

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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All Under Sin

by Dan Trygg

“What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;¹⁰ as it is written, ‘There is none righteous, not even one’”

Romans 3:9,10

The apostle Paul has been working his way in his argument to make the point that *we are all under sin.*

Those who only had the general revelation that comes through nature knew enough to recognize that God exists, and that they ought to honor Him and give Him thanks (1:18-20). They, however, chose to suppress that truth in order to go after sensual pleasures (vs. 24). Some of that pleasure-seeking would get pretty extreme, resulting in unhealthy, destructive and even unnatural behavior (1:26,27).

Others, who took note of this, and would judge these people as “immoral”, yet they were guilty of the same kinds of behaviors, even if it were not so extreme (2:1-3). They, too, suppressed the truth that they were aware of. It was easy to judge others, but too often this self-righteousness was a cover for their own inconsistencies.

Speaking of inconsistencies, none was more damning than to have the revealed word of God, and choose to not live up to it. The Jews of Paul’s day, and many Christians of our own time, were guilty of being religiously arrogant toward others, but living hypocritical lives (2:17-24). They, too, judged others, but in reality they were no better because they chose to disregard the truth of God which they knew.

A truly spiritual person is not someone who just *looks good* on the outside, or one who attends religious meetings and performs certain spiritual disciplines. A healthy spirituality is *rooted in the heart, and is expressed outwardly and consistently* in one’s actions (2:25-29).

Chapter three begins with Paul answering several hypothetical questions, objections he had undoubtedly faced repeatedly as he had traveled the Roman Empire sharing the gospel message. Like John the Baptist and Jesus had done (Matt. 3:7-12; 23:1-36), Paul would often confront the “religious people”, pointing out their inconsistencies and their need for a more authentic, practical relationship with God (Acts 13:44-52; 28:23-28). Part of the significance of baptism, as preached both by John the Baptist, the Lord Jesus, and by early church preachers was the fact that it implied that everyone had to start over with God. To the “religious people” this was like a slap in the face! They were offended, because they trusted in their religious traditions and rituals to make them better and more acceptable to God than others. In his argument here, Paul had claimed that a righteous Gentile was as acceptable to God as a Jew would be (2:25-27). This was a highly offensive statement to the Jews, and they responded with several objections:

THE FIRST OBJECTION (3:1) which would come out of the mouths of his Jewish readers would be, “Well, what advantage is there to being a Jew? Or what is the advantage of circumcision?” We could easily add, “What is the advantage of going to church? Or, what is the advantage of being baptized?” **PAUL’S RESPONSE**, “*There is great advantage. First of all, that you have been entrusted with the oracles of God.*” (vs. 2) What does this mean? There were many advantages, but the primary one was that Jews (and Christians) had been given the clear, unmuddled revelation of God’s Word. The Scriptures were able to give them wisdom which would lead to salvation through faith in Jesus (II Tim. 2:15). Even the OT Law was like a tutor to lead the Jewish people to Christ (Gal. 3:24).

A SECOND OBJECTION grew out of this privilege: “What then? If some did not believe, their unbelief (*faith-less-ness*) will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?” (vs. 3) In other words, the reality that some did not respond properly to God’s Word, and, instead, lived hypocritical and inconsistent lives, did not mean that God Himself was unfaithful or unreliable, did it? Apparently, some were making this claim. Did this follow? Does the inconsistency of people show that God Himself must be inconsistent? **PAUL’S RESPONSE**: Of course not! “*May it never be!* Let God be true, although every person was a liar (or a phony). *God will be proved-right in His Words, and He will prevail in His judgments.*” (vs. 4; cf. Psa. 51:4)

A THIRD OBJECTION was twisted out of the fact of God’s dependable righteousness: “If our unrighteousness shows up (by contrast) the righteousness of God, what will we say? God is not unrighteous, ...the one bringing wrath, is He?” (vs. 5) In other words, *if our sin shows that God is good, would God be unfair to punish us for our sin?* **PAUL’S RESPONSE**: Note first, that Paul includes a parenthetical clause, “I speak according to man.” This is to indicate that in Paul’s mind this is a foolish argument, ...something so patently ridiculous that only a fallen, contentious human could have cooked this one up! **Of course not!** “*May it never be! For otherwise how will God judge the world?*” (vs. 6) **He has to apply justice to all**, no matter what good may possibly come from our evil choices.

A FOURTH OBJECTION: In a restatement of the same twisted line of reasoning from the third objection, Paul writes, “But if through my lie the truth of God abounds to His glory, why am I still judged as a sinner?” (vs. 7) **If God’s character is more clearly revealed by my sin, should God judge me negatively?** This question hints that possibly God would be unjust to do so. A **FIFTH OBJECTION:** Paul reports another objection, which some have *falsely claimed* is a teaching promoted by the Christians, “*And why not say, ‘Let us do evil that good may come?’*” (vs. 8) **PAUL’S RESPONSE:** Again, Paul clearly says that others *slanderously report that Christians teach this kind of error. They did NOT.* In fact, *the apostle strongly condemns such teaching!* It is *never* right to do evil, no matter what the result. The end does *not* justify the means.

Turning from these objections, **Paul comes back to the point he is attempting to convince us of.** “What then? Are *we* better than *they*? Not at all; for we have already charged that **both Jews and Greeks are all under sin.**” It doesn’t matter who we are, what our background may have been, we all are under sin and we cannot think we can escape the judgment of God. **Every one of us has failed to live up to the truth we have known.**

Verses 10-18 are a listing of seven OT scriptures which have been pulled from their contexts and inserted here to strengthen Paul’s argument. *This is a well-known literary device of that time*, called a “catena”, a “chain” or series of scripture verses. **We have to be careful in our interpretation of these verses, since they are pulled out of their original contexts.** They were chosen because *their language is supportive of Paul’s main point*, namely that we are all under sin. Some literary license was allowed in order to pull together this impressive chain, but the main point is powerfully illustrated by the combination of these passages in this manner.

Verses 10-12, “There is no one who is righteous, not even one”; “...there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one”, are selected quotes from Ecc. 7:20 and Psa. 14:1-3. **These are not meant to be absolute statements, but general ones.** For example, we know that Job was considered by God to be a righteous and blameless man (Job 1:1). Even Job was not without sin, however, and he knew it (7:21; 9:2). **Paul’s point here in Romans is that none can stand before God in his or her own merit.** We *all* have missed the mark in some fashion.

Verse 13 contains quotes from Psa. 5:9 and 140:3, “Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of vipers is under their lips.” Note that just as the quotes from Psalm 14 were about the fool (Psa. 14:1), so these quotes were about David’s foes and about violent, evil men (Psa. 5:8; 140:1). **Again, these quotes were not selected to teach us absolute statements about all people, all the time. They are general statements about how sin affects behavior, and how distasteful and repulsive it can be.** We are also to identify with the fact that *we have, at times, said some raunchy, distasteful, poisonous things.*

The quote in vs. 14, “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness”, is from Psa. 10:7, about what the wicked and greedy people say (vss. 3,4). That said, **have you ever cursed, or spoken bitter words?**

Vss. 15-17, “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery are in their paths, and the way of peace they have not known”, are from Isa. 59:7,8. They speak of the sinful condition to which Israel had sunk *at that time*. **We may not be literally “quick to kill people”, ...but many of us have no problem slicing and dicing people, verbally. And we have all felt the ruin and misery that follows along with sinful ways, as well as the lack of peace.**

Psalm 36:1 is the source for the quote in vs. 18. The entire quote in that context is “Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes.” Note again that this is *not a general statement about all people at all times, ...but about the “ungodly”*. Nevertheless, **we have all experienced times where we were thoughtless of any fear of God. We were focused only upon what we wanted at the time.**

We come to the culmination of Paul’s argument about the sinful condition of humankind. It was quite clear to the Jews that the Gentiles were sinners, but the apostle tells his kindred that **the Law**, which God had entrusted to Israel, **was given so that no one could boast before God.** Every mouth might be silenced with honest conviction, and the entire world might become accountable to God, ...both Jew and Gentile. Why? Because **by works of the Law no flesh would ever be justified or shown to be righteous.** Why? Because **knowledge of sin comes through the Law, not the development of righteousness.** Sin is already there; the Law turns the light on, so that we can see it. **The problem is not about a lack of information on our part. Righteousness does not develop simply as a by-product of education. Knowing God’s will and being motivated to do it are two different things.** The Law reveals that we are *not* doing all that God wants us to do. **The Law has no power to make us alive, or enable us to be righteous.** In fact, **it only exposes our faults and aggravates the rebellion within us** (Rom. 7:5,7-13). As Paul wrote in Galatians 3:21,22, “...if a law had been given which could impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. But **the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.**” Salvation and life would only come through Jesus, not by self-righteousness (cf. Gal. 2:21).