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ALL UNDER SIN

Romans 3:9-18

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Romans Lesson 15

All Under Sin
Romans 3:9-18

The late well-known preacher Harry Ironside once asked a man after a gospel meeting, "Are you saved, sir?"

"No, I really can't say I am, but I would like to be."

"Why would you? Do you realize you are a lost sinner?"

"Oh, of course, we're all sinners."

"Ah! But that often means little or nothing. Are you a sinner yourself?"

"Well, I suppose I am, but I'm not what you could call a bad sinner. I am, I think, rather a good one. I always try to do the best I know."

Ironside went on to tell the man that there was little use in showing him the way of salvation. Good sinners are like honest liars and upright thieves: they are far from ready to admit that they are vile, hell-deserving sinners who need God's grace to be saved (*Illustrations of Bible Truth*, H. A. Ironside [Moody Press], p. 71).

Most people view themselves as "good" sinners. They would say, "I know I'm not perfect. I've got my share of faults. But I'm not a murderer or terrorist or child molester. I'm a decent person. So, yes, I'm a sinner, but I'm a good sinner."

"Good" sinners, especially religious ones, are the most difficult to reach with the gospel. They faithfully attend church. They give money to the church. (The stained glass window has a plaque commemorating their generous gift!) They serve on the church board. Their family has been a mainstay in the church for many generations. "Who do you think you are, preacher, to call me a sinner? I'll get you fired if you keep talking like that!"

But Paul, like Jesus before him (see Matthew 23), talked like that to the most religious people he knew, the Jews. Paul knew that if the Jews trusted in their religiosity and good works, they would not see their need to trust in Jesus as their Savior. If they did not

feel the condemnation of their true moral guilt before the holy God, they would not sense their need to be rescued from the coming judgment. Even if they professed to trust in Christ, but thought that He had forgiven them just a little, they would only love Him a little (Luke 7:47).

So as Paul comes to the conclusion of this section showing why everyone needs the gospel, namely, because everyone is under God's just condemnation, he strings together a number of Old Testament texts to show the Jews (who professed to believe those Scriptures) that he wasn't making this up. Through machine-gun fire repetition, Paul shows that...

Since all people are under sin, they all need the good news that God has provided a Savior from sin.

First (3:9), he summarizes the charge which he has leveled (1:18-3:8), "that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin." Then (3:10-18), with the longest citation of Scripture in Paul's letters, he shows that Scripture confirms the charge. It shows the universality of sin (3:10-12). Here he cites from Psalm 14:1-3 (parallel, Ps. 53:1-3). Scripture also shows that all of us are guilty of sins of speech (3:13-14). Verse 13 quotes from Psalms 5:9 and 140:3. Verse 14 comes from Psalm 10:7. Also, we all have committed sins that destroy harmonious relationships (3:15-17). These verses cite Isaiah 59:7-8. The root cause of our sinful behavior comes back to our relationship with God (3:18): "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (citing Psalm 36:1). The quotations are not in every case verbatim from the LXX, which may mean that Paul was either citing from memory or translating from the Hebrew into Greek. But this rapid-fire string of quotations shows that the Bible clearly establishes that everyone is under sin.

But some may think, "Now wait a minute! I've got my faults, but I'm not nearly as bad as this description! I've bent the truth at times, but verses 13 & 14 do not describe my speech. And I've never murdered anyone as verse 15 alleges. Unlike verse 17, I'm a peaceable man."

But like the list of sins in 1:29-32, Paul isn't saying that every sinner does all of these sins all the time. Rather, he is saying that the seeds for all of these sins are planted deeply in every fallen hu-

man heart. Through His common grace, God prevents sinners from being as terrible as they would be if He didn't restrain them. But if you can read this description of human nature and think, "Thank God I'm not like that," then God has not opened your eyes to the true condition of your heart. As Jesus pointed out, if you have ever been angry with another person, in God's sight you are a murderer. If you've ever lusted, you're an adulterer. By nature, your heart is "under sin." If you had been reared in less favorable circumstances and had not met Christ, there is no limit to the sins to which you would be enslaved (see Eph. 4:17-19).

If we don't understand how bad the disease is, we won't seek the cure, whether for ourselves or to share with those who outwardly seem to be "good" folks. So let's examine Paul's penetrating analysis of sin.

1. All human beings, with no exceptions, are under sin.

Paul begins by summarizing his charge (a legal term; 3:9), "What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin."

Scholars debate how to translate the first three phrases. Without getting into all of the technical arguments, I think that the way the NASB translates it is probably the best: "What then? Are we better than they? Not at all...." But, you still have to determine, who is "we" and who are "they"? Again, without delving into the various arguments, I think it's best to understand "we" as "we Jews" and "they" as the Gentiles. But, that seems to make Paul contradict in verse 9 what he said in verse 1, that the Jews have many advantages over the Gentiles. But he is considering two different issues. In verse 1 he is saying that there are many spiritual advantages to being born a Jew, if the Jew will take them. But in verse 9 he is coming back to what he argued in 2:17-29, that the Jews are just as much under sin and in need of God's salvation as the Gentiles are.

And so in verse 9 he restates his charge that the entire human race ("Jews and Greeks") is under sin. This is the first occurrence of *sin* in Romans. Paul goes on to use that word nearly 50 times from here through chapter 8. He is charging that both religious people and raw pagans are under sin. Relatively "good" people and

rotten scoundrels are under sin. As an ancient Chinese proverb observed, "There are two good men—one is dead and the other is not yet born" (cited by S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. "Studies in Romans: Part IX: The Universality of Sin," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 131:522:164).

Then, to show that he didn't make up this charge, Paul cites Scripture. Verse 10b, "There is none righteous, not even one." is not verbatim from Psalm 14:1, which reads, "There is no one who does good" (or, LXX, lit., "kindness"). Paul may be blending Ecclesiastes 7:20, "Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins" with Psalm 14:1.

But whatever the source, verses 10-12 drive home the fact that *every* human being, without exception, is under sin: "As it is written, 'There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.'"

Paul hammers the lid with so many nails that you cannot pry it open: *none* righteous; *not even one*; *none* who understands, *none* who seeks for God; *all* have turned aside, *together* they have become useless; there is *none* who does good, there is *not even one!* Paul does not let anyone slip under the radar! We *all* have sinned.

To be *righteous* means to be blameless with regard to God and to our fellow man, to live in perfect conformity to God's law (Marty Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: The Righteous Judgment of God* [Zondervan], pp. 197-198). So Paul means "that there is not a single person who, apart from God's justifying grace, can stand as 'right' before God" (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 203).

When Paul says (3:9) that all are "under sin," he means that everyone is *under the guilt of sin*. This is not to say that everyone *feels* guilty. A mafia hit man may not feel the slightest twinge of guilt after shooting a man in the face. Afterwards, he goes to dinner with his friends and jokes about the look of horror on the victim's face just before he blew him away. But although he doesn't *feel* guilty, he is truly guilty of murder in God's sight. To be "under sin" means that we are truly guilty of violating God's holy law. We will be condemned when we stand before Him for judgment, unless our sins are atoned for through Christ's blood.

Also, to be "under sin" means that outside of Christ, we are *under the power of sin*. It dominates our lives so that we obey its lusts. Paul refers to this as being slaves of sin (Rom. 6:6, 16-22). Again, this does not mean that unbelievers are as wicked as they possibly could be. Nor does it mean that they are incapable of being kind or doing good deeds. Rather, in God's sight and by His perfect standard of righteousness, even their good deeds are as filthy rags (Isa. 64:6). They do them ultimately to exalt self, not to glorify God.

Also, note that being "under sin" means that sin, like a disease, affects their *entire being*. Acts of sin are the symptoms of the underlying disease. Their understanding or mind is darkened (3:11; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 4:18). Their motivation is warped, so that they do not seek God or fear Him (3:11, 18). Their speech, which comes out of their heart (Matt. 12:34), is corrupt (3:13-14). Their behavior is selfish and destructive (3:15-17). Their entire way of life ("path") is misdirected (3:16, 17). So *all* human beings and *all parts* of all human beings are under sin.

2. Sin negatively affects our relationships with God and with other people.

The two greatest commandments are to love God with all our being and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matt. 22:37-39). Sin sabotages both relationships.

A. Sin negatively affects our relationship with God.

God warned Adam and Eve that in the day they sinned, they would die (Gen. 2:17). This referred to the curse of physical death, but also to spiritual death, being cut off from the life of God in their souls. Since their original sin, the entire human race is born in sin, alienated from the life of God. Hence, no one is born righteous, not even one. No one, apart from God's saving grace, is able to seek or attain righteousness in God's sight, because we all sin often in many ways. The assessment of Genesis 6:5 is not limited to the human race just prior to the flood, but is true of all who are outside of Christ: "Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually."

When Paul says (3:11a), "there is none who understands," he is referring to moral and spiritual understanding (see 1:31; Matt.

13:14, 15, 19, 23, 51). Outside of Christ, our minds are darkened with regard to spiritual truth, as we've seen. As Paul explains (1 Cor. 2:14), "But the natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised."

"There is none who seeks for God" (3:11b) means that, apart from God's drawing the sinner to Himself (John 6:44, 65), none could or would seek for Him. As Jesus said (John 3:19, 20), "Men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed."

Furthermore (3:12a), "All have turned aside." As Isaiah 53:6 puts it, "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way...." We deliberately tossed aside God's roadmap to heaven and took what we thought would be a shortcut. But it got us hopelessly lost.

Also (3:12b), "Together they have become useless." The word useless is used of sour milk or of rotten fruit. Our lives are useless to God because of our sin. Then (3:12c, d) Paul repeats verse 10 with a slight variation, "There is none who does good, there is not even one." Since "good" in God's sight means to do what we do for His glory, no one outside of Christ does good. Everything we do before we come to Christ is tainted by the disease of sin.

At the end of this section (3:18), Paul comes back to another sin issue that negatively affects our relationship with God, "There is no fear of God before their eyes." This is the root problem. Since "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10), the one who does not fear God is a fool. He hasn't even entered the kindergarten of wise living, because he does not revere God. He does not bow in awe before God's sovereignty, majesty, and glory. He does not fear God's judgment on his sins.

Since the fear of God is not "before his *eyes*," it means that God is not at the center of his thoughts. The sinner does not live with the awareness that he is accountable to God and dependent on God for all things. He does not think about the fact that God could easily say (Luke 12:20), "You fool! This very night your soul

is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?" Sin negatively affects our relationship with God.

B. Sin negatively affects our relationships with others.

Sin prevents us from obeying the second great commandment, to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We'll look at these destructive behaviors more in just a moment, but here I just want to point out the obvious, that people who use deception and abusive speech (3:13-14) do not have harmonious relationships. People who use anger and threats of violence are on the path of destruction and misery, not on "the path of peace" (3:15-17) They shred harmonious relationships.

3. Sin always has destructive results.

Again, I am stating the obvious, but it needs to be stated. Why do we fall into sin? Because we wrongly think that it will bring us the happiness and satisfaction that we long for. True joy and lasting pleasure is found only in God. As David wrote (Ps. 16:11), "You will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever."

But maybe you aren't experiencing God's joy and the pleasures of His presence. Maybe you're in a difficult marriage. You know that you ought to obey God by being faithful to your mate and by loving her as God has commanded. But it's not easy. Along comes a seductive woman at work who shows an interest in you. She seems as if she will give you the happiness that your wife is not providing. So you give in to temptation, fall into adultery, get a divorce, and marry the new "Ms. Right." Will you be happy?

Not for long, because sin is like buying stuff on credit. For a short while, you can live like a king. Travel wherever you want, stay in five star hotels, and eat in the finest restaurants. What a great life! But then the bills start coming due, and life isn't so great anymore! Sin provides short term pleasure, but long term pain. Obedience is often difficult in the short term, but it yields pleasures forever at God's right hand.

Also, note how sin destroys relationships. Paul (3:13a) describes the *throat* of sinners as an *open grave*. The idea is that the stench of a corpse belches out. The person who gets near such a place will be defiled. Also (3:13b), the *tongues* of the wicked "keep

deceiving.” They use smooth speech to beguile you, but all the while they are trying to use you for their own evil advantage. “*The poison of asps is under their lips*” (3:13c) just waiting to strike and kill their victim. Their “*mouth is full of cursing and bitterness*” (3:14). They not only take the Lord’s name in vain, but they use curses to get power over their enemies. They are bitter, unforgiving people. They seek to destroy others, and the result is *misery* and *no peace* (3:16-17).

In some cases, sin destroys the sinner himself by driving him to suicide. His sin has alienated him from God and from all human relationships to the point that he loses all hope. He has no peace with God, no peace with others, and no peace in his own soul. In despair, he destroys himself. Sin always has destructive results.

So Paul’s picture of the human race, fallen in sin, is pretty grim. First, he allows no exceptions: all people, even so-called “good” people, are under sin. Second, their sin negatively affects their relationships with God and others. Third, sin always has destructive results. It never gets us where we hope it will take us. It leaves a trail of destruction and misery.

If I stayed strictly with our text, I’d end the message here and say, “Have a great week!” There isn’t much hope in these verses. And, he’s not quite done. Next time, we’ll look at verses 19 & 20, which close his case. But Paul knows that unless you feel the despair of the awful disease of sin, you won’t take the cure. But rather than end on a downer, let’s briefly look at verses 21 and following, where Paul gives us the cure:

4. All people need to hear the good news that God has provided a Savior from sin.

Paul breaks in with one of the great “buts” of Scripture (3:21, 22): “But now apart from the Law [which we could never keep perfectly] the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe.” He is going back to 1:16-17, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous

man shall live by faith.” Or, as we saw, the last phrase may be translated, “But the righteous man by faith shall live.”

The greatest news in the world is that although we all are under sin’s condemnation, by faith in Jesus Christ, who paid the penalty we deserved, we can receive God’s gift of eternal life. As Paul says (Rom. 3:24), “being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.” Have you received that gift?

Conclusion

There are modern preachers, some with huge, “successful” churches, who would never preach the message of Romans 3:9-18. It’s too negative. It puts people down. It tears down their self esteem. It makes them feel terrible about themselves. It sounds harsh, not loving.

But Paul knew that the most loving doctor will tell you the truth about your disease. If he knows that you’re terminally ill and he has the cure, but he just hugs you and tells you that you’re wonderful and sends you out the door, he doesn’t love you. Or, if he doesn’t tell you the bad news that you’re terminal, he knows that you would not take the chemotherapy that could cure you. If you don’t think you’re sick, you won’t take the medicine.

In love, God (through Paul) tells you the grim truth: you’re terminal under sin. You’re headed for eternal condemnation. But then He gives you the good news: God will justify the guilty sinner who puts his trust in Jesus Christ and the redemption He secured on the cross. It’s not a dreadful cure, like chemo. It’s a wonderful cure! Believe in Him today and you will be freed from the curse of sin and death!

Application Questions

1. Why are “good” sinners the most difficult to reach with the gospel? What is their root sin?
2. If no one can seek for God unless God first seeks him, is it futile to exhort sinners to seek the Lord? Why/why not?
3. Some professing Christians argue that fearing God is an Old Testament concept, but that the New Testament emphasizes His love. What Scriptures would you use to refute this?
4. How would you answer someone who claims that his sin (immorality, drugs, lying, etc.) has brought him happiness that he lacked when he tried to obey God?

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