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Romans 3: Universal Condemnation for Sin

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Chapter 3 Universal condemnation for sin

Paul has just established in 2:17-20 the fact that although the Jewish people are God's chosen and uniquely blessed nation, this did not guarantee individual spiritual security either through physical links back to Abraham or religious heritage. Being a direct descendant of Abraham, having and knowing God's law and being circumcised did not assure any of them an acceptance into heaven. On the contrary, such blessings only made them more accountable for their obedience. After having destroyed the false notions of a national religious security, Paul now anticipates the objections that the Jewish or moralist readers would have to the universal and equal condemnation of all sinners.

The apostle did not deny the importance of the Jewish heritage or their Mosaic ceremonies and feast days. They were God-given and important, but they were not, nor ever had been, the means for satisfying the divine standard of righteousness. Even though Paul continued to worship in the Temple when he was in Jerusalem and personally followed the moral Law of Moses, even circumcised Timothy who was part Jewish (Acts 16:1-3), he made it very clear that none of these outward religious acts had any saving benefit. The only way any person could become acceptable to God was through trusting in the cleansing of Jesus' blood sacrifice and gift of righteousness graciously given through Christ alone.

It was the truth of salvation which declared that only through faith in the grace of God giving His Son as the sacrifice for sins could man ever be acceptable to God. It exposed the worthlessness of his religious tradition and the hypocrisy of his supposed devotion to God as a self-righteous effort to appease God. The Jews could not stand any attack on their Abrahamic assurances and man-made legalism. Paul now confronts the objections that were raised whenever he taught Jews about God's plan of salvation.

I. Three Objections against Paul's teaching on salvation (Rom 3:1-8)

Paul typically would raise a question then answer it to preclude their objections, especially to his teachings in 2:17-19.

A. Paul supposedly taught there was no benefit to being a Jew (3:1-2)

^{NET} **Romans 3:1** Therefore what **advantage** does the Jew have, or what is the **value** of circumcision?

² Actually, there are many advantages. First of all, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.

3:1 If being an "inward" Jew (2:29) is so valuable to God, what is the importance of being a physical Jew? That is, if a person is a *physical* descendant of Abraham, this does not mean that he is necessarily a *spiritual* descendant. However, merely being a physical Jew has its benefits. The Jewish nation had benefits that the Gentiles did not have. In Rom 9:3-5 Paul will list eight benefits that the Jews had. Can you name them all?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

- The Jews were privileged in many ways. In addition, they were blessed, protected and delivered from enemies by God's direct intervention as no other nation. With this privilege came accountability. What did the prophet Amos warn the nation concerning their unfaithfulness in Amos 3:2?
- Who were the special invited guests in Jesus' teaching of the wedding feast in Matt 22:1-9? What were the consequences of the rejection of the special guests (Israel)?
- What was the questioning of God concerning Israel in Isa 5:4?

3:2 "First of all" suggests that Paul was going to begin a list, or that he is saying "the most important benefit of all is..." The latter makes the most sense because there is no second, third, etc. This incredible benefit is that the Jews were "**entrusted with**" (*pisteuo*, aorist passive tense: done in the past to the subject, "having committed the care of something to someone") the "**oracles** of God" (*logio*, a diminutive form of *logos*, "brief spoken words," used mostly of the Lord). What are the "oracles" in Acts 7:38 and how were they received in Acts 7:39?

- Sadly the Jews gloried more in their privileges than in their responsibilities concerning the Words of God entrusted to them. At one time they lost all copies of the inspired texts only to be discovered decades later by Hilkiah, the high priest, during a remodeling of the Temple, which was followed by a brief period of revival of obedience under King Josiah (2 Chron 34:14-33).
- During the Captivity, God's chastisement for their disregard of His Word, the Jews repented and created myriads of rules and regulations to make sure they obeyed the laws of God. Their pride in these rabbinical laws became more important than the oracles themselves (much as the Roman Catholic Canon Law and papal decrees superseded and often contradicted the authority of the original NT text in the church age). Most Jews followed the rabbinic tradition, but how did Timothy's Jewish heritage help him come to Christ in 2 Tim 3:15?

b. Paul supposedly annulled the promises to Israel (3:3-4)

The second argument against Paul was that he declared the Jews as lost sinners even though they had received all the promises to the chosen people. How could a Jew not be secure having received so many promises?

³ What then? If some did not **believe**, does their unbelief **nullify** the faithfulness of God?

⁴ Absolutely not! Let God be proven true, and every human being shown up as a liar, just as it is written: "so that you will be **justified** in your words and will prevail when you are judged."

3:3 Did Paul's teachings annul the promises to Israel? Part of the confusion that was common among the Jews was the promises to the nation of Israel being interpreted for the individual Jews. God never promised individual Jews an unconditional security regardless of their faith, repentance and faithfulness from the heart. How did God call the individuals in Israel to respond in Isa 55:6-7?

- Some Jews were unfaithful or unbelieving with respect to being entrusted with the "words" of God (3:2), but this does not annul the promises to the nation of Israel. Many of the OT promises were conditional on the faith and obedience of the people and linked to severe warnings. The unconditional promises were made to the nation of Israel, not to individuals. God's faithfulness to His promises to the nation of Israel

will be explained in Romans 9-11. God has postponed the promises to Israel, but not cancelled them. Can you see how Zech 12:10 describes a future repentance of Israel?

- Paul's accusers were right, in that the unbelief of individuals will not change the promises to the nation; however, the national security for promised restoration does not pass through to the individual throughout history. God cannot break His Word. Eventually, the unbelief of the Jews will be turned into faith, but for now, the individual unbelieving Jews were forfeiting their personal participation in the "blessing."

3:4 "Absolutely not!" is a frequent expression of Paul (3:6, 31; 6:1, 15; 7:7, 13; 11:1, 11).

God will always fulfill His Word, no matter what man says or thinks. God's faithfulness will be proven in Rom 9-11. What do these verses reveal about the character of God that can be trusted?

Deut 7:9

1 Cor 1:9

Heb 10:23

Heb 11:11

- Even if man proves unfaithful to the oracles of God, He remains faithful in His promises to man. Paul quotes David from Psalm 51:4 where David had broken his covenant with God, and claimed no personal righteousness or integrity. The objective is to show that men are often unfaithful, but God is ever faithful. Whatever God says is perfect and never fails. David declared that God will be proven right in His judgments (as He was in David's case). God will be vindicated when the world goes on trial. God is always true to His Word, thus He can be trusted without question. This same faithfulness requires chastisement for disobedience, which is often forgotten. How does our unfaithfulness affect God's ultimate response to us in 2 Tim 2:13?

c. Paul supposedly contradicts the holiness of God (3:5-8)

This section is an irrational argument which spins Scriptures to make what is obviously evil to be ultimately good. Oh, the deviousness of the human mind!

⁵ But if our unrighteousness **demonstrates** the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who **inflicts** wrath is not unrighteous, is he? (I am speaking in human terms.)

⁶ Absolutely not! For otherwise how could God judge the world?

⁷ For if by my lie the truth of God **enhances** his glory, why am I still actually being judged as a sinner?

⁸ And why not say, "Let us do evil so that good may come of it"?— as some who **slander** us **allege** that we say. (Their condemnation is **deserved!**)

3:5 The historical context of Paul's writing was to the remaining Jews of the captivity period after they were spread over the empire for their disobedience. Paul had heard someone say, "If our (especially the Jews) sin causes God's holiness to be more obvious, then our sin is clarifying that the holiness of God must exist."

- Second question: "Would it not be unjust for God to punish us (the Jews) for magnifying the purity of His holiness?" Literally this says, "That God is not unjust to inflict wrath, is he?"
- "I am speaking in human terms" (similar expression in Gal 3:15; Rom 6:19 and 1 Cor 9:8). Paul is saying, "This is the way the world might think, but not me. I am only repeating the charges against the gospel that I have heard."

3:6 If the evil of the Jewish unbelief and unfaithfulness were rewarded or not chastised, then how could God judge the world, which is full of sin? God will not be unfair by ignoring the guilty Jews by withholding His wrath. What is the character of God which makes this impossible in Rom 2:11?

- **Early in Genesis God is introduced as the “Judge of all the earth”** (Gen 18:25) and became a repeated theme of the prophets: God will eventually bring ultimate justice to all creation. If God did not judge the Jews for their disobedience, how could God judge the world? He would have no basis for a righteous, equitable and unbiased judgment, if He ignored or accepted sin. What is the basis of God’s judgment?
John 5:30
John 12:48
1 Peter 1:17

3:7 A reiteration of the principle of 3:5 in different terms. This question is confronting the false logic of antinomianism (“against-law”). Twisted minds were saying that the more wicked a person, the more it glorifies God’s grace to forgive him, the more one lies, the more evident God’s truth becomes. Thus antinomianism has a proposed good purpose. Congregations often have participants who hold ungodly views, which make the godly appear even godlier. Compare this view with the group in Jude 4.

3:8 These were not imaginary accusations of the Jews against the gospel because Paul adds, “as some who **slander** us allege that we say” (*blasphemeo*, present tense passive voice: “continuously being done to us” – “to speak reproachfully, revile, be evil spoken of”). The enemies of the gospel believed that the gospel of salvation by grace through faith alone would ignore God’s law and create a license to sin without guilt. How are the non-spiritual Jews called in Rev 2:9?

- Paul does not reply here to this argument but will later expand it in 6:1. Here he declares “their condemnation is deserved” – a conclusive argument of the justice of God’s judgment. To question God’s fairness in judging is to blaspheme the nature of the God of all justice. Such a one who questions God’s condemning nature is himself condemned.

II. All people are guilty (3:9-20)

Most people believe that they are basically good and acceptable to God. Most psychological systems are built on the premise that man is basically good and his environment either reinforces his goodness or turns it into negative reactions. If honest with himself, everyone knows he is not perfect and does wrong things, however it is defined. Typically he invents a number of ways to deal with this sense of imperfection like blaming others or circumstances, then comparing himself favorably with others to conclude that he is not so bad after all. But the sense of guilt persists and he wants to get rid of his guilt but does not know how. The more he tries to deny it, the more he is aware of his guilt.

People feel guilty because they are guilty, but guilt is just a symptom of a deeper problem, which the Bible calls “sin.” **Any technique of blame-transfer or denial of its reality only augments its reality.** The truth is that everyone’s guilt is caused by his own sin and unless his sin is removed, he remains under the reality of guilt. This is the beauty of the “gospel” (which means “good news”). Only the biblical message of the “good news” offers the only way a person can be totally free of all guilt, but the first step is to accept the fact that one is unacceptably sinful. The greatest need of all men is to find a way that their sin and guilt can be removed. The only answer for the world is through trusting in the death of Jesus Christ as full payment for all sin. Without the admission of personal sin there is not “good news.” If you don’t understand the “bad news,” the “good news” has no meaning.

A. The charge against all men (3:9)

⁹ What then? Are we **better** off? Certainly not, for we have already **charged** that Jews and Greeks alike are all under sin,

3:9 The first question, “What then?” (*oon*, “these things being so...”), is saying, “What more information do you need?” Paul has already shown how the immoral and moral pagan and the moral and immoral Jew are all equally condemned (Rom 1-2). The second question, “**Are we better off?**” (*proecho*, present tense: “continuously...” – “have” + “before,” thus “be preferred, be superior, surpass”). The subject of the pronoun “we” is not clear. Usually “we” or “us” refer to the Jews (as Paul was a Jew) and the “you” and “they/them” refer to Gentiles. However, here the Jews were just shown to have a superior position to the Gentiles, as they were “entrusted with the oracles of God,” but Paul nowhere else refers to himself as “we” Jews.

- It seems better to see the “we” as the believers, both Jew and Gentile in the church. The question is, “Are Christians [we] any “**better than**” either the Jews or the Gentiles?” The answer “Certainly not” clarifies the scope of the biblical condemnation: all mankind is included without exception: “we all have been equally **charged** under the guilt of sin” (*proaitiaomai*, aorist tense: “at one time in the past...” – “accuse beforehand, already charged”). No one is any better than any other person. This notion was absurd to the Jews, because they thought themselves superior and secure because of the Jewish heritage. Even Christians can think of themselves as more deserving of God’s salvation, but the truth is that everyone is burdened with a guilt of sin that must be acknowledged (be it little or much) as a total unworthiness and helplessness before God; then in humble faith to accept His forgiveness and cleansing from all our sins. How would you describe the difference between the lost and the saved in 1 John 1:8-9?

B. Paul’s 13-count indictment against sinful mankind (3:10-17)

Paul now builds on the final statement of 3:9, Jew and Gentile “alike are all under sin.” He will use the word “no one” (“none” in other translations) or “not even one” six times to clarify that not a living soul is righteous before God. Paul’s argument will find evidence from six OT passages. This indictment will have three encompassing focuses: character (vv. 10-12), conversation (vv. 13-14) and conduct (vv. 15-17).

1. Character of the condemned (3:10-12) – Six indictments:

¹⁰ just as it is written: “There is **no one** righteous, **not even one**,

¹¹ there is **no one** who understands, there is **no one** who seeks God.

¹² **All** have turned away, together they have become worthless; there is **no one** who shows kindness, **not even one**.”

3:10 First indictment: Mankind is universally evil, without exception quoting from Ps 14:1, “The fool has said in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; There is no one who does good.” In Romans “righteousness” or “doing good” is a major theme being repeated 30 times. The same Greek root word is translated “justified,” or “justification” as well. There is not a single person who has ever lived, “not even one,” (except the sinless Lord Jesus Christ—2 Cor 5:21) who has been “righteous” by God’s standard inwardly and behaviorally. Truly, there has been many noble and good deeds done by men through history, but none come close to the righteous perfection of God

Himself, which is the only righteousness that He can accept. What is God's standard according to Matt 5:48?

- **Man typically sees degrees of differences among people** in every realm. Some are better than others in sports, business, writing, appearance, and altruism or good deeds, but in God's view there are no levels of righteousness as far as His acceptance is concerned. He can only accept perfect sinlessness or the perfect righteousness of Christ. Period. There never has been any middle ground or other alternative. How does the last phrase in 3:22 clarify God's perspective?
- **If everyone in our hemisphere were infected with a virus** and the only hope for the Americans was to swim across the Atlantic to Europe or Africa, some could swim further than others, but it would make no difference, no one could make it.

3:11a Second indictment: Man is spiritually ignorant as the Psalmist wrote, “no one understands” (*sunieimi*, present tense: “continually or habitually...” – “bring together, put the perception with the thing perceived, join together in the mind”). From the evidence of creation all men should discern that there must be a magnificent, powerful, ingenious, humorous, intelligent Designer-Creator (Rom 1:20). Men chose not to put the obvious evidence together with the inevitable implication of a personal, all-powerful God who cares. Why do men not have the discernment to understand about God in these verses?
1 Cor 2:14
Eph 4:18

3:11b Third indictment: Not only is mankind willfully ignorant but even worse, “no one seeks God” (quoting from Psalm 14:2). When God is perceived as a threat to the sinner's lifestyle, he does not see the eternal blessing of sharing this life with God as a high value nor does he have any motivation to “seek God” (*ekzeteo*, present tense: “continually or habitually...” – “seek out, investigate, scrutinize”). Though religions are plenteous with multitudes of followers, the truth is that they are not seeking the true God, but rather they are seeking a false god of their own invention and convenience. The true and only God has promised that anyone sincerely seeking Him will find him (Jer 29:13). How does what a person seeks in his life reveal his true character in these verses?
John 5:44
Phil 2:21
Heb 11:6

3:12a Fourth indictment: All men prefer to go their own way, quoting from Psalms 14:3, “all have turned away” (*ekklino*, aorist tense: “At one time in the past...”-- seen as a collective act—“to deviate from the right way and course, to shun”). Militarily it is used of a deserter from a battle. How do these verses describe this common tendency of people?
Isa 53:6
2 Pet 2:15, 21
Prov 14:12

3:12b Fifth indictment: The natural man is spiritually “worthless” (*achreioo*, aorist tense, “to make useless, unserviceable, or depraved”). The term is used to describe milk that has soured or is rancid, therefore it has become unfit to drink or to use to make butter or cheese. This is the only use in the NT. Jesus described the worthless dead branches of a tree as destined to be cut off and thrown into a fire (John 15:6). Notice how false religious people are described in Titus 1:16.

3:12c Sixth indictment: None of the natural men “do good” (*chrestotes*, “moral goodness, integrity, kindness”). In comparison with other human beings some are better than others, but in comparison with the righteousness and holiness of God, no one can be viewed as morally good or perfect. Behind what often appears to be benevolent acts is an unseen selfishness or self-centered benefit caused by sin. What did Isaiah say about the righteousness or goodness of man in comparison with the holiness of God in 64:6?

2. The conversation of the condemned (3:13-14) – 4 indictments:

The true character of a person is inevitably revealed by what he says: “...the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.” (Matt 12:34).

¹³ "Their throats are open graves, they deceive with their tongues, the poison of asps is under their lips."

¹⁴ "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."

3:13a Seventh indictment: The deadness within a person is opened to the outside world through the throat and is evidenced by the sounds and voices heard: “throats are open graves” (from Ps 5:9). Where embalming is not practiced corpses must be buried within 24 hours due to the rapid disfigurement and stench of decay. Natural man refuses to cover the spiritual deadness within and exposes the stench of his foul words without awareness of how foul and offensive they are to the righteousness of God. How is this described in these verses?

Matt 15:18

Prov 15:2, 28

James 3:6

3:13b Eighth indictment: Their tongues are “deceitful” (*dolios*, imperfect tense: continuous and repetitive action in the past: “keep on...” – “to deal treacherously, use fraud, falsehood, trickery”). The idea is to lure or deceive someone into a decision. It is used of baiting a hook to disguise the danger of the hook. How is the tongue of the natural man described here?

Prov 36:1-3

Ps 36:3

Jer 9:3-5

3:13c Ninth indictment: Their lips are poisonous to others, quoting from Ps 140:3. This was a common metaphor in Jesus’ day for false teachers who destroy people with their false hopes. An “asp” is a small and venomous snake. As the poisonous snake is untamable so is the tongue of the unregenerate (James 3:8). How is the tongue an evidence of a transformed life in James 1:26?

3:14 Tenth indictment: Their “mouth is full of cursing and bitterness” (from Ps 10:7). The word “cursing” (*ara*, “prayer, supplication, curse, malediction”) has the idea of wishing the worst for another person in a public and open forum in defamatory remarks. The word “bitterness” (*pikria*, “plants that produce inedible or poisonous fruit,” used metaphorically of a person whose influence or actions become harmful to a community, a hostile attitude, angry, resentment,” FRIBERG) is an openly expressed emotional hostility against someone perceived as an enemy. How did David describe the vocal attacks in his day in Ps 64:3-4?

3. The conduct of the condemned (3:15-17) – 3 indictments:

¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood,
¹⁶ ruin and misery are in their paths,
¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known."

3:15 Eleventh indictment: The unsaved are intuitively murderous: "feet are swift to shed blood." Ethnic cleansing, mass genocide and merciless killings are common news items. For those not involved, it seems unbelievable that the human heart can become so depraved. "The most savage animals do not destroy so many of their own species to appease their hunger, as man destroys of his fellows, to satiate his ambition, his revenge, or his cupidity [greed]" {Haldane 1958:120}. MacArthur writes, "Even in the United States, with its Christian heritage, since the turn of the twentieth century twice as many of its citizens have been slain in private acts of murder than have been killed in all the wars of its entire history {MacArthur 1991:190}. Though often repressed, the seed of murder is part of every sin infected heart and only needs the right environment to express itself. Where do these actions in man find their origins, according to Jesus in Matt 15:18-19?"

3:16 Twelfth indictment: Given full sway, "destruction and misery are in their paths." Thankfully laws and society often tend to put a cap on unleashing the evil of human nature on the rest of mankind. The word "**destruction**" (*suntrimma*, "broken, shattered, ruin"—a compound word that means breaking into pieces) is similar to the concept of "abusive" people who destroy others. "**Misery**" (*talaiporia*, "an emotional condition that arises from inner or outer torment, wretchedness," FRIBERG) is the result of selfish, self-centered sinful actions or reactions taken by one sinner against another. How can a transformed life change this tendency as described in James 3:9-10?

3:17 Thirteenth indictment: Sinful man cannot build peaceful relationship by following his instincts and intuition, but, if he wants peace, he must follow rules that force him to act against his natural tendencies. Ultimately peace will only come on earth when the "Prince of Peace" returns to reign and in the human heart when the Savior removes all enmity between God and the sinner who trusts in His redeeming work on the cross.

C. The Basic corruption of man's nature (3:18)

¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

3:18 The full text of ^{NET}Ps 36:1, "An evil man is rebellious to the core. He does not fear God." This was the point of the first attack of Satan on humans: "Surely, you shall not die" (Gen 3:4); that is, he said, "Do not be afraid that God will do what He said He would. Do whatever you want. There are no repercussions." The main reason people will take seriously the Word of God is if they believe that God will do what He says He will. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Prov 1:7). When Eve was deceived into thinking that God would not do what He said He would, then the temptation became insurmountable. Anyone who thinks he can get away with sin or disobedience finds an inner motivation to yield to his selfish, sensual desires, only revealing his true nature. What to these verses reveal about the proper attitude towards the "fear of God" that transforms a life?

Matt 10:28

Rom 11:20

2 Cor 5:11

D. The Final Verdict to the Indictments (3:19-20)

This is Paul's final verdict addressed primarily to the Jewish readers concerning the purpose of the Law, since they would understand the implications of these statements.

¹⁹ 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** may be held **accountable** to God.

²⁰ For **no one** is **declared** righteous before him by the works of the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

3:19 Paul includes himself stating, “we know” (*oida*, perfect tense: past completed action that is still valid, a knowledge that is “perceived with the eyes or senses, with certainty”). The Law's mandates are “to those who are under the law.” Is this just the Jews or does it include everyone on earth? If the results of knowing the Law is “every mouth may be **silenced** [Gk., “stopped”] and the whole world may be held **accountable** [Gk. “answerable”] to God,” then everyone, one way or another must be “under the law.” There is no defense for either the Jews or the Gentiles who are under the equally condemning law of the conscience (Rom 2:11-15). No one is outside the accountability to God for sin.¹ The law was given to show that everyone has sinned and needs a Savior who can resolve the sin problem before God. There is no exception. What happens to the Gentiles who have never known the written Law of Moses according to Rom 2:11-15?

3:20 To preclude the argument that some people might possibly be able to live a righteous life the apostle adds: “no one is declared righteous before him by the works of the law.” For example: if a young man of 15 were to kill a person with a 38 caliber pistol, this would make him a murderer. Few would question this. Now, if we were to jump ahead 50 years till that same young man is now 65, the question is, Is he still a murderer? Even though he does not kill another person for 50 years, he is still a murderer. It does not change. Most will accept this concept, but the same is true when applied to liar, thief, adulterer, coveter (luster), disobedient or dishonoring a parent, or cursing (taking the name of the Lord in vain). If you do it once, you have violated His command. Adam only had to violate God's command one time, and he and all his descendants were condemned as sinners. The purpose of the law is to teach the sinner that he has sinned before a holy God. What is the purpose of the Law in Gal 3:24?

III. Seven Characteristics of the righteousness provided by God's grace (3:21-25a)

By condemning the entire human race, God revealed His infinite righteousness since not a single human being (with the exception of Jesus Christ) could ever obey perfectly the Ten Commandments or the law He gave to man. All mankind stands guilty as charged. Now the Judge becomes the solution to the sinner's problem – Christ paid the penalty for sin and

¹ The best way to begin the presentation of the Gospel is by asking the question that everyone delights in answering positively: “Do you think you are a good person?” Inevitably, the answer will be “Yes, I do the best I can” or something similar. A follow-up question might be, “God has given us a test to see how “good” we are before Him. Would you like to know what He will ask us?” When their curiosity drives them to answer “yes,” begin by asking them, “Have you ever told a lie, even a little lie?” When they respond “yes” ask the clarification question: “What does that make you?” They may need to be guided to the implication that having lied they are now a “liar.” The second test is “Have you ever stolen anything, even something little?”... “What does that make you?” They need to admit that it makes them a thief. “Jesus taught that if someone has lustful thoughts about someone not your spouse, that God sees it as adultery. Have you ever had lustful thought about someone?” “What does that make you?” Then you can summarize their responses, “You have admitted to me that you are a liar, a thief and an adulterer. This is only three of the Ten Commandments. Do you still think you are a good person?” If they see this clearly, they will have no excuse and only be able to say they are guilty. Now is when it is time to tell them the good news that Jesus came to save sinners, not the ones who thought they were already good enough. He paid the penalty for their sins, so that they could be totally free of guilt.

offers His perfect righteousness to cover the sinner before God. Justification occurs when God declares the sinner as righteous, imputing or crediting the believer's account with Christ's righteousness, which is provided by God's grace and received by personal faith in His promise. Can you answer the question of Job (9:2)?

If this is the sequence that God has revealed for salvation to man, it seems that this same sequence must be used when men explain the gospel to one another: it begins with the diagnosis of the disease of sin and the symptoms of guilt in every man. Until this is made clear through the exposure to the law of God (that no one has ever kept, thus all are guilty without excuse), only then does God's remedy, the gospel, have meaning and importance. Until man is desperate he will not rely exclusively and completely on the only cure for man's sin: the righteousness provided by the redeeming sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

After revealing God as the Judge and Prosecutor, indicting and convicting all men of their sins, now God is revealed as Defendant and Savior (beginning in 3:21). He extends His offer of a full pardon and a righteousness standing in His sight, to all men if they would only hear, believe and depend upon His provision to be saved. Seven aspects of the righteousness that God offers to those who trust and depend on His Son are now described.

A. Righteousness has nothing to do with a legalistic system (3:21a)

²¹ **But now apart from the law the righteousness of God** (which is attested by the law and the prophets) has been **disclosed**—

3:21a The connective, “**but now,**” marks a sharp contrast with the preceding section of Romans: “No one will be declared righteous in His [God's] sight by observing the Law” [or any legalistic system] (v. 20). The phrase “apart from the law” is in the emphatic position in the Greek text. The righteousness that God offers is totally apart from any legalistic system. The word “**law**” (*nomos*, “anything established, a custom, a law, a command”) can refer to the Mosaic law or the entire OT or the concept of any legalistic system of human efforts to become acceptable to God. God's offer of righteousness through faith in His Son, has nothing to do with human efforts to be good. Notice God's attitude toward human efforts to be righteous in Isa 57:12. Now see how this distinction between human effort and God's offer of righteousness is reiterated in the following verses:

Gal 2:16

Gal 5:1-2

Rom 3:28

Gal 3:10-11

Eph 2:8-9

Titus 3:5

B. Righteousness is discovered by learning God's revelation (3:21b)

3:21b Mankind would never know about God's plan to offer His righteousness to sinful man except that He reveal it to us, as He did throughout the OT. The phrase “law and the prophets” often referred to the entire OT (Matt 5:17), where the “law” referred to the five books of Moses and the “prophets” the remaining books of the OT, which were all revealed through prophets. The Jews revered the Scriptures, but did not understand that the Scriptures themselves, though divinely revealed, did not possess power to save. “You [Jews] study the scriptures [OT] thoroughly because you think in them you possess eternal life, and it is these same scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39). God's revelation pointed toward the promised Messiah, the Savior who would live a sinless life yet die an ignominious death guilty of all the sins of the world, while suffering the wrath of God for

guilty mankind (Isa 53). All this made it possible to freely offer to all who believe in Him His perfect righteousness. What are all the things that Christ become for us in 1 Cor 1:30?

C. Righteousness can only be acquired by faith (3:22a)

²² namely, the **righteousness of God** through the **faithfulness of Jesus Christ** for all who believe. For there is **no distinction**,

3:22a Paul reiterates that he is referring to the perfect righteousness of God, not the imperfect righteousness of human efforts. The first part of the verse is the continuation of the previous verse and is called an appositional clause, which could be translated “a righteousness from God through faith.” The NET Bible translated the phrase “faithfulness of Christ” instead of “faith in Christ” because of the Greek grammar which is translated as a “subjective genitive,” that is, Christ is subject or actor of the “**faithfulness**” (*pisteos* can be translated either “faith” or “faithfulness”).² Most translations prefer the objective genitive view: “faith of Christ.” The verse has either a redundant emphasis on faith (“...faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe”) or an emphasis on the reliable and worthy objective of our faith (“...faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe”). Regardless, there is no human effort that God can accept, rather only a righteousness that is granted to the ones who “**believe**” (*pisteuo*, present tense, “continuously...” – “to think to be true, place confidence in”).

- How to believe becomes the issue. It obviously means more than mere intellectual acceptance, since even the demons “believe” that God exists (James 2:19). “Believe” is used 59 times in John and 144 times in the NT. To believe in something is to trust it implicitly without question and to depend upon it without hesitation. It involves the **will** (you have to decide to accept God’s solution in His Word and reject man’s theories), the **emotions** (you have to want to be acceptable to God by His standards and want Him as a permanent part of your life) and the **intellect** (you have to comprehend the revelation we have been given in the Word and trust it completely). Who are the ones that God is pleased to save in 1 Cor 1:21?

D. Righteousness is provided for all mankind without distinction (3:22b-23)

^{22b} ... for all who believe. For there is no distinction,

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

3:22b The salvation that God offers is sufficient for all mankind, but must be heard of, understood and trusted in: “**all who believe**.” The only basis of the transference of Christ’s righteousness to our credit before God is through faith, that is, those who believe in its truth. The connective “for” ties the second phrase to the preceding assurance that God’s righteousness is offered to all mankind who believe. There are no limitations or “**distinctions**” (*diastole*, “difference, discrimination”) of race or privilege in the new age of the Church. This whole concept contradicts the supposed privileged position of the Jew. Since all are equally guilty of sin (3:9), the remedy is offered with identical result equally to all sinners worldwide. There are no privileged groups, special people nor restricted people in this amazing offer. God does not discriminate. His offer is without limitation to “all who believe.” There is no chosen privileged people who accept the offer because they are made to do so by some select divine manipulation. The whole sense of the Scripture is that God

²² Another verse where these same phrases are encountered is Gal 2:16 where the phrase “justified by the faith of Christ” is translated “faithfulness of Christ”^{NET}. What does “faith of Christ” refer to? Most translations change it to “faith in Christ,” but this is not the meaning of the genitive form. Does the verse focus on belief in the faithfulness of Christ or are the phrases “believe in Jesus Christ” and “faith of Christ” synonyms in apposition. It appears to make more sense that we are believing or trusting in the faithfulness of Christ to provide us His righteousness by grace.

exposes the sinfulness of all men then provides a perfect solution to sin's offence before God through the free offer of His own righteousness to all who trust in His character and promise. How do these verses help clarify this generosity?

Acts 13:39

Rom 9:30

John 6:37

3:23 Just as there is “no difference” in the offer of His righteousness, so there is “no difference” in the sinfulness or lostness of men. This, likewise, was a blow to the Jewish readers who were convinced that they were better than the Gentiles. The “**for**” connective ties the phrase “**there is no difference**” with the blanket condemnation “all have **sinned**” (*hamartano*, aorist tense: a past action, “miss the mark, fail of doing, err”) and also all have “**come short**” (*hustereo*, present tense: “continually, habitually...” - “to come too late, fail to reach, be inferior to”) of the “glory of God.” This glory is His outward attributes and splendor of holiness. No amount of good works or determined obedience to the law can ever measure up to this standard. In fact, just one violation (as with Adam) condemns any person as a sinner. Can you prove this last statement from James 2:10? See also 4:17.

E. Righteousness is given freely because of His grace (3:24a)

²⁴ But they are justified freely by his grace ...

3:24a Just as there is no distinction between those who need God's salvation, so there is no distinction between those who receive it: “they are **justified**” (*dikaioo*, present passive participle: “being continually without end” – “declared righteous”), which is a legal term stating that all the demands of the law are fulfilled on behalf of the believing sinner through the crediting of the righteousness of Christ to the sinner's record. This changes the judicial standing of the sinner before the righteous demand of the holiness of God. This whole transaction is done “**freely**” (*dorean*, “of a gift bestowed without payment, gratis,” FRIBERG) thus totally unmerited and undeserved. In addition it was “by his **grace**” (*charis*, “favorable attitude, expression of kindness”), which is a favorite term of Paul, used 24 times in Romans. The character of God is abundant in “grace” as much as it is in righteousness and justice. God's nature condemns sin, then condemns His Son, the Lord Jesus, one time on a cross for the sins of mankind. How could anyone think himself worthy of or deserving of the sacrifice of Christ, just because he tries to do some good deeds? Absurd! Only because He was motivated by His grace to offer His righteousness to undeserving sinners could any man ever be saved. Why is the “free-grace” manner the only way a person can receive God's righteousness? (compare Gal 2:21).

F. Righteousness is accomplished through His redemption (3:24b)

²⁴ through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

3:24b It would be impossible and unjust for God to declare someone righteous without dealing with his sin and guilt. An offence demands a just punishment for justice's sake. Since God is just, there must be a just penalty paid for the sins of mankind for God's justice to be satisfied. This is provided through the “**redemption**” that is in Christ Jesus (*apolutrosis*, “to release someone by payment of ransom, setting free”). This is the term for buying back a slave or prisoner through payment of a ransom, thus “liberation or deliverance.” The term is used ten times in the NT. What can you learn about this term from these verses?

Eph 1:7

Eph 1:14
 Heb 9:15

G. Righteousness was paid for by His atoning sacrifice (3:25a)

^{25a} God publicly **displayed** him at his death as the **mercy seat** accessible through faith.

3:25a The public death of Christ on the cross under the wrath of God was the price of the payment to release sinful men from the bondage to sin and Satan. This payment is good for all who hear and trust in God's gracious promise of forgiveness, righteousness and salvation. God displayed Christ on the cross as the "**mercy seat**" (*hilasterion*, "place where God forgives sins by means of the blood of a sacrifice victim"). Once a year the high priest in Judaism sprinkled the blood of a sacrificed lamb on the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies in the Temple at Jerusalem. This act demonstrated that a lamb's life had been sacrificed as a substitute for the just punishment that sinners deserved. God chose to demonstrate His "mercy seat" on the cross of Calvary. How would you describe this "mercy seat" in these verses?

1 Tim 2:6
 1 Pet 1:18-19
 Heb 10:10, 14

- **The phrase "through faith in his blood"** makes reference to the horrible price that was paid under the law to place the penalty of sin on an innocent victim as a substitute for the sinner. The faith is the trust that God's full and absolute justice is satisfied once-and-for-all through the shed blood of the sacrificial lamb. When John the Baptist introduced Jesus he said, "Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). The focus on the "blood" refers to more than the physical red corpuscles, because the blood is only shed in the death of the sacrifice victim. "The wages of sin is death" (6:23), which in the OT sacrifice metaphor was pointing to Lamb of God shedding His blood which was then offered as a "sin covering" to all who believe.³ What do these verses reveal about our trust in the blood of Christ?

Rom 5:9
 Eph 2:13
 Col 1:14
 Col 1:20
 Heb 9:12
 Heb 9:14
 Heb 9:22
 Heb 13:12
 1 Pet 1:18-19
 1 John 1:7
 Rev 1:5

³ An optical illusion occurs when a red object is placed under a red light – it changes color or disappears. In the Bible sin has a color: it is "red" ("Though your sins have stained you like the color red, you can become white like snow" (Isa 1:18). If we are stained red through sin, and a red "lens" (the blood covering) is placed between the sinner and God, all that is red in the sinner disappears from God's perspective and he is made as "white like snow." Amazing!

IV. The Righteousness of God reveals His character (3:25b-31)

The theme of Romans is “justification by faith,” the essence of the gospel message. A clear understanding of God’s plan of salvation reveals the amazing character of the God in whom we trust. The more we learn, the more trustworthy He becomes. Our present passage clarifies several aspects of the gospel of free justification through the cross of Jesus Christ that reveal more of God’s character.

A. His Righteousness reveals his forbearance and justice for all time (3:25b-26)

^{25b} This was to **demonstrate** his righteousness, because God in his **forbearance** had passed over the sins previously committed.

²⁶ This was also to **demonstrate** his righteousness in the present time, so that he would be just and the justifier of the one who lives because of Jesus’ faithfulness

3:25b “This” refers back to the propitiatory death of Christ which was to “**demonstrate**” (*endeixis*, “proof, evidence”) His righteousness. Through the apparent “unjust” crucifixion of Christ on the cross, God provided sufficient punishment against His sinless Son, to satisfy His justice against all sin of every sinner. God’s righteousness is exalted by the extreme price that had to be paid (the sacrifice of the Son of God) in order to remain Just in forgiving the sin of any sinner who is willing to trust Him. Furthermore, during the OT His “**forbearance**” (*anochē*, “toleration, patience, self-restraint, holding-back hostilities,” LIDDELL-SCOTT) in anticipation of the cross of Calvary where eventually His justice would be satisfied enabled God to “**pass over**” (*pareisis*, “overlooking (for the time being).”⁴ What can we learn about God’s trustworthiness and amazing grace in these verses?

Deut 32:4

Ps 78:38-39

Acts 17:30-31

3:26 The cross was the highest “demonstration” (“proof”) of his righteousness or justice “at this **present** time” (*nun*, “now” in the sense of present age), that is, He was “including them in what he would do in this present time”^{NLT}. God wants to be known as the God who perfectly justifies the sinner through His grace, love, mercy and wisdom. He demonstrated it and now He wants us to unashamedly proclaim it around the world. The Psalmist saw this climactic event and described it in Ps 85:10. How accurate do you think his description of the cross is portrayed in the imagery?

- The serious dilemma of a workable salvation was not getting sinful men to come to a holy God, but rather, getting a holy God to accept sinful men without violating His holiness and justice. The only way he could be both Just and the Justifier would be if He personally met all the penalty demands of justice against sin, then He could declare that the price has been paid in full for every sinner who believes in Him. How does this reinforce Acts 4:12?

B. Five questions that reveal God’s plan for redemption (3:27-31)

Paul either anticipates questions that might be asked or uses the questions as a rhetorical device to clarify the salvation by faith through grace.

²⁷ Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded! By what **principle**? Of works? No, but by the **principle of faith!**

⁴ The KJV translates this word as “remission” which goes too far. This was a temporary action anticipating a future penalty to be paid by a perfect sacrifice.

²⁸ For we consider that a person is **declared righteous** by faith apart from the works of the law.

3:27 First question: Is there any self-exalting, self-satisfaction, or pride in this faith-salvation? The answer is “it is excluded!” Since every aspect of salvation is in the cross of Christ and there is nothing that any sinner can do to improve or merit the work of Christ, there is no reason for pride or self-righteousness. Quite the contrary: for the believer who understands the Word and trusts in its revelation, there is an overwhelming sense of unworthiness, a feeling of “How could He be so gracious?” How does Luke 18:13 exemplify the attitude of a true believer?

- **Second question:** “By what **principle**” (*nomos*, “law, anything established, custom”) is boasting excluded? That is to say, Why is boasting inappropriate? Is it on the basis of works? If man could work enough or be good enough to be justified then he would have reason to boast or brag, or feel proud of himself. The principle of works could not possibly exclude boasting. Paul explains, “By the principle of faith,” which quenches any sense of self-improvement, or self-righteousness because one’s dependency is shifted from self to a total dependency on Christ as Savior. Here are four reasons why faith is the law of God’s kingdom:

1. Faith annuls the pride of human effort, because faith is not a deed or work we do.
2. Faith glories in what God has done, not what man has done.
3. Faith confesses our inability to measure up to God’s standard, thus we need help.
4. Faith is based on dependency and indebtedness to God, not our good deeds for God.

3:28 Paul’s clear declaration of a faith-based salvation: “a person is declared righteous by faith apart from the works of the law.” Paul begins this verse with “we **consider**” (*logizomai*, “come to a settled conclusion”). The similar negative statement of this principle in 3:20 concludes with the purpose of the law: to reveal our sinfulness, not our goodness, thus it is an impossible means of salvation. The only option left is to trust in the promise of God to declare us righteous merely because we trust Him and His Word. Good deeds are important for the believer, but they have nothing to do with our salvation. The preposition “**apart from**” (*choris*, “separate, without, no relationship to, no association with,” THAYER) excludes any relationship or benefit of good works or attempts at obedience to the law, no matter how close one comes to obeying all of the law. It is not close enough. God’s plan contemplates the utter failure of man to meet God’s demand for perfect righteousness, then He creates a perfect means to grant to any and all men who desire acceptance before Him with His perfect righteousness and eternal life. It could only work if it were completely by faith alone without human effort. No other religion or human being has ever thought up such a plan.

²⁹ Or is God the God of the **Jews only**? Is he not the God of the Gentiles too? Yes, of the Gentiles too!

³⁰ Since God is **one**, he will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through **faith**.

3:29a Third question: “Is God the God of the Jews only?” This evidently was a common belief among the Jews. This was a hard conviction to change even in the early churches. Evangelism for the first decade of the Church was only for the Jews (Acts 11:19). It took a miraculous intervention of God to persuade Peter to cross the racial barrier and speak the gospel to a Gentile (Acts 10). Even then it was almost 20 years before the Jerusalem church would recognize that Gentiles could be saved (Acts 15). God had promised Abraham that he

and his descendants would be a blessing to all peoples on earth (Gen 12:3), that is, the offering of salvation of all men. The Jewish nation was chosen for this purpose to bless the world, but they became twisted in prideful separation from the world despising the ones God wanted them to bless. Why were the Jews not open to the Gospel, but the Gentiles were in Acts 28:27-28?

3:29b Fourth question: “Is he not the God of the Gentiles too? Yes, of the Gentiles too!”

God is the God of the Gentiles as well as of the Jews. The phrase “there is no difference” has little impact today, but in the first century this was one of the most difficult doctrines to accept. How could Jewish Christians not have a special place before Gentile Christians? Is the Jewish God just letting the Gentiles come in if they become like the Jews (Judaizers) or can they remain Gentiles and God still accept them?

3:30 “Since God is one”—The Jewish “*Shema*” (Deut 6:4) declares that “God is one” not only in being, but also in creation, where He is equally the God of the Jews as He is of the Gentiles. Just as men are equally guilty before God (3:19), so they are universally offered His gracious salvation through faith in His Son.

1 Cor 8:5-6

1 Tim 2:3-6

Rom 1:16

³¹ Do we then **nullify** the law through faith? Absolutely not! Instead we **uphold** the law.

3:31 Fifth question: “Do we nullify the law by this faith?” -- The Jewish reader was probably asking if this “faith” would nullify the Jewish customs, traditions and the Mosaic Law to the point that the Christians do not have to obey God’s law? Emphatically the answer is “No.” The verb “**nullify**” (*katargeo*, present tense: “continually...” – “to render idle, inoperative”) means that it has no use, but that is not the case at all. The Jewish cultural issues are not the conflict with faith. The reason the answer to this question is an emphatic “no” is that faith-righteousness gives the only answer to man’s dilemma, which the Mosaic law [especially the Ten Commandments] creates: man cannot measure up to God’s standards. The law continues to have a critical role in clarifying the gospel message to sinners. This is why the believers “**uphold**” the law (*histemi*, present tense: “continually...” – “to cause to stand, make firm, establish”), because it is the key element for the unsaved to understand the need for the gospel, so we continually establish the purpose of the law which is to lead men to Christ. Can you trace the progression from “under the law” to being free from the guilt of the law in this sequence of verses?

Gal 3:23 - As unsaved, “we were held in custody under the law, being kept as prisoners **until the coming faith** would be revealed.” Everyone in the world is condemned under the law until faith in Jesus Christ satisfies the penalty for sin.

Rom 3:19 – “Whatever the law says, it says to those **who are under the law**, so that **every mouth** may be silenced and **the whole world** may be held accountable [become guilty] to God” – the effect of the law is to reveal the guilt [and need of a Savior] of everyone in the world.

Gal 4:5 - Christ came “to redeem them that were **under the law**,” that is, the whole world.

Gal 3:24 - The continual purpose of the law: “The Law had become our **guardian [schoolmaster, tutor] to lead us to Christ** that we could be declared righteous by faith.” It teaches the sinner how guilty he is before a holy God.

NOTES

Gal 5:18 - “But if you are led by the Spirit (following the new birth by putting your faith in Christ), **you are not under the law.**”

Rom 6:14 - “For you **are not under law**, but under grace.” The Christian is free from a legalistic life of guilt to live in godliness and gratitude to such a gracious Savior.