

Remorse Code

Romans 3:1-20

Rev. Brett Shoemaker ~ August 9, 2026 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹ Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? ² Much, in every way. For in the first place, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. ³ What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? ⁴ By no means! Although every human is a liar, let God be proved true, as it is written,

“So that you may be justified in your words
and you will prevail when you go to trial.”

⁵ But if our injustice serves to confirm the justice of God, what should we say? That God is unjust 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 falsehood God’s truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being judged as a sinner? ⁸ And why not say (as some people slander us by saying that we say), “Let us do evil so that good may come”? Their judgment is deserved!

⁹ What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all, for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, ¹⁰ as it is written:

“There is no one who is righteous, not even one;

¹¹ there is no one who has understanding;
there is no one who seeks God.

¹² All have turned aside; together they have
become worthless;

there is no one who shows kindness;
there is not even one.”

¹³ “Their throats are opened graves;
they use their tongues to deceive.”

“The venom of vipers is under their lips.”

¹⁴ “Their mouths are full of cursing and
bitterness.”

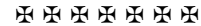
¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

¹⁶ ruin and misery are in their paths,

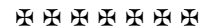
¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known.”

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

¹⁹ Now we know that, whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For no human will be justified before him by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.
(Romans 3:1-20, NRSV)



We’ve been making our way through Paul’s letter to the Romans, and today - Chapter 3. Romans is, in many ways, Paul’s great explanation of the gospel—the good news of what God has done for us through Christ. Today, Paul comes to the point where he brings the problem of sin into sharp focus—and prepares us to hear just how extraordinary the grace of God really is...



I wonder if anyone here has taken part in a foot-washing service? Maybe it’s not for everyone. Not everyone loves to have their feet washed, or touched, or even seen. If it’s done right, in the right setting, it can be very moving - an opportunity at the end of an experience together to show the commitment to continue serving one another for the long haul in an intimate way.

The first foot-washing ceremony I experienced was at summer camp - as a high school student - with well over one hundred students. I’m not sure it lived up to what the camp staff hoped it would be. And I’m pretty sure I had something to do with that. In this case, the high-school seniors were the ones at the foot-washing stations, and everyone was to line up in one of the lines in silence, considering the message that had just been shared, barefoot, so that our feet could be washed. When I realized that my best friend, a notorious prankster himself, was the one at the station washing feet - in my line - I had to do something. So I quickly snuck over to the drinking fountain for a “drink” - the

leaky drinking fountain - the one with mud all around the base of it. And I smeared all the mud I could all over my feet, so that my friend - my best friend - would really have his work cut out for him.

I never made it to the front of the line. Instead, I got to have a "conversation" with the lead counselor about how I should have been taking this experience seriously - about how I had missed out on something significant because I didn't pay attention to what was going on.

Actually, I'm in good company. In the first foot washing ceremony, recorded in scripture, Peter didn't really get it either. Jesus offered to wash Peter's feet, and he protested. In fact Jesus told him, "Peter, you don't understand what I am doing right now, but someday you will." And Peter said, "No, you will *never* wash my feet."

Do you remember what Jesus said?
"Unless I wash you, you can have no part with me."

That night, Peter didn't get it. He didn't understand that what Jesus was about to do, he had to do for him as much as for any other person.

So Peter cut off a soldier's ear when they came to arrest him. *He didn't yet understand.*

Peter denied Jesus three times later that night, denied that he even knew him. *He didn't yet understand.*

Peter ran all the way to the tomb several miles unsure of what he heard about Jesus' body missing from the grave. *He didn't yet understand.*

But Jesus was right. One morning, weeks later after his resurrection, a strange man called to him from the beach while he was fishing and invited him to breakfast. So he disrobed, jumped in the water, swam to Jesus. *Because he finally understood.* Then Jesus asked him three times if he loved him. And after each one of Peter's YES's to that question, he didn't just say, "Great, know that I love you, too." He said share that love with my sheep. FEED my sheep with the love you know I have for them, too.¹

Later, during a nap on the roof at a friend's house by the sea, he would learn that Jesus' *sheep* meant more than just the Jewish people of God, it meant the Gentiles, too, it meant everybody - something that took divine intervention and angels and visions and surprise visitors to get the point across.²

I want us to take these words of Jesus with us this morning as we consider Paul's letter to the Romans:
"Unless I wash you, you can have no part with me."

To be willing to be washed is to admit that something about us is not clean. To recognize that on some level and for various reasons our motives are mixed, our actions are compromised, and before we can even do anything wrong, our very thoughts can be evil or wayward and give us pause about who we really are.

Perhaps there's a part of each one of us that doesn't fully understand.

To be fair, there are many people, likely some of you in this room, that are *well* aware of your own mixed motives and actions. You may be able to come up with a long list of ways you have hurt the people around you, slandered God, broken commandments. You may be the ones thinking to yourself: "I don't even know how I was allowed through the doors of this holy building this morning!" But let me say this early on today:

YOU are in a place of advantage. YOU get it! YOU understand the need in your life that will lead to receiving the love and salvation of Christ - with JOY!

The very first line of Jesus' most famous sermon? "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of God. Blessed are the meek, the tired, the sinful, the angry, the confused." YOU are the ones that are most likely going to *understand* that Christ died for YOU this morning. Jesus also said, "I didn't come for the healthy, I came for the sick." YOU are the ones that most deserve to be in the pews this morning.

But Paul, primarily, in this letter to the Romans, is writing to the rest of the people. He's writing to the ones that aren't really sure if they need anything from God. THEY are the ones that feel they have it all together. THEY have put their poker chips down, bet everything on the fact that they were born into the right nation, and that they are God's chosen people. They were banking on the fact - even boasting of it publicly to others - that they have followed the commandments, performed rituals and sacrifices, festivals and prayers. They were *in*. Or so they thought.

Sometimes we laugh at a nickname we've been given as Presbyterians - the Frozen Chosen. Of all the oxymorons, this might be the oxy-est (is that a word?). Being chosen is a central part of our theology. We believe that because of Christ's work on the cross, and the invitation of Good News through his teaching that we have been offered the free gift of grace and adopted into the people of God - the same status-as-the-people-of-God that these new Christians in the Roman church were boasting about! We are the Gentiles - the prodigal sons and daughters so to speak - that Paul was putting

¹ John 13

² Acts 10.

on an equal place spiritually with these devout followers of the law. So being *chosen* makes sense.

But how could you be *chosen*, and really understand what an incredible free and undeserved gift this is and still be *unmoved* by it. How could we be frozen? — Only if we, too, have failed to realize that we once were lost but now are found. Maybe the years and centuries of being good Presbyterians (or whatever tradition you're from) have lulled us into a state of complacency. Maybe we, too, are saying, like Paul's audience: "Well, I'm not that bad. I'm a Christian, free grace and all that. My parents were Christians, my grandfather was a pastor, my great grandfather was Billy Graham.

(Or more likely...) I've been "pretty" good, followed most of the rules, given my money, showed up at church, and I'm trying, I'm really trying to be a good person. Shouldn't that count for something?"

Paul is inviting us to celebrate our *chosenness* by being aware of our *brokenness* - to allow that to thaw the ice of our *frozenness*, and lead us into a joyful life of faith.

Now, let's look a little more closely at the passage. Paul asks in verse 1: "What advantage is there in being a Jew, or in circumcision that you use as a sign and seal of your salvation?" He's starting to answer a question he started in the middle of the last chapter, verse 2:17 when he says:

*"Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and boast in God..."*³

He's really leaning in on those of us that are taking a little too much credit for the life we've lived, for showing up at church, for having our quiet times and tithing our 10%. And the expected answer we might get in verse 2 today would be, "NO advantage at all!" But he doesn't say that. He says, "Much, in every way!" Why? Because of the covenant with Abraham way back when he said, "I will be your God and you will be my people...AND...you are blessed *to be a blessing* to others." Or as Jesus puts it later to ALL those that follow including the Frozen Chosen - YOU are the salt of the earth and the light of the world! YOU - go and preach the good news and baptize everybody in my name. Paul calls it being *entrusted with the oracles of God*.

What's an oracle? Is it a law? A command? A birthright?

No. An oracle is a *medium through which God might be seen or heard*. **They** were the oracles - the ones that were to bring the good news to others, to invite them into this amazing story of being...

- Lost, and found
- Broken, and healed
- Alone, and then loved by a merciful God

NT Wright says, "The point about being 'entrusted' is that the thing that's being given to you isn't actually *for* you; it's for the person to whom you are supposed to deliver it." ⁴

Once they realize that, they can join the Gentile friends in gratitude that they are receiving something undeserved as well!

So the advantage that we have is the same as the advantage of these Jewish people. But it's also a responsibility: We know the whole story, and we get to share it with others, not hold on to it for our own benefit, pointing our fingers at the rest of the world. We *invite* the world. We get to say, *God is so good*.

Then we come to what I've come to see as the very core of this passage, because I think it's the core of all of scripture, verse 4.

*Let God be proved true as it is written,
"So that you may be justified in your words
and you will prevail when you go to trial."*

Paul's quoting Psalm 51:4.

And if you read through this verse too quickly, you might think it's us on trial. We might think it says that even if every other person is a liar, God will remember that I'm justified when I am on trial. But if you read it carefully, you realize God is the one on trial. Paul is about to make a case that every human being is on the same level, that all have to deal with the effects of sin in their lives. But Paul has to insert this verse so that this idea can be the first and last word:

Even if all are faithless (which Paul will say in no uncertain terms) God remains faithful.

How will God possibly remain faithful to save his people if they've all been faithless? Through the death of Christ, but Paul hasn't gotten that far yet.

As much as we want Scripture to be about us, to figure out our own response, our own actions, how we can save ourselves, this is the key verse because Scripture is always the story of God - a God who *alone* can save. We cannot save ourselves.

The hope here is that we begin to see this idea of "faithfulness" in a whole new light. That when we compare *our faithfulness* with *God's faithfulness*, we realize we shouldn't even be using the same word:

³ Romans 2:17.

⁴ Wright, NT. *Paul, Romans, Part 1*. Pg 43.

Calvin puts it this way: “We are never sufficiently touched and affected by the awareness of our lowly state until we compare ourselves with God’s majesty.”⁵

And so, Paul is about to let us know just how lowly we are. In verse 9, he finishes his answer about whether his audience has an advantage to being Jewish and circumcised. Do you think you are better off than those to whom you bring the light? Unfortunately not. And here he repeats a message that needs repeating because they didn’t get it the first two times in the letter:

Jewish and non-Jewish - are under the same power of sin together.

And then, most of this section is a long list that Paul curates from the Old Testament law that his audience is supposed to know so well - mostly from Psalms with a verse from each of Ecclesiastes and Isaiah for good measure. Let me just read the second half:

- Their throats are open graves
- Their tongues deceive
- Venom of vipers is on their lips
- Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness
- Their feet are swift to shed blood
- Ruin and misery are in their paths
- And the way of peace they have not known
- There is no fear of God before their eyes.

If those were the only verses that Paul included in the list, it could have led to confirm what the people were thinking: *I am okay, it’s THOSE GUYS over there that have all the problems:*

THEIR throats. THEIR tongues. THEIR feet. He basically hits every body part! So if this was it, they might have come to the conclusion that they had to bring this good news to these other awful people, because they were exempt. It would depend how you interpret it.

There’s a song called “Family” by Drew Holcomb - not sure if anyone knows it. All about the ups and downs, challenges and beauty of being in a family. The bridge goes like this:

*You don't choose 'em, you can't lose 'em
We all have a song to sing
Some are crazy, some are amazing
All got a little bit of everything...*

I realized there’s two different ways to interpret those lines. Some are crazy. Some are amazing. All got a little

bit of everything. *All* may refer to the fact that ALL families have some people that are crazy and some people that are amazing. OR it could be saying that ALL people - each person - within every family have a little bit of crazy and a little bit of amazing in them. The first way would be to divide and characterize people as either *crazy* or *amazing*. The hope is that you’re on the right side and can say (like the Pharisee to the tax collector), “I’m glad I’m not like them.” But the other way would be to group every member of your family and mine into one and admit that *all of us* have a little bit of everything.

Paul is talking to people that have for centuries built a system of division of people. They have used their privilege as God’s people and the lives they have lived to put people in one of two categories - either you’re in and have God’s blessing - or you don’t. And so Paul stirs the pot here to say that the division is within each person. You ALL have a little bit of everything, and you’re not coming to grips with the part of you that is tearing you away from knowing God’s love!

So, verses 11 and 12 are key to set up the entire list:

- No one is righteous
- No one understands
- No one seeks God
- All have turned away...

YOU INCLUDED!

And guess what. US INCLUDED as well.

Tim Keller said, “You are more sinful and flawed than you ever dared believe...” Well, that’s half of the sentence; we’ll get to the other half at the end. But this is what Paul was saying to this Roman church. He wasn’t just trying to be hard on them. This was the new church in Rome. These were the ones following Jesus. They were just holding on tight to privilege and rights that didn’t really pertain to them alone anymore.

If Paul hadn’t gone through a dramatic conversion earlier in his life, blinded on the road and spoken to directly by Jesus, he would have been speaking to himself. Paul believed more than anyone that he had the keys to the kingdom, as a Pharisee, as a Jew, as one who had worked so hard to follow every tiny law in scripture. At one recent point in his life, he felt so strongly that this set him apart from others that in the beginning he was part of a group trying to kill Christians who were sharing this very message, claiming to be God’s people of a “new” covenant. So Paul understood that this was difficult language. That’s why he had to be so emphatic about it in this list.

⁵ Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Book 1, Chapter 1, Section 3.

What was he trying to accomplish in this argument to these people that were just like him? What would you say was the emotion that he was trying to bring out in them?

Guilt?
Shame?
Humiliation?
Dishonor?

I'll give you a hint. It's on the front of the bulletin.

But first, let me lay out four possible responses to sin as we often find them even in the church today. If it's helpful, I've attached an emoji to each one:



The first is *boredom*. We've been around the church too long. We've heard too many sermons about sin. Maybe we've been in church communities that use the doctrine of sin to shame and scare people toward Jesus, so we tune out the message so we say, "Yeah, I get it, let's move on. I'm not that bad."



The second is *judgment*. We find ourselves amazed that *other* people can be so bad. We play the comparison game, we put our hand over our mouth and point our finger at those people. We've divided the room into us and them.



Another is *shame*. We would rather keep it quiet and pretend it doesn't exist. We develop an exterior that makes us look great on the outside when we know that who we really are is someone very different. That part of us has little chance to really be touched by Jesus in a helpful way.

But the last one is...



Yes. *Remorse*. Feeling the full weight of our own actions, which has a chance to lead to a place of healing, correction, connection with God, even joy.

More than these other emotions, remorse is a negative emotion with a purposeful outcome. Remorse doesn't just land on you and hurt. Remorse lands on you and hurts *and* leads you somewhere, because deep down you know there's more to the story. You might think of it as a not-so-secret code that leads us to see God's love, opens us up to put ourselves aside for a moment, and puts God back into the center of the story.

Remorse is a way to tell God:

"I'm sorry I've made this all about me when you're the one that has done everything needed not just for me, but for every person you will lead me to this week."

There was a moment this week (as soon as yesterday if I'm honest) when I thought the main point of this passage was to move us to a place of **wallowing** in the stink of our lives long enough to be glad that we're rescued.

Paul wasn't trying to get the church to wallow - just to see how bad they were!

Paul was trying to get the church to hold in tension their NEED for God with God's incredible LOVE for them. Remorse is about holding these two realities constantly together. When we tell the Good News about Jesus, we do it with unfrozen joy and hope, but also with a sobering reality of how much we need it every day. We have to be careful to never be so sure of our own role in salvation that we begin to divide ourselves from others with whom we share this planet.

I looked back on this past week in my life. I counted 5 occasions when someone I was with shed tears. Real tears. Wet tears. I wouldn't say they were all tears of remorse. But as I thought about it, I realized that all of them were tears that opened a door for something real and lasting to meet them. All of them offered - immediately in those moments - a chance to really connect, deepen, or at least begin the process of change - either in perspective or in action.

I wonder what the mood of the church was when they read the end of this passage? Let me read them again:

¹⁹ Now we know that, whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For no human will be justified before him by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

We often hear the term “remorse” in the context of a courtroom scene, with a convicted criminal on trial. Remorse is the key. If a criminal shows remorse, we are talking about a very different person than one that does not show remorse. Only with remorse is there hope for change to occur, for ways to be mended.

And a courtroom is exactly where Paul ends the passage for today. He equates an experience of coming before God as one who is under the law. In most cases, whether personally or through an arbitrator, the defendant is allowed to speak their defense, to show all of the reasons that they should be allowed to avoid the coming sentence. They speak up as to why they are *not guilty*.

But here Paul is hoping that his argument will lead to silence, one in which the defendants who have just heard this list will have nothing left to say. So, we are left with silence in the courtroom. Why? Because we can see that all of us are held accountable for the power of sin in our lives. We are all guilty of trying to replace God’s salvation with a salvation of our own making.

But in that silence - once we realize we have no other defense - we can only wait. We can only wait for the next words out of the mouth of the judge.

Here’s the rest of what Tim Keller said: “You are more sinful and flawed than you ever dared believe, yet more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than you ever dared hope.”

Remorse is the code, the stance, the attitude that sets us up to hear and know the grace of God - which is both crazy and amazing.

Amen.

✱ ✱ ✱ ✱ ✱ ✱ ✱

“The Next Step”

A Resource for Life Groups and/or Personal Application

1. Read through Romans 3:1-20 again. What makes the most sense? What do you have questions about?
2. Paul seems conflicted about whether a Jewish heritage is an advantage or not. What does Paul say?
3. What does it mean for the Jewish people to be “entrusted with the oracles of God”? Should we see ourselves as being entrusted with something from God?
4. Do you agree that verse 4 is the core verse of this passage? Why or why not?
5. Paul offers a list of Old Testament verses that claim that everyone is under the power of sin. Why does he quote so many here? What would you add to this list from Scripture or from life experience?
6. What is the purpose of God’s law for us as followers of Jesus? Discuss this together, then look back through the passage for clues Paul gives to the Roman church.
7. What does it mean for “every mouth to be silenced” in this passage (v. 19)? What does that look like in our lives of faith?
8. What part does “remorse” play in your life of faith? How can it be an important element of following Jesus?

✱ ✱ ✱ ✱ ✱ ✱ ✱

Table to Table

Something for kids and adults to consider together

What does it mean to be a blessing to the world and share Jesus with others? What are some ways you can do this in your school or neighborhood this year?