



International Bible Study Commentary

Verse-by-Verse Bible Lessons Thru the Bible

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Lesson 5

Romans 3:9-20 Commentary New Revised Standard Version

(Romans 3:9) What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin,

God gave the Jews the oracles (the very words) of God in the Hebrew Scriptures (the Old Testament). But they did not obey the commands, laws, or words of God; instead, they invented and followed the “traditions of men,” as Jesus told them in Mark 7:7-13. Possessing the words of God did not make them so special that God excused them from obeying His commandments; rather, possessing the oracles of God made them more accountable to God so they should have obeyed God more carefully and wisely. They had no excuse for not knowing what God requires of every person. Paul showed that all Jews and Gentiles had and have broken the law of God, which they had and have come to know in different ways, and breaking God’s laws always puts people under the power of sin.

(Romans 3:10) as it is written: “There is no one who is righteous, not even one;

Because Paul was reasoning with Jews, he pointed them to the oracles of God in the Greek translation of the Hebrew

Scriptures (which would have been used mostly by Greeks, Romans, and Jews outside of Judea who did not read Hebrew). See especially Psalms 14:1-3, which Paul abbreviates from the Greek version of the Old Testament in Romans 3:10-12: “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good. The LORD looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.” Only a fool says there is no God or lives as though there is no God. Unhappily, everyone has said and done some foolish things and have disobeyed God. Because no one has perfectly obeyed the law of God, we must depend on the love, grace, and mercy of God to be made right with God and to be put into a right relationship with God (to be made righteous and live rightly). By the grace of God, the Father sent His Son into the world to put those who believe in Jesus in a right relationship with God.

(Romans 3:11) there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God.

Quoting the Old Testament as his absolute authority, Paul wanted everyone who would read his letter to understand that before coming to faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior each person has had a period in their lives when they did not understand (and did not truly want to understand) the true God and God’s purposes for them.

They had preferred to live for themselves supremely. Furthermore, there was a time when they sought only to satisfy their selfish, self-centered selves rather than seek God, God's will, and God's laws. Even those raised in Christian homes and churches have sinned and need Jesus Christ to save them. No Christian, Gentile, or Jew can be right with God by their obedience to God's law, because no one has ever perfectly obeyed God's law. After disobeying God, no one can "make up" or "atone" for that disobedience by future obedience. We cannot unbreak a broken law of God. Salvation depends on Jesus Christ, on His love, grace, and mercy to save people from their sins and the consequences of sin (eternal death) through their faith in Him. Knowing the love of Jesus has saved them from sin and death, believers in Jesus will love to obey God and love and follow Jesus and His teachings.

(Romans 3:12) All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one."

Paul continued to prove his point from the Scriptures. God looks down from heaven into the heart of every person. God sees our motive behind our every action. God sees our selfishness. Even mature Christians have acknowledged that there were times in the past when they consciously turned away from God to pursue some way of the world, the flesh, and the devil; therefore, they have needed to repent and return to faithful obedience to God. When

Christians sin, they realize even more how much they need Jesus to help them love and live for God day-by-day. Their righteousness totally depends on Jesus, their study of the Bible that renews their minds, and the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives helping them understand how to express their love for God and others. It may seem harsh to us for God to say that turning from Him and His will makes us worthless (worthless to God, others, and ourselves seems like strong language). In Hebrew, the word “worthless” can be translated as “spoiled” or “rotten,” as in rotten fruit or spoiled meat (unfit to eat and properly enjoy). Certainly, if someone is walking away from God and further into spiritual darkness and the enslaving power of sin, they are ruining their lives and making themselves worthless, spoiled, or rotten. Some might say they know an atheist “who does good.” However, no one can see into their heart. Their “doing good outwardly” does not always reveal why they do what they do; their motive may be selfishness or even an attempt to prove that people do not need God (compare Matthew 23:25-26). Paul achieved his purpose in showing us how much we need to turn to Jesus for saving grace, for trusting in Jesus, and for following Jesus day-by-day. Only Jesus can recreate us and help us fulfill God’s plans for our lives.

(Romans 3:13) “Their throats are opened graves; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of vipers is under their lips.”

In Romans 3:13-18, Paul showed more of the results when a person, culture, society, tribe, nation, government, and world turns from the true God. To show the complete depravity of a person who has turned from God, Paul wrote of the throat, the tongue, the lips, and the feet. Compare Psalm 5:9—“Not a word from their mouth can be trusted; their heart is filled with malice. Their throat is an open grave; with their tongues they tell lies.” The grave receives the dead and the body decays, and slander comes forth from those who have spiritually died and have morally decayed. They tell lies and want to murder the character or the good name of someone they want to destroy, especially the lives and testimony of Christians. Their poisonous lies can destroy someone as quickly as a poisonous viper and many times there is no antidote. They would kill them if they knew they would face no consequences. Paul used the Bible once again to show the horrific consequences when someone turns from God and how they hurt others with their false, malicious lies. Compare Psalm 140:1-3—“Rescue me, LORD, from evildoers; protect me from the violent, who devise evil plans in their hearts and stir up war every day. They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent’s; the poison of vipers is on their lips.” As David knew, only the LORD can deliver and guard believers from the liar. The liar has slander always ready “on the tip of their tongue,” and they have a lie ready to conceal and deny their misdeeds. Evildoers are often compared to snakes and vipers. Jesus had these

words for those who live like poisonous vipers: “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (Matthew 23:33). No one can claim that they have always perfectly used their tongue and lips to honor God and bless others. We all need the Lord Jesus to forgive us and help us and where both wise and possible we do need to make amends to those we have harmed.

(Romans 3:14) “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.”

When Paul abbreviated or paraphrased Psalm 10:7, “His mouth is full of lies and threats; trouble and evil are under his tongue,” he continued to show the consequences for people and societies that have turned away from God. Since God gives a “depraved mind” to those who turn away from Him and from the truth about Him and refuse to repent, their thinking becomes futile or useless. We can expect (and see in many cultures and nations today) that those under the power of sin cannot use sound reason and calmly discuss truth with others. Instead, they turn to cursing them and using all manner of foul language to express themselves and to shut down intelligent conversation and debate (see Romans 1:28). Sometimes they even use violent means to silence those who do not think as they do. We also see them expressing the bitterness in their hearts as their words flow forth in an irrational torrent. Living under the power of sin will always result in unhappiness, bitterness, disappointment,

hatred, and anger that is either suppressed or openly expressed in words and deeds.

(Romans 3:15) “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

As Paul continued to quote from the Greek Old Testament, remember Paul, a Jew, was writing about the sins of the Jews and not their enemies when you compare Romans 3:15-18 to Isaiah 59:7-9—

“Their feet rush into sin; they are swift to shed innocent blood. They pursue evil schemes; acts of violence mark their ways. The way of peace they do not know; there is no justice in their paths. They have turned them into crooked roads; no one who walks along them will know peace. So justice is far from us, and righteousness does not reach us. We look for light, but all is darkness; for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows.”

As with all sinful nations eventually, the leaders and the people in the Jewish nation had further declined from destroying others by telling lies to physically attacking to hurt and destroy others. Violence increases among groups and in nations that have turned from God. In Paul’s day, the Jews were continuing their downward spiral into increasing violence. After crucifying their Messiah, they persecuted His followers (as Paul had once done). Lying about others to destroy them can eventually no longer satisfy those who have turned from the Lord, and violence

will spread throughout a society that refuses to repent and turn back to God.

(Romans 3:16) ruin and misery are in their paths,

Ruin and misery will come upon the individual, the culture, the society, the nation, and the world that will not turn to the true God and to Jesus Christ for salvation from the power of sin and all the consequences that flow from the power of sin. They will also bring misery on those around them, and Christians will sometimes die a martyr's death at their hands. A government, nation, and world that has rejected the truth God will descend into further unrighteousness, chaos, violence, and death that will lead to the ruin and misery of the sinner and the temporal suffering of those they seek to harm. But Jesus has shown us the way of righteousness and peace, and He is the Way of righteousness and peace for all who follow Him.

(Romans 3:17) and the way of peace they have not known.”

There is a way to peace and a way of peace that results from trust in and obedience to the true God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Faith in Jesus Christ can bring love, inner peace, and joy to those who love and follow Jesus even when they find themselves in the midst of people who are enslaved to sin, to violent behavior, and to activities that bring ruin and misery to themselves and others. Paul intended to show that the only way to be right with God

and right within yourself was through faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Freedom from the power of sin can only come from receiving the love, grace, and mercy of God in Jesus Christ. Two thousand years of history since the writings of Saint Paul have proved him and the Bible right—living according to the ways of the world have proven to result in failure, violence, and death.

(Romans 3:18) “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

The word “fear” in this verse can be interpreted to mean that those under the power of sin and who choose to remain under the power of sin rather than turn to God for freedom from sin and forgiveness by God have no awe or reverence for God. “Fear” can also be interpreted in this verse to mean [and this may be the preferred interpretation here] that those committed to lying, crime, and violence for selfish reasons do not fear God; they do not fear any punishment from God for their unjust behavior either in this life or the next life. Paul has proved from reason and the Scriptures that sinners, whether Jews or Gentiles, need Jesus Christ to save them from the consequences of sin because no law has the power to make anyone righteous or right with God. No law can change the direction of a human heart. Only the love and truth of God and the work of Holy Spirit within those who trust in Jesus can change a human heart, restore reason, grant peace, and enable righteous living—especially in a sin-sick world.

(Romans 3:19) Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

The study of the Scriptures, of human history, of cultures, of societies, and of nations, show how sin has robbed the world and every person of true happiness, love, joy, and peace. The Law of God in the Bible (the moral law of love, the law requiring everyone to love God and others), the laws revealed by reason and observation, the laws revealed by the human conscience, and the laws of those who have never heard of the Scriptures from the true God and the gospel of Jesus Christ, show everyone that they have not lived according to the moral law of love. God will hold both the Jew and the Gentile accountable because they knew God and turned away from God; therefore, to show them mercy and forgiveness God sent His Son to save both Jew and Gentile believers in Him. Every mouth will be stopped or silenced because those of this world cannot experience true and lasting joy and peace apart from trusting in Jesus Christ to free them from sin and cleanse them from all unrighteousness. When God judges the world, because the whole world is accountable to God, no one will be able to give a good and sufficient excuse for their sins and rebellion against God. God's judgments will be just, for these words of God apply to all Jews and Gentiles: "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13). God has promised that if you

truly seek Him, you will find Him—no matter how long it may take.

(Romans 3:20) For “no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

Because of their sins, God will not declare anyone righteous in His sight by works of the law or by trying to obey the law. God sees each person in the totality of their lives. Past sins will not be forgiven based on imperfect efforts to obey the law of God as people have come to understand the law. Even people’s imperfect understanding of the law from the Scriptures or experience leads them to become conscious of the fact that they have sinned and lived imperfectly. All the law can do is show us how we have sinned, and where we need to make improvements—it cannot save us from the temporal and eternal consequences of sin—only God’s love and mercy can do what the law cannot do. In the Old Testament, Abraham and Job were declared righteous because of their faith in the true God, not because they obeyed God perfectly. In the New Testament, salvation is by God’s grace through faith in the true God (the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit) as revealed by Jesus Christ, our Lord who came into the world to be our Savior by dying on the cross and rising from the dead. The law makes us aware of our sins and our need of salvation. The

Holy Spirit uses the law of God and the gospel to show us the way of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. When Jesus fills the repentant believer with the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit circumcises their hearts and empowers them to love God and others in obedience to the moral law of God, but their obedience does not save them. The obedience to God and the good works that a Christian displays before the world are the fruit of the Holy Spirit at work in their lives. The Holy Spirit enables Christians to love God with all their heart, mind, soul, and strength and others as they love themselves.

Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. What are some advantages of having the Bible to read?
2. What does it mean to be under the power of sin?
3. How do most people live when they refuse to repent and turn to God, preferring instead to live the way they want?
4. What did Paul say happens to someone when they turn away from God?
5. Do you think sincere followers of Jesus Christ should still study the law of God? Give a reason for your answer.

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