



What do you see when you look in the mirror? Physically I see gray hair that should still be brown. People say, “Your gray hair is beautiful. You look so beautiful with long hair ... You look so handsome with a little stubble ... You’re kind of short ... skinny ... fat.” It’s ironic that no matter who you are, when you look in the mirror you see both the good and the flaws. As the saying goes, “mirrors don’t lie.”

Our passage of scripture today is Paul’s fourth section describing the sinfulness of humanity. Paul is methodically showing us different angles in the mirror that show us our flaws. Most people would like to overestimate how good they are. We ignore the flaws; we minimize them; we point out larger flaws in others, all in an attempt to overestimate how good we are.

Paul has been methodically leading us, since Romans 1:18, down a path with one message at the end: Since everyone is a sinner, everyone needs a Savior.

- The pagan (Romans 1:18-32)
- The self-righteous person (Romans 2:1-16)
- The religious moral person (Romans 2:17-3:8)
- The Gentile and the Jew
- Someone from Asia, Europe, Africa or the Americas

From the time of cavemen to today, no one escapes the thorough effects of sin which have worked deeply into our hearts.

In our passage of scripture today—Romans 3:9-20—Paul states the universal, timeless truth that every single person who’s ever lived and ever will live, except Jesus Christ, is affected by sin. Theologians refer to this as Total Depravity.

Total Depravity is the doctrine that fallen man is completely touched by sin and that he is completely a sinner. He is not as bad as he could be, but in all areas of his being—body, soul, spirit, mind, emotions—he is touched by sin. It affects my ability to choose, but it also impacts my capacity to reason, my emotions, my memories, my desires.

Think of it this way: If sin were the color blue, then Total Depravity means that every dimension of our 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. Regarding Total Depravity, Blaise Pascal wrote, “Nothing offends us more rudely than this doctrine, yet without this mystery, the most incomprehensible of all, we are

incomprehensible to ourselves.” For it’s by acknowledging our total, complete and radical depravity that we are able to see ourselves accurately and see our need for a Savior clearly.

Many on the peninsula will object to the extreme description of this doctrine and these verses. They’ll say things like, “We’re not really that bad;” “Who’s to say what is and isn’t a problem;” “It seems too extreme. How can you lump a hard working responsible person with a sociopath in prison?” Being equally under the power of sin does not mean that everyone is equally sinful. It simply means that since everyone is a sinner, everyone needs a Savior. This is the same simple point that Paul’s been making since 1:18.

To illustrate this, imagine three swimmers who left California headed to Japan. One drowns at the 1-mile mark. One drowns at the 5-mile mark. The last swam an impressive 100 miles before drowning. It doesn’t matter who swam further, they’re all totally and completely dead. They are incapable of reaching Japan.

In response to this, some people would think, “OK. I get it. I’m sinful and so is everyone else. What’s the benefit to going over and over it? It doesn’t make me feel good to look into the mirror of God’s Word and see my flaws.” The benefit is to strip us of any shred of belief that we could ever reach the righteousness of God on our own. At first you might think that leads to depression, but it doesn’t. We’re all the swimmers who’ve drowned on our swim to Japan. We are dead. We are incapable. We’ll never be able. But what if someone revives us and transports us by boat to Japan? This shouldn’t lead to depression. Instead, it should produce the deepest love and thankful. That’s the byproduct God hopes will spring from our lives as we see how flawed and sinful we are.

Turn with me to Romans 3 and let’s look at God’s Word on this sobering and weighty topic.

**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 (v. 9).**

That last phrase “all under the power of sin” is a legal term describing a person’s legal citizenship. The phrase could be restated “all under the legal citizenship of sin,” meaning that our spiritual passport has been stamped “under sin.” Only when a person accepts Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior does this stamp change to “under grace.”

As a result of our "citizenship of sin," in the following verses Paul gives a long list of sin's effects. In verses 10-20 layer after layer of evidence is given to describe this. In these verses there are seven effects that I'll point out. Let's read these verses first. Then I'll show you these effects.

**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 (verses 10–20).

## **The 7 Effects of Sin**

### **Our legal standing**

**"no one is righteous"** (v. 10). This is describing our guilty pronouncement as if we're in a courtroom and the judge says, "you do not meet the righteous standard of the law. As in ... You were required to stop completely at the stop sign. You rolled the stop. You are guilty ... you are not righteous."

### **Our minds**

**"there is no one who understands"** (v. 11). Our thinking and our minds have been corrupted by sin so we don't understand God's truth without God's intervention. In a similar description, Ephesians 4:18 says we **"are darkened in our understanding."**

### **Our motives**

**"there is no one who seeks God"** (v. 11b). No one really wants to find God. We want to find relief from pain. We want to find pleasure. We want to find everything that heaven offers but we don't seek God because our motives have been corrupted. This effect is so damaging and so crippling. It sits right at the heart of a person trying to find a solution to all of this sin. Because it's so crucial for us to rightly understand this, I'm going to revisit this topic later in my sermon in order to give it a more thorough explanation.

### **Our wills**

**"all have turned away ... there is no one who does good"** (v. 12). This is the opposite of how two people turn and face one another when they exchange their wedding vows. Their body language says, "I am turning toward you and engaging you in a loving relationship." In contrast to this, everyone has "turned their backs on God" and walked away from him at the altar.

This helps us understand the next phrase Paul says here, "there is no one who does good." On the surface this statement seems unnecessarily extreme. Of course, many people who don't believe in Jesus do good actions. Our world would be a horrible place if people didn't give money to charities, follow laws or serve in some way. But those are not the kinds of so-called good acts Paul is referring to here. His focus is on our relationship with God. Can our good deeds do anything to fix that broken relationship? That's the crucial question. The answer? No. We have turned away and our good actions will never fix it because good actions don't repair the relationship.

### **Our tongues**

**"Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness"** (verses 13–14). The image of this verse is quite graphic. It's that of an open grave with rotting bodies in it. Our sinful words are a sign of decay and death in our hearts. With our tongues we lie to protect ourselves and we cut others down so we can feel better about ourselves. With our tongues we pass judgment on others. With our tongues we gossip and destroy the reputation of others.

### **Our relationships**

**"Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know"** (verses 15–17). In this we see how this radical depravity is not just affecting God but affecting other people. People often literally shed other's blood as we see in many places of the world today.

In America this is more often portrayed by people seeking to get ahead by pushing someone else down. When someone else blocks our path to getting what we want, we get angry and resentful. We are not seeking to love our neighbor but we are professionals at loving ourselves. It's an ugly truth but people will run others over in their pursuit of loving themselves.

### **Our relationship to God**

**"There is no fear of God before their eyes"** (v. 18). This phrase functions as a description and a summary of our total depravity. "There is no fear of God." A healthy "fear of God" is a key concept through scripture that describes a good reaction of the follower of God. Psalm 111:10 says, **"The fear of the lord is the beginning of wisdom."** Fear, not meaning "afraid." Instead, "fear" means "awe, reverence and respect." In contrast to this healthy fear this

verse is saying that humanity doesn't fear him. There's no awe of God; no reverence for him.

Although God created humanity to experience our greatest fulfillment by being in a relationship with him, we are so far gone that we don't even know it. That's what these verses are describing. They're describing a person who's lost their awareness of being made for relationship with God.

This reminds me of the well-documented case of two girls who were raised by wolves. Kamala and Amala, better known as the "wolf children," were discovered in 1920 in the jungles of Godamuri, India. The girls, aged 3 and about 8, had been living with a she-wolf and her pack. The man who found the girls, Reverend Singh, took them back to his orphanage, where he tried to get them accustomed to their human surroundings.

In these situations the children are often unable to learn basic behaviors of human interaction like using a toilet or walking upright after walking on fours all their life. Additionally, they display a complete lack of interest in the human activity around them. "They often seem mentally impaired and have almost insurmountable trouble learning a human language," describes one doctor.

Kamala and Amala struggled with these over the years and both eventually died of fatal illnesses. After their deaths and so little progress made, the Reverend wondered if the right thing to do would have been to leave these children in the wild where he found them.

That's thought provoking, isn't it? The minds of these two girls were so far gone that they felt and behaved more like a wolf than a little girl. They'd lost what it meant to be human. Could Romans 3:9-18 be saying that humanity is so far gone that we've forgotten what it means to be created for a relationship with God? I think that is what these verses are saying. Our sin really is worse than anyone thought!

I want to go back and talk about verse 11, "*no one seeks God.*" The implications of this phrase are dangerous and petrifying. A well-meaning friend of yours could agree with all of sinfulness as described in these verses today and conclude, "I better find a way to fix my sin." Verse 11 means that a person can't do it because they can't seek God. The implication is everyone is doomed and everyone is incapable of doing anything to fix it. Let me explain why no one seeks God...

This phrase seems too extreme because many will say, "I know people who aren't Christians but they pray sometimes, they've read a Christian book and I've talked with them about spiritual matters. They are seeking God, even I was seeking before I became a Christian."

Does this sound familiar to anyone? How can we reconcile Paul's statement that "no one seeks God" with these experiences?

Pastor and author Tim Keller put it this way: "Someone might have an intellectual interest in the possibility of God, or a philosophical conviction that there is a God. But that is not a real passion to meet with God." Pastor and author Francis Chan put it this way in *Crazy Love*: "Lukewarm people don't really want to be saved from their sin; they want only to be saved from the penalty of their sin."

So what Paul is communicating in this phrase "no one seeks God" is that sometimes people do want spiritual blessings, like answered prayers, inner peace or appeasement from guilt. But wanting these spiritual blessings is not the same as wanting to find God himself. It's very human to want all the perks a supernatural being offers but no one of their own desire wants to know the holy, righteous, sovereign God of the universe. In fact, there's something terrifying about that! This means that anyone who looks like they're seeking God has actually been sought by God first.

That's what Jesus said in John 6:44, "*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me DRAWS them.*" Later in his ministry Jesus said, "*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will DRAW all people to myself*" (John 12:32). That word "draw" is a strong word. It's the same Greek word used in Acts 16:19, "*When her owners realized that their hope of making money was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and DRAGGED them into the marketplace to face the authorities.*"

When God seeks a person he draws them to himself with powerful force that's infused with unconditional love. We read in Romans 1:16 that the Gospel is the declaration of good news that brings salvation to everyone who believes. What an amazing message! But the scriptures also tell us that no one is willing to be saved by their own inner desires because "no one seeks God." God must draw them with his Word and the Holy Spirit.

An illustration that helps me understand this involves two scenarios of a drowning man. In the first scenario there is a man in the ocean flapping his arms, bobbing up and down, screaming for someone to save him. He is clearly drowning and he's asking for someone's help. A kind person on a nearby boat sees him, throws him a life preserver and all is well. Some people mistakenly think this is the way God saves us. A person sees their need, they call out for help (which would be seeking), and then they are rescued. This is wrong (Ephesians 1, Romans 9, 1 Peter 1, 2 Corinthians 5).

Instead, let me describe scenario #2. There is a man in the ocean but he is not flapping his arms and bobbing up and down. He is dead, lying on the ocean floor. He has no pulse and therefore he is not screaming for anyone to save him. God sees him, slides his hand under him and **draws** him to the surface to breathe life into him. This is the picture the scriptures are painting. There is

"no one who seeks God" but God is drawing people to himself all the time.

What difference does this make? It means that God is not hiding from you. He has placed his truth all around you to show you that he loves you. Have you seen it? Have you seen the intricate and thorough lengths God will go to show you that he loves you? This is how he **draws** you. God wants this to trigger a response of love and thankfulness. It means that your prayers for God to draw people to himself are more important than your conversations with them. It means that instead of contributing something to your salvation, you contributed nothing.

And how do you react to this? Does this bristle against your pride because you want to somehow add merit to your salvation? Or can you join with Luther and see that this is "a gracious allure-ment, such as that of the man whom everybody loves, and to whom everybody willingly goes." When we accurately see that "no one ever seeks God," we see humanity accurately.

I asked earlier, Why is Paul going over and over how badly hu-manity has it? From Romans 1:18 – 3:20 Paul has said:

- immoral pagans – you're in big trouble
- self-righteous moralists – you're in big trouble
- law-abiding Jews – you're in big trouble
- (today) everyone – you're in big trouble

Remember I said he's doing this to trigger a response of love and thankfulness. But don't rush past the painful searching of the Holy Spirit to get to the good feelings. There is unspeakable joy waiting for you. There is gratitude and thankfulness that ex-ceeds anything of earth. But for now, we reflect on our sin like someone who can't stop looking at himself in a mirror.

Look at how Paul ends all of this bad news in verses 19-20. He says, I've said all of this ... ***"so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God."*** Paul wants ev-eryone to just be quiet. Stop trying to defend yourself; stop ratio-nalizing; stop lying to yourself about how good you want to be; stop hurting others and yourself; stop ignoring your secret sins. Just stop. Allow yourself to honestly look in the mirror and face your brokenness and be quiet. There is no rescue you can manu-facture. You will be held accountable to God. It is inescapable.

***"Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law (i.e., anything you do); rather through the law we become conscious of our sin"*** (v. 20).

Paul's whole point here is to guide us to a place where we are aware of our sin. Since everyone is a sinner, everyone needs a Savior. I think Paul spends so much time guiding us to see our sin because we spend so much time ignoring that our sin is a problem.

Let me end today with one more illustration.

You've probably noticed we got a new pulpit recently. Many of you have commented on how beautiful it is. This wood is called Spalted Tamarind. It comes from Laos and as soon as I saw it, I wanted to use it. I thought the pulpit should reflect the glory and beauty of God's creation when you look at it. But I learned there's a lot more meaning packed into this wood.

This wood comes from logs that were found on the moist jungle floor. These dark lines are the tracks insects leave behind as they tunnel through. Because of this, each piece is utterly unique. If the logs are just left there, these insects and the moisture will totally rot the wood. After the years pass they become part of the jungle floor, their beauty wasted and lost. However, if har-vesters are able to find the wood, they can rescue it for a skilled craftsman to create something beautiful.

When I heard the story of this wood, I knew we had to use it. It's a visual reminder to us that we were dead. But God knew where we were. We weren't left to rot and decay. God drew us to himself. He gave us the gift of salvation through Jesus. And now we're spiritually alive and being built into something beautiful. Only God can do that.

Do you sense that God is drawing you to himself today? If so, say "yes" to him. As you become more aware of your sinfulness through these verses in Romans, what's your reaction? Don't try to ignore your sin problem.

*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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