

THERE IS NO ONE RIGHTEOUS

Romans 2:17-3:20

Key Verse: 3:10

“As it is written: There is no one righteous, not even one....”

In Romans 1:17, Paul said that in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed. This righteousness can be obtained only through faith in Jesus, not by works. This is amazing news. Yet to accept it, we must acknowledge that we are sinners. This is not easy because of our pride. Yet people are perishing without the gospel. Paul was eager to preach the gospel so that they may be saved. With a great shepherd’s heart, he exposed their sin. He indicted the fallen Gentile world and the moralists. Now he turns to the Jews who had strong self-righteousness based on their knowledge of the law. Self-righteous people seem to be the last ones to accept the gospel. Paul understood them very well. Out of love, he exposed their hypocrisy. Then Paul concluded that all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, are under the power of sin, and the whole world accountable to God. No one is righteous, not even one. This is universal truth about mankind. We must accept this truth to accept the gospel.

Someone may ask, “Since Paul is addressing unbelieving Jews, how can this apply to me, a Christian believer?” A gospel truth is that we are all sinners, before and after believing in Jesus. Apostle John said, writing to believers: **“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us”** (1Jn 1:8). Martin Luther taught that we are, at the same time, both righteous and sinners.¹ This means we are still sinners, but Jesus’ righteousness is imputed to us through faith in him. Our righteousness does not come from ourselves; it comes from Christ. This is why we need to live by faith in Christ from first to last (1:17). We need to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus (2Pe 3:18). As we are more aware of God’s righteousness, we are more aware of our sinfulness. The cross of Jesus gets bigger and bigger in our hearts and we can deepen in gospel faith. Let’s learn what it means that no one is righteous, including “me,” so that we may grow in gospel faith.

First, the law and circumcision did not make the Jews righteous (2:17-29). In 2:1-16, Paul addressed mankind in general with the words, **“O man”** (2:1 ESV), but now, Paul addresses **“the Jew”** specifically (2:17). In 2:17-29, the word **“law”** is repeated ten times, and the words **“circumcised”** or **“circumcision”** nine times. To the Jews, the law and circumcision were everything, and the basis of their self-

¹ <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/simul-justus-et-peccator/>

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righteousness. Paul knew how a self-righteous Jew thought, for he had been one himself.

Paul first dealt with the Jews' self-righteousness based on the law (17-24). The Jews felt special; they were the only people chosen by God who received the law as God's revelation to them. Here "**law**" means the "Torah," the first five books of the Old Testament. The Torah is the written code of their covenant with God. It can be compared to the U.S. Constitution, but was far more authoritative, for it governed every aspect of their society: civil, moral, and religious. They relied on the law and put their confidence in the fact that God gave it to them. Because they were instructed by the law, they knew God's will and approved of what is superior (18). They bragged about their unique relationship to God and felt distinguished above the Gentiles. As a result, they were convinced that they were a guide for the spiritually blind Gentiles, a light for them in their darkness, instructors of them in their foolishness, and teachers for them in their spiritual infancy (19-20a).

In fact, the Gentiles were groping in the darkness, worshiping idols, slaves of superstition, and suffering from demons. They needed to know the true God. It was great that the Jews had confidence to teach the truth about God. Their confidence rested in having the law, "**the embodiment of knowledge and truth**" (20b). This is God's special revelation about himself, that is, the true knowledge of God. It is also the truth about mankind, the world, and especially the way of salvation. We should have such confidence to teach the Bible. The holy Scriptures are able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus, and are useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that we may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2Ti 3:15-17).

In verse 21, Paul's tone changed. He indicted the self-confident Jews for their hypocrisy by using five rhetorical questions: "**...you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?**"² **You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law?"** (21-23) This hypocrisy was historical reality. A prominent Rabbi, Jochanan ben Zakkai, who lived from 30-90 A.D., bewailed, "The glory of God left Israel because of the increase of murder, adultery, sexual vice, commercial and judicial corruption, bitter sectarian strife, and other

² Pagan temples were places of idol worship. But some Jews robbed treasures from these temples. Thus, they defiled themselves.

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evils.”³ Although the Jews boasted of the law and taught others, they lived according to their sinful desires. They deceived themselves and others and lied to God. What they taught and how they acted were so different, which is a most detestable sin. As a result, God’s name was blasphemed among the Gentiles because of them (24). Unbelievers carefully watch what believers do. When they discover hypocrisy, they expose it with relish, discrediting believers and dishonoring God. We Christians must take seriously our influence. We are ambassadors of Christ in every area of life - home, workplace, campus, and community.

What was the fundamental reason for their hypocritical lives? Verse 21a says, **“You, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself?”** They didn’t teach themselves. This sin is easily committed by those who teach others. When we do not teach ourselves, we cannot grow spiritually and end up as hypocrites. Before teaching others, we should examine ourselves, repent our sins and obey God’s word practically. Then we can share what we learned with others. When we do so, we can grow as influential people of God and be a blessing. Though I have taught young couples about marriage, I fall short of God’s standard in loving my wife. Though I have taught parents to dedicate their children to God, I have not been diligent enough to instruct my own children. Though I have taught others to be shepherds for God’s flock, I fall short in loving God’s children sacrificially. The solution is not to stop teaching others, but to teach myself more diligently. Lord, help me to do so.

While the Torah was the revelation from God, circumcision was the sign of being God’s covenant people. It was so serious that one who was not circumcised would be cut off from their community (Gen 17:14). So, they circumcised infants on the eighth day, even if it was a Sabbath (Jn 7:22). The problem is that they assumed physical circumcision guaranteed their salvation and was the ticket to God’s kingdom. Rabbinic epigrams expressed it: “Circumcised men do not descend into Gehenna” (hell), and “Circumcision will deliver Israel from Gehenna.”⁴ What a serious error. Circumcision is not a magical ceremony. It began with Abraham as the sign of God’s covenant with him, given after he was justified by faith. It was not the means to be justified, but a sign of obedience. It has value only if one obeys the law. If one breaks the law, circumcision is useless. Uncircumcised people who keep the law will condemn circumcised lawbreakers

³ Dodd, C. H., *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, in *The Moffatt New Testament Commentary* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1932; eleventh edition, 1947). p.39.

⁴ Cranfield, Charles E. B., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, in *The International Critical Commentaries* (T. and T. Clark; vol. I, 1975). p.172.

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(25-27). It is more important to keep the law than to be circumcised. In Galatians 5:6 Paul said, **“For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.”** For Christians, circumcision can be compared to baptism. Some people believe that the act of baptism itself guarantees salvation. They assume they can live as they please after baptism. This is a great mistake. The ceremony of baptism has value only if we have faith in Christ that leads to obedience.

In verses 28-29 Paul explained who a true Jew is, in contrast to cultural Jews. He makes a fourfold contrast: 1) The essence of being a true Jew is not something outward and visible, but inward and invisible. 2) True circumcision is in the heart, not in the flesh - which can be mere ritual. 3) It is done by the Spirit, not the law. 4) It wins the approval of God rather than people. Human beings are comfortable with what is outward, visible and material. What matters to God is a deep, inward, secret work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. True Jews are conscious of God, seek God’s recognition and praise, and strive to please God. They circumcise (cut away) worldly desires, and human glory and honor. They love God and God’s people wholeheartedly. In the same way, true Christians live by the Holy Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh (Gal 5:16). Paul said, “...if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ” (Ro 8:9). As Jesus said, “The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing” (Jn 6:63a).

Second, no excuse for unrighteousness (3:1-8). Paul’s explanation of who is a true Jew was so revolutionary. Someone could claim that he was challenging the integrity of God who had chosen the Jews and endowed them with many privileges. Paul anticipated strong resistance to his teaching. In 3:1-8, he upholds God’s faithfulness and righteousness, while nullifying all excuses. He uses the Socratic method of question and answer. The first question is: “What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?” (1) The answer is: “Much in every way!” Later he will explain this in detail (9:4-5). Here he mentions only the most important advantage: **“First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God”** (2). This refers to the Old Testament, especially God’s promises to send the Messiah. Among all nations, God had chosen the Jews as stewards of his salvation plan for mankind. When God called Abraham, he promised that all nations on earth would be blessed through his offspring. Paul understood that this offspring referred to Jesus Christ, and the blessing to becoming children of God, which includes forgiveness of sins, the gift of the Holy Spirit, eternal life and inheritance in the kingdom of God (Gal 3:16,26).

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As we know, along with privileges comes responsibility. The greater the privilege, the greater the responsibility. While the Jews enjoyed the privileges and blessings, they did not live up to God's standards as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, and a light to the Gentiles (Ex 19:5-6; Isa 49:6). Moreover, when the Messiah came, they rejected him. Therefore, it seemed that their lack of faith nullified God's faithfulness. So, Paul asked his second question: **“What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness?”** (3) He answered, **“Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar.”** People's unfaithfulness did not undermine God's faithfulness. Even if every single human being is a liar, God is always true. God cannot lie (4a; Heb 6:18). God cannot be unfaithful (2Ti 2:13). Paul supports this truth by saying, **“As it is written: ‘So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge’”** (4b; Ps 51:4b, 116:11). God is always true to his word; he is faithful to his righteous character. God never breaks his promises. This is why we can trust in his promises.

In his third question, Paul anticipates how some may try to justify their unrighteousness: **“But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us?”** (5) His answer was, **“Certainly not!”** If God was unjust, he could not judge the world justly (6). Any reasonable human being would agree with Paul's argument. As the saying goes: “Two wrongs don't make a right.” Paul raised a fourth question: **“Someone might argue, ‘If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?’”** (7) Paul exposed the fallacy in this way of thinking by raising another question, **“Why not say--as some slanderously claim that we say--‘Let us do evil that good may result’”?** (8a) People who think like this are irrational and will make any argument to keep on sinning. They are not worthy of any further response. Paul concluded: **“Their condemnation is just!”** (8b) In short, their excuses cannot justify their unrighteousness.

Third, the whole world is accountable to God (3:9-20). After silencing all the arguments of the Jews, Paul makes his final declaration about the condition of all human beings. **“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”** (9). Being under the power of sin means being slaves to sin, under its control. Sin is like a cruel tyrant who holds the human race imprisoned in guilt and under judgment. Sin is upon us, weighing us down--a crushing burden. People think sin is enjoyable and commit sin so lightly. However, sin has power to bind and rule over people from the moment they sin. Karl Heim, a

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German theologian said, “Sin is like a prison which I always freely can enter in from outside with a key. But as soon as I come in, the door is locked, and I cannot but be a prisoner who can’t run away.”⁵ All human beings commit sin and become prisoners of sin who are powerless to escape. There is no one righteous in the world.

Paul supports this by quoting Scripture. Let’s read verse 10: **“As it is written: ‘There is no one righteous, not even one....’**” The words **“no one”** are repeated four times, and **“not even one,”** two times in verses 10-12. This stresses that not a single exception can be found in the whole human race - except of course, Jesus. The words **“is”** and **“are,”** which appear repeatedly in verses 10-18, are the present tense of the verb **“being.”** The statements describe what human beings are now, and continue to be, due to the power of sin. Sin is in our very being - it is in our nature - which we express through the phrase **“sinful nature.”** Some people look very noble, stately and elegant. We wonder how they can be sinners. But there is no exception; maybe they are elegant sinners. The point is that no one is righteous, not even one.

To support his general, universal statement, Paul quotes a series of six more Old Testament verses (Ps 5:9; 10:7; 14:1-3; 36:1; 140:3; Isa 59:7-8). These verses explain practically how sin affects human beings. In fact, sin affects every part of our being: our understanding, what we seek, what we do, our thoughts, throats, tongues, lips and mouths. We don’t do the good things we should do, but the evil things we should not do (11-15). Human beings are created in God’s image. We should share God’s attributes and be like noble princes and princesses. We should be kind, compassionate, generous, honest, faithful, truthful, loving, righteous and holy. But due to sin people became ugly, corrupt, selfish, greedy, arrogant, wicked, immoral, violent, deceptive and depraved. As a result, **“ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes”** (16-18). This describes the total depravity of human beings.

Here we need to understand the meaning of “total depravity.” “Depravity” refers to our broken relationship with God, which results in the corruption of our human nature, by which we are inclined toward sin all the time (Gen 6:5). “Total depravity” refers to the comprehensive effects of sin that make us unable to do anything to obtain salvation. It does not mean that humans never do anything good, but rather that we are totally incapable of saving ourselves.

⁵ Karl Heim, *Jesus the world’s perfecter*, Edited by Kuk-Won Chang (Seoul: The UBF Press, 1988), P. 57.

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Paul finally declares in 3:19: **“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.”** The law is holy, righteous and good; the law is perfect (Ro 7:12; Ps 19:7). This reflects God’s standard, which is lofty indeed. No one can meet this standard. 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 (20). Paul’s indictment is clear: The whole world is under the power of sin and subject to God’s righteous judgment. All people must suffer a cursed life, die, and go to eternal condemnation. This is why people are desperate, miserable and hopeless. When we realize this, we can be humble and accept the glorious gospel which God prepared for us.