along. This is one of the most poignant commentaries on the depravity of man as God sees us.

There are your second four counts for a total of ten. They come from Ps 5:9; 140:3 and 10:7. Each is a condemnation of man because of his depraved *speech*.

Their throat is an open grave

With their tongues they keep deceiving

The poison of asps is under their lips

Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness

Man can neither master his character or his speech. We are corrupt and sin is our master, unless the grace and mercy of God rescues us from this dark domain.

Verses 15-17 continues with a string of four final indictments. It comes from Isa 59:7-8. Each is a condemnation of man because of his depraved *conduct*. The eleventh overall count against man, verse 15, **THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD**. The reference to shedding of blood is murder; the unlawful destruction of the image of God due to a welling up of hatred which cannot be restrained. The fact that their feet are used as synecdoche for the rapidity of movement toward murder demonstrates their inability to control themselves.

Verse 16, the twelfth count, **DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS**. Wherever they go, whatever they do, there is nothing but wretchedness and misery left behind.

Verse 17, **AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN**. They talk about peace, but they want peace on their terms not God's terms. Jesus Christ is God's terms. He is our Peace, He is our Path, apart from Him there is no peace and the path is to destruction.

Verse 18, **THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES**. In the end they live as if God is not there. This may be a summary of all that has gone before. Instead of living in reverential respect of Him whom they very well know through creation and conscience in the least they suppress the truth in unrighteousness and plummet into mental derangement, moral decay and idolatrous worship.

That is an awful picture of the human race! We are depraved in character, what we are, depraved in speech, what we say, and depraved in conduct, what we do. "In all that man is, in all that he says, in all that he does, there is the taint of depravity and sin." This list does not mean that every man manifests these things or does these things to the same extent, but rather that every man is depraved. The doctrine of depravity is defined by Ryrie as to what it is and as what it is not. "Depravity...does not mean that people cannot or do not perform actions that are good in man's...sight; nor does it mean that sinful man has no conscience to judge between good and evil for himself; nor that people indulge in every form of sin or even in any particular sin to the greatest extent possible. But depravity does mean that because man's entire being has been corrupted he can never do anything that would merit

saving favor with God.”⁸ There is no aspect of our being not tainted and corrupted by sin. Paul’s point is that consequently man has nothing in himself that can commend himself to God. He has no merit. If the story is set out here then it would be a very dark picture indeed.

Verse 19 is man’s defense. Every accused man is given the opportunity to defend himself in a court of law. Verse 19 is that defense. His defense is to say nothing! **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;** the man is given an opportunity to defend himself only in order to avoid a possible mistake. In this case God has made the charges. He makes no mistakes. Therefore there will be no defense in that day. Bertrand Russell said that he would one day argue to God that there was not enough evidence. He will not make that argument. No one will make an argument. The Day of Judgment for every unbeliever will not be a day when everyone is making their argument. It will be a day that is completely silent except for the accusations of God. One voice will be heard in that day and it will be the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ, since all judgment has been given to Him. They will be free to talk but they will not talk because they will know they are guilty.

Verse 20, the verdict is pronounced. **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 is not referring to the Mosaic Law here, he does not use the definite article as elsewhere. He is referring to law in general. No flesh will be justified in God’s sight by works. You may be justified in man’s sight but no one will be justified in His sight. All that Law does is reveal sin. That is the purpose of Law, to reveal sin. If you have heard what Paul has said for the first three chapters you will say something like this right now, “I know that I am a sinner.” If you have said that then you have said what God wants you to say.

Paul has accomplished what he set out to do; have every man lost and condemned and standing silent before God and trembling. As dark as this picture is I hope that you allow it to penetrate your heart or at least three reasons. First, to increase your compassion for the lost. Your compassion for the lost is only proportional to your realization of how lost you were without Him. If you think that you were not really that lost then you will not have much compassion for others who are lost. Second, to increase your gratitude to God. Your gratitude to God for salvation is only proportional to your realization of the depth of depravity from which He has saved you. If you think you helped Him save you, that you were cooperating in your salvation then you will not have the depth of gratitude that someone who realizes that God alone is the author of salvation. Third, to increase your dependence upon Him. Your dependence now is only proportional to your recognition of weakness and inability apart from Him. If you think that you can live the Christian life without Him then you will not learn to depend upon Him. Jesus said, apart from Me you can do nothing. It is not about you and Jesus doing it together, it is about

you depending on Him and Him doing it through you. These are very different outlooks. Which one are you trying to live by?

Now we are ready for salvation and for the incomprehensible grace of God toward us in 3:21-5:21; God has reached down and paved a way for us to be with Him through His Son Jesus Christ. He provides a righteousness to us through faith. The tunnel of darkness has come to an end and there is found the light of salvation.

¹ <http://www.roger-pearse.com/weblog/2013/06/21/stephen-langton-and-the-modern-chapter-divisions-of-the-bible/>

² Alva McClain, *Romans: The Gospel of God's Grace*, p 92.

³ Entry for *δικαιος*. Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

⁴ Cf Merriam-Webster, Inc. *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003.

⁵ Entry for *συνιημι*. Arndt, William, Frederick W. Danker, and Walter Bauer. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

⁶ C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism*, p 103.

⁷ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ro 3:10.

⁸ Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, p 323.