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None is Righteous Romans 3:9-20

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My parents live in a large gated community for seniors. One of the things we've discovered is that you have to really watch out for other drivers, especially at intersections. There's a disturbing number of people who drive through stop signs without stopping. They get very angry when pulled over and issued a ticket by the private security that looks after the community. Their excuse—and they seem to be convinced of its validity—is that the rules only apply to visitors, not to residents. Of course, that doesn't fly with the community association, which adds the amount of any traffic fines to their association fees for the month. The association will simply respond, "Oh...you live here. Then you know the rules."

These people aren't all that unlike the Jews whom Paul is addressing in Romans 3. He's been explaining that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God. The gospel is the message that Jesus, who died and rose from the dead, is the world's true Lord. The gospel is a call to faithful, obedient, and loyal allegiance. And the gospel about Jesus reveals God's righteousness—which for Paul means God's faithfulness to his promises. Through the gospel, God is setting his Creation to rights. This has two sides. On one side we see people who have believed the gospel and have submitted to King Jesus and have aligned themselves with God's plan to renew Creation. But on the other side, we see God's judgement. Part of making Creation new involves removing, wiping away, destroying everything and everyone who insists on corruption and who opposes God and his rule. Both reveal God's

righteousness, his faithfulness and the fact that he is fulfilling his promises to set right what we have, though our rebellion, idolatry, and sin turned upside-down.

Of course, people object to falling under God's judgement. Paul's been addressing these objections in these early chapters. In Chapter One he explained how the Gentiles stand condemned. And then in Chapter Two he anticipated the Jew's objection. They appeal to God: We're special. You chose us. You gave us your law. See, look at us, we're circumcised, we eat only clean food, and we observe the Sabbath. We're marked out as your people. It's this objection that Paul now addresses head-on. They're like the people who get a ticket for driving through a stop sign and then say, "No, you can't give me a ticket. I live here." Paul has affirmed that the privileges of the Jews are real. The problem is that they've forgotten what their privilege really means and have ended up squandering it. We pick up, now, at Romans 3:9.

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...

Paul sets up a courtroom scene here and he lays a charge against both Jews and Gentiles. The Jews may have some advantages in other respects, but in this court, none of that does them any good. All of humanity is in the dock, including the Jews. *All*, he says, are "under sin". This is the first time in Romans Paul uses this word "sin". The Greek word literally means "to miss the mark". God's intent when he created us was for human beings to flourish, but we repeatedly and consistently miss the mark. As Paul explained earlier, sin isn't the breaking of arbitrary rules that God has established. Sin is sin because it undermines the sort of life and vocation he intended for us to have. But Paul doesn't just use the word "sin" to describe our individual acts of sin that miss the mark. For Paul, sin

takes on a life of its own. Some translations add a word to bring out the sense of what Paul's talking about, saying that we are under the *power* of sin. What Paul is doing is giving us a picture of enslavement. We don't just choose sin. We're *enslaved* to it. We're enslaved to sin the way the Israelites were enslaved to Pharaoh. And Paul builds on this. The story of redemption, the gospel story, is a story of exodus. Sin is like Pharaoh, brutally subjugating and abusing the people of God. Jesus' death and resurrection are world-changing events like the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea, through which God creates a new people. As the Lord met his people at Mt. Sinai and gave them the law, in this new exodus, Jesus pours out the Holy Spirit on us so that we can truly live the life he has called us to live as his people. And as the Lord led the Israelites to the promised land, we now live as Jesus' people in hope of the promise of all Creation being made new.

Now, Paul's not quite there yet. That's actually the narrative he'll lay out in Chapter 5-8. Right now, he's making the point that, like the Israelites helplessly in bondage to Pharaoh, the human race is hopelessly in bondage to sin. In God's courtroom that means that all of us stand condemned to death. Paul's already proved the Gentiles are guilty, but the Jews say, "No, no! Not us! We're God's special people. He won't condemn us." And Paul stresses that *all* are sinners. The Jews appeal to the law to make their case, so Paul quotes the law at them: "Here's what your law, your Scripture says about you."

What follows in verses 10-18 is a sequence of quotes from the Psalms and from Isaiah. He writes:

as it is written:

"None is righteous, no, not one;

Paul begins by quoting verse 3 from Psalms 14 and 53—two psalms that are almost identical. He may also be

working in Ecclesiastes 7:20. His point is that Scripture tells us that no one is righteous. In the psalm the Lord looks down from heaven on the human race and sees that *all* have gone astray, all are perverse, no one does what is right. It's a *universal* indictment against all humanity, Jew and Gentile alike. He goes on:

**no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside; together they
have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one."**

God searches the earth for someone—anyone—who does good and finds no one—not even in Israel. In verse 13, Paul now jumps to Psalm 5, verse 9.

**"Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive."**

What comes out of our mouths is as vile as a rotting corpse in an open grave. Instead of using our tongues to give praise and glory to God, instead of using our tongues to exhort each other, instead of using our tongues to bless, we abuse God's gift of speech and spew lies. To give another vivid illustration, Paul quotes Psalm 140:3.

**"The venom of asps is under their
lips."**

We poison each other and we poison God's Creation with our speech. Paul now shifts to Psalm 10:7.

**"Their mouth is full of curses and
bitterness."**

And wicked speech leads to wicked action. Paul now quotes from Isaiah 59:7-8.

**"Their feet are swift to shed blood;
in their paths are ruin and misery,
and the way of peace they have not
known."**

And Paul ends, finally, by quoting Psalm 36:1.

**"There is no fear of God before
their eyes."**

We have no awe and no respect for God and refuse to honour him or to give him the glory and praise he is due. We serve only ourselves and we worship idols.

Again, Paul begins this series of quotations from Scripture with a statement of universal indictment. "There is no one righteous, no, not one." No Gentile, but no Jew either. Again, though, Paul's already made his case against the Gentiles. Here he's addressing the Jews, who insist that it'll be different for them. They're God's chosen. So these psalms that Paul quotes from are all psalms that were read in the synagogues and that the Jews would have seen as heaping up the sins of the Gentiles. Particularly, they highlight the sins of the Gentiles against the Jews at various times in their history. We get a sense of what Paul is arguing against by looking at the apocryphal book of 1 Enoch. There the writer exhorts the righteous—and by "righteous" he means the Jews—to prepare themselves for the coming judgement by testifying against the sins of the wicked—and by "wicked" he means the Gentiles—so that the angels can bring charges against the wicked before God, who will then destroy them on behalf of the righteous." This was what the Jews longed for when they looked to the coming Messiah. He would right the wrongs done to them. They would bring their charges against the wicked Gentiles in the heavenly court and God would destroy them. But here Paul turns these Psalms against the Jews. The Gentiles are certainly sinners, but the Jews are too. Their throats are open graves, the venom of asps is on their lips, their feet are swift to shed blood. Paul may have been thinking of Jesus, weeping over

Jerusalem, when he quoted from Isaiah 59: "If only you had known the way that makes for peace." But Israel did know the way of peace, which was why judgement was coming. Quoting Isaiah, Paul charges the Jews from their own Scriptures. Israel uses the law to appeal to the Lord that she deserves special treatment, but that same law indicts Israel herself and paints a very ugly picture of her wickedness.

That said, there's more to Paul's selection of Scripture quotations. If we take them at face value, they paint a bleak picture. But there's more to it. You see, the Jews knew their scriptures well. They knew the Psalms, in particular, very well. A rabbi could quote one verse and the rest of the psalm or the rest of the Scripture passage would immediately come to mind, much the way we can quote a single line from a song or a hymn and the rest quickly comes to mind.

To follow a tangent for a moment: Paul's use of Scripture here illustrates just how much we modern Christians have failed to steep ourselves in Scripture. The Jews sang the Scriptures, particularly the Psalms, and committed them to memory the way we commit so many of our modern songs to memory. Quote one line and everyone would instantly recall the rest of the psalm. Christians, for many centuries, did much the same thing, singing the Psalms and other parts of the Bible, not just inscribing it in memory, but allowing it through that kind of internalisation, to work itself through them and to shape their thoughts and actions. Medieval monks sang their way through the entire Psalter once every week. When Archbishop Cranmer reformed our liturgy and translated it into English, he setup the rhythm of Morning and Evening Prayer for both the clergy *and* the laypeople, giving us a pattern, not just to read through the whole Bible every year, but to read and pray and

sing our way through the whole Psalter once each month, gradually memorising it and allowing it to permeate our hearts and minds. The Puritans, a generation later, opposed the singing of hymns with non-biblical texts, because they feared that it would distract from the ancient practise of singing Scripture, particularly the Psalms, and that Christians would miss out on the memorisation and internalisation that come naturally with the regular singing of God's Word. They may have been extreme in their position, but they were right about what would happen. There's nothing wrong with non-biblical song and hymn lyrics, but as Christians have given them preference, just what the Puritans feared has happened. Few Christians still sing and pray the Psalter daily. And it's no surprise that we no longer know Scripture the way our forefathers in the faith once did. It's no surprise that we read Paul's list of Scripture quotations here and give no thought to the rest of those psalms.

You see, Paul's list of quotations paints a bleak picture of human sinfulness, but it also gives a subtle but very bright picture of hope. Psalms 14 and 53 affirm that there is no one righteous, but they end looking forward to the day when the Lord, in his righteousness—faithful to his promises—comes to Zion to vindicate his people. In Psalm 5 we read the condemnation that our mouths are like open graves, but that is followed by an exhortation to rejoice and to take refuge in the Lord. There the Psalmist prays, knowing his sins, for the Lord, in his righteousness, to make the way straight before him. Psalm 140 speaks of venom under our lips and Psalm 10 condemns us for mouths full of curses, but knowing that the Lord will be faithful to his promise to set right what we have set wrong, both psalms go on, praying for God to act, to judge, and to establish his kingdom. Notice, all of these psalms speak of God's righteousness—his faithfulness to his promises. He will not allow his

creation or his people to be in bondage to sin forever.

Finally, Isaiah 59 condemns us all universally, but it also goes on:

**The LORD saw it, and it displeased him
that there was no justice.
He saw that there was no man,
and wondered that there was no one to intercede;
then his own arm brought him salvation,
and his righteousness upheld him.
He put on righteousness as a breastplate,
and a helmet of salvation on his head;
he put on garments of vengeance for clothing,
and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak.
According to their deeds, so will he repay,
wrath to his adversaries,
repayment to his enemies;
to the coastlands he will render repayment.** (Isaiah 59:15b-18)

The Lord sees that there is no one righteous, he sees that wickedness and violence reign on the earth, he sees that there is no one to intercede, to set things right, so he takes up righteousness and salvation *himself* and charges in to redeem his Creation. At the end of the chapter, the Lord declares:

“And as for me, this is my covenant with them,” says the LORD: “My Spirit that is upon you, and my words that I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your offspring, or out of the mouth of your children’s offspring,” says the LORD, “from this time forth and forevermore.” (Isaiah 59:21)

Paul's point is that all are sinners, Gentiles and Jews alike. Israel keeps appeal to the law to claim that she is special, but the law only serves to

condemn her. Yes, the Jews are special, but they're still guilty and the law only serves to expose their sin. And yet, as the law condemns, it also declares: It is precisely because things are this bad, it is precisely because even God's own people are in bondage to sin, that the Lord will act. He will do what he has promised. He will judge sin. He will rescue the helpless. He will establish his covenant forever. This is what the gospel is all about and this is how it reveals the righteousness of God.

Paul now brings us back to the courtroom in verse 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.

In Paul's world you would plead your case before the judge and, when you were finished, you would place your hand over your mouth. It was their way of saying, “I rest my case.” Of course, some people just don't know when to quit. They think they're defending themselves, but they're just digging the hole deeper—like the person who gets pulled over for driving through the stop signs and says, “It's okay. I live here.” Well, if you live here, you should know better. In the face of God's judgement, the Jews said “It's okay. We're God's special people. We have the law.” Well, if you have the law, you should know better. In Paul's day, a person who didn't know when to stop might be struck on the mouth by the bailiff. This is what happened to Jesus during his trial in John 18:22 and to Paul in Acts 23:2. That's what Paul does now. The Jew appeals to the law and Paul silences him by throwing the law right back at him. The more you appeal to the law the more you condemn yourself.

Paul goes on in verse 20:

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

Paul literally says that “all flesh shall not be justified”. All flesh. Paul lumps together the Gentiles, whose “flesh” represents corrupt humanity and the Jews, who bear the God’s covenant mark of circumcision in their “flesh”. Again, when it came to God coming as judge to set the world right and to deal with human sin and corruption, the Jews expected him to come down like a ton of bricks on the godless Gentiles. But they expected him to recognise them as his own. They expected him to send them out from his court justified, which means to be declared to be in the right. He would vindicate them because they were his special people. They were careful to live like his special people. They were diligent in circumcising their children, they were diligent in observing the Sabbath, they were diligent in eating only clean foods and in keeping themselves ritually pure. They were diligent to keep themselves apart from the godless Gentiles so that God would know, when he came in judgement, who to reward and who to smite. But all this shows is that they’ve misunderstood the law. They’ve twisted it. They’ve forgotten that they’re as much in bondage to sin as any of the Gentiles. They’re as responsible for the mess the world is in as the Gentiles.

So Paul makes the point here that those works of the law — circumcision, diet, and Sabbath — won’t cut it. They don’t solve the problem. The Jews have missed the point of the law. Appeal to it only highlights their own sin. No, keeping the law won’t do any good. Consider Paul. He wrote in Philippians 3:6 that, as far as the law went, he was blameless. That didn’t mean he had never sinned. It meant that he had consistently observed the law and it meant that when he had

sinned, he availed himself of the means the law gave to make atonement through offerings and sacrifice. You see, the Jews — particularly the Pharisees — have often been portrayed as trying to earn God’s grace through their works. This goes back to St. Augustine in his arguments with Pelagius, who taught a sort of salvation by works. Augustine mistakenly saw the Pharisees as sort of proto-Pelagians. But that’s not what the Pharisees were about. They knew they were sinners. When they sinned, they made the appropriate offerings and sacrifices. The problem with the Pharisees — and they embodied the larger problem of Israel as a whole — was that they had forgotten that the purpose of the law. God had chosen Israel and given her his law so that she could prepare the world for his coming. Instead she used his law to justify herself and condemn the nations.

So this is the theme now emerging in Paul’s letter to the Romans. Because God is just and righteous, he must judge the wicked in order to set the world to rights. Israel was called and given the law so that she could be a sort of benchmark of righteousness for the world. Because she failed to live up to it, Israel now stands in the way of God’s judgement on the nations. Israel has to be held accountable first and the time of her judgement is fast approaching, but her redemption — for those Jews who were ready to cast themselves on God’s righteousness — has come in Jesus. He is the faithful Israelite. He is the light to the nations. And he’s also the one who died for the sins of his people. In him a new Israel has been formed. In him a new law has been established. In him the life of the Spirit has been made possible. And through him and through this New Israel, God’s redemption, God’s life, and God’s kingdom are finally going out to the nations. Through Jesus, God has revealed his righteousness as he leads those who will follow in faith in an exodus from

their bondage to sin, but he is also declared to be King and through him judgement on sin is declared and through him, when the time is right, sin and death will be destroyed as God’s creation is made new.

Brothers and Sisters, Jesus gives us a reminder and a foretaste of his life and his kingdom here at his Table. Here he reminds us that he has died for our sins, giving his body and his blood for us. And here he lifts the veil and gives us a glimpse of the goodness of his kingdom as we come to banquet in his presence on the food of grace. Here, as we gather around the Table together, he reminds us of the law of the Spirit he has given to mark us out as his people — a law of love for him and for each other. And from here he sends us out, equipped with his grace and filled with his Spirit, to proclaim to the world that he is King and to take practical steps to show his love, to live his grace, and to walk in his justice. Here we see the righteousness of God revealed and here he equips us to show his righteousness to the rest of the world.

Let us pray the words of today’s collect: Almighty God, you show to those who are in error the light of your truth, that they may return to the way of righteousness: Grant to all those who are admitted into the fellowship of Christ’s religion, that they may reject those things that are contrary to their profession, and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same; through our Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*