

Sin's Tyranny
Romans 3:9-20
John Breon

The Declaration of Independence refers to tyrants or tyranny four times. Here are a couple of examples:

The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States.

A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

(<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>)

A tyrant is a cruel or oppressive ruler. Tyranny is arbitrary or unrestrained exercise of power that's cruel or oppressive (*The Random House Dictionary*, Classic Edition, 1983).

The Bible says here that all people are "under the power of sin." Sin is a tyrant, a power that rules our lives, our thoughts, our actions, everything about us. Humans chose the tyranny of sin and then we found that we couldn't escape. We can't just declare our own independence from sin's tyranny.

We see evidence of sin's tyranny all around us and within us. As we look around at the world or look within ourselves, we see that something has gone wrong. The world and life in it aren't how they ought to be, how God created them to be.

Some years ago, we watched the movie *Grand Canyon*. I didn't understand all of it, but there is a scene that makes a lot of sense. At the beginning of the movie, a man is leaving a Los Angeles Lakers game. He decides to take a short cut around a traffic jam. Then he finds himself lost in an unfamiliar neighborhood, on streets that seem to get darker and more threatening. Then his fancy sports car stalls on one of those streets. Along comes a gang of kids carrying guns. He calls for a tow truck, but before it

arrives, five young thugs surround and threaten him. The tow truck arrives just in time, and its driver starts to hook up the sports car. The gang members protest. They had other plans. So the driver takes the gang's leader aside and says, "Man, the world ain't supposed to work like this. Maybe you don't know that, but this ain't the way it's supposed to be. I'm supposed to be able to do my job without asking you if I can. And that dude is supposed to be able to wait with his car without you ripping him off. Everything's supposed to be different than what it is here" (summary from Donald McCullough, *The Trivialization of God* 91).

The world as it is now isn't the way it's supposed to be. Of course there's still good in the world. But, what is good in the world is like what someone on a desert island salvages from a shipwreck (G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* 70).

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, argues that all people need God's grace because all have sinned (3:9-20, 23). Paul spends most of the first three chapters of Romans showing that all people are under the power of sin. The emphasis in this passage is that Jews as well as Gentiles are guilty. The overall theme is summed up in verses 22-23: "There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Now let's look more closely at vv. 9-20 and see more clearly what sin is and why it's such a problem.

Paul writes about *the power of sin* and of people being under sin's power. That's the tyranny I mentioned earlier. Sin isn't just the absence of good. We can see sin as a disease and as the corruption of our nature. It's also like an active force that can enslave a person.

Paul brings in several references from the Hebrew scriptures, mostly from the Psalms, that drive home the point that all people are under the power of sin. People who thought that having the word of God automatically gave them status with God find that God's word condemns their sin as much as anyone's.

Paul's also preparing for what he will say later in this letter. There were groups in the church in Rome who disagreed and were judging each other. Paul's trying to get them to see that they need each other, that they

are brothers and sisters together. One of the things that unites them is their need for grace because they're all under sin's power.

Paul starts this chapter talking about "they" and "them." Then he moves to talking about "we" and "us." I've been helped over the years by a way of praying for forgiveness. It starts with, "Lord, forgive me." Then we move to, "I forgive myself." That's a tough one, but we need it. Then we can pray, "Lord, forgive *them*." Finally, we identify with others and we're free to pray, "Lord, forgive *us*" (Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Congratulations, God Believes in You!* 34-37).

At this point, Paul stresses that Jewish believers were just as needy for God's grace as gentile believers. So he quotes several passages from the scriptures that were so important to the Jewish believers. The framework for this series of quotations emphasizes that people *lack faith in and devotion to God*. The opening and closing verses of this series say that no one understands or seeks God (v. 11) and no one keeps the fear of God before their eyes (v. 18). This shows sin as a lack of knowledge of God, a failure to seek God, and a lack of regard for God. John Wesley said that the essence of sin is unbelief, failing to trust or refusing to trust God. This is a twisting of the relationship between God and humans. This leaves a void, an emptiness in us. When we try to fill that emptiness, we fall into idolatry, making our own gods. Making an idol of self is the sin of pride. So sin is being without God, or trying to live without God.

Next Paul shows that sin involves *turning away from God or going astray*. This is why we talk about being lost when we're not in right relationship with God. When we're lost we're misplaced (not where we're meant to be), we don't know who we really are, we aren't going the direction we need to go. The prophet Isaiah summed up this aspect of sin when he said, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way" (53:6). Jesus told a series of stories that showed God's love for the lost—the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (Luke 15). May God fill us with God's own love for lost people.

The next expression of sin Paul highlights is *wicked speech*. Sinful talk is full of death ("their throats are open graves"), deceit, poison, cursing and

bitterness. Our words matter. The spirit or attitude behind our speech matters as well.

Jesus said that what we say shows what is in our hearts (Matthew 15:18; Lk 6:45) and that we'll be judged by the careless words we speak (Mt 12:36-37). Despite all our efforts to keep people from saying hateful things, what's in our hearts will come out eventually. We can't clean that up on our own.

Paul cites one more group of scriptures that shows *violence* as an expression of sin. "Their feet are swift to shed blood, ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known" (vv. 15-17).

War provides another example that the world isn't now as God intends it. Even if we allow that war is sometimes necessary, we see that that very need for war demonstrates human sin. The violence and bloodshed in war are not always sin, but sin is the occasion for such violence and killing. Law enforcement is another example. Appropriate force used against criminals isn't sin in itself, but sin or evil is the occasion for it. Some force is necessary to oppose, to restrict, to confine human evil.

There are examples of violence that are sinful in themselves. All kinds of abuse, whether of children or a spouse or the elderly. Violent crime obviously. Excessive or unnecessary force that's disproportionate to the crime. Any use of force to oppress others, for selfish gain—these are examples of violence as sin.

Notice how the verses Paul quotes talk about various body parts involved in sin: eyes, feet, mouth. Later Paul will say, "Do not let any part of your body become a tool of wickedness, to be used for sinning. Instead, give yourselves completely to God since you have been given new life. And use your whole body as a tool to do what is right for the glory of God" (6:13, *New Living Translation*). God cares about our attitude, our spirit, our mind. God also cares about what we do, our bodily actions.

That list of scriptures that Paul quotes could be just a long list that hammers home the point that we're all sinners. But if we look at the contexts of those verses in the Old Testament, we see that each one is part of a passage where people are looking to God to come and deliver them.

So even as he gathers all that scriptural support to show that everyone is under sin's power, Paul holds out hope that God does come to deliver.

Someone asked, "How do you measure the size of a fire?" Look at the number of firefighters and fire engines sent to fight it. How do we measure the seriousness of a medical condition? Look at what the doctors prescribe and how they treat the illness. How do we measure the seriousness of sin and the greatness of God's love for us? We look at what God did for us in Jesus, the Son of God who became human, who became like a common criminal for our sake and in our place

(www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2015/april/7041315.html).

We see how serious sin is by looking at the cross. One of the reasons we know we're sinners is that God comes to us as Savior in Jesus. If salvation requires God becoming human in Jesus, living among us and dying for us, then being raised from the dead, then sin is a powerful enemy, a tyrant whose power only God can break. Only God can liberate us from that power.

I once came across a story that shows our need for a Savior. Mark Gooden is a pastor in Tennessee. He tells about when he was a little boy, he would go with his mom up the hill to wait for his dad to come home from work. They would meet at a particular spot and then all walk home together. Mark always dressed in his G.I. Joe outfit for this "mission." Except he had cowboy boots instead of combat boots. One very hot day they made the walk and got to the meeting place a little early. They waited in the shade of a huge planter, about eight feet tall. Mark's mom set him up on top of it. He was watching for his dad—and for any enemies that might be approaching. As he was moving around, suddenly the top of the planter gave way and he fell in. He wasn't hurt, just a little scratched, but he was scared. He tried to climb out, but he couldn't get a hold on anything and his boots were too slick to give him any traction. His mom was too short to reach in and get him. Every once in a while he would look up and see his mom's face—she was jumping up, trying to see inside. He says, "I needed help to get out of this jam. I could not get out by myself. I was close to tears when I looked up and saw a familiar hand reaching down for me. My dad had arrived on the scene and had scaled the planter to free me"

(*Preaching Doctrine in a Postmodern World*, Asbury Theological Seminary Dissertation, April 2003, 175-76).

We're stuck in sin and we can't get out by ourselves. But God in Jesus Christ comes to be with us to rescue us. You can know the freedom of forgiveness for sin and cleansing from sin right now. Ask God for it. Trust God's grace in Jesus. Receive the gift of salvation. Take hold of the hand that reaches in to rescue you.