

THE ROAD OF THE RIGHTEOUS

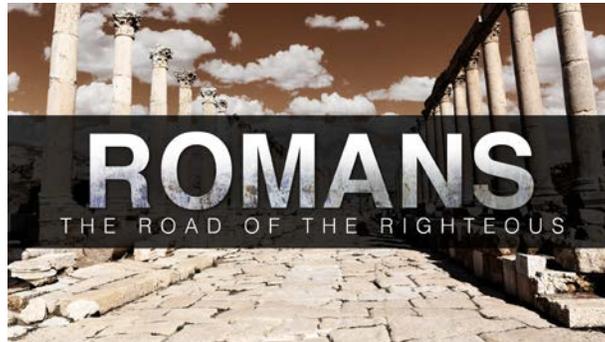
Expositional Study Of Romans

Romans 3:9-20

Written By

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May 27, 2018



Aerosmith, a major rock band for those who aren't into music, attempted in 1993 to address the social and moral morass of the world with a song titled *Livin' on the Edge*. The opening lyrics seek to uncover the main issue driving man's social and moral meltdown:

There's somethin' wrong with the world today
I don't know what it is
Something's wrong with our eyes

We're seein' things in a different way
And God knows it ain't his
It sure ain't no surprise

Livin' on the edge
Livin' on the edge
Livin' on the edge
Livin' on the edge¹

It was a good attempt to isolate man's core issue, but it didn't come close to the real cause of man's problem. Man's problem is not with his eyes; it is with his heart. Addressing the root cause of Israel's social, spiritual, and moral demise prior to their Babylonian captivity, Jeremiah minced no words identifying the internal issue of the people:

¹Aerosmith, "Livin' on the Edge," by Steven Tyler, Joe Perry, and Mark Hudson, recorded 1993, accessed May 24, 2018, <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/aerosmith/livinontheedge.html>.

^{KJV} ⁹The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? (Jer. 17).

^{NAS} ⁹The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it? (Jer. 17).

“Deceit,” from the Hebrew *aqov* (אָפוּן), is placed first in the sentence for dramatic emphasis, and to identify the origin of man’s deceitful propensity is his heart, the seat of who he is. Because man is diseased at the core of his being, Jeremiah surmises he is “desperately sick,” which is a more precise translation of the term *w^{anus}* (שָׁאַף) which is used to describe a terminal situation. The conjunction *waw* (and) wedded to the adjective for “sick” is highly disjunctive, meaning it is extremely emphatic . . . something akin to an exclamation point. Jeremiah couldn’t have been more right in his appraisal of the problem with man, and in an attempt to move his diseased society toward health and wholeness he, like a good doctor, leveled with them instead of coddling them.

Writing to the Romans some five hundred years later, Paul in the spirit of Jeremiah addressed man’s issue by pointing directly to his spiritually diseased heart. In verse 21 of chapter 1, he talked about how sinful man’s heart is darkened to the things of God. In verse 5 of chapter 2, he warned that the unrepentant heart merely stores up divine wrath for the day of the revelation of God’s wrath against sinners. As we discover in chapter 3, starting with verse 9, all mankind, Gentile and Jew alike, have a heart problem. None are excluded. No one is exempt.

Paul will get the solution to man’s spiritual heart malady starting in verse 21, and he will really touch upon it in chapter 10, verses 8 through 10; however, before he reveals the medicinal curative power of the Christ’s redemptive work, he pauses in verses 9 through 20 to show us the menacing MRI of man’s disease-ridden heart. Why does he do this? Why the negativity? Wouldn’t you want your doctor to be open and honest with you about your spiritual health situation? Armed with the facts about your diagnosis you just might be motivated to turn from sin to the Savior, to place your heart in the hands of the only One who can bring it to a state of health and wholeness. Put differently, as sinners born with diseased hearts, we cannot fully appreciate the wonder and power of Christ’s gospel until we first understand our spiritual predicament. Further, if we do not cognitively grasp the spiritual terminal nature of our internal issue we will not be moved to head toward repentance so Jesus, the doctor of all doctor’s, can cure us.

To attempt to move sinners toward the Savior, Paul, brings them not to a doctor’s office but to a courtroom in chapter 3, verses 9 through 20.

Why Do All People Need The Savior? (Romans 3:9-20)

Paul develops his case against sinners like a skilled prosecutor. Three powerful arguments to prove his case climax with a conclusion in verses 19 through 20. As we move through his reasoning several thoughts are in order. If you are Christian, you must stop and ask yourself, “Do I, like Paul, give the sinner an honest appraisal of his spiritual standing before a holy God, or do I water it down so he is not offended?” If you are a non-Christian, I pray you would be honest with Paul’s words so you can see yourself as God sees you so you can be moved toward spiritual acquittal by means of placing your faith in Christ’s power to save. With these thoughts in mind, let us enter the courtroom.

The Charge: Man Is A Sinner (Rom. 3:9)

Paul begins with the bad news about mankind's spiritual standing.

⁹ What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; (Rom. 3:9).

Structurally, his opening argument can be broken down into two movements:

Two Questions (Rom. 3:9a). Contextually, these two questions are addressed, moralistic Jews Paul's day. The "we" is Paul and any other Jew, and the "they" is any Gentile. Of course, the answer to the two rhetorical questions is a definitive "No!" A Jew who thinks they are kingdom-bound by means of their heredity, their love of ritual, and their mere reception of the Torah, but who lives an internal life of no faith toward God is just as guilty before God as a Gentile who worships false gods. As Paul has demonstrated, Jews have the advantage of the presence of God's revelation of how to know and follow Him; however, regarding their humanness they have no leg up on the Gentiles.

One Verdict (Rom. 3:9b). What is the verdict? Here is how Paul presents it in court:

⁹ What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; (Rom. 3:9).

The opening conjunctive "for" (γὰρ) introduces us to the reason Jews are not spiritually better off than Gentiles. Paul says, I've already leveled that charge. And what is the charge? That "Jews and Greeks are all under sin." William Barclay brings out the meaning of this prepositional phrase, viz., "under sin," when he states:

The Greek phrase that he uses for *under sin*, *hupo hamartian*, is very interesting. In this sense, *hupo* means *in the power of*, *under the authority of*. In Matthew 8:9, the centurion says: 'I have soldiers [*hupo emauton*] *under me*.' That is, I have soldiers *under my command*. A schoolboy was *hupo paidagōgon* (*under the direction*) of the slave who was in control of him. A slave was *hupo zugon* (*under the yoke*) of his master. In the Christless state, men and women are under the control of sin, and helpless to escape from it.²

Spiritually speaking, all mankind is under the dominion and power of sin. No one is excluded no matter how nice or religious he is. If he rejects Christ, he is, *ipso facto*, a slave to the power of sin. Religious works will not deliver him from this predicament. Being moral will not work either. Observing religious rituals, be what they may, cannot remove the sinner from the slave master called sin. When Paul says "all," he means "all." None are excluded. And the slavish state is perpetual from the moment of birth (Psa. 51:5). We know this much because Paul employs the present tense verbal infinitive (εἶναι) to describe man's spiritual standing.

The universality of sin is a harsh reality taught throughout Scripture:

² And do not enter into judgment with Thy servant, for in Thy sight no man living is righteous. (Ps. 143).

² William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, 3rd ed. fully rev. & updated., The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 64.

²⁰ Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who *continually* does good and who never sins. (Eccl. 7).

⁹ Who can say, "I have cleansed my heart, I am pure from my sin"? (Prov. 20).

Sin is not limited to acts but includes the possession of a sinful nature. In fact, the sinful nature is the source of the sinful acts. Jesus addressed this theological concept on several occasions:

⁴³ For there is no good tree which produces bad fruit; nor, on the other hand, a bad tree which produces good fruit. ⁴⁴ For each tree is known by its own fruit. For men do not gather figs from thorns, nor do they pick grapes from a briar bush (Lk. 6).

³⁴ You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. ³⁵ The good man out of *his* good treasure brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of *his* evil treasure brings forth what is evil (Matt. 12).

Man is therefore, intrinsically evil. If you are thinking you are basically a good person, you should reconsider your position. Yes, you might be good in some respects; however, judicially you cannot escape the fact you are under the dominion and control of sin.

Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, went so far as to teach that sin does not even exist. Convenient. Writing in *The First Church of Christ, Scientist, and Miscellany*; namely, chapter 17 titled *Answer to Criticisms* she waxes eloquent:

I submit that Christian Science has been widely made known to the world, and that it contains the entire truth of the Scriptures, as also whatever portions of truth may be found in creeds. In addition to this, Christian Science presents the demonstrable divine Principle and rules of the Bible, hitherto undiscovered in the translations of the Bible and lacking in the creeds. Therefore, I query: Do Christians, who believe in sin, and especially those who claim to pardon sin, believe that God is good, and that God is All? Christian Scientists firmly subscribe to this statement; yea, they understand it and the law governing it, namely, that God, the divine Principle of Christian Science, is "of purer eyes than to behold evil." On this basis they endeavor to cast out the belief in sin or in aught besides God, thus enabling the sinner to overcome sin according to the Scripture, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure." Does he who believes in sickness know or declare that there is no sickness or disease, and thus heal disease? Christian Scientists, who do not believe in the reality of disease, heal disease, for the reason that the divine Principle of Christian Science, demonstrated, heals the most inveterate diseases.³

³Mary Baker Eddy, *The First Church of Christ, Scientist, and Miscellany* (Boston: The Christian Board of Directors, 1913), 299-300, Kindle.

Her position does not even square with reality, let alone the teaching of the Word of God. Biblical scholars correctly conclude that not only does sin exist, but man's slavish predicament to sin's power means man is, by definition, spiritually depraved in every respect. What does this mean? Henry Thiessen offers this astute analysis:

From the negative standpoint, it does not mean that every sinner is devoid of all qualities pleasing to man; that he commits, or is prone to, every form of sin; or that he is as bitterly opposed to God as it is possible for him to be. . . . From a positive standpoint, it does mean that every sinner is totally destitute of that love to God which is the fundamental requirement of the law (Deut. 6:4f; Matt. 22:37); that he has supremely given a preference of himself to God (2 Tim. 3:2-4); that he has an aversion to God which on occasion becomes active enmity to him (Rom. 8:7); that his every faculty is disordered and corrupted (Eph. 4:18); that he has no thought, feeling, or deed of which God can fully approve (Rom. 7:18); that he has entered upon a line of constant progress in depravity from which he can in no wise turn away in his own strength (Rom. 7:18). Depravity has infected the whole man—mind, emotions, and will.⁴

No person born on this planet has been free from the dominion of sin, save Jesus, the Christ. You and I are certainly no exceptions, and until we come to this realization we cannot be saved, acquitted, and made spiritually healthy and whole.

As I said, Paul minces no words because so much is at stake. He definitively states all mankind is under the power of sin. This is a unique word in the original text. Paul could have used *paraptoma*, which speaks of specific sins (Mark 11:25; Matt. 18:15, 21), or *anomia*, which speaks of lawlessness (2 Co. 6:14); or *parabasis*, which means to trespass (Rom. 4:15), but he chose *hamartia*, which is an archery term which denoted missing a given target. Ideally, this is what sin is, isn't it? It is missing the target of God's glory in God's requirements by doing what you want to, not what God wants you to do. No wonder Paul gives this word a good workout in Romans, for it effectively shows man who he is before God so he can see his need of the Savior (Rom. 3:20; 4:7-8; 5:12, 13, 20, 21; 6:1, 2, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 20, 22, 23; 7:5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 14, 17, 20, 23; 8:2, 3; 11:27; 14:23). You may be a nice, good, upstanding person, but at your core you will miss God's standards for holiness every time because sin taints everything about you. This is a sad reality, but one we must all understand if we are ever going to see the need of a faith relationship with the only One who can forgive our sin and make us new people (2 Cor. 5:17).

I have to ask you some personal questions, "Do you see your sinful standing right now? Do you sense guilt for your sin which is God's way of pointing you to His Son who is more than capable of washing your soul clean of its guilty?" I hope you do for this is the step you must take toward redemption at the hand of Jesus.

With verses 10 through 17, Paul moves from the spiritual charge against all sinners to the contamination. From a legal, courtroom perspective we could call these thirteen rapid fire indictments against mankind. Paul has leveled his charge against mankind and now he proceeds to prove his case that mankind is, indeed, under the perpetual dominion and power of sin.

⁴Henry Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1979), 191-192.

The Contamination: Man Is Completely Corrupt (Rom. 3:10-17)

Paul's indictments can be divided into three quadrants, as various scholars have noted.⁵ First, Paul addresses man's *character* (vv. 10-12). Second, he isolates man's sinful *conversation* (vv. 13-14). Third, he talks about man's wicked *conduct* (vv. 15-17). All three combined serve to validate his charge that all mankind is under the dominion and power of sin. And please note that many of his statements are loose quotes from various Old Testament texts. He introduces all of them by saying,

¹⁰ as it is written, (Rom. 3)

The verb here is a perfect passive indicative (*γέγραπται*). The perfect tense grammatically can denote a past act with an abiding result. By using this tense, Paul tells the Jews that their inspired texts have always demonstrated that sin is part and parcel to all mankind, Jews included. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians, the Jews had the Scriptures from God but they didn't understand them.

¹⁴ But their minds were hardened; for until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ. (2 Cor. 3).

Sad situation, wouldn't you agree? They boasted in the act they, of all people, had the Word of God, the Torah and the Prophets, but they did not really understand the spiritual message of their own writings, writings which told them they were sinners along with the Gentile world they grew to despise. Can you think of anything more tragic than having God's Word and not understanding it, but boasting in the mere possession of it . . . like this means anything where eternity is concerned. Paul lays this misguided thinking to rest in his detailed indictment proof texted by the Old Testament.

Man's character (Rom. 3:10-12). Charge #1 couldn't be clearer nor more ominous. Quoting from Psalm 14, verses 1 through 3, Paul declares the obvious:

There is none righteous, not even one; (Rom. 3).

Paul's words are definitive: Outside of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:21), there has never lived, nor is there anyone alive, and there will not ever be in the future anyone born who is righteous per God's holy, lofty, perfect standard. To be righteous in God's eyes, you must be as righteous as He is (Psa. 7:9; 119:137). He is perpetually and intrinsically, as the Psalmist says, righteous (Psa. 11:7). Pick the greatest rabbi who has ever lived and he cannot measure up on his own to God's righteousness. Pick the most philanthropic person you've read or heard about and their righteousness falls woefully short of God's perfect righteousness. There are people who have different degrees of righteousness about them, but it is highly inferior to the person of God. Even Enoch didn't measure up. Nor did Abraham. To study Abraham's life is to see a man with unrighteous proclivities like lying and deception.

If you want to get into God's heaven, you must be as good as He is, and He is perfectly good . . . always. His righteousness never has a bad day, a slight downturn, a momentary lapse, or a period where it slips into sinful behavior. He always is in a state of absolute righteousness.

⁵John MacArthur, *Romans*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody, 1991), 181; R. Kent Hughes, *Romans: Righteousness from Heaven* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 76.

Our righteousness, conversely, has major issues because it is tainted at its core by sin. Isaiah spoke honestly about this when he stated:

⁶ For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. (Isa. 64).

Our best righteous works always fall short of pleasing God because behind them is the contagion of sin which keeps them from ever being perfect. This is why false world religions are incapable of providing true salvation for their adherents. They offer faith in God, whoever he may be, coupled with perpetual works to garner God's favor. Mormon doctrine is a case in point.

Mosiah 4:6 [From the Book of Mormon]: "I say unto you, if ye have come to a knowledge of the goodness of God, and his matchless power, and his wisdom, and his patience, and his long-suffering towards the children of men; and also, the atonement which has been prepared from the foundation of the world, that thereby salvation might come to him that should put his trust in the Lord, and should be diligent in keeping his commandments, and continue in the faith even unto the end of his life, I mean the life of the mortal body—"

Doctrine and Covenants: Section 5:21 And now I command you, my servant Joseph, to repent and walk more uprightly before me, and to yield to the persuasions of men no more;²² And that you be firm in keeping the commandments wherewith I have commanded you; and if you do this, behold I grant unto you eternal life, even if you should be slain.

Doctrine and Covenants: Section 9:13 Do this thing which I have commanded you, and you shall prosper. Be faithful, and yield to no temptation.¹⁴ Stand fast in the work wherewith I have called you, and a hair of your head shall not be lost, and you shall be lifted up at the last day. Amen.

Ron Rhodes, a skilled Christian apologist, helpfully identifies the three ways a Hindu can hopefully achieve Brahman/divine status in his book *The Challenge of the Cults and New Religions*:

- They are (1) karma marga (the way of action and ritual---involving prescribed ceremonies, duties, and religious rites; (2) jnana marga (the way of knowledge and meditation--- one must dispel ignorance and come to experientially know that the only reality is Brahman); and (3) Bhakti marga (the way of devotion---involving private and public acts of worship). Whichever way one attains enlightenment, the goal of such enlightenment is for one's separate self or ego to lose its separate identity in Brahman, the Universal Soul."⁶

For Hindus, the chief end of man is simple: Through seemingly endless deaths and rebirths they eventually realize their atman, or soul, is really Brahman. Their spiritual issue therefore has nothing to do with sin, but everything to do with the fact they do not realize they are deity. By

⁶ Ron Rhodes, *The Challenge of the Cults and New Religions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2001), 174.

performing the various Hindu religious works, then, a person is placed on a path of immortality and divinity.

The Way of Ritual offers the false hope that a sinful person can attain immortality by sheer and perpetual ritualistic effort. Many Hindu scriptures underscore this tenuous teaching. The *Taittiriya Upanishad*, Part 1, 9, 1 highlights this particular path to God when it asserts, “Practice right conduct, learning and teaching, be truthful always, learning and teaching; master the passions, learning and teaching; control the senses, learning and teaching; strive for peace always, learning and teaching; Rouse kundalini, learning and teaching; serve humanity, learning and teaching. . . .” At the end of this extended list the inspired writer affirms in section 10, 1, “I have become one with the tree of life.”

To all of this Paul shouts,

There is none righteous, not even one; (Rom. 3).

Are you listening to him, you who think your righteousness will mean something to God? What you need is God’s perfect righteousness, and this is only attained by trusting in Christ who is righteous and who desires to give you His righteousness. Looking back at his life as an unsaved religious person, Paul tells us how we, who have no righteous by means of our works, can secure the absolute righteousness of God in our lives:

⁴ although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: ⁵ circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. ⁷ But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, ⁹ and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from *the* Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which *comes* from God on the basis of faith, ¹⁰ that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; (Phil. 3).

Paul realized that his religious righteousness meant nothing to a God who was, and is, the epitome of perfect righteousness. His righteousness was meaningless because it was built on the foundation of sinful life. What he came to realize on the Damascus road is that it is *only* through faith in Christ the sinner receives God’s righteousness. Prior to that glorious, life-changing moment he, like you perhaps, thought his righteousness was good enough for God. During that event, he realized the utter worthless nature of His righteousness and his need for the perfect implanting of God’s righteousness which comes only by means of faith in Jesus. This is the work which counts in eternity (John 6:29).

Will this be the day you, too, wake up to the inferior nature of your righteous religious works? I am praying for you to come to that realization.