

THE ROAD OF THE RIGHTEOUS

Expositional Study Of Romans

Romans 3:19-24a

Written By

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Escape Rooms are the rage, especially in the D.C. area. What's their purpose? Simple. To see how long it takes you and your team to break out of a secured thematic room by finding and using various clever clues. Armed with the right information you are equipped to get the door open so you can flee to safety.

At the Georgetown location, you can choose from four nail biting themes: *Friday the 13th*, *Ghostbusters*, *Runaway Subway*, and the *Titanic*. In this last room the goal is get out the room before the sea water flood through a portal. Oh, now that sounds challenging . . . and relaxing. Right. The average breakout time is, according to the website, an hour and fifteen minutes. Of course, you only exit the locked thematic room if you follow the correct clues.

Spiritually speaking, I think we have something here, don't you? The Escape Room motif reminds me of man's spiritual predicament as detailed by the Apostle Paul in Romans chapters 1 through 3. Everyone since the fall of Adam is born locked in an **Escape Room of Sin**.

Gentiles are not exempt, nor are Jews who received unique revelations, promises, laws, and traditions from the living God at various junctures of history. The main difference, however, between this room and the entertainment version is clear from the opening chapters of Romans: those who willfully choose not to break out per God's design forfeit a life-giving relationship with Him for all eternity and incur God's judgment against their inherited sin (Rom. 2:5-10). Conversely, those who listen to God's clues and follow what He says trade death for life. Put differently, at the precise moment they submit to God's plan for escape the door to forgiveness and life opens, allowing them to become God's child.



Are you trapped in an escape proof room called sin? No doubt, the room in question is probably beautifully adorned as you experience life with your team in it. Yet, in your soul you know sin stains and traps you. You see it in your thoughts, in what you do when you face opposition, in how your pride keeps you from admitting when you are wrong to your mate, in the things you fail to say when you fill out your life description on a dating site, in how you just can't seem to get control of your temper or your penchant for laughing at lewd things, in how you continue to do the same destructive things you did with your last two wives or with your last three boyfriends, in how you can't shake a debilitating habit no matter how hard you try. I could go on but I'm sure you don't need convincing. In the quiet of the night as you stare at the ceiling, one thought keeps playing in your mind: I'm in an **Escape Room** called **Sin**.

This cold, stark spiritual reality leads logically to one question.

What Is God's Escape Plan For Sinners?

Paul answers this most important life question definitively in Romans 3, verses 19 through 31. Because these verses are chock-full of breathtaking and highly illuminating spiritual information, we will take two studies to methodically make sure you know exactly how to exit the room which traps you. First, we must consider the wrong way to try and get out of this particular spiritual room.

The Wrong Path To Freedom (Rom. 3:19-20)

Speaking primarily to Jews, who did not think they were guilty before God because they were His chosen people (Deut. 7), and who were convinced their pedigree and religious works would garner the eternal favor of God, Paul is painfully candid. Put another way, to those Jews who didn't feel that they, of all people, were locked in an Escape Room called Sin, the loving Apostle gives them a wake-up call. Read on and you'll see what I mean:

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; ²⁰ because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin.

Having just demonstrated that Jews are just as guilty before God as Gentiles in chapters two through three, Paul turns here to begin to draw his argument to its much needed conclusion. "We know," *oidamen* (Οἶδαμεν), is a perfect active indicative, first person plural. The perfect speaks, in its base form, of a past act with an abiding, uninterrupted result. By using this particular tense Paul stresses the timeless truth that "We, as Jews, know that what the Law of Moses says of all people, or at least we should." The Law is from the Greek *nomos* (νόμος), which is a code word for the entire Old Testament. The article "the" before this key word tells us this much. This is not natural law, or *any* type of law, but THE Law as God revealed in the *entire* Old Testament. Paul's quoting from Isaiah and the Psalter in Romans 3, verses 10 through 18 also helps substantiate this phrase usage (Rom. 3:10-12 is from Psalm 14:1-3 and Isaiah 53:1-3; Romans 3:13 is from Psalm 5:9 and 140:3, and so forth). As a side light, Jews call their Old Testament the TANAK, which is a descriptive acronym: T=Torah/law, N=Nevi'im/Prophets, and K=Ketuvim/Writings.

What is the purpose of the Law? Does its mere possession or faithful observance allow a sinner to escape from the room called Sin? Put differently, can a person work their way out of their

sinful predicament? In a word, “No.” Why not? Because of the divinely limited nature of the Law. For one, it leaves sinners speechless before its dictates, or in other words, it leaves *all* sinners without a word in their defense before the holy throne of God Almighty. For Jews, this would have been a paradigm shattering statement for they didn’t believe they were sinners in an escape room called Sin. But, as Paul asserts here, they should have known better because the Law is merely designed to leave *all* sinners with no argument for why God should permit them into His heaven by means of their observance of the Law. Jesus says they will try in vain on Judgement Day to gain entrance based on works-related arguments (Matt. 7:15ff); however, at the end of the day Jesus will say, “Silence! Your arguments are not valid because the Law doesn’t *commend* a person to God, it *condemns*.”

As Paul articulates in the next phrase

... and all the world may become accountable to God;

“Accountable” is from the Greek *hypodikos* (ὑπόδικος), which is a legal term denoting that a given person is answerable to the court for their illegal activities. Applied to God and His Law it means all sinners will stand guilty before His throne of judgment and give account of their lives which were lived contrary to God’s Law. God will, in a sense, itemize the Law and then lay it like a template over the sinner’s life to demonstrate how he failed to truly measure up no matter how hard he tried. This, of course, is why all mouths, all debate, and all counter arguments will be shut down by Jesus on Judgement Day. When they give account of their lives, and they will all give account, they will quickly learn they can really say absolutely nothing in their defense.

- “Lord, I works so hard to observe the laws and rituals of my religion. Surely, this is enough to garner your favor.” His reply, “Silence! You are guilty.”
- “Lord, I thought that the highest law in life was tolerance. Surely, you found my commitment worthy of eternal acceptance.” His reply, “Silence! You are guilty.”
- “Lord, I made sure everyone around me understood the law of relativism so they would stop arguing and judging each other and live in peace. Surely, your face shines on those who zealously wave the banner of relativism.” His reply, “Silence You are guilty.!”
- “Lord, I really was a pretty good person who abided by the laws of the and kept my life morally clean. Surely, being good is enough to move you to allow me into your presence.” His reply, “Silence! You are guilty.”
- “Lord, I’m a Jew who loved the TANAK and I made sure I meticulously observed all the rituals you gave us. Surely, you are pleased with your people.” His reply, “Silence! You are guilty.”

Are you prepared right now to be scrutinized by the living, holy God?

To help prepare you for that day, I must ask a pertinent, timely question: Why are all sinners guilty? For one, they are born under the dominion and domination of sin (Rom. 5:12-21), and for another, their allegiance and observance of the Law of God cannot save and deliver from the room of Sin because the Law only condemns. It has absolutely no saving, delivering value. Those who think otherwise are on the wrong path in their quest for freedom.

For those who might have had time swallowing this profound truth, Paul states it in a different fashion in verse 20. Listen and learn:

²⁰ because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law *comes* the knowledge of sin.

The adverbial conjunction, *dioti* (διότι), denotes the reason why observance of the Law provides no spiritual deliverance for sinners. The Law, by definition, simply makes sinners aware of sin. Whether it is the big Ten Commandments in Exodus 20, verses 1 through 17, or all of the laws of God revealed in the New Testament, all the laws of God do is tell you what He expects and to showcase when you sin by disregarding His dictates.

My world tells me that all religions are equally valid, therefore, I should enjoy mine and let other people enjoy theirs so there can be universal peace. God's Law, however, informs me that there is only one true God and He should be worshipped above all other so-called gods. To disregard God's Law, at this point, therefore, is to be condemned by the Law as a sinner. Again, all the Law can do is show each of us where we don't measure up to God's lofty, holy, righteous standards.

My world tells me to gratify myself and to pursue all of my desires, be what they may, but God's Law tells me that not all desire is godly desire. Some of it is perverted desire. When I, therefore, rationalize my behavior to pursue my devious desires, I break God's Law and stand before Him as one accused of sinful activity. This is what the Law does: it condemns, it doesn't save.

Because of the nature of the Law of God, Paul states "*by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight.*" Did you get that? Let the import of these words sink deep into your soul. "Justify," *dikaioo* (δικαιώω), is a legal term from the Grecian world and it speaks of declaring a guilty person righteous or not-guilty. The leading Greek lexicon provides a helpful definition of the key word Paul employs quite frequently in the book of Romans. Of the four lexical nuances, the second is most instructive in relation to Paul's usage:

② to render a favorable verdict, *vindicate*.

ⓐ as activity of humans *justify, vindicate, treat as just* (Appian, Liby. 17 §70; Gen 44:16; Sir 10:29; 13:22; 23:11 al.) θέλων δ. ἑαυτὸν *wishing to justify himself* Lk 10:29; δ. ἑαυτὸν ἐνώπιόν τινος *j. oneself before someone*=you try to make out a good case for yourselves before the public' 16:15 (δ. ἑαυτὸν as En 102:10; but s. JJeremias, ZNW 38, '39, 117f [against him SAalen, NTS 13, '67, 1ff]). ὁ δικαιοῦμενός μοι *the one who vindicates himself before (or against) me* B 6:1 (cp. Is 50:8). τελῶναι ἐδικαίωσαν τὸν θεὸν βαπτισθέντες *tax-collectors affirmed God's uprightness and got baptized* i.e. by ruling in God's favor they admitted that they were in the wrong and took a new direction (opp. τὴν βουλήν τ. θεοῦ ἀθετεῖν) Lk 7:29 (cp. PsSol 2:15; 3:5; 8:7, 23; 9:2).

ⓑ of experience or activity of transcendent figures, esp. in relation to humans

α. of wisdom ἐδικαιώθη ἀπὸ τῶν τέκνων αὐτῆς *is vindicated by her children* (on δικ. ἀπό cp. Is 45:25. S. also Appian, Basil. 8: δικαιώω=consider someth. just or correct) Lk 7:35; also ἀπὸ τῶν ἔργων αὐτῆς Mt 11:19 (v.l. τέκνων). On this saying s. DVölter, NThT 8, 1919, 22–42; JBover, Biblica 6, 1925, 323–25; 463–65; M-JLagrange, *ibid.* 461–63. Of an angel Hm 5, 1, 7.

β. of God *be found in the right, be free of charges* (cp. TestAbr A 13 p. 93, 14 [Stone p. 34] 'be vindicated' in a trial by fire) Mt 12:37 (opp. καταδικάζειν). δεδικαιωμένος Lk 18:14; GJs 5:1; δεδικαιωμένη (Salome) 20:4 (not pap). Ac 13:39 (but s. 3 below); Rv 22:11 v.l.; Dg 5:14.—Paul, who has influenced later wr. (cp. Iren. 3, 18, 7 [Harv. II 102, 2f]), uses the word almost exclusively of God's judgment. As affirmative verdict Ro 2:13. Esp. of pers. δικαιούσθαι *be acquitted, be pronounced and treated as righteous* and thereby become δίκαιος, receive the divine gift of δικαιοσύνη through faith in Christ Jesus and apart from νόμος as a basis for evaluation (MSeifrid, Justification by Faith—The Origin and Development of a Central Pauline Theme '92) 3:20 (Ps 142:2), 24, 28; 4:2; 5:1, 9; 1 Cor 4:4; Gal 2:16f (Ps 142:2); 3:11, 24; 5:4; Tit 3:7; Phil 3:12 v.l.; B 4:10; 15:7; IPhld 8:2; Dg 9:4; (w. ἀγιαζεσθαι) Hv 3, 9, 1. οὐ παρὰ τοῦτο δεδικαίωμα *I am not justified by this* (after 1 Cor 4:4) IRo 5:1. ἵνα δικαιωθῇ σου ἡ σὰρξ *that your flesh* (as the sinful part) *may be acquitted* Hs 5, 7, 1; δ. ἔργοις *by* (on the basis of) *works, by what one does* 1 Cl 30:3; cp. Js 2:21, 24f (ἔργον 1a and πίστις 2dδ); δι' ἑαυτῶν δ. *by oneself*=as a result of one's own accomplishments 1 Cl 32:4. (cp. κατὰ νόμον Hippol., Ref. 7, 34, 1).—Since Paul views God's justifying action in close connection with the power of Christ's resurrection, there is sometimes no clear distinction between the justifying action of acquittal and the gift of new life through the Holy Spirit as God's activity in promoting uprightness in believers. Passages of this nature include Ro 3:26, 30; 4:5 (on δικαιούν τὸν ἀσεβῆ cp. the warning against accepting δῶρα to arrange acquittal Ex 23:7 and Is 5:23; δικαιούμενοι δωρεάν Ro 3:24 is therefore all the more pointed); 8:30, 33 (Is 50:8); Gal 3:8; Dg 9:5.¹

Simply put: No amount of law observance will EVER cause God to pronounce that sinner a saint in His courtroom. Why? The nature of the law, as I have said, merely convicts a person of their sinful status. It was NEVER designed to move him to a saved status.

If you are one who places great hope in your observance of law, be what it may, to garner the favor of God in eternity, I hope you realize right now the error of your trajectory. This course of action will never get you free from the Escape Room named Sin. All the Law will ever do is verify that you are, in fact, a sinner.

Unfortunately, our world has its share of people who feel their works of the law will, on the contrary, be sufficient to win God's eternal acceptance. Ron Rhodes gives us an apt illustration of this tragic reality in his apologetic book *Reasoning from the Scriptures with Muslims*:

The Quran teaches that if a person has any hope of salvation it will be based on pleasing Allah by good works. We read in Sura 23:102-103: "In the day of judgment, they whose balances shall be heavy with good works, shall be happy, whose balances shall be light, are those who shall lose their souls, and shall remain in hell forever." Salvation is based upon one's merit, for one's good deeds must outweigh one's bad deeds.

Muslims generally believe that one stands the best chance of salvation by copying the sayings and actions of Muhammad, the greatest of all humans. After all, Muhammad was pleasing to Allah, and if a Muslim can do and say what

¹ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 249.

Muhammad did, then perhaps he or she will end up in paradise. This is one reason Muslim tradition is so important, for it is within tradition that one finds a record of what Muhammad did and said in various circumstances.²

Teaching of this nature, of course, runs diametrically opposed to the inspired teaching of Paul. He makes it devastatingly clear that all mankind are sinners and that the only way out of this Escape Room is first realize personal religious works in relation to law do not save. If you happen to cling tightly to this misguided notion, I pray you will listen to Paul for your escape plan is merely going to leave you trapped for all eternity. That's the bad news, spiritually speaking, and unfortunately too many people have not received the inspired memo. You have that memo, that clue right now, so I challenge you to move from the bad news to the good news. Lovingly, Paul presents that refreshing news beginning with verse 21. I call his teacher here . . .

The Right Path To Freedom (Rom. 3:21-24a)

Paul talks opening about the true path out of the Escape Room of Sin in verses 21 through 24. As you read these profound verses, you'll see the path to freedom most clearly:

²¹ But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²² even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;

According to these verses, we can readily say there are four components to the right path to spiritual freedom.

It Focuses On The Past (v. 21). In the past Israel did possess the Law; however, this did not mean they had no cognition that a right standing before God could not be gained by observance of said Law. On the contrary, the Jews had plenty of biblical evidence which told them sinners are declared saints not by observance of the Law but by faith in God's provision. Paul opened his letter by stating this premise in a definitive fashion:

¹⁷ For in it *the* righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "BUT THE RIGHTEOUS *man* SHALL LIVE BY FAITH" (Rom. 1).

You will remember Paul's quote here about the gospel, or good news of God for sinners, is drawn from the prophet Habakkuk, chapter 2 verse 4. Nowhere in Habakkuk did the prophet say sinners are transformed into saints by strict, perpetual, and loyal adherence to the Law of Moses. He said, as you can read, just the opposite. A man who is justified and declared righteous before God is a man who evidences faith in God. Period. Paul will further substantiate this viewpoint in Romans 4 where he demonstrates that Abraham, the father of the Israelite nation, secured righteousness by faith, not by works.

From what we see in Romans chapters 2 through 3, the Jews were blinded by their love of the Law. They mistakenly believed their observance of it would lead, *ipso facto*, to a right standing with God. They, however, thought wrong, as Paul reminds them from their own writings. Perhaps

²Ron Rhodes, *Reasoning from the Scripture with Muslims* (Eugene: Harvest House, 2002), 235-236.

you, too, are mistaken, thinking that the love of Law and legalism is what might possibly save you one day and give you freedom from the room of sin. If this is you, I hope you realize right now the tenuous nature of your position in light of God's revelation.

In addition, the right road to deliverance has a second focus.

It Focuses On A Person (v. 22). That person is none other than Jesus, the perfect and holy Son of God. Follow Paul's words closely:

²² even *the* righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction;

By yourself, even your best religious effort, apart from a faith relationship with the Messiah, Jesus, is unrighteousness. In order to break free from the room of sin which contaminates you, you need righteousness before an absolutely holy God. And because you have no righteousness about you, you desperately need His holiness. How does a sinner obtain God's holiness? Good question. The preposition "through," *dia* (διὰ) gives us the answer by showing us *the only means* of acquiring God's righteousness is intrinsically associated with faith in Jesus Christ, who is the essence of righteousness.

Jesus came to earth and bore our unrighteousness, our sin, upon His body as our supreme sacrifice to the Father. When He rose from the grave three days later, He was perfectly suited to give His righteousness to any and all who would place their faith in His redemptive act. This imputational righteousness of Jesus gained by faith is described by Paul in his letter to the Corinthians:

³⁰ But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor. 1).

The only way to secure freedom from the dominion of sin is to come to God on God's terms, not yours. What are His terms? His terms are all tied to the sinner placing his faith in Christ's work, not in his works. I have to ask you, Have you trusted Jesus's work as your redemptive work yet, or are you still relying upon your vacuous and vain works? The person who places their faith in this Savior finds the divine door to forgiveness and life. I pray you find it soon.

A third concept about God's path to life is disclosed by Paul in verse 23.

It Focuses On A Predicament (v. 23). What's your predicament? Paul couldn't be clearer:

²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

You cannot find the door to spiritual life until you realize you, no matter how nice, moral, and/or religious you are, you, my friend, are a sinner who constantly falls short of the perfection of God's glory. No matter how often you recite a memorized prayer your father gave you, which direction you aim your prayer rug, how many holy beads you prayer over, how often you, well you can fill in the blank, your works will always fall woefully short of the perfection God requires from one who works. As Paul writes in Galatians:

¹⁰ For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, to perform them (Gal. 3).

Or in other words, you are cursed before God if you do not maintain perfect obedience to the Law. And since that is impossible, then you will remain spiritually cursed and dead until you come to God on His terms. What terms are those? You must place your faith in the One who is righteous, who came and died and rose again so you might have His righteousness. His name? Jesus.

Think of two men swept overboard on an ocean liner in open sea. Let's say for sake of argument they fell overboard when the boat was halfway between Lisbon and New York. One man might be a more skilled swimmer because he was on many swim teams as he grew up, while the other man only had a couple of Red Cross lessons when he was seven or eight years old. Of these two men, which one do you think will actually reach shore? Neither because it is humanly impossible for the human body, no matter it's skill level or conditioning to swim that far. Both will die, for sure. Both will fall woefully short of the goal. Such is an apt description of man attempting to acquire the righteousness of God by his effort. His sinful status keeps him from ever swimming to that shore because it is intrinsically related to the holiness of God.

This is man's spiritual predicament, but thanks be to God who sent His perfect Son to be our Savior and Redeemer. He did the work that none of us could ever do. Paul waxes eloquent on this point in verse 24. Here he tells us that the path to freedom couldn't be clearer:

It Focuses On Provision (v. 24a). What this entails is showcased for all to see by Paul:

²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;

God justifies sinners not based on their works but upon their reception of His gift of grace. Justification, or being declared righteous in God's courtroom, as it were, is a complete gift the sinner cannot ever work for. God gives it freely to all those who place their faith in the person and work of His Son to redeem sinners. Further, justification is all about grace, meaning there is absolutely no room for personal works. It absolutely cannot be earned for it all about a gracious, generous, free gift from the hands of God.

But some still don't get the picture. Take Muhammad Ali. Writing about life and death in *Reader's Digest*, he remarks:

One day we're all going to die, and God is going to judge us [our] good deeds and bad deeds. If the bad outweighs the good, you go to hell. If the good outweighs the bad, you go to heaven.³

The boxer's words couldn't have been more far afield from Paul's, could they? He didn't get the picture of the true gospel.

Actress Sophia Loren doesn't get the picture. In 1999 she made this shocking, sad statement:

I'm not a practican, but I pray. I read the Bible. It's the most beautiful book ever written. I should go to heaven; otherwise it's not nice. I haven't done anything wrong. My conscience is very clean. My soul is as white as those orchids over there, and I should go straight, straight to heaven.⁴

³"Ali," *Reader's Digest* (December 2001) 93.

⁴Sophia Loren, *USA Today* (2-4-99).

I think she needs to read Romans 3, especially giving attention to verses 19 through 24. Actor Rob Lowe doesn't get the picture either. Back in 2015 he surmised,

I try to hold on to the things I believe to be good and true. Good things happen to good people. Karma is real. There is a larger, better plan for us all if we stay positive, keep pushing, and get out of our own way.⁵

Karma is not real, but sin is and the only way to deal with sin is not by staying positive but by becoming humble before God.

Karma doesn't free a person. No amount of good karma will ever be enough to free you from the wheel of death. Freedom only comes in the form of divine gift God extends to you. When you take the gift by faith, you, my friend, hear the gears and locks of the **Escape Room of Sin** grind, resulting in a hidden door slowly opening leading you to a new life with God you could have never acquired on your own. The gift of grace is now sitting in the sealed room waiting for you to make your next move. Got any takers who want to move to freedom?

⁵Rob Lowe, *Love Life* (Simon & Schuster, 2015), 143.