

The Cross of Christ, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 2: The Problem of Sin: Why We Needed Redeeming

Romans 3:9–23

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

The doctrine at stake in this lesson is the biblical doctrine of sin, and how thoroughly the class grasps it will shape how deeply they treasure everything that follows in the study. Romans 3:9–23 is Paul's sweeping verdict on the human race: all are under sin, none is righteous, every mouth is stopped, and all fall short of the glory of God. Your task is to let this verdict stand at full strength. The temptation, both for the teacher and the class, is to soften it, to leave room for the respectable person to feel exempt. Paul allows no such room. He deliberately indicts the religious and the irreligious together, because both stand in equal need of the cross.

Guard against two errors as you teach. The first is the comfortable error of comparison, in which a person measures himself against others he considers worse and concludes that he is fine. Paul measures us against the glory of God, and by that measure all fall short. The second error is the Calvinistic overstatement that treats human beings as so totally depraved that they are incapable of responding to God at all. That is not what this text teaches. Sin reaches the whole person and leaves no one righteous, yet Paul will spend this very letter calling people to hear, believe, and obey the gospel. Human beings are deeply sinful and genuinely accountable, which means they are genuinely able to respond to God's call. Hold both truths: the problem is universal and serious, and the gospel call is real and answerable.

Yet this passage was never meant to leave people crushed. It was written to silence excuses so that grace could be received. The formational aim this week is not to manufacture shame but to produce the kind of honesty that runs to Christ. The people most overwhelmed by the cross are those who have stopped pretending they are basically fine. Lead the class to feel the weight of their need, and then point unmistakably to verse 24, where the same sentence that condemns gives way to the redemption in Christ Jesus. Send them home not in despair but in deepened gratitude.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul concludes that "all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin" and that "none is righteous, no, not one" (vv. 9–10). Why does Paul insist there is no distinction, and what is he establishing about the universal reach of sin before he ever mentions the cross?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by setting the verdict in its place in Paul's argument. He has already shown in chapters 1 and 2 that the openly sinful pagan and the respectable, law-keeping religious person are both guilty before God. Now he gathers the whole case into a single charge: all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin. The phrase under sin pictures sin as a power that holds the whole human race captive, not merely a series of isolated wrong choices.

Press the words none and not one. Paul could hardly be more absolute. He is deliberately closing every exit, every way a person might try to place himself outside the indictment. There is no distinction, he insists, because the problem is not a matter of background, religion, or relative decency. It reaches every one of us at the same depth.

Help the class see why Paul establishes this before he says a word about the cross. The gospel is a rescue, and a rescue only makes sense to those who know they are in danger. If even one person could stand outside this verdict, that person would not truly need Christ. By leveling all of humanity onto the same ground, Paul prepares every listener to receive grace on the same terms.

Connect this to the consistent teaching of Scripture that all have sinned and that there is none who does good. This is not Paul inventing a harsh doctrine; he is quoting the Psalms and the Prophets. The universal need of humanity is the settled testimony of the whole Bible, and it is the necessary backdrop to the universal offer of the cross.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The universality of sin: all people, religious and irreligious alike, are under its power (Romans 3:9; 3:23)
- Sin as both individual acts and a condition that holds the whole race captive
- The leveling of all humanity before God, so that no one stands outside the need for grace
- The consistency of this verdict with the whole testimony of Scripture (Psalm 14; 53)
- Genuine accountability before God, against the idea that anyone is exempt by background or merit

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul insist there is no distinction between the religious and the irreligious here?
- How does establishing the universal problem of sin prepare us to receive the universal offer of the cross?
- Where do we still try to find exceptions to this verdict, in ourselves or in others?

Question 2

Student Question:

When you examine your own heart honestly, where are you most tempted to think of yourself as an exception, as basically a good person who only occasionally slips? What does this passage say to that quiet sense of being the exception?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question targets the most common defense the human heart raises against Romans 3: the sense of being the exception. Almost everyone agrees in the abstract that people are sinners; the difficulty is applying it to oneself. We tend to grade on a curve, comparing ourselves to those we consider worse and quietly concluding that we are basically fine.

Help students see what comparison actually does. It changes the standard. Paul does not measure us against the worst person we can think of; he measures us against the glory of God. By that standard the gap is not a matter of degree but of kind. The comfort we take from being better than someone else is a false comfort, because that was never the measure.

Be a gentle but honest pastor here. The goal is not to bully people into feeling worthless, but to dismantle the pride that keeps us from grace. Ironically, the person who insists he is basically good cannot be deeply grateful for the cross, because he does not believe he needed much. The honest sinner, by contrast, becomes the joyful worshiper. Invite students to let this passage, rather than the curve, tell them the truth, and to discover that this honesty is the doorway to joy, not despair.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of measuring ourselves by comparison to others rather than by God's standard
- Pride and self-justification as barriers to receiving grace (Luke 18:9–14)
- Honest self-knowledge as the doorway to gratitude, not despair
- The connection between a small sense of sin and a small sense of the cross

Discussion Prompts

- Whom do you tend to compare yourself to in order to feel like a good person?
- How does changing the standard from other people to the glory of God change the picture?
- Why does the person most honest about sin often become the most joyful about grace?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul piles up Old Testament quotations describing throats, tongues, lips, feet, and eyes (vv. 13–18). What is he teaching about how deep and how total the problem of sin is, that it touches the whole person rather than just our worst moments?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul now moves from the verdict to a kind of anatomy of sin, quoting a chain of Old Testament texts that move through the body: the throat, the tongue, the lips, the mouth, the feet, and the eyes. This is a deliberate literary picture. Sin is not localized in one organ or one bad habit; it has corrupted the whole person, from the words we speak to the paths we walk to the way we see the world.

Linger on a few of the images. The throat is an open grave, a picture of words that bring death rather than life. The feet are swift to shed blood, a picture of how readily we harm others. Under their lips is the venom of asps, a picture of speech that poisons. Paul is showing that sin is not merely occasional misbehavior but a pervasive condition that touches every faculty God gave us.

Help the class avoid two mistakes. One is to read this as describing only the very worst criminals; Paul applies it to all of us, including the respectable. The other is to read it as teaching that human beings are incapable of any good at all. The point is comprehensiveness, that no part of us is untouched by sin, not that no part of us can ever do anything decent. Even our best deeds are stained, as Isaiah says, by the same corruption.

Bring it home by noticing how much of the list concerns the tongue and our words. Sin is profoundly relational and verbal; it does much of its damage through speech. This will matter pastorally, because most people in the class will recognize themselves more readily in deceitful or bitter words than in dramatic crimes.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The pervasiveness of sin, touching the whole person rather than one isolated area
- The prominence of the tongue and our words in the biblical account of sin (James 3:1–12)
- Sin as both an inner condition and an outward practice
- The corruption of even our best deeds apart from God (Isaiah 64:6)
- The seriousness of sin against neighbor, not only against God

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul describe sin moving through the whole body rather than naming one bad deed?
- Why do you think so much of this list concerns our speech?
- How does seeing sin as a whole-person condition change the way we fight it?

Question 4

Student Question:

Which of the specific sins Paul lists, deceit, bitterness, harsh words, restless feet, or “no fear of God before their eyes,” do you most need to take seriously in your own life right now, and why is it tempting to overlook?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns the anatomy of sin inward and asks each student to apply it personally. Paul's list is uncomfortably specific: deceit, bitterness, harsh and cursing words, feet swift to harm, restless discontent, and the absence of the fear of God. The aim is not to wallow but to let one or two of these land honestly.

Notice that the most respectable sins in the list are often the most overlooked. Few in your class will identify with shedding blood, but many will recognize bitterness they have nursed, words they have used as weapons, or a deceit they have justified as harmless. These quieter sins do real damage, and they are no less named here than the dramatic ones.

Encourage specificity without inviting public confession of private matters. The goal is for each person to leave with one concrete area of honesty, one place where they stop excusing and start bringing the sin to God. Remind them that naming a sin is not the same as being defeated by it; it is the first step toward letting the cross deal with it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The importance of honest, specific self-examination (Psalm 139:23–24)
- The danger of overlooking respectable sins such as bitterness and harsh words
- Confession as agreeing with God about specific sin (1 John 1:9)
- The difference between naming sin to deal with it and being condemned by it

Discussion Prompts

- Which sin in Paul's list do you most need to take seriously right now?
- Why are the respectable sins, like bitterness or deceit, so easy to overlook?
- What is one specific area where you will stop excusing and start bringing it to God?

Question 5

Student Question:

Verse 18 names the root of the whole list: "There is no fear of God before their eyes." How is the loss of the fear of God the source from which the other sins flow, and what does this teach us about the true nature of sin as something done first against God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul ends his catalog of sins with a line that functions as the root of all the rest: there is no fear of God before their eyes. This is not the last item on a list of equal items; it is the spring from which the others flow. When God is no longer kept before our eyes, when his holiness and presence fade from view, every other sin becomes easier to commit.

Clarify what the fear of God means, because the phrase is often misunderstood. It is not cringing terror, but a deep reverence and awe, a living awareness that God is holy, that he sees, and that we will answer to him. Such fear is the beginning of wisdom. Its loss is the beginning of folly, because a person who forgets that God is watching will do in private what he would never do if he remembered.

Help the class see that this makes sin first and foremost an offense against God. David, after a sin that harmed many people, could still say to God, against you, you only, have I sinned. Every sin has a horizontal dimension that wounds our neighbor, but its deepest dimension is vertical. We sin against the God who made us and loves us, and forgetting him is what makes it possible.

This vertical understanding of sin sets up the entire study. If sin were only harm to neighbor, the cross would be unnecessary; we could simply make amends. But because sin is first against God, only God can deal with it, and he does so at the cross. The loss of the fear of God is the problem; the restored relationship with God is the solution the cross provides.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The fear of God as reverent awe, the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 1:7; 9:10)
- The loss of the fear of God as the root from which other sins flow
- Sin as first and foremost an offense against God (Psalm 51:4)
- The vertical dimension of sin requiring a divine, not merely human, remedy
- The connection between a high view of God and a serious view of sin

Discussion Prompts

- What does the fear of God actually mean, and what does it not mean?
- How does losing sight of God's presence make every other sin easier?
- Why does it matter that sin is first an offense against God and not only against people?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where has a low view of God, a forgetting of his holiness and his presence, quietly made it easier for you to excuse sin in your own life? What would change if the fear of God were more real to you day by day?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question follows directly from the previous one, asking students to trace the connection between a low view of God and an easy conscience about sin. When God shrinks in our imagination, sin shrinks too. We excuse what we would never excuse if we remembered who he is.

Invite students to consider how this happens practically. We crowd God out with busyness and noise; we let our picture of him grow vague and distant; we treat him as a benign presence who does not much mind how we live. In that fog, compromise becomes easy. The remedy is not to whip up fear but to recover a true and vivid sense of God, his holiness, his nearness, his love, and his right to our obedience.

Move toward something concrete. Ask how each person might keep the reality of God more consistently before their eyes this week, perhaps through Scripture, prayer, or simply the habit of remembering his presence in moments of temptation. The fear of God is not restored by trying harder to be afraid, but by drawing near to him until he becomes real to us again.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The link between a diminished view of God and a casual attitude toward sin
- Recovering the reality of God's presence as a guard against temptation (Genesis 39:9)
- The practice of living before the face of God in daily life
- Reverence as something nourished by drawing near, not manufactured by effort

Discussion Prompts

- Where has a vague or distant picture of God made compromise easier for you?
- What practices help keep the reality of God before your eyes day by day?
- How is the fear of God restored, according to Scripture, by drawing near rather than by trying to be afraid?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul says the law speaks "so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God" (v. 19). Why must every excuse be silenced before the gospel can be good news, and how does honest accountability before God actually prepare us to receive grace?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul now states the purpose of the whole indictment: that every mouth may be stopped and the whole world held accountable to God. The image is courtroom finality. When the evidence is overwhelming, the defendant has nothing left to say. Every excuse, every plea of relative innocence, every comparison to others falls silent.

Help the class see that this silence is not cruelty but mercy in disguise. As long as we are still arguing our case, still insisting we are basically fine, we cannot receive grace, because grace is for the guilty, not the self-justified. The stopped mouth is the prerequisite for the open hand. Only the person who has run out of excuses is ready to receive a gift.

This is why the gospel is good news precisely for those who feel the bad news. The proud person who never stops talking in his own defense remains outside grace, not because grace is unavailable, but because his hands are too full of his own arguments to receive it. The humbled person, with mouth stopped, is exactly the one Christ came to save.

Connect this to the larger pattern of conversion. Genuine repentance begins where self-justification ends. When we stop defending ourselves and simply agree with God about our need, we are finally in a position to hear and obey the gospel. The stopped mouth and the obedient heart go together.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The purpose of the law to silence excuses and establish accountability (Romans 3:19–20)
- Self-justification as the chief barrier to receiving grace (Luke 16:15)
- Repentance as beginning where self-defense ends
- Grace as a gift that only empty hands can receive
- Accountability before God as the necessary backdrop to the gospel

Discussion Prompts

- Why must every excuse be silenced before grace can be received?
- How is a stopped mouth actually a mercy rather than a defeat?
- What does it look like in practice to stop defending ourselves and agree with God?

Question 8

Student Question:

Be honest about the excuses you tend to offer for your own sin, blaming circumstances, comparing yourself to others, or minimizing the damage. What would it look like this week to let your mouth be stopped and simply agree with God about your need?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the matter of excuses into personal practice. We are remarkably creative in defending our sin: we blame our circumstances, our upbringing, the people who provoked us; we compare ourselves favorably to others; we minimize the damage by telling ourselves no one was really hurt. Each of these keeps our mouth open in our own defense.

Help students recognize their own characteristic excuses, since we each tend to have a favorite. Naming the excuse robs it of its power. The point is not to grovel but to come into the clear honesty that allows grace to flow. As long as a sin is half-excused, it cannot be fully confessed or fully healed.

Aim at one concrete practice for the week: choosing a single area where the student will stop the excuse and simply agree with God. This is the practical shape of letting your mouth be

stopped. Assure them that this honesty is safe, because the God before whom every mouth is stopped is the same God who, in the very next verse, offers redemption as a gift in Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The varieties of self-excuse: blaming circumstances, comparison, minimizing
- Honest confession as the path to cleansing (1 John 1:8-9)
- Agreeing with God about sin as the heart of repentance
- The safety of honesty before a God who offers grace in the same breath

Discussion Prompts

- What is your most common way of excusing your own sin?
- How does naming an excuse begin to rob it of its power?
- What is one area this week where you will stop excusing and simply agree with God?

Question 9

Student Question:

Everything in this passage builds toward verse 23: "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Explain what it means that sin is both something we do and a condition we share, why no amount of human effort or religious performance can bridge that gap, and how this universal verdict prepares the way for the redemption Paul announces in the very next verse. Why is it crucial that we feel the weight of this before we hear about the cross?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, gathering the whole passage into its climactic statement: all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Walk the class carefully through both halves. Have sinned points to things we have done, actual acts of rebellion and failure. Fall short points to a continuing condition, a present inability to reach the standard for which we were made. Sin is therefore both deed and state, both what we do and what we are apart from grace.

Unpack the phrase fall short of the glory of God. The word pictures an arrow falling short of the target or a runner failing to reach the finish. Human beings were created for the glory of God, to reflect his character and dwell in his presence, and sin means we cannot reach that glory on our own. No amount of moral effort closes the gap, because the gap is not merely behavioral but a matter of our standing before a holy God. Religious performance, sincerity, and self-improvement all fall short by definition, because they are our works, and the problem is precisely that our works cannot reach his glory.

Make the universal nature of the verdict unmistakable. All have sinned leaves out no one: not the moral, not the religious, not the lifelong church member. This is the great leveler, and it is

also the great equalizer of grace, because the same all that have sinned is offered the same redemption in Christ. Be careful, however, not to overstate this into the Calvinistic notion that fallen people are incapable of responding to God. Paul writes the entire letter to summon people to an obedient faith; the verdict establishes universal need and universal accountability, not universal inability to answer the gospel call.

Now show the class the hinge. Verse 23 does not stand alone; it flows directly into verse 24: justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. The sentence that diagnoses the disease introduces the cure in the same breath. This is the structure of the entire study. We feel the weight of sin not to remain there, but so that the redemption announced at the cross will strike us as the wonder it truly is.

Emphasize why feeling the weight matters. A patient who does not believe he is sick will not value the cure. A person who thinks his sin is minor will think the cross is optional. But the one who has stood under Romans 3 and felt the full force of all have sinned will fall to his knees at all are justified by his grace as a gift. The bad news is the dark backdrop against which the diamond of grace shines.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin as both act (have sinned) and condition (fall short), the universal human reality (Romans 3:23)
- Falling short of the glory of God as an inability no human effort or religion can overcome
- The impossibility of bridging the gap by works, sincerity, or moral improvement (Ephesians 2:8-9)
- Universal sin establishing universal need and accountability, not Calvinistic total inability to respond
- Verse 23 flowing directly into verse 24: the diagnosis introduces the redemption in Christ as a gift

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between sin as something we do and sin as a condition we share?
- Why can no amount of effort or religion bridge the gap between us and the glory of God?
- How does feeling the full weight of all have sinned prepare us to treasure all are justified by grace?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across Romans 3:9-23 as a whole. Rather than leaving you in despair, this diagnosis is meant to send you to Christ. Name one specific way seeing your own need more clearly is deepening your gratitude for the cross, and one concrete way you will respond to God this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The capstone question turns the diagnosis toward gratitude and response. Make clear that the purpose of dwelling on sin was never to leave the class in despair but to send them to Christ. The same Paul who wrote all have sinned wrote, in the next breath, of the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. A right sense of sin does not crush the believer; it makes the cross precious.

Invite each student to name one specific way that seeing their need more clearly is deepening their gratitude for the cross. For one it may be a fresh wonder that God would justify someone like them; for another, relief at finally stopping the exhausting work of self-justification; for another, a new tenderness toward fellow sinners.

Then ask for one concrete response to God this week, whether deeper confession, renewed obedience, or simple worship. For anyone in the class not yet in Christ, this is the natural moment to point gently to the gospel response that the next lessons will unfold: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, and being baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of sins. End the lesson where Paul ends his sentence, not in condemnation, but in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- A right sense of sin leading to gratitude rather than despair
- The cross as precious in proportion to our awareness of need
- The gospel response of faith, repentance, confession, and baptism for those not yet in Christ (Acts 2:38)
- Worship and renewed obedience as the fitting response to grace

Discussion Prompts

- How is seeing your need more clearly deepening your gratitude for the cross?
- Why does an honest view of sin lead to worship rather than despair?
- What is one concrete way you will respond to God this week?