

# The Verdict

## Romans 3:9-20

**Series:** Romans 2022: Righteousness from God – Yay!

**Preaching Date:** February 27, 2022

**Worship:** Hope in Darkness

**Key Sentence:** The evidence of Scripture and experience is that all have sinned.

**Outline:**

I. All are under sin. (Romans 3:9-12)

II. All are sinful in every part (Romans 3:13-18)

III. All are accountable to God (Romans 3:19-20)

**Romans 3:9–20** 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, <sup>10</sup>as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; <sup>11</sup>no one understands; no one seeks for God. <sup>12</sup>All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

<sup>13</sup>“Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.” <sup>14</sup>“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” <sup>15</sup>“Their feet are swift to shed blood; <sup>16</sup>in their paths are ruin and misery, <sup>17</sup>and the way of peace they have not known.” <sup>18</sup>“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

<sup>19</sup>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. <sup>20</sup>For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

## The Verdict Romans 3:9-20

All have sinned. This is the conclusion Paul has been working toward in Romans for nearly two chapters. Today he'll wrap up the argument by supporting it from the Old Testament. But we don't need Paul to prove this to us. A few minutes on the internet, a few minutes with a newspaper will glaringly show the depth of the sin that pervades our culture, as it has every human culture in history.

On Monday I googled "Houston crime." The first hit showed the Chronicles's crime page with these headlines: "Family of Arlene Alvarez calls for an end to gun violence against Houston's children. 9-year-old gunned down during Houston robbery is among several children killed on Houston streets in recent weeks." "One person dead, another hurt in shootings near downtown." "Authorities find human remains in northwest Houston. Authorities found human remains in a wooded area of northwest Houston Friday as they were searching for the body of a 35-year-old man who was reported missing late last month." "A 19-year-old boy has been accused in the death of an 11-year-old boy who was fatally shot earlier this month at a northeast Harris County apartment complex." "A Houston couple was indicted on charges of capital murder Thursday in connection with the March 2021 death of an 8-year-old boy, according to the Harris County District Attorney."

I googled "Robbery Friendswood," and though older, there was no shortage. The best was "Friendswood Police search for suspects in Ace Hardware chainsaw robbery." Contrary to how it sounds, this wasn't a robbery committed with chainsaws as weapons, but a robbery of chainsaws. Another headline read "Suspect accused of Friendswood robbery crime spree. Friendswood Police are breathing a sigh of relief after getting Jose Luis Perez off the streets. Perez is accused of committing multiple armed robberies in the Friendswood area." On a larger scale I keep thinking of the Boy Scouts. At this point over 100,000 people have come forward claiming sexual abuse in Boy Scouting. Almost all that abuse was by adult leaders. The average age of the victims was twelve.

Then, of course, there is war. Just this week Russia has began a "special military action" against the neighboring country of Ukraine, and once again innocent people are under the lash of modern warfare. The BBC reported that between 169,000 and 190,000 Russian troops are stationed along Ukraine's border, both in Russia and neighboring Belarus. Boris Johnson, the UK Prime Minister said that this would be the biggest war in Europe since 1945.

Does this prove that “all have sinned.” No. But it does remind us that human sin is pervasive. No day passes when human sin is not the most dominant force in human events. What rarely makes the news is all the sin that occurs in almost every family and almost every workplace. Not abuse necessarily or violence, but anger and manipulation, sexual infidelity and pornography, plus plain and simple selfishness, looking out for ourselves rather than others. Add to that the many times when we know that God would have us do some positive good and we don’t do it. The theory that all have sinned seems all too plausible.

Paul has been telling us that since Romans 1:18. To complete his argument he provides a long list of quotes from the Old Testament. What we’re seeing today is that the evidence of Scripture and experience is that all have sinned. Our outline says first that “all are under sin” (Romans 3:9-12). Then we learn that “we are sinful in every part” (Romans 3:13-18). Finally, we learn that as a result of this sin, “all are held accountable to God” (Romans 3:19-20).

Let’s begin with Romans 3:9–12 *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, <sup>10</sup>as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; <sup>11</sup>no one understands; no one seeks for God. <sup>12</sup>All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”*

The translation of verse 9 requires a judgment call. The Greek simply says “What then? Are we better off?” Most translations just go with that. But it leaves us wondering who the “we” is. Recall that the chapter began by asking what advantage the Jews had. “Much in every way.” But in terms of being judged for their sin, the Jews have no advantage, despite having the word of God and the covenant of circumcision. So in context the English Standard Version is probably right to have Paul saying “Are we Jews any better off?” No, he says, for “we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.”

Douglas Moo says “We have, then, in this statement, Paul’s own comment on his purpose in this section of his letter. All people who have not experienced the righteousness of God by faith are ‘under sin’: that is, they are helpless captives to its power. Nothing that Paul has said suggests that there are exceptions to this rule, and nothing shows more clearly the desperate need for the message of the gospel. For the problem with people is not just that they commit sins; their problem is that they are enslaved to sin.” As Jesus said, “everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.” What is needed, therefore, is a new power to break in and set people free from sin—a power found in, and only in, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the good news that follows this section.

Now, in verse 10, Paul begins to substantiate this truth with quotations from the Old Testament. The first part of verse 10 is the general heading “As it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one.” This begins a series of phrases from Psalm 14, verses 1-3, “The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good. <sup>2</sup>The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. <sup>3</sup>They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.”

The Psalm says “there is none who does good, not even one.” Paul says “None is righteous, no, not one.” It seems like a pretty big difference, between doing good and being righteous, but Paul probably makes the substitution for two good reasons. First, though it sounds like a big difference, the two categories, “none who does good,” and “none who is righteous” overlap by pretty much 100%. Second, righteous is Paul’s big word in Romans. We’ve heard him talk about God’s judgment of unrighteousness, and his revelation of a righteousness that comes from him. Paul has every reason to use that word in his summary. He does use the phrase “no one does good” in verse 12.

The psalmist pictures God looking down from heaven to see if there are any who understand, who retain enough conscience and enough consciousness of God to seek after him. But no one does. Paul said this in chapter 1: “although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” Verse 11: “no one understands; no one seeks for God.” This doesn’t mean people aren’t religious, but means people’s religion is human centered and idolatrous. Again, chapter 1: “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.” And if we continue to follow the path laid out in chapter 1, this ultimately leads to the things we saw in the Monday’s news headlines: “evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup>slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, <sup>31</sup>foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.”

Therefore, Paul concludes, quoting Psalm 14 almost exactly “All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.” Don’t take Paul or the Psalmist wrong. It’s not that people don’t do some good some of the time, it’s that they don’t do all good all the time. The basic attitude of their heart is “turned aside” from God. This is the summary not only of these verses but of everything from 1:18 to this point. All have sinned. There is none righteous, no not one.

If you were to gather the 100 greatest statesmen of all time and examine their lives and their hearts, you would find sin in all of them. If you were to gather the 100 greatest philanthropists of all time, you would find selfishness and sin in all of them. If you were to gather the 100 most faithful and devoted Christians of all time, you would find sin that all of them had sinned. The difference would be that the believers had received the free gift of forgiveness from God.

With a quote from Psalm 14, which is also paralleled in Psalm 53, Paul has shown that the teaching of the Old Testament confirms the universality of human sin. But he's not ready to stop yet, and we don't want him to. In verses 13-18 he shows from Scripture that we are sinful in every part. *"Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive."* *"The venom of asps is under their lips."* <sup>14</sup>*"Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness."* <sup>15</sup>*"Their feet are swift to shed blood;* <sup>16</sup>*in their paths are ruin and misery,* <sup>17</sup>*and the way of peace they have not known."* <sup>18</sup>*"There is no fear of God before their eyes."*

The list begins with the organs of speech in the sequence of speech: throat, tongue, lips, mouth. "Their throat is an open grave." This phrase and the next are from Psalm 5 verse 9: "For there is no truth in their mouth; their inmost self is destruction; their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue." The speech of those without God is like a mass grave, full of rotting bodies under a hot sun. That's how devastating our words are to others. Yet even those who have never robbed, murdered, or committed adultery have said hurtful, angry, condemning things. Many make this kind of speech their common practice. "They use their tongues to deceive," Paul says. We've all known people who were good at spinning a story, sounding sincere, convincing us their words were true, but not keeping them. In Crisis Response the classic example is the contractor who says "Yea, I can repair your house for \$10,000, but I'll need it up front to buy materials. Then you never see them again. This sin goes all the way up to world leaders and all the way down to people in your own family.

The last phrase in verse 13, "The venom of asps is under their lips" is from Psalm 140, another Psalm of David describing evil people "They make their tongue sharp as a serpent's, and under their lips is the venom of asps." This is an apt description of the poison that seems to enter our veins when we are lied to and deceived or mocked and belittled. Just as poison works by destroying vital tissues, condemnation works by destroying vital self-understandings. "So-and-so must be right. I am ugly. I am slow. I am stupid. I'm no good." Words like that from people who ought to be protecting us are life devastating.

Verse 14: “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” Again, from the Psalms, Psalm 10:7, describing the wicked person, “His mouth is filled with cursing and deceit and oppression; under his tongue are mischief and iniquity.” Whenever I talk about these “tongue” sections of Scripture I think of the time I parked in the Walmart parking lot and when I opened the door heard a string of curses and yelling, a woman berating someone in the most foul language. When I looked over I saw a large, unattractive woman leaning over a five or six year old girl, squeezing her arm and unloading this poison. To my shame I didn’t say anything, but it is that kind of cruelty that condemns humankind.

We all remember what James said “So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire! <sup>6</sup>And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. <sup>7</sup>For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, <sup>8</sup>but no person can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” Jesus said it too, and in his characteristic way took it further within to the heart. In Matthew 15:10 he said “Hear and understand: <sup>11</sup>it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.” And a few verses later he explained “Are you also still without understanding? <sup>17</sup>Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? <sup>18</sup>But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. <sup>19</sup>For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.” Our tongues and their sins are a reflection of the corruption of our hearts. A Russian poet named Turgenev said this perfectly “I don’t know what the heart of a bad man is like, but I do know what the heart of a good man is like and it is terrible.” Let me read that again “I don’t know what the heart of a bad man is like, but I do know what the heart of a good man is like and it is terrible.”

But even there Paul doesn’t stop, though we might be begging him to. He goes on in the next verses to give what R. Kent Hughes says could be a condensed history of the world. Verse 15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood; <sup>16</sup>in their paths are ruin and misery, <sup>17</sup>and the way of peace they have not known.” This is a quote from Isaiah 59, although once again Paul is using the Greek version rather than the Hebrew, so it won’t read exactly the same in our Bibles. But the thrust is the same “Their feet are swift to shed blood.” Notice that Paul switches from the mouth to the feet, from words to ways. And the history of the world affirms violence as the trademark of humankind, affirms ruin and misery, affirms, verse 17, that people do not know or follow the way of peace.

Whether we are talking about war on the national level, the tribal level, the gang wars in our cities, or the relational wars in our families, violence has been the continuous fruit of the fall since Cain murdered Abel. The latest is the war in Ukraine. It's a fascinating country. Tremendously rich in resources, mineral, agricultural and industrial, it has been the focus of wars for centuries. In 1920 the people of the Ukraine, seeking to be a separate Soviet state, were brutally crushed by the Red Army. In the 1930's Stalin attempted to feed Russia on the backs of the Ukrainians, leading to the Holodomor, the death-by-famine of seven to ten million people. In 1941 Hitler invaded the Soviet Union and overran Ukraine. Originally hailed as liberators, the Germans soon showed themselves as brutal as the Soviets, killing and starving millions of Ukrainians, including an estimated 1.5 million Jews. Ukrainian was turned against Ukrainian, as Germany recruited Jew and Soviet hating Ukrainians to terrorize their country. After the war Ukraine was again a puppet state of Russia. Is it any wonder then, that Ukraine sought independence after the collapse of communism? Yet regions on the Russian border continued to engage in violent separatist movement that have provided part of the excuse for Putin to bomb and invade the whole country.

And that's just one small, small portrait of one episode in the violent and deadly history of the world. As R. Kent Hughes says, "Man's depravity is seen in his rush to violence." He quotes Will Durant's famous conclusion in his *Lessons From History* that "In the last 3,421 years of recorded history only 268 have seen no war." I'm sure though, that if you count tribal and gang conflict, even those 268 years were filled with violence. And there have been no years without violence and the shedding of innocent blood since Durant wrote.

Why is this? Murder is abhorrent to most people. We have that law written on our hearts. Yet time after time people have justified the de-humanization of other people and groups so that violence becomes not only thinkable but embraced. It's still happening today and the increasing polarization in Western culture is not a good sign. It's as if there is something drastically broken in the make up of human nature. Oh . . . there is. The reason there is no one righteous is that "There is no fear of God before their eyes," verse 18. This final quote is from Psalm 36 "Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes." The heart is corrupt and the eye, which should see God in creation and in Scripture and thus fear him and cry out to him in repentance, does not do so. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the lack of fear is the gateway to corruption, to violence, bloodshed, oppression, abuse, bitterness and harm.

Again, we wish Paul were finished. We're convinced the world is under sin. But he's got one more thing to remind us of, that all sinners are accountable to God. Verses 19-20. *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. <sup>20</sup>For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.*

Paul is using the word "law" here to refer to the list of verses we just studied. Since these quotations were from the Psalms and Isaiah, "law" doesn't mean the law of Moses, but is all the teaching of the Old Testament. Paul's point is that anyone who is taught the Scripture hearing these verses, would have to take them seriously. God himself accuses each person individually of being under sin, shown guilty by the words they have uttered, the acts they have done and by the rebellion and selfishness of their heart. This applies to both Jews and Gentiles. The actual Scriptures quoted in verses 10 to 12 were explicitly addressed to the whole world, while many of the verses quoted in 13-17 were addressed to the Gentile enemies of the Jews, and the final verse, 18, is applied in Scripture both to Jews and to Gentiles. So this accusation is universal.

The purpose of this convicting Scriptural testimony, Paul says, is "that every mouth might be stopped and the whole world be held accountable to God." The vocabulary, Douglas Moo says, is that of the courtroom. "Shutting the mouth" refers to the defendant who has no more to say in response to the charges brought against him or her. The Greek word translated "accountable" occurs nowhere else in the Scriptures, but is used in extrabiblical Greek to mean "answerable to" or "liable to prosecution." Paul pictures God both as the one offended and as the judge who weighs the evidence and pronounces the verdict. The image, then, is of all humanity standing before God, accountable to him for willful and inexcusable violations of his will, but with nothing to say, awaiting the sentence of condemnation that their actions deserve.

Verse 20: "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." Paul has already proved his point, but he goes back to repeat an important element. You can't be declared righteous by obeying the law, either the law of Moses, the larger behavioral burden of the Scriptures, or the law written in your heart. Perfect good works would justify you. Paul has already said that. But now he has shown that nobody does perfect good works. Furthermore future good works do not erase the sin you've already done and do not balance the sin you've already done. In fact, Paul says, the law, in all its aspects is primarily for pointing out the sin you do do. Through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

Well folks, I think we've made it. Beginning in Romans 1:18 we've processed bad news for Gentiles, bad news for Jews, the fact that none of our excuses is valid, and the fact that Scripture and experience prove that all have sinned. I'm going to be out of the pulpit for the next two Sundays, but when we come back, we'll finally look directly at the good news, that we are "justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."

We've talked today about many sins. Some of them we may resonate with, for example, the behavior of our tongues. Some of them are unthinkable to us, war and bloody violence. But I want to close with a thought from Jackie Hill Perry's relatively new book about God's holiness. She says "The soil from which all sin grows is unbelief. We sin because it is our nature to do so, but it's not as if we always sin unintentionally, like depraved robots without the ability to behave according to reason. We are thoughtful with our rebellion. There is a level of reasoning within us when we decide which golden calf we'll love on any given day. With that said, the foundation of our idolatry, the sin begetting all others, is a specific belief about God. Our perverse sexual ethics, wild tongue, religious superiority, dark thoughts, legalistic posture, mean ways, impatient moods, greedy antics, intellectual arrogance, and rebellious tendencies come out of what we believe about the living God. We do one or all of the above when we have made the decision not to believe, trust, acknowledge, or depend on who God has revealed Himself to be."

Do you see that? We sin when we don't trust God as he has revealed himself to be. The reason God can judge us is because he is holy, he is perfect, he is good, he is always right. We sin when we don't believe his righteousness makes a difference, or that he is really as pure as he claims to be. We sin when we place our perceived needs and ways of getting them met above his promises. We sin when we refuse to put our creator first and ourselves second.

But God is bigger than our disbelief. God has provided a way out of our sins, if we will believe. God has shown utter and overwhelming righteousness by making us right in his sight, punishing our sins in Jesus and fulfilling every definition of justice. We sin when we choose not to believe, trust, acknowledge or depend on who God has revealed himself to be. And all have sinned. But we are saved when we choose to believe, trust, acknowledge and depend on God as revealed in the saving sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's the good news for all of us who are the all who have sinned.