

SMALL GROUPS

Relentless Grace: How the Gospel Changes Everything

Paul's Letter to the Romans

Session 4 – Sinners, One and All | Romans Chapter 3

Paul had always been one to speak his mind. He was trained to think a matter through and explain it decisively. His brilliance as a teacher/lawyer (that's what a rabbi was) set him apart as a young man. Paul arrogantly pursued all the ceremony and demands of the Law, fully convinced that he was earning God's approval. Then one day, on the Damascus Road, God knocked him down and turned his whole life right side up. The zeal remained, but the rage was gone.

No one gets to Heaven on their own. This was the message beating out of Paul's heart for his Jewish brothers. His passion for truth and bulldogged determination is legendary, but his exceptional skills of persuasion isn't what changes hearts and minds. It is simply the power of the gospel. Nothing more and nothing else.

Icebreaker

Which most closely describes your natural disposition toward rules?

- I try to follow rules. Rules are made to be broken. Rules are useful if they make sense.
 I love rules! Make me the hall monitor. Rules? What rules?

Goals for this Session:

- Discover the purpose of the Law and what makes it vital to the gospel.
- Consider the difference between doing right things and being redeemed.
- Pray honest prayers that embrace redemption and redeem the time.

Guilty as Charged

Romans 3:1–20

Wherever Paul preached, there were critics. They claimed that he preached a false gospel. He got used to it. He anticipated it. In so many years, Paul had enough heated discussions with actual critics to know what their objections would be. So this chapter opens with an imagined debate.

1. Being a Jew had advantages, and Paul mentions their greatest privilege here. The “oracles of God” refers to the entire Old Testament with all the laws and covenants and blessings that God Himself gave to the descendants of Abraham.

- a. **National treasure.** No other people had ever been given direct access to know God the way the Jews did. Let that sink in and consider what the following verses say about it.

Deuteronomy 4:5–10

Deuteronomy 11:18–19

Psalm 147:19–20

- b. The Jews were *entrusted* with the Scripture. What does that mean, and how does it apply to us today, as believers?

2. Paul anticipates the critic’s response. There’s always an excuse!

- a. **But what about . . .** (verses 3–4). When truth gets uncomfortable, we change the subject. The woman at the well did this with Jesus (see John 4:19–20). But Paul wouldn’t let critics make this a debate about God’s faithfulness when man’s failure was the point.

When the teaching of God’s Word strikes close to home, what is your first response? What would you like it to be?

#wordstoknow

Greek words/terms at a glance.

justified (dikaióo) Legal term which means “to acquit” or declare free of guilt.

redemption (apolutrósis) To be set free on account of the ransom paid.

propitiation (hilasterion) To atone for; to appease and satisfy an offense in order to restore favor.

b. **How could a God of love . . .** (verses 5–8). Apparently there were some who tried to excuse sin.* Imagine that. We’re more prone to rationalize sin than repent of it. But Paul wouldn’t let critics make this a debate about God’s fairness. Their faulty logic went something like this:

- 1) *Why would God make impossible rules and then punish people for failing? That’s unfair.*
- 2) *Nobody’s perfect, so why try? God’s got you covered, so go ahead. Sin. Repent. Repeat.*

Sound familiar? What helps us to resist falling for these rational lies?

John 14:15, 23

1 Corinthians 10:12–14

1 Peter 1:14–16

3. Paul brings this debate full circle, back to his opening question. Did Jews have an advantage? Yes. Did it make them better than everyone else? *No*.

a. *As it is written . . .* (verses 10–18). This is no *take-my-word-for-it* speech. Paul knows his Bible, and he cites Scripture to support his claim. If you’d like, write the Old Testament reference next to each of the Romans verses in your Bible.

- Romans 3:10–12 | Psalm 14:1–3, Psalm 53:1–3, Ecclesiastes 7:20
- Romans 3:13 | Psalm 5:9, Psalm 140:3
- Romans 3:14 | Psalm 10:7
- Romans 3:15–17 | Isaiah 59:7–8
- Romans 3:18 | Psalm 36:1

b. In one simple sentence, how would you describe Paul’s conclusion about the condition of every person?

c. For Paul to call *everyone* a sinner was a foreign concept to the typical Jew of his day. They identified “sinners” in terms of ethnic identity, not personal conduct. Simply put, Gentiles were “sinners” and Jews were “righteous.”

Are we sinners? To the average person, that just means admitting you aren’t perfect. In a recent survey, 74% of Americans think that most people are basically good, and that “small” sins are no big deal and certainly won’t keep you out of Heaven.

“The Law is like a moral mirror. It shuts our mouths and opens our eyes. It condemns, but does not convert. It challenges, but does not change. It points the finger but can’t give mercy. And it drives us to Jesus, who has the answer we are looking for.”

Greg Laurie

When it comes down to it, many people don’t see themselves as sinners in need of salvation. How would you try to overcome this obstacle when you’re sharing the gospel?

* Paul talks more about this in chapter 6.

Memory Verse

As you memorize this verse, let it sink in and make it part of your prayers. Ask the Holy Spirit to examine your heart and increase your understanding.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

Romans 3:23–24 NKJV

Think About It . . .

Which part of this scripture resonates the most with you today?

But Now . . .

Romans 3:21–31

Paul concludes his description of sinful humanity with God’s final answer to man’s total failure.

1. Paul has already demonstrated that no one can ever fully obey the Law to be righteous and acceptable in God’s sight.
 - a. God’s Law was never given to make a person righteous. What is the purpose of the Law? Look back at verse 20 for help with your answer.
 - b. **But now.** If we could hear Paul dictating this letter, we would catch the emphasis on these words in his voice. This is good news! The Law can never set things right, but God has done it *for* you. From verses 22–26, explain the *who*, *what*, *when*, and *how* of the gospel.
2. Have you ever wondered how people in the Old Testament were saved? Was it by keeping the Law? We might say, all they *had* was the Law—but now we have grace. The short answer is that God has always been gracious and people have always been saved through faith (Paul explains this a bit more in the next chapter). Even those who didn’t have the advantage of seeing how Jesus accomplished their salvation.
 - a. Paul mentioned that the Law and Prophets (a common term for Old Testament scripture) testified that salvation would not come through the Law. The apostle Peter said much the same thing in 1 Peter 1:10–13. Briefly add what you find there.

b. It was important for these believers (particularly Jews) to know that Paul’s teaching was totally in line with Scripture. Simply put, God’s plan of salvation was not an afterthought! For people who all their life were told that *doing all the right things* makes you righteous, this was a game-changer. In this respect, how has the gospel been a game-changer for you?

3. *How the gospel changes everything.* Because He is just, God does not lower His standard of perfection to accommodate our sinfulness. When we remember that the Law was given to expose sin and prove our guilt, the power of the gospel is good news all over again.

No matter how long or how far I’ve walked with God, I am *and always will be* a sinner, saved by grace. Paul knew this about himself (Romans 7:18, 1 Timothy 1:15) and it kept him from taking God’s gift of salvation for granted.

a. The gospel is incentive to stay grateful. God declares us “*not guilty*” because Jesus paid our debt. It was nothing we did ourselves; He did it for us.

Sometimes we forget. Like the lepers who were so relieved and happy to get on with life after Jesus cleansed them, we forget to come back and give glory to God (Luke 17:17–18).

Take time to meditate on these verses . . .

Isaiah 53:4–6, 11

1 Peter 1:18–19

Hebrews 12:2–3

. . . and express your gratitude in a sentence or two.

Good to Know

In pagan religions (think of Greek mythology for example) the only way to satisfy the gods and stay on their good side was through an act of **propitiation**—making a sacrifice, bringing a gift, doing a good deed to appease anger and curry favor. Humans could never be quite sure where they stood with their deities. What made the gods angry? What put them back in a good mood? But this is not what **propitiation** means in the Bible.

God is not moody, arbitrary, or easily provoked. He is holy and just. There is no service, sacrifice, or gift we can offer to satisfy His perfect justice and reconcile us to Him.

So God did what we could not do. God paid the price.

Jesus is the costly and perfect sacrifice. He met all the righteous requirements of the Law to be **propitiation** for our sin, so that we can be reconciled to God.

b. The gospel is incentive to live with purpose. We were rescued from a life of “aimless conduct” empty of any power to change (see 1 Peter 1:18). Jesus redeemed our life so that we can redeem the time (see Ephesians 5:15–16). Simply put, that means investing your life in ways that will outlast it. When you think about your life and loved ones, what kind of legacy matters most?

When you think of *knowing God and making Him known*, what does that look like to you?



Gospel at a Glance: Day of Atonement | “Salvation is free, but it is not cheap. The word *blood* tells us what the price was. Jesus had to die on the cross in order to satisfy the Law and justify lost sinners. The best illustration of this is the Jewish Day of Atonement described in Leviticus 16.”—Warren Wiersbe¹

For the atonement offering, two goats were brought to the altar. One was slain and the blood was taken into the holy of holies and sprinkled on the *mercy seat*. God’s presence rested above (Exodus 25:22) and the mercy seat fit perfectly on top of the ark, with the tablets of Law inside. In this way, when sacrificial blood was sprinkled, it covered the law and atoned for sin. Judgment was deserved, but this was a place of mercy. Then the priest would lay his hands on the head of the live goat and confess the sins of the people. The animal would then be sent away into the wilderness, a *scapegoat* set free to represent what God does with the sins of a pardoned sinner. **“He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west” (Psalm 103:12 NLT).**

Adoration **C**onfession **T**hankfulness **S**upplication

“Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people.” Ephesians 6:18 NIV

In each session, we will pray—for ourselves, for others, for our church, and for our nation. As a focus for prayer, use the memory verse, another scripture, or what the Lord has impressed on you from the chapter. No need to be profound or elaborate, just authentic.

Write a simple prayer, including each element here.

A _____

C _____

T _____

S _____

¹ Warren Wiersbe, *Bible Exposition Commentary/New Testament, Volume 1*, (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Cook Communications, 2001), p.523.

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