

IS YOUR SAFETY ROPE SECURE?

Romans 3:1-20

Bob Bonner

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Over the years, I have loved Charles Swindoll's story telling. Many are true, which make them even funnier. The following is just one of those stories; and after I first heard it, I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. A man was working on the roof of his house, making some repairs. It was a blustery day. His roof had quite a steep peak. In order to stay safe up there while working on the repairs, he wanted to secure himself to something on the ground. So he climbed up the roof, tied a rope around himself, and yelled down to his son, "Hey, Junior, tie the end of the rope to the base of that tree." Well, Junior heard his dad, took a look at the tree, and thought, "That looks kind of small." So he tied the end of the rope to the bumper of their car. A few moments later, the mother came out of the house to make a quick trip to the store. Junior had gone inside the house and hadn't told the mother about the rope. She hopped in the car, put it in reverse, and dad went zoom! over the roof to the ground and ended up in the hospital in serious pain.

When I think of that story, I'm reminded of many religious folks I know who, in a way, are just like this man and his rope. They are holding on to religion as though it will protect them, when in fact it will not. Their rope is not secure. The only thing that will secure them from eternal separation from God and guarantee God's repair work in their lives is for them to be tied to Jesus Christ as their anchor, savior, and the repairman of their lives.

For the past few weeks, we have been zeroing in on Paul's words to the Jews, who I believe in many facets resemble all religious people who have ever lived. He is doing so to demonstrate that no Jew or religious devotee holds a special "get out of jail free" card as it concerns God's indictment against humanity and His promised wrath or damnation.

You ask, "What indictment against humanity?" The indictment that the Apostle Paul is writing about covers the first major section of **Romans**, from **1:18** to **3:20**. In **1:18-23**, Paul speaks of God's response of eternal wrath against all human beings who know the truth about God but suppress it and

exchange it for a lie. Then, from **1:24-3:20**, the Apostle Paul presents his case that no person stands innocent before God but is guilty as charged for suppressing the truth about God. As a result, all of us, left to our own, are worthy of being sentenced by God to eternal damnation.

This morning, we want to quickly bring to a close our study of this major section. By way of review, here is where we are. If you have been following us in our study, you remember that Paul has broken humanity down into four groups, all of who are deserving of God's wrath. All persons fall into one or more of these categories. The first is the immoral godless hedonist that we looked at in **1:24-32**. Then, Paul turned to those who agree with God's judgment of the immoral godless hedonist. He speaks to the godless humanist, the self-righteous moralist, in **2:1-11**. These individuals believe they should get a free pass from God's judgment, because they live moral lives. But Paul quickly demonstrates to them that they are, in fact, guilty of violating God's perfect laws, and that they too are worthy of God's wrath. Then Paul turns to the third group, the enlightened pagan found in **2:12-16**. Although this pagan has had no religious training like the Jew, he has a God-given conscience, a built-in moral standard. His problem is that he can't even live according to his own moral standard. Regardless of God's standard spelled out in Scripture, the pagan violates his own standard. As a result, Paul explains that this pagan too, has suppressed the truth about God that he knew and is worthy of God's wrath.

By now the Jew, and I believe any religious person, thinks they are a special case, because they are God's chosen people. But chosen or not, Paul demonstrates in **verses 17-29** that this religious devotee is guilty of stealing, adultery, and robbing pagan temples for their own personal gain. As a result of their obvious hypocritical lifestyle, they have dishonored God and blasphemed God. Therefore their religious name, the fact that they are the chosen people of God, their religious rite of circumcision, and their possession of the Law will not save them from God's wrath.

This morning, we look at the final words of Paul's closing argument in his case against all humanity, in **Romans 3:1-20**. In **3:1-8**, he finishes his comments to the Jew. Paul, being a Jew, imagines his brethren are taking umbrage at his negative comments about them that the Jew will be treated no

differently than the non-Jew. Specifically, the Jew pushes back against Paul's statements that they will have no more special consideration before God than the uncircumcised non-Jew. Paul imagines their defense is based on four questions. He addresses those four questions, stripping them of their defense, leaving them to stand guilty before God, worthy of His damnation.

Let's read the first eight verses of **chapter 3**, and then go back to examine Paul's rebuttal to the Jew's defense.

¹Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? ²Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God. ³What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it? ⁴May it never be! Rather, let God be found true, though every man be found a liar, as it is written, "THAT YOU MAY BE JUSTIFIED IN YOUR WORDS, AND PREVAIL WHEN YOU ARE JUDGED." ⁵But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms.) ⁶May it never be! For otherwise, how will God judge the world? ⁷But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner? ⁸And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as

some claim that we say), “Let us do evil that good may come? **Their condemnation is just.**

In **verses 1-2**, we have the first question: What advantage, if any, does the Jew have over the non-Jew? Here it is not Paul’s purpose to list a series of advantages that one has being a Jew. He will do that later in **9:4-5**. In these verses, his purpose is to show, from a human perspective, the chief advantage of being a religious Jew. That’s what he means by “**first of all.**” If you notice in the text, there is no second or third item in a list. Paul’s answer to the question is that the chief advantage of a Jew is that they were “**entrusted with the oracles of God.**” In other words, the Jews were privileged to possess the literal Word of God.

Paul doesn’t go into detail as to why this was a benefit, because the advantage did not need to be explained to the Jew. Suffice it to say that those who possess God’s Word have the opportunity to learn about God and what He is like, what we are like, and what He requires to have a relationship with Him and to spend eternity with Him.

The Jews had all of the information to be saved, but because some Jews, as Paul mentioned back in **2:23-24**, chose to ignore the truth about God, and by their very disobedience to Him caused non-Jews to blaspheme God, there arises a second question: Will these unbelieving Jews nullify God’s faithfulness to believing Jews?

Paul’s answer, in **verse 4** is short and swift. No! Paul uses the strongest negative answer possible in the Greek language to clear the air that God will never turn His back on the faithful. We read:

May it never be! May God be found true [meaning faithful to his promises to save the faithful believing Jew], **though every man be found a liar, as it is written, “THAT YOU [God] MAY BE JUSTIFIED** [declared righteous, acceptable, approved and not guilty] **IN YOUR**

[GOD’S] WORDS, AND PREVAIL WHEN YOU [GOD] ARE JUDGED

[meaning wrongfully put on trial and judged by humans for your verdict against them].

Paul’s point is that God is always faithful and true to His promises even though we may be liars and unfaithful. Notice, Paul is quoting here from David’s **Psalm 51:4**, which was David’s confession of sin to God after he had committed adultery with Bathsheba. Paul quotes David to drive home the point that if God was faithful to a disobedient and repentful David, He will be faithful to all who seek Him. God is always a faithful and just judge.

There is a third question rolling around in the Jew’s mind in **verses 5-6**. Paul writes, “**But if our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous, is He? (I am speaking in human terms).**” This question is actually a false accusation or an indictment against God for being unfair and therefore unworthy to judge. They are saying, “Isn’t God using mankind’s failure to His advantage? If so, how can He judge us whom He has used to prove His righteousness? Why should God get all hot and bothered by our sin when it makes Him look good? That’s not fair! There should be no judgment against anyone.” That’s a typical human tactic of trying to shift the blame for our wrong activity and failure onto someone else. On the one hand, we admit that we are wrong, and then on the other try to prove the judge unworthy to judge, hence dismissing the idea that there should be any judgment, even if they are wrong.

Paul’s answer again is very strong. He says, “**May it never be! For otherwise how will God judge the world?**” Paul’s answer is No! And his argument is this: If there is a world, there must be a God who made it, to whom all who live in this world are responsible for their actions, regardless of their outcomes. Whether their actions make God look good or bad, if they are wrong, the doer will be judged for them. Therefore, as far as Paul is concerned, the universal fact of the judgment of God is a given, hence he does not even go on to prove it.

But still not satisfied, the Jewish reader continues to argue about their right to do wrong and not be judged for it by asking another question, in **verses 7-8**. Paul writes, **“But if through my lie the truth of God abounded to His glory, why am I also still being judged as a sinner? And why not say (as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say), ‘Let us do evil that good may come?’”**

Here we see the human objection to God’s judgement moving one step further down the line of the ridiculous. The argument is, “If being bad makes God look good, then why not be bad so that God looks even better?” In other words, the ends (God being made to look good) justify the means (our committing evil). If this were allowed, and no judgment was forthcoming for evil, this world as we know it would be locked into perpetual evil. Hence, this is such an irrational and foolish question that Paul doesn’t answer yes or no. He simply states that for those who promote this idea, **“Their condemnation [literally damnation] is just.”** Or, “Let those who think such an illogical thought be damned!”

From this point to **verse 20**, Paul makes his summation, his prosecuting attorney’s closing argument, declaring the rightful, just, and universal condemnation of people.

Paul introduces this section with a general statement in **verse 9**. He says, **“What then? Are we [meaning the Jews, or church goers or religious folks] better than they? [those who aren’t religious or who have not been exposed to the written word of God] Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin.”**

Notice that term **“sin”** is singular, not plural. Paul is saying that every one of us are being driven by this dynamic of sin, this thing Paul later calls **“the flesh.”** Apart from Christ, we are under sin’s or the flesh’s power, control, and dominion. It drives us and rules our lives. We can’t escape it on our own. Apart from Christ, we are slaves to sin.

One commentator put it this way:

What we have in this statement and in the following verses is the most explicit description of the total depravity of mankind in all of Scripture.

This does not mean man is as depraved as he could be, but that there is always room for ‘deprovement’ (as compared to improvement) because he is under the power of sin. [Hughes, p.75]

I remember reading the 1994 TIME magazine’s report on the O. J. Simpson trial. The writer made the statement, “If O.J. killed these two people, we must all rethink human nature.” The utter shocking possibility that such a popular, nice, smiling guy like O.J. could murder someone was beyond the comprehension of many. Why? Because it flew in the face of what the world and the humanists would have us believe. They tell us that all people are basically good. But when we uncover the thoughts and actions of our hearts and private lives and put them on display for the whole world to see, what we see is not righteousness, but unrighteousness, not goodness, but evil.

The Russian poet, Turgenev, stated it perfectly when he said, “I don’t know what the heart of a bad man is like, but I do know what the heart of a good man is like, and it is terrible.” [ibid, p.76]

To substantiate this charge against the human race, Paul continues in the next verses to string together a series of Old Testament texts. This is called a Charaz, which literally means the “stringing together of pearls.” [William Barclay, *The Letter to the Romans*, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975, p.51]. I’d rather think of each statement as another loop of rope around a hangman’s noose prepared for a condemned criminal.

Let’s read these verses and then examine them more closely:

¹⁰**As it is written, “THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE;**

¹¹**THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS; THERE IS NONE WHO**

SEEKS FOR GOD; ¹²ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE; TOGETHER THEY
 HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD,
 THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE. ¹³THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE;
 WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING. THE POISON OF
 ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS, ¹⁴WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING
 AND BITTERNESS. ¹⁵THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD;
¹⁶DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS, ¹⁷AND THE
 PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN. ¹⁸THERE IS NO FEAR OF
 GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES.” ¹⁹Now 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,
²⁰because 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 10-12**, Paul strings together several quotes that describe the depraved character of all humans. Paul quotes:

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 SEEKS FOR GOD; ¹²ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE; TOGETHER THEY
 HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD,
 THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE.”

Allow me to simply pick out a few observations from these verses. When Paul says “**no one understands,**” he means that they do not understand enough about spiritual things to give the answers to the mysteries of life. For instance, Dr. James Boice cites his own seminary career at Harvard University, where he had many non-Christian professors, when he says:

They could present the doctrines of Christianity so brilliantly that Christians would marvel at their lectures and be edified by them; even the unbelieving students would rise to their feet and applaud. But these professors did not believe what they were teaching. If they had been asked their opinion of what they were so accurately presenting, they would have said that it was all utter nonsense.

This really shouldn't surprise us if we remember what Paul said back at the beginning of this letter in **chapter 1**, that humanity's approach to God is to “**suppress the truth about God.**”

Then Paul adds further, “**There is none who seeks for God.**” That is, no one by nature really wants to know God. Now that statement really bothers some religious folks. They want to stop and yell, “Wait a minute, I have been seeking after God. If you don't call going to church or doing this religious thing seeking after God, what do you call it?” Well, this word for “**seek**” means a determined search. It's the type of search that says, “I don't just want to understand God or bring Him down to my level, or be religious, but I want to know God so as to worship Him and submit my life to His control as God.” That is what “**seek**” means. Paul is saying here that no person, by nature, wants to seek God for who He is. Many seek a god, one they can control or manipulate. Remember what Jesus said back in **John 6:44**, “**No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.**” In other words, Jesus is saying that it is not natural for us to seek after God. We are dead spiritually apart from Christ, as illustrated by our circles last time. It is only when God begins to draw us to Him that we ever turn around and follow

after Him. Our natural inclination, our fleshly response, is to ignore God--to suppress the truth about God.

Paul continues, **“All have turned aside.”** That is a strong verb, used only three times in the New Testament, meaning an active willful departure from God. **“Together they have become useless.”** This uselessness finds its meaning in something that was alive, but when dead becomes putrid and is unfit for the use for which it was intended. This uselessness is the natural outcome of having turned our backs upon God. We have spiritually died. We cannot fulfill our God-given purpose for which we were created.

He continues, **“There is none who does good; there is not even one.”** He does not mean that we never do good things, but that we do not do them consistently. And typically, when we do good things, good or morally upright things, they are often tainted with self-serving motives. Hence, in comparison to God’s perfect standard of righteousness, our good deeds are not good, holy, or perfect.

From the depraved character of the human race, Paul now switches to the depraved conduct of all humans, which does nothing more than reflect depraved character. Conduct always corresponds to character. To the degree that one’s character is good, so will be one’s conduct. If my character is flawed, so will be my conduct.

In verses 13-14, Paul speaks to conduct as it regards our speech. In verses 15-17, as it regards our actions, Paul states, **“¹³Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving; the poison of asps is under their lips; ¹⁴whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.”** What a description of our political arena today. Talk about deception, slander, and malice! The two terms, **“cursing and bitterness,”** are specific words used of blaming God for every little thing and using His name in vain. Our conduct in speech reveals our character.

And so does our depraved conduct reveal itself in our actions. Paul says in verses 15-17, **“¹⁵Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶destruction and misery are in their paths, ¹⁷and the path of peace they have not known.”** Look at our ghettos and our social welfare programs. They haven’t changed

anything. In fact, many people will tell you that they have produced more misery than they have helped. Whether it is NATO or the UN, we cannot seem to find the path of peace. Every year we watch more and more of our planet being destroyed, all due to our conduct.

How is it that our character and our conduct are so flawed? What is the cause? Paul tells us in **verse 18**. He says, “**There is no fear of God before their eyes.**” The “**fear of God**” does not refer to being terrified of God, but rather to a respect for Who He is and a recognition of His right to rule over our lives. To fear God means to submit to His will as it is laid out for us in His Word. The more we refuse to fear God and to recognize His rightful place in our lives, the more our character and conduct will reveal itself in a depraved society.

Where does this leave us? In **verses 19-20**, Paul makes the concluding statement of his closing argument:

¹⁹Now we know that whatever the Law says [The law can refer to the Jews trying to live under the Law of God or the godless moralist or pagan trying to live up to their own law.], **it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed** [can’t say a word, because they are guilty of violating their own laws], **and all the world may become accountable to God; because** [a unique Greek term that is driving home a powerful conclusion, in this case, the final conclusion based upon everything Paul has been saying since chapter one] **by the works of the Law no flesh** [and that term is the Old Testament term that is used in **Psalm 143:2** and means no person] **will be justified in His**

sight; [The opposite of being justified is to be condemned.] **for through**
the Law comes the knowledge of sin.

But let's go just a little further to take a brief look at the next six words that introduce our next passage of study. In **verse 21** we read, "**But now apart from the Law.**" Paul is "**now**" signaling that here comes the good news. Here comes God's solution to the dilemma that all human beings face damnation. And I'll give you a clue: that solution is not based upon our self-efforts to earn God's approval. Obviously, the solution has to do with being declared righteous and acceptable before God by putting our confidence and life in the hands of the one who died on the cross for our sin, Jesus.

So what can we thank God for this morning? We can thank Him that He has loved us so much, that He has been brutally honest with us about our condition apart from the savior. As we close, I invite you to loudly and spontaneously pray and give public thanks for the Savior's work on your behalf. Then, I will close in prayer.

Father, we thank you for loving us enough to tell us the truth--to show us how lost we are, that we might turn to you for help. Thank you for loving us enough to show us that all the other ways to earn your acceptance are futile or blocked and lead nowhere. Help us to take the only way that has ever been provided, a righteousness that is given to us in Christ Jesus, something never earned or deserved. Help us to more fully understand in the days ahead just exactly what you have offered us in knowing Jesus Christ as our personal Savior and Lord.