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WHY GOD GAVE THE LAW

Romans 3:19-20

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Romans, Lesson 16

Why God Gave the Law Romans 3:19-20

Have you ever noticed how prone you are to excuse yourself and blame others? This especially comes out when I'm driving. The driver who whizzed past me is a maniac. The granny in front of me holding up traffic by her slow driving is a road hazard. But me? Hey, I drive just right!

The guy who spends less than I do is a tightwad. The guy who spends more is irresponsible. But me? I'm a careful manager of what the Lord gives me.

We chuckle at these examples, but if we go through life justifying ourselves and blaming others, the day will come when we won't be laughing. We'll be standing before God, all of our excuses will evaporate, our mouths will be closed, and we will hear the Sovereign Judge pronounce, "Guilty as charged!" At that point, it will be too late to plead for mercy.

As we've seen in recent messages, the most difficult people to reach with the gospel are relatively "good" people, especially religious "good" people. They go to church. They are outwardly moral. They take pride in their good deeds. They think, "Sure, I've got my faults. Who doesn't? But, God knows that I'm a basically good person. Criminals and terrorists may deserve hell, but I'm not like they are." Filled with self-righteousness, they trust in their good works to justify them on judgment day. They don't see their need for a Savior from sin. And so they never repent of their sins and trust in Jesus Christ.

Paul is like a prosecuting attorney, summing up his case. He's still aiming at the self-righteous Jews. In Romans 3:9, he sums up his case, "for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin." Then, to cinch his case with the Jews, he cites from their own Scriptures to prove that there is none righteous, not even one (3:10-18).

But he's not quite done. Paul realizes that religious, "good" sinners are very difficult to convince of their sin. He knows that

they still may be thinking, "The passages you just quoted, Paul, refer only to *wicked* Jews or to the Gentiles. But I'm a good, law-keeping Jew. Those verses don't describe me!"

So Paul shows ("we know" appeals to something that is common knowledge, which even the religious Jews would agree with) that the Law speaks to all who are under it. Yes, God's Law condemns the Gentiles, too, so that "the whole world may become accountable to God." But the Law speaks to those who are "in the Law" (literal translation), namely, to the Jews. He is showing that their own Law, in which they boasted, condemns them. They will not be justified by the Law unless they have kept it perfectly, which no one has. We can't expect to be justified by a law that we have only kept occasionally and have broken often. That is his closing argument before resting his case.

But this raises a question: Then why did God give the Law? Paul shows,

God gave the Law to reveal His standard of absolute righteousness to convict us all of our true guilt before Him, so that we would see our need for the gospel.

We all need to understand and apply this text personally, so that we abandon any attempt to justify ourselves. We need to trust in Christ alone. Also, we need to understand these verses so that we can use them to dislodge the propensity of others toward self-righteousness, so that they will see why they need to believe in the gospel. This is by far the most common problem that you will encounter when you talk to others about their need for the Savior. They're blind towards their own sin. They wrongly think, "God will let me into heaven because I'm a good person." They can't imagine how a loving God could damn them eternally for their "few" faults. These verses show God's standard of absolute righteousness and how that standard will convict everyone who trusts in his own righteousness. To be acquitted, we need the perfect righteousness of the Savior credited to our account (3:21-28).

1. God gave the Law to reveal His standard of absolute righteousness.

When you tell people that they have sinned against the holy God, you will often hear, "God knows that I've done the best that

I could. I believe in the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule. I try to live by the Sermon on the Mount." They seem to think that if you try to do your best, even if you fail thousands of times, God will let you off on judgment day. He will reward your effort, not penalize your failures. Besides, if He demanded perfection, no one could be saved! Precisely!

But James 2:10 points out, "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all." We don't like to admit this, but if you think about it, you have to admit it. If a man stole your credit card and used it to buy thousands of dollars of purchases, he is guilty of stealing. What would you think if, when he came to trial, he argued, "But judge, I didn't commit adultery with his wife"? "I didn't steal his car or burn down his house. I didn't lie to him. I didn't molest his children. And, besides, I try to live by the Golden Rule. I do the best that I can." All of that is irrelevant to the main issue: "Did you steal his credit card and use it to buy thousands of dollars of goods?" If so, he is guilty in spite of all the other bad things he didn't do and in spite of all the good things that he may be doing. He's a law-breaker.

Let's look for a moment at the absolute righteousness of God's Law (Paul means the whole Old Testament), which gives us "the knowledge of sin" (3:20).

A. The two great commandments sum up God's absolute standard.

Jesus said (Matt. 22:37-40) that the entire Law rests on the two great commandments: "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets."

Who can possibly claim even to have come close to keeping the first great commandment? Have you, from your earliest memory, always loved God completely, with all your heart, soul, and mind, every day all day long? This would mean that you have always obeyed Him, because if you don't obey Him, you don't love Him. It would mean that He always has been the center of your waking thoughts. His will has been at the center of every decision

that you have made. His glory has been your supreme desire and aim in whatever you think, say or do. You begin every day by worshipping Him. You love His Word more than food and meditate on it day and night. Who in his right mind can say, "You've just described me"?

We don't fare any better on the second great commandment, to love our neighbor just as much as we in fact love ourselves. Did you always gladly share your toys as a toddler? In school, did you always put others ahead of yourself? Have you given generously and sacrificially to help the needy? Have you always put your mate's needs ahead of your own? Have you always treated your children with love and kindness, even when they were disobedient? At work, did you rejoice when your co-worker got the promotion that you thought you deserved? Again, who in his right mind can say, "You've just described me"? What about the Ten Commandments?

B. The Ten Commandments elaborate on the two great commandments.

Surveys have shown that even though many people say that they try to live by the Ten Commandments, few can name them all. So it's hard to imagine how anyone can keep commandments that he doesn't even know! The Ten Commandments are found in Exodus 20:1-17 (also, Deut. 5:6-21). The first four commandments elaborate on our love for God. (1) "You shall have no other gods before Me." (2) "You shall not make for yourself an idol...." (3) "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain...." (4) Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy...."

There is a debate about whether Christians under the New Covenant are under the Ten Commandments and especially about how the sabbath command applies to believers in Christ. But all of the Ten Commandments, except for the sabbath command, can be found in the New Testament. So even if we say that you are free to watch a football game on Sunday afternoon, have you perfectly kept the first three commandments? "Yes, I've never had any other gods before the Lord, or made or worshiped any idols." Really? You've never usurped God's rightful lordship over your life? You've never put your money or possessions or some pastime ahead of the place that belongs to God alone? And, you didn't mention the third command. Have you never carelessly said, "Oh,

my God"? Or, "Oh, Jeez"? Most of us have said far worse in a moment of anger!

Skipping how you have violated the Lord's Day, let's move on to the other six, which focus on your love for others: (5) "Honor your father and mother." (6) "You shall not murder." (7) "You shall not commit adultery." (8) "You shall not steal." (9) "You shall not bear false witness...." (10) "You shall not covet...."

None of us have made it through childhood by always honoring our parents. As for murder and adultery, let's wait until we come to the Sermon on the Mount. But, what about stealing? Have you never taken what does not belong to you? Have you always claimed all of your income on your tax forms and never fudged on a deduction? What about lying? Have you always told the truth, even if it made you look bad? And have you never coveted something that belongs to someone else?

"But I'm a Christian. I try to follow Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount." Really? You just jumped from the frying pan into the fire!

C. The Sermon on the Mount reveals that God judges us on the heart level, not just on external obedience.

As I just alluded to, Jesus brought up the command about murder. While the self-righteous Pharisees were congratulating themselves that they had never killed anyone, Jesus nailed them (and us!) by saying that if you've ever been angry with your brother, you're guilty of murder in God's sight and deserving of "the fiery hell" (Matt. 5:21-22). He did the same thing regarding the seventh commandment against adultery. He said that if you've ever lusted in your heart after a woman, you're guilty of adultery (Matt. 5:27-30). He sums up the requirement (Matt. 5:48): "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." How can anyone claim, "I keep the Sermon on the Mount"?

The so-called Golden Rule is a part of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:12), "In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets." Again, it's a noble goal, but who can claim that they've done it perfectly? If you say that you have, you just broke the commandment about lying!

So Paul's point is that God's Law reveals His standard of absolute righteousness. As a result,

2. God's Law convicts us all of our true moral guilt before Him.

This is Paul's point when he says (3:19b-20), "so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin."

These verses re-emphasize the universality of sin, which verses 10-12 established so forcefully. Paul makes three points:

A. The Law closes every mouth.

The picture is of an accused person standing before the judge to present his case. But in this case, the judge is the Sovereign, holy God, creator of heaven and earth! Here comes the proud atheist, who wrote books arguing that God is not great or that He is a delusion. What will he say when he stands before the blinding glory of the holy God? Nothing! His mouth will be stopped. He has no more arguments.

Or, here is the person who often complained about how unfair God is. If He were a God of love and power, He would not allow all of the suffering that we see in this world. If He would just run the universe differently (as I would!), it would be a much happier place. Now he stands before the Almighty. What does he say? Nothing! He has no defense.

Even godly men have had their down times, when they questioned God. God allowed Satan to attack the righteous Job by taking his possessions, killing his ten children, and then covering his body with painful boils. Job wanted to argue his case before God that he was being dealt with unfairly. But when God appeared and gave Job a glimpse of His power and wisdom, Job's response was to slap his hand over his mouth, to be silent, and to repent in dust and ashes (Job 40:4-5; 42:6). Isaiah (Isa. 6:1-5), Habakkuk (Hab. 3:16), and the apostle John (Rev. 1:17) were also silenced when they got a glimpse of the glory of the Lord. The point is, when you stand for judgment before God on His throne, you won't have anything to say. Every mouth will be closed.

I read about a woman who got a traffic ticket. She was guilty, but she thought that she had some excuses that might get the charges dropped, so she arranged to argue her case before the judge. In her mind, she imagined how the judge would ask if she was guilty. She would say, "Yes, but I want to explain why." She would proceed to convince the judge that what she did could hardly be avoided and so the ticket should be excused. She had her argument ready.

"But," she said, "when I came into that court and stood up there all alone, and the judge was on the bench, dressed in his black robe, and he looked over his glasses at me and said, 'Guilty or not guilty,' all my arguments faded." Her mouth was stopped.

If that happened in a traffic court with a human judge, how much more will we be silenced when we stand before the Sovereign of the universe! Martyn Lloyd-Jones observed (*Romans: Atonement and Justification* [Zondervan], p. 19), "You are not a Christian unless you have been made speechless! How do you know whether you are a Christian or not? It is that you 'stop talking.'"

B. The Law makes us all accountable to God.

"Accountable" is a legal term that occurs only here in the New Testament. It means that we are guilty and liable for punishment. It's not that we are accountable in a human court, but to *God* Himself! He knows every evil thought that we've entertained. He knows every secret sin that we've committed. All things are open and laid bare before Him (Heb. 4:13). We've all broken His holy Law, not just a few times, but thousands and thousands of times. How could we possibly hope that all charges will be dropped?

But, you may wonder, how can *the whole world* be accountable to God through the Law, since it was only given to the Jews? Paul has already pointed out that even the Gentiles, who did not have the Law, had the work of the Law written in their hearts and consciences (2:15). But here, Paul does not seem to be referring to that, but to the Law that God gave in written form to the Jews. He is arguing from the greater to the lesser: If the Jews, who were God's covenantal people, could not even keep His Law, then it follows that no one else could keep it either. The failure of the Gentiles is obvious (1:18-32), but here Paul is indicting the self-

righteous Jews. If they are guilty, then the whole world is also accountable to God. None will escape His judgment.

C. Keeping the Law cannot be the way to justification.

Back in 2:13, Paul said, "It is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified." As I explained when we studied that verse, some understand it in a hypothetical sense, that *if* anyone can keep the Law, he will be justified, but none can. Others (and I lean this way) say that in the context there, Paul was not speaking of hypothetical perfect obedience, but rather to the general obedience that some, by God's saving grace, are able to perform. He was not looking at the front end of how one attains justification, but at the pattern of life of those who have been justified by faith.

But here Paul is looking at how one attains justification in the first place. It is not earned by keeping the Law, because no one can keep it perfectly. If we could earn right standing with God by our perfect obedience to God's Law, salvation would not be by grace alone and we then could boast. Nothing that we do by way of obedience (here called, "the works of the Law") will ever be good enough, because we all have sinned and fall short of God's glory (3:23). As we've seen, God gave the Law to reveal His standard of absolute righteousness, not to be the way of salvation. J. B. Phillips (*The New Testament in Modern English* [Geoffrey Bles], p. 314) paraphrases the last clause of verse 20, "it is the straight-edge of the Law that shows us how crooked we are." Thus,

3. Our utter failure to keep God's Law should drive us to the gospel for salvation.

Paul has been laying the foundation for this point from 1:18 through 3:20. We will study it in 3:21-28, but briefly notice (3:21-22): "But now apart from the Law 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." As he goes on to say (3:24), we are "justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." That's the greatest news in the world: Even though we are all guilty of breaking God's Law, He offers a pardon to all that trust in Jesus and His substitutionary death on the cross!

Conclusion

Years ago, Donald Grey Barnhouse, the pastor for many years of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, used to ask those with whom he shared the gospel, "When you die and God asks, 'What *right* do you have to come into my heaven?' what will your answer be?" He was trying to get people to understand that their only right to heaven had to be that they were trusting in the Lord Jesus Christ and His death on the cross to pay for their sins.

On one occasion, an Arthur Murray dance instructor had been out late on a Saturday night. In the early hours of the morning, he stumbled back to his hotel room and fell into bed. The next morning, he was jolted awake by his clock radio, where the speaker asked, "If in the next few moments some great disaster should happen and you should be killed and if you should find yourself before God and he should ask you, 'What right do you have to come into my heaven?' what would you say?"

The question amazed and confounded the dance instructor. He had never heard such a question before. He realized that he didn't have an answer. His mouth was stopped. He sat silently on the edge of his bed while the speaker, Dr. Barnhouse, explained the answer. The dance instructor put his trust in Jesus Christ that day in his hotel room.

His name was D. James Kennedy. He went on to become the pastor for many years of the Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. He also developed the Evangelism Explosion program that has led thousands to Christ by asking that question: "If you were to die today and God asked you, 'Why should I let you into my heaven?' what would you say?" (This story related by James Boice, *Romans* [Baker], 1:326-327.)

"Lord, I've tried to be a good person; I've done my best to keep the Golden Rule," won't cut it. "Lord, I'm a guilty sinner, but I put my trust in Your Son Jesus who died to pay my penalty," is the only answer that will be accepted. Make sure that your trust is in Christ alone!

Application Questions

1. Someone asks you, "Is God fair to punish sincere, relatively "good" people forever in hell?" How would you answer?
2. Is it enough to explain in general terms that we all have sinned? How can we properly use God's Law to show lost people their true guilt before God?
3. Can a person be saved by believing in Christ as one who will give them a better life, without realizing his guilt? Or, must he be convicted of sin before he can trust in Christ as Savior?
4. An atheist tells you, "I don't believe in God and so I don't believe that I will face Him in judgment." How would you answer him?

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