

Romans 3:9-20 Humanity's biggest problem

Introduction

One of the pre-eminent literary figures at the start of the twentieth century was G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936). He had a penetrating mind and powerful pen as he addressed many of the key issues of his day. On one occasion *The Times* newspaper asked its readers a question concerning what was the biggest problem in the world today? Many people wrote in to lament the great evils present in the world, but one letter stood out above all the others not just by its eloquent simplicity, but by the profundity of its contents. Chesterton wrote: 'Dear Sir, I am, yours faithfully, G K Chesterton. In the latter twentieth and early twenty-first centuries the point he was making sadly needs a little explanation for some people. Chesterton was not claiming to be the most wicked person on the planet, or even potentially so, he was pointing to the sinfulness of the human heart as being the root problem that lies behind the acts of wickedness and evil that have so damaged our world. In 1973 secular Psychiatrist Karl Menninger who a book '*Whatever became of sin?*' The publishers blurb contained the following extraordinary words: In the present book Dr. Menninger attempts to apply psychiatry to a world-wide affliction, the depression, gloom, discouragement and apprehensiveness which are so prevalent. The word "sin" has almost disappeared from our vocabulary, but the sense of guilt remains in our hearts and minds. The prisoners punished in our jails are a small minority of all the offenders; "all we like sheep have gone astray." While a few deplore their guilt, many remain blandly indifferent or vaguely depressed or bitterly accusatory of others. Are these states of illness? Not until the EPILOGUE, which he calls a deferred preface, does the author tell us how he came to write this book and how he has come from many years of experience to consider moral values an essential aspect of psychiatry. If, as he believes, mental health and moral health are identical, **the recognition of the reality of sin** [my emphasis] offers to the suffering struggling, anxious world a real hope not of belated treatment but of prevention. This task enlists the physician, the psychiatrist, the minister, the lawyer, the editor, the teacher, and the mother in a common army- an army against self-destruction and world destruction. These counter-cultural words penned at a time when the revolt against Judao-Christian moral standards was at its height, are incredibly powerful and harmonise incredibly well with the section of the letter to the Romans covered in this message.

1. The definite charge (Romans 3:9)

What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. The apostle here in Romans 3:9 repeats the question asked in Romans 3:1 concerning whether the Jews are in a better position than Gentiles before God? He has answered this in Rom.3:1 with a 'yes' and in Rom.3:9 with a 'no'. However, as the whole book of Romans is a carefully argued presentation of the Christian faith, it is obvious that Paul has something different in mind on the two occasions he asks this question. In Romans 3:1 he has in mind the privileges the Jews had of access to God's Word and the associated responsibilities they had to make the Gospel known throughout the world. In that sense they had a great advantage- as do we -of reading and hearing God's Word proclaimed. However, by contrast in Romans 3:9 the apostle is bringing together his concluding remarks about the universality of the problem of human sinfulness. He wants to make plain that in this matter Jews and Gentiles are in exactly the same position. All need redemption from our sins. Every one of us needs a Saviour -God makes no exemptions in this matter. The phrase *Do we have any advantage?* in some translations is rendered *Are we better than...[Gentiles]?* Paul wants to do away with any possibility of any

sector of the society of his day thinking that they didn't have a problem to deal with because they were better than other people. The good news of Jesus is equally applicable to people of all social classes; all racial backgrounds; rich or poor, male or female. Yet too often discrimination goes on. I remember years ago early in his time as Baptist Union Mission adviser, Robert Breustedt challenged us on this point. He had come to faith from a wealthy background and had given up a prosperous career to enter the ministry. He told us something of his story. He remarked that in the well-to-do area where he lived prior to his conversion he could not remember any church putting leaflets through their doors, let alone knocking them. Yet a nearby council estate was regularly visited by Christians going round the doors. The challenge then and now is to acknowledge that the people we may most expect to want to come to Christ may not be the most responsive; others with whom we had little hope of an interest in what we believe may be more open to hearing about the Lord. Paul wants to make it absolutely plain to the followers of Jesus for whom this letter was first written that we cannot discriminate between people with respect to human sinfulness. All of us are in exactly the same position as sinners before God. There is no dispute that some people have chosen act on sinful desires in a manner that the majority of other people find difficult to comprehend how anyone could behave that way. Yet in the light of God's perfect holiness all of us fall short of His standards. When we grasp this truth it will affect, for example, how we relate to other people when they have failed in some matter. Although sin can never rightly be swept under the carpet, a recognition that 'but for the grace of God go I...' enables us to be much more gracious and loving in seeking to help someone correct their mistakes; we are either unforgiven sinners or forgiven sinners with respect to God and the gospel. However, only when we grasp our need of forgiveness of our own sins, and come to see Jesus as the Saviour from our sins will we then want to put our faith and trust in Him. This is a foundational matter of our faith and provides the explanation for the necessity of Jesus' sacrifice in our place on the cross. Have you had that time in your life when you acknowledged your sinfulness within and asked God to forgive your sin and owned the Lord Jesus as your Saviour from sin? This is the most important step we take in life. Paul will very soon come to the good news, but in Romans chapters one to three he sets out the bad news that reveals the necessity of what God did to put both humanity and His created world in order and back on track. The problem is very serious as he will explain in the series of biblical quotations, but he has declared already his confidence in the remedy God has provided for us in Romans 1:16-17: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. ¹⁷For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith."*

2. **The universal proof** (Romans 3:10-18)

Paul provides a series of quotations from the Old Testament to back up his case. One quotation comes from Ecclesiastes, five from Psalms and one from Isaiah. His approach was in line with that of most rabbis of the day, who would list the passages of the Bible they believed supported their case, prior to offering an explanation of their significance where they thought that was necessary. Although in earlier sermons on Romans I have quoted rabbis who did not agree with what Paul was teaching here, others did share this conviction of the universal sinfulness of humanity, both Jews and Gentiles alike. A Jewish document from this era records information of a public discussion between Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Akiba. A brief segment of the exchange included these words: [R. Eliezer asked R. Akiba, 'Akiba have I neglected anything of the whole Torah?' Akiba replied, 'Thou, O Master, hast taught us, *For there is not a just man upon earth, that doest good and sinneth not*' [Sanhedrin. 101a, quoted

in L.L. Morris, *Romans*, p. 166.] The apostle then uses these Scripture passages to make essentially three points. The first is:

(a) **Sin in human character** (Romans 3:10-12)¹⁰ *As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; ¹¹ there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.¹² All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.* He begins with a quotation from Ecclesiastes 7:20: *Indeed, there is no one on earth who is righteous, no one who does what is right and never sins.* This is the fundamental reason why so many people are totally disinterested when we seek to share our faith with them. The foundational sin of humanity is failing to give God His place; that is failing to give Him the glory and honour due to His holy name. The more we have an habitual preference for self-centredness or the more a person takes pleasure in some form of sinful attitude, or conduct the further they are from placing their trust in God or having any real desire to put Him first in their lives. The ungodliness of sin is revealed here in a stark and depressing way. It is easy to look in horror at a figure like Hitler who in his thinking was deeply influenced by the atheistic philosopher Frederick Nietzsche and put into practice this philosopher's creed of the advancement of 'the strong' (or survival of the fittest) and the elimination of 'the weak' and 'defective' in his death camps. Or at individuals like Jimmy Saville who preyed on the innocent and vulnerable and list them as serious sinners. However, we are all sinners as Paul and the quotation from the book of Ecclesiastes have declared. The issue for each of us, though, is not what these people did, but in terms of my attitudes, the words that come out of my mouth and the behavioural choices I make –how close am I to being the person God wants me to be? Are there issues that He wants me to address? The Ecclesiastes quotation reminds us of the benchmark of perfection which God attains and we cannot reach, no matter how hard we attempt it. To fail an exam at school or university or through work by one percent or fifty percent has the same end result; it is psychologically better to come close and be convinced that another attempt will get us over the finish line! But in both cases it is a failure. The ultimate sin is to fail to recognise or honour God, therefore, in an absolute sense a life lived without God will always fall short of the quality of life God intended for that man or woman. Paul then cites Psalm 14:1-3 (or Psalm 53:1-3 which are virtually identical) which states: *The fool says in his heart, "There is no God." They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good.² The Lord looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God.³ All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.* The apostle is not saying here that a person who wants nothing to do with God plunges recklessly into acts of great evil, whereas if a person recognizes their need of God that without exception they all live outstandingly holy lives. Life is never so simple and black and white! What he is saying is that godlessness is the essence of sin. God's charge against humanity is that collectively we do seek to follow Him as we should; that we do not constantly seek His glory as our chief aim and objective; that He is not central in our thoughts on a regular basis and we do not love Him as we should. Jesus, in response to a question about which was the greatest commandment, in Matthew 22:37-38, declared: ³⁷ *Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.* John Stott (*Romans*, p. 100) expressed it this way: 'Sin is the revolt of the self against God, the dethronement of God with a view to the enthronement of oneself. Ultimately sin is self-deification, the reckless determination to occupy the throne which belongs to God alone.' What is it that I get most passionate about? What do I choose to spend the largest proportions of my free time on? What is it that constantly pops up in my thoughts, apart from the obvious things in the workplace or our family circle? The apostle's words at times in our lives can be deeply challenging to each one of us when we get things out of perspective. Is there something you need to address today?

(b) **Sin in human conduct** (Romans 3:13-17) It is not just in our thought life that there can be problems, what is inside will always eventually come out. Paul is seeking to highlight the

pervasiveness of sin through these quotations of Scripture which refer to sins of speech and conduct. (i) Sins of Speech (Romans 3:13-14)¹³ “*Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.*” “*The poison of vipers is on their lips.*”¹⁴ “*Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.* Romans 3:13 begins with a quotation of part of 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 final part of that verse comes from Psalm 140:3: *They make their tongues as sharp as a serpent’s; the poison of vipers is on their lips.* Romans 4:14 is a citation of Psalm 10:7: *His mouth is full of lies and threats; trouble and evil are under his tongue.* Through these different quotations Paul is referring to corrupt speech, deceitful words, uncharitable utterances and blasphemous language. All of us have heard conversations where these descriptions could fairly describe what we have heard. Yet can anyone say that we have never spoken inappropriately? That our words have always been wise, judicious and appropriate? It goes beyond our thought-life we can have problems with our tongues. In James 3 the writer draws attention to the problems that can arise through misuse of the tongue. James 3: 7-10 states: *All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind,⁸ but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.⁹ With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness.¹⁰ Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.* (ii) Sins of Conduct (Romans 3:15-16)¹⁵ “*Their feet are swift to shed blood;¹⁶ ruin and misery mark their ways,¹⁷ and the way of peace they do not know.*” It doesn’t stop at sinful thought-patterns or inappropriate speech, but develops like an infection into misconduct. Paul here makes reference to Isaiah 59:7-8: *Their feet rush into sin; they are swift to shed innocent blood. They pursue evil schemes; acts of violence mark their ways.⁸ The way of peace they do not know;* it is not insignificant that earlier in that chapter Isaiah presents this charge against the people of His nation: *But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear* (Isaiah 59:2). All our faculties were given to us to use not only for our own benefit but for the good of others, through which we might bring glory to God by living in a way which He intended for us. A biblical understanding of the problem of sin reveals to us that it is all pervasive and mars the thoughts, words and actions of even some of the best of people. Some great actions can have improper or even base motives; or simply to make us look good (or not look bad) in the eyes of other people. All of us at times have done things for other people that are good which we really didn’t want to do –not because we necessarily begrudged the person that service, but because, for example, we may have had to sacrifice doing something we judged more important. We rightly can be critical of politicians making promises at election times that afterwards reveal no serious intentions of putting into practice their promises. But, have we not been guilty at times also of speaking too hastily? In essence, the apostle is saying that everyone Jew or Gentile has failed to live to the high standards set for us by God. We may never be as bad as we could be (thankfully!) but equally our thoughts words and actions are often not as good as they might be either.

(c) The cause of human sinfulness (Romans 3:18)¹⁸ “*There is no fear of God before their eyes.*” So why ultimately does humanity have this awful problem that Paul has spent the best part of two chapters of his letter describing? He once again makes reference to a Psalm, in this case Psalm 36. In that song David was reflecting on why human beings do bad things? *I have a message from God in my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: **There is no fear of God before their eyes.**² In their own eyes they flatter themselves too much to detect or hate their sin.³ The words of their mouths are wicked and deceitful; they fail to act wisely or do good.⁴ Even on their beds they plot evil; they commit themselves to a sinful course and do not reject what is wrong* (Psalm 36:3-4). Paul has been speaking in general terms with respect to Jews and Gentiles. There are always exceptions to rules and within any culture and society there are always minorities who behave better or worse than the vast majority of the population. However, a large proportion of the people will simply go along with what they perceive are the opinions and values of the

majority. It is like the tribal militias in Afghanistan. When they think the Taliban are stronger they sign up with them and currently it appears that the Government side is in favour with three major militias signing up with President Karzai's forces. A lack of absolute convictions can leave us floundering in a moral mess. Ultimate and absolute goodness is derived from God who is absolutely good. It is in the light of who He is that human beings have a plumb-line to measure our own conduct. In practice, God has gone much further than we could ever imagine or expect in asking Jesus to come down to earth to show us how to live and then to die in our place as a substitute for sinners. However, the bottom line is that we either want the approval of other people most or the approval of God. We cannot truly revere (*fear* in the sense of the highest respect) God and not want to live in a way that pleases Him, even if it is out of step at times with other people. Whom do you most want to please the Lord or people around you who are still to come to faith? Sometimes this is an extremely difficult call in practice. In principle, in church, it is easy to give the right answer, but standing firm for your principles can require courage and real conviction. Paul in another letter spoke about the spiritual battle in which we are engaged and urged God's people to stand firm. ¹⁰ *Finally, be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power.* ¹¹ *Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes.* ¹² *For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.* ¹³ *Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand* (Ephesians 6:10-13). Do you need to pray: Lord help me take a stand for you as a Christian?

3. **The personal application** (Romans 3:19-20)

¹⁹ *Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.* ²⁰ *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin.* Clearly Paul must have felt that some Jews were trying to wriggle out of acknowledging their sinfulness and so his concluding words of this section are very specifically addressed to them. He points out to them that the Law of God is good, but through knowing the law we find that we fall short of its just demands upon us. The Law is beneficial, but like the sun shining through windows we have just washed on a summer's day it can expose things we would rather not have seen! Windows that looked completely clean after they had been washed in that purer searchlight were exposed as less than fully cleansed of the grime. When the light of God's law shines on our lives and in our consciences it reveals the inadequacy of trying to earn God's favour by our own good works and drives us to Christ for salvation and the gift of God's glorious grace. Have you received God's salvation through Jesus? If you have never taken that step can I urge you to take it today? If you have been away from God and need to renew your fellowship with Him then again can I urge you to do so today?

In Romans 1:18 to 3:20 Paul has highlighted five things, prior to moving on to the remedy for human sinfulness.

1. Conviction of sins from the experience of Human Life (Romans 1:18-3:6)
2. Conviction of sin from the Word of God (Romans 3:9-18)

3. Conviction of responsibility for sin and our own sins (Romans 3:19) *so that every mouth may be silenced*
4. Conviction of guilt before God (Romans 3:19) *and the whole world held accountable to God.*
5. Conviction of human helplessness with regard to obtaining a right standing before God (Romans 3:20) *Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law.*

May God help us to turn from our sins, turn to Jesus and give our lives wholeheartedly to Him as Lord and Saviour, Amen.