

Week 14

Sin: Its Nature and Character

Key Verses

Romans 3:23 "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Romans 3:10-12 "As it is written, 'There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.'"

+ Introduction: Bad News Before Good News

Most of us are familiar with "Good News – Bad News" jokes. In case you're not, here are a couple of examples:

To the head of the athletic department:

Good news: The girls' softball team finally won a game!

Bad news: They beat the boys' softball team.

Wife: I have good news and bad news.

Husband: I'm busy, just give me the good news.

Wife: The airbags in your new BMW work great!

As we consider the topic of sin, we quickly discover our need to understand the bad news of sin and its consequences before fully appreciating the good news of God's provision for it. Every man, according to the world's law, is considered innocent until he is proven guilty. But the Word of God takes the opposite approach. Man, because of his actions and inherited sin nature, is guilty until he is declared innocent.

Consider two popular evangelism tools, the Four Spiritual Laws and the Roman Road gospel presentation. According to Law #2, man is sinful and separated from God. Only when this is accepted can someone appreciate God's provision for man's sin, which is the theme of Law #3. Similarly, in the Roman Road presentation, the problem of sin (Romans 3:23, 3:10) is presented, as well as the consequences of man's sin (Romans 5:12, 6:23) before the solution is offered (Romans 5:8) and man's response explained (Romans 10:9-10).

In this lesson, we will focus on Romans 3, and see that in it, Paul summarizes the condition of every human apart from the grace of God in Jesus Christ. And, as J.M. Boice says, "It is not a pretty picture."¹

A History of Sin and Rebellion

As we will learn, "The history of the human race as presented in Scripture is primarily a history of man in a state of sin and rebellion against God, and of God's plan of redemption to bring man back to Himself."²

Indeed, taken as a whole, the Bible clearly indicates the "devastating effects of sin and the hopelessness of man to solve his own sin problem. Our understanding of the doctrine of sin is therefore essential to our understanding – and appreciation – of God's remedy for it."³

+ What Is Sin?

The word "sin" occurs at least 400 times in the Bible. Depending on the specific Hebrew or Greek word used, "sin" may be translated as crookedness, rebellion, trespass, debt, lawlessness, godlessness, injustice, or wickedness. One of the most common Greek words for "sin" is *hamartia*, which means "missing the mark," and refers to an archer missing the bullseye on a target. This word picture helps us understand that sin is essentially a failure to live up to God's standard or to stay on the path in which God desires that we walk.

Personal Sin

Sin is directly opposite to all that is good in the character of God. Therefore, God hates sin as it is a contradiction of His moral character and of His holiness. Sin is often defined as "any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude, or nature." Therefore, sin includes:

- Individual acts – such as stealing or lying
- Attitudes – such as jealousy, anger, or selfishness
- Our moral nature – who we are as persons.

Romans 3:23 states that "*all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" The words "fall short" mean "to come short" or "to lack." Because we are sinners, we

- lack any spiritual good in ourselves;
- lack the ability to do anything that, in itself, will please God;
- lack the ability to come to God in our own strength.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, in a sermon on the character of sin, sheds valuable light on this for us:

- Sin is a want of conformity to the will of God; sin is disobedience to God's command. Sin is a forgetfulness of the obligations of the relation which exists between the creature and the Creator. This is the very essence of sin."

- “It clearly proves how deeply evil is fixed in man, when we reflect that sin is in the very heart of man. Man loves sin. Sin is not an accident to man, a ditch into which he falls because he cannot help it, but sin is the subject of man’s deliberate preference. Man selects evil and rejects good.” ⁴

Our Sin Nature: Where Sin Comes From

A future lesson in this series will address the Fall of Man and what is referred to as “original sin,” but a few comments are appropriate at this point. Before the disobedience of Adam and Eve, sin was present in the angelic world with the fall of Satan and demons. But, with respect to the human race, the first sin was that of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Adam, as our first representative, sinned – and God counted us guilty.

Wayne Grudem, in *Systematic Theology*, explains that our inherited corruption, our tendency to sin, which we received from Adam, means that “as far as God is concerned, we are not able to do anything that pleases Him.” ⁵ James M. Boice explains

“In other words, the point is not merely that all people sin and are therefore sinners, though that is true. The point is that all sin because they are sinners. The original sin of Adam and the guilt of sin in some inevitable way passed upon the entire human race. The biblical view is that God holds the entire race to be guilty because of Adam’s transgression.” ⁶

Adam’s sin caused us to inherit a sinful nature, one that is opposed to God and His moral law. That is why so many biblical writers and leaders stated:

- “I know that nothing good dwells in me” (Romans 7:18).
- “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9)
- “I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Psalm 51:5).

✚ Our Failure to Face the Truth

1 JOHN 1:10 *“If we say we have not sinned, we make Him out to be a liar, and His Word is not in us.”*

Despite the fact that the Bible is clear about sin and states that we are all, without Christ, “under sin,” our human tendency is to deny or diminish the depth of our sin. We either delude ourselves by comparing ourselves with others, or we are intentionally blind to our need for a Savior.

“But God does speak to us again and again, and it is good he does because we need it. Indeed, most of us have trouble hearing him even then. To my knowledge, nothing in the Bible is repeated as frequently or as forcefully as the words summing up mankind’s sinful nature.” ⁷

Comparing Ourselves with Others

We are familiar with the illustration in which a yardstick is placed in a vertical position. At the top of the yardstick is "sinless perfection." If we ask, "Who measures up," most would say "Jesus Christ." Then if we ask who "comes close," we might name individuals such as Billy Graham or Mother Teresa. But while we may accept that we "fall short" of God's standard, we may comfort ourselves by claiming that we are "not so bad." Our tendency to run from the truth about ourselves can keep us from understanding the meaning of God's grace.

"We are willing to admit that we are not perfect, but not that we are not righteous. We are willing to admit that there are things not known to us, but not that we are devoid of all spiritual understanding. We're willing to admit that we wander off the true path at times, but not that we are not even on the right path. Instead of admitting that we are running away from God, we pretend that we are seeking him." ⁸

Blind to Our Spiritual Need

In the New Testament, the scribes and Pharisees were quick to diagnose the needs of others but blind to their own needs. They appeared righteous on the outside, but their hearts were filled with pride and pretension. Jesus often confronted the Pharisees about this. One great example is in Luke 5, as Jesus interacts with the Pharisees who complain because Jesus is eating with "tax-gatherers and sinners" (Luke 5:29-32). Jesus replies to their grumbling by saying, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick." Jesus presents Himself as a physician who has the cure for the sickness of sin, but the Pharisees think of themselves as "well" and are unwilling to admit their need. H. A. Ironside explains,

"How hard it is for the natural man to give up all pretension to righteousness and to fall down in the dust of self-judgment and repentance before God, only to find he is then in the very place where grace can meet him." ⁹

The Apostle Paul understood this about us, so he addressed this in Romans 3 by taking us into a courtroom and into a doctor's office to indicate how desperately in need we truly are.

+ God's Case Against Us

Romans 1:18 is, according to Warren Wiersbe, the "door" that leads us into God's courtroom. In Romans 1:18-3:08, Paul shows that no one is righteous – not the Jew, the Gentile, the heathen, or the self-righteous. Wiersbe writes that Paul,

"piles proof upon proof, evidence upon evidence, and Scripture upon Scripture to demonstrate the solemn fact that man has no righteousness of his own, but is both by nature and practice utterly unsuited to a God of infinite holiness whose throne is established on righteousness... Man is guilty, hopelessly so, and can do nothing to retrieve his condition." ¹⁰

In God's Courtroom

ROMANS 3:9-12 *What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, There is none righteous, not even one; There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; All have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.*

In these verses, Paul uses the word "sin" in two ways:

1. A willful act of disobedience against God
2. A power at work in human lives that causes us to behave in ways we wish we didn't

Thus, Paul describes God's case against the human race. All are on the same footing, all have sinned, and sin has affected every aspect of our personality. God finds us guilty, and brings multiple charges against us:

- All are under sin
- None righteous
- None seek God
- We have detoured and gone our own way
- We are worthless, like over-ripe fruit

We are, according to John Phillips, unrighteous, unreasonable, unresponsive, and unrepentant.

"The place has come in the epistle for the summation of God's case against the human race. The heathen, hypocrite, and Hebrew have each in turn been arraigned and found guilty. Now humanity at large is summoned to the bar of God to hear his indictment against mankind."¹¹

The Doctor's Office

ROMANS 3:13-18 *"Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving; The poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace have they not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes."*

In case the courtroom judgment has not convinced us of our guilt, Paul now takes us into "God's clinic." We are before the Great Physician who diagnoses what is wrong. Using multiple quotes from Psalms and Isaiah, Paul guides us through what Warren Wiersbe calls "an X-ray study" of the lost sinner from head to foot. The quoted verses describe what is wrong with

- Our words (v. 13-14)
- Our actions (v. 15-17)
- Our attitudes (v. 18)

The conclusion: Man, according to Romans 3:19-20, is declared both helpless and hopeless to attain to the righteousness of God. H. A. Ironside proclaims, "How hopeless is the picture. But it is the dark background on which God will display the riches of His grace in Christ Jesus!"¹²

✚ Conclusion: Introducing the Good News

ROMANS 3:21 *"But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets..."*

The greater the sinner, the greater the Savior! Following the indictment against us in the first three chapters of Romans, how refreshing it is to glimpse the beginnings of an answer to our spiritual depravity.

"Mark now these 'buts' of the Bible. Just as great doors swing on very ordinary hinges, so dramatic changes in Scripture often hinge upon this very common word."¹³

The story of the Bible is one of God fixing broken people. It is the story of God's victory over the many results of sin in the world. The rest of Romans 3 introduces God's plan of salvation. And, as John Phillips so eloquently describes it:

"There is a rift in the sky where the sun breaks through. God has a plan of salvation for sinners, even the chief of sinners."¹⁴

And that message, the Good News of salvation and new life in Christ, once received, is the message we must communicate to others. We must never shy away from the truth about sin. We must never minimize our need for the only remedy God has provided for it. And, as we are called to not only love God but to love others, we are remiss if we remain silent.

While I cannot find the original source of the following quotation, it is one that provides a fitting challenge for us:

"it is no kindness, but a terrible wrong, to hide from a criminal the sentence that must surely overtake him unless pardoned;
For a physician to conceal from a patient a cancer that will destroy him unless quickly removed;
For one acquainted with the hidden pitfalls of a path he beholds someone taking, not to warn him of his danger."

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¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans, Volume 1*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991.

² Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994.

³ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974.

⁴ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, "The Deep-Seated Character of Sin," spurgeon.org/resource-library/sermons.

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*.

⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986.

⁷ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans, Volume 1*.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ H. A. Ironside, *Romans and Galatians*, Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ John Phillips, *Exploring Romans*, Neptune, NJ: Moody Press, 1969.

¹² H. A. Ironside, *Romans and Galatians*.

¹³ John Phillips, *Exploring Romans*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*