

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## A Look at Romans: Romans 1:17-3:20

Have you noticed how often the Government or other welfare agencies aim to improve the conditions we live in or the people we are? Yet, as conditions seemingly improve, so we become more dissatisfied. But is there real improvement? The Courts are always busy, the prisons are over full; man has lost his readiness to think of others and he thinks only of himself. Similarly, when the theory of evolution was propounded, it was on the basis that there was a clear improvement from the lowest form of life gradually to the exalted state of man. All of this takes no account of God.

Our last message, in the introduction to this letter to the Romans, we learned that the great reason the apostle Paul had for writing was to speak of the 'gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth', 1:16. This is truly a great provision but if man is getting better day by day, where is the necessity for it? Sadly, as we consider the verses today, we find an evolution in reverse; mankind is going downward and has always done so. Our purposes and plans without God will never improve our lot. In fact, the apostle concludes that all the world is 'guilty before God'. The writer must convince the world of total sin if he is ever to show the absolute worth of the good news of forgiveness.

It is as though Paul is standing in a court room. The Court is in session and, one by one, various persons are brought before the Judge. Each case is examined carefully and at the end the Judge has no option but to announce a guilty verdict. Clearly, in every case, the need for salvation is demonstrated; there is no other way of avoiding God's punishment than through the plan of the Judge himself. The section we are looking at today shows that the whole world is in desperate need of salvation. The whole world is guilty before God.

The apostle first makes **a statement**.

'For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness', 1:18. God is ignored and His standards have been flouted. No one is excluded; the personal emotion in the word 'wrath' which God shows is clearly stated. Paul puts this in another way to the Ephesian Christians: 'Among whom also we all had our conversation (conduct) in times past in the lusts of the flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others', Ephesians 2:3. So this all inclusive statement concerning man is made right at the start. Man, who turns away from God, is subject to all the personal emotion of a God who has always demonstrated His care and love.

Now the apostle goes on to give evidence of the authority of God. This is clearly seen in **the Universe**

No one has an excuse. Anyone who dares to suggest that he cannot know God is immediately provided with evidence both of God Himself and His attributes, verse 20, in the created things all around. 'The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament (sky) sheweth His handiwork ... There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard'. Psalm 19:1-3. Here is tremendous evidence! When man rejects this evidence, he is quite unable to hear the voice of God. So the Judge says, 'Guilty, there is no excuse'!

In order to demonstrate that all the world is guilty before God the apostle now describes three groups of people. These three groups cover everyone in this world who does not enjoy the blessing of salvation. The first group are: **Careless Gentile idolaters**.

The apostle sets out the way of living in verses 21-23 and we note seven steps such a person takes in getting away from God:

1. They know God but will not give Him the honour that is due to Him as God. All of us know God in some measure; we have an inbuilt recognition of Him.
2. They do not give thanks to God for anything.
3. Their whole purpose in life becomes empty and futile.
4. They lose the sense within their physical being of linking facts with their own observation.
5. They call themselves wise without grounds for doing so.

6. They are, in fact, foolish.
7. They end up by making forms and images which they honour as idols.

How could these ways encourage the blessing of God? We now read, three times, that 'He gave them up' as the following verses tell us. These people, who will not have God in their vision, only have interests in this world. So we read, in verses 24-25, that God gives them up – hands them over – to their own selfish indiscipline to 'dishonour their own bodies' with uncleanness. In their lives they exchange the true God and His standards for a lie. This describes the physical action of these persons; they live only for their bodies and themselves. They concern themselves with honouring the creature while completely passing by the Creator.

This leads on to a further stage. Verses 26-27, describe the person's innermost being – the soul. The language is still more graphic than before. One thing leads to another and, when self discipline fails, we find that God hands them over to passions of dishonour. Females and males are specifically mentioned because the distinction of sex is contemplated; women with women; men with men. Their action is quite unnatural. Men burned out with their shameless acts and received disfiguring consequences. What terrible language is used! The media today may publicise these actions but the apostle makes clear that God does not approve of homosexual and lesbian practices. 'God gave them up'.

Lastly, we have the mind, or spirit, involved, verses 28-29. They refused to retain God in their knowledge – what total rejection of a loving God – so 'God gave them over' to a debased mind that was not able to stand any test of His and they are condemned. What a terrible list of wickedness is given! It all comes from the corrupt heart of man and covers such serious things as murder, and more minor things as being 'disobedient to parents'; we find that the person has had the conscience seared and become 'without natural affection' and unmerciful. What fruits of a hardened corrupt human nature are recorded! There is one more thing. These people, in the apostle's day and in our day too, know of and ignore the judgement of God. They know their actions are worthy of death, yet they prefer to persist with them. Man degrades himself to this level without God. God patiently waits but when man refuses, God gives them up! God says there is no excuse. The verdict is 'guilty'!

The apostle writes to Timothy cataloguing a list similar to what we have in Romans 2. He begins, 2 Timothy 3:1, by saying, 'In the last days perilous times shall come'. Sadly, he goes on to show us that 'in the last days' similar things will happen. You and I know these verses describe conditions today almost exactly. Sin at its raw level is publicised and man goes along with a total rejection of God. To Timothy, Paul also applies this to the failure in the professing Christian Church. We need to be so careful today as we see what is happening around us. The need of salvation is clearly demonstrated.

Now the apostle Paul comes to the second group. These are **Gentiles who are moralists and reformers.** 2:1-16.

This group are the type of people who openly state that they will have nothing to do with the undisciplined and wayward life and readily condemn the first group. They regard themselves as upright, good citizens, beyond reproach. How is this possible, the apostle asks? You are judging others but you are doing the same, verse 1! We hear of similar cases today. God only judges on the basis of truth and this must be clear for every individual. We may well ask then on what basis can God judge those who appear to live upright lives? They are guilty of 'the same', verse 3. That is, they despise 'the riches of His goodness and forbearance and longsuffering', verse 4, and refuse every encouragement to vital repentance. Not one is free from sin! What we *do* is an indication of *the way we think* and are. This group consider themselves so upright that they do not need the love of God. They have also become hard hearted and Paul tells these people that, as an unrepentant people, by ignoring God they are facing the judgement of God. Everyone will be judged according to his deeds, verse 6. The verdict for them is guilty and, in the same way that treasure is gathered, they gather up for themselves the wrath of God against them! How clearly we find that we cannot trample under our feet the love of God and the work of Christ without hearing that judgement of guilty.

A question is raised in defence. God is not impartial. He has always favoured the Jew. Not so, the apostle answers. Everyone is on the same basis. There are two classes of people indicated in these verses. God renders to every man according to his deeds, which are the result of the way we think and are. First there are those, both Jew and Gentile, to whom, because of their desire to do well, patiently seeking God's way, God will give eternal life, verse 7. 'There is no respect of persons with God', verse 11. God is just and has no favourites. No description is given here of the way eternal life is obtained. That is to come later, and only repentance from sins will effect this. God's moral government is just.

But amongst this group there are those who 'are contentious, and do not obey the truth', verse 8. Those Jews who have the law know they cannot keep it. Gentiles who are outside the law even break their own moral code of conduct. They have worked out a law for themselves. Their conscience bears them witness, verse 15. God must, in justice, pronounce all of them guilty according to the Gospel. The law was not given for man to obtain righteousness but to

show that man needs a Saviour. Paul writes to the Galatian church, 'Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ'.

Now we come to the last group. This group is **the nation of the Jews – 2:17-29**.

How will the Jew stand up before the Judge? Surely he cannot be accused like the Gentiles. His boast is that his claim is based on what God has entrusted to him. First, he claims to have 'the law', those instructions for upright living which God gave to the nation. He learns from the law and teaches this, but, the apostle says, you can't keep it! He asks, do you steal? do you commit adultery? Do you even commit sacrilege by following idols? Through breaking the law, Paul charges them, you dishonour God, 2:23. In 3:20 Paul says, 'by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in His (God's) sight'. With serious regret this claim of the Jew is rejected.

Another claim is raised. The nation claims that it has the specific rite of circumcision. What other nation can claim separation from the 'flesh' and the world unto God? The apostle points out that circumcision is only of benefit if you keep the law. Otherwise it is meaningless; it need never have been applied, verse 25. If there is only dependence on the physical rite, then the Judge must declare a guilty verdict. There is now a wonderful change since the Lord Jesus has come. 'He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God', verses 28-29. The Jew, as with all others, is guilty.

We begin chapter 3 with **questions** or mitigating circumstances for the Judge to consider.

1. Verses 1-2. If the Jew is on the same level as the Gentile and condemned, what advantage does he have? Yes, he has the Holy Scriptures, the Old Testament. In chapter 11 the apostle points out that God has not cast away His people and Paul deals with their future blessing as a nation. This does not change their present failure.
2. Verses 3-4. Next the suggestion is made that not everyone has believed, therefore the whole purpose of God in salvation will fail. No, says the apostle, unlike man, God is totally true and does not fail those who put their trust in Him because others do not believe.
3. Verses 5-6. Yet a further query is raised. The fact that we are sinners only commends God's righteous action. If that is so, does not it suggest that God is unrighteous when His wrath is against sinful man? 'God forbid', says the apostle, verse 6. Of course, God does not need our sins to bring praise to Himself. If that were so, how could He judge the world?
4. This leads on to a further suggestion in verse 8, 'Let us do evil that good may come'. No, says the apostle, that is absolutely false and anyone basing their position on that will rightly be judged by a just God.

So we are brought to the final stage. In the court room, the Gentile idolaters have been examined and found to be far from the standards which God requires. The moralists, those who condemn the kind of living followed by the idolaters, are found to be just as failing in their standards – they do the same! Lastly the Jewish nation, with all their benefits, has shown that it can have no argument against the judgement of God. Their judgement also is just.

So we find **the whole world guilty before God, 3:9-20**.

The apostle sums it all up by a number of descriptive quotations from Psalms 5, 10 and 14 and from Isaiah 59. First we read the general statement that 'there is none righteous', verse 10. This is emphasised by the force of the words added twice, 'no, not one'. How can any one of us today have a better claim? We have to include ourselves in this general statement of guilt. Let us look quickly at the following verses.

Verse 11. There is none that understandeth. This term is closely allied to the word in 1:21, 'foolish'. There was no readiness to link the facts they learned with the God they knew. They did not understand and were foolish. There was not one that sought after God.

Verse 12. What we are, leads to what we do. 'They have all gone out of the way'. Isaiah 53:6, gave the prophet's comment; 'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way'; he then finishes with a note of both sadness and triumph, 'and the LORD hath laid on Him (the Lord Jesus) the iniquity of us all'. The progression continues 'they are together become unprofitable'. How useless to God is everyone in the condition of sin. We can never do good, or become profitable.

Next we have two verses on what we are. The throat is like an open sepulchre, full of that which speaks of death. As to the tongue, they continually smoothed their language with guile as hypocrites, yet it is no more than cursing and bitterness.

Then, where do we go? Verses 15 and 16 describe a path of aggression, destruction and misery. How can any of this be of honour to God?

Lastly, verses 19 and 20 show us what the law was intended to do. It was to open the eyes and shut the mouth before God. When our eyes are opened to understand God, to see God's purpose, we cannot say a further word in self defence. We can do nothing of ourselves. We only learn that we are sinners before a holy God and have to bow in shame. We understand that all the world is guilty before God, verse 19.

It is only when we get to this point that we can get to the good news of the next verse, but we will have to leave this for our next message. Yes, praise God, our consideration is not the end of the story. The apostle says, 'But now...' It is only when man has reached his extremity, guilty before God, that he begins to understand God's opportunity. There is a way back to God! An important way, the only way, a way fully satisfying to God Himself, and it is through the life and death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. As we continue to go on through this letter to the Romans, we will learn of what has been done for us and how we can rejoice in the eternal blessing provided for us. How great is our God!

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