

The Verdict: GUILTY!
Romans 1:18 - 3:20
Series: Book of Romans [#3]
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Theme: **Everyone Stands Guilty Before God.**

Introduction

In our last look at Romans we considered the theme of this letter, stated in 1:16-17. Paul wrote,

“I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith.’”

Paul’s theme is the good news of the gospel. The good news of how God brings salvation and reveals righteousness through it.

But there is a dramatic shift starting in the next verse—a shift from the good news to the bad news, a shift that continues through chapter three verse twenty. The subject is summarized in the opening verse of this section, 1:18,

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”

The main truths here are: God’s wrath against all sin, and all people are sinners. Paul puts the human family under the lense of God’s truth and examines us. The outcome, *the verdict*, **GUILTY!**

It is not popular today to mention *this bad news* except, perhaps, briefly in passing. After all, “Many people feel uncomfortable when they hear anything like this. We don’t want to turn them off.” We like to, want to hear the uplifting, positive, possibility and purpose themes of the gospel.

But God has given us the bad news because we need it as well as the good news. We need it because it is easy to think all religions are basically the same—“You believe what you want to and I’ll believe what I want to. It all ends up the same in the end.” Then there are many who respond to the gospel by saying, “Why do I have to be *saved*? I’m doing about as good as I can, God knows that. He understands. And I certainly am not a monster! In fact, I live better than many who say they are Christians.” You see, there is no point to salvation unless there is both something to be saved from as well as something to be saved to.

God’s plan for Paul presenting the gospel here is to first state our need of the gospel. We may think we measure up to our own standards, but whether we do or don’t is not the issue

in salvation. The issue is whether or not we measure up to God's standards. In the Bible, from cover to cover, God tells us we do not. God, who is the sole judge, gives the verdict of guilty. That is the bad news. The inescapable truth is *everyone is guilty before God*.

Bad News: God Is Angry At Sin.

And so today, we are looking at this bad news. It starts with the uncomfortable truth that God is angry at sin. "God gets angry? God is an angry God? Really?? Doesn't the Bible tells us 'God is love'?" Yes, God is love (1 John 4:8). But that is not the only quality of His character. There are others. Look at verse 18 again.

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness."

God is a God of love and a God of wrath. But God's anger is not like our anger. God never plays favorites, He never makes mistakes, let alone flies off the handle in a fit of rage. Even the word for wrath Paul used here speaks of a settled, sustained action. It is the response to, it is the action of God's holiness against sin. God is merciful and patient but sin, He tells us, arouses His righteous anger. God's anger against all that is evil is complimentary to His love for all that is good and righteous. Both assert and defend His integrity and holiness.

The Bible has much to say about God's righteous anger in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. J. I. Packer writes, "One of the most striking things about the Bible is the vigor with which both Testaments emphasize the reality and terror of God's wrath."¹ We see it in Psalm 90 where Moses speaks of God's people Israel,

"For we have been consumed by Your anger and by Your wrath we have been dismayed. You have placed our iniquities before You, our secret sins in the light of Your presence. For all our days have declined in Your fury; we have finished our years like a sigh." (7-9)

We see this in the New Testament as well. The third chapter of John's gospel is well known and loved. Especially verse 16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life." But there also is verse 18.

"He who believes in Him is not judged; but he who does not believe in Him has been judged already, because He has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."

Even stronger is the last verse of the chapter,

"He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (36).

In Ephesians 5 Paul tells us to be imitators of God and to have nothing to do with sin. He warns, “Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (6). Then in the opening chapter of his second letter to the church at Thessalonica he writes that when the Lord Jesus returns He

“...will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.” (7b-9)

Yes, God’s anger, His wrath is aroused by sin. His action in response to it reveals, releases and executes His righteous anger in judgment.

Verse 18 tells us that God’s wrath is revealed from heaven against all sin. What does it mean that God’s anger is *revealed*, and in what ways is it revealed? This word reveal means to bring to light, to uncover, to draw back the blinds in order to see something. This revealing, Paul says, is “against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.” God’s wrath is constantly being revealed, constantly being displayed against all sin.

- Against the lust of people’s hearts that lead to impure thoughts and actions (1:24);
- against degrading and unnatural sexual passions (1:26);
- against a depraved mind leading people to do things that are not proper (1:28);
- against those who condemn others for sin that they themselves are doing (2:1-2);
- against all those who stubbornly do not repent, who are selfishly ambitious and practice sin (2:5-10);

and these are just starters—God’s wrath is revealed “against *all* ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.”

It is often and properly noted here that the greatest revelation of God’s wrath on sin was when Jesus died on the cross for us, even though this is not mentioned in this section. Isaiah’s prophecy of the Suffering, Sin-bearing Servant in chapter 53 certainly presents this reality. Look at some of the picture,

- “He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed.” (5)
- “All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.” (6)
- “He was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due.” (8)

- “the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering.” (10)
- “by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities.” (11)

Then Galatians 3:13 tells us “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us.” And 2 Corinthians 5:21 states that God the Father “...made Him [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Our sins were placed on Christ at the cross. In taking our sins on Himself, God revealed and Jesus received the wrath, the full punishment due to each and all of us.

The bad news is that our sin arouses God’s anger and He reveals, unleashes that anger against all sin. This is not the end of the bad news. There is...

More Bad News: Everyone Is A Sinner.

Comparison. We all do it. It starts very early in life and continues, sometimes intensifies, from there on. We compare ourselves with others on anything and everything. Often the impact is negative. One woman wrote,

“I wanted to run away from home. I wasn’t a 10 year old threatening my mother because she wanted me to clean my room, I was the mother. I had always wanted to be a mother. When all my friends talked about their future careers, I shocked them by saying, ‘I just want to be a wife and mother.’”

She went on to say that she felt she wasn’t measuring up as a wife and mother when she compared herself with those around her. Her hectic, disorganized life seemed to be the total opposite of her friends who appeared to have a calm, well-ordered life. In time she realized that it was comparing herself with the real and imagined lives of others and her envy of them that led her to feel like running away from home.²

But sometimes when we compare ourselves with others we see ourselves as being better. For example, a number of surveys in North America show that while we may think, let’s say, that about half of us will make it to heaven, significantly more than half of us think *we* will make it to heaven. The numbers don’t add up. They don’t add up because people tend to think their chances are better than those of others.

Paul put the entire human family under the lense of God’s truth and demonstrates that *everyone is a sinner*. First he looks at the pagan Gentiles. Who are they? To a Jew everyone is either a Jew or a Gentile. Either you are one of us or one of them. So then, Gentiles also are those who worshiped anyone or anything other than the one true God who had set them apart as His people. In particular, this group is characterized by their worship of idols in the form of people and all sorts of animals, as we read in verse 23.

Paul charts their development of religion. It starts with their seeing God's revelation of Himself in nature and within themselves. Look at verse 19.

“that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.” (19-20)

So, as verse 21 says, they knew about God. They knew enough to search for God. Their fatal error is that they do not honor and give thanks to Him, but turn to their ideas (21a). The result of this includes, Paul tells us,

- moral and spiritual darkness (21b-22),
- and in that, idolatry (23, 25).
- They become dominated by
 - impurity (24);
 - degrading and indecent passions and perversions (26-27);
 - depraved minds—depraved to the extent of flaunting their sinful passions and celebrating with others who join them (27, 32);
 - and all kinds of unrighteous, sinful, wicked behavior (29-31).

This does not mean they never do anything that is good, but these things reveal their moral and spiritual character.

Three times here we read “God gave them up” or “over” to these things (24, 26, 28). God in no way causes them to sin, but gives them over to their own sinfulness. While this is the natural consequence of God's moral law, God is active in and starts the process. As one man writes,

“God does not simply let the boat go—he gives it a push downstream. Like a judge who hands over a prisoner to the punishment his crime has earned, God hands over the sinner to the terrible cycle of ever-increasing sin.”³

Rather than accepting the light that points to God, they reject it. The pagan Gentiles are sinners, they are guilty.

Next Paul turns to the respectable moralists in verses 1-16 of chapter 2. Again we ask, who are these people? The section makes it fairly clear that Paul is looking at a group of people which includes both Jews and Gentiles. What times them together? They go a step farther than worshiping the sun, moon, stars, any intriguing rock or mountain, or some figure of a person or animal. They have adopted moral standards and ethics. These are the

good and respectable people of society. In every generation they tell us, “The *heathen* are sinners, but while we may not be perfect, we are *not* like them.”

An important point here is that morality and even knowledge of God and His truth alone does not make a person right before God. Look at the opening verses of chapter 2.

“Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things. And we know that the judgment of God rightly falls upon those who practice such things. But do you suppose this, O man, when you pass judgment on those who practice such things and do the same yourself, that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” (1-4)

God’s standard is righteousness—complete, total, 100% righteousness. Seeking it sincerely, being better than most others is not sufficient. Another glimpse of truth here is that even though I don’t bow down to the sun, moon and stars or idols, even though my actions are better than the pagans, I still have the same thoughts and desires they do.

Respectable moralism has long been popular. For example, many people have said, “My religion is the sermon on the Mount.” In other words, “I live by the outstanding moral qualities in that sermon of Jesus, even if I don’t believe He is the Savior.” Gandhi said,

“If then I had to face only the Sermon on the Mount and my own interpretation of it, I should not hesitate to say, ‘Oh, yes, I am a Christian’”⁴

Others have said “My religion is the golden rule. ‘Treat others the same way you want them to treat you’” (Luke 6:31). Today there are many who say, “I’m spiritual. I find and follow what fits me, what is right for me.” God says, “If you are going that route, perfection is required.” Knowing and trying to do what is right is not enough. And so, the respectable moralist also is guilty in his or her sins.

The next group under the lense of God’s truth is privileged Jews, which we find in 2:17–3:8. God gave the Jews a unique, highly privileged position. Look at the opening verses of Paul’s summary, beginning at verse 17 of chapter 2.

“But if you bear the name ‘Jew’ and rely upon the Law and boast in God, and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth.” (17-20)

What privileges! Paul comes back to their privileges or advantage in 3:2, “they were entrusted with the oracles of God.” God’s revelation in His creation points people to Him. His revelation in the Scriptures leads people to Him. The Jews were called out by God, given His word and the mission of being His light in this sin-darkened world.

But those who only trusted in being Jewish, in being God’s chosen ones with His law, were like the pagan Gentiles and respectable moralists trying to make it on their own. And so they stood guilty. Specifically, Paul says,

- Guilty for disobeying and dishonoring God (2:21-23).
- Guilty for distorting the view of God to the world, rather than accurately, clearly revealing Him (2:24).
- Guilty for their misplaced pride (2:25).

So their judgment is just. God’s judgment is righteous. He must judge them as well as the others (3:5-8). They have no pass of privilege based on their pedigree.

Now, in summation, Paul looks at the whole world through the lense of God’s truth, beginning at chapter 3 verse 9. Here Paul describes the character of all humanity.

“What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, ‘There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.’” (3:9-12)

The evidence shows that none of us on our own are righteous. We are sinners by nature. The evidence shows that none of us on our own seek after God. We are sinners by action.

Paul goes on to touch on some of the evidence. First, our speech. Verse 13,

“Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.” (3:13-14)

Then the common thread of self-centered, vengeful actions. Verse 15,

“Their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known.”
(3:15-17)

The key evidence and primary condemnation is in verse 18. “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (3:18). We see that lack of proper, reverential fear of God as some angrily shake their fists at Him in defiance, while others make light of their failure to acknowledge Him. Woody Allen is credited with saying, “You see me as an atheist. God sees me as the loyal opposition.”⁵

In light of all this, what about the Law and its standards? The Law of God brings about the knowledge of sin, not righteousness. Look at verse 20, “by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.” The law puts a gag order on all boasting and protesting, as verse 19 says, “so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God.”

The pagan Gentiles, the respectable moralists, the privileged Jews...*everyone* stands before God and the verdict is *GUILTY!* “There is none righteous, not even one” (3:9).

Conclusion.

Bad news and more bad news. We don't like bad news. I know this bad news can be very difficult to take in, even for believers. God directed Paul to present this first to the church at Rome to graphically remind them to never forget their need of God's grace in Christ, to never forget what God had done for them in Christ; and so they would never grow complacent about the lost people around them.

God's purpose for us is the same. We must never forget our need of Christ and what God has done for us in Christ. We must never grow complacent about the lost people around us. When we look at the crowds of people in the malls, at football and hockey games, in concert halls, many, perhaps even most of them, are still standing before God guilty in their sin. We are the only people who know and can share the truth which can free them from the righteous wrath and judgment of God. This is our privilege and our responsibility.

Question: How are we doing, what are we doing to fulfill it? If I were to invite you into my office and show you a large stack of money, \$1 M., and tell you that it is yours to use and enjoy, I'm sure (after I had picked you up off the floor), your mind would be racing with ideas and plans. And it wouldn't take you long to excitedly act on those plans.

You and I have the privilege of sharing the gospel, the good news of Christ Jesus with people who are standing before God guilty in their sin. This is a privilege that is infinitely more valuable, exciting and rewarding than receiving \$1 M or \$1 B.

As each of us now turn to God in the next few quiet moments, I want you to do several things. First, ask God to never let you forget that you were without Him and without hope, you were guilty in your sin until you came to know Jesus Christ. Then, ask God to help you see every person who is in your life or who crosses your path who is not a believer as one who is without God and without hope; and, seeing that, to do whatever you can to point them to Christ.

One more. Right after these moments we will observe communion. Usually we have a time of prayer before the bread and cup to prepare our hearts and thank God. But today I want you to do that now. To remember and thank God specifically for Christ taking the full wrath, the full punishment of God for your sins when He was on the cross.

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- ¹ Packer, J.I. *Knowing God*. (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 134.
- ² Anderson, Lisa. "Run Away Mom." *Stories from Latter-day Saints Online*. n.d. About.com: Latter-day Saints. 15 October 2009. <<http://lds.about.com/library/community/blrunawaymom.htm>>.
- ³ Moo, Douglas J. *The Epistle To The Romans*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996, p. 111.
- ⁴ Gandhi, Mohandas. In *Gandhi—His Life And Message For The World*. (New York: Signet Key Books), 1954, p. 131 as cited in *Hinduism: A Catholic Perspective* by Peter J. Wilkinson, 1968. 16 October 2009. <<http://www.pamphlets.org.au/australia/acts1531.html>>.
- ⁵ Cited in *Philosophy: An Introduction To The Art Of Wondering*. James L. Christian. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Cengage Learning), 2009, p. 41

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