



What do you see when you look in the mirror? I look and I see I got my hair cut. My barber says shorter is better, but I think the gray shows up more, don't you? Oh well, it works for Richard Gere. Could take off a few pounds. No french fries for a week. But, hey, I do work out. It could be worse for a 59 year old. Not sure if the shirt is helping me out there, either. I guess 'slim fit' means slim. Oh well, the Bible says it's what's on the inside that counts, right? You know, God looks not at the outward appearance but at the heart. I wonder what it would be like for me to see **that** in the mirror. That would be something, wouldn't it? A mirror that reflects back to us not our outward appearance but our character; our heart.

In Romans 3:9-20 the apostle Paul holds up a mirror; it's a mirror that reveals not just the outer man but the inner man. And it's a mirror that reflects back to us not just what's in our **own** hearts, not just our **own** character, but humanity as a whole; it looks at us not just individually, but also collectively. It's a mirror that explains why armed men kidnap 200 teenage girls and sell them into slavery. Why our prisons are full to capacity. Why drug addiction is still an epidemic. Why sex-trafficking during the Super Bowl is rampant. Why almost 200,000 babies are aborted each year. Why the killing in Syria, and the mass exodus of refugees into Europe, and the tyranny in North Korea? Listen to what Paul wrote.

What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. As it is written:

"There is no one righteous, not even one;

there is no one who understands;

there is 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 God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin (Romans 3:9–20).

We can divide this up into three sections: in verse 9 we see the charge made against us. In verses 10-18 we see the overwhelming evidence to support his charge. And in verses 19-20 we see the verdict that we're guilty before God. In all of this we see the plight of every human being and humanity as a whole is worse than we ever thought.

The Charge Made Against Us is that We are All Under Sin

Paul has just finished explaining that the Jewish people of which he was a part are guilty before; they have not lived up to God's law. Now he concludes that despite all of the privileges of being Jewish there's no advantage in terms of their standing before God. The charge Paul makes in verse 9 is **"Jews and Gentiles alike are under the power of sin."** What does it mean to be under sin's power? It means to be under the control and dominion of sin. Paul personifies sin as a cruel tyrant who holds each of us under its power, imprisoned in guilt and under God's judgment. In America we value freedom. We fight for our freedom. Lynn and I were in Washington a week ago and we walked through Arlington Cemetery, saw the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, and all the graves of men and women who've fought to protect our freedom as a nation. It was moving, but are we really free? Paul says, no. Spiritually, none of us are born free.

The problem is, we don't really know it. A few years ago I traveled to the Dominican Republic and visited a neighborhood that was formally a garbage dump. Now squatters live there and they call it "The Hole." The people I met there lived in horrible squalor. The stench was overwhelming. People foraged in a barely moving stream of raw sewage. They fed on rotten food and prized garbage as possessions. But it was like they didn't know it. Why? Because everyone lived that way. That's all any of them knew. They'd never been given a picture of what it means to live differently.

That's our problem too. That's why we think of ourselves as largely innocent, decent people. We don't get how impoverished we are spiritually because everyone around us is in the same

boat. And that's true of the person who lives an outwardly immoral life, as well as the morally upright or even religious person. We're all under the power of sin.

This doesn't mean every person is as sinful as every other person. It means our condition before God is the same. It's like three people trying to start on the beach in Santa Cruz and swim to Hawaii. One can't swim at all; he sinks as soon as he gets out of his depth. The next is a weak swimmer; he flounders for 100 feet before drowning. The third is an Olympic Champion. He swims strongly for a long time. But after 30 miles he's struggling; after 40 he's sinking, and after 50 he drowns. Is one worse off than the other? No! It doesn't matter who swam further, not one of them even got close to Hawaii. In the same way, the religious person or moral person may get further towards righteousness than the immoral person, but neither gets close to God's standard of righteousness. We're equally condemned to perish. We're all under sin.

The Evidence Against Us is Overwhelming

Now a claim as sweeping and startling as that needs some support or backing. So like an expert prosecuting attorney, Paul lays out the evidence against us. He does so with a method commonly used by Rabbis in Paul's day called "pearl stringing" in which he strings together several quotations from the Old Testament. Notice three features of this grim collage.

The universality of sin

First, we see the universality of sin in verses 10–12:

As it is written:

**"There is no one righteous, not even one;
there is no one who understands;
there is no one who seeks God.**

**All have turned away,
they have together become worthless;
there is no one who does good,
not even one."**

He says there's **no one** righteous, not even one. Not a single person who's ever lived besides Jesus Christ can claim to meet the righteous standard of a Holy God.

Not only that, there's **no one** who understands. Our minds and thinking have been darkened so we can't understand the truth about God. That's as true of double PhDs as it is for the mindless.

Not only that, there's **no one** who seeks God. This is talking about a desire to know the true God, to be in relationship with him and obey him and worship him for who he is. Paul isn't saying no one seeks spiritual blessings, or no one seeks to have their prayers answered, or no one seeks spiritual experiences. We all know many people do this. But Paul is saying sinful self-centeredness controls all spiritual searching for meaning, so we try to get blessings from God but maintain control of our own

lives. We cry out to God when we're in pain, but we don't really want him, we just want relief.

Then he says **all** have turned away from God and become useless. Lynn and I watched that old movie the other night, *Runaway Bride*. It's about a woman who gets to the altar but runs away four times before she can make her vows. That's the story of each and every one of us in relation to God. Instead of turning to him and engaging in a loving relationship, we've turned our backs on him and run away.

Finally Paul says something even more surprising. He says **no one** does good, not even one. "Really, Paul? That seems like an extreme statement!" We can all point to many Christians and non-Christians alike who use their talents and their wealth to help others. But we need to remember we're talking about what God sees, and God sees deep into the heart; he sees our motives.

There's an old story about a gardener who grew a huge carrot. He decided to give it to his prince because he loved him. When he gave it, the prince saw his love and devotion and how he expected nothing in return. So as the gardener turned to leave the Prince said, "Here, my son, I want to give you some of my land so you can produce an even greater crop. It's yours." The gardener went home rejoicing. Another man heard of this and thought: "If that's what the prince gives in response to the gift of a carrot, what would he give me if I gave him a fine horse?" So he came and gave the prince a fine horse as a gift. But the prince discerned his motives and said: "You expect me to give to you as I did to the gardener, but you're different. He gave **me** the carrot. But you gave **yourself** the horse." That's what Paul means when he says **no one** does good.

The pervasiveness of sin

He doesn't just drive home the universality of sin, but also the pervasiveness of sin. In other words, every part of our human makeup, every faculty and function is tainted by sin. You see this especially in verses 13–17 as Paul lists different parts of the body.

"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."

He says our throats are an open grave filled with unclean corpses. Our tongues practice deceit. How often do we listen to a person and everything sounds so good but we know it's all falseness and flattery? The poison of vipers is on our lips. How often do we harm others with our lips? And finally he says their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. All of this has to do with our speech. Jesus talked a lot about this. He said, *"The things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these*

defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matthew 15:18-19). James wrote, *“All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison”* (James 3:7-8). How many things have we said in just the last week we’d love to take back?

Then Paul moves from what comes out of our mouth to where we run with our feet. He says our feet are swift to shed blood. There’s no hesitation. Ruin and misery mark our paths and we don’t walk in the way of peace. Just read the paper. Just watch the news. Dysfunctional, destructive relationships that often end in violence. And even those of us who think of ourselves as “above all that” know in our hearts how anger, resentment, envy and jealousy get the better of us.

The ungodliness of sin

Finally, Paul moves to the eyes, and with that he focuses on the ungodliness of sin. *“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”* He leaves this for last because it’s the root of all the others. Why is the mouth full of such wickedness and why do our feet not hesitate to do harm? Because we don’t fear God. What does that mean? We often say it just means to revere or respect God; you don’t need to really fear him. But I think it’s more than that. If you stand before a powerful rising river you respect it, you’re even drawn to it, but you also fear it. You know if you get too close and you slip it will sweep you away and you’ll never survive. So when the Bible talks about fearing God, it means not just respect, but also the kind of fear you might feel at the edge of rushing river, where you’re drawn to his amazing goodness and beauty, but also feel a realistic fear at the danger, because people who’ve acted foolishly near it have died. It’s the lack of that fear of God that characterizes the human race.

In all of this you can see Paul paints a very dismal picture of the human condition. Theologians call this total depravity. That doesn’t mean we’re all as bad as we could be, but rather sin has impacted us in every aspect of our being. It’s like if sin were the color blue, then total depravity means every dimension of my personality is some shade of blue. Some areas are more blue than others, and some people are more blue than others, but every part of every person is some shade of blue.

I saw this in myself last week. Lynn and I took a nighttime bike tour of DC. We found the tour online and paid for it. We met the guide and others on the tour at about 6:00 pm and it lasted 3 hours. It was so cool to see the Lincoln Memorial and other sights all lit up at night! When the tour was finished we all turned in our bikes and of course it’s customary to give the guide a tip. I looked in my wallet and just had \$20 bills and there was no where to get change. So I had to make a choice: do I give him a generous tip or walk away and pretend like I didn’t know any better? I walked away. Lynn wasn’t too happy with me, but

understand I really wanted to give him something. I even told Lynn maybe I’ll mail him a tip (Yeah, right!) You see, there was some good in me, but not enough to hand over \$20. Like I look in the mirror and I see myself as frugal, a good steward of God’s resources. But the reality is, I was being cheap. I was being stingy. I may not be navy blue, but I’m blue!

The Verdict is that We’re All Guilty Before God

Now with all of the evidence in, the verdict is delivered in verses 19–20.

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 God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.

When he says, “Whatever the law says...” he’s talking about the Old Testament Scripture he just finished quoting. He says all this applies to those under the law. The Jewish people thought all these verses applied only to the ungodly Gentiles. But what the law really does is silence **all** of us before God. It’s like we’re in a courtroom and have just been declared guilty and then asked if we have anything to say and we can’t say a word because it’s all true. Then he makes this bold declaration that no one will be declared righteous by the works of the law. The law can’t make us right with God, all it can do is show us our sin.

We are Worse Than We Ever Thought

The plight of every human being and humanity as a whole is worse than we ever thought. So what do we do with all of this? Certainly, this helps us understand what’s going on in the world. We’d all agree there’s a lot of bad stuff out there. And there are all kinds of ways people explain the evil in the world. We need to have a clear view of what’s really wrong. Some say it’s poor parenting. Others say it’s social disadvantages or abuse by others. Still others say it’s bad genetics. But it starts with us. I’m going to go with Albert Einstein on this. He said, “The real problem is in the hearts and minds of men. It is not a problem of physics but of ethics. It is easier to denature plutonium than to denounce the evil spirit of man.” This helps us understand what’s going on in the world; it may also help us understand what’s going on in our own hearts. Maybe we’re not as sinful as we could be, but we know every part of us is some shade of blue, and no matter how hard we try, we can’t change. This is true of the moral and the immoral; whether we can swim 100 feet or 30 miles; we all fall short.

If no one will be declared righteous by the works of the law, are we all just doomed? Or is there another way? As we’ll learn next week in the second half of chapter 3, there’s a way out of this predicament. It’s the only way out. It’s called the Gospel; the good news of Jesus. What we couldn’t accomplish through the

law, God accomplished for us through his Son. Jesus kept the law. Jesus lived a righteous life in thought, word and deed. Jesus paid the price for our sins and conquered death, and now offers us his perfect righteousness as a gift. The only way to be declared righteous and the only way to really begin to change from the inside out is to accept the free gift he offers to each of us. You see, we're worse than we ever thought, but God's grace is better than we ever dreamed.

I heard a story about a young man who had to take a final exam in a class at a college in Missouri. When he got to class, everybody was doing their last-minute studying. The teacher came in and said he'd review with them before the test. Most of his review came right from the study guide, but there were some things this young man had never heard. The teacher just said it was all in the book and they were responsible for it. He couldn't argue with that. Finally it was time. As he passed out the test, the teacher said, "Leave them face down on the desk until everyone has one, and I'll tell you when to start." When the young man turned his over along with the rest of the class, he was shocked to see every answer on the test was filled in. His name was even written on the exam in red ink. This was true for everyone. The bottom of the last page said: "This is the end of the exam. All the answers on your test are correct. You'll receive an A. The reason you passed the test is because the creator of the test took it for you. All the work you did in preparation for this test didn't help you get the A. You've just experienced grace." The teacher then went around the room and asked each student, "What's your grade? Do you deserve that? How much did all your studying help achieve your final grade?" Then he said, "Some things you learn from lectures and research, but some you can only learn from experience. You've just experienced grace. If you know Jesus as your Savior, your name is written down in a book, and you've had nothing to do with writing it there. That's the ultimate grace experience."

You see, that's what Jesus did for you. He took the exam for you and got an A. And he offers that to each of us. The only thing that can get in the way is **not** your inability but your ability. This is rather offensive. It means I have nothing to offer, nothing to contribute. My mouth is silent! John Gerstner put it this way, "The way to God is wide open. There's nothing standing between

the sinner and his God... No sin can hold you back, because God offers justification to the ungodly. Nothing now stands between the sinner and God but the sinner's good works. Nothing can keep him from Christ but his delusion...that he has good works of his own that can satisfy God... All they need is need. All that they must have is nothing... But, alas, sinners cannot part with their virtues. They have none that are not imaginary, but they are real to them. So grace becomes unreal." How about you? Can you part with your virtues? Is your insistence on doing it yourself keeping you from fully embracing the work he's done on your behalf?

Remember back in Romans 1:16 Paul said "*in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith.*" So all we need to do to become righteous is to come to Christ with empty hands and receive his righteousness by faith. What keeps people from salvation isn't their sin but their good works.

If you've received his gift of righteousness you know you have nothing to boast about. You know there's nothing in yourself that drew you to God. Any goodness you might find in yourself could have only happened because of Christ in you. You can take absolutely no credit for anything in your relationship with God. This can give you joy because you know God isn't trying to hide from you, that all the things you know about him, and all the blessings you have, and the fruit you might have born are gifts of his grace. This also gives you a wonderful sense of security. Why? Because if you didn't do anything in the first place to gain all this, you can't do anything to lose it. From start to finish it's all about his work, and there's nothing you can do to get in the way of that.

So next time you look in the mirror, you might want to think about that. When you look at yourself in the mirror, do you see your flaws? Do you try to find ways to cover them up? Or do you see the person clothed with the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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