

WHEN LOVE CARES ENOUGH TO SAY NO

Romans 2:17-3:20

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Rather than reading the Scripture in completion at the beginning, we will go through it section-by-section today. As we have noted beginning with Romans 1:18, the Apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is giving a diagnosis of the human condition. Before we can proceed to the remedy which God offers, we have to understand what the problem is that God seeks to correct.

In Romans 1:18–32, we have diagnosed for us the non-religious world which has given up the knowledge of God and, therefore, God has given it up to immorality, to perversion, and to pervasive moral sickness.

In Romans 2:1–16, Paul bridges in to look at the person who claims a certain degree of morality and religiousness and says God, in His principles of judgment when He judges all men—the nonreligious as well as the religious—is going to judge by the tests of truth, of works, and of impartiality. No one can successfully meet those tests. There is only one—Jesus our Lord—who has successfully met the test of truth and of good works before God, and has proven faithful to God. God has not shown partiality to Him, for in His early life He was despised and rejected of men, abandoned by God on the cross.

In Romans 2:17–3:8, Paul comes directly to look at what was in his day the religious person, called here the Jew. I think we would do something wrong to the text, however, if we understood that word “Jew” only in the modern context of what we mean by Jewishness—being a Jew ethnically. What is meant here is a person who puts his reliance on a form of religion, a form even of biblical religion, if you will, and does not have a real saving faith in Christ Jesus. The

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beginning premise of Paul's letter to the Romans in laying down what constitutes the basis of our salvation and our walk with God is not a very positive statement. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God." This last section, 2:17–3:8, and then the culmination in 3:9-20, simply puts, if you will, the last demolition piece into motion. The last nail is pegged in the coffin so if one has any hope of being right with God on the basis of works, that should be destroyed by the time we're finished with this passage.

I say that's not a very positive thought. I believe that the gospel is a very positive message of God to us. It is good news, not bad news. Why then does Paul take so much time talking about the bad news? And about the lostness of ourselves in God's presence? It's because Christians, apostles, Jesus himself, has a love that is tough enough to say, "You're not ok." A love tough enough to point out our limitations and our failures in order that we might come to the light and be all right.

I think of a person I used to work around a number of years ago—not in this locality at all, so don't think of anybody when I mention this. If you've ever seen the advertisements on television which make Right Guard and Arrid Extra Dry important workaday ingredients of life, you would know that this particular person that I worked close to was in great need of these saving instruments. All of us, however, loved this warm, gentle-hearted, kind, gracious human being who was difficult to be near within a twenty- to twenty-five-foot radius. Yet none of us had the courage to ever come to him directly and say to him as the commercial television would indicate that we should do. As a result, he went on, and still probably to this day people are staying away from him, and this friendly, good man is wondering why. We did not have a love tough enough to be honest. A love courageous enough to say, "Here's the deficiency. Correct it and go on and be whole."

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I find this being courageous rather difficult and sometimes difficult to accept. When I preached the first sermon that I gave before a preaching class in seminary, I recall what a masterful job I thought I had done in preaching to my twenty other student colleagues in the class. I had shown them what true preaching was all about. In fact, I chose a sermon on Elijah so that it would be filled with fire. My understanding of preaching was: Get up there and say it—loud, high, and fast. I recall, with chagrin and shock, that the people in that class who were tough enough to be honest would come back to me and say, “Who do you think you were? What is this person up there that we don’t know speaking to us in a voice we’ve never heard before?” Did that cause me pause to sit down and examine what I was doing! I obviously recognize, and you do too, that unless people are tough enough with their love to correct us, we’ll just go on being average. So the gospel comes to us in this way today to say, “You’re not ok.” But it, fortunately, doesn’t stop there. If all it did was say, “You’re not ok,” then we’d really have a terrible problem. And maybe, I think, some circles of the Christian church have not understood that the gospel does get past Romans 3:20. It’s possible to spend all of our time in that sphere of thought and say over and over again, “You’re not ok. You’ll never be pleasing to God. You’ll always be a failure. You can’t relate.” You say that long enough, you’ll begin to believe it.

God has a purpose, however, in saying you’re not ok. As we look especially at Paul’s references to the Jew, 2:17–3:8, we find him saying three things about they’re not being ok. He notes first of all, in verses 17 through 24, that:

I. There is a difference between saying and doing.

“Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an

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instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—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? You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: ‘God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you’” (Romans 2:17–24, NIV).

Here is what the religious person is saying. In relationship to God, he’s saying five things:

A. “I am a Jew.” In our vernacular, he would be saying, “I am Assemblies of God. I am a Baptist. I am a Catholic. I am Episcopalian. I am a Presbyterian. I am a pride of the denomination.” As though that affiliation with a religious body somehow grants us standing with God. It doesn’t mean a thing in terms of our standing with God. The only thing it may mean is simply that we associate with other Christians in order to have fellowship and better get the work of God done in our world. We can’t do it alone, so we need to work with other believers. But the pride of denomination and affiliation doesn’t mean a thing in God’s eyes in terms of our affiliation. He couldn’t care less whether you are Assemblies of God or Baptist or Episcopalian or Presbyterian, if that’s all you have.

“I am a Jew.”

B. A second way of boasting in relationship to God is saying: “I rely upon the Law. That’s my standard. I stand upon the Word of God. This is my Book—King James Version, or the RSV, or twenty-five other translations. It is because I’m Bible-based that I take my stand in God. I need the test of orthodoxy. When it comes time for me to take a doctrinal examination as to what I believe, I’m able to correctly interpret and understand the nature of the Trinity, the nature of sin in the human race, the nature of Jesus Christ, and the union between humanity and divinity

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brought together in the person of Christ. I understand the work and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in terms of orthodoxy and having a biblically-based faith. I meet the test. Look at how right I am!”

In terms of our relationship with God, we will see that one cannot base His relationship with God on the contents simply of what he says is truth or what he claims is his means of salvation. I’m not saved simply because I have biblical knowledge or correct doctrine.

If that isn’t enough, if it’s not my denomination or my surpassing excellent knowledge of the Bible, then what else can I boast of?

C. “I can boast of my relationship with God.” Paul indeed notes this in verse 17. As I look around and see other persons who are religious or who are following God, I see that I am more spiritual than they. If others were just as spiritual as I am, how wonderful a world it would be! Or the person says, on the opposite extreme—and I think this happens maybe a lot in our day as a reaction to those who go along saying, “I’m more spiritual...if we could just do something spiritual”—then an opposite reaction emerges that says: “I’m not a phony like that person over there. They’re trying to be spiritual. I’m not phony. I am honest. I’m an honest doubter. I’m an honest agnostic. I’m an honest critic.” Whether you’re claiming spirituality or honesty, in that kind of fashion it is the elevation of pride.

D. “I know God’s will.” What a tremendous statement. All of us who long to be close to God long to know His will. Here’s a great statement: “I’m thoroughly stuffed with biblical knowledge, and I know how I should relate Scripture into my life in terms of knowing God’s will. I am acquainted with the original languages, or I have heard the best speakers. I’ve heard the best cassette tapes and books. I know His will!”

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E. And I approve what is excellent. “I have a sense of value. I know when I hear a sermon whether it is a good sermon or a bad sermon. When I hear a piece of music, whether it meets the finest of my discriminating tastes or whether it does not. I have a finely-tuned sense of values. Therefore, in relationship to others, what else can I be but a guide to the blind, a light to those in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children”—whether “children” here is literal or symbolic. It’s probably symbolic, standing for new persons in the faith. “I am so in with God that, quite naturally, my ministry is to correct others and help them come to that same lofty position that I’m in.”

There’s something extremely subtle going on here with Paul. He is not saying, on the one hand, that it is wrong to be a Jew. It is not saying it is wrong to have a relationship with God or to know God’s will or to approve what is excellent or to be a teacher. We need teachers and communicators and correctors and the like. The subtlety of this whole text is that a person can come along and believe all these things and not truly see themselves in an honest kind of a way, so that they rely on attainment rather than upon a simple faith and trust in God. Paul found this so in his day in the religious world.

All of the above qualities which we noted have good aspects to them. But Paul’s point is simply this: If the most religious people are sinning, if the person who is proud of his denomination relies on the Law, if the most religious person is a sinner—which he articulates that he is—you teach others; you’re incapable of teaching yourself. You tell others not to worship idols; you rob temples—a phrase evidently linked with cutthroat business of taking merchandise from a heathen temple and marketing it. If the most religious sin, then Paul has proved his point. He is saying, in effect, that all the world can be gathered up before God as sinners. Because if the people who

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claim to know Him the most and have the most highly-tuned sense of ethics and religiousness fail God, then all mankind fails.

He finds in the doing aspect, verses 19–24, that these religious ones are untaught by their own teaching and they wind up dishonoring the God in whose Law they are boasting. Isaiah 52:5 is quoted: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” We need not think that this is a peculiar Scripture reserved for the Jewish synagogue alone. Unfortunately, it happens from time to time in the church of Jesus Christ. It is a constant concern of mine in this church, among this fellowship of people, that our conduct and our teaching is done in such a way that God’s name is not blasphemed in the world. You have been acquainted with those ministries and those persons who engage in a very public way with the proclamation of the gospel, yet whose conduct lacks so much in terms of what is actually being communicated. In effect, their preaching and their ministry becomes a greater reproach for Christ. This is the first thing Paul says in the religious world—a lack of correspondence between saying and doing.

The second thing he notes in verses 25 through 29 is that:

II. There is a difference between outward righteousness or outward marks of religion and the inward mark of spiritual relationship with God.

He traces this outward-inward contrast through the figure of circumcision. “Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. If those who are not circumcised keep the law’s requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision

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of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God" (Romans 2:25–29, NIV).

Paul's probing of the Jew, the religious person who's relying on the Law and saying, "Your actions are not consistent with what you're saying," immediately brings up a defensive argument intellectually. Regardless of my obedience or disobedience, I have a mark in my body which testifies that I bear a special, peculiar relationship with God. And this, for men in the Jewish world, was manifest in circumcision. When God first gave circumcision, it was to Abraham (Genesis 17). He made a covenant with Abraham that He would bless him. When you make a covenant in the Bible, one way that you ratify the covenant is to have the shedding of blood. Some living thing must be cut, and blood must be shed as a reminder that that covenant is sacred. We today, when you bought your house and made a covenant with your mortgage contractor, you signed a whole bunch of escrow papers, but they didn't ask you for your blood. They will do that as you make the payments.

This mark upon the body was in effect God's stamp of ownership upon the male. It was a way of saying that in his very private person, a part of him accessible to himself, he bore continually the mark of God's ownership upon the deepest levels of his being. God even stamped His ownership upon his sexuality. It was a very personal and private matter. It was a mark that the covenant which God had made would be kept. It was a testimony that there would be obedience on both sides. God would obey—or be faithful to—His Word, and man would obey what God's Word had called for.

What Paul is essentially saying in this passage is that as time went along, circumcision came to mean nothing because the covenant was broken over and over again on man's part. Therefore, it

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is an empty symbol. It is like a label on the outside of a product that means nothing now that the product itself has been changed.

We sometimes think in Madison Avenue advertising that it is labels that sell products. I'm not so sure that's the case. I think the product has a great deal with selling itself. For example, many of you buy Coca-Cola. There is a special taste in Coke that you may like. So since Coca-Cola does such a great job in advertising, it's a natural thing to pick Coke. It's the most widely-selling soft drink. What if all of a sudden the makers of Coca-Cola decided in their factory to begin injecting just a little dash of lye soap in every bottle that went out from the market? Soon people would quit asking for Coca-Cola. Or if Kleenex began adding just a bit of sandpaper to their facial tissue, you would quit asking for Kleenex. You would ask for facial tissue. For it's the product that truly carries the label. The label doesn't mean anything more than what is actually contained in the product.

Paul is saying this to the religious world of his day. It's not the label that you wear that testifies to reality. It is what is going on inwardly. That's why he says the outward label of circumcision means nothing. Where a person without circumcision inwardly keeps the law of God, that is counted to him as circumcision for God's mark of authenticity. His mark of approval and ownership is upon that person's life.

So he comes to this conclusion: He is a real Jew who is one inwardly. It's a tremendously exciting thing to read this and then look at the news columns today over the debate that still rages in Israel over what constitutes a Jew. Is he a Jew by means of nationality or simply by means of religion or what? Paul comes along and says, inspired by the Spirit, he is a Jew who is one inwardly. And, as he will indicate in Galatians 3, Christ is the heir of the promises made to

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Abraham—and he who is Christ’s offspring is, therefore, a recipient of the promises that God made to this man Abraham. An inward circumcision, a circumcision of the heart.

What does this mean? In Scripture, the heart is not the biological heart. It is, to me, the real me, where only I and God know. It’s beyond what is accessible to anyone else, even the person closest to me. It is my true inner-self, out of which radiates my thought life, my emotions, my will. It is in this area of life, the private me, that God seeks to brand me with His ownership. To cut away that part of me which is not of Him and to put His stamp of approval on my life. “He is a real Jew who is one inwardly, and his praise is from God.” Paul, in verse 29, does a real play on words, which is missing from the English language. The word “Jew” itself literally means “praise.” It comes from the word “Judah.” When Judah was born—this child of Jacob—his mother, in bearing him said, “This time I will praise the Lord.” That’s this baby coming into the world. His mother is saying as the baby comes and she looks at it, “This time I will praise the Lord. His name is Judah. Praise.” Yeas later when Jacob—Judah’s father—is dying, Jacob on his deathbed, calls Judah in with all the other brothers and blesses Judah and says, ”Judah, your brothers shall praise you.” So here’s a remarkable man. His mother says as he is born, “This time I will praise the Lord.” His father later, as he looks at him, calls him “Praise.”

Paul is saying here: “He who is a praise is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—spiritual, not literal. His praise, his Jewishness, his Judah-ness is not from men, but from God.”

I would like to give you a new expression. God praise you! How better that is than the alternative which we so often hear in the world. How better it is than maybe the overworked slogan, God bless you—although that’s a good and helpful thing, because God does bless us. But to say to a person, “God praise you!” There is so much in your life that you know can be damned, so much

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that is wrong. But God wants to come along, and does come along through Jesus Christ, and do something right in the heart which makes Him able to say to us, “God praise you!” and you able to turn around to someone else and say, “God praise you!” It’s both a prayer and a blessing.

The third problem in the religious person—that Paul notes where he must come in with this tough love and love honest enough to point out wrong—is to say to the Jew, to the religious person, who is not relying truly upon God:

III. There is a difference between human thinking and divine thinking.

In verses 1 through 8 of chapter 3, we’re going to see this. It is so subtle and difficult a passage that I’m not sure I understand it completely myself. But I think I understand it enough that I can share it with you. It comes from a kind of a context where Paul is putting together in this book the result of many a sermon he has preached in the synagogues. He realizes that there are real arguments that are going to be advanced by his listeners to what he is saying. He’ll cover some of these arguments more basically in Romans 9, 10, and 11. He summarizes a few of these arguments in a very quick way in verses 1 through 8. Paul is thinking back to those times in the synagogues where his address is interrupted by someone who protested with a saying, “If that’s true, then what about this?” So three times in these eight verses, this imaginary interrogator arises to address Paul.

A. The first time he arises is this: “What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?” (Romans 3:1, NIV). That’s not coming from Paul himself. That’s coming from somebody in the audience.

“Paul, if you’re saying we’ve blown it in terms of the Law, and circumcision doesn’t do us any good, what advantage do we have anyway?” The motive behind this kind of question, Paul’s listeners are sitting there and hearing Paul say that the moral Gentile is better off than the

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immoral Jew. If this is the case, then what becomes of the advantages which have belonged to the Jew—his circumcision and his special standing with God? The spirit behind this question is really one of lawlessness. It's a kind of a spirit that's saying no matter what we do, we're still better off because of our special relationship with God, which began with Abraham. No matter what we do we're better off than the most noble person who is outside the synagogue, outside the religious faith. We have a special standing with God. What advantage has the Jew? Certainly we have this advantage.

This kind of a spirit, by the way, has not been absent from the Church as well. A saying, "No matter what we do as Christians, we're still better off. We're automatically covered with God's insurance policy." It's kind of a lawless spirit which can emerge.

What advantage has the Jew? Paul simply says in response, "Much in every way!" (verse 2, NIV). The religious person has much advantage. But it's not an advantage in terms of a privilege—of being in a standing with God and being worse than everybody else, and God picks you up and says, "I'm preferential towards you." It is an advantage because of the responsibility that God has given: the oracles of the Law, the giving of the Word. Paul will develop in Romans 9:4,5 a more complete exposition by saying, "To the Jewish people, God gave the promises. God gave the Messiah." All of this is bound up with their Jewishness. So the question is raised, "Is there any advantage?" Yes, there's an advantage. There's a marvelous advantage to being around and being a part of this institution which God has made with all His promises and covenants.

B. Then the second question arises. What if some are unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? In other words, the interrogator of Paul is saying, "When God made the covenant with Abraham, He promised that He would be faithful to it. If some have been unfaithful (and Paul will go on to say, by the way, that all have been unfaithful) does that mean

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that God has to take back His Word?" The idea being, if God has to take back His Word, then God can't be faithful. God could have anticipated that some would have said no to Him and, therefore, would have made the promise conditional in nature. When asked, "Would God be unfaithful?" Paul responds, "No, it's unthinkable that God would be unfaithful. Rather, unfaithfulness is always our fault and never God's fault."

He quotes from Psalm 51 to manifest it. When David sinned, he did not come to God and say, "God, You gave me a human nature and You made me live in this world where I must make choices. Look at the environment from which I came. I came up a very long and hard way. I can't help that in the progress of circumstances, Bathsheba happened to move next door. That's Your fault, God, for putting her there." No, there's no attribution of blame toward God. It is our cognition that when sin and error has occurred, "Lord, that's my responsibility."

I find this spirit sometimes comes up within the Church. From time to time, we see people who have walked with God and who then have failed. When we see someone who was really walking with the Lord and then failed and gone astray, it's a temptation that comes to say, "Lord, that's what Christianity is like. If that's what it all is, then I'm not sure I want it." There is a difference between the faithfulness and the righteousness of God and the unfaithfulness and the unrighteousness of man. Even religious persons. It is unthinkable to accuse God of being faithless. He is going to be faithful to His promises no matter what. Paul will give a much fuller exposition of this in Romans 9, 10, and 11, where he'll show that God's going to fulfill His promises to the Jews no matter what. All Israel is going to be saved. For a temporary time, He must set aside the promise in order to fulfill it through us that God has not let go of His ancient Word. God will be completely vindicated.

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C. The third objection that has been raised by the interrogator is this: “If our wickedness serves to show the justice of God, what can we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us?”

Here is a person who has entered and says, “I think what happens is my unrighteousness shows by contrast how righteous God is. I give God a chance to demonstrate His great faithfulness when I am unfaithful. How can He ever show His faithfulness if I’m not unfaithful? And how can He ever show His righteousness if I’m not unrighteous? So what I’ll do is I will sin all the more in order to show how really great God is.”

I don't know if anyone really thinks in those terms any more. I think Paul so devastated that argument that it's rough for anybody to think that way again, so sin doesn't seem as alive, maybe, as it was in that day. But what is so really crucial is to have Paul come along and say, “People have accused my doctrine of being this way. The justification of faith. Some have accused me of saying, ‘Sin all you want because God will in the end make it all right.’” No, justification by faith. God forbid that He'd ever allow a person to live loosely in his life. Those of you with this type of argument, Paul says, don't need to be refuted. Their condemnation is just. Anybody who would think that way doesn't deserve an answer.

So on three counts he has approached the problem of the religious person. The discrepancy between what he's saying and what he's doing. The discrepancy between what is outward and what is inward. The discrepancy between what man is thinking and what God is thinking and doing.

So Paul comes up with the conclusions in Romans 3:9–20. He asks two questions: Are there any exempt from the power of sin? Is there anyone in this room who is exempt from the power of sin? Jew or Gentile? No, none at all. In verses 10–18 he quotes a series of seven passages from the Old Testament. He strings them together to manifest the point. Up to this time he has only

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talked from experience about man's sinfulness. But now added to that experience of man in sin is the Word of God which testifies to this very fact. Verses 10–12 speak of how sin affects our relationship to God. "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God" (Romans 3:10–11, NIV).

We look at this and say, "I know some people who are seeking for God, who are trying to be righteous." But what Paul is really saying in this passage is in terms of God's understanding of righteousness and in terms of God's understanding of knowledge, no one has met the test. Maybe a better way to really understand the real impact of what he is saying is, "No one is flawless. No, not one." For that is the standard of God's righteousness. A flawless life. No one seeks for God. This is even true when it comes to matters of the Christian life, where prayer often for the Christian becomes the very most difficult feature of the Christian life and the one area where it's most easy for us to feel condemnation and blame. Because there's that sinful nature that wrestles with the new nature that Christ has given to us and pulls us away from seeking God. In our heart, we want to seek God. But in terms of actual fact in our prayer, we find Paul saying a very solid truth. No one seeks after God.

In verses 13–14 he notes the destructive power of sin in our personality. "Their throats are open graves" (Romans 3:13, NIV). Think of that a moment. A graphic description, saying that there's nothing coming from the human life. What is coming out is an odor. It is offensive. Language is offensive. There are cutting words that are spoken. "The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness" (Romans 3:13–14, NIV). Then there's the effect of sin in spoiling human relationships. "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know" (Romans 3:15–16, NIV). It's culminated in an irreverence toward God. Verse 18: "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (NIV). The

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apostle, in drawing this picture, does not mean that each of these characteristics is found equally developed in every human individual. But rather in seed form or in latent form, they all are there. It only takes certain events to trigger them and bring them to full flower.

In verses 19–20, Paul asks if all are under the power of sin, then what is the purpose of the Law, the Law of God which says, “Thou shalt not”? What is the purpose of the Law in all of this? The Law is like laying a ruler down on a sheet of paper after we have tried to draw a straight line. By laying the ruler down, we compare the line which we drew with the line that could be really drawn if it were straight. We find out that we have failed to draw the line as God wanted it to be drawn. The Law simply demonstrates our inability to be righteous before God with our own works.

Paul notes in verse 19 the following: “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” (NIV). What did he mean by this? He’s really saying that God used the Jewish people as sort of the test tube, the test case by which the whole human race is summed up and judged.

Suppose you had a desert ranch. You decided to farm it. You set aside twelve acres of your ranch. You went out and broke ground. You planted seed. You cultivated it. You then reaped it. But all you reaped was sagebrush and cactus. You know after doing it with twelve acres there’s no use to going out and planting the rest of the ranch, because the results are going to be the same in all the other acreage.

God has given us in the Old Testament a demonstration that in the beginning He took in the tribes that belonged to Jacob, Israel—twelve acres of humanity. He planted them. He cultivated them. He sent them prophets and wise men and scribes. Finally He sent His own Son, and Him

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they rejected. The whole tribe brought only sagebrush and cactus. God could have repeatedly sent Christ into the human race to different tribes, to different nationalities, in different centuries of time, but because there is something that is common to humanity—whether Jew or Gentile—God only needed to do it once to establish the point. The Law does not save. It can do nothing for us. “Therefore,” verse 20 reads, “no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law” (NIV). The Living Bible puts it very eloquently in saying, “So you can see that no one can ever find God’s favor by being good enough. For the more we know of God’s laws, the clearer it becomes we don’t obey them for His law makes us see that we are sinners.”

Remember that Romans doesn’t close here. The next verse really gets us in to the other alternatives. But I can’t leave until we at least look at a couple of applications because Paul didn’t end this letter at 3:20. We’ve got to do some jumping for a moment.

First of all I would like to say to any person here who has never personally received Jesus Christ that there is something really tremendous that is in this Scripture today for you. It is this: If you are waiting to be good enough to invite Jesus Christ into your life, you will never be able to do that. Because you’ll never be good enough. Revelation 3:20 says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone will open the door...” We see the artist rendering of kind of a garden scene. But it doesn’t show you what’s behind the door. What I think by looking at the picture is, Here is a nice tidy house. The person on the inside has supper set on the table. They’ve just been waiting for the Lord to knock. They’ve cleaned the house all day and got it ready. Now the Lord’s knocking.

Actually, the Bible presentation of our house is anything but that. It’s a mess on the inside when the Lord knocks. The fact is, we can never get it totally clean for Him to come into our lives. By

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the time we get one room of our life in order, the other one has gone back to being a mess. So don't wait until you're good enough for Jesus Christ. He'll come to you just as you are.

For those of you who have expressed faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, I want to say that the apostle indicates to us we not only begin by grace, but in our Christian life we continue by grace. One of the hardest things in the Christian life is to know what to do when we have failed God, when we have not kept house as clean for the Holy Spirit as we felt we should be keeping it clean. We're ready to substitute performance as the basis of whether or not God is approving our life. We're ready to substitute performance for grace. God is saying to you as a Christian, "You can still draw near to God when you've failed." That is the time when you need to draw near to God. It is His salvation by a different principle, other than the principle of Law and works, that applies. As a Christian, sometimes we find what we found as a non-Christian. That when we have not kept house or done good—that is alienating us from God—that is the very time we need God and the time when He wants to bring fellowship to us through the Person of His Son Christ Jesus.

Can you imagine with me just for a moment. Imagine Romans 1:18–3:20 was written just before Christ was born. As Paul writes verse twenty, no human being will be justified in His sight by works of the Law since through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. At that point God has in respect for the Law, hung up hope for the human race and has said, "By that principle man has demonstrated to himself something I have known all along. By perfect obedience, by doing good, you will never be acceptable to Me. So now into the world comes My only Son who will show you how to be acceptable and righteous before God. Follow Him and He'll give you another way."

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The Lord says that to us again today. There's something other than your works. There is God's Son, Jesus Christ, who will give you a righteousness that you could not earn. He will literally give it to you as you trust. And He will keep on giving it to you all your life.

Closing Prayer

We began in worship today by lifting our hearts to praise You and by saying, "Morning has broken," and we praise You that the morning indeed has broken in our lives through Jesus Christ our Lord. Now that we have praised You, we hear You through Your Word saying to us that You praise us. God praise You. We recognize as You say that that there is indeed nothing in ourselves which has accomplished this. It is the free gift of Jesus made available to us, giving to us a righteousness and a peace and a joy we could have never earned. I pray, Lord Jesus, for all of us, that we might really grow in grace and not rely upon our own performance as a basis of knowing whether or not we'll really relate to You. It is through Your righteousness imparted to us that then makes our performance not a matter of earning merit with You, but a way of saying thanks to You for all You've done. This we ask in the Lord's Name. Amen.