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Enjoying God Ministries
Romans #15
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You Have Spiritual Cancer. It's Terminal. But There is a Cure!
Romans 3:9-20

Most of you will not know the name of Dr. Marvin Knight, but he served for many years as the orthopedic surgeon for the Dallas Cowboys professional football team. Those of you who are old enough to remember, can probably envision in your mind a tall man wearing a huge cowboy hat lumbering out to the middle of the field to check up on a player who had just been injured during the game. That was Dr. Knight. I saw him dozens of times on TV treat injured Cowboy players before I ever met him in person.

Dr. Knight was a remarkable orthopedic surgeon. But he did not have the best or most winsome bedside manner. He was gruff and profane, but incredibly good at his skill. My dad and I walked into his office in Dallas following the end of my freshman year in high school. I had already undergone two major surgical procedures, one on my left knee and one on my left arm, due to injuries sustained in playing football. My left knee had recovered well enough, but not my left arm.

The memory of what happened that day is vividly impressed on my mind. After taking X-rays and examining my arm, Dr. Knight walked into the room where my dad and I were sitting, anxiously awaiting news of how bad my arm was and would I ever be able to play sports again.

As Dr. Knight walked in, my dad asked the simple question: "So, what are we looking at here?" To which Dr. Knight brusquely responded: "What do you think we're looking at? We're looking at fixing his damn arm." You couldn't get my dad to utter a profanity with a gun pointed at his head. His only response to Dr. Knight's declaration was, "O.k."

Then came the bad news. My arm had been badly broken when I was six years old. Now, at the age of sixteen, a botched surgical procedure and another injury had made matters worse. Dr. Knight looked us straight in the eye and said: "He'll never have full use of his arm again. But you've got a choice. I can give you an arm that extends fully, but won't be able to bend beyond this point, or I can give you an arm that bends a bit farther but will never extend fully."

After a brief discussion, the three of us decided that it would be best to be able to bend my arm sufficiently that I could touch my face and tie a necktie, etc., while suffering the disadvantage of not being able to extend it fully. Such is the state of my arm from then until this day.

Now, why have I told you this story? Only for one reason. As painful and distressing as it was for us to hear the news of what I would have to deal with for the rest of my life, my dad and I were incredibly grateful for the honest, painful, and even profane way, in which Dr. Knight broke the news to us. He could have lied to us or given us false hope. He could have thought to himself, "Goodness, I hate to be the bearer of bad news to this sixteen-year-old kid and his dad. I don't want to discourage them. I want them to leave my office feeling good about themselves. So I'll downplay how serious the condition is."

If he had done that, you might think that he was a kind man, a compassionate man, who was thinking preeminently of my best interests. But you'd be wrong. There is such a thing as deadly kindness. There is such a thing as lethal compassion. It is seen when a genuinely dire and threatening situation is minimized or avoided and supposedly in the interests of the emotional well-being of a person, they are not told the truth.

All of this I say as a way of introducing our passage for today. The Apostle Paul's diagnosis of the human condition is bleak. He's not profane, like Dr. Knight, but he comes straight to the point. You are not morally good by nature. You are, in fact, as Paul says in Ephesians 2:3, "by nature" a "child of wrath." You don't just sin. You are sinful. Or, as Paul puts it here in Romans 3:9, you and the entire human race together are "under sin."

Your problem, says Paul, isn't the lack of education. Your problem isn't climate change. Your problem isn't that your parents were abusive. Your problem isn't that you are financially distressed. Your problem, which is the problem of every human being, is that you are both by nature and choice a rebel against God. You have committed cosmic treason in defiance of your Creator.

So there, I've said it. I realize that what I've said, and will say today, is not a popular message. If you want to hear a different diagnosis of the problem with human beings, turn to Oprah or any number of other public figures who will tell you what you want to hear. But they are lying to you. I have to be bluntly honest. If I have pancreatic cancer or a brain tumor, I don't want my physician to tell me that it's only a mild case of indigestion or a migraine headache. I want him to say: "You have a malignancy."

In telling you that perhaps Oprah or Dr. Phil or someone similar has a different and more uplifting message about your condition, I should also point out that you can find a similar perspective to theirs in a lot of churches today. The church is under constant pressure to conform to society. Pastors and leaders are starting to think that if the church is going to survive, it must reshape and redefine and reform its message. But that is not the purpose of the church. Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 3:15 that the church is the "pillar and buttress of the truth." ***Our job is to tell the truth.*** We are not free to reconfigure or reshape the message to make people feel better about themselves. We are responsible for declaring the truth about the human condition and the only eternal remedy to our problem.

Here's the major difference between the diagnosis of an earthly physician and our heavenly Father. Your doctor may speak honestly about your condition and then tell you, "There's very little hope that you will survive this. I give you no more than six months to live." But God describes the human condition in this passage, a condition that threatens more than merely physical death, it threatens eternal death, and he says, "But I have good news for you. I have a cure. I have provided the remedy. It is found in the substitutionary, sacrificial, propitiatory death of Jesus Christ on the cross. And it is yours by faith alone!"

It is truly remarkable that the God who provides us with this spiritual diagnosis is also the God who says, "I still love you. As ugly and deformed as your heart and mind may be, I love you, and I'm here to rescue you from the eternal consequences of your sin." So, no matter how grim and dim and distressing the diagnosis may be, and it is, don't despair. God has a remedy. God has a cure. And it is found in the gospel

of Jesus Christ, for in that gospel God provides for you and me the righteousness that he requires of us. And it is yours by faith and by faith alone.

What Does it mean to be "Under Sin"? (v. 9)

As I've said many times before, Paul, the spiritual prosecuting attorney, has indicted the entire human race, both Jew and Gentile. The opening words of v. 9, "what then?" are a call to summation. It is as if Paul has reached the mountain top and turns around to look back upon the treacherous path that he has traversed. It's as if Paul pauses and says, "OK. What conclusion may we draw from what we've seen?" Very simply, it is this: all men and women, whether Jew or Gentile, are "under sin." What does this mean? I think there are at least three things here.

First, we are under sin in the sense that because of our sin we are guilty before God, justly condemned. Sin exerts a condemning influence and authority over us because we have rebelled against God. We have committed cosmic treason. We are subject to the legal penalties that God's justice imposes. Paul will explain this in vv. 10-18 as lacking the righteousness that God's righteousness requires him to require and failing to seek God and, as he says in v. 18, living with no fear of God in our hearts.

This is yet again a firm and unmistakable reminder to us that the most fundamental orientation of sin is vertical, not horizontal. Sin is only secondarily what you and I do to other people: steal from them, lie to them, defraud them, break our promises to them. Sin is first and fundamentally what you and I do to God: we don't love him or honor him or thank him or cherish him as the most precious person in the universe. You may do some nice things to other people, but if you lack a reverence for God, you are not righteous in his sight.

Second, we are under sin in the sense that it exerts an experiential power over our lives. We live subject to its promptings. There is a sense in which all mankind are enslaved to sin. In fact, later in Romans Paul will speak of sin as "reigning" (5:21), "enslaving" (6:6), "ruling" (6:12) and exercising lordship (6:14). We go through life carrying this burden on our shoulders and in our souls, one from which Paul will happily declare us free in Romans 6.

Third, as will become evident from Romans 3:13-17, we are "under sin" in the sense that we violate the rights and treat with contempt other human beings. So, yes, there is a horizontal dimension to sin: we deceive one another with our tongues (v. 13b); out of bitterness we curse one another (v. 14); we shed the blood of other people (v. 15); we ruin other people and make them miserable and strive to destroy peace (vv. 16-17). Both in our speech and in our deeds, we are sinners in our relationships one with another.

The Biblical Confirmation (vv. 10-18)

When Paul says at the beginning of v. 10, "as it is written," he is immediately and unmistakably appealing to Scripture as his authority. He cites six different passages from the OT to make his point. So, if I am asked on what basis do I draw my conclusions about the nature of humanity apart from the saving grace

of God, I appeal, as does Paul, to Scripture. We believe what we do about human nature and our need for salvation because this is what Scripture says.

Romans 3:10b-12 are largely taken from Psalm 14:1-3. Let's look at it together.

The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good. The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one (Psalm 14:1-3).

The only problem with this is that a couple of verses farther down in the psalm, David refers to "the generation of the righteous" (Ps. 14:5). But wait a minute. If Paul says in Romans 3:10 that no one is "righteous," and he cites Psalm 14 to prove it, how can Psalm 14 proceed to refer to a generation of people as "righteous"? It seems as if the psalmist has contradicted himself.

The answer is really quite simple. In the first half of Psalm 14 the psalmist, David, is describing the Gentile or non-Jewish world. They lack God's special revelation as found in the Law of Moses. They have no sacrificial system. They lack the knowledge of God. Being devoid of the saving grace and revelation of God that he made available to Israel, no one can be called "righteous." Not a single one. Paul isn't saying that there is no way possible for anyone to get right with God. He is saying that the Gentiles, who lack God's presence and truth, are unrighteous and fail to do anything good.

But what, then, about the Jewish people? If Paul is indicting all mankind as under sin, including the Jews, how does he prove this from the OT? The answer is found in Romans 3:15-17. These three verses are a reference to Isaiah 59:7-8 which have the people of Israel in view. Let's look at it:

Their feet run to evil, and they are swift to shed innocent blood; their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity; desolation and destruction are in their highways. The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths; they have made their roads crooked; no one who treads on them knows peace (Isaiah 59:7-8).

This is a statement about the spiritual condition of Israel in the days of Isaiah the prophet. In addition, Romans 3:13a is a reference to Psalm 5:9 which describes the people of Israel. Romans 3:13b is a citation of Psalm 140:3, which describes the enemies of King David from among his own people. The same is true of Romans 3:14, which is based on Psalm 10:7. Romans 3:18, the final verse in Paul's concluding indictment of the Jewish people, comes from Psalm 36:1.

So, by citing OT texts that describe the pervasive sinfulness of both Gentile and Jew, Paul has made his point: "all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin" (v. 9). So, when anyone in the OT, or in the NT for that matter, is described as "righteous" it is not because they are free from sin or that they have escaped the portrayal that we see in these many texts. It is only because God has graciously intervened in their lives and awakened them to their need for faith in the provision God has made, first in the sacrifices of the OT and finally, of course, in the sacrifice of Jesus in the NT.

So, Paul does not mean here that neither he nor David are sinners, nor does he mean that neither he nor David can be righteous. Neither does he mean that some Gentiles are righteous while others are sinners. All are under sin, but can be regarded by God as righteous when by his grace they come to faith!

And don't overlook the universal scope of the sinfulness of humanity. No fewer than eight times in vv. 10-12 Paul makes use of terms such as "none" and "not one" and "no one" and "all" and "together" and "not even one." He allows no exceptions. Apart from the saving grace of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ, this description is about all of us, you and me!

The supreme irony in this is that in every age of mankind the one thing that unites us is sin! And it is that one thing, sin, that consequently keeps us apart! The one unifying force in our lives, sin, is the one disunifying force that puts us at odds with one another. "The unity for which men strive in various ways is always being negated by the unity for which they never need to strive—their unity in sin" (D. R. Davies).

But wait! What about all those people who appear to be "seeking" God? How can Paul say that no one seeks after God? They are seeking for God, so we are told, they just haven't found him yet. Maybe God is playing hide and seek with them. Mankind is running after God, so they say, but God is running away from mankind. Actually, no. Apart from God's grace that pursues us, people are running away from God. They don't want him. They want his benefits and blessings: a sense of personal value, peace of mind, forgiveness from their guilt, a purpose on earth, and acceptance and love. But they don't want him.

Let's look more closely at how Paul describes the universal sinfulness of the human race. He begins in vv. 13-14 with a portrayal of how we make use of our speech to sin, and then turns in vv. 15-17 to describe our deeds, our actions.

Our Speech (vv. 13-14)

First, in vv. 13-14, Paul points to the destructive power of the tongue. In saying that "their throat is an open grave" he has in mind the deadly effects of human speech. The word "deceive" points to the way we lie and flatter to promote ourselves. Again, "the venom of asps is under their lips" has in view the lethal, cruel way in which we use our speech to destroy others. Such poisonous speech is not occasional, but "their mouth is **full of** curses and bitterness" (v. 14).

Our Deeds (vv. 15-17)

Second, as noted, human wickedness isn't confined to what we say but also includes our actions toward others. In v. 15a Paul refers to the widespread evil of murder and killing. The "ruin and misery" (v. 16) in view does not refer to the subjective feelings that you and I have when we sin but to the misery and devastation that we inflict on others. In saying "the way of peace they have not known" (v. 17), Paul doesn't primarily mean the absence of peace in our hearts, the anxiety that we so often experience. No, he is talking about the violence and warlike ways in which we relate to others.

Worst of all, “there is no fear of God before their eyes” (v. 18). We need to slow down here and explore more deeply what Paul means by this. The fact is, the Bible frequently calls on us to “fear” God at the same time we are not to “fear” God. How can this be?

First, we must note that the absence of the fear of God means that at the center of sin, at its core is the refusal to let God rule our lives. I like the way my friend Tom Schreiner put it: “Sin at its heart decenters God; it de-gods God” (174). So here again we see that sin is first and fundamentally vertical in its orientation: it is the refusal to honor and reverence and obey and fear God, a refusal that expresses itself horizontally in the way we defraud and destroy one another.

So, in what sense are we to fear God, and in what sense should we not be afraid of him? Answering this question is not easy because it is culturally, politically, and even psychologically unpopular today to speak of the “fear” of God. And yet we read in Proverbs that “the *fear of the Lord* is the beginning of knowledge” (Prov. 1:7a). The apostle Peter gives us this command: “Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. *Fear God*. Honor the emperor” (1 Peter 2:17).

At minimum to fear God entails reverence and awe. We must live, speak, think, and act with a keen and ever-present awareness that he is holy and we are not, he is powerful and we are weak, he is self-sufficient and we are utterly dependent on his goodness and grace for every breath we breathe. This is the sort of “fear” that expresses itself in trembling and amazement and an overwhelming sense of personal frailty and finitude.

To fear God means to live conscious of his all-pervasive presence, conscious of our absolute, moment-by-moment dependence on him for light and life, conscious of our comprehensive responsibility to do all he has commanded, fearful of offending him, determined to obey him (Deut. 6:1-2,24; 8:6; Pss. 112:1; 119:63; Malachi 3:5), and committed to loving him (Deut. 10:12,20; 13:4).

To fear God is to know him (Prov. 1:29; 2:4-5) and to hate evil (Prov. 8:13; 16:6). Fearing God yields confidence (Prov. 14:26) and humility (Prov. 3:7; 22:4), and contentment (Prov. 23:17). This, then, is the primary sense in which people do not “fear” God.

But we are not to be frightened of God in the sense that we live in uncertainty as to whether he might one day turn on us and lay upon us the condemnation that our sin deserves. We must not live in doubt about his intentions or whether or not he plans on fulfilling the promises of his Word. We must not be terrorized and paralyzed at the prospect of having our transgressions visited yet again upon us, because they have been fully and finally visited on our Savior, the Lord Jesus. It is not to live in anxious dread that divine wrath will yet find us out and bring death and eternal destruction to our souls.

Paul's Conclusion to Romans 1:18-3:20 (vv. 19-20)

Verses 19-20 are Paul's conclusion to everything he's been saying from 1:18 through 3:18. Romans 3:19 is somewhat befuddling. It is the Jewish people who "are under the law," so how does their failure to keep it imply that "every mouth," indeed the "whole world," is guilty before God? In other words, "How could the whole world be guilty before God because of a law given to the Jews?" The answer is that "if the Jews, who had the privilege of being God's covenant and elect people, couldn't keep the law, then it follows that no one can, including the gentiles" (Schreiner, 175).

In other words, the people of Israel have been the recipients of massive blessings from God. If anyone could have benefited from having the law of God, that is to say, if anyone could be justified by obedience to that law, it would surely be the Jews. But they have not obeyed it perfectly. They never could. They could never be justified in God's sight by obeying the law. Why? Because the law only served to awaken and reveal sin in their hearts, not faith. And if *they* couldn't be justified by performing all the good works commanded in the law, then certainly the Gentiles couldn't either.

Do you think of yourself as an exception to this declaration? Do you see yourself as someone who has done a pretty darn good job of living a moral life? Do you actually think of yourself as being in good standing with God because you never committed a scandalous sin; you never committed murder, you never committed adultery, you never cheated on your taxes or embezzled from your employer? Don't be deluded. Paul says that "every" mouth, yours and mine included, and "the whole world", which encompasses each of us, is guilty before God.

Think deeply about Paul's words that "every mouth" will "be stopped" (v. 19). The word "stopped" means something along the lines of muzzled, shut, silenced! You may think that you have an excuse, a justification for what you did, an argument to make that will secure your acquittal, but you don't. No human will be able to open his mouth to utter so much as a syllable in self-defense. We are all guilty. We are all subject to eternal condemnation.

When I sat on a jury in 1983 to determine the penalty to be imposed on a young man who had committed a string of crimes, he was given the opportunity to plead his case. His lawyer made several arguments as to why the punishment should be lenient. The young man also did his best to justify his actions. But such is not the case with us. We will all stand before the Holy and altogether Righteous Judge of the universe, tongue-tied! Speechless! Convicted, with nothing to say. Unless, of course, we have already been declared forgiven, not guilty, justified by faith in Jesus Christ!

But why? Why is it that no one will be able to contend with the verdict of the court? The answer is given in v. 20. The "law" is in itself good and godly, for it reveals the character of God and his will for humanity. But because of our corrupt and wicked nature, it is impossible for us to live up to its requirements. The law serves only to highlight our moral impotence and rebellion. When we see what God requires, we see instantly how we have failed to comply.

When an unregenerate, unsaved person, male or female, young or old, is confronted with the revelation of God's will, whether in nature, in conscience, or in the Bible itself, that person is awakened to the rebellion and unbelief in his/her heart. In the presence of the law, sin rises up and brings conviction. That is why our only hope is that when we feel that indictment in our souls, that unmistakable sense of moral failure, we must turn to Christ and declare: "I'm trusting in what Jesus did for me. All the guilt and well-deserved punishment for my spiritual and moral wickedness was laid on him and he satisfied the demands of God's justice in my place."

The consequence is clear: don't ever think that you will be made right with God on the basis of what you do, or don't do. Justification, says Paul, being declared righteous in the sight of God and thus acceptable in his presence, does not and never will be obtained by doing good works.

Conclusion

You may think this is a dire and depressing passage, that all is hopeless. But no! The gloriously great news is that the eternal physician whose diagnosis of our condition is bleak is also the one who has the cure! It is found in the grace of God as revealed in the gospel of who Jesus is and what he has done to heal the human soul and provide it with a righteousness that avails in God's presence. So, with this in mind, let's sum up Paul's argument.

First, the whole world, including you and me, stands guilty before God. That includes your entire family, all your friends, everyone at your place of employment and at school. It includes your favorite athlete, your preferred politician, the barista who serves you coffee, and every person in every country who has ever been born, lived, and died on the face of the earth. Of course, the one exception is Jesus himself.

This is not something your children will be taught in our public schools or in the classrooms of our most prestigious universities. They will tell you that all is well with the human race, that all we need is better education and more tolerance and a handful of honest politicians. But they are lying.

Second, Paul has made it clear that no one will be able to mount up a defense or an excuse before God that he/she should be set free and declared innocent. Paul has closed every loophole. He has done it in three ways. (1) In Romans 1:18ff. he pointed out that creation itself has made God's existence and nature known so that no one has an excuse (1:21). (2) He then argued in Romans 2:12-16 that every human being has been created in the image of God with a conscience that convicts them of their failure to obey God. Each person knows intuitively what God requires. Each person knows intuitively that they have fallen short and are worthy of death (see 1:32). Each person has the law of God "written on their hearts" (2:15). (3) He concludes his argument in Romans 3:9-20 by pointing to the written Law of God, a law that no human, be he Jew or Gentile, can perfectly obey.

Third, isn't it amazing that the infinitely holy God who pronounces us guilty, is the same God who loves us in spite of our brokenness and sin? If you are burdened under the oppressive weight of guilt and shame and feel hopeless, the good news of the gospel is that God stands ready, in Jesus Christ, not only to forgive you and cleanse you and lift shame from your soul but also to empower you to live a godly life. You don't have to remain enslaved to shame and guilt and self-condemnation a second longer!

Praise be to God. Our good and great Heavenly Physician has not only diagnosed our condition. He also has supplied us with the only medicine that can cure our souls and rid us of our guilt. This prescription for fallen humanity is found in Romans 3:21-25,

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:21-25).