

Romans 3:9-20

When Paul wrote or dictated his letter to the Romans, he did not divide it into sections with headings as we find in the NRSV or most any of our bibles. But these headings are a help to our study for they summarize the main theme in that section. Our present heading is “None is Righteous.” What we will find is that Paul continues to stress the fact that both Jews and Gentiles are subject to sin. Paul makes this point with such intensity that he almost seems to despair of seeing any goodness in humanity. What we must patiently await is the conclusion which Paul will draw from this sad state. In the next segment, Paul will indicate that he does not give up on humanity, rather he trusts in the infinite love and mercy of God.

In the first half of verse 9, Paul seems to contradict what he had said in 3:1. Let’s go back and look at his earlier remarks.

Remember that in chapter 2, Paul repeated numerous times that both Jews and Gentiles have sinned. In the second half of chapter 2, he says that the Jews cannot claim any special privilege, for even though they have the law they have not followed it. He reminds them that circumcision means nothing if they do not follow the will of God. Since Paul has ruled out the law and circumcision, it is only natural that the Jews should ask, “Then what advantage has the Jew?” (3:1) And Paul says, “Much, in every way.” (3:2) But then, when we look at verse 9, the Jews again ask, “Are we any better off?” and Paul says, “No, not at all.” How do we reconcile these two answers?

The two words which will help us understand the distinction which Paul is making are “opportunity” and “judgment.” In 3:1 when the Jews ask what advantage they have, Paul responds by speaking of their opportunities. They have had the privilege of knowing God and his will. Paul says that they have been entrusted with the “oracles of God.” They have come to know that they are in relationship with God, that he is loving, and that he is their personal God. This is the advantage, the opportunity, which the Jews have which the Gentiles did not have. But in the second question in verse 9, when the Jews ask about being better off, Paul then responds in terms of judgment. When it comes to being judged by God, the Jews do not have an advantage over the Gentiles because they, the Jews, have also sinned even though they had the law. Their state as the chosen people made them unique in their call to service to proclaim that God is One.

Their state does not make them immune from sin or the judgment, which comes from sin. Both Jews and Gentiles are deprived of God's glory because both have turned away from God. The Law of Moses should have helped the Jews avoid sin, but since no one could keep the law, it only makes them more aware of how far they were from God.

At the end of verse 9, Paul says that everyone is "under the power of sin." The Greek word which he uses for "under" is the same word which is used to speak of a soldier who is under the power of centurion, or a slave under the power of the master. This is the beginning of the teaching of St. Paul on what we traditionally call "original sin." In another part of his letter we will go into this in greater detail.

In verses 10 through 18, we see an example of a technique used by Jewish rabbis to emphasize a point. It was a custom to string together a series of scriptural quotations to indicate that this is a major theme in God's Word. Paul makes use of this technique by putting together five quotations from the psalms and one quotation from the prophet Isaiah. Paul wants to show that no one is justified in God's sight. Human beings are not able to earn salvation by their own efforts. Paul will eventually show that salvation is a gift from God, and only faith in Jesus Christ can bring justification to humanity.

Verses 10, 11 and 12 are a quotation from Psalm 14, repeated in Psalm 53. The constant refrain of "no one" is righteous, "no one" has understanding, "no one" seeks God, builds as a crescendo until in verse 12 the psalmist says that "they have become worthless." The psalmist depicts humanity as devoid of any awareness of goodness. Who can save us from such a state? Paul will soon answer.

In verses 13 and 14, Paul chooses texts which refer to the faculty of speech. These verses mention "throats," "tongues," "lips" and "mouths," and each is a sign of the evil which can be caused by the power of speech. God gave humanity the ability to speak in order to praise him and to support one another, but how often is this gift used to tear down and destroy.

Verses 15 through 17 contain the quotation from the prophet Isaiah. The Jewish people spoke of following God's will as "walking in the way." In this text from Isaiah, the prophet uses "feet," "paths" and "way" to convey this image of what happens when a person does not walk in the way of the Lord. This same image of the "way" was used to describe early Christianity. In chapter 9 of Acts of the Apostles, Luke describes the conversion of Paul. In 9:2 he says that before he was converted, Paul received letters of permission which would allow him to arrest "any who belonged to the Way." Also, in the healing of the paralytic in Matthew 9:2-8, there is an intentional play on the word "walk." The Pharisees thought that the paralytic was a sinner and therefore he could not walk in God's way. Jesus forgave the man's sins and made it possible for him to walk in the Lord. And to show that Jesus had the power to do this, he also gave the man the ability to walk with his legs. The power of Jesus to heal is what Paul will soon stress in the next section.

Finally, in verse 18, Paul chooses a text which sums up the entire string of quotations. “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” To fear God means to stand in awe and respect of him. Both Jews and Gentiles have failed to show respect for God, his commands, and his creation. Both have given in to sin and are deprived of God’s glory. Since the eyes are the window of the soul, humanity is wounded to its deepest part.

The sadness of this part of Paul’s letter and the hope he will offer in the next segment are what attracted Martin Luther. Most of Luther’s theology is rooted in Pauline theology as expressed in Romans. Luther was intensely aware of his own sinfulness. He could identify with the quotations from the Hebrew Scriptures. But he was even more aware of the infinite mercy bestowed on him through his faith in Jesus Christ.

Paul begins verse 19 by affirming something that everyone should know, namely, that anyone who is under the law is obliged to obey the law. But Paul has already shown that both Jews and Gentiles are subject to the law. The Jews are subject because they have been given a conscience which can guide them to moral goodness. But both Jews and Gentiles have failed to fulfill the law, and so “every mouth” will be silenced. No one is capable of fulfilling the entire law. No one is capable of self-justification.

In verse 20, Paul repeats the same message. He quotes Psalm 143 to remind his readers that it is not possible to earn salvation through human efforts. Again, if this was possible, Jesus would not have had to die on the cross for us. At the very end of this verse, Paul acknowledges what the law has accomplished – it has made humanity aware of sin. The law reveals what should be done, but it does not give humanity the power to do it.

Paul now has his readers where he wants them. He has used various arguments to show how they are subject to sin. He has shown how they deserve punishment. He has shown how it is impossible for human beings to save themselves. If Paul had stopped here he would have created a people with no hope. But Paul has spoken to the Roman Christians in this way so that he could show them that there is a reason for hope. He wants to stress the gratuity of God’s mercy and love by showing that God loves them even when they do not deserve it. Now he is prepared to tell them what it means to be saved through faith in Jesus Christ.

Romans 3:21-28

The opening words of verse 21, “But now,” indicate that a major transition is about to take place. All that Paul has said from 1:18 to 3:20 has described the sinfulness of humanity. Now he will show how humanity is lifted out of this state through the mercy of God.

Paul says that “apart from law” the righteousness of God has been revealed. The law is only important as a sign, a sign of God’s will. The law by itself cannot bring about salvation. This had to be a shock to Paul’s Jewish readers.

When Paul speaks of the “righteousness of God,” he means God’s willingness to forgive the sins of all people and put humanity in right relationship with himself. This gratuitous love has been revealed through the person of Jesus. The law and prophets have pointed to Jesus as the future revelation of God. But now that Jesus has come and he has suffered, died and risen from the dead, the fullness of God’s revelation is present. The time has come in which humanity can share in divine life. The fullness of this sharing is yet to come in heaven, but the participation is already there.

Let’s pause for a moment to explain a term you may come across in your reading. The term is “Realized Eschatology.” This is more prominent in John’s theology, but it is also present in Paul’s.

The Greek word ta escha means the “end,” the things which pertain to the end of the world. Eschatology is a study of these last things. According to Paul, the end of the world will not be destruction but transformation. The whole universe will be transformed and brought into unity and harmony as God intends. The end of the world also means eternal life, a sharing in God’s own divine life. The word “Realized,” used in this context, means something that is happening right now at this present time. And so, “Realized Eschatology” implies that even here and now in this earthly life, we are already sharing divine life. We do not have to wait until we die and go to heaven to share God’s life. It is a present reality through the graciousness of God in Jesus Christ. Paul and John do not actually use the term “Realized Eschatology” in their texts, rather this is the theological term used to explain what they mean when they say that we are already “in Christ Jesus.” Our celebration of the Eucharist is a constant reminder to us that we are living eternal life in the sharing of Jesus’ body & blood.

In verses 22 through 24, Paul reveals how humanity is able to participate in the righteousness of God; it is through faith in Jesus Christ. When it comes to the gift of faith, no one has a privileged position. All who believe can now be at peace with God because they have been forgiven of their sins. In his wisdom, God knows that what humanity deserves is punishment, but in his mercy he chooses to forgive. This is the gift of God, and this is the heart of Paul’s gospel. Back in 1:16-17, Paul had briefly stated the meaning of the gospel, now he goes into a deeper explanation.

In verse 25, Paul introduces a phrase which is not easy to understand. He speaks of Jesus as “a sacrifice of atonement.” Our Christian theology states that Jesus is a sacrifice for our sins. This is at the very core of our teaching. But we must be careful with the image of God which this presents. It can give the image of an angry God who demands his pound of flesh. It can give an image of God whose divine honor has been offended by sin, and who will only forgive if his honor is restored by the death of the innocent one. This is perhaps deeper theology than we are able to address in this study, but it is still a caution worth noting. Our human minds are not capable of comprehending the totality of God’s plan of redemption for us.

In verse 26, the theme of God's gratuity is repeated. God is willing to forgive, not because humanity deserves it, but because God chooses to love. Anyone can acquit an innocent person. This is a matter of legal justice. But what God chooses to do is to acquit the guilty. God chooses to look upon humanity as innocent even though he knows that this is not the case, for all people have sinned. And so, there is no room for human boasting. The only boasting that can be done is in the cross of Jesus Christ, as Paul says in Galatians 6:14.

In verse 27, Paul returns to the format of asking questions. In doing so he creates a clever twist in his use of the term "law" which is not easy to follow. Let me reword verse 27 to try to help us understand it. Remember, this is only one interpretation.

Paul imagines the Jew saying, "Then what becomes of my boasting of my achieving my own salvation?" And Paul says, "All such boasting is excluded. There is no room for it." Then the Jew asks, "By what law is this boasting excluded? Is it the law of works, because works are useless in trying to earn heaven?" At this point in the dialogue, Paul could have answered "Yes, the law of works, because works are useless in trying to earn heaven." Now this is where the twist comes in. Paul wants to stress the nature of faith. And so, he says, "No. Boasting is excluded not only because works are useless, but primarily because faith is a gift. Faith cannot be earned, and so there is no room for boasting." By speaking in this way, Paul has introduced a new concept – the law of faith. Let's examine what he means. (I attribute this thought to the scripture commentator William Barclay.)

When the Jewish people thought of the law, they imagined that if they followed the law they would avoid the wrath of God. It would perhaps be unfair to say that this was their sole motivation, but it was a strong point. When Paul introduces the concept of the law of faith, he is saying that fear of God should no longer be the motivation which urges people to follow God's will. Through faith, people are now able to see the depth of love which God has for humanity. This awareness of God's love should move a person to want to follow God's way as a response to love. The fear that should motivate is not the fear of breaking God's laws, but the fear of breaking God's heart.

In verse 28, Paul again states that justification comes through faith in Jesus Christ. It is not something we earn. And we remind ourselves that our works of charity are not the means by which we earn heaven. Our works of charity are the concrete signs that we have accepted the gift of faith, and that we are responding to God in love. They are also the means by which God touches the lives of other people. God can use us to bring his salvation to others.