

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: Romans – Jesus’ Gospel Sets You Free!**

#### **Our Problem/God’s Solution**

(Romans 3:9-30)

Study #5

#### **Introduction: Help from an ancient...**

Horace is one of the best known poets and playwrights of ancient Rome. He lived about a hundred years before Jesus and laid down some guidelines for his fellow writers.

Responding to what he considered excesses, Horace criticized those who resorted too readily to a literary device called *deus ex machina* to resolve problems in their plays.

A *deus ex machina* occurs when a writer uses a divine being or supernatural powers to allow the story’s hero to gain an advantage.

It was all too common among Horace’s contemporaries for a hero to run into a problem and then call on Hercules or Mars to rescue him.

Horace wrote, “*Do not bring a god on to the stage unless the problem is one that deserves a god to solve it.*”<sup>1</sup>

In the Roman plays of his day, the gods were trivialized by being brought in to solve problems too petty to really warrant divine attention.

While such advice may seem dated to the situation of ancient Rome, Horace’s words are very relevant to what we will see in our study of Romans today.

Thus far in our study the apostle Paul has explained our standing before God, and it’s not a pretty sight.

We suffer the consequences right now of being abandoned by God (He “***gave us over***”) because of our sin. We live under the condemnation of God because of our sin. And, unless something changes, we will suffer eternally, separated from God, on account of our sin.

What is worse, we can do nothing to extricate ourselves from this dilemma. Truly, if any people ever were, we are in a situation that demands a *deus ex machina*. Our problem is so big that only God can solve it.

In Romans, Paul surfaces THE problem of all problems. In the end, it is the only question that matters: How can anyone be right before God?

The passage we are exploring this morning brings us the answer to that question, and the message today will come in two movements.

We’ll end up by seeing the HUGE solution that God has crafted to deal with our problem. But first, we’ll see, again, the HUGE problem caused by our sin.

#### **The Trouble with the World (vv. 9-20)**

##### **ALL are “Under Sin” (vv. 9-18)**

*There is no partiality with God (v. 9)*

***[9] What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin***

All are on equal footing before God

We might think that the Jews, having been entrusted with the Old Testament revelation of God, might be at some advantage over the Gentiles in getting in good with God.

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<sup>1</sup> Fun fact: Aristotle also argued against the use of *deus ex machina* in his Poetics.

Not so.

The Jews are not any better off than the Gentiles, because, as Paul says, both are ***“under sin.”***

All are under the authority of sin

Once, a Roman soldier told Jesus, ***“I have soldiers under me.”*** (Matthew 8:9) He meant that he could tell those soldiers what to do. They were under his authority.

When Paul says that all people everywhere are “under sin”, he means that we are all under the power, the control of sin. Sin is our master. And to make sure that we “get it”, Paul delivers a series of staggering blows to our pride as he details our rebellion.

What I’m about to read consists of quotes from the Old Testament. (and none of these verses make it on to very many kitchen or dining room plaques...)

*There is no righteousness (vv. 10-12)*

***[10] as it is written, “THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE; [11] THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD;<sup>2</sup> [12] ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE.***

Out of the billions of people alive right now and the billions of people who have lived before us not one has been righteous before God. No exceptions. (except Jesus)

We are all like hikers who have deliberately taken a turn off the protection of the mountain trail just as night is coming on.

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<sup>2</sup> For the pursuit of God as a universal human responsibility, see Exod. 33:7; 2 Chron. 15:12, 13, 15; Ezra 8:22; Ps. 9:10; 24:6; 27:8; Prov. 28:5; Is. 9:13; 31:1; 51:1; 55:6; Jer. 29:13; Zeph. 1:6

We have turned away from God’s well-lit pathway, and have plummeted off the cliff into sin because of our self-willed commitment to go our own way. In one way or another, to one degree or another, all of us are guilty of abandoning God’s well-marked trail.

But Paul’s just warming up. As he continues, he details some of the specific sins that arise from a polluted heart. Yes, sin in the heart - and maybe it will help to think of “sin in the heart” this way...

A worm gets into an apple by pre-planning its assault. First, an insect lays an egg in the blossom of an apple tree. Then, as the egg grows, it turns into a worm, which then eats its way out of the apple.

Just so, sin begins in the heart and works its way out through our words and deeds, through our hands and feet and mouths.

*There is no innocence (v. 13-18)*

***[13] THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE,  
WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING,  
THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS;  
[14] “WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS;***

That is quite a description of toxic speech - deadly, deceitful, and poisonous! Of course, it is not that everyone always speaks this way. Most people say kind things from time to time. Many people exercise great restraint in what they say.

But is there anyone among us who can say that by either tone of voice or word choice, we have never deceived or injured someone?

And it’s not just what we say. It’s also what we do that is destructive.

Do you remember the charge that God leveled against the generation of Noah, when He destroyed the world through the great flood? It was violence. Unjust, cruel, violence. (Genesis 6:11). So Paul writes, ***[15] THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD,  
[16] DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS,  
[17] AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN.***

And 2012 doesn't find us doing any better than the generation of Noah. The violence and injustice in our own world, in our nation, in our city, is evidence of sin in the heart.

And the ultimate cause of this ugliness? It is our disregard of the God who created us all.

**[18] THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES<sup>3</sup>**

Now, what is pictured here in these lines is the biblical doctrine usually described by the words "total depravity."

**Defining terms:** "Total depravity"

But, those words, "total depravity," are often accompanied by the mental image of an Adolf Hitler or some other notorious monster.

We need to be careful...

We shouldn't understand "total depravity" to mean that we are all as bad as we might be all the time. It means that each of us is thoroughly infected with the disease of rebellion against God. Sin has hold not only of every person without exception, but also of every part of us - without exception.

If sin was blue, I would be some shade of blue all over. In some places, I would be dark blue, and in other places, faint blue. But, in every place - blue.

If I said that Medina Lake is "totally polluted," I wouldn't mean that every part of the lake is as thoroughly polluted with filth and garbage as it could be. I would mean that there is no part of the lake that is not contaminated to some degree with pollution.

In the same way, when I say that I am totally depraved - and that you are, too - I mean that there is no part of us that has not been contaminated to some degree with sin.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul's method in verses 10-18 is a familiar rabbinic ploy of stringing together lots of verses to make a point. It is called a *charaz*, literally, a stringing of pearls.

Our intellect and reasoning, our will and emotions - it has all been polluted, and that explains why we have such a propensity toward sin.

As the late Chuck Colson has written, "*It is in us.*"

Many thoughtful people sadly agree with the idea of personal, internal corruption. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who, while he lived, was one of my great heroes, firmly believed that there was a fatal flaw in the heart of every woman and man.

Solzhenitsyn himself was a paragon of courage and integrity, a former Soviet dissident, cancer patient, labor camp slave, author, and Nobel Peace Prize winner.

Addressing himself to the issue of sin in the heart, he wrote, "*If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?*"<sup>4</sup>

According to Paul we are not theoretical sinners or honorary sinners, vicarious sinners or sinners emeritus or potential sinners. We are sinners in deed and indeed.

And because of our sin, we are condemned.

**ALL Stand Condemned (vv. 19-20)**

*The Law brings accountability (v. 19)*

***[19] Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God...***

God has made Himself and His requirements perfectly clear in the pages of the Bible.

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<sup>4</sup> From The Gulag Archipelago, Part 1. Or, as Mark Twain once wrote, "*We are all like the moon; we all have our dark side.*"

And the purpose of that clear revelation is that every excuse, every rationalization, every explaining away of rebellion due to “extenuating circumstances” dies on our lips. We have no alibi.

The words ***“that every mouth may be closed”*** bring to mind the picture of a defendant in court. He is given the opportunity to speak in his own defense, but he is speechless in light of the evidence that has been brought against him.

So for us, our mouths are shut. We’ve been caught with our hands in the cookie jar.<sup>5</sup>

We stand before God, our guilt proven beyond all doubt, and wait for Him to pass sentence. There is nothing to say because we knew exactly what we were doing when we broke His Law.

Then Paul tells us why God gave the Law in the first place.

*The Law brings knowledge of sin (v. 20)*

***[20] because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight;<sup>6</sup> for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.***

To be perfectly clear, Law doesn’t create sin; it brings sin to the surface. Law can’t remove sin; it can only condemn. Law has no power to set what is wrong, right.

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Carl Menninger’s book, Whatever Became of Sin, (1988) was a landmark effort to return a measure of responsibility to the individual in dealing with personality problems and inner conflicts. In that book Menninger writes, “*Sin was once a word in everyone’s mind, but is now rarely if ever heard. Does that mean that no sin is involved in all our troubles? Has no one committed any sins? Where, indeed, did sin go? What became of it?*” Dr. Menninger notes that many former sins have now become crimes, so that responsibility for dealing with them has passed from church to state; others have dissolved into sicknesses requiring not punishment, but treatment. Obviously, nothing has changed objectively. We have simply switched the tags, and no longer call “sin” what has been understood for centuries to be sin.

<sup>6</sup> This verse does not negate the principle that was stated in Romans 2:13 that ***“the doers of the law will be justified.”*** Paul simply says here that, really, such a situation never arises (cf. v. 10).

All of this may make it seem cruel for God to have even given the Law, something that only points an accusing finger and says, “*Guilty!*” Wouldn’t it have been better if He had never given the Law at all?

No! It is a mercy that God have us this sin-revealing Law!

We wouldn’t appreciate it if a doctor sugarcoated our serious illness. What would you think of a doctor who discovered a massive tumor buried in your body, and responded with, “*Take two aspirin and, call me in the morning.*”?

We wouldn’t think highly of a fireman who responded to a three alarm fire with, “*It’ll burn itself out soon enough*” or the policeman who, upon arriving at the scene of a robbery, shakes his head and says, “*Boys will be boys.*”

As tough as the medicine is, there is nothing unloving about being clear about how serious is the matter of our sin. Taking his cue from the Law, Paul simply shoots straight and tells it like it is.

The Law was given to drive you and me to see the reality of our sin. The Law shuts our mouths.

Whew!

Now, I will be the first to admit that the going has been less than “happy” as we have travelled through these first three chapters of Romans.

Spending weeks examining human depravity can be a dark exercise. But RIGHT NOW we turn a wonderful corner into the light, as Paul reveals the solution to our predicament.<sup>7</sup>

How do we get right with God?

The good news is that it is in a way that totally bypasses the dead end road of trying to obey the commands of God!

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<sup>7</sup> In the passage before us Paul uses the three metaphors of the legal system, the slave market, and the sacrificial system to communicate the truth about what it means to be rightly related to God.

## **God's Extravagant Gift! (vv. 21-31)**

### **The Cross of Jesus - His Righteousness to Me! (vv. 21-23)**

*The NEW manifestation of God's righteousness (v. 21)*

***[21] But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets***

In the days of the Old Testament, before Jesus was born, believing Jewish men and women knew full well that keeping the Law, going to synagogue, and tithing could never save them from their sins.

Oh, some might have been under the mistaken impression that Law-keeping was the way to be eternally saved - but the thoughtful person had always known that the way of Law could never make someone right before God.

Was keeping the moral code important for the Jews? Yes! It told them how to live. It just never told them how to be saved.

However, the Law and the Prophets did speak of a way to be right with God. And that "way" was found in the sacrificial system.

There, the Jews discovered God's provision for dealing with human sin. Provision for the forgiveness of sin was made through the shed blood of sacrificed animals.

When a Jew offered up an animal in the way prescribed by Moses, his sin was "*covered over*"<sup>8</sup> by God. He became clean. His sin was forgiven.

And the sacrifice was effective when it was offered up by a Jew who believed that God would cover his sin through the sacrifice.

The mechanical act of offering up the sacrifice didn't win forgiveness. It was the worshipper's faith (demonstrated by his offering of the sacrifice) that pleased God.

THAT is the way of salvation as witnessed by "*the Law and the Prophets.*"

Now, though, it is no longer the faithful sacrifice of an ox or goat or lamb that brings salvation. Now it is faith in the Son of God, Jesus, who was sacrificed for us, that saves.

*God's righteousness now transferred to sinners (vv. 22-23)*

***[22] even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction, [23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God***

Salvation is not - and has never been - by the works of the Law. It is - and has always been - by faith.

It has to be by faith or none of us will ever be saved - because we, like all people, have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. (v. 23)

Those who memorize Bible verses usually memorize Romans 3:23. It's crucial truth and it's short, which makes it a great verse. So the verse may be familiar to you.

The word we translate here "*sinned*" literally means, "*to miss the mark.*" The image is of someone striving for God's standard of perfection and missing.

In the book of Judges, we read of the remarkable marksmen of the tribe of Benjamin who could "*sling a stone at a hair and not miss.*" (20:16)

When translated into Greek, the word used for "*miss*" in Judges is the same word Paul uses here in Romans 3:23 to describe sin. To sin is to miss the mark.

It's to try to hit the bulls-eye - and miss the whole target. It's to try to swim from Corpus Christi to Cancun - and not make it out of sight of the beach. It's for me to try and dunk a basketball.

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<sup>8</sup> The biblical word for "covering over sin" is "atonement."

The thought is that when I do the best I can, it's still not good enough. And, what is worse - I don't always do the best I can!

So, salvation will never come through works. Rather, consistent with God's plan from the very beginning, simple trust in God's sacrifice - Jesus - is the only way to be saved, and it is exactly what is required to be saved.

And THAT is one gracious plan!

### **The Cross of Jesus - All of GRACE! (v. 24)**

*[24] being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus*

*Justification is a gift*

The manner by which salvation, (here, the whole package is referred to by the word "*justified*") comes to any person is in the form of a free gift. It is not based on anything a person does.

It's like Christmas at my house. On Christmas morning, grace reigns supreme. There will be presents under the tree - regardless of whether the past year's behavior has merited presents or not. I am her husband, so she gives me a present. That's grace.

But how many gifts do we receive in life that truly have NO STRINGS attached?

In this pre-election season, we are asked to believe that there will be free lunches if we vote for this or that candidate.

Jobs will proliferate, taxes will evaporate, income will escalate, jobs will self-create, and crime will dissipate.

But even as we hear the hype, we know it's just noise. There are no free lunches. There will never be the kind of utopia promised us just before the first Tuesday in November.

In this world, there are always strings attached and exception clauses. Not so with the promises of God.

God offers salvation to you at the moment of trusting faith. There is no fine print.

So, salvation is a free gift. And, it is a *redemption*.<sup>9</sup>

*Justification is by redemption*

When sat down to write Romans, it was common for slaves to be sold at the city marketplace to the highest bidder. When they were sold, people would say, "*That slave was REDEEMED out of the marketplace of slavery.*"

In the same way, when a person believes in Jesus, he or she is redeemed from slavery to sin. (Remember, we are "*under*" sin)

God paid a ransom - the life of His Son - to free us from the bondage and condemnation of sin.

So, to whom did God pay this ransom? Amazingly, He paid it to Himself!

God is the One whose righteousness was offended by our sin. Therefore, He condemned us.

Yet God is also the One who loves us and longs to receive us back into relationship. So, God paid the ultimate price in the death of His Son, Jesus, on the cross to redeem us from the marketplace of sin.

Continuing in Romans 3, we listen as Paul changes the salvation scenery from the slave market to the sacrificial altar and addresses what J.I. Packer calls "*the heart of the Gospel.*"<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The word "redemption" (*απολυτροσις*) contains within it the idea of a purchase price (ransom) being paid to free someone from something. In the Old Testament, there were laws that regulated redemption prices for various objects (a first born son; an indentured servant), or to recompense for various offences (an animal that gored a neighbor; a thief to be freed).

## The Cross of Jesus - the Heart of the Gospel (vv. 25-26)

*The meaning of propitiation (v.25a)*

***[25a] whom God displayed publicly<sup>11</sup> as a propitiation<sup>12</sup> in His blood through faith.***

The idea behind the word “**propitiation**” is that of turning away wrath by means of a sacrifice.

Think of a husband who has offended his wife and wants to get back into her good graces. He might bring home flowers, or be extra helpful around the house for a few days.

By means of his sacrificial gifts or efforts, he is seeking to turn aside her wrath. The \$5 way to say it? He is seeking to propitiate her.

You’re likely right if you think this illustration is a bit crude to apply to our relationship with God. But it illustrates the essential element of propitiation, which is to turn aside wrath by means of a sacrifice.

God the Father made a decision to send His Son to die on the cross for the purpose of turning aside His own anger from man.

So, as in the case of redemption where God Himself paid the ransom price to Himself, it is now God Himself who takes the initiative to turn away His own wrath, by sacrificing His own Son for you and me.

*The means of propitiation*

The image of propitiation is a bloody one. Paul even says that God was propitiated “in” or “by” Jesus’ blood.

But, biblically (scientifically, as well), “***the life is in the blood***” (Leviticus 17:11), and when there is the spilling of blood, there is the giving up of life itself. The shedding of blood represents the ultimate sacrifice.

And God’s wrath is now turned away from us - again - WHEN WE BELIEVE! (v. 25 - “***through faith***”) Not until you trust in Christ is the wrath of God turned away from you.

But couldn’t God have found another way? I mean, the death of Jesus, His only begotten Son, is such an incredibly high price to pay. Could there not have been a less costly way to provide salvation?

In a word, no. Not if God was going to NOT violate justice. Listen to Paul’s masterly way of putting it in the words that follow.

## The Cross of Jesus’ Cross - Showing off God’s Justice (vv. 25b-26)

***[25b] This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; [26] for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.***

The thought here is that in times past God held back his wrath. He literally passed over sins committed before Jesus came to the earth and left them, for the time being, unpunished.

God was showing people mercy, knowing that He would finally demonstrate His righteousness on the cross of Calvary when Jesus died.

At some point, God would have to punish sin. If He didn’t He would be violating justice. He could not have just winked at sin forever.<sup>13</sup>

And he dealt with it by paying an enormous price.

<sup>13</sup> For God to have forgiven men’s sins lightly, to have offered a cheap forgiveness that would have implied that moral evil does not matter very much, would have been altogether unrighteous. That would have violated His own justice. And, it would have been profoundly unmerciful and unloving toward men, since it would have annihilated our dignity as morally accountable persons.

<sup>10</sup> From Packer’s masterpiece, Knowing God. Inter-Varsity Press, 1972.

<sup>11</sup> It is interesting to note the relative secrecy of so many of the others of Christ’s works - the Incarnation, the Transfiguration, the Resurrection, and the Ascension. Not so the cross, which was VERY public.

<sup>12</sup> Some English versions of Romans 3:25 do not contain the word that the New American Standard Bible does to describe Jesus’ sacrifice. “Sacrifice of atonement” (NIV) comes close to the idea of the original word (*ιλαστηριον*), but I prefer the use of the more precise word, “propitiation.”

If you take someone out to lunch and pay their way, their lunch is free - for them. But, Bill Miller is not going to give away a lunch. Someone has to pay. The free lunch your friend enjoys is not free to you.

Your children live in your home “free” - they don’t pay room and board. But, their cushy existence costs you.

Make no mistake about it - eternal salvation is a free gift TO US. We can’t earn it or pay for it. We can’t repay God for it. But, our free salvation was costly beyond measure for God.

So, let’s review just how salvation “works.”

- We are all guilty of sin and are under the authority of sin and the condemnation of God.
- God sent His Son, Jesus, to be the Sacrifice who would pay the ultimate price (ransom) for our redemption.
- By Jesus’ death on the cross, He turned aside (propitiated) the wrath of God by paying the penalty for our sin.
- Now, when any of us trust Jesus we receive the benefits of that sacrifice - forgiveness and eternal life and so much more.

That’s God News! It is everything of substance coming from God, while we contribute nothing to our salvation but our complete and total need - as we gratefully receive a free gift by faith.

So, to God be all the glory!

### **The Cross of Jesus - and Boasting (?) (vv. 27-30)**

*[27] Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. [28] For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. [29] Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, [30] since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.*<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The reference to God’s unity here calls to mind the great “sh’mā” of Judaism. “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” (Dt.

When it comes to the matter of gaining attaining eternal salvation and entering into a right relationship with God, we have nothing to boast about and everything to worship about.

### **Conclusion:**

In an early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a correspondent of the London Times, researching and reporting on many of the same problems we now face in 2012, ended every article with this rhetorical question: “*What’s wrong with the world?*”

Author, thinker, and devout Christian, G.K. Chesterton wrote a famous reply, “*Dear editor: What’s wrong with the world? I am. Faithfully yours, G.K. Chesterton.*”

What is wrong with the world? I am. You are. The problems of our world will not be fundamentally solved through politics, economic reorganization, or school reform.

The most important message we can bring to this world is the declaration that there is a mess caused by “sin” and it is present in every person. It ravages the heart, condemns the soul, and pollutes our world.

And there is a great Savior - Jesus - who saves us, transforms us, and will use us to bring His love and grace to the world He so desperately loves.

6:4-5) God is One. He is united in His positions. He is consistent within the Trinity. There are no internal contradictions within Himself.