

A. The World Condemned (3:9–20)

This is the conclusion of the first section of Romans (1:18–3:20); it addresses man's condemnation and the revelation of the wrath of God. It is the final answer to the question, "Is the world lost?" It sums up the ultimate reason why all men need the righteousness of the gospel (1:16–17).

"Up to this point the writer has been dealing with classes of men—the pagan, the moralist, the Jew. Against the pagan he has brought the witness of creation; against the moralist the witness of conscience; against the Jew the witness of scripture. Now in this section he will summon to the bar of God all the world, both Jews and Gentiles. The procedure will be judicial and the language like that of the courtroom." (McClain, Romans, 20)

1. The charge (3:9): "both Jews and Greeks are all under sin."

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

Paul said that all who have sinned without the Law will perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law (Romans 2:12). Paul now asks if the Jews are better off than the Gentiles; he concludes that they are not. He then gives the reason why; "for" (*gar* - γάρ ; see note on 1:17) both Jews and Greeks are under sin. Paul has already made this charge in Romans 1:18–3:8.

Paul doesn't say everyone is a sinner; he will say that later. Rather, he says all are "under sin." The word under is *hupo* (ὑπό) in Greek, and refers to being subject to the power of something or someone. An excellent example of how this is used is in Matthew 8:9 where the centurion said to Jesus, "I also am a man *under* (*hupo* - ὑπό) authority, with soldiers *under* (*hupo* - ὑπό) me." Just as the centurion was under the power and authority of others, so were his soldiers under his authority. Thus, to be under sin is to live under its authority and act in its sphere. This expression is all-encompassing. Elsewhere in Romans sin is described as reigning (5:21), enslaving (6:6), ruling (6:12), and exercising lordship over someone (6:14). People are described as being either slaves to sin or freed from sin (6:18, 22). Sin as a power cannot be separated from sinful acts (Schreiner, 164).

Sin is mainly a condition of rebellion against God. Being "under sin" results in a ruined relationship with God. Romans 3:10–18 begin and end with this point. Verses 10–11: "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God." And verse 18: "There is no fear of God before their eyes." Being "under sin" also means that our relations with people are ruined. In verses 13–14 Paul describes the way sin ruins our speech. In verses 15–17 Paul describes the way sin ruins our actions.

Being under the power of sin means that we do not just sin occasionally, we are subjugated to everything that goes with sin; we are under guilt, condemnation, sin's power, and its final destiny—hell. Paul proves his point in the following verses by quoting six OT passages.

2. The Indictment (3:10–18)

There are fourteen counts in Paul's indictment that can be divided into three sections; (a) man is depraved in character (3:10–12), (b) in speech (3:13–14), and (c) in conduct (3:15–18). Isaiah 59 is an even more detailed description of what Paul says here.

a. Man is depraved in character (3:10–12)

**3:10 as it is written, "THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;
3:11 THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;
3:12 ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS
NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE."**

Verses 10–12 hammer home the universality of sin. Like an x-ray, Paul looks at the inside of man and addresses his character.

- 1) There is none righteous (3:10; cf. Ps. 14:1c, 2b–3).

To be righteous means to be right before God. It means to measure up to His standards, to meet the demands of the law. "Righteousness is the criterion by which sin is judged and the absence of righteousness means the presence of sin" (Murray, 103). Paul says that no man meets God's criteria in having a right standing before Him. This has been demonstrated in Romans 1:18–3:9.

- 2) There is none who understands (3:11; cf. Ps. 53:3).

No man left to his own reasoning apart from illumination understands spiritual things. There is no movement in man's mind toward spiritual truth. In 1 Corinthians 2:14 Paul says, "the natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised." Ephesians 4:18 describes men as "being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart." Romans 1:28 tells us that when men did not see it fit to acknowledge God any longer, "God gave them over to a depraved mind." Because people are "under sin" they instinctively reject all truth that falls outside of their narrative of what reality should be.

- 3) There is none who seeks after God (3:11; cf. Ps. 53:3).

Although men may sense a spiritual vacuum, or believe in the existence of a Supreme Being, aspirations to know God are dead.

Psalm 14:1–3 says, "The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God.' They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; There is no one who does good. The LORD has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; There is no one who does good, not even one."

Psalm 53:2–3 is almost identical: “God has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there is anyone who understands, who seeks after God. Every one of them has turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.”

At first glance these verses may appear to contradict other places in the Bible which encourage men to seek after God.

- In Acts 17:24–27 Paul says, “The God who made the world and all things in it. . . gives to all people life and breath and all things; and He made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth. . . *that they would seek God*, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us”
- In 1 Chronicles 28:9 Solomon is told, “*if you seek Him*, He will let you find Him.”
- Isaiah 55:6 says, “Seek the LORD while He may be found; call on Him while He is near.”
- Jeremiah 29:13: “You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart.”
- Lastly, Hebrews 11:6 says God “rewards those who earnestly seek Him.”

How do we harmonize these verses with Romans 3:11?

The easiest way to understand these differences is to realize that there are levels, degrees, and even different kinds of “seeking.” People as creatures made in the image of God have a longing and yearning for God. Paul is not denying this. Nevertheless, humanity’s sinful bent inevitably leads to what is false. The abundance of false religions testifies to this. Apart from divine intervention no one by his or her own power will arrive at a true knowledge of God. Jesus said, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44).

Something that also needs to be considered is that many of the passages that tell people to seek God are written to Israel in a particular historical context. For example, Isaiah 55:6 says, “Seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near.” Then in Isaiah 55:7 the prophet adds, “. . . and let him *return* to the LORD.” Isaiah is calling Israel to repent, to *return* to God, while there was still the opportunity before being invaded by foreign powers. God had already called Israel, set them apart as His own possession and revealed Himself to them through the Scriptures. Israel existed because God had sought them. In the prophets He continued to pursue them by calling them to repent. The very fact that God is telling people to seek Him is itself evidence that people don’t seek for God; if they did, there would be no need to be told to seek Him.

Secondly, the evidence that God gives of His existence in creation (Acts 17) is part of the means that God uses to draw people to Himself. Although creation serves the task of evangelism, having evidence does not insure that people will properly interpret what they see; that only happens when God enlightens the individual’s heart. People may see divine glory in creation or even a Designer, but apart from God’s intervention they will not seek the God of the Bible (Ro. 1:18 ff.).

In sum, although some seeking can be explained by human nature and emptiness, apart from the specific prompting of God’s Spirit, no one actively seeks the true God; they cannot.

As Romans 8:7 says, “the mind set on the flesh is hostile toward God.” The human condition naturally rejects God; this is what Paul is referring to in Romans 3:11.

- 4) All have turned aside (3:12; Ps. 14:3; 53:4).

The picture is that of a caravan that is traveling through the desert but has gotten off route. In one way or another all men have deviated from the right way of God (McClain, 94). Romans 1:18 and following elaborate on this idea.

Isaiah 53:6: “All of us like sheep have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way.”

- 5) They have together become unprofitable (3:12).

The Hebrew word translated by the Greek for “unprofitable” refers to something that is useless due to corruption or deterioration; it is used of milk that has turned sour or fruit that has become rotten.

The human race is rancid; it has gone sour. It has been corrupted and consequently it is useless.

- 6) There is none who does good (3:12).

We are self-glorifying and self-seeking. Though we can do good things (feed the poor, help the widow, serve others when they are in need), if our good does not give God the glory as the source of all good, our actions lack true goodness. Thus, no one, as a course of life, can be said to “do good.”

b. Man is depraved in speech (3:13–14).

3:13 "THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE, WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING," "THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS";
3:14 "WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS";

- 7) Their throat is an open tomb (cf. Ps. 5:9).

This could either mean that death, filth, and all types of uncleanness come out of the mouth (as the following phrases elaborate upon) or, it could mean that the throat is open like a grave, always ready to consume. In Jeremiah 5:16 it says of the Chaldeans, “Their quiver is like an open tomb,” i.e., it is destructive.

- 8) With their tongues they have practiced deceit (Ps. 5:9).

“They keep deceiving” is in a verb tense that indicates continuous action in Greek. In Hebrew (Ps. 5:9) it is literally, “they make smooth their tongue,” i.e., they flatter.

- 9) The poison of asps is under their lips (cf. Ps. 140:3).

The bite of the asp (a poisonous snake) brings pain, suffering, and death. So does the tongue.

James 3:6–8 says, “the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and *full of deadly poison*.”

10) Their mouth is full of cursing and bitterness (cf. Ps. 10:7) (cf. my notes on Ja. 3).

Matthew 15:18 says, “the things that proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and those defile the man.”

c. Man is depraved in conduct (3:15–18).

**3:15 "THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD,
3:16 DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS,
3:17 AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN."
3:18 "THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES."**

11) Their feet are swift to shed blood (cf. Isa 59:7ff.).

The life of their fellow man is nothing in their estimation. At the slightest provocation, men are willing to murder.

12) Destruction and misery are in their ways.

Not only do they kill, but their life is characterized by bringing destruction and misery to others.

13) The way of peace they have not known (Isa. 59:7).

They do not frequent the way that leads to peace.

14) There is no fear of God before their eyes (Ps. 36:1).

Man’s actions prove that he does not revere or have any piety towards God. This is the ground and the root cause behind all the other sins listed.

Notice the many parts of the body that Paul says are corrupt: the throat, tongue, lips, mouth, feet and eyes. “This list serves to affirm what theologians speak of as total depravity, i.e., not that man in his natural state is as bad as he can possibly be, but rather that his entire being is adversely affected by sin. His whole nature is permeated with it.” (Harrison, EBC, 39). “Character is what man is. Speech is what man says. Conduct is what man does” (McClain, 97). The taint of sin is associated with everything in man.

3. The Verdict (3:19–20): “every mouth shall be stopped, and the entire world will be guilty before God.”

3:19 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;

3:20 because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

In verses 10–18 Paul has quoted numerous places in the OT which he now calls in general terms “the law” (3:19).

God designed the law to shut up every man who thinks he is righteous and hold him accountable to God. (“so that” in 3:19 expresses the purpose of the law). The law reduces men to silence.

When God declares His verdict upon the world, there isn’t any rebuttal. The cry of innocence is not heard. Nobody screams that God isn’t fair or that they have been unjustly accused. The world is silent, for the evidence against them is overwhelming.

When we say someone is guilty, we mean that they did what they are accused of doing. When Paul says we are guilty, it also means that we are accountable to bear the consequences (the penalty) of our guilt.

Verse 20 begins with “because” (translated as “therefore” in some versions) and gives the reason why men are guilty; all are guilty “because by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight” (cf. Gal. 2:16; 3:11). The law could justify the righteous man, but it cannot pardon the sinner. The law can point out where men err; it cannot give power to transform behavior. The only thing that the law can do is to bring the knowledge of sin (cf. Ro. 5:20; 7:7 ff.). Therefore, men remain in their guilt.

After reading Paul’s discussion on sin, our conclusion should be, “I am a sinner.” “If you learned that, you learned the lesson that God wants you to learn” (McClain, 100).

Paul will now go on to explain how the gospel meets the need of sinful man.