

The Cross of Christ

Lesson 2: The Problem of Sin: Why We Needed Redeeming -- Romans 3:9–

23

No one likes the moment in the doctor's office when the news turns serious. We come in hoping to hear that the ache is nothing, that a little rest will fix it, that we are basically fine. We do not come in hoping for a diagnosis that requires surgery. And yet a good doctor who softens the truth to spare our feelings is not being kind; he is being dangerous. The only mercy that helps us is mercy that tells us the truth about what is wrong, because only then can the cure begin. The cross of Christ is the cure. But we will never marvel at the cure until we have heard the diagnosis, and Romans 3 is the diagnosis.

Paul has spent two chapters building his case, first against the openly pagan world, then against the respectable religious person who quietly judged everyone else. Now he brings the gavel down on all of us at once. There is no distinction, he says, for both Jew and Gentile are under sin. Then he strings together verse after verse from the Old Testament like a prosecutor reading the charges: none is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God; all have turned aside. Throats, tongues, lips, feet, and eyes all appear in the indictment. Sin is not a single bad habit tucked away in one corner of us. It runs through the whole person.

Most of us instinctively resist this. We grade ourselves on a curve, comparing our lives to people we consider worse, and we come away feeling reasonably good. We admit we are not perfect, the way we might admit to a small dent in an otherwise fine car. But Paul is not talking about dents. He is talking about a condition that reaches every one of us, the universal human reality that we have all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. The word for fall short pictures an arrow that cannot reach the target, an athlete who cannot clear the bar. We were made for the glory of God, and on our own we simply cannot get there.

This may feel like a heavy place to spend a lesson, and in one sense it is. But there is a strange kindness in it. The people who have been most overwhelmed by grace are always the ones who have first been honest about their need of it. You cannot be amazed by a rescue you never believed you needed. So read Romans 3 without flinching, and let it do its work. The bad news is the doorway to the best news in the world, because the same passage that says all have sinned is the one that goes on to announce that we are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. We have to feel the weight of the problem to treasure the wonder of the cross.

Group Discussion: We live in a culture that prefers to talk about mistakes, struggles, and brokenness rather than sin. Why do you think the word sin makes people so uncomfortable, and what is lost when we trade it for gentler words? How might naming sin honestly actually be the first step toward real hope rather than despair?

Personal Reflection: Think about how you usually measure whether you are a good person. Do you compare yourself to God's standard or to other people you consider worse? What would it mean to let this passage, rather than the curve you grade yourself on, tell you the truth about your need?

Read Romans 3:9-23

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?

6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Isaiah 64:6, all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment; Psalm 14:1–3, the Lord looks down and sees that none does good; Jeremiah 17:9, the heart is deceitful above all things; Romans 6:23, the wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life; Romans 3:24, justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption in Christ Jesus.