

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor

[Swift Creek Baptist Church.com](http://SwiftCreekBaptistChurch.com), 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834

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## Romans 3:9-20          “The Universal Problem of Sin”

Intro. In the first main section of the book of Romans, Paul sets forth the important biblical doctrine of human depravity. You see, ever since Adam and Eve sinned, man has been born with a sin nature. We sin quite naturally, and we are incapable of living completely right in the sight of God. According to the Bible, we are not only depraved, but we are afflicted with what Bible scholars call “total depravity.” Total depravity does not mean that there is no good in man. After all, we were created in the image of a good God. However, sin has so marred us that there is no good in man which can satisfy a righteous God. So the Word of God starts off with the premise that everything in man must be condemned and that God must begin with a new creation within the human heart. Trying to reform the sin nature of man is not enough.

Yet many people deny that they have a serious sin problem. Man stands before God today like a little boy who swears, with crying and tears, that he has not been anywhere near the cookie jar. With an air of outraged innocence, he pleads the justice of his position, in total ignorance of the fact that crumbs have fallen on his shirt and chocolate is plainly visible around his mouth to all but him. We can easily see the sins of others, but we are reluctant to admit our own sin.

People would rather believe that human nature is basically good. They start off with the premise that there is something good in himself that can be polished and perfected. They want to feel that they can save themselves in some way. But if God had set out a plan of salvation that *man* could accomplish, He would be stooping to the human level and men would become proud that they were able to meet the demands of God. Heaven would be filled with strutting roosters & proud peacocks in regard to their attainments. Also, God would seem to be cruel to those who could not measure up to whatever standard He set.

Though the Bible teaches that man’s nature is fundamentally flawed, there is a way of salvation from sin that is available to all. Next Sunday we will begin to see a detailed presentation of that truth. God’s way of salvation does not begin with reformation, but with a recreation of the heart of man. Only God is capable of creating new life within.

So listen to the truth concerning ourselves as we find it here in our text. This passage on human depravity is not pleasant to hear, but it is absolutely important that a person hear & accept the basic truths of these verses. You see, before a person will go and see a doctor, they must first admit that they are sick. Even so, a person will not be saved until they realize that they *need* to be saved. Here in this text of Scripture Paul proves why we need a Savior from sin. Notice how Paul goes about demonstrating this. First of all, I call your attention to:

### I. THE CHARGE: ALL ARE UNDER SIN

Imagine that you are in a courtroom as the defendant. Paul is the prosecuting attorney. He affirms the charge against you, and then sets out to prove it in this text of Scripture. What is the

charge? Paul says in the last of v.9, “For we have previously charged<sup>1</sup> both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin.”

A. The Meaning of the Charge - To be “under sin” means to be under the condemnation of sin. Perhaps he even has crucifixion in mind. When a person was condemned to death, their charge was posted above their head. Or it can refer to being under the control of the power of sin. There are many times when we do things we know we shouldn’t do. Yet, there seems to be some inward power that compels us to do wrong. Actually, both ideas are true of the human condition. Notice that here for the first time in the epistle Paul uses the word “sin” in the singular form. Here it refers to the sin principle which dominates the lives of unredeemed men. Man is a sinner by nature. In our case, we do not become sinners by an act of sin; we sin because we are sinners by nature. It should be quite obvious to anyone that man is a sinner.

B. The Inclusiveness of the Charge - “All” does not have the article, thus denoting that all individuals are under sin. Paul is not just thinking of humanity as a whole. He has in mind each individual. No one is exempt. There are no exceptions. Furthermore, notice that:

1. In Spite of Their Advantages, Jews are Under Sin – The Jews did indeed have a number of spiritual advantages. But did this make them fundamentally better<sup>2</sup> than others? Paul says in v.9, “Not at all.” Or in light of the spiritual advantages mentioned in 3:2, he may have meant, “Not altogether.” While the Jew has a real advantage, he is not at an advantage in every respect. Notice that Paul “charged both Jews and Greeks [to be] ... under sin.” Being a Jew doesn’t change the fact that the Jew is still a sinner. In that respect they are no different from Gentiles. So while the Jews had privileges, these privileges gave them no advantage in escaping divine condemnation.

Now if God’s chosen people are afflicted with this problem, then certainly:

2. Everyone Else Is Under Sin [Application] - Regardless of Paul’s exact meaning, the fact remains that Paul is here asserting that both Jews & Gentiles are on the same ground with reference to sin and guilt before God. It doesn’t make any difference who we are today—high or low, rich or poor, good or bad—we’re all under sin. We all have inherited the same problem. Yes, there is not a single person I am speaking to today who doesn’t have a sin problem.

Of course, many Jews would object to Paul’s statement that when it comes to the sin problem, Jews and Gentiles are essentially no different. So Paul not only makes the charge, but secondly, he gives:

## II. THE PROOF

Beginning with v.10 Paul appeals to a number of Scripture quotations to prove his point.<sup>3</sup> Most are from the book of Psalms. He begins the quotations with the words, “As it is written.” It is a perfect tense in Greek. That means it was written in the past and it stands written today with abiding authority. Everywhere there is an attitude of quiet assumption that the Bible is the Word of

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<sup>1</sup> Paul uses the word *proaitiaomai*, from *pro*, meaning before, and the verb form of *aitia*, which refers to an accusation, a charge. *Aitia* was used of the charge or accusation that was placed above Jesus on the cross (Matthew 27:37).

<sup>2</sup> “Are we (i.e. Paul & Jews) better than they?” is difficult to translate correctly. In the active voice the word means, “to have before, to excel.” However, here it is middle/passive. Robertson takes it as passive. He knows of no case where this form takes an active meaning. However, it could take an active force with a middle meaning, for the Jews attributed superiority to themselves.

<sup>3</sup> Some of them are verbatim quotations, but several reproduce only the sense of the original.

God. The Old Testament is stamped with, "Thus said the Lord;" and the New Testament is stamped with, "It is written." So these Scripture quotations should settle the issue completely. Paul needs no other proof.

Paul begins with some Scripture quotations that prove:

A. Man's Sinful Condition in General - The quotations of vv.10-12 come from Psa. 14:2-3. These statements apply to mankind in general, for in v.2 of that Psalm we read, "The Lord looked down from heaven on the sons of mankind..." The quotation relates what He saw in man. If any man were to be so foolish as to deny his guilt, the Creator-Judge has set forth this manifesto declaring what mankind really is in His sight. Notice what God says about mankind here:

1. None Righteous – In v.10 Paul gives the following quote, "There is none righteous, no, not one." The all-knowing, all-seeing God could not find a single person who was truly righteous. Likewise, Micah 7:2 also concludes, "There is no one upright among men." To be righteous here means to be right with God, to live completely right in line with God's will. So when Paul says that there is none righteous, he is speaking of divine righteousness. Are you less perfect than God? If you are, then you are unrighteous in His sight. In Psa. 143:2 David pleads, "Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous."

There is a story of a woman who washed some fine linen and thought it was very white. But then she placed it on some new fallen snow and discovered that it was a bit yellowish. Compared to others we may feel righteous, but compared to the righteousness of God, truly "there is none righteous."

2. None Who Understands – That's the quotation that Paul gives in v.11. This verse speaks of spiritual understanding. 1 Cor. 2:14 tells us that "the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit...neither can he know them." Men may think that they can figure out God on their own, but God flatly states that no man understands. That is why the entire philosophical literature about religion is essentially a worthless heap. Here's one reason: God said in Isa. 55:8, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways."

3. None Who Seeks After God – We see that quote in v.11. Paul is not saying that people do not seek God ever, in any sense of the word. The Greek word for "seek" is intensive, "seek out diligently." No unbeliever truly seeks God with all their heart. They may seek for ways to soothe their guilty conscience. They may seek for divine favors, but they are not seeking after the heart of God. Do not be confused by the passages where some men are told to seek God; these are addressed to believers only. In the case of unbelievers God must first seek us. For example, after Adam sinned, he hid from God. He did not seek after God. God had to seek him. Lk. 19:10 says, "for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." People seek God only after God first intervenes in their life to cause them to want to seek God.

4. All Have Turned Aside – We see that truth in v.12. God has set forth a pathway that we are to follow. We must not deviate from God's will at all. Yet the Scripture says we all have "turned aside" (*ekklino*, to turn away; to deviate from the right way) from what we know to be God's will. We often are like sheep, straying away from God.

Have you ever chosen a shopping cart that had something wrong with one its wheels? There have been times when I picked one that tended to go left or right. That's the way *we* are! Our sin nature causes us to want to turn aside from the way of the Lord. Hosea 11:7 says, "My people are bent on backsliding from Me..."

5. All Have Become Unprofitable - "Unprofitable" (*achreioo*) in v.12 means in the passive voice, "to become depraved, worthless, of no good." Jesus said, "...the flesh profits

nothing...” (Jn. 6:63). The Hebrew word from which the Greek is translated is *ahlah* - be corrupt morally; tainted. It is used of milk that has turned sour. It is used of meat that has spoiled, and begins to stink. Using the Hebrew meaning, John Owen translated this as, “They are become putrid, or corrupted, like putrefied fruit or meat, therefore useless, not fit for what they were designed.” This is very strong language.

6. None Who Does Good – The word translated “good” (*chrestotes*) in v.12 refers to the opposite of the previous word: goodness, usefulness, kindness. Here it refers to doing what is good & right by God’s standard, not man’s. Furthermore, “does” is a present tense. None habitually does what is good & right. This would remind us of Jesus’ response to the rich young ruler when He said, “There is none good but one, that is, God” (Mark 10:18).

Those scriptures alone should be enough to convict any of us of being under sin. But beginning in v.13, Paul examines the tongue, feet, and mind of man to prove his sinful condition. Here we see:

B. Man’s Condition Evidenced by His Speech - The concentration upon organs of speech in verses 13 &14 shows how, in the apostle’s esteem, the depravity of man is exemplified in his words. Even so, Jesus taught that a person’s speech is a good indication of the condition of their heart. He said in Mt. 12:34, “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” If you want to know what a person is like on the inside, just listen to them talk. There is a direct link between a man’s heart & his mouth. Very frequently when a doctor begins the general examination of a patient, he starts by looking in his mouth. He says, “Stick out your tongue.”

So when we look at the tongue of man, what do we see? We will discover:

1. Distasteful Speech – Paul takes up the following quote in v.13, “Their throat is an open tomb.” Comparing the mouth & throat to a tomb probably refers to what comes out of the mouth, words that are corrupt and stinking like the decay of death.<sup>4</sup> That is why Paul said in Eph. 4:29, “Let no corruption communication proceed out of your mouth.” What proceeds out of man’s mouth is often as offensive as the stench of an open grave. The perfect participle translated “open” denotes that vulgarity is a permanent and hardened trait of character with many people. It is descriptive of their nature rather than just their practice. Indeed, much of the language that is used today is a corrupt and vile as an open grave.

According to a 2002 survey, 81% admitted to using profanity at least some.<sup>5</sup> I would say it is a pretty universal practice among those who are unsaved.

2. Deceitful Speech – In v.13 Paul also says, “With their tongues they have practiced deceit.” “Practiced deceit” is an imperfect tense. They keep on practicing deception. You know that you are a liar by nature. Never did parents have a child that they did not have to correct in this matter. The child lies as soon as they learn to talk. There is not one person in my audience today who has not told a lie. People often lie or deceive to cover up what they have done, or to make themselves look better, or even to help others feel better. “I love your new hairstyle.”

Did you read the story about a minister who told his congregation, “Next week I plan to preach about the sin of lying. To help you understand my sermon, I want you all to read Mark 17.” The following Sunday, as he prepared to deliver his sermon, the minister asked for a show of hands. He wanted to know how many had read Mark 17. Just about every hand went up. The

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<sup>4</sup> Some interpreters believe it refers to deadly speech. The mouth of sinful man is capable of swallowing others whole like the grave. Some have even literally died as a result of false accusations. But this aspect of the tongue is covered under the last part of v.13.

<sup>5</sup> 2002 survey by Public Agenda in Readers' Digests, August 2002, "Only in America," 29.

minister smiled and said, “Mark has only 16 chapters. I will now proceed with my sermon on the sin of lying.”<sup>6</sup> Even church folks are not immune to lying.

By the way, the Hebrew word refers more to flattery. Men use flattery & deception to get their own way. Some have a sugared tongue, which charms you like a melodious instrument, but the speak lies.

3. Dangerous Speech – In v.13 Paul says, “The poison of asps is under their lips.” An asp refers to an Egyptian cobra, for *aspidon* basically refers to something round. The poison lies in a bag under the lips. As soon as the snake would bite its victim, that would squeeze the poison bag and force the venom into its victim. Lost men are children of Satan, the offspring of vipers (Lk. 3:7). People can speak words that strike like a poisonous snake. You have a tongue that you can use to ruin the reputation of someone else. Your tongue can be very harmful. Gossip can hurt others like poison.

4. Angry Speech – Paul says in v.14, “Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.” “Cursing” probably refers to words that wish evil or harm upon a person. “Bitterness” is from *pikria*, bitterness, animosity, anger, harshness. Usually, when someone has bitter animosity toward someone, they will curse their enemy, or call upon their god to curse someone.

All of these verbal expressions arise from the sinful heart of man. What does *your* tongue say about your heart’s condition? Do you use profanity? Do you lie & deceive? Do you use words that hurt others? Do you wish harm upon others with angry words? If so, you need to make sure you have truly repented of sin, and that you have been born again.

C. Man’s Condition Evidenced by Violent Behavior - As people in America have turned away from God, there has been a corresponding increase in violence. That is a symptom of our sinful condition. Things are getting so bad that the youth of America are fighting one another, filming it, and posting it on the Internet. We’ve heard of many examples of young people brings guns to school, and killing many people. Notice some of the expressions of violence that Paul mentions here. In v.15 Paul says their feet are:

1. Swift to Shed Blood - This verse speaks of murder, but it must be kept in mind that Christ taught that hatred is the root of murder & spiritually it is the same as murder. The feet of the first baby who ever learned to walk upon this earth were swift to shed blood. How could this be? Because he had inherited the fallen nature of his father Adam.

2. Destructive – Paul says in v.16, “Destruction and misery are in their ways.” “Ways” has the article in Greek. The lost have their own, specific ways they live their lives, but like a tornado, destruction & misery are left behind. Look all around and you can see the destruction and ruin of sin. Look at certain elements of society where the influence of the Gospel is not strong, and you will see widespread destruction and misery.

3. Not Peaceful - Paul says in v.17, “And the way of peace they have not known.” If you have at least 2 children, you know “the way of peace they have not known!” Selfishness and sin always leads to conflict. When he speaks of peace he is not speaking of pacifism. He is not speaking of a peace that is forced upon people by a powerful regime. He is talking about true peace: a peace with God that results in peaceful relationships with others. Such peace man has not experienced.<sup>7</sup> The history of man has been a history of war and conflict. And look about you in the world today. After all these years man is still talking about peace, but he hasn’t found it. Just read your newspaper, my friend; there is no peace in this world.

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<sup>6</sup> From the Internet 4-26-06.

<sup>7</sup> “Known” speaks of experiential knowledge.

How often are you involved in conflict? If you find yourself in verbal or physical conflicts with any regularity, you probably still need to be born again. By the way, the word “way” in v.17 is singular [however, it doesn’t have the definite article]. There is one way to have peace, and it is by surrendering to the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ. Once you are right with God, and at peace with Him, you can have peace with others. And true peace will not come on earth until the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, comes again to this earth.

D. Man’s Condition Evidenced by Irreverence Toward God – Paul gives the following quote in v.18, “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Paul seems to sum up all of man’s sin in this final statement. To fear God means that we respect God. We respect the fact that He is holy, all-powerful, and all-knowing. We are rightly concerned about displeasing Him, for no sin can be hidden from Him. It is the fear of God that keeps people from sin when no-one else is watching. When I was a child, I always had the fear of God. I did wrong sometimes, but I never felt good about it. I always had a healthy concern about doing wrong.

But tragically, too many do not fear God. Notice that there is no fear of God “before their eyes.” It is because God is not seen by physical eyes that men often ignore Him. In our country today we have driven the consciousness of God out of our public schools, and out of popular culture. Many either deny God exists, or they simply ignore Him. As a result, we are raising up a generation of people in this country who do not fear God. Some are even shooting people in cold blood with no remorse. Any society that has a significant number of people who do not fear God is in trouble. We cannot hire enough police officers to control people who do not fear God. I am thankful that we have God-fearing young people in our church.

Do you fear God? When you do wrong, are you concerned that God knows what you have done, and that you have incurred divine displeasure? If not, then that is another evidence that you are still under the condemnation and control of sin.

I believe that Paul has done a masterful job of quoting Scripture to prove his point that all are sinners. All are under the condemnation and control of sin. Now let’s conclude by considering:

### III. THE CONCLUSIONS

Paul presses upon us four conclusions:

A. These Scriptures Apply to All, Including Jews – Paul demonstrates the truth of that statement in v.19 by saying, “Now we know that whatever the law<sup>8</sup> says, it says to those who are under the law.” You see, Paul anticipated the above Old Testament quotations to be resisted by some Jews on the ground that since the quotations were so descriptive of the Gentiles, they undoubtedly had no reference to the Jews. The fact is, these quotations are taken from the Jewish scriptures, and therefore the people whom they have in view are primarily fellow Jews. Notice in his response that he uses two different words translated “says” in v.19. The first refers to the contents of the law, while the second word refers to the outward, audible speech of the law. One denotes the record of the law; the second refers to the teaching of the law. The Scripture is not a dead word; it is living speech with relevance to the present.

Now we must not think that this passage is accusing every member of the human race of having committed all of these individual sins. What it is teaching is that the roots of all sin are in all men. There is an illustration of this in the fact that when bombs fell on London during WWII

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<sup>8</sup> Here is an example of the word “law” being used as representative of all the Old Testament, not just the Pentateuch.

and ploughed up the earth to great depths, flowers sprang up from the earth, some of which had been lost to the botanists for more than a century. You may have all of these sins grubbed down beneath the surface of your life, but the roots are still there. The actual evil of some men shows the potential evil of all men.

Just as the truth of human depravity applies to Jews, even so it applies to those of Christian heritage.

B. All the World Is Guilty Before God – Paul says in the last part of v.19 that these quotations were given “that ... all the world may become guilty before God.” The word translated “guilty” (*hupodikos*) is only used here in the New Testament. It literally means “under condemnation.” You have no defense. You have lost your case. There is no escape from the condemnation our sins deserve. The fact is we are all guilty before God. We are all guilty, for as Paul says in v.23, “All have sinned.” Unless you do something about your sin problem, you will stand before God some day and hear Him repeat this sentence of guilt and declare, “Depart from me, you who have worked iniquity.” The reason why more people are not true Christians is that they are unwilling to accept God’s verdict as to the sinful nature of their being.

C. Every Mouth Should Be Silenced – Paul also said in v.19 that the guilt of man has been clearly established “that every mouth may be stopped.” The Old Testament prophet wrote, “The Lord is in His holy temple; Let all the earth keep silence before Him” (Hab. 2:20). Stop making excuses. Stop trying to defend yourself. Just admit that you are guilty before God.

Stopping mouths is a difficult business. Many parents have accused their children of wrongdoing, only to hear their children give a long and passionate defense. Oh, how we seek to defend ourselves! We are so slow to admit our guilt. Paul seems here to be speaking mostly to Jews, the hardest to convince.

Simply admit that you are a sinner. Come to Christ singing:

Just as I am without one plea,  
But that Thy blood was shed for me,  
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,  
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!

Now we come to the most important conclusion:

D. We Can’t Be Saved by Keeping the Law – Paul says in v.20, “Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” Our sin problem is so serious that we cannot keep the Law. There is no way we can keep the Law well enough to be saved that way. Paul points out here that the Law was not given to save us but to show us that we are sinners in need of a Savior. The Law cannot save us; instead it condemns us. To hold onto the Law as a means of salvation is like a man jumping out of an airplane, and instead of taking a parachute, he takes a sack of cement with him. If there is any hope for either Jew or Gentile, it must be found in the mercy of God.

Conclusion: Jesus tells the story of 2 people who went to the temple to pray one day (Luke 18:9-14). One was a self-righteous Pharisee. He felt that he kept the Law well enough to be right with God. He tithed; he fasted. He did not do things like steal, or commit adultery. The other man was a

tax collector. He knew he was a sinner, and he did not so much as look up to heaven. All he say was, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” Who do you think went away from the temple, right with God? Jesus said it was the tax collector.

The purpose of this Scripture passage is to get you to admit the charge that God lays against you. By nature we are all sinners. We are all under the condemnation & control of sin. The evidences for this reality are overwhelming. Don’t think you can overcome your sin problem by sheer determination to live by God’s law. You can’t do it. Law cannot save us; it only condemns us. The first step toward true salvation is to acknowledge that you are a sinner in need of the Savior. Jesus said, “They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Lk. 5:31).

Sources: Steve Felker; Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); Hershel Hobbs, *Romans: A Verse by Verse Study* (Waco: Word Books, 1977); Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950 reprint); Leon McBeth, *Exegetical & Practical Commentary on Romans* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1937); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); C.I. Scofield, Ed., *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (NY: Oxford Univ. Press), 1967; Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest’s *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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