



8.
'Bible diagnostics'
Romans 3.9-20

Background

This passage brings to a conclusion the thesis which Paul has been working through since Rom.1.18. His reason for so doing, of course, is in order to highlight why the gospel is such thrilling 'good news', and why he is not at all ashamed of it (Rom.1.16-17).

If you don't see your need of the righteousness God has provided, you won't see the point of Jesus. His thesis, at least in broad outline, is this. The wrath of God is not only righteous but very real; and the judgment of God is not only final but thoroughly fair. Neither your performance (however upright and respectable you may be), nor your pedigree (however long and strong that religious pedigree may be) saves you from God's wrath or sees you through God's judgment – for the very simple reason that you do not measure up: you're not perfect.

'Well, no-one's perfect!' you say. To which the apostle now says, 'Exactly.'

No matter who you are, whether a scrupulously religious Jew, or a wantonly wayward Gentile (or any mixture of the two), all are 'under sin' (that's how the original puts it, rather than the NIV's 'under the power of sin', for all that that's the case). All, therefore, have need of that 'righteousness of God' to which he'd alluded at the outset (Rom.1.17).

To prove his point, he fires off a barrage of Scripture quotes – 14 separate indictments, from 7 different texts, from 3 different books of the Bible. Quoting Scripture like this (this is the longest series of quotes in the New Testament) was a common rabbinic practice, sometimes called 'pearl stringing': you string a series of quotes together in order to make your point. And the point here, of course, is simply this, that the clear and consistent teaching of God's Word is that our natural condition as human beings is altogether sinful. A sobering thought, and one – when it hits home – which prompts the pained cry in our heart, "What must I do to be saved?"

That's where Paul has been driving his readers, so that they and we might recognise our need before a holy God – all of us (notice the consistently comprehensive terms which Paul makes use of through this passage).

Read the whole passage and if short of time then start with '**days**' (3), (5) and (7).

1) Monday 26th February – that sinking feeling!

Read [Romans 3.9](#)

“.. Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin ..” (Rom.3.9)

In some ways, your background may give you an advantage (Rom.3.1-2), but the bottom line is this: no matter our background, we’re all in the same boat – and it’s leaking! The size of the leak is irrelevant if your boat is holed! We’re sunk by our sin.

Compare this verse with [Rom.3.1](#) (they start in exactly the same way): how can Paul say there is both ‘much’ advantage, and no advantage?

Do believers (perhaps unwittingly) too easily convey the impression that they are somehow ‘better’ than others? How can that be avoided?

Prayer: *God have mercy on me, a sinner. Keep me, Lord, from a critical spirit which sees always the faults of others, and impress on my heart my need of Your mercy.*

2) Tuesday 27th February – ‘We’re doomed!’

Read [Romans 3.10-11](#)

“.. there is no one righteous, not even one ..” (Rom.3.10)

A blanket condemnation which permits no exceptions! It’s not the jaundiced view of a grumpy old man, but the unequivocal, consistent analysis of the human condition given by God Himself in His Word. Morally, intellectually, spiritually we’re ‘write-offs’.

What is the difference in nuance between each of the three statements Paul quotes here from the Scriptures (see [Ps.14.1-3](#))?

How would you answer someone who argued that there surely *are* those who are righteous, who understand, and who seek God?

Prayer: *Unless You renew my heart, Lord, I cannot seek Your face: unless You open my eyes, I cannot see: unless You empower me daily, I cannot follow. Grant me such grace!*

3) Wednesday 28th February – warped, worthless, and wayward

Read [Romans 3.12](#)

“.. all have turned away ..” (Rom.3.12)

A further, discerning analysis of the human condition. Our concern sees us go our own way (‘turn away’), our condition leaves us unfit for purpose (‘worthless’), and our conduct is not up to scratch (‘no one who does good’). We’re all essentially ‘bent’.

What light does each part of this 3-fold diagnosis from Scripture ([Ps.53.3](#)) shed on the human condition?

In what ways are you conscious yourself of having 'turned away'?

How would you answer someone who pointed to all the 'good' that is done in the world and claimed that Paul (and the Bible) was too negative?

Read [Mark 10.17-30](#): what did Jesus mean the rich man to understand?

Prayer: Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting ([Ps.139.23f](#)).

4) Thursday 29th February – bad-mouthing

Read [Romans 3.13-14](#)

".. their throats are open graves .." (Rom.3.13)

Our problem is 'what lies beneath'. Our throats are the fissures in the surface of our living through which the foul lava of our sinful hearts comes pouring out. The stench of death, the torrent of subtle lies, the poison of gossip, slander, complaint.

What damage have you seen being done by the words which people speak?

Read [Eph.4.29-32](#): what steps might you take, by the power of God's Spirit, to guard your lips from any 'unwholesome talk'?

Prayer: Grant me a well-instructed tongue, O Lord, that I may know the word that sustains the weary. Help me daily to listen to You before speaking to others ([Is.50.4](#)).

5) Friday 1st March – the root problem

Read [Romans 3.15-18](#)

".. there is no fear of God before their eyes .." (Rom.3.18)

Wise living begins with the fear of God. But if your eyes aren't on Him, if your gaze isn't fixed on the perfections of His being, then your whole way of life is bound to be skewed, and the trademark impact of your living will be pain far more than peace.

What's meant by 'the way of peace'? And once we come to faith in Christ, what will our seeking and knowing 'the way of peace' look like?

If the beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord ([Prov.9.10](#)), how would you define that 'fear of the Lord' to someone who longed to be wise?

How is 'the fear of the Lord' cultivated in the life of a congregation?

Why does the absence of the 'fear of God' result in ruin, misery, and a lack of peace?

Prayer: [My God, how wonderful Thou art](#), Thy majesty how bright! How wonderful, how beautiful, the sight of Thee must be: Thine endless wisdom, boundless power and awful purity.

6) Saturday 2nd March – silenced

Read [Romans 3.19](#)

“.. so that every mouth may be silenced ..” (Rom.3.19)

We learn at an early age to talk our way out of trouble. We come up with a load of excuses, plead mitigating circumstances, blame and criticize others. But faced by the finger of God’s law, we’re left without a leg to stand on, and without a plea to make.

Do you recognise in yourself this propensity to ‘talk your way out of trouble’, one way or another, rather than acknowledging failure/wrong-doing?

How did the Lord bring you to that point where your ‘mouth was silenced’?

Prayer: *Remind me, daily, Almighty God, not only of my guilt before Yourself, but also of the way that You have graciously covered all my guilt through the Lord Jesus Christ.*

7) Sunday 3rd March – reviving the soul

Read [Romans 3.20](#)

“.. rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin ..” (Rom.3.20)

‘God’s law is perfect,’ the psalmist declares, ‘reviving the soul’ ([Ps.19.7](#)): and it does so by first opening our eyes to the reality of sin in our hearts and lives, and then driving us to the Lord Jesus Christ as the one who alone can afford us the forgiveness we need.

In what ways do people ‘become conscious of sin’ through the law?

If the Holy Spirit uses the law to effect conviction of sin, and if therefore the preaching includes such ‘law-work’, how can the church avoid being viewed as either legalistic or judgmental?

What has been your own experience of the Spirit convicting you of ‘sin and righteousness and judgment’ ([Jn.16.8](#))?

‘To run and work the law commands, but gives us neither feet nor hands. But better news the gospel brings, it bids us fly and gives us wings’: why did God give us the law if it only serves to condemn us?

Prayer: *Turn my heart towards Your statutes and not towards selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things, preserve my life according to Your word ([Ps.119.36f](#)).*