

## ROMANS SERIES #10

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on Sunday, January 21, 1996, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

### ROMANS 3:1-20

#### GOD'S FINAL VERDICT

Today we turn to the last 20 verses of the first major division of Romans, in which the Apostle make his closing arguments with regard to the universal sinfulness of mankind.

Next week we get into the good news! We've been in the bad news for six weeks. Paul has shown how rebellious, respectable, and religious people all need the salvation that only Christ can give. So today in Romans 3:1-20 Paul sums up everything we've looked at thus far, and he draws some conclusions.

Now, I have told you that in this first section of Romans, Paul, the prosecuting attorney, makes the case that everybody in the world has done something wrong in his life and will therefore be judged by a holy God. And that is why we need a Savior.

In this section Paul does what any good lawyer would do as he prosecutes a case:

1. He anticipates the questions that are raised in the minds of the jurors, and he answers them in advance (verses 1-9)

2. He presents supporting evidence in the form of quotations from the Old Testament. "These," he says, "are my witnesses whom I call to the stand in support of the prosecution's case" (verses 10-18).

3. He summarizes his conclusions and asks for a verdict (verses 19-20).

In the first 8 verses Paul asks some questions and gives some answers. So, take your outline and let's look at the objections that Paul answers. Notice that there are 5 questions and 5 answers. Paul loved to use questions and answers as a teaching tool. In fact, in a synagogue setting, it was perfectly normal for a rabbi to get up and speak and then say, "Now, are there any questions?" "It often becomes easier to follow Paul's arguments," writes C. K. Barrett, "if the reader imagines the apostle face to face with a heckler, who makes interjections and receives replies which sometimes are withering and brusque." But Paul in this passage asks the questions himself and answers them himself.

Paul has just told the Jews at the end of chapter 2 that their religion will never get them to heaven. In fact, he says that religion will never get *anybody* to heaven. So Paul is standing, as

it were, before some hecklers, and these Jews are saying, “Wait a minute, Paul. You can’t say *that*.” And they begin coming up with objections, and Paul answers these objections in verses 1-9.

**I. THE QUESTIONS.** There are five of them.

(1) **The first question is about the Jews’ uniqueness.** (Romans 3:1). “What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?” Paul says, “Some of you are thinking, ‘Why be religious at all? If working hard and praying and going to synagogue and being circumcised and keeping the Law and observing the Jewish holidays--if all these things don’t get you into heaven, then why should I even try to be a good Jew? Is there any advantage in being a Jew over being a pagan, if we’re all guilty anyway?’”

Paul answers in verse 2: He says, “Much in every way!” It’s a great privilege to be a Jew. If you’re Jewish you ought to be proud of it. What is the advantage the Jews have? He says, “First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God.” The greatest thing the Jews had going for them was that God had given them His Word. It had been “entrusted” to them.

(a) He gave them the Old Testament Scriptures so that they might care for them and protect them. And we as Christians have a lot for which to thank the Jews because they have preserved the Bible for thousands of years. In Exodus 25:10ff we read about the construction of the Ark of the Covenant, a box overlaid with gold both inside and out, in which the Jews were to keep the Ten Commandments. What was special about the Ark was what was inside it. Later God told Solomon to build the Jerusalem Temple, and that temple was built for one purpose--to hold the Ark which contained the Word of God. It was that important. So God says, “I’m giving the Jews My Word, and they are to care for and protect it so that down through the ages the people of God might have it.”

(b) The Jews were to share this Word of God. They were to be the missionaries and evangelists to the rest of the world. God didn’t make them the “chosen” people so that they could say, “We’ve got it and you don’t.” But did they share it? No, they didn’t. They certainly took care of it, but they did not share it. They thought that “We’re the chosen people” meant “We’re the only people,” but God said, “I gave you My Word so that you could share it with everybody else.” They had a privilege in having the Word, but they also had a responsibility to share it with the world.

(2) **The second question deals with God’s faithfulness.** Look at verse 3: “What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God’s faithfulness?” Paul is saying, “There were obviously some Jews who were not faithful to God. So, will God give up on the Jewish nation because some of them were unfaithful?”

Can God break His promises? Look at verse 4: “Not at all. Let God be true and every man a liar. As it is written: ‘So that You may be proved right when You speak and prevail when You judge.’” Paul’s question is this: Can God renege on His promises since the Jews did not

obey His commandments completely? And Paul says, “No, not at all!” This is a favorite expression of Paul. It is used 13 times in his letters, 9 times in Romans. It means, “Not on your life! No way, Jose!” He’s saying, “God doesn’t break His promises even when our performance would tempt Him to do so.”

In the Bible, there are two kinds of promises: conditional promises and unconditional promises. Conditional promises are promises that say, “If you do this, then I will do this.” For example: “Ask and it shall be given to you” (Matthew 7:7). The condition is: “Ask;” the promise is: “It shall be given to you.” Similarly, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).

But there are also in the Bible many promises that are totally unconditional whether we do what’s right or not, and these are the promises Paul is talking about here. There are some promises God made to the Jews regardless of what they did. For instance, God promised the Jews that they would eventually have a Messiah. Now, did the Jews deserve that Messiah? Were they faithful throughout the centuries of Old Testament history? They were not. But God sent the Messiah anyway, even though He knew that they were going to reject Him! Again, the Bible says that one day Jesus is going to return. That is a promise, and it doesn’t matter what we do or don’t do — the promise is unconditional. So what Paul is saying here is this: “God’s promises are based upon *His* character, not upon *our* performance.”

Aren’t you glad that some of God’s promises are not based upon how we perform? Now, Paul bases his answer on Psalm 89:30-34. These were the verses Paul was thinking about when this question concerning the faithfulness of God came up. Listen:

“If his Sons forsake My law and do not follow My statutes,  
if they violate My decrees and fail to keep My commands,  
I will punish their sin with the rod, their iniquity with flogging;  
**but I will not take my love from him, nor will I ever betray My faithfulness.**  
I will not violate My covenant or alter what my lips have uttered.”

God is saying, “Even though the Jewish nation has not done what I told them to do, I still love them and I will still fulfil the promises I made to them.”

Now, if you want an example of the faithfulness of God, just look at the Jewish nation of Israel. The Hittites and the Jebusites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites were powerful nations in Old Testament times. But how many of those “ites” are still around today? Only one — the Israelites. Why? Because God is faithful. And we see the faithfulness of God in the nation of Israel, and that ought to be an encouragement to us. God’s promises are trustworthy; you can count on them. If God says it, it will happen. And remember, God is not through with Israel; and no nation has ever prospered that has persecuted God’s chosen people. And the nation of Israel is the ultimate key to world history. God will see to that.

**(3) The third question has to do with God’s righteousness and justice.** Look at verse 5: “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?” You see, there were those who were saying, “Hey, Paul, you just said that God is faithful to us even when we’re unfaithful to Him.” Now, follow this convoluted logic: “Therefore, it seems that when I sin, God forgives me; and I sin more, and God forgives me more. So, every time I sin it makes God look good because it shows how forgiving He is. Therefore, God shouldn’t be upset with me when I sin because my sin actually makes God look good!” Do you get the logic of that?! The objection is that if our sin makes God look good and more gracious, then why should we be judged for it? Why should He condemn us because we’re actually doing Him a favor, because, by our sin, He is showing what a great God He is, so He ought to thank us for our sin!

Paul says, “I am using a human argument,” and human logic is often insanity! He was realizing that you can twist what he is saying. Some were saying that the Jews’ unfaithfulness was actually reinforcing God’s faithfulness.

Let me illustrate this. A man is unfaithful to his wife over and over again. And yet his wife remains faithful to him. And the husband says, “You know, my dear, my unfaithfulness just makes you look better because you’re staying faithful to me even though I’m unfaithful to you. It just demonstrates what a great lady you are!” So one day this wife finally says, “I’ve had enough of this. I’m not going to put up with it any longer.” And the husband says, “What gives? Why are you mad at me? My unfaithfulness just shows how patient and loving you are. Instead of being upset, you ought to thank me for my adultery because it shows what a great person you are!”

Now, does that make sense? Of course not. And Paul is destroying this objection that the Jews are bringing up. Notice his answer to this distorted logic. He says, “Is this the right way to think about it?” Verse 6: “Certainly, not.” No way, Jose! “If that were so, how could God judge the world?” He’s saying, “If God doesn’t have any standards, and He lets everybody get away with anything, how could He be a fair and righteous Judge?” If sin results in doing good, then God couldn’t judge anybody, because everybody would be doing good every time sin is committed. And he says, “That is a ridiculous argument.”

**(4) The fourth question is about God’s truthfulness.** In verse 7 Paul cites another objection: “Someone might agree, ‘If my falsehood enhances God’s truthfulness and so increases His glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?’” Paul is saying, “If all the bad things I do really make God happy because it gives Him a chance to show His grace, then why would God condemn me? And if the truth of God has increased through my sin, then why am I being blamed for something that brings glory to God?” Look at verse 8: “Why not say. . . ‘Let us do evil that good may result?’” He’s really saying, “If every time I sin it brings more glory to God, then let’s live it up so that God can be super-forgiving!” Now, obviously that does *not* make sense. God does not need our evil to highlight and enhance His goodness.

Do we have people arguing and acting that way today? There are lots of people across America who go to church and believe the right things, and their lifestyle is quite contrary to what they *say* they believe. They live for the Lord on Sunday and live like the devil the rest of the week.

So Paul says, “You don’t want to go out and sin *more* in order to prove how gracious

God is. Suppose you get strep throat, and you go to your doctor, and he says, “I have a new wonder drug which will wipe out your strep infection almost immediately.” And you say, “Doctor, I have an idea. Let’s wait a few days, and let’s pray that I get a super-severe case of strep throat, and then you can demonstrate how powerful this wonder drug really is.” That’s the same kind of stupid logic. And yet a great number of people do that with God today. They think that God is some old grandfather up in the sky Who is loving, but Who is absolutely harmless. He sits rocking in His chair while the kids tear up the house. And He smiles benignly, and the kids think, “Hey, Grandpa must love this. Let’s do it even more!”

A lot of people think God is like that. Many times have I heard people say in counseling, “Pastor, I know the choice I’m making is wrong, but I’m going to do it anyway because I know God will forgive me.” What kind of a fool does that person think God is? God sees through that hypocrisy. A God Who would let you get away with that wouldn’t be worth worshipping, would He? Never forget, forgiveness from God is never a license to sin.

Let me ask you this: Can a parent forgive a child for doing something wrong and still let that child reap the consequences of his behavior at the same time? Yes. Maybe as a child you stole some candy, and your parents found out, and they forgave you. But they marched you down to the candy store to apologize to the storekeeper, and out of your allowance you had to pay for the stolen candy! You can get your life messed up and ask God to forgive you, but you will still reap what you have sown. The consequences and the scars remain.

I think of a man in his thirties who fried his brain with LSD during his teen years, and today, 20 years later, he is a mental and emotional basket case, unable to work, even though he repented and received God’s forgiveness and is a true Christian.

So Paul is saying, “Don’t presume on the grace of God.” The apostle had been accused of encouraging loose living, and anytime you get a pastor who teaches on “grace,” that pastor is always going to be misrepresented by someone who says, “Oh, he doesn’t have any standards; his teaching encourages people to sin.” Paul says, “If you think you can go out and sin and get away with it, even if you ask God to forgive you, you will nevertheless get what you deserve.”

**(5) The fifth question is about man’s sinfulness.** In verse 9 Paul asks the question: “What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? [Paul is talking about his fellow Jews.] Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles *alike* are *all* under sin.”

So, there are the 5 objections or excuses — the Jews’ uniqueness, God’s faithfulness, God’s righteousness, God’s truthfulness, and everyone’s sinfulness. Now, this is the first section in Paul’s closing argument — the questions.

**II. THE QUOTATIONS.** (Verses 10-18). Paul now turns to the Old Testament for his supporting evidence to nail down his case. He quotes six Old Testament passages. The Rabbis in Jewish history had a teaching method that they called “charaz,” and charaz means literally “a stringing of pearls.” They would take verses from a variety of sources in the Old Testament and put them together and develop an argument from them. Paul, in these verses, makes 14

statements about mankind.

(a) Verses 10-12 come from Psalm 14:1-3: “There is no one righteous, not even one . . . no one seeks God.” Indeed, they run from God. We don’t seek God; He seeks us. Jesus didn’t say, “I came to earth to be found.” He said, “I came to seek and to save those who are lost” (Luke 19:10). Psalm 14 continues, “All have turned away” — they’re all doing their own thing. “They have altogether become worthless.” That word “worthless” was used originally to describe “sour milk.” Does anything smell worse than sour milk? These people stink!

(b) Verse 13a is a quote from Psalm 5:9. “Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.” In the next couple of verses Paul talks about our speech, and he says that our speech gives our sinfulness away.

When I was a boy and had a physical checkup, the first thing the doctor would say was, “Let me see your tongue.” If it had a white coating on it there might be something wrong. God says, “Let me see your tongue. That will tell Me what you are like because what you *say* is what’s *inside* of you.”

(c) Verse 13b is a quote from Psalm 143:3: “The poison of vipers is on their lips.” Vipers’ poison can kill people. Can human beings kill people with their mouth? You bet they can. They can kill a good person’s reputation by gossip and lies.

(d) Verse 14 says, “Their mouths are full of cursings and bitterness.” That’s from Psalm 10:7. He’s saying that foul talk is an offense against God.

(e) Then in verses 15-17 he describes their actions: “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know.” That is from Isaiah 59:7-9. Why are there wars and rumors of wars? Because of man’s innate sinfulness.

(f) And then finally in verse 18 Paul asks, “Why are they the sinful people they are?” And he answers his question: “Because there is no fear of God before their eyes.” That’s Psalm 36:1.

So, Paul begins with QUESTIONS. Then he moves to QUOTATIONS. And then he moves to

**III. THE INEVITABLE CONCLUSION**; and the last two verses, 19 and 20, summarize everything Paul has been building in his case for the prosecution in Romans 1:18—3:20 that we’ve looked at now for six weeks.

“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.” Paul sums it all up by stating two truths:

(1) The whole world is accountable to God; and

(2) The whole world is without excuse.

Every mouth will be silenced; the ungodly will stand before God on the Judgment Day, and they will be speechless; in no way will they be able to defend themselves, because they will be without excuse and helpless.

And finally verse 20: “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the Law; rather, through the Law we become conscious of sin.” Paul says, “No one can be saved by keeping the Commandments.” Why, then, was the Law given if it can’t get you to heaven? God gave the Law for two reasons:

(a) It makes us aware of our sin: “Through the Law we become conscious of sin.” When you have a standard, you know when you fall short. When you have a goal, you know when you don’t reach it. When you have a law, you know when you break it. So, the first purpose of the Law is that it shows us that we need to be saved.

(b) Galatians 3:23-24 gives us the second reason why God gave us the Law. Verse 23 says, “Before faith came, we were held prisoners by the Law, locked up until faith should be revealed.” The Law imprisons people; it doesn’t set them free. *Grace* sets people free, not the Law.

Verse 24: “So the Law was put in charge to lead us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith.” The Law is intended to point us to Christ. It shows us that we need to be saved, and it shows us *Who* the Savior is — and it directs us to the One Who alone can save us.

**IV. THE FINAL VERDICT.** What, then, is the final verdict? It is this: Man is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. The whole world is lost. Everybody needs to be saved. You may be rebellious, respectable or religious — you need to be saved. We might call this passage we have studied this morning “Total Wipeout.”

That’s the bad news. Next week we get into the good news. Dr. J. Vernon McGee says that the space between verses 20 and 21 of Romans 3 might be called “The Grand Canyon.” And next week we will see Paul switching roles and becoming the attorney for the defense; and all of a sudden, we realize that we don’t have to live under condemnation.

Let me close by reading this great verse, Romans 8:1. “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...!” No condemnation — that’s the *good* news!

**AMEN.**