

No One Seeks God

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[0 : 0 0] This morning's reading is from Romans chapter 3 verses 1 to 20. You can find it on page 1130 of the Pew Bible. Romans chapter 3 verses 1 to 20.

What advantage then is there in being a Jew? What value is there in circumcision? Much in every way. First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.

What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? Not at all. Let God be true and every human being a liar. As it is written, so that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.

But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? I am using a human argument. Certainly not.

If that were so, how could God judge the world? Someone might argue, if my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?

[1 : 1 4] Why not say, as some slanderously claim that we say, let us do evil that good may result? Their condemnation is just. 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. As it is written, there is no one righteous, not even one.

There is no one who understands. There is no one who seeks God. All have turned away. They have together become worthless. There is no one who does good, not even one.

Their throats are open graves. Their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood.

Ruin and misery mark their ways. And the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes. 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.

[2 : 3 0] 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.

This is the word of the Lord. Great. Good morning, St Silas. Thanks, Trevor, for reading.

If you could keep your Bibles open at Romans chapter 3, that would be really helpful. My name is Martin Ayers. I'm a senior pastor here at St Silas. And we're in a series in Romans.

We're on our fifth sermon in Romans. So we're kind of, if you're visiting here today, you're joining us in the middle of a series as we work through the book this year. You can find an outline inside the notice sheet if you find that helpful.

But let's pray and let's ask for God's help as we turn to his word. Heavenly Father, we praise you and thank you that you have given us the privilege of the very words of God.

- [3 : 28] Father, we pray that you will give us ears to hear your word, heads that can understand what you're saying, and hearts that are willing to accept your truth and follow you.
- For Jesus' name's sake. Amen. Well, I don't know whether you've ever had a shocking dose of reality, something that's true, that's communicated to you, that you didn't want to hear, but you needed to hear.
- About six years ago, I'd had some blank spells at various points. And I went to the doctor, and a neurologist I was referred to said, I'm going to send you for a brain scan, but I don't think you've got anything to worry about.
- I think you're just stressed out. So he said, it's better if you don't drive for the time being while you wait for the results, but it's probably nothing to worry about. So I knew what day I was going to get the results of this brain scan, and I wasn't worried at all.
- And I remember the moment the phone rang, and I realized it was the neurologist phoning me, and my heart leapt with joy, because I thought, I can drive again. As soon as I get this phone call out of the way, I can get back in my car.
- [4 : 36] And the neurologist said to me, the brain scans come back, and you've got a brain tumor, and that's what's causing these blank spells, and we're going to have to treat that.
- So it was truth that I needed to hear, but it was completely shocking. And I remember in the days afterwards, I'd wake up in the morning, and there'd be a moment where I forgot, and it was just a normal day, and I was happy.
- And then I'd remember I had a brain tumor, and I had this sinking feeling of sadness. About that, that I had this great problem. Well, look, in Romans, that's the kind of thing that's going on here.
- I feel today a bit like that neurologist must have felt phoning me up, that we come together to hear God's word, and it's shocking news that God gives us in Romans 3.
- But he tells us the truth, because we need to hear it, so that we will do something about it. What's happening here is, Paul, the apostle, is setting out why we needed Jesus to come and die on the cross.
- [5 : 39] And this is like the black cloth that we have to lay down, so that the news that Jesus died on the cross is like a diamond that sparkles on top of it. God's telling us here what's wrong with the world, so that he can explain to us how he's going to put it right.
- So in chapter 1, verses 16 and 17, Paul started with this great headline. He said, I'm not ashamed of the gospel, because it's the power of God to save everyone who believes it.
- But why would we need God's power to save us? What do we need saving from? Well, Paul has now made this argument since chapter 1, verse 18. He said in chapter 1 that every one of us has turned away from God.
- We've chosen other things to build our lives on instead of God. And God is angry. He's rightly angry with us for that, because we've rejected Him. Some people, though, they choose religion to try and put things right between them and God.
- They think, well, God will accept me and approve of me, because I've been a good person. I've kept the commands of God. But Paul said in Romans 2 last week that measured up against the frightening beauty of God's law, every one of us falls short.
- [6 : 50] The standard is way beyond us. So in the first eight verses of chapter 3, Paul deals with a few objections from the religious person to what he's just said.
- And the religious person at that time is the first century Jew, the moralistic Jewish person. Paul had been one himself before he met Jesus. So when we read the objections that a Jew might make, we think about the Jew in the first century.

There's a lot of overlap with the churchgoer today, the Christian, the person who's in church on a Sunday. And you can picture Paul on the floor of the synagogue, having just given them the devastating news they cannot be good enough for God.

And people interject from the crowd. And he deals with these three objections. And our first point is the judgment that's faithful. So they're on the sheet, in the notice sheet.

The first objection is, how can God judge us when we're meant to be special? So they're saying, if what you're saying is true, Paul, it would turn out that after all these years, there's nothing special about being a Jewish person, one of God's chosen people.

[8 : 00] So you see that objection in verse 1. What advantage then is there in being a Jew? Or what value is there in circumcision? And Paul's answer is, there is an advantage to being a Jew.

He says, much in every way. First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God. That's an incredible advantage. It's a great privilege.

I was hearing from somebody this week who has devoted his life to getting Bibles into North Korea. He's had the Bible translated into modern Korean, and he's smuggling them into North Korea for secret believers.

He said, if you're found with a Bible in North Korea, your whole family will be taken to a camp for the rest of their lives. They'll never get out. It's incredibly dangerous in North Korea today to have a Bible.

They hide them away. Teachers try to find out of children if they've ever seen their parents reading something in secret, and then they'll search the house. It's a very dangerous thing.

[9 : 01] And the Jews had been entrusted with God's words. It's a great advantage, but it's not a saving advantage. If you've got the Bible, it doesn't mean that when you break the law, God will approve of you if you're trying to rely on yourself to get right with Him.

It doesn't work like that. It doesn't make you right with God if you do something wrong that you've got the Bible. But the Bible isn't just a book of commands. It's got promises in it.

God says in the Bible, I will be their God, and they will be my people. So if the Bible people sin, and God judges them for their sin, does He break His promise?

Does He become unfaithful? That's the second objection in verse 3. How can God judge us when He promised He would bless His people? And we get the answer in verse 4.

Not at all. He's not unfaithful to judge. Let God be true and every human being a liar, as it is written. And then He quotes Psalm 51. So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge.

[10 : 05] Those words were written as a prayer by the great king of God's people, David, when he committed adultery, and he's praying confession to God, and he recognizes if God judges me now, He will be right to do that.

He will prevail when He judges. Even David. Even the king of God's people. It's a bit like if you imagine somebody's committed a terrible crime, and they're in the dock, and they get convicted, the sentence is handed down, and the police take them off and put them in a van to take them off to prison, and on the way, the prisoner says, you police, you are wrong to do this.

You have to let me go. You represent the state, and the state is there to protect my freedom. You're there to look after me, not put me in prison. And the answer is, well, the police are there to do that.

Yes, they are there to protect us, but now another promise has taken effect because you broke the law, and you have to be judged for that. Your freedom has to be taken away.

And in the same way, God has made promises to have a people he'll bless, but also promises that he will judge wrongdoing. But someone else calls out, hang on, if God looks so righteous when he punishes my sin, I'm doing him a favor.

[11 : 23] I'm the person who sins and gets punished, but I'm making God look good. Shouldn't he reward me for that? That's the third objection. How can God judge us when we're making him look good?

Verse 5. But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what should we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? I'm using a human argument.

And Paul's answer is, that's ridiculous. Because if that was true, God couldn't bring justice to his world. Verse 6, certainly not. If that was so, how could God judge the world?

It would be like a perpetrator of genocide being before the war crimes tribunal. We had this two weeks ago, didn't we, with the Khmer Rouge in the national news. Standing before an international tribunal, being convicted of war crimes and then saying, well, hang on a minute.

By convicting me for what I did, you've been shown to be a just courtroom. So you should really reward me. I've done you a favor. It's ridiculous. So the key point of these eight verses is that God is righteous when he condemns us for what we have done wrong.

[12 : 32] His judgment is faithful. So we might not have the same objections today, but the idea that God will judge people for what they have done wrong is very controversial in Scotland today.

People scoff at the idea. The idea of sin, of a God that we might have a problem with. Like the 19th century poet, we think, of course God will forgive me. That's his job.

But we overlook that alongside God's grace, an essential aspect of God's character is that he doesn't leave the guilty unpunished. He says that about himself.

And Paul is saying that when you stand before God, it won't be any use to say that you've got Christian parents, that you grew up in a Christian home. To grow up in a Christian home is a great advantage.

You hear the truth about God in your home, but it won't save you from God's judgment when you do wrong. Oh, but I'll be alright, we think. I'm from the islands. We're Presbyterians.

[13 : 34] We're from Stonaway. There was a revival. Oh, I'm alright. I've been, I'm a Roman Catholic. I was baptized in the one true church, the Roman Catholic Church. Paul's saying these are not excuses that will work.

It won't be an excuse to say we're British when we stand before God. But it seems as though all around us people have that as their security blanket. They think, well, I'm not really sure if there's a God.

Church isn't really for me. But if there is a God, I'm sure it'll be alright in the end. I try and be a good person. This is a Christian country. I remember a friend saying to me, shortly after I became a Christian, he said, so as he, that was, that's my nickname among my mates, so as he, as long as I kind of try and be good and I believe in God a bit and I believe in Jesus a bit, will I be alright?

Well, Romans 3 says that whatever you believe about God in your head, wherever you're from, God is right to judge you for your sin, to punish sin. That's our first point, the judgment that's faithful.

So who is that a problem for? That's our second point, the sin that's universal. The Apostle Paul brings this whole section to a close. You can see that in verse 9. He says, what shall we conclude then?

[14 : 52] Do we have any advantage? But here, compared with verse 1 when he said advantage, he means, do we have a saving advantage? That we will sail through judgment day for being Jewish.

He's speaking as a Jewish man there. And he goes on in verse 9, not at all. For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin.

And then he proves it in verses 10 to 18. He proves it by showing us it from God's word. You see the great tragedy in having a Bible and not seeing this.

That God's word tells us this and we need the spirit to open our eyes to it. And the Jewish people had their Bibles but they hadn't seen what God's word really said. We see the outcome of sin in verses 13 to 17.

The way that sin plays out in our lives and causes relational carnage, speech that causes harm. But before that we see the essence of sin. If you look at verse 10.

[15 : 59] There is no one righteous, not even one. There is no one who understands. There is no one who seeks God. All have turned away. They have together become worthless.

There is no one who does good, not even one. Now we looked at this in Roots a few weeks ago and there were a couple of verses that jumped out for the guys in my Roots group. One is that it does say there, doesn't it, there is no one who seeks God.

But don't we see people around us who are searching spiritually? We see spiritual hunger around us. Haven't we met people who say, well I'm open to their being a God, I just need more evidence to persuade me that he's there.

The problem is it depends what you mean by seek and it depends what you mean by God. The God of the Bible, the true and living God is a sovereign king. As the quote goes, there is not a square inch of the world and of your life over which Jesus Christ does not say, mine.

That's mine. And rightly so, for he made us. Now when people are spiritually searching, we might be looking for something transcendent, an experience that transcends the material in our lives.

[17 : 15] We might be looking for something to make sense of our lives and our world, something to give meaning and purpose. But naturally, none of us wants to meet a God like this. We don't want God for who he really is.

We might want him for his blessings, but God for God? Well, we don't want to change. The other issue for us is that Romans 3 is describing how we are naturally without the merciful work of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit coming in and drawing us to God.

And so I think we do have people around us and we have people here this morning who are saying at the moment, I'm not a Christian, but I'm looking into it. And people are doing that because God the Holy Spirit is at work in their hearts and their lives, drawing them in.

So if you're here and you feel you are open to God and you're seeking God, don't feel condemned by what it's saying here about there's no one who seeks God, but rather, could that be evidence that the Spirit of God is at work in your life?

That's why you're here today, that he's drawing you in. And there's an encouragement there, not to take that for granted, but to respond to him today, to his prompting to look at Jesus.

[18 : 29] But then Paul says, there is no one who does good. Isn't that a bit shocking? When we look at the world around us, no one who does good? But that's because it depends what you mean by good.

And for Paul and for the Bible, for God, goodness is relational. If God is really there, then what matters isn't just that we do the right things, it matters that we do the right things for the right reason, that we do it, to seek God's approval and glory, his pleasure.

In fact, it's not even right to do it, to seek God's approval, it's just to seek his glory and pleasure. We know that motive is important, don't we, when it comes to doing things. Just imagine if you were driving down Great Western Road one day, next week, and you see me helping an old lady across the road up ahead of you.

and you think, well, that's nice, isn't it? That minister at St. Sala, such a nice chap, helping that old lady across the road. But what if you found out that actually I'd seen you in the traffic jam two minutes earlier, so I'd grabbed an old lady and I was helping her over the road so that you would notice.

Suddenly I don't seem so good, do I? It's the same act. What if you found out that actually this old lady, I knew she was really, really rich and I know that she's got a terminal illness and so I've been looking after her in the hope that I'll be in the will.

[20 : 00] That would make me a scoundrel, wouldn't it? It's the same act. But when it comes to the good things we do, naturally, our motivation really matters and our motivation is always wrong.

Ultimately, we do good things out of self-interest. We do them to feel good about ourselves and so that others will think well of us. We do it to satisfy feelings inside of us, feelings of compassion.

We want gratitude from people. Even the religious person does good for selfish reasons so that God will approve of them. They're bargaining with God.

The reason we should do good things is simply for the glory of God. God is not. There is no one who does that. And down in verse 11, Paul says, there is no fear of God.

Sorry, down in verse 18, there is no fear of God before their eyes. So we don't live our lives for an audience of one. What does God think? Delighting and pleasing Him.

[21 : 04] Terrified that we might displease Him because all that we want in God's world is that He gets the honor and the glory. There's nothing like that and that's the essence of sin.

And as well as seeing the essence of sin, we see the universality of sin here. So just look at the repetition of that in verse 10. Paul says, there is no one righteous, not even one.

There's no one who understands. There's no one who seeks God. All have turned away. It's emphatic. In verse 12, there is no one who does good, not even one.

sin. The moralist wants to divide humanity between the good people and the bad people. Jesus says, no one is good except God. Why?

Because none of us can stop sinning. We're all, verse 9, under the power of sin. We can't stop sinning. You could try it. See how long you last this week.

[22 : 04] Try and stop sinning. And this is the scandal of God's grace that you can live a life of compassion, and charity, and good works, or a life of cruelty and criminality.

And the root in the human heart towards God is the same. We reject God. We're radically self-centered people. The moral Pharisee who everyone looks up to and thinks he's such a good person is seeking their own glory.

The rebel bandit is seeking their glory. And none of us pleases God. And that's deeply offensive to us if we think that we are better than other people.

That's our problem. This is a great leveler for us. A great leveler for the whole of humanity. And if you accept it, it does something amazing for you. It radically rehumanizes the people around you.

Because you no longer look at people and think, it's me and them. It's us and them. You give all kinds of people respect and dignity who you never before had the time of day for because you know in your heart, fundamentally, I'm no better than them.

[23 : 10] We're just the same. Made in the image of God. Everyone is made in the image of God. Radically and totally depraved. Every one of us. Why does Paul dwell on that?

Why are we dwelling on this? That's our third point. So we've heard the judgment that's fair, the sin that's universal. Thirdly, the silence that's essential. Just have a look with me at verse 19.

When he says the law, he's talking about the commands of God. 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.

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 sin. Paul's using courtroom language here.

Being declared righteous is a legal verdict on your life that you have done what's right. And our own good works cannot achieve that for us. I used to be a lawyer.

[24 : 16] I worked on a very long trial where we were acting for the defendants. We defended the Bank of England. That was our client. The trial began with an opening speech from the claimant. So the claimant sets out in the opening speech what the allegations are against your client.

The opening speech in this trial lasted 86 days. Isn't that amazing? 86 days. More than six months of my life in court listening to one barrister do his opening speech against the claimants.

I told one of my friends, he said, how's that opening speech? Still going? I said, yes. He said, Martin, what I don't get is if I had to stand up in a courtroom and say everything that I knew about everything in the world, it wouldn't take me 86 days.

How is it taking so long? It was the longest speech in English legal history. Then our barrister got up to do the defendant's response, responding to all those allegations.

And guess what? He was even longer. He took 118 days to give his speech. Non-stop talking, defending our client. Now what Paul is describing here is when we meet with God and we stand in his courtroom and the charge sheet will be read out against us and it will list everything that we've ever thought, everything we've ever said and everything we've ever done and the case for the prosecution will be overwhelming and when it comes to our defense there will be nothing to say.

[25 : 49] There will be silence because none of us can be declared righteous by what we've done. It's the spiritual condition of silence.

We've got nothing to say to defend ourselves. Let me give three implications. First of all, it's a problem for every single person. We need to grasp that.

John Alan Chow in the news this week grasped that, didn't he? He's the guy who was in India. He went to an island. He got shot with a bow and arrow. He was trying to tell the people of the tribe on the island that they have a problem with God.

Now he may have done the wrong thing. It may have been a wrong thing to do to go in the way he did. He brought laws. People say it was a medical risk. But at least he grasped this, that every one of us has this problem before God.

When Paul says no one is righteous, no not one, he is including your friends in the tennis club. He's including your colleagues at the hospital. The millions of people in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan today who don't know any Christians.

[26 : 56] The people who live in the nice suburbs of East Renfrewshire who seem to have everything going right in their lives. The people who go to church all across Glasgow today and leave thinking God will approve of me as long as I'm a good person.

The people who live in Postle and Clydebank who have never been to church. It's their problem. It's your problem. It's my problem. It's a problem for everybody. That's why we have carol services.

That's why we do flyers for our carol services. This is everybody's problem. It's why we have mission partners around the world. It's why Jesus hasn't come back yet because of this problem.

This is why Jesus is not here today because of this problem. Act 17 says it's why God has given you the non-Christians that you know. It's why he has put you in their lives because of this problem.

It's a problem for every single person. Secondly, it's a problem of wrath. It's not just that without God we've got an emptiness deep inside a void in our lives.

[28 : 00] That's not primarily why Jesus came. It's not just that sin messes up our society and our relationships. That's not primarily why Jesus came.

It's not just that we need rescuing from our own selfishness so that we can become who we were made to be. That's not primarily why Jesus came. Our problem is that we are under the wrath of God because of our sin and one day we will stand before him and it will be a terrible thing to stand that day and not have sorted out this problem.

You will have no defense before God. Do we know that for ourselves? ourselves. And our third point it's a problem that we could never solve.

In other words we cannot put this right by trying harder. We can't make it up to God. We can't leave today thinking I'll put things right myself. So folks it's like the call I got that day from the neurologist.

It's horrible news but we need to hear it so that we understand what's required. The hope comes in verse 21. We'll get there next week. You can read on today. You don't have to wait until next week.

[29 : 14] We hear in verse 11 that no one seeks God. Friends if that is true then our only hope is that God would come and seek us. That's why we have Christmas.

That's why Christmas is such astonishing news. News that God saw us in this condition and he came and sought us to bring us back.

News of Emmanuel a God who came to find us because we weren't seeking him on our own. It says in verse 18 that the essence of sin is there is no fear of God before their eyes.

But that verse is from Psalm 36 and in Psalm 36 there are people who fear God and they fear God because they know his love. Let me read you from Psalm 36. It says in verse 5 Your love Lord reaches to the heavens your faithfulness to the skies.

Verse 7 How priceless is your unfailing love O God! People take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast in the abundance of your house. You give them drink from your river of delights.

[30 : 16] With you is the fountain of life. There's a connection there between fearing God and knowing that he loves us. In Psalm 130 it says to God With you there is forgiveness therefore you are feared.

There is something about grasping God's love for us and his forgiveness that transforms us and brings us back to him. But to grasp that we have to repent not to turn away not just from our sin our wrongdoing but from our own good works as well.

The writer John Gerstner says this The way to God is wide open. There is nothing standing between the sinner and his God. He has immediate and unimpeded access to the Saviour.

There is nothing to hinder. No sin can hold you back. Nothing now stands between you and God except for your good works. Nothing can keep the sinner from Christ except his delusion that he has good works of his own that can satisfy God.

All you need to have is need. In other words the grace of God is on offer to deal with all of this in Christ. Don't miss out on that grace because you hold on to the idea that you don't need it.

[31 : 33] So what a week to share the Lord's Supper together. As we come to the Lord's Supper let's use it as an opportunity to admit our own need afresh and accept Jesus' grace to save us his new covenant that cost him his blood.

Without the cross we have no hope but Jesus invites us having died for us draw near with faith take and eat as a sign that we trust his rescue.

Because the sinless Savior died my sinful soul is counted free for God the just is satisfied to look on him and pardon me. So we say no merit of my own I claim but wholly lean on Jesus' name on Christ the solid rock I stand all of the ground is sinking sand.

Amen. We're going to sing together just have a moment of quiet as the band come up to lead us and then they'll lead us in a couple of songs and the children will come back in.