

# THE WHOLE WORLD IS HELD ACCOUNTABLE TO GOD

Romans 3:1–20

Key Verse: 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 stopped, and the whole world held accountable to God.”

Has anyone ever tried to show you you’re wrong? It’s so painful, we have a way of blocking those memories from our minds. We can fight tooth and nail to defend ourselves, but in the end, we just feel angry and exhausted.

Such “fighting back” is exactly what Paul addresses today. In chapters 1 and 2 Apostle Paul has been giving a convicting description of what’s wrong with human beings. Our sin of ingratitude to our Creator has led us to foolish and outrageous rebellion, creating our own fake reality with all kinds of unrighteousness. Our sin of self-righteousness is even worse. It leads to another fake reality: hypocrisy, a form of religion where we judge others, know and say all the right things, but all the while harbor sin in our own unrepentant hearts.

Paul knows us so well. Despite us being presented with all these truths, he knows we’re still arguing, kicking and screaming. We blame God for having wrath on us and look for loopholes to maintain the status quo, to keep on sinning.

So in 3:1–20 Paul brings what’s been called his “closing argument” in prosecuting all humanity of our sin before God. He’s saying so many important things here, in rapid-fire succession, it can feel overwhelming to follow. In verses 1–8 he dismisses questions about the Jews, about God’s right to judge, and about how we should respond to his grace. Then in verses 9–18 Paul brings together a powerful list of Old Testament verses to help us see our own utter depravity before God. Finally in verses 19–20 he brings us to a place of silent surrender, where we face our own rebellious, self-righteous sins and finally confess our accountability to God. Though it’s painful, being made aware of our own sin is the only way we can be ready to receive Jesus. May God speak to us personally today through his word.

## I. Arguing with God (1–8)

It’s interesting: after an entire chapter of challenging the self-righteous, Paul now anticipates quite a bit of push back. He’s been sharing the gospel in various cities over

the past 20 years, going always first to the Jew. He's had vast experience with their opposition. So in verses 1–8 he brings up several kinds of resistance. "If we Jews are just the same sinners before God as Gentiles, what happened to our privileged status? If some of us didn't accept the Messiah, and God has moved on to Gentiles instead, did he break his promise to us? Is God not faithful to us anymore? Also, if our failures enhance God's glory, how can he still judge us?" And last but not least, "Why don't we just go ahead and sin, so God can get all the more glory?" These are pretty snarky questions.

In his reasoning with the Jews Paul had heard these questions often. They say, "There's never a bad question." But in fact, there is. They're called "bad faith" questions. They're not sincere—they're just trying to make the other person look foolish. So twice Paul says, "By no means!" (4,6)—in today's language, "Absolutely not!" In just a few short verses, Paul shuts such people down. And in verse 8, he wraps up this "talk back" phase with a rebuke, using their own fake question: "And why not do evil that good may come?" It was a vicious mockery of Paul's message of grace for sinners. Both Jews and Gentiles had probably been mocking it. Paul concludes: "Their condemnation is just" (8b). He means, "Someday, people who mock like that are going to get what they deserve."

Even in all this insincerity, Paul shares some profound truths about God. God entrusts people with his oracles, his living words. God is faithful. God is true. When he judges, God is always righteous and just. If anyone tries to judge God, God always prevails. It's God who deserves to judge sinful people for our sins. Yet God wants to give us his saving grace. He just doesn't want us to abuse it. Someday, the most clever, self-righteous, argumentative people are all going to have to deal with God, who is real.

## II. The case against us (9–18)

Next, Paul moves from the argument to the evidence phase. He's like a prosecutor who stops asking questions and just starts laying out photos on the evidence table. This is when the holy facade of self-righteous people who've been suppressing the truth comes crashing down. In these verses Paul strings together seven Old Testament passages, mostly from Psalms and Isaiah, to create one inescapable and undeniable indictment: "...all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin" (9b). The word "under" is key. It means living under a power that's taken over us.

The opening verses begin, "No one is righteous, no not one" (10). And they end, "...no one does good, not even one" (12b). The Jews were sure they were the experts in the Bible. So Paul is basically saying here: "You want to talk about the Bible? Great.

Let's see what it says about you." As we move through these scripture quotes, it's like Paul is doing a diagnostic surgery on our human nature, moving in a specific order. He begins with the mind and will: "...no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside, they have together become worthless" (11). It's exactly what he said back in chapter 1.

Then, like a diagnostic surgeon, he examines what living under sin does to us. Verses 13–14 expose this reality, "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.' 'The venom of asps is under their lips.' 'Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.'" These aren't surface-level blemishes; they're deep, systemic sicknesses that have taken root in our very being. It's like discovering tumors and infections in our soul. And notice how it all is centered on our privilege of using language. With this capacity, we humans are creatures who can be entrusted with the oracles of God. But our sin completely corrupts this faculty.

Next, Paul runs an analysis on our life patterns, like someone tracking our web browsing, tv watching, shopping and dining patterns, and all our social interactions. In this case, facts are facts, and the facts are bad. Verses 15–17 read, "Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known." To some people, these words may not seem very relatable: "Am I not a pretty good person? I'm not violent. There's no ruin or misery in my life; it's kinda peaceful." But the verses aren't only describing outward, physical violence. They diagnose the spiritual outcome of anyone living apart from God. The "ruin" is spiritual bankruptcy. The "misery" is the dull ache of anxiety and lack of purpose that characterize a life centered on the self.

If verses 10–17 are symptoms, verse 18 gets at the core problem. It's not in our mind, throat, tongue, lips, mouth or feet. It's an eye disease. The diagnosis is: "There is no fear of God before their eyes." The fear of God gives us healthy eyes with which to see reality—the reality of God, myself, others, and the world. Without it, we're looking through a distorted, self-centered lens. Fear of God doesn't mean living in a constant state of dread. Fear of God means living with the weight of who he is always in my view, and of my accountability to him. Inwardly, we may be arguing with God and with the truths of the gospel. We may be trying to deny all the spiritual photos of our inner life and way of life. We do this because we don't have the fear of God in view. Cut off from him, we're living for ourselves. That's what ruins us, ruins our relationships, and ruins our world.

III. "So that every mouth may be stopped" (19–20)

Now let's read verse 19. All of a sudden, Paul brings back "the law." But notice what he's doing: he isn't just talking about the Ten Commandments or the first five books of the Bible. He's using "the law" as a title for the verses we just read—for the entire Old Testament. In this passage, all the books of the Old Testament are the evidence. The very Scriptures they rely on for their self-righteousness are now the instrument that exposes who they really are. This poem of nine verses strung together is speaking primarily not to those who never pick up a Bible, but to the "insiders," the self-righteous who read it all the time. We all can get so proud of knowing and teaching the Bible, but forget that it's meant to teach ourselves first. We can use our Bible knowledge as a badge of honor, instead of as a mirror to see our true selves. If Bible experts are found guilty by the very book they teach, the rest of the world is left with absolutely no defense.

Paul says, "...so that every mouth may be stopped" (19). They say "silence is golden." But sometimes it's not. Sometimes, the sound of silence can feel like totally meaningless isolation from other human beings and the world. But sometimes, the silence of a time out is the perfect time for self-realization. Paul is using an unusual word here that means more than just "be quiet." It literally means to fix a hole in a fence or a leak in a pipe, or literally, to plug shut our mouth. To us, it's the moment we stop trying to teach and start listening and learning. It's the moment we stop thinking, "But, but, but..." It's the moment we encounter the living God and see myself according to what he sees, in agreement with him about how sinful I am. It's frightening, but necessary.

Then Paul says, "...and the whole world may be held accountable to God." "Accountable" is like a financial report listing our true income and expenditures, like our day of financial reckoning we can't ignore or hide. In legal terms, it's even more sobering. It means we've lost the case, totally guilty, no appeals possible, no escape, no more control. Now we have to face the dire consequences. "The whole world" doesn't just mean all those people out there, but all of us here. Many have preached this to non-Christians, that they need to wake up and see the judgment they're going to face. It's true. But Paul also says the same thing to Christians. In Romans 14:12 he says, "So then each of us will give an account of himself to God." Us, too? Yes, us too. And the words "to God" are so important. Not to people, not to an organization, but to the living God. What no one else caught us doing, God saw. The neglect we engaged in, God saw. This spiritual reality is what brings us into a moment of holy silence. Once, a young man had this powerful realization. Through fasting and prayer he realized, for the first time in his life, what kind of person he'd been. He became aware of the living God. He used to talk a lot, but he became so quiet. After several months, a pastor asked him,

“What’s going on with you? You’re different.” The young man just made a quiet smile. It was the beginning of his spiritual awakening.

Let’s read verse 20. Here, “works of the law” are our attempts to earn salvation through moral performance, to be “good enough” to be justified. It’s us trying to build a resume of righteousness, highlighting what we know and do, to prove to God and ourselves that we’re okay. But all our knowledge, all our efforts, are never enough in God’s sight. He sees through it all. Paul ends, “...since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” The law is not like a ladder of achievement to get to God. It’s like an MRI with contrast, or even a PET scan, that sees into all our body’s tissues and cells to find out what’s wrong. This knowledge of sin in verse 20 is a heavy thing. It’s not the knowledge of sin from “acting it out”—most of us are pretty good at behaving ourselves. No, it’s the knowledge that comes from seeing sin’s reality living within me, even when I’m doing nothing. It’s realizing that the venom is in my heart even when my mouth is shut. It’s the realization that I don’t just commit sin; I contain it.

For now, the arguments are over. The gears of our excuses are jammed. The room has gone quiet. We’re here, speechless and accountable, because there’s nothing left to say in our defense. But look at the Cross. There’s a Man there who went to that place of condemnation and remained silent. Like a lamb led to the slaughter, he opened not his mouth (Isa.53:7). He took our place in the prisoner’s dock so that he could become the only Voice that speaks for us now. He is our advocate (1 John 2:1). He knows our venom, our open grave, exactly who we are. But he is here. Let’s stop trying to explain ourselves. Let’s stop trying to fix ourselves. Let’s allow the truth we heard today from Paul to dwell in us. Let’s allow the only One who can save us to have the final word.