

Final Charge: No Excuses in the Totality of Depravity
Romans 3:1-20

“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us...” – 1 John 1:8

Introduction: *“Why do you talk about sin so much?”* This was a conversation with one of our Grace students’ years ago who questioned why we would bring sin up in chapel *so much*, since it felt like we were mad at them or dragged them down. I tried to explain why it was important to understand the bad news before we can understand the good, and confessed we need to make sure to infuse the hopeful parts with more vigor, since that is what we all cling to. It was not an unexpected conversation, and one that’s possible some here have thought as well. Some churches will even expunge the word from their vocabulary, trying to soften the blow or lower the expectation, calling sin “mistakes”, “messing up”, or a “flaw”. But in lowering the standard of our sin, we fail to teach the truth on two fronts: 1) We are NOT THAT BAD, and are not desperate for radical transformation, and 2) Christ’s sacrifice was not THAT GREAT, since we simply needed a nudge or help, not a heart transplant.

You’ve probably heard an illustration along these lines. A man finally visits the doctor after dealing with a horrendous headache for days (this is how you know it’s a made up story – in the fact that a man went to the doctor!). After scanning his brain, it is discovered that he has a deadly brain disease. But the doctor was kind-hearted and loved the man, and did not want to diminish his joy or the family’s peace, so told the man that after examining the results, he assured the man that in a few months he’d be better and feel no pain. *Would we call this doctor loving? Would we say he did what was best for the man? Or would we call this malpractice and take away his medical license?*

This is what we are faced with as believers, disciples, and a church. We want to love God and others to the fullest measure, which means we want to see them reconciled to God and find their greatest joy in God through Christ. We want people to *taste and see that God is good*, that we are loved and secure for eternity. We want people to comprehend the depth and breadth of Jesus’ work on the cross, including His willingness to condescend and humble Himself by becoming a servant. This is our heartbeat. But just like any good physician, we must offer people **bad news** in order to offer the hope of the **best news possible**. This is why Paul has spent so much time explaining that everyone in the world, for all time, in every age and area, stand condemned before the Lord.

What this requires of all of us, again, is to know how sick we really are. If we think we have some bad things but overall are pretty good, we will not deal with the condition radically. I’ve never been a doctor, but I can imagine how hard it would be to convince someone to go along with a heart transplant if they did not think they needed one. It’s also why it’s hard to give medicine to dogs and kids (and some men), since they cannot connect the dots of their need and the solution.

So this morning, we will go back to the courtroom where Paul makes his final arguments by answering a couple of final excuses and then a chain of Scriptural arguments designed to leave the people in the room speechless, evaluative, and thus hopeful!

Answering Final Objections (3:1-8)

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 everyone 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.

You may have had an experience like this at some point. *“Who drank the last of the milk in the fridge and put back the empty bottle? Johnny, did you drink the last of it? Nope. Who did? No idea. You’re the only one in the house, and there’s a milk stain on your shirt! ‘Well, didn’t you buy the milk to drink? Yes, but you are supposed to throw the bottle away and let us know to buy more. Now there’s no milk for cereal! ‘But aren’t you happy that the milk WAS drank, and it brings you so much happiness to care for this family, you can now buy more and enjoy it EVEN more! I’m just glad you guys are so loving and gracious.”*

Even as I write this, it seems ridiculous and the argumentation itself is flawed, but it is nearly the equivalent to the objections to our own sin that Paul has addressed in **2:1-3:8**. Paul has indicted the moral person who agreed with Paul but could not see his own sin (2:1-3). Also the sensitive one who wondered about those who did not have the Law (2:6-16), and finally those religious who participated in rituals, worship, and morals (2:17-29). But in ALL of these, we mankind has been found to be **idolatrous, immoral, and senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless, arrogant, and boastful, inventors of evil.** (1:28-32).

Paul addresses **three main arguments that could be made based on what he just covered**, though each argument has several questions. Once again, he is not speaking to a specific person, though he has dealt with these arguments along the way. As Paul preached a gospel that was all about the **power of Christ to justify mankind and satisfy the righteousness of God, and that by grace through faith alone**, many objected, thinking this was a cheap gospel, or outright heresy, since it did not take into account the keeping of the law or any kind of obedience. Paul will come back to this over and over throughout the entirety of the letter, but he addresses it in part here.

1) Objection #1 – What is the ADVANTAGE of being a Jew or having circumcision?

We looked last week at the fact that a **true Jewish person** was NOT one that merely had the law in their possession or had the sign of circumcision, **“But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.”** (2:29) The anticipated question is this: What good is it to be called as God’s chosen people????!! Is there any advantage? In an unexpected response, Paul said **“much in every way”!** They were entrusted with the *oracles* of God, which would have included all of revealed truth in the Old Testament (2). The case that Paul is making is that with *advantage* comes *responsibility*. They were the first to hear, were entrusted to teach and proclaim, were called for that purpose, and would be held responsible accordingly.

2) Objection #2 – Does the unfaithfulness of some nullify God’s faithfulness for the rest? (3)

The answer is obvious, but the argument is regular. This would be like Johnny saying “maybe we shouldn’t even buy milk anymore”, or someone blaming their rental car not working because they did not put gas in it, but arguing “rental cars are trash!”. Paul answers **emphatically**, “*By no means*”, a favorite of Paul’s in Romans. Even if everyone lied and said they did not sin (1 John 1:8) or said God was a liar (1 John 1:10), God is not bound by our view of Him. He then brings up the words of David in **Psalm 51:4**, where David did not look to his heritage or advantage to justify His sin, but simply stated God was justified in his judgment.

What is the point that Paul is making? ***Whether God keeps His promises or judges sin, HE IS RIGHT, and Israel’s status as God’s people does not exempt individuals from judgment.*** Your kids can have a friend over to the house, and together they can break something valuable. They are both wrong and guilty, but you would hold your own child more responsible, since they knew better according to living in the house and being one of your own.

3) **Objection #3 – Shouldn’t our unrighteousness show God’s righteousness and get us out of judgement?** (5-8)

It sometimes seems like Paul would be one of those friends in a group that is so smart, that when he explained something, you would nod along so as not to seem dumb, but not sure if you actually tracked what he was saying. Try to follow the logic of this last argument:

- **Our UN-righteousness actually shows the righteousness of God** (5) ----- thus
- **If that is the case, why would God still condemn me as a sinner** (7) ----- thus
- **If our sin magnifies God’s goodness, shouldn’t we sin more?** (8)

Convoluting as it seems, these were actually charges Paul dealt with (8). This was a direct shot against his teaching of salvation by grace through faith alone, and he will circle back around on this later in Romans, but for now, the point he continues to make is simply this: God is both **righteous, just, and faithful** (truthful) to bring condemnation on sin for all people, including his own chosen ones. We will come back to the future of Israel in Romans 9-11, but for now, it is clear that without coming to Christ by faith, even the Jews are under condemnation.

Closing Argument Made (9-18)

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; 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; in their paths are ruin and misery,***

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

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

In a classic Pauline way, Paul almost seems to contradict himself in what he *just* said, but upon reflection, simply clarifies what he has already said. *Are the Jews better off?* Nope, not when it comes to

standing before God and measuring up to His righteousness. Since Paul has already charged that everyone is under sin, Jews, Greeks, Gentiles, and anyone in between, he unleashes a final barrage to make the point stick. I like to imagine a scene where he stands boldly looking at everyone in the courtroom and runs through this list. Let's make a couple of observations about this list before drawing some conclusions:

- 1) It is thoroughly **Biblical** – Paul is taking known OT passages, mainly from Psalms, and systematizes them to build a solid argument: 3:10-12 to Psalm 14:1-3; 3:13 to Psalm 5:9; 3:14 to Psalm 10:7; 3:15-17 to Isaiah 59:7-8 and 3:18 to Psalm 35:2. All of these take a cue from **Ecclesiastes 7:20**:

"Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins"

The point is that the universal sinfulness of mankind is NOT a recent invention, not of Paul's own making, but is absolutely built into the entirety of God's plan, character, and truth.

- 2) The plight of sin is **pervasive** – Notice that the phrase "no one", 'none', and 'all' is repeated. The wide pervasiveness of sin is something that we call **total depravity**. What is that? It is simply a way to define what Paul has been explaining. It means that sin touches every part of us, but not necessarily in the same measure that it could. Here is how one theologian explained it:

*"This doctrine of **total inability**, which declares that men are **dead in sin**, does not mean that all men are equally bad, nor that any man is as bad as he could be, nor that anyone is entirely destitute of virtue, nor that human nature is evil in itself, nor that man's spirit is inactive, and much less does it mean that the body is dead. What it does mean is that, since the Fall, **man rests under the curse of sin**, that he is actuated by wrong principles, and that **he is wholly unable to love God or to do anything meriting salvation**. His corruption is extensive but not necessarily intensive. It is in this sense that man, **since the Fall, is utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, wholly inclined to all evil**. He possesses a fixed bias of the will against God and instinctively and willingly turns to evil. **He is an alien by birth and a sinner by choice**. The inability under which he labors is not an **inability to exercise volition** but an inability to **be willing to exercise holy volitions**. And it is this phase of "it" which led Luther to declare that, 'Free will is an empty term, whose reality is lost. And a lost liberty, according to my grammar, is no liberty at all.'" (Lorraine Boettner, "The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination")*

This is a long but helpful description of the pervasiveness and consequence of sin since it explains how a kind and sweet elementary teacher can be as guilty as a mass murderer. We all have the capacity for all kinds of evil, but recognize that evil is restrained by normal means of grace. God has given us government and law enforcement to punish evil doers and praise those who keep the law. We have parents who are to discipline their kids. We have commerce that allows for honest practices which yield better results. But we also know that if the restraints come off, we'll have a version of *The Lord of the Flies* on our hands, where seemingly well behaved boys did savage things when left to their own devices. We'll come back to some implications of this in a bit, but hold onto this for now.

- 3) **Sin affects every part of us** – Paul **first** points out that no one is righteous and no one can comprehend, on their own, the nature of God. It seems a bit odd to say "**no one seeks for God**" since many claim to do so, seeking spiritual answers in life, pursuing spirituality and religion. But the reality is, no one seeks after God the Righteous One, because they cannot. They can try to find the blessings or results, or create some version of God, but they cannot come to grips with

YHWH.....unless God prompts them. Then Psalm 9:10 and 27:8 are sweet, which command us to seek Him and we WILL find Him, and He will not forsake those who do seek Him. But no one, NO ONE, can do this on their own initiative. **Second**, we see how sin affects our words, and even our appendages: throat, tongue, lips, and mouth (13-14). Out of the heart the mouth speaks, and just like a grave with a rotting corpse, our mouth spews venom, hurting others and creating devastating fires (James 3:1-8). Corrupting words is a universal issue, and reveals a depraved heart. **Third**, see that our feet are corrupted and desire to shed blood. Violence is a plight of the human condition as has been seen over and over. Violence may be rarer than hurtful words, but they are more severe. **Finally**, the overarching idea is that the **Fear of the Lord** is not something people possess in themselves. Reverence to God restrains sin, but the depraved heart is **concave**, focused inward. There is both a negative and positive fear of the Lord, one drawing us to Him and one making us scared of Him...but sin keeps us away from both.

Final Indictment Given (19-20)

*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**.*

Without even going to the judge or jury, all of humanity is found guilty. This should leave us utterly silent, stopping the words from our mouth in trying to justify ourselves, or lying to ourselves and others about our condition, or making any kind of final excuses. We should realize that we now are **accountable to God** and must measure up to His righteousness. We finally look at what we have to offer, like any good and acceptable works or obedience to the law, and we realize that as the law is turned around, it reads "THIS ONLY HELPS YOU SEE YOUR SIN, NOT TO SAVE YOU."

Voddie Baucham, commented on this passage this way:

*"**Total Depravity** affects the way we share the Gospel. There's a difference between the way you share the Gospel with a person that you believe is kinda bad and one that you believe is **radically depraved**.*

*This doctrine also affects the way that **we hear and receive the Gospel**. If I feel like I'm a pretty good person, I will never comprehend the depths of my own sin and the depths of my need of Jesus Christ. If I feel that I'm a pretty good person, I will never, ever come to the place where I magnify Christ rightly and worship and adore him in the way that he is to be worshipped and adored — **because I do not comprehend the vast magnitude of difference between him and me**.*

It is only when I understand sin rightly, that I magnify and worship Christ appropriately. So this is bad news today. It's very bad news today. But without the bad news, you don't understand the goodness of the good news. Amen?"

So this is what is at stake and what we take away. The gospel comes to depraved sinners who have no righteousness of their own to offer the Lord. That means good kids growing up in the church have to come to grips with their utter depravity before they can be saved. It means that we cannot "nice" someone into salvation, we cannot hope that if we are loving enough or welcoming enough someone will be saved. It is the gospel of Jesus alone, as God gives grace to believe by faith alone.

But it also levels all of us, since God does not grade on a curve. You may have never done anything heinous while someone else in this room has done things that would not go over well in a party. But we

all come to Christ the same way, and when we understand that the nice person and the overtly sinful person are under the SAME WRATH, we can all lift holy hands together, worshipping a God who, out of love, and while we were still wretched sinners, came to sacrifice Himself, offering us forgiveness, salvation, and restoration in Him alone.

Though our sin was great, His grace was greater. Though our depravity was total, His love was greater. Though we deserved wrath, His gospel was greater.