

July 10
Lesson 6

STRUGGLING UNDER SIN'S POWER

DEVOTIONAL READING: 1 John 1:5-10

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Romans 3:1-20

ROMANS 3:9-20

⁹ What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. ¹⁰ As it is written:

“There is no one righteous, not even one;

¹¹ there is no one who understands;
there is no one who seeks God.

¹² All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
not even one.”

¹³ “Their throats are open graves;
their tongues practice deceit.”

“The poison of vipers is on their lips.”

¹⁴ “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”

¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

¹⁶ ruin and misery mark their ways,

¹⁷ and the way of peace they do not know.”

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



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¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. ²⁰ Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

KEY VERSE

No one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.
—Romans 3:20

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Summarize humanity's situation in relation to God's law.
2. Rebut the argument that, since everyone sins, it's not a problem; God will save us anyway.
3. Write a prayer of confession and repentance for one area of sin that besets him or her.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. An Honest Look at Ourselves
- B. Lesson Background

I. Humanity's Problem (ROMANS 3:9)

II. Scripture's Declarations (ROMANS 3:10-18)

- A. Lostness (vv. 10-12)
- B. Death (vv. 13, 14)
- C. Violence (vv. 15-17)
 - Our Violent Century*
- D. Godlessness (v. 18)

III. Law's Result (ROMANS 3:19, 20)

- A. Blameworthy Before God (v. 19)
 - Our Guilt*
- B. Awareness of Sin (v. 20)

Conclusion

- A. Saved from Sin's Power
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. An Honest Look at Ourselves

Do you believe what you see in the mirror? Certainly we all know that the images we see there are those of ourselves, not someone else. But do we really recognize the significance of what we see in the mirror? Do we notice that we no longer look as we once did? Or do we still mostly see the person in the mirror from years back? Do we see the way we have become different, or do we imagine we look and can act as we once did?

The reality of changing appearance is hard to admit as years pass. Harder still are the intangible realities regarding who we truly are as people. Some have an unrealistically negative view of themselves: I'm a failure; no one can love me; surely God is very unhappy with me. Others may have the opposite: an unrealistically positive view of themselves. In either case, we may arrive at our unrealistic view because we compare ourselves with others, concluding that we are markedly better or worse than the people we know.

The gospel is a reality check, like an honest look in a mirror, on our estimate of ourselves. Today's text summarizes a key aspect of that reality check.

B. Lesson Background

In his letter to the Romans, Paul addressed Christians of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds who struggled to receive and respect each other as members of Christ's body. Paul mounts an argument in the first three chapters to show that neither has an advantage over the other. Gentiles might claim that they are not responsible for their sin because they did not have God's law. But Paul notes that they have violated the will of God that is demonstrated in creation, visible to every person (Romans 1:18-32; lesson 4).

As for his fellow Jews, Paul points out that *having* God's law and *obeying* it are very different things. Jews who have the law are put to shame by those who never had the law but still manage to obey it. History reveals that Israelites with God's law were no better at obeying him than were Gentiles without the law (Romans 2:1-29; lesson 5).

Paul's argument was not to deny the importance either of God's call to Israel or the law that was given to that nation. The Jews held an advantageous position historically since they "have been entrusted with the very words of God" (Romans 3:1, 2). The law performed a vital function even when disobeyed, showing Israel and all humanity how deeply everyone needs God's gracious salvation. Even if every person is shown to be unfaithful, God is still faithful (3:3, 4).

Our text today brings to a climax the arguments from these early chapters of Romans, addressing the issue of *advantage* further still.

I. Humanity's Problem

(ROMANS 3:9)

9. What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin.

This verse summarizes much of what Paul has said in the early chapters of Romans. His question *What shall we conclude then?* introduces the implication of his line of reasoning to this point.

As he continues, Paul uses *we* to include himself among the Jewish-Christian readers, and *they* to refer to Christians of Gentile background. But even if the pronouns were reversed, the meaning would be the same. All people, *Jews and Gentiles alike*, have demonstrated rebellion against God. “Whatever historical privilege the Jews may have, these do not place Jews in a superior position in God’s judgment” (Douglas Moo).

Here for the first time in Romans, Paul uses the Greek noun for *sin* (the word translated *sinner* in [Romans 3:7](#) is an adjective in Greek). He does so with a special emphasis. By speaking of all people as being *under the power of sin*, the apostle explains that everyone has lived under its reign. Sin is a power at work. It is not that we have simply made a few mistakes. Neither is it that no one has ever done anything godly or virtuous. It is, rather, that all of human experience has been tainted by evil.

No group or individual can claim to be exempt. Nowhere can we point to someone who is free of evil’s influence. Sin’s mark is found in every human endeavor. The created order itself “has been groaning,” reflecting this tragic reality ([Romans 8:22, 23](#)). There is no advantage for anyone in this situation, and no opportunity for escape through one’s own power.

What Do You Think?

What misconceptions do people hold regarding sin? How do we correct these?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Concerning its definition

Concerning its cause

Concerning its effects

Concerning its prevalence

Other

II. Scripture’s Declarations

([ROMANS 3:10-18](#))

A. Lostness (vv. 10-12)

10. As it is written:

“There is no one righteous, not even one;

Here Paul begins to recite a collection of quotations from the Old Testament, each undoubtedly familiar to readers who share his Jewish heritage. The first quotation is from [Psalms 14:1-3; 53:1-3](#). These two psalms are remarkable in that they are essentially identical. It is as if the message is so important that it needs to be said twice. We can also detect part of [Ecclesiastes 7:20](#). The message is one found repeatedly in Israel’s Scriptures.

Beginning with the declaration, “The fool says in his heart, “There is no God,”” [Psalms 14](#) and [53](#) go on to state that all humans essentially deserve the label *fool* for their failure to be righteous (compare [Romans 1:22](#), [lesson 4](#)). Righteousness—God’s own standard of justice and goodness—is at odds with what we see in all of human life. The repetition in the verse before us drives home the universality of sin. It has tainted everyone.

**11. “there is no one who understands;
there is no one who seeks God.**

Paul continues the quotation from [Psalms 14](#) and [53](#) as those speak of God’s looking down from Heaven to inspect human life; he desires to see whether any goodness can be found. We are reminded of God’s finding only evil among the people of Noah’s day ([Genesis 6:5](#)) and in Sodom and Gomorrah in Abraham’s time ([18:16-33](#)). Those episodes are not isolated. They are typical.

The words quoted here are especially potent for Paul’s audience. Regardless of whether one is a recipient of God’s law or not, no one can claim genuine understanding. Though many might claim to seek God, the consistent sincerity of their quest is betrayed by their desire to follow their own will. That was the story of Adam and Eve, the parents of all humanity. Placed in a paradise by God, they sought to become independent of him by disobeying his one restriction on their lives ([Genesis 3:1-7](#)).

**12. “All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
not even one.”**

The quotation of [Psalms 14](#) and [53](#) continues, further describing universal human rebellion. *All have turned away* describes people’s departing from God’s path to choose their own. In so doing, humans *become worthless*, that is, useless to God, to one another, and to themselves. Only by submitting to his rule and following his way can a person live out the true purpose God has for humanity.

The final statement in the verse before us is quite powerful—distressingly so. Not a single person can be found who has expressed God’s goodness. That is, not a single person has done so except for Christ. As Paul offers these quotations, he prepares readers to understand what God has accomplished with the cross of Christ (next week’s lesson). Human sinfulness is such a huge problem, so much bigger than we typically recognize, that it required a huge solution in Christ and the cross.

What Do You Think?

How does the cross of Christ help you grasp the depth of the human problem of sin?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In terms of Christ's innocence
- In terms of Christ's suffering
- In terms of Christ's abandonment
- In terms of Christ's obedience
- Other

B. Death (vv. 13, 14)

13a. "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit."

Having presented humanity's lost state in general, Paul turns to quotations that focus on the dishonest, malicious way that people speak and act toward one another. Quoted now is [Psalm 5:9](#). This psalm is a lament in which the psalmist cries out to God for deliverance from oppressive enemies. Such people have *throats* like *open graves*, speaking words filled with death.

13b. "The poison of vipers is on their lips."

This part of the verse is from [Psalm 140:3](#), a psalm that also includes a lament that cries out for deliverance from enemies. The portion before us compares the speech of such people to *the poison of venomous snakes (vipers)*. It was not just Eve and Adam who listened to the voice of the serpent, and not just the serpent who spoke with that deadly voice. Though many have been victims of humanity's evil, all have also been participants in it.

14. "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness."

The series of quotations now shifts to [Psalm 10:7](#). This psalm also calls out to God for help against oppressive enemies. Their violent intentions are expressed by speech that calls down evil things on others (*cursing*) and expresses angry hostility (*bitterness*; your English translation of [Psalm 10:7](#) doesn't look the same because Paul is quoting from the Septuagint, which is the old Greek version of the Old Testament). Were such experiences uncommon, we might question whether Paul understands things rightly. But we must sadly admit that we have all experienced such things, and we all have done them ourselves.

C. Violence (vv. 15-17)

15. "Their feet are swift to shed blood;

Thoughts and words now become deeds in Paul's quoted description of human sinfulness. The source at this point is [Isaiah 59:7](#), with [Proverbs 1:16](#) being similar. Both texts depict the person who is so inclined to evil that he or she is ready to run to commit violence.

This particular quotation is especially pointed for Paul's Jewish-Christian readers. In [Isaiah 59](#), the prophet specifically addressed Judah's sin that ultimately led to the nation's exile in pagan Babylon. As the Jewish-Christian audience of Paul's day hears these familiar words, they have to respond, "Yes, that refers to me as well."

16. "ruin and misery mark their ways,

The quotation of [Isaiah 59:7](#) continues. Where do feet dedicated to violence tread? The answer is here: on the path characterized by *ruin* and human *misery*. Far from being the agents of God's goodness in the world, human beings—even those who have received God's Word—are agents of death.

17. "and the way of peace they do not know."

The quotation continues to the opening phrase of [Isaiah 59:8](#). The violent hatred that characterizes human sinfulness excludes any possibility of *peace*. We should remember that in its biblical usage, *peace* is more than just a cease-fire in the relentless pattern of hostility. God's true peace is a positive condition that means fellowship, love, and well-being among people.

This peace is the assurance God gives as he promises to solve the problem of human rebellion ([Isaiah 9:1-7](#); [chap. 11](#)). To recognize the absence of peace in the present is to reckon with one's own rebellion.

OUR VIOLENT CENTURY

If there is any one word that can be said to characterize these opening years of the twenty-first century, it is *violent*. The century had hardly begun when the terrorist attacks of 9/11 killed nearly 3,000 innocent people. Then came an extended war in Afghanistan, which saw a multinational force arrayed against the fanatical Taliban.

HOW TO SAY IT

Abraham *Ay-bruh-ham*.

Ecclesiastes *Ik-leez-ec-as-teez*.

Gomorrah Guh-more-uh.
 Septuagint Sep-too-ih-jent.
 Sinai Sigh-nye or Sigh-nay-eye.
 Sodom Sod-um.

Concurrent with the war in Afghanistan was the invasion of Iraq. That effort overthrew a tyrant, but also spawned the years of tribal and sectarian violence that followed. The so-called Arab Spring of 2011 and the ensuing years saw revolutions topple autocratic governments in Egypt and Libya, a lengthy civil war in Syria (in which the number of deaths approaches 200,000 at the time of this writing), and violent demonstrations in many nations throughout the Middle East and northern Africa. And, of course, sporadic warfare continued between Israel and the Hamas faction in Palestine. The tragic list seems to be unending.

Paul characterizes the problems of the ancient world as swiftness in shedding blood, walking in the ways of destruction, and knowing nothing about the ways of peace. Paul's words are as true now as they were when he wrote them! Human nature has not changed. We know the cure for the violence: it's the gospel of Jesus Christ. But the question is, how do we get the message out?

—C. R. B.

What Do You Think?

In what ways does the negative tone of news stories dovetail with the Bible's message about human sinfulness?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding hostility
- Regarding dishonesty
- Regarding greed
- Regarding stubbornness
- Other

D. Godlessness (v. 18)

18. "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

The quotations come to their conclusion with [Psalm 36:1](#). This psalm begins with a description of human sinfulness, contrasting it in the second part of the psalm with God's faithfulness and goodness. As Paul uses the statement we see here, he creates a fitting climax to the litany. The despair, hostility, and violence that arise from human sinfulness all reflect the absence of *fear of God*.

That expression needs careful attention. Used often in the Bible, *fear of God* indicates the profound, awe-filled respect that the creature must have for its Creator. Recognizing and submitting to God's utter superiority in power, wisdom, and goodness is what *fear of God* represents.

Such fear does not imply living in constant dread that God's displeasure and judgment will come upon us. But it does mean having a deeply felt acknowledgement that God will indeed overcome his enemies, that he will judge the wicked. The person who fears God in this way seeks to obey God. Ironically, the one who fears God's authority has the least to fear of God's displeasure.

What Do You Think?

How should an appropriate "fear of God" be demonstrated?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding thought processes
- Regarding attitudes toward others
- Regarding behavior
- Regarding manner of speech
- Other

III. Law's Result

(ROMANS 3:19, 20)

A. Blameworthy Before God (v. 19)

19. Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.

To bring the collection of quotations into perspective, Paul speaks of the nature of the books from which they are drawn. The Law of Moses was God's gift to ancient Israel, intended to speak especially to them. The advantage that the law gives is in seeing one's own sinfulness. Israel is no better off than the pagan Gentiles. If Israel listens to its deposit from God, then Israel realizes its guilt before God.

By implication, this applies to the rest of Israel's Scriptures as well. This includes the books of prophets such as Isaiah, who by God's Spirit

applied the law's principles to the issues of his own time. Also included are the Psalms and Proverbs, which express those principles of law poetically. The litany of quotations has laid out the point that Paul now sums up.

As the law makes Israel's guilt clear, creation itself makes clear the guilt of the rest of the world. Gentiles and Jews, pagans and God-worshippers—all are *held accountable to God*.

OUR GUILT

Sally (name changed) grew up in a fine Christian family. But as she reached her teen years, she began to think church people were too old-fashioned. She sometimes remarked, "The church doesn't want you to have any fun." Soon enough, it became apparent what Sally meant by *fun*: she was dating a married man. When she became pregnant with his child, it wasn't so much "fun" anymore.

To her credit, Sally carried the baby to full term. Some tongues wagged during the months of her pregnancy, but there were changes taking place in her heart. After the baby was born, Sally came before the church with a repentant heart and publicly confessed her sin. Her Christian brothers and sisters acknowledged her repentance and welcomed her back.

From that point on, Sally's life was exemplary. Not every story of this nature has such a happy ending, but Sally's experience reminds us of an important truth: we are all Sally. Our guilt may not be exactly the same as hers, but we are all guilty of sin nonetheless. When we fail, the world is ready and willing to point out hypocrisy; but that's nothing compared with standing condemned in the sight of God! But the one who has the right to condemn us the most is also the one in whom forgiveness is found.—C. R. B.

B. Awareness of Sin (v. 20)

20. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

With the word *therefore* Paul brings to a close the first part of the letter to the Romans. As he says in the discussion immediately preceding today's text, the law is a great boon despite Israel's unfaithfulness ([Romans 3:1-8](#)). But how can the law be such a boon if it is disobeyed? It brings to light the very sinfulness of humanity, including especially the sinfulness of those who have received the law. The law tells us how far humanity has fallen. It makes impossible any attempt to excuse oneself for rebellion against the Creator. When one understands the law, it is impossible to believe that one can *be declared righteous*.

The books of the law themselves demonstrate this point. Those five Old Testament books, Genesis through Deuteronomy, contain not just laws but also narratives of Israel's history. Those narratives show the consistent failure to keep the law on the part of those who received it. Indeed, as God gave Moses the tablets of the law on Mount Sinai, the Israelites were openly engaged in idolatrous worship at the bottom of the mountain ([Exodus 32](#)).

Reading the law gives us little hope that we can do better than they. Paul has made this point in various ways to his readers, and he now sums up that point: the law makes us *conscious of our sin*. Even those who are identified as God's people are rebels unworthy of his blessing. To see others' sin—of Israel in the past, of pagans around us in the present—is to be drawn to confess our own sin if we read God's Word rightly.

What Do You Think?

How has Scripture helped you understand your position as one who has rebelled against God?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In terms of attitudes revealed
- In terms of actions interpreted
- In terms of stories hitting home
- In terms of excuses swept away
- Other

Conclusion

A. Saved from Sin's Power

The words of today's text are quite discouraging if read by themselves. But thanks be to God, they bring to a close what is only the beginning of the message of Romans! The problem of human sin is deep and wide. It goes back to the very beginning of the human family and extends to every member in every place in the world. This problem cannot be solved by human endeavor; we know only how to create and perpetuate the problem. If the problem is to be solved, then God must be the one to solve it.



Visual for Lesson 6. Start a discussion by pointing to this visual as you ask, "How do we keep from fooling ourselves in this regard?"

We modern-day Christians can easily fail to hear how this message addresses us. Certainly we see Israel's failure as we read the Old Testament. But, we think, that is them, not us. We have no problem affirming the power of sin in our own world. We see it all around us in others' degraded, chaotic, ruined lives. But, we think, that is them, not us.

Forgetting what our lives would be without God's work in Christ, ignoring how sin's power still reveals itself in us, we can imagine that the universal power of sin is not a factor in our lives. If we succumb to such thinking, we become the kind of people Paul corrected in Romans: those who imagine that their position as God's people gives them a superior status over others.

May our study of this text remind us that we, like they, are victims of sin's power, to be saved from it only by God's grace.

B. Prayer

Gracious God, grant that we can see ourselves as we really are, as you see us. Purge from our hearts the power of sin. We rely utterly on your forgiveness in Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

We can seek God's grace
when we recognize our sin.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Form learners into groups of three to five. Provide each group with magazines, newspapers, markers, glue sticks, scissors, and a half sheet of poster board. Instruct each group to create a picture and word collage in response to this question: *What is wrong in the world today?* After five minutes, ask each group to display its collage. Discuss the commonalities and differences among them.

Say, "When asked the same question in about 1910, Christian author and theologian G. K. Chesterton purportedly responded, 'I am.'" Discuss that response and compare it with the collages. Then say, "Let's see how Chesterton's response serves as an introduction to today's text."

Into the Word

Read [Romans 3:9](#) aloud. Say, "Last week, Paul rebuked the Jews for focusing on physical circumcision rather than the circumcision of the heart. Here in [verse 9](#), he now addresses the common sinful state of Jews and Gentiles."

Pose these questions for whole-class discussion: 1. Why was it important for Paul to remind both Jews and Gentiles they were all under sin? 2. How should the reality of everyone's sinfulness inform our relationships with others?

Next, say, "Paul begins to recite a series of Old Testament Scriptures to continue to support his argument that all are under sin."

Divide the class into three groups and provide instructions as follows. *Lostness Group*—Read [Romans 3:10-12](#), then describe the journey of biblical characters who failed in their attempts to follow God. In what ways are people still lost? *Death Group*—Read [Romans 3:13, 14](#), then discuss how the spoken word can be deadly and deceitful; compare with [James 3:2-12](#). *Violence and Godlessness Group*—Read [Romans 3:15-18](#), then discuss where people are experiencing violence (physical force, unjust power) in the world. Compare [verse 18](#) with the beginning of Paul's argument in [Romans 1:18-20](#).

Have groups share conclusions in whole-class discussion. Ask how Christ is the exception to all of the verses read. Then read [Romans 3:19, 20](#) before posing this question: "How would you respond to someone who says that since everyone sins, it's not a problem because God will save us anyway?"

Alternative. Instead of considering [Romans 3:10-18](#) in the manner above, distribute copies of the "Old Testament References" activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. If your class has eight or fewer learners, this exercise can be accomplished with greater speed by assigning only one or two references per learner. For nine or more learners, form them into pairs or small groups to complete an appropriate number each. Have individuals, pairs, or groups report their findings in the ensuing whole-class discussion.

Make a transition by asking, "When we ponder what's wrong with the world today, how does our lesson text indicate that should we join with G. K. Chesterton in saying, 'I am?'"

Into Life

Ask each learner to compose a prayer as follows: *Part 1*—Write a confession of personal sins (especially besetting sins) that are highlighted in [Romans 3:10-18](#). *Part 2*—Write a repentance statement that describes how he or she will turn away from those sins and turn toward God. *Part 3*—Write a statement that thanks God for his forgiveness and grace. (*Option:* Provide handouts that list the above instructions along with adequate blank space for writing.) Before learners begin, stress that you will ask them to share part 3 with the class as a whole, but not parts 1 and 2.

Option. Following the above, shift the focus from sins against God to the impact of sin on others by having learners complete the "The Impact of Sin" activity from the reproducible page.