**THERE IS NO ONE RIGHTEOUS  
Romans 2:17–3:20**

**“*As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one’*” (3:10)**

In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he systematically lays out the gospel message. Last week, we looked at the beginning of Paul’s charge against all humanity, that we are all under God’s wrath and without excuse. The previous passage focused on Gentiles, both those who indulge in unrestrained sin and those who seek to keep a moral code and judge such undisciplined people. In today’s passage, Paul finishes his accusation of humanity as a whole, turning his attention specifically to the Jews, who had God’s law and placed their confidence in it. As we consider the final portion of Paul’s indictment, we can see all human beings, including ourselves, as under condemnation and in desperate need of the righteousness of God. Through today’s lesson, let’s think about our human condition and why we must depend fully on Christ for our salvation!

1. **You, Then, Who Teach Others (2:17–29)**

Up till this point in Paul’s argument, the Jews may have been thinking to themselves, “Yes, this is all true about Gentiles, but *we* are different.” So Paul addressed them specifically, pointing out in detail many reasons they considered themselves superior to all the Gentiles. Paul organizes these reasons into two groups of four positive traits, capping each group with the reason for them—that they have the law. Look at verses 17–18: “***Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God; 18 if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law***”. From a young age, the Jews were instructed in the law—the Old Testament scriptures. So as they were taught, they relied on the law, which we know is “*completely reliable*” (2Pe 1:19). They boasted in God, which is absolutely appropriate; Paul wrote: “*Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord*” (1Co 1:31). They knew God’s will and approved of what was superior, which are good things to do.

Look at verses 19–20: “***if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, 20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of little children, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth***”. These verses describe the attitude the Jews had toward others, and indeed that was God’s intent for the Jews: that they should guide the blind, give light to those in darkness, instruct the foolish, and teach little children. And the way they could be equipped to serve people in this way is through God’s word, which is indeed “***the embodiment of knowledge and truth***”. I believe many of us can relate to these verses, since we esteem the Bible and biblical instruction, and we value Bible teaching as an important ministry.

So what’s the problem? If the Jews are doing all these good things, why are they also under condemnation? Paul tells us in verses 21–22: “***you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? 22 You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?***” Their problem wasn’t with what they preached and taught others, but with themselves, their thoughts and actions. Even though they had the revelation of Scripture and shared it, they didn’t apply it to their own lives.

According to Matthew Henry, many of the Jewish rabbis in Paul’s time were said to have been notorious for adultery. Also in Malachi 3:9, God says to Israel, “*You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house…*” They robbed the temple of God in tithes and offerings. The reality of the Jews was evidence that merely being a Jew and having the law didn’t guarantee righteousness. Even if others didn’t sin openly or through actions, they could still actually violate these commandments in their hearts.

Look at verses 23–24: “***You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? 24 As it is written: ‘God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’***” When the Jews hypocritically broke the same law which they taught to others, they dishonored God, stealing from him the glory and honor he deserves. When the Jews were unfaithful to God, putting their trust and hope and love in other things, they were committing spiritual adultery and breaking God’s covenant with them. By placing their hope in worldly things rather than God, they were worshiping idols and robbing God.

We also should take warning from Paul’s accusation of the Jews. Many unbelievers point to hypocrisy by Christians as their reason for disbelieving. Of course this excuse won’t hold up before God, but since our purpose is to bring God glory, we must watch our lives and actions very carefully, lest our careless words and actions rob God of his glory. Also, if we direct our lives toward the things the world chases, such as success, romance, wealth, fun, and fame, more than toward God, then we declare by our actions that God is unworthy of our devotion and bring dishonor to his name.

“***You, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself?***” We, as Bible-believing Christians, having studied God’s word and heard it proclaimed, are held to a high standard—especially those of us who teach others. James 3:10b says that “*we who teach will be judged more strictly.*” So how can we teach ourselves? Through meditating on God’s word with prayer and repentance and self-denial. We should spend personal time with God through prayer, teaching ourselves by applying his word to our lives. Sincere reflection writing on a daily and weekly basis can be a great way to meditate on God’s word, responding to God’s righteous standard of truth with our confession of sin and resolution to turn from sin to God.

The Jews prided themselves not only in having the word of God, but also in their circumcision. Paul smashes this source of confidence in verses 25–27: “***Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. 26 So then, if those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? 27 The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker.***” Paul gives a radical teaching here, essentially saying that circumcised Jews can lose their Jewishness and uncircumcised Gentiles can become Jews. Circumcision was the sign of the covenant God made with Abraham. It was to be a perpetual ordinance for God’s people, a sign that they belonged to God, setting them apart from other nations. Our New Testament equivalent to circumcision is baptism, which sets us apart as followers of Christ. But Paul teaches that such external rituals can be rendered meaningless if our lives and hearts don’t match them.

Evidently, fulfilling the law and keeping its requirements didn’t mean what the Jews thought it meant—doing the outward rules and rituals. Similarly, one is not a Christian merely by outward works such as baptism, church attendance, Bible study, or other virtuous activities. Paul explains what it means to be a true member of God’s chosen people, in verses 28–29: “***A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. 29 No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a person's praise is not from other people, but from God.***” Fulfilling the law is a matter of the heart. The greatest commandment is to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Dt 6:5). This is not something that we can keep by our own efforts. It requires God’s work. God promised in Deuteronomy 30:6 that if his people returned to him, “*The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.*” God would work to remove the hard and sinful parts of their hearts, giving them new, soft, humble hearts to love him. When we repent of our sins and believe in Jesus, he gives us his Holy Spirit, who writes the law on our hearts, enabling us to love God and others. This Spirit-enabled love fulfills the law. As Paul wrote in Romans 13:10b, “*…love is the fulfillment of the law.*” Without renewing our heart by the help of the Spirit, merely outward observance of the law may be motivated by pleasing people, appearing righteous before them and receiving their praise. But one who is born of the Spirit seeks to please God alone, even when no one else approves or sees.

1. **Let God Be True (3:1–8)**

Now if, as Paul said, someone who is a Jew can become as one uncircumcised, and an uncircumcised Gentile can become a Jew, then that raises the obvious question in 3:1: “***What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?***” In this section, Paul answers this question, as well as several others—questions which Paul had encountered when he reasoned with Jews in the synagogues of each town where he ministered.

So, what advantage is there to being a Jew? Paul gives his initial answer in verse 2: “***Much in every way! First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.***” Paul answers as though he is beginning a list, but he doesn’t finish. Instead, he emphasizes the most important blessing, “***the very words of God.***” Having God’s word is a great blessing and spiritual advantage for the Jews as well as for us. God’s word teaches us who God is and who we are and why we are here. It provides guidance for a just society, teaching how to love God and love one’s neighbor. And it shows the way to be saved from our sins. God gave Israel the law not only for their own benefit, but also so that they could serve the whole world as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:6).

Paul anticipates another objection in verse 3: “***What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness?***” Will the sin of the Jewish people render ineffective God’s covenant faithfulness toward his people? Paul answers in verse 4: “***Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar. As it is written: ‘So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.’***” Paul quotes from Psalm 51:4, which reads in full, “*Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge.*” David confessed that the fact that he had sinned against God vindicated God’s judgment of David’s sin, showing God to be just in punishing him. In the same way, Israel’s unfaithfulness toward God revealed God’s righteous justice.

But Paul sensed another objection coming: “***But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.)***” (3:5). Paul clarifies that he is using someone else’s “human argument” as opposed to a scriptural argument. They argued that since God’s righteousness is revealed through man’s sin, it is unjust for God to bring wrath on sinners. Such human reasoning sounds convincing, but their conclusion that God cannot justly bring wrath on sinners contradicts Scripture, so it can’t be sound. God will surely judge the world according to his holiness and justice, so this human argument breaks down, as do also those in verses 7–8: “***Someone might argue, ‘If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?’ 8 Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—‘Let us do evil that good may result’? Their condemnation is just!***” Paul declares that anyone who twists Scripture to justify sinning is justly deserving of condemnation.

Nowadays, some people use similar human arguments, such as, “If God is love, then he won’t send anyone to hell, because that would be unloving,” or, “I can sin all I want now and repent later and still go to heaven,” or, “If God has predestined whom he will save since before creation, then it doesn’t make a difference whether or not I share the gospel.” Such reasoning to reach an unbiblical conclusion shows a desire to keeping enjoying sins and a lack of understanding of Scripture, and especially of God’s holiness, mercy, and grace. The Bible clearly teaches that we should make every effort to avoid sin and share the gospel with others, because sinners, no matter how many excuses they make, will have to answer to God for their sin, and those who don’t believe in Jesus will suffer eternal condemnation.

1. **There Is No One Righteous (3:9–20)**

Having refuted several objections, Paul returns to the main flow of his argument to conclude the case he has made that “***Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin***” (3:9), cementing the verdict with a salvo of scriptures. “***Under the power of sin***” means not just sinning occasionally, but characterized and controlled by sin. This is human nature—not basically good as some insist, but morally evil. Sin doesn’t force us to do bad things against our will, but corrupts our desires to want to do wrong. We are not innocent victims of our sinful desires, but accomplices of the evil in our hearts against God.

Let’s read verse 3:10 all together: “***As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one’***” The six verses Paul chooses from the Psalms and Isaiah prove that without exception no one is righteous; all are sinful. In the original context, some referred to Jews, and some to Gentiles, so taken together they indict all humanity. These verses also paint a vivid picture of human depravity, how sin corrupts each part of us.

Verse 3:11 proclaims, “***there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.***” Sin is primarily a broken relationship with God—a condition of opposing God’s rule. Due to sin, our minds became too darkened to understand God, and our hearts lost all desire for him. Verse 3:12 continues, “***All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.***” Willfully, we have turned away from him. Apart from God, our lives are worthless and powerless, and our best efforts at doing good fail utterly.

Next, Paul describes the speech of those under the power of sin in verses 3:13–14: “***‘Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.’ ‘The poison of vipers is on their lips.’ 14 ‘Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.’***” Our words, which were intended to praise and thank God and bring life are filled with cursing against him and others, bringing death like deadly venom. Bitter words spoken out of pride, envy, or malice inflict deep wounds.

Human sin extends beyond our words to our ways, as Paul describes in 3:15–17: “***Their feet are swift to shed blood; 16 ruin and misery mark their ways, 17 and the way of peace they do not know.***” Our natural tendency is to want to take revenge on people who sin against us. Without the restraints God has put on our sinful behavior, such as law enforcement, then we would quickly resort to bloodshed. We see this in the case of people who get unchecked power, such as dictators. Those people aren’t more evil than the average human; they merely have fewer hindrances to their sinful desires. The way of peace is forgiveness, which is utterly alien to the human heart.

The final consequence of sin Paul lists regards our eyes: “***There is no fear of God before their eyes***” (3:18). Fear of God is essentially revering God and caring about what he thinks such that we don’t provoke him with our sins. But when human eyes scan around before committing a sin, they don’t bother to look up toward heaven. People don’t naturally care about offending God, and will do what they can get away with as far as other people are concerned. Proverbs 9:10 teaches that “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*”, so in our natural, godless state we cannot even approach wisdom.

Scripture’s portrait of humankind is grim, depicting total moral bankruptcy. In last week’s sermon, Spencer mentioned Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son, who despised his father to go off on his own. He ended up in the filth of his own poor decisions, dirty and starving, even envying the slop the pigs ate. By nature, every human’s spiritual condition is of one who despises our heavenly Father to seek satisfaction, security, or righteousness apart from him and ends up just like the foolish son in the parable—filthy, miserable, and ruined.

If this depravity is the human condition, does that mean that the law failed? If the purpose of the law was to produce righteousness, then it’s a complete failure, for there is no one righteous. But what does Paul say is the law’s purpose? Look at verses 3:19–20: “***Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. 20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.***” If the Jews, who had the law and the greatest confluence of moral and spiritual advantages, failed to attain righteousness by the works of the law, then no one will; every mouth will be silenced before God’s judgment. No one will be able to say anything in their own defense. The purpose of the law is to make us aware of sin—not just of what actions are sins, but of our own utter sinfulness. The law shows us our inability to do what is right or escape judgment by our own efforts and reveals our desperate need for a Savior.

Growing up in a Christian home, I lived a relatively moral life. Though sometimes I was aware of specific sins I committed, I didn’t have much sense of my sinfulness. Looking back, however, my mouth was full of boasting and dirty jokes, my righteousness was seeking praise from other people, and my life direction was self-seeking, chasing after fun rather than Jesus. I thank God for the work of his Spirit in my life through Bible study to circumcise my heart and enable me to love God. Now that God has appointed me a Bible teacher and messenger, I must continually teach myself as well. God’s standard is holiness, as he is holy, so in order to teach others, I should flee hypocrisy through repentance and obedience, and strive to bear the image of Christ by the help of the Spirit through teaching myself from God’s Law, the Bible.

The ultimate purpose of the Law is to point us to Jesus. Jesus alone fulfilled both the letter and the spirit of the Law, loving his Father wholeheartedly and obeying all God’s commands blamelessly, even to the cross. Jesus offers to take away our unrighteousness and give us in return his flawless righteousness, so that we can be considered as law-keepers in God’s sight. If we turn from our sins, spurning the idols of this world, and forsake every effort to be earn righteousness apart from Christ, then he gives us his Holy Spirit to dwell within us. The Spirit circumcises our hearts, enabling us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength and to love our neighbors as ourselves in obedience to God’s commands. So let us admit to God our sinfulness and inability to keep the law. May we depend completely on the righteousness of Christ by faith and the working of his Spirit within our hearts. Then we will truly be able to teach others from the word of God and shine the light of Christ to those in darkness.