

Romans: Verse-By-Verse

Romans 3:9-20

Student Notes:

Wrapping up Paul's argument: Verse 9: "What shall we conclude then?"

- **A Quick Summary**

Chapter one -- the clear sinfulness of the majority of the Gentile world. 2:1-6: A look at the hypocritical stance of the moralizers (be they Jewish or Gentile). Third: The self-conscious and self-assured Jews.

Verse 9: "What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin."

Asking the same question again: Romans 2:25 -- "Circumcision has value if you observe the law". Romans 3:1: "Is there any advantage to being a Jew" – he said, "Yes, in every way." The latest: "Are we any better?" ... "Not at all".

Jewish privilege of revelation and responsibility for that revelation? Yes! God's favoritism by virtue of circumcision and the Law? No!

- **Sin As A Power Versus Sin As Behavior:**

Paul: Both Jews and non-Jews (barbarians) are both under the power of sin. See: Galatians 3:22:

"... The Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe." John R.W. Stott: "Paul appears almost to personify sin as a cruel tyrant who holds the human race imprisoned in guilt and under Judgment. Sin is on top of us, weighs us down, and is a crushing burden." John R.W. Stott

Paul concludes both Jews and Gentiles are under the power of sin. He uses quotes from seven Old Testament passages to prove this: The first quote is probably from Ecclesiastes, the next five from the Psalms and the last from Isaiah.

- **"A String Of Pearls": (Rabbinical Proof-texts)**

Paul's use of a popular, ancient pattern of stringing together fragments of verses in order to prove a point. Commonly used by the rabbis.

A quick look at verses 10-18 with references:

10 As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one; 11 there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. (Ecclesiastes 7:20)

12 All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” (Psalm 14:1-3; Psalm 53:1-3)

13 “Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.” (Psalm 5:9) “The poison of vipers is on their lips.” (Psalm 140:3)

14 “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.” (Psalm 10:7)

15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood; 16 ruin and misery mark their ways, 17 and the way of peace they do not know.” (Isaiah 59:7; cf. Proverbs 1:16)

18 “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (Psalm 36:1)

Paul’s whole point is to show how “... Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin.” Three serious conclusions. (John Stott’s outline)

The Character of Sin: Ungodliness

Both the introductory and concluding references speak to the character of sin in all human life. The first reference says, “There is no one righteous, not even one.” The last reference says, “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Sin as “ungodliness”: The essence of sin is ungodliness – and the basic definition of ungodliness is the lack of God in our lives. Ungodliness is the condition of our lives when God is no longer our primary concern.

John Stott: “Sin is the revolt of the self against God, the dethronement of God with a view to the enthronement of oneself. Ultimately, sin is self-deification, the reckless determination to occupy the throne which belongs to God alone”. John R.W. Stott

The Pervasiveness of Sin

What Paul’s quotes say about humanity:

- “There is no one righteous, not even one.”
- “There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.”
- “All have turned away, they have together become worthless.”
- “There is no one who does good, not even one.”

- **The Second “String Of Pearls”: Physicality**

While the first string puts the spotlight on the inward lack of godliness, the second section shows the practical outcome of enthronement of self without regard to God’s commandments.

In each of the verses, starting with verse 13 there is a physical description connected to sinfulness. Hence we have throats, tongues, lips, mouths, feet, and eyes.

- Our throats are open graves
- Our tongues practice deceit.
- Our lips have the poison of vipers on them.
- Our mouths are full of cursing and bitterness”. (See: James 3:9)
- Our feet are swift to shed blood (pursue violence)

In God’s wisdom he gave humans these various capacities in order to glorify Him and serve others. Under the power of sin’s influence these faculties are used to rebel against God and bring harm to other humans.

- **Total Depravity -- Better Explained:**

J. I. Packer: “On the one hand no one is as bad as he or she might be, while on the other, no action of ours is as good as it should be.”

The Universality of Sin

All humans are under the power of this malignant force in our world – whether Jew or Gentile.

- “There is no one righteous, not even one.”
- “There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.”
- “All have turned away, they have together become worthless.”
- “There is no one who does good, not even one.”

2xs: “All have gone their own way”

4xs: “No one is righteous”

2xs: “Not even one”

Paul: The Jews will not escape the judgment; they will be included, just as their Gentile counterparts.

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 his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.”

Verse 19 & 20 has the feel of a courtroom experience. (See: Zechariah 3:1) The Jews and Gentiles are standing as defendants. The universality of their ungodliness has been presented by the prosecutor, using these seven Old Testament quotes.

The result? “Every mouth is silenced and the world is held accountable to God”. That’s the point Paul has been moving towards for more than two chapters:

1. The idolatrous and immoral Gentiles are “without excuse”.
2. The moralists, whether Jews or Gentiles, equally “have no excuse”.
3. The Jews have no special immunity from judgment – despite their special place in salvific history.
4. The entire human race, without exception, has no possibility of defense.

Why? All humans have had some knowledge of God – whether the special revelation of the Jews or the general revelation of the Gentiles.

Yet, all have disregarded that knowledge ... either by outright denial, or in the case of the Jews ... by self-aware pride in the Law. Still, all are guilty before God.

Thus, verse 20 indicates, “Therefore no one will be declared righteous...”