

CCLEB SERMON NOTES



SUNDAY JULY 19, 2026
ROMANS 3:9-20

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AND THE VERDICT IS?



Something Thom read in a Bible study once made me really mad. In the late 90s, Thom and Sue hosted a Bible study in their basement. It was a beautiful mix of people from various churches – and Sheri and I attended as a young married couple.

We met Thom and Sue through the church plant at the YMCA, and they had invited us to their weekly Bible study. We were studying **Romans 3**, and Thom read the passage out loud. When he read **verses 10 and 11**, I remember getting angry inside. No one is righteous, not even one. No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God. It irritated me. I was unsettled. I was angry because my pride was offended. I was seven years into an exhausting journey of faith, genuinely believing I was seeking God. And although I had read that passage many times before, it never hit me like it did that night.

Here was my issue. I had thought my intellectual journey of faith was me seeking God – that all my pursuits of truth and philosophy, all my endless reading, would bring me into a relationship with God. But there it was, right in front of me: “No one is truly wise, no one is seeking God.” No one. That included me! Me! It meant I was on the outside, and I desperately wanted to be on the inside.

What became obvious in the hours that followed – what the Holy Spirit was pressing on me – is that I could never think my way into heaven (how arrogant is that?). All that matters is faith. The bottom line: I was scared to trust, so I avoided it. I wanted to reach heaven on my own intellect instead of trusting God.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant said, “I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith.” That is exactly what God was doing in me that night – clearing away all my reading and thinking to make room for faith. Because in the end that is the only thing that saves – not how much I know, but faith.

That is God's path to a relationship with him. A genuine relationship with God – not just an intellectual connection – could only come through faith.

This is exactly the main point of the book of Romans.

Romans is a carefully staged argument to lead all people to that place. Paul is not only writing strong theology – salvation, repentance, righteousness – but through it, he is persuading the Roman Christians to embrace one unified gospel that brings Jews and Gentiles together in Christ.

This matters because the church in Rome in AD 57 was divided along ethnic lines – Jew versus Gentile, civilized versus uncivilized. Paul's mission is to convince them all that both stand together under the one gospel of Jesus Christ, and under it they ought to be unified, not divided. It is by faith alone in Jesus that anyone is saved.

Here is Paul's main argument in **Romans 1:16-17**.

Paul's main argument of Romans.

(Romans 1:16-17)

1. The gospel is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes.
2. The gospel tells us how God makes everyone right in His sight – by faith in Jesus Christ alone.

From **Romans 1:18** to **Romans 3:20** Paul establishes the universal need for the Gospel. Bottom line: Everyone needs Jesus!!

Romans Outline

1. Main Argument / Thesis — Romans 1:16–17
2. Universal Need for the Gospel — Romans 1:18–3:20
3. God's Saving Action — Romans 3:21–5:21
4. Freedom and Life in the Spirit — Romans 6:1–8:39
5. Israel in God's Plan — Romans 9:1–11:36
6. Transformed - Unified Communal Life — Romans 12:1–15:13
7. Paul's Mission Appeal — Romans 15:14–16:27

In **Romans 1:18-32** we saw that those who reject and suppress the truth, and refuse to worship God, end up in wickedness and immorality. Both the Jewish Christians and the Greek Christians in Rome would agree that such judgment is deserved.

But in **Romans 2:1-16** Paul tells them in condemning others, they condemn themselves, for they are just as deserving of God's judgment equal for the Jew and Gentile because God shows no partiality.

But Paul also reveals a God who shows "wonderful kindness, patience, and tolerance," welcoming the repentant heart. For the unrepentant heart, however, the end is a day when God's righteous judgment is revealed.

A **repentant heart** finds
a God who is “wonderful,
kind, tolerant and patient”.

An **unrepentant heart** finds:



Terrible punishment



A day of anger



God's righteous judgment revealed

Paul's point to these divided Jews and Gentiles is that God is impartial – he treats alike. If they repent, Jew or Gentile, they will find a “wonderfully kind, patient, tolerant” God. If they refuse to repent, Jew or Gentile, they will meet a “day of judgment.” Again, God is impartial.

In the end of **Chapter 2** God shows the Jews they have misplaced trust in their lineage and law, believing that those things give them a special relationship with God. Again, that is misplaced trust.

And last week in Thom's excellent teaching we saw that in **Romans 3:1-8** Paul pauses to answer the objections his argument stirs up – “Then what advantage has the Jew?” and “Doesn't our unrighteousness just show off God's righteousness?” – clearing away those protests so that nothing stands in the way of the universal verdict he is about to deliver.

Objections

1. Then what advantage has the Jew?
2. Doesn't our unrighteousness just show off God's righteousness?

The word “verdict” triggers courtroom imagery. Picture it: the room falls silent, the evidence is laid out, and every eye turns to the bench. The accused stands and waits. The judge's ruling is final; the law has been read, the charges argued, the testimony weighed. The time for argument is past. Everything now hangs on one word from the judge.

That is the scene Paul has been building toward. Chapter by chapter he has been presenting the evidence – against the Gentile, against the Jew, against every one of us – and now the whole courtroom holds its breath for the verdict.

And that universal verdict is exactly what we see starting in **verse 9**. Paul begins with the question, “Well then, should we...”

That's a tough question for anyone to answer.

Here's the real question:

Is any one of us really any better off
before God than the person
standing next to us?

Let me put it this way. Picture a warm house on a bitter cold night – light in the windows, a meal on the table. Out on the sidewalk, two people stand at the door. One is me – arms full of books, head full of podcasts, pockets stuffed with everything I was sure I'd learned. The other has nothing in his pockets at all. Been on the street a while. Nothing to show.

And here's what I finally understood that night in Thom's basement: at that door, my pockets are just as empty as his. All my reading can't buy the lock open nor pick it open. The two of us are standing on the exact same ground – outside, wanting in, and completely unable to get ourselves through that door.

Paul answers that question in **verse 9**: “No, not at all, for we...”

“All under the power of sin.” That's a strong statement – all of humanity, regardless of race, religion, wealth, or favorite mushrooms, is in bondage to the power of sin.

Now that phrase – “under sin” – is the first time in the whole letter Paul uses “sin” as a noun. Think about that. For two and a half chapters he described the problem every other way – ungodliness, unrighteousness, wickedness – but held the word itself back until right here, the verdict. And once he says it, it becomes one of the biggest words in the book.

And it's a fascinating word. The Greek word for sin is hamartia – from the world of archery. Think ancient Olympics: the target is set, the crowd goes quiet, the archer draws the bow, takes aim, lets the arrow fly – and it sails wide. Hamartia. He missed. It literally means “to miss the mark.”

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But the target Paul has in mind is the glory of God – and that is a mark none of us can hit on our own. Paul's point is that every arrow– no matter whose hand is on the bow – falls short of that target.

But the broader phrase in **verse 9** is: “all are under the power of sin.” Any sci-fi fans? In Star Trek there's a thing called a tractor beam – an invisible beam that locks onto a ship and pulls it in. And it doesn't matter whether you're a tiny shuttlecraft or the mightiest starship in the fleet: once that beam has you, your own engines can't break the grip. Fire every thruster, burn every ounce of power you've got – you're still getting pulled in. The beam has you, you are under its power.

That's what Paul means by “all under the power of sin.” It's not just that we each do bad things now and then; it's that a power called sin has a hold on every one of us – and it doesn't care how strong, smart, wealthy, or religious you are. The street and the mansion, the PhD and the dropout, the Jew and the Gentile – the beam has us all, and not one of us can throttle our way out under our own power.

So, let's go back to the courtroom. The room is silent. The evidence has all been laid out – against the Gentile, against the Jew, against every single one of us. The charge has been read aloud: all are under the power of sin. The tractor beam has us; no one broke free. Nothing is left to argue, and every mouth in the room is shut.

And now the Judge leans forward to deliver the verdict – and he does something odd. Paul starts quoting Old Testament verses to describe humanity's total corruption. **Verse 10**. Do you know what “no one” means in Greek? “No one”.

Verse 11. Other translations say “there is no one who understands.” This is the part that hit me and humbled me – it launched me into understanding that trust, that faith, was the path I needed to be on.

Now these verses Paul quotes in his verdict seem to get even more harsh.

Verse 12. The Greek word for “useless” was applied to rotten fruit. Rotten fruit cannot be eaten and cannot produce – it has no value, no worth.

And the next line – “No one does good, not a single one” – humbles anyone who thinks they will get to heaven based on their good works.

It gets even more descriptive in **verse 13** as Paul continues to quote the Old Testament.

I once walked past a groundhog hole, and by the horrible stench coming out of it, it was clear something had died down there. That's what Paul means by the stench of an open grave. Even when someone thinks their good behavior is enough to earn righteousness, what really rises to God from their mouth is the stench of an open grave.

And Paul takes it a step further, comparing their speech to the venom of vipers. Meaning: their words kill.

Verse 14 -15. This list doesn't get any prettier, does it?

In **verse 16** we see what is left in the wake of the people being described.

In June of 2011 my wife led a mission team to Joplin, Missouri. An EF5 tornado – the strongest rating there is – blew through with winds over 200 miles an hour, rain-wrapped so you couldn't see it coming until it was on top of you. It carved a path nearly a mile wide through the heart of the city. When it lifted, 158 people were dead, over a thousand injured, and roughly a third of Joplin was gone – thousands of homes, businesses, and churches flattened. It remains the deadliest single tornado in this country in over half a century, and the costliest on record.

When my wife's team arrived, families were still clearing rubble – bare foundations where houses used to stand, family photos in the mud, whole neighborhoods reduced to splinters. That is the image Paul reaches for in **verse 16**. “Destruction and misery always follow them.”



**Destruction and
misery always
follow them.**

ROMANS 3:16

Sin is not a private mistake that stays neatly contained. It moves through a life, through a family, through a community like that rain-shrouded tornado – and it leaves the same kind of trail behind it: ruin and misery, as far as the eye can see.

And as hard and terrible as that picture of sin is, I'm particularly moved by the sadness of **verse 17**.

The word Paul uses here for peace is the Greek word *eirene*, and its root comes from a verb meaning “to join” – to bind separate things into one. So to the Greek ear, peace was never merely the absence of conflict; it was the state of things joined together, knit back into one whole.

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That is why **verse 17** is so sad. “The way of peace they have not known.” You cannot have peace – real peace, the joined-together kind – while you are severed from the very One you were made to be joined to.

Sin is the great “un-joining”; it cut us off from God, and everything in **verses 13** through **16** – the grave, the venom, the ruin and misery – is simply what a life looks like once it has been torn away from the source of its wholeness.

There is no
peace apart
from being
joined to God.

Now **verse 18** summarizes the last eight verses. The Jewish understanding of fear was to “stand in awe of”. With your eyes or your mind, you behold the awesomeness of God, his power, his sovereignty, his holiness, and then stand in awe of him. That is “fear” of God.

This is about the posture of the mind, heart, and body. One either bows mind, heart, and body before God the Creator, or takes the posture Paul describes in **Romans 1:18** and **21** – suppressing the truth and refusing to bow in worship. They have no fear of God at all. And with that posture, what will they face? Judgment. Look at this slide again. In the story of the prodigal son, the son repented and took the path home to his father – and found a father who was wonderfully kind, patient, and tolerant. He found love, when it could have ended in judgment.

A **repentant heart** finds
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God’s righteous judgment revealed

May I ask, what is the posture of your heart, mind and body towards God right now?

Two more verses. **Verse 19** speaks of the purpose of the law. God's purpose in giving the law was always his desire for a relationship with us. That is God's end game: an eternal, uninterrupted relationship with his prized creation – mankind, you.

But the law shows that both the Jews and Gentiles, “the entire world” was “guilty” why?

The sound of the judge’s gavel echoes the verdict. Guilty! “There is none righteous, no not one”.

Here is what this looks like in outline form

Romans 1: Gentiles – immoral are guilty.

Romans 2: Jews, religious, moralists are guilty.

Romans 3: Everyone is guilty.

So here we are, back in the courtroom. And the gavel has come down – Guilty. Not the person out there. Not the person sitting next to you. You. And if I'm honest, looking back that gavel is the very sound I heard that night in Thom's basement. I walked into that room with my head full of answers, certain I was the exception. And the verdict fell on me too. Me. “There is none righteous, no, not one.”

Remember the two people standing at the door out in the cold? Wanting in - my pockets were just as empty as the man's who'd been on the street for years. All my reading couldn't buy the lock open, and it couldn't pick it. Only faith would open that door.

Here is why. Every arrow of good works I had ever fired at the glory of God had sailed wide – hamartia, I missed – and so has every one of us, no matter who's hand is on the bow. That was the night God did in me what Kant could only describe: he denied my knowledge to make room for faith.

The tractor beam had me, and I could not throttle my way out of it. The same kind of power that carved a mile-wide path through Joplin had been running through my own life, leaving its ruin and misery behind it – the grave-stench of my words, the venom, the un-joining. And because I was severed from the One I was made to be joined to, I had never truly known peace. Not the joined-together kind. How could I? There was no fear of God before my eyes.

But here is the wonder of it. God's purpose in the law was never to leave us standing condemned in that courtroom. It was always about relationship – his desire for you. The verdict is real, and it is guilty. But the same God who reads the charges is the Father in the story, watching the road, ready to run to the child who simply turns for home. The beam can be cut. The door can open. And it opens on exactly the same terms for the man with empty pockets and the man with a head full of books – “everyone who believes.”

So may I ask you once more – what is the posture of your heart, your mind, your body toward God this morning? Because there is a way that door opens. There is Someone stronger than the beam. And next week we get to hear his name, in two of the most beautiful words in all of Scripture: “But now...”

BONUS

CONTENT:

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