

*Romans 3:10-24*

1. What is the Law?
2. What is Sin?
3. What is Grace (& Faith)?

## **Abide With Us<sup>1</sup>**

### **Romans 3:10-24**

Of all the Scripture passages we've been looking at as we go through this Lenten devotional together, today's might be the most appropriate for the season. The first verse in the passage we'll read in just a moment says, "There is no one righteous, not even one" (v. 10). This passage is a reminder of a world that is saturated in sin and death. It's really a lament, despairing the ways of the world – a world good at forgetting God, at violence, at seeming hopelessness. A despair that wonders who could clean up this great mess? Who could put this brokenness back together?

If we're honest, we keep answering that question by saying, "We can fix it if we just work hard enough!" So we create rules, guidelines, and systems, and we fill our calendars. We work and strive, we struggle and persevere, and yet the world *still* seems broken and lost. We aren't any different than the people who originally heard this passage—people who depended on the law to create the boundaries of life, to direct them toward God and away from death. In our culture we scramble for the laws that we think will save us, or we fight against the laws that we think restrain us, bouncing between and over the guardrails that will rein us in and direct us toward life.

Although boundaries are good and important, and doing the work we are called to is great, if we *only* depend on those things, we will still be left wanting.

We are reminded in this season of Lent—with our fasting, with our moments set aside to do the work we are called to—we still need a Savior, and we still need grace.

So let's start by reading the passage. Can I ask you to honor God's Word by standing with me as I read it for us? It's from Romans 3:10-24.

As the Scriptures say, "No one is righteous—not even one. No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God.

All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one. Their talk is foul, like the stench from an open grave. Their tongues are filled with lies. Snake venom drips from their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. They rush to commit murder. Destruction and misery always follow them.

They don't know where to find peace. They have no fear of God at all. Obviously, the law applies to those to whom it was given, for its purpose is to keep people from having excuses, and to show that the entire world is guilty before God. For no one

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can ever be made right with God by doing what the law commands. The law simply shows us how sinful we are.

But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are.

For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. (Romans 3:10-24, nlt)

I pray God will speak supernaturally to our hearts through his Word today. Thank you for standing.

Paul's letter to the Romans has been called his "Magnum Opus," or his theological treatise. There is so much profound stuff in here. You'll remember we did a twelve-week sermon series awhile back out of Romans, and even then, we really only scratched the surface. So from this passage, as much as we are going to talk about, there will be much, much more that we don't have time to look at. But for now, let's start by seeing if we can answer the question...

## 1. What is the Law?

I've mentioned before that I've been reading through the Bible again this year for my time with the Lord, so now I'm in Deuteronomy. The first five books together are called the "Pentateuch" which literally means, "The Five Books." It is in these books that we get the story of the beginning of creation, of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants, and of God's faithfulness to his people through slavery, deliverance, disobedience and blessing as they make their way into the land he had promised them. So the law was given to the Israelites to guide their relationship with God. Jewish law is called in the Hebrew language "Torah," and it often gets a bad reputation, but the heart of all of the law is in Deuteronomy 6:4-5, which says:

"Listen, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength."  
(Deuteronomy 6:4-5, nlt)

This text is known as the *Shema*, because *shema* is the first word – the word we translate as "listen." The whole of the law could be summed up in the two words in that text, "listen" and "love". Listen means more than passive receiving of a message; it means to hear it and to do it. Love means more than an emotion; it means love that results in full devotion of one's entire being. And the *Shema* was the cornerstone in understanding the entire law. It was so important that they were told to write it on the doorframes of their homes, recite it often, and impress it upon their children. Love of God was supposed to be what they oriented their lives around.

And that makes sense, but when you read the Pentateuch, you begin seeing these strange laws that we just don't understand; things like what animals could and couldn't eat, and

cleansing rituals they had to go through when they experienced normal and natural bodily functions. So a lot of the Torah laws seem strange in our world today, but they made sense in the original context. They lived in a world and a culture much different than ours. For example, in an era before much (or anything) was known about germs, it made sense to avoid pork because it can carry numerous diseases when it is not cooked thoroughly.

Also, laws about isolation from the community during illness and ritual cleansing after they recovered also make sense when we consider that the people didn't have our modern understanding of contagious disease. So the laws were boundaries that protected God's people and promoted health and well-being.

But even though the law itself was a good thing, the way it was applied eventually became a stumbling block. Instead of hinging on love, it became a plumbline to judge other people's commitment to God. People – especially religious leaders, would take the list of laws and start comparing their neighbor to that list, looking for where they weren't measuring up. It became a thing to use to judge others. Religious people still do this today. So for the Jews in the Bible, the Law turned into something that had nothing to do with the state of the heart but only people's ability to follow each and every individual rule precisely—and of course, *that* could only be determined by the religious leaders (there were two groups of religious leaders in Jesus' day: the Pharisees and the Sadducees). Ultimately, they used the Law to become a way to keep people out of the Temple and separate from God. This did not make God happy. If you think about it, this is *exactly* why Jesus got so ticked off in the Temple that he cracked a whip, let loose the sacrificial animals and turned over the tables; because the very thing that was supposed to draw people toward God became the way the religious leaders controlled people and kept them away from God. (Matthew 21:12-17)

But even though the law was meant to hinge on love, it was still not totally perfect; for instance, it excluded women or was harsher with them than with men, and it also was not entirely welcoming toward people who weren't born into the faith but wanted to be in community with the Israelites. By the way, this is why Jesus had that playful exchange with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15, when she comes asking Jesus to deliver her demon-possessed daughter. Jesus teased her, saying that he wouldn't give Jewish food to dogs, but she said, "even a dog can get the crumbs that fall off the table." Jesus was making the point that the law fell short of honoring this foreign woman, and he knew she had faith, so he healed her daughter.

So the law and prophets kept trying to get people to treat each other with love and elevate each other and welcome the immigrant and foreigner, but the religious leaders used the law as an excuse to do the opposite.

Now, it's important to say that Paul is pointing out here that the inadequacies of the law were by no means pointing to any inadequacy of God, but to illustrate for the people how greatly they still needed God's grace. No matter how good someone was at keeping the law, it was impossible to be flawless. The law merely pointed out our own sinfulness.

So now it's probably a good time to ask the question...

## **2. What is Sin?**

To understand what sin is, you've got to understand the two sides of the coin called sin. Those two sides are what we call "original sin" and then "personal sin" (or "actual sin"). Let me explain.

Sin entered God's created world when our first parents, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God and tried to seize autonomy from God and be their own sovereign – when they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. When they did that, they condemned all their off-spring – the entire human race – we all inherited both the condition of sin (which is in our nature, our DNA), and the condemnation for sin (which is death). There is nothing we can do to remedy sin; we all have sin-infected blood and genes. That's why Job in the Bible said that no humans are pure, and anyone born of a woman is unrighteous, (Job 15:14) and King David wrote in the Psalms that we are sinful from the time of conception (Psalm 51:5). Jeremiah, among other prophets identified this (Jeremiah 17:9-10) and Jesus talked about this in the Gospels (e.g., Mark 7:21-23), and Paul wrote this extensively in Romans and his other letters (Romans 1:18-25; 5:12-14; 7:1-8:9; 1 Corinthians 3:1-4; Galatians 5:16-25).

Got that? On the one hand, sin is a disease and a curse that no human is capable of healing because we are all diseased and cursed and therefore everything we touch is diseased and cursed.

Original sin – that's one side of the coin. The other side is personal, or what we sometimes call "actual" sin – it's what we all have done and choose to do. We define personal sin this way: it is a voluntary violation of a known law of God by a morally responsible person. *(repeat)* We know it's wrong and choose to do it anyway. We know it's right and choose not to do it anyway. It is self-seeking and self-centered. We often say, if you look at the center letter in the word sin (I) you get the center of sin; it is selfish choices. We are all guilty of these choices – that is, if we are morally responsible humans, meaning we can be held responsible for our actions. Can you think of some humans who cannot be held responsible for their actions? The mentally handicapped or mentally diseased, or infants. That means that God won't judge them for their actions – they are automatically forgiven. But you and I – no matter how immature you might be, you and I are without excuse.

By the way, personal sin is not to be confused with our involuntary and our inescapable shortcomings, infirmities, faults, mistakes, or failures. Because of Adam and Eve's sin, part of the fall of creation means we experience failures and shortcomings that aren't even sin. But there is a difference between shortcomings and sins.

So no matter how you flip the sin coin, we still come up guilty in God's eyes.

Maybe you are here today or you are watching this online and you don't believe in God, so you might not care about laws made up by a God you think doesn't exist. You might not recognize sin as a problem, but I promise you that you feel it's effects and consequences. Sin is everywhere you see hatred and racism. Sin is every time you see fear-mongering partisan politics. Sin is every bit of evil in this world like school shootings and terrorism and bullying and riots. Sin is every bit of abuse and dysfunction in relationships and divisions in families. Every bit of your own insecurities and regrets; all that has its origins in sin. God has given you a conscience that alerts you to the pain and discomfort and imbalance you feel when you experience those things or read about them. That alert is telling you it's sin.

This is why your brain reminds you of all your problems. I read about this recently from one author who said this:<sup>2</sup> “Your brain is planning to remind you of the stupid thing you did 15 years ago in the early hours of tomorrow morning. It (plans) on waking you up with a jolt after only three hours of sleep. Then it will spend much of the rest of the night replaying a list your greatest (mistakes).

The spongy grey lump which sits between your ears is planning a real “greatest hits” retrospective which will include every dumb thing you’ve ever said. That time you got it completely wrong with the person you really (liked) and doomed yourself to a life of regret and loneliness. Every stupid ... choice you’ve ever made and how people are only your friends because they pity you.

It expects this will be complete by about 6:30am, by which time you’ll have to get up and go to work and pretend you’re just fine. When asked, your brain said it intends to do this randomly at intervals for the rest of your life.

Since no one is without sin (as we read in verse 10), you will have many regrets, shameful memories, and sins to ponder late at night (Psalm 32:1-6).

The solution cannot be found in ourselves. We can’t work to fix it and no religious or civil rules are going to resolve it. The problem of sin points us to the need for a solution; in fact, that’s what Paul was saying: the problem of the Law and sin only point us to THE solution: and that is the grace of God through his one and only Son, Jesus Christ.

And that leads us to our third question...

### **3. What is Grace (& Faith)?**

We all fall short! If the law is the standard, there is no possible way to fulfill it completely and flawlessly. Look at the Ten Commandments alone! Sure, maybe it seems easy not to murder, but many of us have struggled at one time or another with idolatry, lying, keeping the Sabbath, honoring our parents, coveting the possessions of others...that’s hitting closer to home.

The reality is, it’s impossible to dot every i and cross every t, and the law itself assumes people will fall short of it, and that’s why the law provided the sacrifice rituals. Sacrifices were an acknowledgment of the ways humanity fell short, and offered a way to atone for sin. But they couldn’t fix our sin problem; they only pointed to the ultimate solution, which was for God to do the unthinkable: offer his one and only Son as the sacrifice for our sin and suffering, freeing us from the condemnation of original sin, and cleansing our hearts from the condition of sin so that God himself, the Holy Spirit could live in us and move us to love him and each other – forgiving us and freeing us from personal sin. And God did this even though we didn’t deserve and didn’t want it, and even though some of us don’t even believe in him.

There is an organization called “The Bible Project,” and they have all kinds of videos that help us understand the Bible and the big concepts we find there. There’s one video that

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<sup>2</sup> Davywav, “Your brain waiting until half two tomorrow morning to remind you of that stupid thing you did,” *NewsThump* (10/11/23); Todd Brewer, “Another Week Ends,” *Mockingbird* (10/13/23)

really helps us understand the law, sin, and God's grace. This video is a little over five minutes long, but I want you to see it because it really helps us tie all this together. Click on this link to view this video: <https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/law/>

Isn't it amazing how the whole Bible story begins to come together and make sense? *That* is what Paul was getting at in the passage we read, and in Romans and all his writings. Nobody can seek God apart from grace. Paul's point is that we all sin, so we all need grace. We cannot work or earn our way out of sin because we will always fall short.

Only in Christ can we find true forgiveness, release from a guilty conscience, and the promise that "God's mercy is new every morning" (Lamentations 3:23-24).

We need grace! Lucky for us, God has revealed His character to us through the Person of Jesus, which means the law is no longer what points us to God because Jesus points and connects us to God.

Grace is the word that describes God's love for us that has done all this for us. Faith, then, is our response to God's grace: we either believe it, accept it, and live in it, or we don't. Either we have faith, or we don't. Our faith in Jesus receives the resolution to the sin problem and opens us up to the Grace of God that allows us to obey and fulfill the Law and its intention. Our lives are transformed because of grace. We cannot work our way to righteousness, but we can be made righteous through faith in Jesus.

This should impact the way we live our lives because we no longer live to *earn* God's favor but know that the driving force is grace through Christ.

There is a certain amount of freedom in knowing we can't earn the love and grace of God, but that it's given freely without our deserving it. There is also freedom when we can admit we have sinned but can now live a different way because of Jesus.

The verses we read deal with the reality of sin, but ultimately it is about profound love. God loved us so much that God made a way for us to be in relationship with Him through Jesus. This way doesn't include the burden of following the letter of the law but offers grace to us instead. Grace made a way for us to connect with God not based on our righteousness but on the righteousness of Jesus. That's why in Lent we diligently seek to confront our sin. We can confront our mistakes, our humanness, and our pain because we know there is a story of grace that is extended to us if we are willing to receive it.

Will you?

*Prayer*

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and evermore. Amen.