

EVERY MOUTH STOPPED **Romans 3:1-20**

Rock of Ages is one of the most popular hymns ever written. The original four stanzas first appeared in 1776 in the evangelistic publication, “The Gospel Magazine.” It was placed at the conclusion of an article by its author, Augustus Toplady, who was writing on the impossibility of a person to pay for his own sins. In the article, Toplady calculated that if a man lived to be 80 he would have the opportunity of committing over two and a half billion sins.¹ I’m not sure how Toplady came to that calculation, but I don’t doubt it.

Prior to wiping out humanity with a worldwide flood, with the exception of Noah and his family who found favor in the eyes of the Lord (Gen. 6:8),

The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

- Genesis 6:5

It was no different after the flood, for the Lord reiterated,

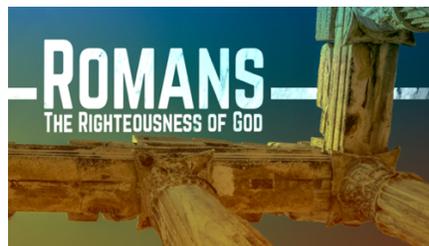
“... Every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood.”

- Genesis 8:21

In Psalm 51, David confessed, “Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (Psalm 51:5 NIV). Job observed that “humans are born for trouble as surely as sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7). Over the course of our lives, we sin countless times. So Toplady’s calculation of two and a half billion may be a bit on the conservative side! Whatever the case, Toplady’s point was that people are sinners through and through; therefore, they are unable to save themselves. Salvation must come from the Lord. Listen again to the second stanza of his hymn, *Rock of Ages*:

*Not the labor of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law’s demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone.
Thou must save, and Thou alone.*

That’s the point that the apostle Paul hammers throughout his letter to the Romans [\[show graphic\]](#), and especially in the first few chapters.



¹ Alfred B. Smith, *Hymn Histories*, keepsake edition (Montrose, PA: Heritage Music Distributors, 1982), pp. 230-231.

After celebrating in Romans 1:16-17 the righteousness of God revealed through the gospel, Paul emphasizes the universal scope of human depravity. His description of it throughout the second half of chapter one applies to everybody. But Paul anticipated that his use of the word “they” would surely lead some self-righteous, moralistic Jews to think that he was describing the depravity of Gentiles only. So, at the start of chapter two, Paul abruptly switches from the 3rd person (“they”) to the 2nd person (“you”). He debunks the notion that Jews are protected from God’s judgment simply because of the privileges God has given them. The fact is, the Jews have not lived in light of their privileges or their self-perception. They have not practiced what they preached. So, they too are subject to God’s judgment.

In chapter three, Paul answers key objections that Jews were sure to raise in response to what Paul said in chapter two. Paul frames these objections in the form of questions and answers them himself. By the time he gets to verse 20, he has come full circle and affirms once again the righteousness of God and the depravity of the whole human race. Follow along in your copy of God’s word as I read Romans 3:1-20. Paul writes,

Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? ² Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.

³ What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? ⁴ By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written,

“That you may be justified in your words,
and prevail when you are judged.”

⁵ But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.)

⁶ By no means! For then how could God judge the world? ⁷ But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?

⁸ And why not do evil that good may come? – as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

⁹ What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, ¹⁰ as it is written:

“None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ no one understands;
no one seeks for God.

¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”

¹³ “Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.”

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

¹⁴ “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

¹⁶ in their paths are ruin and misery,

¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known.”

¹⁸ “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

This passage has all the characteristics of a courtroom drama: the plaintiff versus the defendant, justice versus injustice, the presentation of evidence, the cross-examination, the closing argument, and finally the verdict. In the end, Paul proves that *God alone is righteous, and we are accountable to him.*

***God alone is righteous,
and we are accountable to him.***

The sequence of verses 1-20 is easy to follow. Paul begins by asserting:

1. God is perfectly righteous (vv. 1-8).

In this opening section, Paul imagines a Jewish objector cross-examining him based on what Paul has said in the previous chapter. Paul is basically defending God's honor. It's almost as if God himself is the one on trial. But Paul provides a compelling answer to each objection that is raised.

Objection #1: If everything you just said is true, especially that a Jew who is one *inwardly*, and circumcision is a matter of the *heart*, then what advantage is there in being a Jew?

Answer: One would think the answer would be “none,” but Paul says, “Much in every way.” Why? Because “the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.” The very morning that I was writing out this part of my sermon, before I came into the office, I was reading Matthew Henry's *A Way to Pray* as part of my personal quiet time with the Lord. I was in the section on “Thanksgiving” and came across this prayer to God:

We owe you so much for preserving the divine oracles for your people in the Old Covenant scriptures. ... They saw the radiance of your glory. To them belonged the covenant, the receiving of the law, the proper regulations of worship and all your promises. ... We thank you that at different times and in various ways you spoke in the past to our forefathers by the prophets. Thank you for raising up these holy men of God who spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit and prophesied of the grace that was to come. They gave clear testimony about the suffering of Christ and the glory that would follow before any of those things had happened.²

While God would open the door of salvation to both Jews and Gentiles, God gave the Jews first dibs, so to speak. They got the advance notice, the “early bird special,” the red carpet treatment. While the Gentile world was still in darkness, the Jews had the light of God in their midst. “The gospel ... is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, *to the Jew first* and also to the [Gentile]” (Rom. 1:16). So, the Jews have a beautiful heritage. Their preeminent privilege was being entrusted with the very words of God who told them of the great salvation to come.

Objection #2: “What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God?” (v. 3). In other words, can their unbelief cause God to break his word?

² Matthew Henry, *A Way to Pray*, edited and revised by O. Palmer Robertson (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2010, reprinted 2020), p. 101.

Answer: “By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written, ‘That you may be justified in your words, and prevail when you are judged’” (v. 4). Even if every human winds up being a liar, God will always will be faithful to his word. But Paul wants us to remember that God is true to his word not only when he blesses his people according to his promises, but also when he judges them on account of their disobedience. Such was the case with David when he committed adultery with Bathsheba. In his prayer of confession in Psalm 51, David uttered the words that Paul repeats in Romans 3:4, “That you may be justified in your words and prevail when you are judged.” David was essentially saying to God, “you are right when you speak. You are fair when you judge me” (Ps. 51:4 ICB). This was true not only of King David, but the people of Israel as a whole. Remember Daniel’s prayer that we read earlier. He said, “the Lord our God is righteous in all the works that he has done, and we have not obeyed his voice. ... We have sinned, we have acted wickedly” (Dan. 9:14b, 15b). Likewise, Nehemiah prayed,

“Now, therefore, our God, the great God, mighty and awesome, who keeps his covenant of love, ... In all that has happened to us, you have remained righteous; you have acted faithfully, while we have acted wickedly.

- Nehemiah 9:32-33

Despite the Jews’ faithlessness, God remains faithful and will fulfill his promises. “Our sins only serve to confirm the truthfulness of God’s words.”³ This leads to the third objection.

Objection #3: “But if our unrighteousness serves to show the righteousness of God, what shall we say? That God is unrighteous to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.)” (v. 5). Paul becomes apologetic as he continues with this line of questioning, knowing that it is inappropriate, and even blasphemous, to suggest such a thing about God. But Paul is verbalizing what people are surely thinking, and he is determined to defend God’s honor.

Answer: “By no means! For then how could God judge the world?” (v. 6). Paul’s response shows the ridiculousness of such a question. If God were unrighteous in judging the Jews for their unrighteousness, then God would not be fit to judge the Gentiles either. But God is, by his very nature, the perfectly righteous Judge of all the earth. The Old Testament affirms this truth from the very start. In Genesis, the very first book of the Bible, Abraham said, “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25). Likewise, David testified in Psalm 9,

“The Lord sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for justice, and he judges the world with righteousness; he judges the people with uprightness.”

- Psalm 9:7-8

So far, the cross-examination is not going well for the Jewish objector. But he persists with this line of questioning that culminates in verses 7-8.

³ William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, edited by Art Farstad (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), p. 1685.

Objection #4: “But if through my lie God’s truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not do evil that good may come?” (vv. 7-8a).

Answer: Before answering the question, Paul says that some have falsely accused him and his fellow gospel preachers of teaching such a thing. Nothing could be further from the truth. While it is true that Paul taught that people are justified by faith and not by works, he also taught that such faith also produces the fruits of righteousness in the lives of believers (e.g., Eph. 2:10; Titus 2:11-14). Paul will come back to this question at the beginning of chapter 6, where he asks, “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” (v. 1). Paul provides a full answer in chapter six that begins with Paul saying, “By no means! How can we who have died to sin still live in it?” (v. 2). But all that Paul says here in Romans 3 in response to those who would suggest such a thing is: “Their condemnation is just.” Those who distort the truth of God will answer to him and get the damnation that they deserve.

One by one, Paul dismantles every objection that is raised and defends the righteousness of God. The Scriptures testify to God’s trustworthiness, and God’s track record proves it. Whereas God is perfectly righteous, all people are sinful.

2. All people are sinful (vv. 9-18).

In verses 9-18, Paul goes from defense to offense. He presents his closing argument with compelling proof of human depravity. Paul begins by pointing out that despite their privileges, Jews are no better off than Gentiles, because “both Jews and Greeks are under sin, as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one’” (vv. 9b-12). It’s hard to imagine Paul being any more emphatic. Note that he doesn’t say merely that all people have sinned or are sinners, although that is certainly true, but that all people, both Jews and Gentiles – people of every ethnicity – are “under sin.” They are controlled by sin, dominated by sin, oppressed by sin.

To support his claims, Paul cites a number of Old Testament passages. When he says, “None is righteous,” he’s quoting Ecclesiastes 7:20, which says,

Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins.

- Ecclesiastes 7:20 NIV

Paul also draws from Psalm 14:3 and Psalm 53:3, which tell us that all have turned away, they have become worthless, corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one. This is Paul’s blanket statement, where he asserts the depravity of the entire human race – universal unrighteousness. But in verses 13-18, Paul cites several more Old Testament texts to further substantiate his claim by pointing out specific categories of sin.

For instance, in verses 13-14, Paul cites a few select verses from the Psalms⁴ to describe sins of speech. Note the sequence of people’s oral organs and how they’re used for sinful purposes: “Their *throat* is an open grave; they use their *tongues* to deceive. The venom of asps is under their *lips*. Their *mouth* is full of curses and bitterness.”

⁴ Psalms 5:9; 140:3; 10:7.

In verses 15-17, Paul transitions from sins of speech to sins of violence. He quotes from Isaiah 59:7-8, saying, “Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.”

Paul could have listed many other sins like he did in chapter one, but his point here is to show how all people – both Jews and Gentiles – are “under sin.” Just as Paul began with a blanket statement regarding human depravity, he ends with a general statement about people’s universal lack of reverence for God. Drawing from David’s words in Psalm 36:1, Paul states, “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Now, in the original context of all these passages that Paul quotes in Romans 3:10-18, the Old Testament writers are distinguishing between the righteous and the wicked. Paul knew of many righteous people in the Old Testament, including Abraham, the father of Israel, whom Paul will mention in the next chapter. *But Abraham and the other Old Testament saints were righteous, not because they were morally flawless, but because they responded with repentance and faith to the goodness of God.* So, it’s appropriate for Paul to apply these texts to self-righteous moralists who think they can merit or maintain God’s favor by their good works.

Let’s face it: Paul’s assertion that no one is righteous, that human being does good, not even one, is extreme. To some it may seem uncharitable and quite an overstatement. The early church theologian Origen grappled with Paul’s use of these Scriptures, writing,

That no one has done good, not even one, is a hard saying and difficult to understand. How is it possible that no one, Jew or Greek, has ever done anything good? Are we to believe that nobody has ever shown hospitality, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, delivered the innocent from the hands of the powerful or done anything similar? It does not seem possible to me that Paul was intending to assert anything as incredible as that.⁵

To understand the gist of what Paul is saying, we must consider “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). The Bible has a lot to say on this subject. Thankfully, the teachings of Scripture are well-summarized in some of the historic creeds of the church, such as the Westminster Confession of Faith.

A week ago last Thursday, Pastor Mike and I attended the monthly gathering of our Reformation Society, as did church leaders from several other churches in our region, including Grace Baptist Church of Dansville – our “church of the week” that we prayed for today, and where my wife will be speaking next Saturday at their women’s conference. Anyway, an elder-in-training from their church presented a theological paper which included excerpts from the sixteenth chapter of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which deals with “good works.” Taking into account multiple Scripture passages,⁶ the writers of the *Westminster Confession* wrote in the final section of that chapter,

⁵ *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament, VI: Romans*, p. 90. Cited by Colin G. Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary, gen. ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), p. 168.

⁶ John 15:4-6; Ezekiel 36:26-27; Philippians 2:12-13; 4:13; 2 Corinthians 3:5; Hebrews 6:11-12; 2 Peter 1:3, 5, 10-11; Isaiah 64:7; 2 Timothy 1:6; Acts 26:6-7; Jude 20-21.

Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands, and of good use both in themselves and others; yet, because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God; they are therefore sinful and cannot please God, or make a man meet [suitable] to receive grace from God. And yet their neglect of them is more sinful and displeasing unto God.

- *Westminster Confession of Faith*
Chapter 16, "Of Good Works," Section 7

This explanation is consistent with the teaching of Scripture as a whole and Paul's claims in Romans 3 that no human being is righteous, and no one does good, not even one. God is perfectly righteous, but all people are sinful. This is Paul's closing argument. He wraps it up in verses 19-20, saying,

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

William MacDonald provides a helpful explanation and illustration of Paul's point, saying,

When God gave the law to Israel, He was using Israel as a sample of the human race. He found that Israel was a failure, and He correctly applied this finding to all of humanity. It is the same as when a health inspector takes a test-tube of water from a well, tests the sample, finds it polluted, and then pronounces the entire well polluted.⁷

Paul has presented the evidence, and it is conclusive: God is perfectly righteous, all people are sinful, and ...

3. Everyone must answer to God (vv. 19-20).

But there is nothing that sinners can say in their defense. Their guilt has been exposed, and they have no answer. Their mouths are stopped. They stand before God condemned.

To be "under sin" is a terrible thing. Paul wants us to understand the gravity of it, which is why he has devoted nearly three chapters to the subject of human depravity. It's a terrible thing to be "under sin." But in this dungeon of darkness, the light of the gospel shines through. In the book of Galatians, which is sort of a mini-version of Romans, Paul writes,

But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

- Galatians 3:22

Notice that this verse says nothing about works, but about faith. Not doing but believing. Not I, but Christ! Paul expounds on this theme throughout the remainder of chapter 3, which Pastor Mike will be preaching next week.

⁷ MacDonald, 1686-87.

It is true that “by works of the law no human being will be justified in [God’s] sight” (v. 20). “But,” Paul immediately goes on to say in verses 21-22, “not the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the works of the law ... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.” In this section, Paul returns to the theme of the gospel – the good news of the free gift of salvation that God has provided for us in Christ.

The tropical depression of human depravity has lifted, and the sunshine of God’s grace has returned! But you don’t have to wait until this passage is preached next week to put your trust in Christ. You can do so today. It’s as simple as A-B-C:

Admit that you are “under sin,” under condemnation, and are accountable to God.

Believe that Jesus lived a perfectly righteous life in your place, stood condemned in your place when he died on the cross for your sins, and rose again for your justification – so that you could be forgiven, be reconciled to God, and receive the gift of eternal life. “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).

Confess with your mouth, from your heart, that Jesus is your Lord and Savior. Go public with your faith through baptism.

***God alone is righteous,
and we are accountable to him.***

One day you will stand before the Judge of all the earth. Will your mouth be stopped, or will it sing God’s praise? May we be like the prophet Isaiah, who exclaimed, “I am overwhelmed with joy in the Lord my God! For he has dressed me with the clothing of salvation and draped me in a robe of righteousness. I am like a bridegroom dressed for his wedding or a bride with her jewels” (Isa. 61:10 NLT).