
Paul's Epistle to the Romans

LESSON V: REFUTATION OF JEWISH OBJECTIONS / UNIVERSAL SIN — CHAP 3 VERSES 1-20

INTRODUCTION

DIFFICULT AND CONTROVERSIAL PARAGRAPH — There are parts about this section which are beyond the scope of our Sunday School lessons, but Douglas Moo states he quickly realized “the justice of Godet’s claim that the paragraph 3:1-8 is ‘one of the most difficult, perhaps, in the Epistle.’” Moo then continues to discuss the obscurity of the rapid-fire sequence of questions given by Paul. If the reader is interested, for further detail see Godet’s or Moo’s commentary on Romans.

One difficulty and / or difference in approach to this paragraph centers around who Paul is addressing. Most the more traditional commentaries state Paul is addressing the Jew in vv. 1-4 (or vv. 1-3), then addresses mankind as a whole in vv. 5-8 (or vv. 4-8). The other approach is accepted by most modern commentators and takes the entire paragraph to be addressed to the Jews. Both views have strengths and weaknesses but I will follow Douglas Moo’s comments, for better or worse. “Verses 1-4a reject the inference that the judgment under which disobedient Jews stand (2:17-29) means that the Jews have no advantage at all. Rather, Paul insists, they have a great advantage, in possessing the words of God (vv. 1-2). The widespread unfaithfulness of the Jews in no way annuls God’s faithfulness to those words (vv. 3-4a). Then, with the quotation of Ps. 51:4b, Paul’s argument takes a decisive turn. Here he shows that God’s faithfulness, or ‘righteousness,’ is manifested even through the sin of his people, for God’s words promise judgment for disobedience as well as blessing for obedience. Verse 5, then, is Paul’s formulation of a Jewish objection to the effect that Jewish sin, since it manifests God’s righteousness, should not be subject to the wrath of God. This inference Paul rejects, simply noting that it is incompatible with the biblical doctrine that God is a just judge (v. 6). The objector repeats his or her objection again, however (v. 7), and adds to it the claim that Paul’s doctrine actually encourages sinning (v. 8a). Paul again curtly rejects this line of reasoning, announcing the justice of God’s condemnation (v. 8b). *Taken as a whole, then, the passage both affirms the continuing faithfulness of God to his covenant people and argues that this faithfulness in no way precludes God from judging the Jews. Provoking this discussion is the Jewish tendency to interpret God’s covenant faithfulness solely in terms of his salvific promises. Paul meets that conception with a broader and deeper view of God’s faithfulness — his faithfulness to remain true to his character and to all his words: the promises of cursing for disobedience as well as blessing for obedience.*” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 179f]

GOD IS NOT FINISHED WITH THE JEWS — “What begins, then, as an attempt to answer an objection to Paul’s ironing out of distinctions between Jews and Gentiles (vv. 1-2) becomes a frustratingly brief discussion of the relationship between Israel’s unbelief and God’s righteousness and, ultimately, between human sin and God’s purposes. Indeed, many of our difficulties in interpretation are caused by the fact that Paul is touching here very briefly and sometimes allusively on themes that he develops at greater length elsewhere in the letter — especially chaps. 9-11. *The paragraph as a whole, then, while something of an ‘excursus’ in Paul’s exposition, contributes in important ways to our understanding of Paul’s view of God’s righteousness in its relationship to Israel’s unbelief. In thus allowing the Roman Christians to ‘listen in’ on this dialogue, Paul warns his mainly Gentile audience that they should not interpret the leveling of distinctions between Jew and Gentile in terms of God’s judgment and salvation as the canceling of all the privileges of Israel. As Rom. 11:11-24 makes clear, Paul knows that the Gentile Christians, in Rome and elsewhere, need to hear this caution.*” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 180]

TODAY’S LESSON IN A NUTSHELL

“THE first objection to Paul’s reasoning here presented is, that according to his doctrine the Jew has no advantage over the Gentile, ver. 1. The apostle denies the correctness of this inference from what he had said, and admits that the Jews have great advantages over all other people, ver. 2. The second objection is, that God having promised to be the God of the Jews, their unfaithfulness, even if admitted, does not release him from his engagements, or make his promise of no effect, ver. 3. Paul, in answer, admits that the faithfulness of God must not be called in question, let what will happen, vers. 4, 5; but he shows that the principle on which the Jews expected exemption from punishment, viz., because their unrighteousness commended the righteousness of God, was false. This he proves by showing first, that if their principle was correct, God could not punish any one, Gentile or Jew, vers. 5-7; and secondly, that it would lead to this absurdity, that it is right to do evil that good may come, v. 8.

“THE apostle having demonstrated that the Jews cannot expect exemption from condemnation, on the ground of their being the peculiar people of God, except on principles incompatible with the government of the world, and inconsistent with the plainest moral truths, draws, in ver. 9, the conclusion, that the Jew, as to the matter of justification before God, has no preeminence over the Gentile. He confirms his doctrine of the universal sinfulness of men by numerous quotations from the Scriptures. These passages speak of men in general as depraved, vers. 10-12; and then of the special manifestations of that depravity in sins of the tongue, vers. 13, 14; and in sins of violence, vers. 15-18. The inference from all his reasoning, from chap. 1:18, derived from consciousness, experience, and Scripture is, that ‘the whole world is guilty before God,’ ver 19; and that ‘no flesh can be justified by the deeds of the law,’ ver. 20. [Hodge, *Romans*, pg69f, 76]

REFUTATION OF JEWISH OBJECTIONS

What advantage then hath the Jew? or what profit is there of circumcision? Much every way: chiefly, because that unto them were committed the oracles of God. For what if some did not believe? shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect? God forbid: yea, let God be true, but every man a liar; as it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged. But if our unrighteousness commend the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unrighteous who taketh vengeance? (I speak as a man) God forbid: for then how shall God judge the world? For if the truth of God hath more abounded through my lie unto his glory; why yet am I also judged as a sinner? And not rather, (as we be slanderously reported, and as some affirm that we say,) Let us do evil, that good may come? whose damnation is just. (Rom 3:1-8 KJV)

What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God. What if some did not have faith? Will their lack of faith nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all! Let God be true, and every man a liar. As it is written: So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge. But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner? Why not say — as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say — Let us do evil that good may result? Their condemnation is deserved. (Rom 3:1-8 NIV)

What, then, [is] the superiority of the Jew? or what the profit of the circumcision? much in every way; for first, indeed, that they were intrusted with the oracles of God; for what, if certain were faithless? shall their faithlessness the faithfulness of god make useless? let it not be! and let God become true, and every man false, according as it hath been written, 'That Thou mayest be declared righteous in Thy words, and mayest overcome in Thy being judged.' And, if our unrighteousness God's righteousness doth establish, what shall we say? is God unrighteous who is inflicting the wrath? (after the manner of a man I speak) let it not be! since how shall God judge the world? for if the truth of God in my falsehood did more abound to His glory, why yet am I also as a sinner judged? and not, as we are evil spoken of, and as certain affirm us to say — 'We may do the evil things, that the good ones may come?' whose judgment is righteous. (Rom 3:1-8 Young's Literal Translation)

v1 — Paul had just asserted in chapter 2 that possession of the law and circumcision (i.e., being a Jew) makes no essential difference on the final day of judgment, and what was really important is “being a Jew inwardly” and “the circumcision of the heart.” This would naturally raise the question of this verse: “what then is the advantage of being a Jew, or of what profit is circumcision?” “**what, then**” — Paul often used these words to raise questions about what he taught and to further his argument. These could have been real questions raised by someone with Paul, but all indications are these are questions Paul himself is raising to clarify his position.

the advantage of being Jewish — *περισσός (perissos)* = *over and above, abundant*; and in a comparative sense *better*, and substantively, as in the present instance, *excellence, pre-eminence*. What is the pre-eminence or superiority of the Jew? “Literally, ‘What then is the overplus of the Jew?’ What does the Jew have over and above the Gentile? It is a pertinent question after the stinging indictment of the Jew in chapter 2.” [Robertson, *Word Pictures*, vol 4 pg 341]

v2 — Note Paul’s answer was not “None; there is no distinction whatsoever between the Jew and Gentile.” Rather Paul admits there is a difference. Paul’s intention in the previous chapter was not to deny the Jews have privileges the Gentiles did not have. Paul’s point in chapter two was to emphasize to the Jews that these privileges did not serve as a “pass” when it comes to the judgment of God. “We might have expected Paul to answer this supposed question quite categorically: ‘None at all!’ But, rather to our surprise, he replies, ‘Much in every way.’ Of course it is an advantage to belong to the circumcised nation. Think of all the privileges granted by God to that nation — privileges in which other nations had no part. It would be asking too much of Paul to expect him to deny his true ancestral heritage, especially as now he had found, in the gospel to which his life was devoted, the fulfilment of the age-old hope of his people.” [Bruce, *Romans*, pg 90]

much, in every way — if taken in the most literal sense would mean the Jews had advantages “in every respect,” but Paul’s meaning without doubt was the Jews had advantages in a significant number of ways, although not necessarily every single way without exception. **Other advantages the Jews had over the Gentiles may be gathered from Paul’s comments in 9:4,5: adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, the promises, the patriarchs, and most of all the lineage of the Lord Jesus.**

first of all — Paul may have originally intended to list more than one item since he begins with, “first of all.” That Paul never followed through with his list is no serious objection since there are other examples of the same kind (1:8). Others take this in the sense of “primarily, most significantly, most importantly,” meaning the greatest gift to the Jews was the word of God.

they have been entrusted with the oracles of God — note the use of the third person plural “they.” By doing this Paul may not have been talking about all Jews including Jewish-Christians like himself, but maybe only the Jews who were unbelievers. “Paul sets forth as the greatest of Jewish distinctions the fact that God has spoken to them and entered, with these words, into a special relationship with them.” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 183] Parallel passages of Paul’s intent here may be found: “And what nation is there

so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day?” (Deut 4:8 KJV) “He sheweth his word unto Jacob, his statutes and his judgments unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any nation: and as for his judgments, they have not known them. Praise ye the LORD.” (Ps 147:19,20 KJV) “‘Unto them were committed’ Or were intrusted, were confided. The word translated ‘were committed,’ is what is commonly employed to express ‘faith’ or ‘confidence,’ and it implied ‘confidence’ in them on the part of God in intrusting his oracles to them; a confidence which was not misplaced, for no people ever guarded a sacred trust or deposit with more fidelity, than the Jews did the Sacred Scriptures.” [Barne’s Notes on the Bible: Romans]

oracles = τὰ λόγια (ta logia) divine utterances, used in LXX of Balaam’s “oracle” (Num 24:4,16) and frequently of the words of God to his people (e.g., Deut 33:9; Ps 105:19; and 24x in Ps 119). Its specific reference here could be God’s self-revelation in both the OT / NT; the law, especially the ten commandments; the promises of the OT; or the OT as a whole with special reference perhaps to the promises. The last alternative seems to best suit the general application of the word. “The Greek logia is related to logoi (e.g., John 14:24) but has a specialized meaning. ‘Oracles’ is the usual rendering. It has this meaning in classical Greek, where it is used especially for divine utterances, often for those preserved and handed down by earlier generations. Jewish writers used it both for pagan oracles, which they considered false, and for revelations from the God of Israel. LXX usage makes it evident that two elements could belong to a logion: a disclosure of what God proposes to do (especially in terms of prediction, as in Num 24:16 ff.) or a pronouncement of the duty laid upon man in view of the divine will or promise (e.g., Ps 119:67).” [Harrison, Romans] “It occurs four times in the N.T. (Acts 7:38, which see; Romans 3:2; Hebrews 5:12; 1 Peter 4:11). It is possible that here and in Acts 7:38 the idea may include all the Old Testament, though the commands and promises of God may be all.” [Robertson, Word Pictures, vol 4 pg 341]

v3 — “Being entrusted with the stewardship of God’s revelation is a great distinction. But in light of the sad history of Israel’s rebellion, a rebellion that has (largely) continued right up to the present time, it could be asked whether this distinction any longer has meaning. This is the question raised in v. 3, as Paul departs from his ‘script’ to deal with implications of, and objections to, his assertion of Jewish ‘advantage.’ ... [The verse should probably be punctuated] to attribute both questions to Paul: ‘What, you might ask, of the fact that some Jews have not proven faithful? This does not mean, does it, that God will be any less faithful on his part?’ ... Attribution to Paul himself is suggested by the μή (mē), which shows that the question expects a negative answer and is therefore in continuity rather than in contrast with v. 2. In addition, we would have expected a (presumably) Jewish objector to have used the first person plural [‘we’] rather than the third person plural [‘they’].” [Moo, Romans, pg 183f]

what if some — the use of “some” by Paul must have been used to lessen the offense. Paul makes it clear in Romans 9-11 that he regarded the “some” to be a vast majority of the Jews who has failed to respond in faith to God’s word.

be unfaithful ... unfaithfulness — Paul uses these words to set up an antithesis with his previous statement in v. 2: “God’s entrusting the oracles to the Jews were not met with a corresponding trust on the part of the Jews.” The root word used in v. 2 is ἀπιστεύω (apisteuō, translated in v. 2 as ‘they were entrusted’); one of the root words used in v. 3 is the same as v. 2, ἀπιστεύω (apisteuō, translated in v. 3 as ‘did not believe, did not have faith’) and the other root word is ἀπιστία (apistia, translated in v. 3 as ‘unbelief, lack of faith’). Wuest: “Well then — if, as is the case, certain ones did not exercise faith? Their unbelief will not render the faithfulness of God ineffectual, will it?” [3:3, Wuest Expanded Translation] **More to the point than ‘trust’ is faithfulness: God was faithful while Israel was faithless. In this context, Paul is making special reference to God’s commitment and faithfulness to the covenant versus Israel’s failure to meet their covenant obligations. Part of Israel’s ‘lack of belief’ in the covenant obligations would include at least in part their failure to embrace Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah.**

v4 — While Paul’s question anticipates the response of “no,” Paul answers in such a way to leave no doubt. **not at all!** — μή γένοιτο (mē genoito) is a negative oath, the strongest negative possible in the Greek language. It is variously translated as: ‘God forbid!’ (KJV), ‘Of course not!’ (Phillips), and most literally, ‘May it never be!’ (NASB). Paul uses the formula frequently in the book of Romans (3:6, 31; 6:2, 15; 7:7, 13; 9:14; 11:1, 11).

let God be true — Paul again contrasts the faithfulness of God (“Let God be true”) and Israel’s unfaithfulness (“every man a liar”). “God being true” is not a reference to his honesty but rather refers to his reliability and trustworthiness. God is “true” to his word. Paul is anticipating the last part of the verse: “God is true, reliable and faithful to fulfill his word; even when people suffer his judgment.” Some note the tense of the Greek word used here may imply the sense of “let God be recognized as true; let God be more and more true [as more and more of his promises are fulfilled].” Wuest: “Let God be found veracious and every man a liar.” [3:4, Wuest Expanded Translation] “γινέσθω (ginesthō) has its proper sense, fiat, let him become, i.e., be seen and acknowledged as true.” [Hodge, Romans, pg 71] Others take the sense to be “We confess rather that God is true.” “Let God be esteemed true and faithful, whatever consequence may follow. This was a first principle, and should be now, that God should be believed to be a God of truth, whatever consequence it might involve. How happy would it be, if all people would regard this as a fixed principle, a matter not to be questioned in their hearts, or debated about, that God is true to his word! How much doubt and anxiety would it save professing Christians; and how much error would it save among sinners! Amidst all the agitations of the world, all conflicts, debates, and trials, it would be a fixed position where every man might find rest, and which would do more than all other things to allay the tempests and smooth the agitated waves of human life.” [Barne’s Notes on the Bible: Romans]

and every man a liar — Not only is God true when ‘some’ are unfaithful but he remains true even if every person should prove unreliable.

SUPPORT FROM KING DAVID — Paul quotes from Psalm 51:4 to substantiate his point about the reliability of God: “so that you may be justified in your words, and that you might triumph when you judge.” F. F. Bruce: “That thou mayest be vindicated when thou speakest, and win the case when thou enterest into judgment.” [Bruce, *Romans*, pg 91] “Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: **that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.**” (Psalm 51:4 KJV) “Psalm 51 is David’s moving confession of his sin with Bathsheba, and v. 4b is a purpose clause in which David expresses the intention either of his confession (v. 3) or of his sin (v. 4a). This purpose is that God might be ‘right’ in the sentence he has pronounced over David (cf. 2 Sam 12:9-14) and ‘be clear’ in his judgment of him.” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 186f] “This disposition to justify God under all circumstances, the apostle illustrates by the conduct and language of David, who acknowledged the justice of God even in his own condemnation, and said, ‘Against thee only have I sinned; that thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and overcome when thou art judged;’ i.e., that thy rectitude, under all circumstances, might be seen and acknowledged.... **It is a mark of genuine piety, to be disposed always to justify God, and to condemn ourselves. On the other hand, a disposition to self-justification and the extenuation of our sins, however secret, is an indication of the want of a proper sense of our own unworthiness and of the divine excellence.**” [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 71f] “To confirm the sentiment which he had just advanced and to show that it accorded with the spirit of religion as expressed in the Jewish writings, the apostle appeals to the language of David, uttered in a state of deep penitence for past transgressions. Of all quotations ever made, this is one of the most beautiful and most happy. David was overwhelmed with grief; he saw his crime to be awful; he feared the displeasure of God, and trembled before him. Yet ‘he held it as a fixed, indisputable principle that’ **GOD WAS RIGHT.**” [Barne’s *Notes on the Bible: Romans*]

GOD IS FAITHFUL TO HIS CHARACTER — The verse in Ps 51:4b expresses the faithfulness of God when he judges sin because the truthfulness of God in 3:4a includes this negative aspect of God being faithful to his word — even in judgment. It was one of the great failings of the Jews to not make this distinction. They believed God was faithful to his people (the Jews) almost without regard of Jewish behavior. Even when Babylon was at the gates and Jeremiah was declaring the judgment of God, there were those within the city that preached deliverance and they were to depend upon the ‘faithfulness of God.’ Their mistake was to only remember God’s positive promises to the nation while conveniently forgetting their responsibility to love and serve the Lord. **In the end God was faithful ... to his own character and all of his promises, even those promises of judgment when we turn from him.** “The oracles of God’ include warnings that God will judge sin as well as promises that he will bless his people. Because of this, the OT insists that God is equally faithful when he judges his people’s sin and when he fulfills his promises. We must assume, then, a transition of sorts between vv. 3 and 4. The faithfulness of God is expressed generally in v. 3 and would undoubtedly imply, to a Jewish objector as well as to the readers, a commitment on God’s part to maintain Israel’s special and blessed place in God’s purpose. In v. 4, however, Paul shows that God’s faithfulness must also be recognized when he judges his people’s sins. As Paul has shown at length in chap. 2, the special place of the Jews in God’s plan does not protect them from the judgment of God. In 3:1-4, Paul reaffirms their special status by appealing to the invariability of God with respect to his word. But he also reminds us that this word includes warnings of judgment as well as promises of blessing. It is ‘the Jew first,’ but in judgment (2:9) as well as blessing (1:16; 2:10).” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 188]

v5 — **To clarify, Paul introduces a possible objection to his teaching in vv. 1-4.** That it is Paul bringing forth the objection is obvious because (1) of the transitional clause, “*what shall we say,*” which Paul always uses to introduce his own conclusion or question; (2) the form of the question: it is written in such a manner to expect a negative answer; and (3) his “*apology*” at the end of the verse for the “*human*” way of putting the question.

our unrighteousness — it is difficult to know whether Paul intends it generally, “*the unrighteousness of all men,*” or more specifically, “*the unrighteousness of the Jews.*” It could refer to either.

commend — *recommend; show forth; render illustrious*

God’s righteousness — not God’s saving righteousness, nor to his fairness and justice, nor is it used in the sense of Rom 1:17 to describe the activity by which God justifies his people. “Rather, ‘God’s righteousness’ here designates **God’s faithfulness to his own person and word,** particularly, as v. 4b reveals, as this is revealed in his judgment of sin.” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 190]

our sin glorifies God? — “If human sin has ‘manifested’ something good — for even if God’s righteousness is expressed in judgment, that righteousness is still good — it might well be asked if God is not ‘unjust’ when he punishes that sin.” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 190]

I speak as a man — “*I speak as a man (kata anthroopon).*” See Galatians 3:15 for same phrase. As if to say, ‘pardon me for this line of argument.’ Tholuck says that the rabbis often used *kata anthroopon* and *ti eroumen*. Paul had not forgotten his rabbinical training.” [Robertson, *Word Pictures*, vol 4 pg 342] “I speak after the manner of human beings. I speak as appears to be the case to human view; or as would strike the human mind. It does not mean that the language was such as wicked people were accustomed to use; but that **the objector expressed a sentiment which to human view would seem to follow from what had been said.**” [Barne’s *Notes on the Bible: Romans*]

v6 — Paul emphatically denies God is unjust if he punishes sin with his characteristic “*by no means*” (μη̄ γένοιτο, mē genoito). Paul counters the concept with this question: “*If God is unjust to punish sin or inflict wrath, how would he judge the world?*” “The point of this question is to draw out the absurd and clearly impossible consequences of the supposition stated in v. 5. It is certainly not the case that God is unjust to inflict wrath, for if it were otherwise (that is, if God were unjust), how could God judge the world?” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 192]

v7,8 — There are differences of opinion concerning the manner to take these verses: are these questions those of the same objector who asked the question in v. 5, or are these questions from Paul to further clarify his point? Although commentators differ, Douglas Moo states most commentators adapt some form of the former interpretation. However, though not without difficulties, Moo adapts the latter for this reason: if these were questions asked by an objector, Paul nowhere seems to answer his opponent. “Would Paul have cited such serious accusations about his doctrine and been content simply to condemn their advocates?” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 193] Verse 7 is a re-statement of the basic argument found in v. 5. The response / question in v. 8 is written in such a manner to suggest a negative answer (Paul again uses a μη̄, mē, to imply a negative response). Again, there is much controversy about who is speaking, is v. 8 a continuance of v. 7 or is it a reply, etc. Perhaps the best way to resolve the controversies is reflected in the NIV translation: “*Why not say — as we are being slanderously reported and as some claim that we say — ‘Let us do evil that good may result.’*”

as we are being slanderously reported / some claim that we say — Paul states he (and the other apostles?) have been accused of teaching this doctrine Paul’s opponent claims is the logical outcome of such teaching. The teaching put here by Paul in the mouth of his opponent is one he has heard before and quite possibly one the Roman Christians have heard (see the introductory lesson which referred to Paul attempting to correct misunderstandings as a possible reason for his writing Romans). The question arises then why Paul does not directly answer the accusation. Some state he does in chapter 6 (note the similarity between 3:8 and 6:1). Others state the circumstances of Romans 6 is different and Paul does not even dignify such an objectionable question with a response. The accusation is so absurd that it does not rate an answer and the question itself is blasphemous.

slanderously reported — βλασφημέω (blasphēmēō) Greek, ‘*as we are blasphemed.*’ This is the legitimate and proper use of the word ‘*blaspheme,*’ to speak of one in a reproachful and calumnious manner. It could refer to the ‘*slander*’ of Paul doing such a thing, or slander / blasphemy of the character of God which is implicit in their accusation. Perhaps both are involved in the word, as Paul wrote elsewhere: “*that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed.*” (1 Tim 6:1b KJV)

their condemnation is just — the pronoun “their” could refer back either to the people who say such things, “*to condemn such men as these is surely no injustice*” (NEB), or to the things the people are saying, “*such an argument is properly condemned.*” (Phillips)

SUMMATION / SIMILAR PROBLEM OF ALL WHO TEACH GRACE — “*In sum: Paul begins by warning his readers not to draw the wrong conclusion from his invective against Jewish presumption of salvation through circumcision and the law (chap. 2). God is faithful to his promises to Israel; his ‘righteousness’ is steady and dependable. But Paul quickly turns from defense of Israel to further attack, reminding the Roman Christians that God’s faithfulness is ultimately not to Israel but to his own person and promises. God is therefore ‘righteous’ when he punishes his people for their sin as well as when he rewards them for obedience. But this does not mean, Paul concludes, that we should excuse sin simply because it always magnifies God’s righteousness. Such an attitude brings God’s own name into disrepute.*”

“*The problem Paul attacks in these verses is not confined to the people of God of his day. All too often we Christians have presumed that God’s grace to us exempts us from any concern about our sin. Particularly is this a danger among Christians who share with me the belief that God sovereignly maintains the regenerate in their salvation till the end. Too easily do we forget that God’s ultimate concern is for his own glory and not for our blessing; that his righteousness is beautifully displayed when he judges as well as when he saves. We want to ‘stand on the promises’ — and this is entirely appropriate. But we must not forget that God promises (in the NT as well as in the OT) to rebuke and chastise his people for sin as well as to bless them out of the abundance of his grace.*” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 196f]

“Such is the apostle’s argument against the grounds of confidence on which the Jews rested their hope of exemption from condemnation. ‘Our unfaithfulness serves to commend the faithfulness of God, therefore we ought not to be punished.’ According to this reasoning, says Paul, the worse we are, the better: for the more wicked we are, the more conspicuous will be the mercy of God in our pardon; we may therefore do evil that good may come.’ By reducing the reasoning of the Jews to a conclusion shocking to the moral sense, he thereby refutes it. The apostle often thus recognizes the authority of the intuitive moral judgments of our nature, and thus teaches us that those truths which are believed on their own evidence, as soon as presented to the mind, should be regarded as fixed points in all reasonings; and that to attempt to go beyond these intuitive judgments, is to unsettle the foundation of all faith and knowledge, and to open the door to universal skepticism. Any doctrine, therefore, which is immoral in its tendency, or which conflicts with the first principles of morals, must be false, no matter how plausible may be the arguments in its favor.” [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 75]

CONFIRMATION AND CONCLUSION OF PAUL'S DOCTRINE

What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin; as it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one. Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips: whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness: their feet are swift to shed blood: destruction and misery are in their ways: and the way of peace have they not known: there is no fear of God before their eyes. Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin. (Rom 3:9-20 KJV)

What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes. Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. (Rom 3:9-20 NIV)

What, then? are we better? not at all! for we did before charge both Jews and Greeks with being all under sin, according as it hath been written — ‘There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who is understanding, there is none who is seeking after God. All did go out of the way, together they became unprofitable, there is none doing good, there is not even one. A sepulchre opened [is] their throat; with their tongues they used deceit; poison of asps [is] under their lips. Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Swift [are] their feet to shed blood. Ruin and misery [are] in their ways. And a way of peace they did not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.’ And we have known that as many things as the law saith, to those in the law it doth speak, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may come under judgment to God; wherefore by works of law shall no flesh be declared righteous before Him, for through law is a knowledge of sin. (Rom 3:9-20 Young’s Literal Translation)

*“While the brief questions that open v. 9 connect it with the dialogue of vv. 1-8, it is also clear that Paul is moving toward a summary and application of the teaching he has been developing since 1:18. He labels this long section an ‘accusation.’ In it, he charges all people, Jews and Gentiles, with being ‘under the power of sin’ (v. 9b). A string of loosely related OT quotations confirms the universality and describes the variety of the sin that so characterizes all humanity (vv. 10-18). Finally, in vv. 19-20, Paul draws out the implications of this universal bondage to sin: all stand condemned before the divine bar of judgment and are unable to escape that condemnation by anything they do. Thus is the way prepared for the proclamation of God’s righteousness in Christ (vv. 21-26).” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 198]*

v9 — are we better — The question again arises, “*who are the ‘we’?*” Options include “*we Jews*”, “*we Gentiles*”, “*we Christians*”, “*we apostles*”, *Paul himself?* The inclination that makes the most sense in the context is some way connecting this “*we*” to the Jews, embracing the entire passage back even to chapter two. The sense would be something like: “*Do we Jews have an advantage because of our heritage, the law, circumcision, etc.?*” Note Hodge’s comments: “*What then? do we excel? What then? i.e., what is the conclusion from the preceding discussion? are we Jews better off than the Gentiles? ... The whole discussion has brought the apostle to the conclusion, that the Jews as sinners have no advantage over the Gentiles, and this is the conclusion which he here confirms.*” [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 77] But those who study the linguistics state this solution even has its problems. **Regardless, Paul’s central point is clear: Gentile and Jew are on equal terms when it comes to the judgment of God.**

are we better — When asked if the Jews are therefore “better” than the Gentiles, Paul’s answer is “*no, there is no difference.*” “*At first sight, it might seem that this answer conflicts with what Paul has said in vv. 1-2. But Paul is making complementary, not contradictory, points. The Jews have an unassailable salvation-historical advantage: God has spoken to them and he has given them promises that will not be retracted (vv. 1-2). But, as Paul has repeatedly emphasized in chap. 2, the Jews have no advantage at all when it comes to God’s impartial judgment of every person ‘according to his or her works.’ And this is the issue that Paul is addressing in v. 9, as his explanation of his negative response indicates: ‘we have already accused all people, whether Jew or Greeks, of being under sin.’” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 200f] This was done in 1:18-32 for the Gentile and 2:1-29 for the Jews.*

all under sin — “*We have, then, in this statement, Paul’s own comment on his purpose in this section of his letter. All people who have not experienced the righteousness of God by faith are ‘under sin’: that is, they are helpless captives to its power. However arrived at, Paul’s understanding that all people, Jews as well as Gentiles, were not just sinners but helpless pawns under sin’s power, distinguished him sharply from his Jewish contemporaries. Nothing that Paul has said suggests that there are exceptions to this rule, and nothing shows more clearly the desperate need for the message of the gospel. For the problem with people is not just that they commit sins; their problem is that they are enslaved to sin. What is needed, therefore, is a new power to break in and set people free from sin — a power found in, and only in, the gospel of Jesus Christ.*” [Moo, *Romans*, pg

UNDER THE ‘BONDAGE’ OF SIN — “It is commonplace to characterize Paul’s teaching on sin as dominated by the concepts of bondage and power. And there is reason for this. Paul typically uses ἁμαρτία (hamartia = “sin”) in the singular rather than in the plural and presses into service to describe the human condition images drawn from the world of slavery. The non-Christian is a ‘slave to sin’ (Rom 6:17); becoming a Christian means being ‘set free’ from sin (6:18) and no longer having sin as one’s ‘lord’ (6:14a).” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 201] *“To be under sin means to be under the power of sin, to be sinners, whether the idea of guilt, just exposure to condemnation, or of pollution, or both, be conveyed by the expression depends on the context. Comp. 1 Corinthians 15:17; Galatians 3:10, 22; John 15:22. Here both ideas are to be included. Paul had arraigned all men as sinners, as the transgressors of the law, and therefore exposed to condemnation. Verses 10-18, contain the confirmation of the doctrine of the universal sinfulness of men by the testimony of the Scriptures.”* [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 78]

v10-17 — UNIQUE PAULINE PASSAGE — What follows is unique in the writings of Paul. Paul often quotes from the OT and often introduces his quotes with the familiar ‘as it is written.’ But nowhere in Paul’s writings does he use a quotation so long or one drawn from so many different (at least six) OT passages. Some state this is similar to what the Rabbis called “pearl-stringing.” Some have suggested Paul is quoting an early Christian psalm or “florilegium.” “Paul here uses a catena or chain of quotations to prove his point in verse 9 that Jews are in no better fix than the Greeks for all are under sin. Dr. J. Rendel Harris has shown that the Jews and early Christians had *Testimonia* (quotations from the Old Testament) strung together for certain purposes as proof-texts. Paul may have used one of them or he may have put these passages together himself.” [Robertson, *Word Pictures*, vol 4 pg 344] Whatever the basis is for Paul’s use of OT quotes, it is obvious they all substantiate his claim of universal sin (v. 9). Paul is finalizing the groundwork for his concluding statement in v. 19,20, that “every mouth” be stopped and “all flesh” is guilty before God.

TOTAL DEPRAVITY — 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. Human relations also suffer, because society can be no better than those who constitute it. Some of the obvious effects — conflict and bloodshed — are specified (vv. 15-17). [Harrison, *Romans*]

STRUCTURE OF PAUL’S QUOTES — While at first glance a haphazard collection of OT quotes, there is evidence of some structure and sequence (from Douglas Moo, *Romans*, pg 202):

- repetition of “*there is no*” (οὐκ ἔστιν, ouk estin; vv. 10, 11a, 11b, 12c, 12d, 18)
- v. 10 appears to be a heading of what follows, with v. 18 coming back to the same theme as v. 10
- vv. 11-12 develop the first line with a series of five generally synonymous repetitions of the theme “there is no one righteous,” all beginning with “*there is no*” and with a reference to “*all people*” breaking them up in the middle (v. 12a)
- the next four lines (vv. 13,14) describe sins of speech, each line referring to a different organ of speech. There is a progression: throat, tongue, lips, and finally the mouth.
- vv. 15-17 focus on sins of violence against others

There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. (Rom 3:10-12 NIV)

Quoted from Ps 14:1c, 2b-3; *“The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good. The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God. They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one.”* (Ps 14:1-3 KJV) Ps 53:1-3 is almost identical. As with most of the following quotes in this series, Paul’s wording closely resembles the LXX. One important difference: Psalm text has “*there is none who do good*” while Paul states “*there is no one who is righteous.*” Undoubtedly this is an editorial change on Paul’s part to fit his immediate context.

The sense is “*there is not a single person who, apart from God’s justifying grace, can stand as ‘right’ before God.*” “*There is not a righteous man, not even one.*” This sentence is like a motto for all the rest, a summary for what follows.” [Robertson, *Word Pictures*, vol 4 pg 344]

That understandeth (sunioon) ... to send together, to grasp, to comprehend

No, not one — This is not in the Hebrew but is in the Septuagint. It is a strong universal expression, denoting the state of almost universal corruption which existed in the time of the psalmist. The expression should not be interpreted to mean that there was not literally “one pious man” in the nation; but that the characteristic of the nation was, at that time, that it was exceedingly corrupt. Instead of being righteous, as the Jew claimed, because they were Jews, the testimony of their own Scriptures was, that they were universally wicked. [Barne’s *Notes on the Bible: Romans*]

There is none who understands, there is none who seeks after God — “*There is none who understands*” ... expresses a permanent

characteristic.... This right apprehension or spiritual discernment of divine things is always attended with right affections and right conduct — he that understands seeks after God — which latter expression includes all those exercises of desire, worship, and obedience, which are consequent on this spiritual discernment.” [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 78]

“That seeketh after God — that endeavors to know and do his will, and to be acquainted with his character. A disposition not to seek after God, that is, to neglect and forget him, is one of the most decided proofs of depravity.

They are all gone out of the way — blinded by sin to the perfections and loveliness of God and truth, they have turned from the way which he has prescribed and which leads to himself, and have made choice of another way and of another portion.

become unprofitable — Only here in N.T. The Hebrew word means to go bad, putrid, offensive, like fruit that is spoiled. In Arabic, it is applied to milk that becomes sour. Applied to moral subjects, it means to become corrupt and useless. They are of no value in regard to works of righteousness.

Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. (Rom 3:13a,b NIV)

“For there is no faithfulness in their mouth; their inward part is very wickedness; their throat is an open sepulchre; they flatter with their tongue.” (Ps 5:9 KJV)

Their throat is an open sepulchre — The point of comparison may be the offensive and pestiferous character of the exhalations of an open grave. This is forcible, and suited to the context. Or the idea is, that as the grave is rapacious and insatiable, so the wicked are disposed to do all the injury with their tongues which they can accomplish.

With their tongues they have used deceit — In the Hebrew it is, “They make smooth their tongue,” *i.e.* they flatter. The LXX., and Vulgate give the version which the apostle adopts. In their conversation, their promises, etc., they have been false, treacherous, and unfaithful; the deceptive flatteries of those who intend evil.

The poison of vipers is on their lips. (Rom 3:13c NIV)

“They have sharpened their tongues like a serpent; adders’ poison is under their lips.” (Ps 140:3 KJV)

This is the highest expression of malignity. The asp, or adder, is a species of serpent whose poison is of such active operation that it causes severe pain and produces death quickly. It is small and commonly lies concealed, often in the sand in a road, and strikes the traveler before he sees it. It is found chiefly in Egypt and Lybia. The poison of the serpent is contained in a small bag which is concealed at the root of the tooth. When the tooth is struck into the flesh, the poison is pressed out through a small hole in the tooth into the wound. Whether the psalmist was acquainted with that fact, or referred to it, cannot be known: his words do not of necessity imply it. *The sentiment is, that as the poison of the asp is rapid, certain, spreading quickly through the system, and producing death; so the words of the slanderer are deadly, pestiferous, quickly destroying the reputation and happiness of man. They are as subtle, as insinuating, and as deadly to the reputation, as the poison of the adder is to the body.*

Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. (Rom 3:14 NIV)

“His mouth is full of cursing and deceit and fraud: under his tongue is mischief and vanity.” (Ps 10:7 KJV)

cursing — Reproachful and opprobrious language, such as Shimei used in relation to David; 2 Samuel 16:5,7,8

bitterness — In the psalm, deceits; denotes severity, harshness, cruelty; reproachful and malicious words

Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. (Rom 3:15-17 NIV)

“Their feet run to evil, and they make haste to shed innocent blood: their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; wasting and destruction are in their paths. The way of peace they know not; and there is no judgment in their goings: they have made them crooked paths: whosoever goeth therein shall not know peace.” (Isa 59:7-8 KJV) Verse 15 is probably from Isa 59:7a rather than Prov 1:16, although both contains the words Paul quotes, because vv. 16,17 continue to use Isa 7b-8a.

Their feet are swift to shed blood — That is, on the slightest provocation they commit murder; they thirsted for the blood of innocence, and hastened to shed it, to gratify their malice or to satisfy their vengeance. The life of their fellow-men is as nothing in their estimation, in comparison with the gratification of their pride or malice.

Destruction and misery are in their ways — their path through life is marked not only with blood, but with the ruin and desolation which they spread around them. *Misery* = calamity, ruin. *In their ways* = wherever they go. The tendency of their conduct is to destroy the virtue, happiness, and peace of all with whom they come in contact. “Wherever they go they leave a trail of woe and destruction.”

The way of peace — the way that leads to peace, or pacific ways. Intent on their plans of evil, they do not know or regard what is suited to promote the welfare of themselves or others. This is the case with all who are selfish, and who seek to gain their own purposes of crime and ambition.

“*They have not known*” means they have not approved or frequented. The idea is to be taken in its most comprehensive form, as the apostle designs to prove, not from any specific form of violence, but from the general prevalence of sins of violence among men, that human nature is depraved. The tree which produces such fruit so abundantly must be evil.

There is no fear of God before their eyes. (Rom 3:18 NIV)

“The transgression of the wicked saith within my heart, that there is no fear of God before his eyes.” (Ps 36:1 KJV)

“The course of wicked men, as previously described, is proof that they are destitute of the fear of God. And by ‘the fear of God’ we may understand, according to Scripture usage, reverence for God, piety towards him; or fear, in the more restricted sense, dread of his wrath. In either way, the reckless wickedness of men proves that they are destitute of all proper regard of God. They act as if there were no God, no Being to whom they are responsible for their conduct, and who has the purpose and power to punish them for their iniquity.” [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 80]

v19,20 — we know — introduces a circumstance which is generally acknowledged by Paul and his readers.

whatever the law says, it says to them under the law — since the reference Paul is making here is from his quotes from the Psalms and Isaiah, the first time Paul uses the word “*law*” does not designate the law of Moses, the Torah, as it usually does. Here it designates the entire OT canon. The second time “*law*” is used could also refer to the OT as a whole or it could refer to its usual sense of the Torah only. The reference of course is to the Jews. This makes more sense than giving it a broader sense since the reference to scripture is in the immediate context. *“The word νόμος (nomos) means that which binds, that to which we are bound to be conformed. It is that which binds the reason, the conscience, the heart, and the life, whether it be revealed in the constitution of our nature, or in the decalogue, or in the law of Moses, or in the Scriptures. It is the word or revelation of the will of God, considered as the norm or rule to which men are to conform their faith and practice.”* [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 80]

LAW GIVEN TO REVEAL SIN — Paul states this in such a way to give the reason for the law being given. “The word is ἵνα (hina) ‘in order that.’ That is, *the design of God in these general declarations was, that every mouth should be stopped; that all men should be reduced to silence under the conviction that they had nothing to say against the charge of sin...* The conclusion to which the apostle’s argument, from experience and Scripture, has thus far led is, that all men are guilty in the sight of God; and if guilty, they cannot be justified on the ground of their personal character or conduct. *To justify is to declare not guilty; and therefore the guilty cannot, on the ground of character, be justified.*” [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 80] This is also mentioned in the latter part of v. 20: ‘*through the law we become conscious of sin.*’ — After stating what the law could *not* do in the first part of v. 20, Paul adds this to state what the law *does* do. This is repeated and expanded upon in Rom 5:20; 7:7-11. *“[W]hat is meant is that the law gives to people an understanding of ‘sin’ (singular) as a power that holds everyone in bondage and brings guilt and condemnation. The law presents people with the demand of God. In our constant failure to attain the goal of that demand, we recognize ourselves to be sinners and justly condemned for our failures.”* [Moo, *Romans*, pg 210]

COURTROOM OF HEAVEN — *“so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God”* — “The terminology of this clause reflects the imagery of the courtroom. ‘*Shutting the mouth*’ connotes the situation of the defendant who has no more to say in response to the charges brought against him or her. The Greek word translated ‘accountable’ occurs nowhere else in the Scriptures, but it is used in extra-biblical Greek to mean ‘answerable to’ or ‘liable to prosecution,’ ‘accountable.’ Paul pictures God both as the one offended and as the judge who weighs the evidence and pronounces the verdict. The image, then, is of all humanity standing before God, accountable to him for willful and inexcusable violations of his will, awaiting the sentence of condemnation that their actions deserve.” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 205] “*Guilty before God* — ὑποδικος τῷ Θεῷ (hupodikos tō theō). Margin, ‘subject to the judgment of God.’ The phrase is taken from courts of justice. It is applied to a man who has not vindicated or defended himself; against whom therefore the charge or the indictment is found true; and who is in consequence subject to punishment. The idea is that of subjection to punishment; but always because the man personally deserves it, and because being unable to vindicate himself, he ought to be punished. It is never used to denote simply an obligation to punishment, but with reference to the fact that the punishment is personally deserved.” [Barne’s *Notes on the Bible: Romans*]

ARGUING FROM THE GREATER TO THE LESSER — if the context here gives an emphasis to the Jews, then some ask how this could relate to all mankind? *“Probably Paul is using an implicit ‘from the greater to the lesser’ argument: if Jews, God’s chosen people, cannot be excluded from the scope of sin’s tyranny, then it surely follows that Gentiles, who have no claim on God’s favor, are also guilty. We must remember that Paul’s chief purpose throughout Rom 1:18-3:20 is not to demonstrate that Gentiles are guilty and in need of God’s righteousness — for this could be assumed — but that Jews bear the same burden and have the same need. It is for this reason that, while all people are included in the scope of vv. 19-20, there is particular reference to the Jews and their law.”* [Moo, *Romans*, pg 206] “In making these statements (v. 19) the apostle has been occupied with the Jew because Scripture has been at issue, but suddenly he makes a statement that involves all mankind. He pictures the ‘whole world’ as ‘accountable to God.’ This seems to be a non sequitur — How can Jewish failure in terms of what Scripture requires lead to the involvement of the remainder of the human race? Two possibilities come to mind. One is that the Jewish nation is being regarded as a test case for all peoples. If given the same privileges enjoyed by Israel, the rest would likewise have failed. Their human nature is no different from that of the sons of Abraham. Another possibility, which is the more

likely explanation, is that the failure of the non-Jews is so patent that it is not a debatable subject; it can be taken for granted as already established (1:18-32). Once it has been determined that the record of the Jew is no better, then judgment is seen as universally warranted.” [Harrison, *Romans*]

therefore — this may be taken either as “*because*” giving it the sense of “*why the whole world is accountable to God;*” or “*for*” giving it the sense of confirming the accountability. Most take the latter sense. “Paul counters any Jewish evasion of v. 19 by explicitly denying that the law can offer any hope of defense. Paul alludes to the OT to make his point; for his words, while not a quotation, resemble Ps 143:2b: ‘*no one living is righteous before you.*’” [Moo, *Romans*, pg 206]

by observing the law — Without question the general interpretation of Paul’s comments is “*things that are done in obedience to the law; nothing a person does can bring him or her into favor with God.*” “Interpreters of Paul have traditionally thought that ‘works of the law’ refers to anything done in obedience to the law, particularly those ‘good works’ that one might put forth as a reason why God should accept a person. These interpreters then viewed ‘works of the law’ as a subset of the larger category ‘good works;’ and they understood this verse, and others like it, to be refuting the idea that a person could gain a right standing with God by anything that that person did.... This general view is shared by virtually all the Reformers and became a hallmark of traditional Protestant interpretation.” [Moo, *Romans*, 206] Other places where the same idea is presented are Rom 3:28; Gal 2:16; 3:2,5,10.3. “To be prepared for the reception of the gospel, we must be convinced of sin, humbled under a sense of its turpitude, silenced under a conviction of its condemning power, and prostrated at the footstool of mercy, under a feeling that we cannot satisfy the demands of the law, that if ever saved, it must be by other merit and other power than our own.” [Hodge, *Romans*, pg 87]