

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT

ROM. 3:9 What then? are we better *than they*? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin;

10 As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one:

11 There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.

12 They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

13 Their throat *is* an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps *is* under their lips:

14 Whose mouth *is* full of cursing and bitterness:

15 Their feet *are* swift to shed blood:

16 Destruction and misery *are* in their ways:

17 And the way of peace have they not known:

18 There is no fear of God before their eyes.

19 Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

20 Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin.

NOTES

No One Is Righteous

Lesson Text: Romans 3:9-20

Related Scriptures: Isaiah 59:1-8; Psalms 14:1-3; 53:1-3;
Romans 2:1-16

TIME: A.D. 56

PLACE: from Corinth

GOLDEN TEXT—"As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10).

Lesson Exposition

THE POWER OF SIN—Rom. 3:9

As this letter was first read to the Roman believers, with a significant number of them coming from a Jewish background, they may have been tempted to say "amen" to what Paul wrote about Gentile sinfulness. But here Paul turns his attention to Jews, stressing that they are really no better than Gentiles. It is the answer he intends to the question, "Are we better than they?" (3:9). In case anyone was in doubt, Paul answers, "No, in no wise." Consequently, "both Jews and Gentiles" are under sin's power.

THE PERVASIVENESS OF SIN—Rom. 3:10-18

Unrighteous (Rom. 3:10-11). At this point, Paul embarks on a rapid-fire list of Old Testament quotations to press home his point, namely, that all people are sinners. Quoting from the Hebrew Scriptures would have carried weight with Paul's Jewish readers.

The first quotation is from Psalm 14:3: "There is none that doeth good, no, not one." Significantly, that Psalm begins by stating, "The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God."

Jews might have assumed or wished that the psalmist had said this only about Gentiles, but it deals with the general corruption of the whole human race, Jews included. Since most people think of themselves, and of many others, as inherently good, the truth contained in this verse goes against the grain.

The word "righteous" in Romans 3:10 can carry both the meaning of godliness and the idea of being in a right relationship with God (Jas. 5:16; 1 Pet. 3:12). But here Paul was using it in the sense of absolute righteousness, which is an impossibility since, as fallen beings, we are sinners by nature and by choice.

Romans 3:11 echoes Psalm 14:2: "The Lord looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God." There are, of course, many ways that people do not understand. Obviously, the atheist is a fool (cf. Ps. 14:1), because in his ignorance and arrogance, he has come to a self-condemning conclusion.

There is a sense in which we can and should seek God (Ps. 34:4; Isa.

55:6), but in our fallen state we seek everything but God.

Unprofitable (Rom. 3:12-13). Paul continues to quote Psalm 14: “They are all gone out of the way” (Rom. 3:12). Psalm 14:3 says, “They are all gone aside.” The idea is that the human race has erred from God’s path, the straight and narrow way that leads to heaven. And, as Jesus said, “Few there be that find it” (Matt. 7:14).

The line that “they are together become unprofitable” (vs. 12) is the same as “they are altogether become filthy” in Psalm 14:3. The word translated “filthy” could be rendered “corrupt,” which is what all humans are, spiritually speaking.

Beginning with Romans 3:13, Paul selects Old Testament texts that deal with different parts of the human body, illustrating the fact that sin affects every part of us.

“Their throat is an open sepulchre” is a quotation from Psalm 5. One of the major emphases of this Davidic psalm is the pervasiveness of evil among people. Verse 9 says, “For there is no faithfulness in their mouth; their inward part is very wickedness; their throat is an open sepulchre; they flatter with their tongue.”

Although sin begins in the heart (cf. Mark 7:20-23), one of the first places it manifests itself is in our speech. Indeed, “the poison of asps is under their lips” (Rom. 3:13). This is another quote from David, found in Psalm 140:3. While the New Testament uses the word “asp,” the Old Testament translates it “adder,” both of which are venomous snakes. This is an appropriate figure, especially when we remember that Satan appeared to Eve as a serpent (cf. Gen. 3:1-7).

Unloving (Rom. 3:14-15). Especially characteristic of the unsaved is “cursing and bitterness.” Many lost people do not realize how vile their language is, but when their hearts are

changed by Christ, their language often changes immediately.

Here Paul again quotes from Psalms. Psalm 10:7 says, “His mouth is full of cursing and deceit and fraud: under his tongue is mischief and vanity.”

“Their feet are swift to shed blood” (Rom. 3:15) is a reference to Proverbs 1:16, which says, “For their feet run to evil, and make haste to shed blood.” This same thought is found in Isaiah 59, mentioned below.

Have you noticed how easy it is to choose evil over good—how we have to be prodded to do the right thing but need little persuasion to do wrong? Do little children need instruction on how to insist on their own way or refuse to share? They obviously do not; nor did we when we were their age, although we may not remember it.

As far as bloodshed is concerned, the world has never been a safe place. Wars, terrorist attacks, indiscriminate shootings in schools and churches, domestic violence leading to murder, parents killing their own children, and even abortion all testify to the truth of God’s Word in this regard.

Unrestrained (Rom. 3:16-17). These verses are something of a summary of Isaiah 59:7-8, which says, “Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood: their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths. The way of peace they know not; and there is no judgment in their goings: they have made them crooked paths: whosoever goeth therein shall not know peace.”

The way of the world is the way of destruction and misery. Many marriages end in divorce because of hearts hardened by sin. Parents and children alike succumb to drug and alcohol addiction. Jobs and careers that were supposed to bring security and prosperity frequently end in despair and disappointment. Some become

so distraught over these things that they decide to commit suicide. Sin never brings peace, only the opposite. “There is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked” (Isa. 48:22).

Unafraid (Rom. 3:18). Perhaps the greatest indictment against humanity is that they do not reverence or fear God. When was the last time you heard someone described as God-fearing? People thumb their noses at God, so to speak, both doubting His existence and questioning His wisdom. As Proverbs 1:7 says, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction.”

Even among believers, God’s name is often used in a flippant manner. Immoral behavior is routinely excused or overlooked because the violator is popular or the relative of an important person. God’s Word is not taken as seriously as it was in previous generations. The idea of God’s wrath is scoffed at, and few pastors dare to preach about hell. Indeed, it often seems that “there is no fear of God before their eyes” (Rom. 3:18).

THE PRESUMPTION OF SIN— Rom. 3:19-20

Whether a person was a Jew under the Mosaic Law or a Gentile with the law intuitively written on his heart (2:14-15), both should have come to the same conclusion, namely, that we are all “guilty before God” (3:19). This is the inevitable conclusion from all the texts quoted by Paul.

Since we are all sinners, we must therefore conclude that “by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight” (vs. 20). If in fact a person could perfectly obey God’s law, he could stand before Him and declare his own righteousness based on his perfect obedience. According to rabbinical tradition, the Old Testament Law contains 365 negative precepts

and 248 positive precepts. We have all fallen short of perfectly obeying God’s law. Only the ignorant and arrogant think otherwise of themselves.

If the law cannot save us, what was its purpose? To be sure, the law had several purposes, but the one singled out here concerns the “knowledge of sin.” In other words, we know what sin is because the law tells us. “Sin is the transgression of the law” (I John 3:4). On the other hand, “where no law is, there is no transgression” (Rom. 4:15). Not only does the law convict and condemn, it ultimately leads us to Christ, our only Saviour (John 1:17; 14:6; Gal. 3:24).

—John Alva Owston.

QUESTIONS

1. What was Paul’s purpose in using quotations from the Old Testament?
2. According to Scripture, how many are righteous?
3. What is meant by the phrase “they are all gone out of the way” in Romans 3:10?
4. Why does Paul use the throat to illustrate man’s depravity?
5. What part of the body does the “poison of asps” refer to (vs. 13)? Why is this an apt figure?
6. What does our text say about the prospects for peace in this world?
7. How is the lack of the fear of God seen in today’s world?
8. Does the law save us or condemn us? Explain.
9. Is it possible for us to perfectly obey the law? Has anyone ever done so?
10. According to Paul, what is one purpose of the law?

—John Alva Owston.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. We are all born sinners; none of us can claim superiority to anyone else (Rom. 3:9).
2. We see degrees of goodness in ourselves; God sees only unrighteousness (vs. 10).
3. It is impossible to comprehend God's righteousness without the power of His Spirit (vss. 11-12).
4. An unregenerate heart produces profane and dishonest communication (vss. 13-14).
5. Destructive, violent behavior is the default predisposition for unsaved humanity (vss. 15-18).
6. People who do not fear the Lord are bound by their evil ways (vss. 19-20).

—Valante M. Grant.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. Are there any earthly factors that give one person an advantage over another in the sight of God (Rom. 3:9-10)? If so, what are they and why? Discuss.
2. Are there benefits to religious practices and traditions? If so, what are they? Discuss.
3. Do we see double standards of righteousness in the church today? How does this align with the Word of God? What can we do about it? Discuss.
4. How does dishonest and profane language affect our relationship with God (vss. 13-14)?
5. If no one is righteous, how is it possible to please God?

—Valante M. Grant.

Golden Text Illuminated

“As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10).

I was beyond frustrated. I had been practicing for almost two hours that evening. I had bent two out of five arrows. A third arrow had lost its tip. Yet no matter how hard I concentrated, I simply could not put an arrow into the straw bale that was my target. I had completely missed the mark.

We may not realize it, but missing the mark is something we all do. Paul argued that “all are under sin” (Rom. 3:9).

The fact is that no one can ever hit the mark when it comes to being perfectly righteous. God clearly states this. Sure, many people try to be kind to others. They measure themselves against those around them.

However, human deeds are nothing when placed next to God's righteousness (Isa. 64:6). They are soiled impostors of the reality.

Why? The simple answer is that God's righteousness is perfect righteousness. There is no flaw in it. Unlike ours, God's character is flawless.

The truth is that none of us will ever reach God's level of righteousness on our own. No number of prayers or good deeds will help us achieve that.

Despite this, God expects no less than that. We cannot spend eternity with Him if we fall short of His righteousness.

So, what do we do? Are we to give up and resign ourselves to the fact that we will never be righteous? The answer is an emphatic no! God has provided a way to righteousness for us. We will talk more about that in the next lesson.

—Jennifer Francis.