

TUTORIAL
3.6

Hopeless Before a Holy God

Paul explains that mankind is helpless before a holy God. He concludes with the implications this truth has for believers. This module was developed from lessons presented by Bible Teacher Scot Keen.

Introduction

In this tutorial, we will cover the conclusion to Paul description of the judgement of God. So far Paul has been like a prosecuting attorney. He first brings allegations against the Gentiles. They have exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and as they have the testimony of creation, they are without an excuse. He then explains that God's wrath is impartial towards Jews and Gentiles.

Arguments Rebuffed

Paul confronts the self-righteous Jews by showing them that simply having a standard will not make them right with God; what is important is living up to that standard. Then Paul specifically calls out the Jews, claiming that they trust in the possession of the Law. They trust in the fact that they are Jews. They trust in the fact that they are circumcised. Paul pulls each of these props out from under them showing them that they have no legs to stand on. They have no hope before a holy God.

In the conclusion of Romans 3:9-20, I like to picture a fisherman who has thrown out a net and in it is all of humanity. Paul pulls the net in and inside he sees both the Gentiles and the Jews. He hangs the net up on a hook, and stands back and looks at it, saying, "There is none righteous. Not even one. There is none who does good. There's none who seeks after God. They've all become unprofitable." What Paul says about one, he says about all. Listen to Paul repeat himself here. He says twice, "There is none who does good, not even one. There is none who seeks after God. Not even one." What is true of one is true of all. And this sums up what we have heard so far.

Now look at Romans 3:9, "What then, are we better than they?" The Jews are asking whether they as Jews are better than the Gentiles. Paul says, "No, we

have already charged,” or proved, “that both Jews and Greeks are under sin.” This theme will be significant as we move through the rest of Romans. Notice that when Paul says, “Under sin,” it's like he is personifying sin as an evil dictator who reigns over humanity.

Paul gives several reasons to back his argument. He bases his reasoning on several Old Testament quotes. In Romans 3:10 Paul says, “As it is written, there is none righteous. Not even one.” No one is righteous before a holy God in and of themselves. Paul anticipates some pushback, and so he says that there is no one righteous, not even one. Just in case we were wondering. Not even one. There is no one who deserves God's salvation. We are all sinners.

In a previous tutorial, we looked at the theme of condemnation. In Romans 1:18, Paul says, “God's wrath is revealed against all unrighteousness,” so God's wrath is targeted towards unrighteousness. That is a problem because he says there is no one who is righteous. Not even one. Everyone is an object of the God's wrath. Paul goes on to say that there is no one who understands (Romans 3:11). There is no one who seeks God. This is similar to what Paul said in Corinthians, “The world through its wisdom did not come to know God.” No one is going to reason their way into heaven. Apart from a response to God's divine revelation, no one can be saved. There is no one who understands. There is no one who seeks God.

Often people have trouble with this verse because it does seem like there are some who seek God. It is safe to say that people seek answers to nagging questions like “Where did we come from, and why are we here, and what happens after we die?” People seek answers to questions. People seek to lay their fears to rest. We want to have a sense of well-being because we recognize that something is wrong. We have already seen in Romans that our conscience tells us something is wrong, that we are not living up to even to our own standards. We do seek to allay our fears, but we are not (based on the authority of God's word) seeking God. We are not seeking Him, although ironically God is the One who seeks those who are not seeking him.

Look at Romans 3:12, “All have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.” When Paul says, “They have turned aside,” he is referring to humanity going its own way. Think about Isaiah chapter fifty-three, “All we, like sheep, have gone astray.” This is willful departure from the will of God; this is mankind rejecting God. Paul takes it further by declaring that they have become useless or unprofitable, using terminology the Greek would use when speaking about fruit that is unripe. Mankind is like a rotten tomato, still bearing the image and likeness of God, but not living up to its purpose. Mankind has become useless.

Implications of God's Judgement

Then Paul dares to say, "There is no one who does good. Not even one." There is no one who does good. Granted, there are people who, from a human perspective, do good things, but Paul is not talking from a human perspective. Paul is talking about doing good in such a way that would commend us to God, getting us closer to heaven, and so he says, "There is no one who does good." No one. Unsurprisingly people can have difficulty with this section of Romans, and rightly so, because it humbles every one of us and it takes away any hope for self-righteousness.

When Paul says, "There's no one who does good," people ask questions like, "What about Mother Theresa, who lived in poverty so that she could reach out to the poverty stricken in India? What about people like Princess Diana who, before her death, would reach out in compassion to people with aids, back in the day when people were scared to touch people who had aids?" These were individuals who tried to do benevolent things for other human beings, seemingly because they genuinely cared for them. Remember Paul is not talking about doing good from a human perspective. He is talking about doing something that will get us closer to heaven by commending us to God, and he says, "There is no one who does good. Not even one." By making these statements, Paul is levelling the playing field and showing that we are all hopeless sinners before a holy God. If God does not graciously provide salvation, then no one can be saved. No one!

Paul continues in Romans 3:13, "Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips." Paul says that humanity is defiled, similar to how a grave would defile a Jew, "With their tongues, they keep deceiving." Why is it the tongue that deceives? It is because out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. Our tongues are deceitful because our hearts are deceitful. Paul goes on to say, "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness; their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes."

This is a scathing but true estimation of humanity. Again, this is humbling for all of humanity. We are in no position to declare the Gospel of God's grace until we have come to grips with it ourselves. It is humbling but also necessary to realize that our only standing before God is what Christ has done for us, and in saying so, Paul levels the playing field so that he can unify the church in Rome. Paul continues, "Destruction and misery are in their paths." I have visited areas where tornadoes have gone through the United States, and it is incredible to see the damage. Wherever the tornado goes, it leaves behind a trail of destruction, and that what humanity is like. Wherever we go, we leave wreckage in our path. We hurt other people because we are sinners and we need a Savior.

In Romans 3:19 Paul says, "We know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law." Paul has already shown that all of humanity is under sin and now he is going to show that all of humanity is guilty before God. To come back to that phrase *under sin*, why is it that people hurt other people? Why is it that our feet are swift to shed blood? It is because we are sinners. We sin because we are already sinners. We do not become sinners by sinning. Paul shows our universal guilt before God in Romans 3:19-20. He says, "Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law."

Let's pause there for a while. Who was it under the Law? The Jews; whatever the law says, it speaks to the Jews. Notice the interesting twist in the following statement, "Whatever the law says, it says to those under the law so that every mouth may be closed and all the world guilty or accountable before God." How can the fact that the Jews did not live up to the Law make the whole world liable for judgement? Think of it this way, if a farmer is concerned whether or not his ground is good enough to raise crops, he will not sow seed in the entire field. He will first test the ground by planting some seeds in the corner of the field.

Think of it another way. In a cooking contest the judges don't eat the entire cake to give it the blue ribbon. They just eat a portion of it and make a judgement based on that. God gave his law to the Jews. He gave them prophets to warn them. He placed them in their own land and blessed them. If the Jews could not live up to the Law, then arguably no one else could. Because of their failure Paul says, "All the world is guilty before God, and every mouth is closed." He goes on to say that this is true because by the works of the law, by doing good, no flesh, no humanity will be justified in God's sight. Through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. The Law was given to show that no one can measure up to God's standard and that mankind's only hope is grace.

Mankind's Helpless Condition

I will summarize by reminding you that people will never welcome grace until they see that it is their only hope. Paul is ruthless and aggressive in showing the condemnation of all humanity, but he does it for a reason. He wants to silence every mouth so that no one is offering excuses as to why they are right with God apart from grace. God silences every mouth. People will never welcome grace until they see that grace is their only hope. Paul takes the Jews there. When sharing God's Truth with others, it is a wonderful thing for us to consider that the Good News is good news precisely because the bad news is very bad.

Secondly, not only do people do bad things, but they are bad. Paul shows that people are under sin by the things that they do. People who do not have God's Word, Gentiles, do not become sinners by rejecting the testimony of creation. People reject creation's testimony because they love darkness better than

light. They are already sinners. The Jews do not claim self-righteousness under the Law and then somehow become condemned because they cannot measure up. They cannot keep the Law because they are under sin. They are sinners. As humans we not only do bad things, we are bad. We are desperately wicked. We are a race of helpless sinners under sin, and so we deserve condemnation.

Think of it this way, we are not just sinners, we are helpless, hopeless sinners away from Christ. Don't take this the wrong way. We are helpless sinners because there are none of us from Adam's race who can fix our own problem. We are sinners and we cannot get out of this mess. We are hopeless in the sense that no other human being can get us out of this, as far as Adam's race goes. It is going to take help from outside. It is going to take a Savior. We are helpless, hopeless sinners. We are under God's wrath, and rightfully so. The wrath of God is against all unrighteousness of men, and there are none righteous. Every avenue of escape has been closed. The Gentile cannot hide by saying, "I didn't know." Paul said, "No, you had the testimony of creation." The Jews cannot hide beneath the Law of Moses, beneath their Jewishness, or beneath their circumcision. Paul has eradicated every avenue of escape.

Every hope that people have has been taken away. Do you see what Paul has done here? He has literally silenced every mouth and shown all the world guilty before God. Mankind in and of itself is hopelessly, helplessly lost. What are we to do? Apart from God's intervention, there is nothing that we can do. We have no claim on God, and God is under no obligation whatsoever towards us. God does not owe us anything, yet if anyone acts, it must be God. This is the most desperate situation seen in Scripture. When I think about desperate situations in Scripture, I usually think about Israel on the banks of the Red Sea with Pharaoh's army behind them. Unless God intervenes, they have no chance. This is even worse than Israel on the banks of the Red Sea.

Speaking to Believers

Consider this: why does Paul say these things to believers? We might forget that Paul is talking to believers here. Why does he say all this to them? Paul is laying a theological basis for his later appeal for unity among the believers. Now the Jews cannot see themselves as superior to Gentile believers because, after all, they were all helplessly lost before God until God intervened through Christ.

You might be asking, "What does this have to do with me?" Firstly you should never conclude that you must give God a reason to love you, because you never gave Him a reason to love you in the first place. When we realize the depth of our hopeless condition apart from Christ, it ultimately will magnify the love of God. When we realize He did not first love us because we did something good, but rather loved us because He is love. We never gave Him a reason to love us in the first place. You can also stop looking for good in

yourself because there isn't any. This sets us free to revel in the grace of God because His grace was shown to us while we were sinners.

What does this have to do with you? You and I are the people of Romans 1:18-3:20. We are the helpless sinners. We had a twofold problem, firstly being under sin's condemnation and authority, and secondly being powerless to do anything about it. Wait till you see what God did about it. I'll go into that in the next tutorial.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Hopeless Before a Holy God

1. What does it mean to be “under sin”?
2. Why was the Law given?
3. In vs. 19, we are told that “whatever the Law says it says to those who are under the law”. Who was “under the law”?
4. Since those “under the Law” could not keep it, how does that prove that the whole world is guilty before God?
5. Why does God seek to silence men?
6. How does all of this relate to you (Looking at Romans 3:9-20)?