

“No One, Not Even One”

Sermons on Romans # 7

Texts: Romans 3:9-20; Psalm 53:1-6

In Romans 1, Paul describes Gentile godlessness and the downward spiral of human sin which results when the Gentiles exchange the truth of God for lie. Then in Romans 2, Paul takes aim at the hypocrisy of the Jews, along with their mistaken assumption that possessing the law and the covenant sign of circumcision, somehow exempts them from the judgment of God. In fact, if the Jew does not obey the commandments given to them by God, God regards them as law-breakers and as though they were uncircumcised. Now, in Romans 3:9-20, the apostle will open the Old Testament and describe the human condition after the fall using the stark terms of the Psalmist and Israel’s prophets. This time Paul is not aiming at either Jew or Gentile, he is aiming at both! Indeed, the whole world is accountable to God, because the law has exposed our sin.

For Paul, there can be no clear understanding of the good news of the gospel, without first understanding the consequences of human sin. Paul has already contrasted a righteousness from God which is revealed in the gospel, with the wrath of God against human sin revealed in that same gospel. The cross is a picture to us of what it cost the Son of God to save us from our sins. But the cross is also a reminder to unbelievers that God is holy and that he must punish all human sin. Either Jesus Christ is punished for us or we must face God in the judgment and pay for own sins. Paul has already made it plain that the gospel is power of God for the salvation of all who believe. In that gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.

Theologically speaking, this final portion of Paul’s indictment of the human race (Romans 3:9-20) is rather remarkable. Paul not only lists a veritable catalogue of Old Testament passages to prove his point, but he also describes how the entire person is effected by sin (mind, heart, and will). It is from this description of fallen human nature that Reformed Christians have, in part, developed our doctrines of total inability and total depravity. It is also from these verses that we learn the gravity of the human condition and how sin has distorted every aspect of human existence. Furthermore, we learn that at least one purpose of God’s law—which Paul will later tell us in Romans 7:12 “is holy, righteous and good”—is to make us conscious of our sins so that we realize our need of a savior.

It is also from this section of Romans we get answers to some of the questions raised earlier in chapters 2 and 3, when Paul appeals to the basic covenant principle, “*God will give to everyone according to what they have done.*” Those who persist in doing good, God will reward with eternal life. Those who do evil will receive their just deserts. Paul will now tell us as plainly as he can that there is no one who has persisted in doing good, not even one. In fact, Paul will now tell us that we have all turned away from God, whether we be Jew or Gentile. Indeed, as Anders Nygren reminds us, this entire section of Romans, from 1:18-3:20 depicts the human condition after the fall and is designed “to show us that everything in the old aeon [age], without exception, stands under the wrath of God. Everything and everyone stand under God’s wrath.”¹ So while the Jews were trying to avoid being lumped together with the Gentiles, Paul now cites six passages from Israel’s own Scriptures (the Old Testament) to prove the universal

¹ Nygren, Commentary on Romans, pp. 140-141.

sinfulness of the human race.² If the Gentile is not exempt from the coming judgment of God, then neither is the Jew.

And so let us now turn to the first part of our text this morning (vv. 9-12), where Paul cites from the text of both Psalm 14 and 53, which speak to the question of human sinfulness.

Before quoting directly from Israel's Scriptures, Paul will clearly indicate that he's adding yet another plank to his ongoing case for universal human sinfulness. In verses 1-8 of chapter 3, Paul has answered the question he raised in 3:1—"What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew?" One advantage was that the Jews had been given the very words of God, the Scriptures. But here in verse 9, Paul is apparently still dealing with the subject of Jewish advantages. But this time Paul's point is that the advantages the Jews possess which are associated with being given the Scriptures do not in any sense give the Jew an advantage over the Gentile when it comes to being judged according to what we have done.³ When it comes to sin, the Jew has no advantage over the Gentile. Possessing the Scriptures, the law and circumcision will not exempt the Jew from being judged according to his works.

To make this point, in verse 9, Paul asks another rhetorical question and immediately answers it. "What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin." There are a number of important things to consider here. In the context of his overall argument about the universal nature of human sin which began back in Romans 1:18, Paul has made it plain that the Jew is no better off, and has no advantage over anyone, Gentiles included.⁴ This would have been a difficult message for self-righteous and pious individuals to hear. Nothing bothers the self-righteous any more than to have their self-righteousness exposed for what it truly is. This is why it is always the religious types who object to the gospel of free grace. The self-righteous don't want to believe that prostitutes and tax-collectors who acknowledge their sins and repent, will make it into heaven, while judges, doctors and ministers, who won't acknowledge their sins will not make it into heaven. This is why the Pharisees hated Jesus, why the Judaizers hate Paul, and who so many Americans are offended by Paul's doctrine of justification, especially the part that leaves the self-righteous under God's judgment, facing his wrath.

And speaking of sin, this is first time Paul in Romans uses the term ἄμαρτλαν (sin). For Paul the term "sin" means something like a power which has control of men and women stemming from the fall of the human race as recorded in Genesis 3. Very rarely does Paul speak of sins in the plural—sinful acts we commit, although this is the predominant usage elsewhere in the New Testament.⁵ Therefore, for Paul, sin is not so much what we do. It is what we are. We sin because we are sinners. As a direct result of the fall of the human race in Adam we are sinful by nature, so that we always choose to sin, a point Paul will address in some detail in Romans 5:12-19. In fact, in Romans 7:14, Paul will describe the human condition as being sold into slavery because of what sin does to us. Sin holds us captive. We are

² Nygren, Commentary on Romans, p. 141.

³ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 201.

⁴ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.190. For a discussion of the difficulties of translating this verse, see the discussion in Cranfield, I.187-190.

⁵ Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:3 where Paul does speak of "sins." Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.191.

enslaved to it until Jesus Christ sets us free from both its guilt and its power.

In verse 10, Paul introduces a citation from the LXX text of Psalm 14 and 53 (our Old Testament lesson), with the formula, “as it is written,” indicating the divine authority of the verses which follow (vv. 10-12). Listing a series of verses was a common Rabbinic practice, which, as Edersheim puts it is like stringing together a series of pearls.⁶ One writer speaks of this series of texts as “the jackhammer indictment of human sinfulness in the scriptural [list] of Rom. 3:10-18. . . . Those who are entrusted with the oracles of God are thus given the paradoxical privilege of learning from those oracles the truth of their own depravity.”⁷

As Paul begins to wrap up the divine indictment of the human race, he begins in verse 10, by pointing out, “*there is no one righteous, not even one.*” That Paul begins here is significant, because he has told us in the thesis statement of this epistle, that a righteousness from God is revealed whenever the gospel is preached. That such a righteousness must be revealed by God in the gospel is because of what is set forth here. “*There is no one righteous*” (or justified, or possessing a right standing before God), and to ram the point home, Paul adds for emphasis, “*not even one.*” This means that because of human sin, no one possesses a righteousness which enables them to stand before God on the day of judgment and plead innocence. Rather, because of sin, there is no one righteous in a moral sense either.⁸ We are guilty and corrupt. Sin has leaves us without right-standing (in other words, we are guilty and deserve condemnation) and that we are without personal (or moral) righteousness.

But Paul is just getting started. Sin has not only robbed us of righteousness, it leaves us in complete ignorance of the things of God. Says Paul in verse 11, “*there is no one who understands.*” Not *some* who don’t understand, but “no one” who understands. Sin has left Adam’s race in such a deplorable condition that Paul can write in Ephesians 4:18-19, “*They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.*”

Sin has given to each one of us a certain hardness of heart. And because we are now oriented toward sin and self, instead of toward God and his purposes (what Luther called being bent in upon ourselves), we attempt to suppress the truth in unrighteousness. Indeed, we gladly exchange the truth of God for a lie. Therefore, we are ignorant of the things of God. We do not understand them as we ought. We don’t want to know them or understand them! This is why Paul can tell the Corinthians, “*the man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned*” (1 Corinthians 2:14). Unless God grants us understanding of spiritual things through the work of the Holy Spirit, we will never understand them. The gospel will remain so much foolishness. And all of this is the consequence of human sin.

The third nail in the coffin is the last statement in verse 11, there is “*no one who seeks God.*” Once again

⁶ Cited in Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 166.

⁷ Richard B. Hayes, Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 50.

⁸ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.192.

it is vital to notice that Paul does not say that *some* do not seek God, or *many* do not seek God, but rather, that *no one* seeks God. And why is this? John tells us that people love darkness rather than light because their deeds are evil (John 3:19). People don't seek God because he is holy and we are sinful. Apart from God's regenerating grace and his sovereign call, we hate God because he is holy. We owe him our obedience because we are his creatures. But we have rebelled against him in Eden, when the first of our race shook his fist in God's face and defiantly ate from the tree from which he had been forbidden from eating. We owe God everything. He owes us nothing. We have run up a debt we can never pay, and God's holiness prevents him from looking the other way. God is holy and he must punish us for our sins. This is why, apart from an act of divine grace and mercy, we do not seek God. In fact, in the first part of verse 12, Paul goes on to say, "*All have turned away, they have together become worthless.*" The verb Paul uses speaks of a deliberate avoidance.⁹ The entire human race—the "all" indicates both Jew and Gentile—have deliberately turned away from God. As a result, we end up worthless.

In Ephesians 2:1-5, Paul speaks of this condition in slightly different terms, but with the same effect. "*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, 2 in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. 3 All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. 4 But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, 5 made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved.*" Therefore, we are dead in sin, and unless God raises us from the dead in Jesus Christ, we will remain dead! Dead people cannot effect their own resurrections. This is what Paul is getting at when he speaks of the gospel as the power of God unto the salvation of all who believe. For the gospel alone can bring life where there is only death.

And as if anyone in Paul's audience was still under the mistaken assumption that sinful men and women will actually persist in doing good and gain eternal life, as stated back in Romans 2:6, in the last clause of verse 12 Paul now tells us just how many people will receive God's covenant blessing for doing good: "*there is no one who does good, not even one.*" Again, because of human sin we have all turned away from God and done evil. We are worthless. We have forfeited our righteousness. We live in ignorance of the things of God. Therefore, under the terms of the original covenant of works, which God made with Adam on behalf of the entire human race, we stand condemned. Not one of us has done good. Not one of us merits life. Rather, we all deserve death.

Having demonstrated the grave consequences of our sin, in terms of our guilt before God, in verses 13-18, Paul now goes on to show his readers how sin has infected very part of human nature.

Citing first from Psalm 5:9, "*their throats are open graves,*" Paul uses a perfect participle to make the point that the human throat is like a tomb which is permanently left open. While this would not be the case for a tomb, since a tomb is closed, it is true of the human throat from which unclean things from deep inside the person constantly emerge.¹⁰ Next Paul says "*their tongues practice deceit.*" If evil proceeds from deep within us, then the image of the human tongue practicing deceit, is surely meant to capture the deception of someone who flatters us with their speech while inwardly hoping for, even plotting, ill against us. For such a person, "*the poison of vipers is on their lips,*" a citation taken from

⁹ The verb is ἐξέκλιναν. Cf. Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 167.

¹⁰ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 167.

Psalm 140:3, to indicate that like a poisonous snake, the words which come forth from within us are intended to destroy. “People speak evil, even poisonous things.”¹¹ So, says Paul in verse 14, citing this time from Psalm 10:7, “*Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.*” This is how the open throat, the deceitful tongue, the poison from our lips take concrete form. We continually curse God. We continually grumble about our circumstances. We continually speak ill of our neighbor. We speak forth things which taste bitter and disgusting. And this is true of Jew and Gentile alike. As James puts it, “*no man can tame the tongue. It is restless evil, full of deadly poison*” (3:8). As Paul sees it, our words reveal what is truly in our hearts. What comes out of our mouths is the expression of the evil within.

In verses 15-17, Paul cites from Isaiah 59:7-8, a text where the prophet Isaiah is describing the sins of Israel. “*Their feet are swift to shed blood; 16 ruin and misery mark their ways, 17 and the way of peace they do not know.*” This time Paul focuses upon the feet, which act in perfect harmony with the throat, tongue, mouth and lips. In other words, our actions mirror our words. Sinful people are prone to shed blood—that is, to commit murder. The consequence of such human rage is that ruin and misery follow. This is not exceptional human behavior, it is characteristic human behavior. Since people are prone to acts of violence, peace disappears, so that it becomes the exception, rather than the rule. Violence is all we know. Swiss theologian Karl Barth, writing in his commentary on Romans near the end of World War One, remarked about these verses, “the whole course of human history pronounces this indictment against itself.”¹²

The final passage in Paul’s indictment of the fallen human race is found in verse 18, where Paul cites from Psalm 36:1: “*There is no fear of God before their eyes.*” Being filled with sin from head to toe, having suppressed the truth through unrighteous acts, and having exchanged the truth of God for a lie, all people have become so accustomed to their sin, Paul can say, they no longer fear God. People no longer consider that a day is coming when God will judge the world. They do not fear God, but they should!

Some of Paul’s readers/hearers may say, “Okay, these things may be true of the Gentiles.” But what of the Jews? Paul will now make it perfectly clear that the Jew is every bit a guilty as the Gentile despite being given the commandments. In fact, this was the reason *why* God gave Israel his law—to excite and expose human sin.

The implications of the verses Paul has just cited from the Psalms and prophets, should be readily apparent. As Paul concludes in the first part of verse 19, “*Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law.*” Given the fact that none of the verses cited above are from the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), Paul’s reference to the law in this verse is probably a reference to the law in its broadest sense, i.e., the Torah, the Old Testament.¹³ Even though Paul usually speaks of the law in a narrower sense (i.e., the Ten Commandments), it was a common Rabbinic practice to speak of the Old Testament as a whole as the “Torah,” or the law. That seems to be the case throughout this section.

¹¹ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 168.

¹² Karl Barth, The Epistle to the Romans (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 85.

¹³ See for example: Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 204-205; Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 169-170; and Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.195.

Paul's point is simply that the law speaks to those who are "under it," literally "in the law," i.e., the Jews. Since the Jews have been blessed with the advantage of being given the law (i.e., the Scriptures), that advantage now gives way to responsibility that naturally goes with such a blessing. The Jews are "in the law." Therefore, whatever the law says, it says to the Jews as a people. And what the law says (in the sense of commanding and revealing God's will), it specifically says to those in the covenant. And as Paul has just made clear, the law condemns those who don't obey it. And since Israel possesses this word from God, the Jews of all people, should be aware that this description of fallen human nature applies first and foremost to them!¹⁴

The result of Israel being "in the law," is "*so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.*"¹⁵ Since God reveals his will to Israel through the means of his word (the Scriptures, the law in this broad sense), Israel can no longer boast about possessing the law and the covenant sign of circumcision. Israel can longer boast about a moral superiority over the Gentiles, even though everything Paul has said about the Gentiles in Romans 1:18-32 is absolutely true! No longer can the Jews speak to the Gentiles with a smug sense of security when it comes to the judgment yet to come.¹⁶ Once God has spoken in his word he has the final say. The Jews must now be silent and accept God's verdict—even about them. Their words and boasts no longer matter. Once Israel's guilt is seen to be equal to that of the Gentiles, then both Jew and Gentile ("the whole world") are accountable to God. No one is righteous. No one has sought God. No one has done good. And God will still give to each person according to what they have done . . . and we have all done evil (Jew and Gentile). Since we are accountable to God, we are liable to prosecution. A day of judgment is coming in which both Jew and Gentile will give account according to their works.¹⁷ It will not be a good day.

The final verdict is now announced in verse 20 when Paul alludes to Psalm 143:2. The law has done its work. "*Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.*"¹⁸ Since the whole world (Jew and Gentile) are sinners, we cannot be justified through obedience to the law (literally ἐξ ἔργων νόμου, "works of law"),¹⁹ not because something is wrong with the law, but because we are sinful and don't obey the law. Therefore, we come under the law's curse.

Historically, Protestants have always believed that by this phrase "works of law," Paul meant that these were the good works which God required of us, and because of human sin, no one is capable of doing

¹⁴ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.196.

¹⁵ ὅτι (NIV—"so that") clearly indicates purpose.

¹⁶ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 170.

¹⁷ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 205.

¹⁸ διότι indicates that what follows, a loose citation of Psalm 143:2b, is a confirmation of what has just been said. Cf. Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.197.

¹⁹ There is some debate as to whether or not Paul is using the law in the narrower sense in this verse, or still in the broad sense. But as Moo points out, it really doesn't matter, because *nomos* either refers to that which is revealed by God in his word. See Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 205.

them. The Jews misunderstood the true purpose of the law, as did much of the medieval Roman church. This explains why it was so easy for the Reformers to refute the errors of Roman Catholicism from language such as Paul uses here—we cannot be justified by works of law.

Recently, however, advocates of the so-called New Perspective on Paul (especially E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn) contend that in this phrase, Paul does not at all refer to “good works” in the traditional sense, but instead to a series of cultural things (so-called “boundary markers”) which divided Jew from Gentile. The works of the law, therefore, supposedly include things like circumcision, observing the dietary laws, keeping the feast days and so on.

According to the this New Perspective, Paul is not condemning the Jews because they do not obey the law, but because the Jews were using the law, circumcision and so on, to self-righteously exclude Gentiles from the membership in the covenant, when they too had come to believe in Israel’s Messiah. For a host of reasons we don’t have time to discuss this morning, this so-called New Perspective fails miserably to explain the basic thrust of Paul’s letters, the historical background which lead to their composition, nor adequately describe second temple Judaism—that is, the Judaism of the New Testament era.²⁰

More importantly for our discussion, advocates of the New Perspective cannot at all explain language such as Paul has already used in Romans 2:13: “*For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous.*” And since no one, Jew or Gentile has obeyed the law, no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight. Paul is not rebuking the Jew for excluding Gentiles from the covenant. He’s rebuking the Jew for the mistaken assumption that possessing the law is the same thing as obeying the law. But only those who obey the law will be justified!²¹ And no one has obeyed the law, so, therefore, no one is righteous before God.

What, then, was the purpose of the law? The law, which is holy, righteous and good, does not justify us, because we do not keep it. It is through the law of God we learn what God requires of us, and what good works we must do in order to earn the life promised to us under the original covenant of works, and republished in the Ten Commandments. The problem is not with the law, but with us! When we realize that we have not obeyed the law, and when we realize that we have persisted in doing evil, it is inescapably clear that we deserve God’s just condemnation.²² This, then, is one purpose of the law, the so-called second use of the law, as a teacher of sin.

This is why Paul can say, *through the law we become conscious of sin*. The law shows us how terribly far we fall short of what God requires of us and how truly guilty we are for all of our sins. Indeed, if we

²⁰ See the helpful discussion of these issues in Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 206-217. For a thorough assessment of the Sanders-Dunn appraisal of Second Temple Judaism, see D. A. Carson, Peter T. O’Brien and Mark A. Seifrid, Justification and Variegated Nomism (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001).

²¹ Cf. Thomas Schreiner, The Law and Its Fulfillment (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), pp. 65-66.

²² Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 210. Cf. also Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.199; Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 172.

measure ourselves against others—as the Jews were doing with the Gentiles, we might mistakenly think of ourselves as righteous. But the standard God will use to measure us is the law. And we will never measure up to its righteous requirements. This is why Paul can state so emphatically, there are none righteous, no not one!

Well, there is one who kept the law and who is perfectly righteous, and Paul will take up his work for us in the next few verses. But there can be no good news of the saving work of Jesus Christ, without the bad news of human sin. And the bad news is really bad!

What then should we take with us from this section of Romans by way of application?

We begin with the fact that in this passage Paul says a great deal about the human condition. There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands the things of God. There is no one who seeks God, because all have turned away. Because we fall under this divine indictment, we are worthless. No one has persisted in doing good so as to earn eternal life under the terms of the original covenant with Adam, or the covenant that God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. Therefore, as Christians, we must reject the rosy optimism regarding human goodness and ability, so typical of modern American culture and American evangelicalism. While this optimistic assessment of human nature, is part and parcel of American life and culture, the fact is that Paul's biblical conception is much different from that of Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson or Charles Finney, who imbibed deeply from the springs of the Enlightenment, and who institutionalized the goodness of man in American life.

These verses also tell us that because of sin, no one seeks God. This must frame our doctrine of sin, as well as impact our approach to evangelism. The folly of crafting Christian worship to appeal to so-called "seekers," when there aren't any people truly seeking after God, ought to be self-evident. But because Americans view human nature as essentially good, we think all people need is a few enticements to come to faith. But if no one seeks God, no not one, what good will enticements serve? What Paul says such sinners need is to hear the gospel. This is because gospel alone can give life to those dead in sin. According to Paul, there is no such thing as a sinner seeking God. Rather, Paul teaches that God himself is the evangelist—although he uses human instruments. God seeks sinners and through the gospel, God reveals to them the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, freely available to all who believe! It is the gospel, not the human will, which is the power of God unto salvation. Paul is perfectly clear about this, and so must we.

Finally, this passage, like Romans 2:6-13, teaches us that God will judge us according to our works. So never, never, make the mistake of demanding God's justice. You just might get it. And if you get justice, you will be regarded as a law breaker, under God's just condemnation, and without any hope of heaven whatsoever. The gospel is not the message that God forgets about the original covenant of works and his law, so that he can forgive us of our sins by merely overlooking them. Rather, the gospel is about Jesus Christ dying for our sins, and fulfilling the righteous requirements of the law through his own perfect obedience to the commandments of God.

Indeed, in the gospel, God freely give to us what he demands of us under the law—the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ which renders guilty sinners and as perfectly righteous. But we will never see the gospel for the good news that it truly is, unless we are first crushed by these words—“there is no one righteous, no not one. There is no one who understands. There is no one who seeks for God, all have turned away. There is no one good. No, not one. But in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed!