

Silentium

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Unashamed - A Study of Romans / Ro 3:9–21

After surveying the entire human race, Paul delivers a universal verdict. The law was never given to provide a defense — it was given to expose guilt and silence every excuse.

INTRODUCTION

- Yesterday, our nation celebrated Independence Day.
 - And every year when July 4 rolls around, we tend to remember the beautiful words first.
 - “We hold these truths to be self-evident...”
 - Those are the words that make it onto posters, speeches, fireworks shows, and elementary school bulletin boards.
 - Life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness.
 - Government by consent of the governed.
 - Rights given by the Creator rather than granted by the crown.
 - But the Declaration of Independence is not only a statement of ideals.
 - It is also a legal argument.
 - After the soaring language of liberty comes a long list of charges.
 - “He has refused...”
 - “He has forbidden...”
 - “He has dissolved...”
 - “He has obstructed...”
 - “He has kept among us...”
 - “He has affected...”
 - “He has plundered...”

- “He has constrained...”
- Again and again, the Declaration reads like an indictment.
 - The colonies are making their case before the watching world.
 - They are not merely saying, “We want independence.”
 - They are saying, “Here is the evidence.
 - Here is the record. Here is why the verdict is just.”
 - In other words, the Declaration does not begin with minor complaints and slowly work its way toward a conclusion.
 - It announces that a relationship has been broken, then reads the charges into the record.
- That is very close to what Paul does in [Romans 3](#).
 - Only Paul is not putting a king on trial.
 - He is putting the whole world on trial.
 - And Paul is about to silence us.
- For two chapters, Paul has been walking through the human condition.
 - He has shown us the Gentile world suppressing the truth in unrighteousness.
 - He has shown us the moral person condemning others while practicing the same kinds of things.
 - He has shown us the religious person leaning on outward privilege while missing the inward reality.
 - He has moved from the pagan world to the respectable world to the religious world, and now he gathers everyone into the same courtroom.
 - And then he announces the verdict.
- “None is righteous, no, not one.”

- Not the irreligious person.
- Not the moral person.
- Not the religious person.
- Not the person with Scripture.
- Not the person without Scripture.
- Not the person who knows better.
- Not the person who should have done better.
- Jew and Greek alike are all under sin.
- Then Paul begins reading the evidence into the record.
 - He quotes Scripture after Scripture.
 - It's not because he wants to make sure God has all the evidence he needs to declare us guilty.
 - Instead, Paul turns to the Word of God because we refuse to stop defending ourselves.
- The throat. The tongue. The lips. The mouth. The feet. The eyes.
 - Sin has touched the whole person.
 - It does not stay hidden in the heart.
 - It speaks. It deceives. It wounds.
 - It runs toward destruction.
 - It looks out at the world and sees nothing of God worth fearing.
- And by the time Paul is finished, there is nothing left to say.
 - That silence is the point of this passage.
 - The law does not hand us a defense.
 - Far from it.
 - Instead, it removes our excuses.

- It does not give us a ladder to climb up to God.
- It holds up a mirror and shows us the truth about ourselves.
- It does not open our mouths so we can plead our case.
- It stops every mouth.
- [Romans 3](#) is the silence of human self-defense.
 - And that silence is severe. But it is also mercy.
 - Because as long as we are still defending ourselves, we are not ready to receive grace.
 - As long as we are still arguing our innocence, we are not ready to hear the gospel.
 - As long as we are still saying, “But I am better than they are,” or “But I have done enough,” or “But I know the right things,” we have not yet understood why Christ had to come.
- So before Paul gives us the great gospel words of [Romans 3:21](#), “But now,” he first brings us to the end of ourselves.
 - Every mouth stopped.
 - The whole world accountable to God.
 - Last week, we looked at *fidelis*, God’s faithfulness.
 - But today, our courtroom gets eerily quiet as humans are silenced - *silentium*.

SCRIPTURE READING

Romans 3:9–20 **ESV**

⁹ What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin,

¹⁰ as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God.

¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

¹³ “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.”

¹⁴ “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

¹⁶ in their paths are ruin and misery,

¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known.”

¹⁸ “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

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

²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

Prayer (Return to Title Slide)

- Paul does not let this passage breathe before he announces the verdict.
 - He does not begin by asking us to weigh the evidence as though the outcome is still uncertain.
 - He does not invite us to imagine that one group may escape the charge while another group stands condemned.
 - He begins with a question:
- “What then? Are we Jews any better off?”

- After everything Paul has said about the advantage of having the Word of God, that is the question hanging in the air.
- If the Jews had Scripture, covenant, promises, and history, did that give them some kind of protection when they stood before God?
- Paul's answer is immediate.
 - "No, not at all."
 - And with that we see this plainly...

The Verdict Covers Everyone (v. 9)

- There may be spiritual advantage, but there is no courtroom immunity.
 - Back in verse 2, Paul reminds his readers that the Jews were entrusted with the very words of God.
 - That was an incredible gift because, in Scripture, God gave them the specifics.
 - They did not have to guess about God's nature or character.
 - They did not have to invent their own ideas about holiness.
 - They did not have to stumble around in the dark trying to figure out what God requires.
 - God had spoken.
- They could know what it means to be made in his image.
 - They could know what God expects.
 - They could know what holiness looks like.
- But they could also know something else.
 - They could know just how far short they had fallen.
 - When we apply that same principle to the church, we walk away with even more.
 - We have the fullness of God's revelation in Christ.

- We see the depth of God's love and kindness.
- We know the great lengths God went to in order to secure our salvation.
 - We have the Scriptures.
 - We have the gospel.
 - We have the cross.
 - We have the resurrection.
 - We have access to truth that kings and prophets longed to see.
- There is no denying it. That is a stunning advantage.
 - But possession does not equal obedience.
 - You can own a Bible, read a Bible, quote a Bible, carry a Bible, defend a Bible, and still resist the God who speaks through the Bible.
 - And if you have the words of God but refuse to obey the God of the Word, then your advantage has not saved you.
 - It has only made you more accountable.
- That is why Paul is so careful here.
 - He has already said that the Jews had a real advantage.
 - They were entrusted with the oracles of God.
 - But now he asks, "What then? Are we Jews any better off?"
 - And his answer is blunt.
 - "No, not at all."
- In this phase of the argument, Paul is specifically dealing with the potential advantage of the Jews.
 - They have the Word.
 - They have the covenant markers.

- They have the history.
- They have the promises.
- They have the Scriptures.
- Surely that gives them some kind of exemption.
 - Except it does not.
 - We hear a lot about privilege today.
 - Someone born into one situation may have advantages someone else does not have.
 - Someone born into affluence has advantages someone born into poverty may not have.
 - Someone with access, education, opportunity, and support may have advantages that others lack.
 - So surely, being born Jewish and possessing the very words of God would give someone a privileged status before God.
 - But Paul says, “No, not at all.”
 - Any perception of spiritual immunity evaporates with his next claim:
- “For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.”
 - That is the universal verdict.
 - Not all are equally informed.
 - Not all are equally exposed to Scripture.
 - Not all have received the same light.
 - But all are under the same power.
- All are under sin.
 - That’s a powerful word.

- When Paul says we are “under” sin, that’s more than a directional statement.
- He’s not saying “sin is up here, and we are below it.”
- Instead, it’s a statement about authority.
- When he says we are under sin, he is saying that we are subject to it.
- If you remember back in [Genesis 4](#) when Cain was at odds with his brother Abel, God told him something very specific.

Genesis 4:7 ESV

⁷ “If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, and you must rule over it.”

- God tells Cain that he should exercise mastery over sin.
 - But we know the outcome...sin exercises dominance over Cain.
 - Cain, in essence, is under sin.
- So when Paul says that both Jew and Gentile are “under sin” he is basically saying that we all exist as subjects of this ruthless ruler called sin.
 - The category that finally matters is not Jew or Gentile, religious or irreligious, churchied or unchurchied.
 - The category that finally matters is this: under sin.
 - And no one is exempt.
 - The irreligious person is under sin.
 - The moral person is under sin.
 - The religious person is under sin.
 - The person with no Bible is under sin.
 - The person with a shelf full of Bibles is under sin.

- The person who ran from God is under sin.
- The person who grew up around the things of God is under sin.
- There may be spiritual advantage.
 - But there is no courtroom immunity.
 - Let's be honest, after this trial, a little immunity sure would be nice.
 - We're not going to find it in this text today, however.
- Instead, Paul the Prosecutor is now going to turn up the intensity, calling to the witness stand the very oracles of God with which the Jews had been entrusted.

The Anatomy of Sin (vv. 10-18)

- Verses 10-18 are known as a *catena*.
 - If you haven't heard that term before, that's okay.
 - It comes from the Latin word for chain.
- It is a way of explaining a theological point by stringing together biblical passages with little or no commentary.
 - In normal preaching, I might use a biblical reference, but I'll explain it.
 - In a *catena*, I would simply use reference after reference and let the passages speak for themselves.
- In this case, Paul's *catena* is part of his closing argument in this metaphorical trial.
 - Just like the founders ran through the list of offenses committed by King George, Paul is pointing out the offenses of the entire human race.
 - They wrote it down and entered it into the record. Paul does the same thing.

- Listen to it again, deliberately. (If you're interested, I've included a visual in today's sermon page that shows where each of these references is drawn from).
- Imagine the apostle Paul taking a deep breath, and then rhythmically and methodically, point by point, laying out the evidence against us.
- [Romans 3:10-18](#)

Romans 3:10–18 ESV

¹⁰ as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God.

¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

¹³ “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.”

¹⁴ “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

¹⁵ “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

¹⁶ in their paths are ruin and misery,

¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known.”

¹⁸ “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

- This is what it looks like when humanity lives under the dominion of sin.
- There are two things that should stand out as you consider these words.
- First - each and every single line is drawn from the “oracles of God” with which the Jews have been entrusted.
- These aren't new words.
 - This isn't new evidence.

- This isn't some last-minute submission from the prosecution to try to make an emotional appeal to the jury.
- None is righteous, no, not one - that is not something suddenly invented for the sake of argument.
- All have turned aside, no one does good...
- This would be like someone standing up in a Baptist church and saying, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."
- Nobody would wonder what song that came from.
- That language is part of our church vocabulary.
- In the same way, these Scriptures were part of Israel's sacred vocabulary.
 - They've heard all these things...over and over again.
 - And every one of these statements is functioning as a crystal clear indictment of the whole human race.
- Don't ignore that the language is incredibly inclusive.
 - None, no one, all, not even one...
 - There's no room for exception.
 - Not Jew. Not Gentile.
 - Not rich. Not poor.
 - Not man. Not woman.
 - Not old. Not young.
- Secondly - don't miss this because it can be really subtle if you aren't paying attention.
- Remember, this is a catena - a chain of text strung together to communicate a point.

- And in this case, Paul has pulled together texts that emphasize language associated with the human body.
 - Paul points to throats that are open graves.
 - Deceptive tongues
 - Venom under their lips.
 - Mouths that are full of curses and bitterness.
 - Feet that run fast to bloodshed.
 - And eyes...cursed eyes that do not know the fear of God.
- All of that is very important.
 - Throughout these first three chapters, it's been easy to divert attention.
 - This is about those people over there.
 - This is about that group that I don't associate with.
 - This is about a religion that I don't participate in.
- But that's why we have all of this language.
 - This isn't about a type of person.
 - This isn't about a group of people who are somehow different from me.
 - This is about me. All of me.
 - And this is why the gospel must be both incredibly universal and deeply personal.
- It must be universal because the guilt is universal.
 - There is not one problem for this people and a different problem for somebody else.
 - There is not one kind of sin for the Gentile and another kind for the Jew.

- There is not one diagnosis for the irreligious and another diagnosis for the religious.
- All are under sin.
- So there cannot be one salvation for this people and a different salvation for somebody else.
 - We can have a million different ways to communicate the gospel, but the gospel message is the same for everybody.
 - Christ came for sinners.
 - And that is good news because sinners are the only kind of people there are.
- But the gospel is also deeply personal because this guilt is deeply personal.
 - Your parents cannot respond to the gospel on your behalf.
 - The church cannot save you.
 - A priest cannot cleanse you from your sins.
 - Your background cannot stand before God in your place.
 - And that is the point we are finally getting to in this letter.
 - The entire human race is guilty.
 - And that guilt is incurred by each one of us.
- You are guilty, and I am too.
 - From the top of my head to the soles of my feet.
 - My speech. My steps. My desires. My vision of God.
 - I am just as guilty as my neighbors, the ones I like and the ones I do not.
 - I am no more righteous than they are.
 - And when that truth finally lands, my mouth stops too.

- And now Paul tells us why the law speaks this way.
 - Listen to v. 19 again...

Romans 3:19 ESV

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

The Silence of Every Defense (vv. 19-20)

- That is the purpose statement.
- Paul has just quoted the Scriptures.
 - He has strung together this chain of testimony.
 - None is righteous. No one understands. No one seeks for God.
 - Their throat is an open grave. Their tongues deceive.
 - Their mouths are full of curses and bitterness.
 - Their feet run toward bloodshed. There is no fear of God before their eyes.
- And someone might be tempted to say, “Yes, but surely that is talking about someone else.”
 - Surely that is talking about the wicked.
 - Surely that is talking about the Gentiles.
 - Surely that is talking about the violent, the godless, the immoral, the people outside the covenant community.
- But Paul says, “Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law.”
 - In other words, the people who received the Scriptures are not allowed to use the Scriptures as a shield against conviction.
 - The Word of God does not merely expose those people over there.
 - It exposes us.

- That is always one of the dangers of religious familiarity.
 - We can learn how to handle the Bible without letting the Bible handle us.
 - We can use Scripture as binoculars for inspecting everyone else while refusing to let it become a mirror.
- But Paul does not let us do that.
 - Whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law.
 - Why?
 - “So that every mouth may be stopped.”
- That is the word that gives this sermon its title.
 - Silentium.
 - Silence.
- The law does not open our mouths so we can make a better argument for our innocence.
 - The law closes our mouths because every argument has failed.
 - The comparison defense stops.
 - “At least I am not like them.”
 - The religious defense stops.
 - “But I grew up around the things of God.”
 - The sincerity defense stops.
 - “But I meant well.”
 - The improvement defense stops.
 - “But I am better than I used to be.”
 - The heritage defense stops.
 - “But my family believed.”

- The knowledge defense stops.
 - “But I knew the right answers.”
- Every mouth stopped.
- The evidence has been entered.
 - The testimony has been read.
 - The verdict has been announced.
 - And the defendant has nothing left to say.
- That is not only true for Israel. Paul says the whole world is held accountable to God.
 - The Jews are not exempt because they had the law.
 - The Gentiles are not exempt because they lacked the law.
 - The religious are not exempt because they know the language.
 - The irreligious are not exempt because they reject the category.
 - The whole world is accountable to God.
- Then Paul says it plainly in verse 20:

Romans 3:20 ESV

²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

 - That phrase matters: “in his sight.”
 - We are remarkably skilled at justifying ourselves in our own sight.
 - We can explain our motives.
 - We can soften our failures.
 - We can compare ourselves to someone worse.
 - We can remember the good things and minimize the ugly things.

- We can build a version of the story where we are understandable, reasonable, and maybe even righteous.
- And sometimes we can justify ourselves in the sight of others.
 - We can appear respectable.
 - We can look religious.
 - We can say the right words.
 - We can keep the worst parts hidden.
 - We can convince people that we are better than we are.
- But Paul is not asking whether I can justify myself in my own sight.
 - He is not asking whether I can justify myself in your sight.
 - He is asking whether I can be justified in God's sight.
 - And by works of the law, no human being will be justified in his sight.
 - Why?
 - Because the law was never given to acquit sinners.
 - It was given to expose sin.
 - The law is good.
 - The law is holy.
 - The law tells the truth.
 - But the law cannot save the sinner it exposes.
 - A mirror can show you the dirt on your face, but it cannot wash you clean.
 - An X-ray can reveal the fracture, but it cannot heal the bone.
 - A thermometer can tell you there is a fever, but it cannot cure the infection.

- And the law can show you your sin, but it cannot justify you before God.
- That was never its job.
- “Through the law comes knowledge of sin.”
 - The law does not provide our defense.
 - It removes it.
 - And that is severe mercy.
 - Because as long as I am still defending myself, I am not ready to receive grace.
 - As long as I am still arguing my innocence, I am not ready to hear the gospel.
 - As long as I am still saying, “But I am better than they are,” or “But I have done enough,” or “But I know the right things,” I have not yet understood why Christ had to come.

Invitation

- [Romans 3:20](#) is not the final word of the gospel.
- But it is the final word to every form of self-salvation.
- Before Paul says, “But now,” he first makes sure every mouth has stopped.
- Because grace is only good news to people who have stopped trying to prove they do not need it.
- So where does this leave us?
 - Every mouth stopped.
 - The whole world accountable to God.
 - No defense left. No excuse left.
 - No comparison left. No religious résumé left.

- No argument strong enough to justify us in his sight.
- And that sounds terrifying until you realize this is also mercy.
 - Because God is not silencing us so he can crush us.
 - He is silencing us so we will stop trying to save ourselves.
 - The courtroom has gone quiet.
 - The evidence has been read. The verdict has been returned. The defense has run out of arguments.
 - And in that silence, something is finally possible that was not possible before.
 - Not condemnation — you were already condemned.
 - Not judgment — that has already been rendered.
 - What is finally possible is grace.
 - Because grace has nowhere to land in a life that is still making its case.
 - It cannot reach the person who is still negotiating their innocence, still pointing to someone worse, still leaning on what they know or where they came from or how hard they tried.
 - But the person whose mouth has stopped — that person is ready to hear what Christ has done.
- The law stops every mouth.
 - But the gospel opens the door to mercy.
 - So today, the invitation is simple.
 - Stop defending yourself before God.
 - Stop minimizing your sin.
 - Stop leaning on your background, your morality, your church attendance, your Bible knowledge, your good intentions, or your comparison to someone worse.

- Let the Word of God tell the truth about you.
- And then come to Christ.
- Because the Savior we need is not the Savior for people who have a decent case to make.
- He is the Savior for sinners whose mouths have finally stopped.
- If today you know that is you, then do not run from that conviction. Bring it to Jesus.
 - Confess your sin.
 - Trust his mercy.
 - Rest in his righteousness.
 - The law has spoken, and it has left us silent.
 - But Christ has spoken too.
 - And his word is grace.