

Romans: The Law Can't Save You

Romans 3:19-20

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 3, verse 19. The last time we were together we said that Paul was beginning his closing arguments. Ever since Romans, chapter 1, verse 18, we said Paul has been functioning like a prosecuting attorney, both for the Jews and for the Gentiles that all the world might be found guilty before God. He laid out his argument against the Gentiles in Romans, chapter 1, verses 18 to the end of the chapter, and Romans, chapter 2, although his Jewish friends had been nodding their heads all along agreeing yes, the Gentiles were under condemnation. Yes, the Gentiles needed to be saved. Yes, the Gentiles were law breakers. Then Paul turned his focus upon his Jewish friends, and he made it very clear that they themselves were under the condemnation of God, even though they had been specially chosen from amongst the nations and been given a unique vocation by God. They had been the special recipients of the law and had even been given a great sign of promise, the sign of circumcision. Yet, their trust was misplaced. They had refused the gospel. They had rejected the Messiah who was God's way of salvation, and, therefore, they were under condemnation. And the Apostle Paul makes that very clear in Romans, chapter 2.

Then in the first eight verses of Romans, chapter 3, Paul, we saw, had three or four objections to some of the things that he had said in the course of making these charges, and he responds to each of those objections. And then beginning with Romans, chapter 3, verse 9 he starts what we might call his closing argument. The prosecuting attorney is now preparing to rest his case.

And what we're going to look at today are the final words of that closing argument. Paul is concerned that there may still be some Jews in his hearing, and perhaps even some Jewish Christians in the church which are confused about some very important matters. And he wants to straighten out their thinking so that we might understand the relationship to us of a law in a fallen world where we are already sinners. What is the relationship of that law to us? And Paul begins to work that out for us here in Romans 3, verses 19 and 20. So let's hear God's holy word:

"Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law. 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."

Amen and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

Our Lord, we bow before You as before Your word, and we ask that You would help us to understand these important words spoken to us under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by the apostle Paul. And not only to understand them as information, but to be touched, to be stricken in the heart by them. That we might be humbled and believe, that we might trust in Christ as He has offered in the gospel. These things we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

Paul, in his final words in his closing argument, is dealing with yet another objection which he thinks has perhaps not been supplanted in the heart of some of recalcitrant Jewish hearers to whom he is speaking, and which he perhaps feels has infected the thinking of some of the young impressionable Jewish Christians in the congregation in Rome. You see, Paul knows that the Jews agreed with him in Romans, chapter 1 that the Gentiles were under the judgment of God, under the condemnation of God. We're lawbreakers, we're lawless, we're guilty, we're godless, needed salvation, needed God, needed the God of Israel. But, many of those pious Jews did not believe that they were under the liability of God's judgment. They felt that their receipt of the law, their having been circumcised, their being part of the covenant community, that stood them well before God. And therefore, Paul says, this is all nice what you're saying, that it applies to the Gentiles, but it doesn't apply to us.

And Paul takes one last opportunity to disabuse them of that point in order that he can make an even bigger point. The bigger point being that everybody, apart from Christ, everybody in the world is guilty before the bar of God. When you stand before God as judge, all of us, everyone apart from Christ, is guilty.

And so I'd like you to see three or four points that Paul makes in his final words in this great assault. We have said all along that Paul says these things not to be mean but precisely because of his heart of love. He desires that everyone would come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ, but until we admit our guilt and our need of Christ, we are not in a position to partake of the benefits that he offers in the gospel. So Paul is relentlessly and remorselessly pounding home this truth that we are guilty and stand in need of grace.

I. Christians must beware applying the Bible's warnings exclusively to others/pagans.

The first thing I'd like you to see is in the very first few words of verse 19. Notice what Paul says: "We know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law." The better translation there may be, 'speaks to those who are in the law.' Many of you Bible scholars know that if you were to turn over just a few chapters to Romans, chapter 6, verse 14 you would see that phrase again "under the law." It's not the same phrase that Paul is using here, and it's not the same concept, and so maybe to keep those two things distinct it would be better for us to say "for those who are in the law." Paul is not speaking here of those who are under the law as a covenant of works as he will in Romans, chapter 6. He is speaking of those to whom the law has been primarily addressed. Those who are in the sphere of the law's hearing, the law's reading, the law's judgment. Especially he is thinking of the Jewish people, because in their minds, they are not under condemnation, only the lawless Gentiles.

But Paul's point is precisely that when the law speaks, it speaks to those who are its primary audience. And, therefore, far from being exempt they stand in even greater situation of condemnation, because they have rejected what God has plainly said to them in the law. While at the same time they have been condemnatory of the pagan Gentiles who were not the primary recipients of God's specially revealed law through His servants Moses and the various prophets and writers of the Old Testament. So Paul says here in Romans 3:19 that the whole of Scripture speaks directly and authoritatively to the covenant community. Again, remember the Jews claim that the law condemns the Gentiles. But that the law will, in the end, assure them of divine favor because they viewed the law as containing the promises.

Notice that Paul uses the term "law" in a very general sense here. Paul is not thinking of the Ten Commandments, he's not thinking of the *decalogue*, he's not even thinking of those specific laws that you find in the first five books of the Bible. He's not thinking of the first five books of the Bible themselves which are often called The Law of Moses. Remember, he's just quoted from Isaiah and from Psalms, and he calls this the law. So he is using the law just like you find it used in John 10:35 and in John 15:25 and in I Corinthians 14:25. He's using the term "law" to refer to the Scriptures, the whole of the Old Testament. And he's saying this, "Yes, of course, the warnings and the condemnations and the cursing written down in the Old Testament against the nations, against the Gentiles. Yes, of course, that applies to the Gentiles, but primarily those warnings and those cursing and those condemnations apply to the people of God who were the primary recipients of that law, the Jewish people, the old covenant people, and we need to understand that the scriptures speak directly and authoritatively to that community. He's saying, in fact, that the Jew needs to realize that the condemnations of the Old Testament are not merely meant for the nations, not merely mean for the Gentiles, they are meant for them when they do not embrace the covenant with their whole life.

Notice here again that the law refers to the whole of the Old Testament

scriptures, but notice that Paul does not treat it as a dead word. He treats it as living speech. Notice how he characterizes the law and says it speaks. The law is a living word. The Scripture of God is a living and active and powerful word.

One of our congregation members was at a meeting just about a week ago where he was accused of being a *bibliolater*, a Bible worshiper. I don't know about you, but I've never met a bibliolater. I've never met somebody who had too high of a view of God's word, because God's word belongs to God; and just as we show honor and respect to Him, we show honor and respect to His word. And so the idea of a Christian being accused of being a bibliolater really ought to come across to you as a compliment. Well, thank you, ought to be your response. I've always aspired to being a bibliolater. I've always wanted to be one. I never think I've quite made it, but I've always wanted to be one. You see Paul speaks of these Scriptures, some of them were written a thousand years before the time that he was speaking, some of them were written six hundred years before the time he was speaking and writing, and yet he talks about them saying and speaking to the people of his own day, just like they say and speak to us today. God's word is living and if anyone ever, ever accuses you of thinking too highly of God's word, you can be assured of two things. One, you're on the right track. And two, they're not. The apostle sees the word of God as living and active and powerful. And so he uses these terms, it speaks, it says.

Notice that he sees it as relevant to the present circumstance. Even though Isaiah said what he said six hundred years ago, even though David said what he said a thousand years ago, it is directly applicable to the people that Paul is preaching to in his own day, and he knows that it's applicable to us as well.

And notice again that Paul sees these words as especially relevant to their primary recipients. As the Jews are looking at the Bible and seeing its condemnation to the Gentiles, and saying, "You see there? Those pagan Gentiles do deserve condemnation." Paul is saying, "Think about who God primarily wrote these words to you." He wrote them to you, he wrote them to his community, his people. The people who had heard God Himself give the word. And they had seen Moses bring the tablets down from the mountain. And they had heard Isaiah the prophet, and they had heard Jeremiah and Ezekiel and all the other writers and preachers of the Old Testament. They'd heard it. That's who God primarily intended that word. Don't worry about the pagan out there. Worry about 'you' for a few moments. Paul is saying, "No one should assume that apart from a saving faith and interest in Jesus Christ, no one should assume that he is exempt from the Scripture's warnings nor be too swift to apply those warnings to others without having taken stock of them themselves." Paul is telling the Jewish people of his day that the Scriptures speak directly to them and authoritatively to them and especially to them, but Paul's message is for us as Christians, too.

Paul's message is that Christian's must beware of applying the Bible's warnings exclusively to others. Have you ever heard a Christian teacher do that, perhaps

by flattering the ears of his people by condemning the evils of the world, without ever addressing the reality of sin within the context of the covenant community, without ever acknowledging the sin that exists in a congregation? It's very easy for a minister to stand up and condemn them. They don't pay his salary. You do. It's harder, however, to address the sins that we have to deal with in context of our community, our congregation. And Paul is looking right at these people, his own fellow Jewish people, and he's saying, "Remember that God's word is first for you." And I'm saying to you today on the authority of Paul, remember this is God's word for you. Don't think about how it applies to them out there first. Think about what Paul is saying to you. Think about what God is saying to you. That's the first thing that I want you to see.

II. If we really understand the Bible, we know that all are guilty, accountable and speechless(apart from Christ).

Then if you'll look at the second half of verse 19, there's another thing I'd like you to see. Here, Paul tells us why God's word speaks especially to the covenant community in the context of its sin. The Scripture speaks in order that we might be dumbstruck before God while we await sentencing. Paul says, "So that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God." If we really understand the Bible, we will understand that all are guilty, all are accountable, all are speechless before God's judgment who are apart from Christ. If you are not in Christ, if you've not trusted in Christ, if you have not received the benefits of His saving work and person, then you are going to be speechless and called guilty and accountable before God at the great judgment. Whereas, pious Jews believe that the Gentiles were under condemnation and needed salvation, but they did not believe themselves under that condemnation, Paul again is pressing them with the realization that that is a major error.

Now, by the way, I'd like you to notice a very interesting word that Paul uses. Look at verse 19. He uses the word 'that they may become accountable' to God. This is another one of those courtroom terms. Turn back to Romans 1:20. The first courtroom term that we saw in this closing argument was at the very end of Romans 1:20. Remember we said that Paul said that 'all the world is without excuse.' We said that that term literally is a courtroom term that means that it's a defendant that doesn't have a defense. He doesn't have anything to say. He doesn't have an argument, he doesn't have a defense before the court. Now Paul comprehends us. Picture what he's talking about here in Romans 3:19. He comprehends us standing before God. The trial has begun. We have had no argument, no defense. We have nothing to say for ourselves. There is no defense for what we have done. The procedure has gone on. We have been convicted of the crime. Now we are standing before the bar of justice, and we are awaiting sentencing. And in Romans, chapter 3, verse 19 he says that the law says what it says so that every mouth will be stopped, and so that we might be held accountable before God. And that little word *accountable* means that *we are*

going to be speechless before God as we await the sentencing. It's almost as if the judge in the courtroom is saying now to the convicted criminal: "Do you have anything to say to this court before I proceed to the sentencing?" And the response is: "No mitigating circumstances, no excuses, no explanations, no appeal for reasons why the sentence ought to be mitigated, no nothing." This person is accountable before God. Speechless before God in the court as he awaits the sentence being delivered. And so standing before God with the trial over, we've lost. Before the sentencing phase, God says do you have anything to say before this court. And the answer is nothing.

Paul knows that as we read the Scriptures the most indispensable requirement for understanding the word of God is understanding our own sin. And if we read the Scripture without an appreciation for our own sin, we will always read it wrong. And so Paul pauses here to say that the proper understanding of someone who is in the sphere of the law, who has heard the law, who has been presented the law, who knows the judgments of the law is to recognize his or her sinfulness and need of grace.

III. The law can't save you, acquit you or justify you!

And then Paul goes on to say a third thing in verse 20. Look at the first part of verse 20: "Because by the works of the law, no flesh will be justified in His sight." This verse gives the reason why every mouth is stopped and why the whole world is condemned. And the reason is we're sinners, and the law can't save us. The law can't save us, it can't acquit us, it can't justify us. In the wake of the fall, in the wake of our own sin, the law only serves to condemn us. And so Paul says very provocatively, "By the works of the law, no flesh will be justified."

Notice what Paul speaks about. Paul doesn't speak about just any old work, he speaks about law works here. He's anticipating an argument. "Paul, I'm not saying that just by doing some good things that God must bless me and fulfill his promises to me. I'm saying by doing the things that his word tells me that I'm supposed to do." And Paul says, "Okay, let's take those. Let's talk about law works. Let's talk about things that God says in His word that we ought to do. By those no flesh is going to be justified." Now you say, "But wait a minute, doesn't that contradict something that Paul just said? In Romans, chapter 2, and verse 13 didn't he say at the end of that verse that the doers of the law will be justified. Didn't you just say, Paul, that if you do the law, you will be justified? Are you taking that back? Are you now denying that?" "No."

Understand what Paul is doing. Paul is not saying that that principle is something that he is now repudiating. The problem is not the principle. The problem is there is nobody who does that. The problem is that there is no one who does the work of the law. Therefore, Paul says, because of this no flesh will be justified in his sight.

The problem is not the principle, the problem is us. Paul doesn't have a hang up with obedience. He has a hang up with people who think they are obedient, but they're not. And so the apostle Paul says, "I want to make an announcement here. If the standard of judgment is God's law, and it is, and you appear before the bar of God, depending upon your goodness. You're a nice person. You've done the works of the law and you've been part of the covenant community. But you haven't ever trusted in the Messiah, you haven't acknowledged your own sin, you haven't fled to Him, you haven't put your faith in Him alone for salvation. Let me tell you ahead of time," Paul is saying, "what the verdict will be. The verdict will be guilty. The sentence will be eternal death, and you will have nothing to say. Absolutely nothing, because the works of the law will justify no flesh in his sight. The problem is not with the law, the problem is not with the principle of justice. The problem is with us, and the problem is with our sin. The law condemns us. The law can't save you, the law can't acquit you, the law can't justify you."

IV. Think about it, the law itself shows us our need of grace.

Then Paul concludes with something that would have been very shocking to his Jewish friends. At the very end of verse 20 he says, "For through the law comes the knowledge of sin." Now that I think would have greatly irritated a pious Jew. Listen closely. A pious Jew would have said, "What do you mean that through the Scripture comes a knowledge of sin? Through the Scripture comes the knowledge of the great and holy and awesome God. How dare you say that through the Scripture merely comes the knowledge of sin." Well, of course, Paul is saying this provocatively. He's been provocative throughout this passage. He knows he's provoking the pious Jew, but he's doing it for a gospel purpose.

And Paul isn't in this little phrase telling you everything that the law is and does. In fact, the final hymn that we're going to sing – I'd like you to take your hymnals and open to it. Number 150. We'll sing it to the familiar tune "Duke Street." Number 150 perhaps better than any hymn that I've ever seen summarizes everything that the law does and says. Matthias Loy wrote this hymn last century, and it summarizes beautifully what the law is and does. And Paul isn't trying to tell you everything that the law is and does in this passage. But he is telling you this. Think about it. The law itself in our fallen condition, the law itself, as we are already sinners, the law itself shows us our need of grace. Far from putting us right with God, the law shows that we are wrong with God; and that we need to be put right with God, but that we can't be put right ourselves, or in our selves, or by ourselves. In light of this situation, the law itself functions to reveal to us our sin, to convince us of our sin, and to show us that we need an escape from sin which we can't provide.

Isn't it interesting that in those habits and patterns of life in us which are most

offensive to others, to our spouses, to our friends, to our colleagues, to those who know us best. When they confront us with those patterns, one of our favorite techniques is to deny that we have done that or thought that or said that. Because it is so painful for us to think about what we had done, we would rather pretend like we didn't do it in the face of clear contradictory evidence. And the apostle Paul says I know that. The sinner loves to cope by denial and the law is here to lift the mirror in front of us and to convince us that our denial is denial. Look what you are, look what you are. You need grace. The law can't save you. It can't put you right. It can't remove sin, but it can show you your need for a Savior. So far from justification being possible by the law, the opposite is true. The law brings the knowledge of sin. It uncovers and exposes it. It shows its true nature, and the fact that it deserves condemnation. The law imparts the knowledge of sin, it enables us to perceive that from the works of the law, no flesh will be justified.

Paul, as we said, doesn't have a hang up with obedience, he doesn't have a hang up with the law, but he has a hang up with people who think that they are obedient, who think that they are keeping the law, but they are not. And he is saying look, if you at the end of time are counting on the acquittal of God based upon being a nice person, based upon having done good deeds, based upon having been obedient to the law of God, your verdict is already settled, and that is why you need an alien righteousness, not from within you, but from somewhere else. And that is why you need a supernatural power, not from within you but from someone else that can enable you to walk in righteousness.

And by the way, Paul, notice, is not pointing us to look within. So often we hear people today say, "What we need to do is look within and find the power, find that spark, find that divine something." That is the dumbest idea in the history of the world. Paul's whole point in this passage is there is nothing within us to look to that can get us off this particular hook. The whole thrust of his argument is we need to look somewhere else. We need to look somewhere else other than ourselves to find a righteousness that will stand us before God.

Paul's question to us is this. "What stands you before God? What makes you secure before the wholly God of the universe?" And his answer is, "The righteousness of God. That's what stands."

But, you see, that brings another crisis. "Well, I'm not the righteousness of God. My life condemns me if that's the standard. Where do I get this?" And Paul says, "Well, that's where I wanted you to be in the first place. Because until you understand that you need the righteousness of God, before you stand before the awesome and holy God, you're not ready to hear the good news that I've been wanting to tell you." And for the rest of this book, for the rest of this book, Paul is going to tell us just how glorious that good news is. But it will make no sense to us, no sense, until we first acknowledge our need of that good news. Until we're honest with ourselves, and we run from our deeds, good and bad, to the one

place where we can find the righteousness of God, and that's in Jesus Christ as is offered in the gospel. That's the issue that Paul is pressing on you today. That's the issue that Christ is pressing on you for He said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." He can deliver, you can't. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, give us hearts to see our sin, and to see the greatness of the Savior, so that even as we are humbled by our sin, the Savior is exalted in the gospel, and we trust on Him alone for salvation and life. We ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

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