

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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7/13/25

Sermon Title: Jews and Gentiles Are Under Sin

Sermon Text: Romans 3:9-20

Rom. 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,

Rom. 3:10 as it is written:

“None is righteous, no, not one;

Rom. 3:11 no one understands;
no one seeks for God.

Rom. 3:12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”

Rom. 3:13 “Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.”

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

Rom. 3:14 “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

Rom. 3:15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood;

Rom. 3:16 in their paths are ruin and misery,

Rom. 3:17 and the way of peace they have not known.”

Rom. 3:18 “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Rom. 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 may be held accountable to God.

Rom. 3:20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

Main Point: The Scriptures teach that all people are under the power of sin, regardless of social or ethnic boundaries; therefore, all people are in desperate need of the grace of God in Christ.

Outline:

1. The Conclusion (concerning human sin)
2. The Catalog (of human sin)
3. The Conviction (for human sin)

Introduction

In last week's passage Paul was anticipating an objection, that if the gospel is real and true, then all of Jewish history was a huge waste of time and that there was no advantage in Judaism at all. If the Jews and Gentiles are all saved in the same way (through faith in Jesus Christ) then isn't everybody really just a Gentile at the end of the day, and there's really no such thing as Judaism? And Paul's answer was no, there were incredible blessings and benefits that the Jews enjoyed.

But Paul is expecting that the gospel will really bother some people: that some people are really going to be vexed by this whole project where there are circumcised people who aren't really circumcised, and there are uncircumcised people who are truly circumcised because they have faith.

So today he is now going to correct an over-correction from what he just said, or a misunderstanding. He just listed some of the blessings of being Jewish, and the question is, wait, does that mean that the Jews really do enjoy some kind of leg up when it comes to salvation? Are they, to use Paul's question, "any better off?"

And Paul's answer here is no. The Jews don't get some kind of exemption from God's judgment. They don't get special treatment by God, or a hall pass or anything like that. God is the same judge and a fair judge across the board, and he calls all people – whether Jew or gentile – to faith in him.

It turns out, *all* people have a serious problem, and that problem transcends race, sex, ethnicity, and any other categories you might want to put people into. For *all* of us, sin is deep and pervasive. How deep? Well Paul is going to take us there today. He wants us to see and feel and know that human sin transcends race, it is beyond culture, and it affects us in every part of our beings. From our minds, to our heart, to our actions.

Sin is still unnatural. It is not part of what we were made for. It is our unnatural enemy. So Paul teaches us what our enemy is like here under three headings: first, the conclusion concerning human sin. Second, the catalog of human sin. The third, the conviction of human sin.

We might think of today's passage the way a prosecutor makes his closing statements to the jury.

Paul is continuing in his project of making us see the bad news before he fully lays out the good news. We have to see that this is us, or we cannot move forward in receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ for ourselves.

1. The Conclusion (concerning human sin)

First today, Paul offers his conclusion concerning sin, namely that all of mankind, no matter our race or culture or background, is "under sin."

So what he does in verse 9 here is give a one-sentence summary of the first two chapters. The first chapter was Paul's argument that Gentiles are what he calls "under sin." The second chapter was Paul's argument that the Jews are "under sin." Now here he is bringing these things together.

Paul says, "all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin." Then he's going to draw on Scripture to show, once again, this is not a New Testament development. It has been God's consistent testimony about all human beings long before the time of Christ, even.

But here's an important question: What does it mean to be under sin? Well it means two things: it refers to sin's guilt, and sin's corruption.

When we talk about sin's guilt, we're talking about God's legal verdict about you, and me, and our neighbors, and everyone else who is a sinner: namely, we are sinners descended from Adam, and we have a sin nature. We will get to the topic of Original Sin later, but we do share in the first sin of the first man and woman in taking the fruit. So we sin because we are sinners. But we have also sinned in practice, and therefore we are guilty. God is a good judge, and so when Paul says all are "under sin," he is saying that in his good, perfect judgment he knows this to be true: that we are guilty of sin.

But secondly, being under sin also refers to sin's corruption. Sin, in other words, isn't just something that renders us guilty, but it feeds itself and expands itself within the soul and moves into every part of our being.

Every part of our being is corrupted and changed because of sin. Sin isn't just a small seed that sits over here in one part of our nature while the rest is normal and unaffected. It's not like I have my soul over here which is free of sin, and my mind over here which is free of sin, and then my body over here which is free of sin, but I have this little part of me over here that has sin, and that's the part that's the problem.

Instead, sin affects our intellects. We don't think as clearly as we should. Paul says in Ephesians 4 that our minds are actually darkened by sin.

Sin affects our will. It affects what we choose and all our actions. Instead of having wills that are oriented toward God, our wills are oriented toward ourselves.

It affects our affections: what we love and what we want. We want and love forbidden things instead of good things.

It affects our bodies. Instead of living healthy and eternally, our bodies bear the consequences of sin. Sickness and death and decay are a normal part of our lives because sin has impacted us through and through.

This is completely different from the way people think today. If people do believe there is a such thing as sin, they tend to think of it as harmless personal choices. So sin has sort of been reduced to this human thing that maybe we do to each other, but this is both a minimizing of sin... and at the very same time a horizontalizing of sin.

Here's what I mean by that: In the modern approach to sin, sin is just something between me and another person. Morality is reduced to consent rather than morality being seen as something that exists and is real outside of ourselves and how we feel about what we do or what was done.

When most modern people hear the Christian view of sin, it's very scandalizing because they think it's no big deal unless someone murders or steals. Sin is tangible in the modern mindset. But Paul is actually saying, "Sin infects your motivations, in your thoughts, in your plans, in your body, in your will." You have to see how it drives and moves you and even turns you against the creator.

Sin is something between me and other people. But I can also sin with no one else around at all. Sin dwells within the heart.

So notice that sin is not merely a behavioral problem. Instead, it is something about our thinking, our loving, our desiring, our doing, and our living and dying. And none of this is an overstatement.

Paul's conclusion in this first point is that we are under sin. We all experience its guilt and corruption. All of us.

2. The Catalog (of human sin)

Second, Paul moves from this statement that all are "under sin" to this catalog of what that looks like in practice. He goes to the Old Testament and shows us the many things the Bible

says about sin and what we are like because of it. Let me just take us through that catalog briefly so we can see the picture that Paul is painting.

First the Scriptures say that we have a Sinful status. In verse 10 he quotes from Ecclesiastes where it says that “no one is righteous.” Righteousness is a positive thing. A good thing. Righteousness is when you and I reflect God and his character in our own hearts, wills, motivations, lives, and actions. But notice that sin here is put negatively. Sin is being “not righteous.” It is an absence of goodness. And this is because sin is not a “thing,” it is not a “substance,” it cannot get on you. You can’t get near it or carry it around. Sin is a matter of the heart, the will, and the actions. Sin is about what we are not, not fundamentally about what we are. It is a corruption and an interruption of the good, not a thing with its own sort of independent existence. I mention this because I want you to think well about sin and what it is, but also what it is not.

[Illustration] Sin is like darkness. Darkness isn’t a thing in itself—it’s just what you have when there’s no light. You don’t ‘add’ darkness to a room; you remove the light. Righteousness is like light—it’s positive, it’s something. Sin is what happens when the light of God’s righteousness is gone. It’s not a substance, not something you can bottle or spread. It’s the absence of what should be there. That’s why Paul says we are ‘not righteous’—not because we are filled with some dark sludge called sin, but because we are empty of the good, empty of the righteousness we were made to reflect.

Paul here, drawing from Scripture, says that we have a sinful status. Something is very wrong with us. We are not righteous.

Second, the Scriptures say we have Sinful hearts. Paul quotes two things to that effect. In verse 11 he says, “no one seeks God.” Again, notice that negative there: sin is *not* seeking God. We were made to seek God. When we don’t do that, we are deviating from the good. Sin is a corruption of the good. God made us to live for his glory and seek him. But what he says is also, in verse 12, that “all have turned aside.” So this avoidance of God, this resistance to our purpose is something that happens not fundamentally in our actions, but in our hearts. In our motivations, in our deep personal loyalties. Instead of being loyal and accountable to God, we are loyal to ourselves and our own desires. Deep down we were made to follow God, but instead we have become God-dislikers, God-avoiders, God-resisters, because we see him as being in the way of what we want.

We were made for one thing, and live for another. We misuse the lives and souls that God has gifted us with.

[Illustration] Imagine a beautiful violin — handcrafted, tuned to play music that moves people to tears. That violin has a purpose: to make beautiful music. But now imagine someone takes that violin and starts using it to hammer nails into a wall. What happens? Not only will it fail to do what it was made to do — but it gets damaged in the process. That’s what sin is like. God made our hearts to seek him, to enjoy him, to glorify him. (In that sense our heart is the violin here.) We were made to have a fundamentally Godward, God-centered orientation. But we’ve turned aside from that purpose. Instead of worshiping, we chase idols. Instead of loving God, we resist him. We were made for beauty and harmony with God — but when we live for other things, we malfunction. We hurt ourselves and others. We dishonor our design.

Paul, drawing from Scripture, says that we have sinful hearts.

Third, the Scriptures say our sin is evident in our words. In verse 13, Paul quotes from Psalm 5:9 which says “they use their tongues to deceive.” The larger quote from that Psalm is very helpful. It says, “Because there is no truth in their mouth, their inmost self is destruction; their throat is an open grave; they flatter with their tongue.” I want you to keep seeing this: the problem of corrupt speech, of cruel words, of hateful sayings and so on... it doesn’t start with our tongue or our keyboard; it begins deeper in the heart. It is the “inmost self” that is the origin of our twisted speech.

In James chapter 3, the Lord’s half-brother talks about how hard it is to tame the tongue. He says, “No human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God” (James 3:8-9).

And you might think that James’ application there will be, “Stop talking bad!” But James knows the problem is deeper in the heart: “Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and salt water? Can a fig tree, my brothers, bear olives, or a grapevine produce figs? Neither can a salt pond yield fresh water” (James 3:11-12).

When you speak without self-control, when you give yourself free rein to speak with cruelty, when you curse people, hate people, gossip about people, just know that the problem isn’t really them, it’s you. You cannot do anything about other people, but you are accountable for how you respond to other people. But even then, see, James tells us that the person we are hating is made in the image of God.

And here is the connection Scripture makes to the heart here: even when we assault others in our heart and mind, we are fundamentally assaulting God, because they bear his image. When we hate others, tear down others, it’s really another way for us to hate and assault and tear down and dethrone God.

Paul says our sin is evident in our words.

Fourth, Paul says that our sin is evident in our actions. In verse 12 he says, “no one *does* good.” Again notice that sin isn’t just about doing something bad, it’s also about the good that we omit to do. We ought to have done good, and we did not. We sometimes think that if we keep to ourselves and mind our own business that we can somehow avoid sinning. But often that self-centered, withdrawn, self-focused attitude (where all we think about is ourselves) is sinful also. There is good we ought to be doing that we aren’t doing. So sin can be passive, but it is also active.

It’s not just about what we don’t do, but it’s about what we actually do. Because we are sinners, we not only commit sins of omission, where we don’t do good, but we also engage in sins of commission where we are more *active* in doing what is wrong. Paul quotes from Isaiah, who says about sinful people that “their feet are swift to shed blood.” Sin doesn’t just touch our hearts and our speech, but even reaches to our feet and the roads we walk, the way we carry ourselves through the world.

Jesus, in his sermon on the mount, talks about this: long before we hurt another person, we hate that person. And before we hate that other person, we really hate God. This is why when we sin against another person, the problem isn’t just horizontal (between us and them), but it’s vertical (between us and God).

Because our hearts are bad, we can see sin come out in our action and in the way we act in and move through the world.

Fifth, Paul says that we have sinful minds. In verse 17 Paul quotes Isaiah 59:8 which says, “the way of peace they have not known.” You see, we sometimes think, well our hearts are bad. Our actions are bad. Maybe we do this from ignorance. Maybe the only real need is for us to know what is true. Maybe if we just knew more. Maybe if we had all the data. Maybe it’s just a matter of education.

The problem, however, is not really with what we know, but with what we do with what we know. When Paul says, “the way of peace they have not known,” he doesn’t mean that we have absolutely no idea how to have peace. What he really means is that we don’t love what we know; we don’t treasure what we know. Instead, we know the way of peace (in this instance) and our way of *thinking* about that has been twisted and corrupted by sin.

Colossians 1:21 says that people are “alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.” Our thinking itself has been twisted and hostile to God.

In another place Paul says that “the god of this world has blinded the minds of unbelievers.”

Again, the problem is not a truth problem, and it’s not actually a knowledge problem. The mind is what apprehends and holds on to what is true. But a mind hostile to God takes that knowledge and twists and manipulates the truth and knowledge that we have.

When Athanasius was writing about this in the fourth century, he put it this way: “Men having rejected the contemplation of God... and turned their understanding upon themselves” (*On the Incarnation*, §3).

John Chrysostom was seeking to explain this to his own congregation back in the 4th century and he put it this way: “For the soul which is corrupted with sin is like a city that is full of confusion... it cannot rightly judge” (*Homily on 2 Corinthians 4*).

Clement of Alexandria, writing all the way back in the second century said, “Ignorance is, as it were, a darkness of the soul; and sin is the cause of both” (*Stromata*, 2.6). So the Fathers were saying, Sin is the cause of our ignorance, and it also rises from ignorance.

In other words, sin means that we ought to second-guess even our own thinking and judgments. We think we’re fair, honest, and truthful. We tell ourselves that. But Scripture says, we are not the even-thinking straight shooters that we would like to believe.

We should often ask ourselves: Is God reigning over what I love, what I feel, what I think, what I want, and what I do?

The picture being painted here by Paul is of sin’s utter pervasiveness in every part of our being. There is no part of our person that we could point to and say, “Well *this* part is fine.” No, all of us has been corrupted and changed because of sin.

3. The Conviction (for human sin)

Finally this morning in our third point, Paul moves from this catalog of human sin to this statement regarding conviction for human sin.

Paul says this: “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.”

What Paul is doing here is wrapping up everything he’s been arguing since chapter one: if people (especially the Jews) haven’t been justified by the law, then *no one* can ever expect to be justified by the law. Whether it’s the ceremonies of circumcision or the rest of the law... or

whether it's just trying to be a good person, our sin can't be removed by those things, because that is not the law's function.

[Illustration] Trying to use the law to cleanse yourself from sin is like trying to wash your face with a mirror. The mirror shows you the dirt — it's honest, unflinching, and even painful to look at. But it has no power to remove the grime. That's how the Jews tried to use the law, but that was never its function. The law reflects the truth about your condition — it exposes sin — but it can't cleanse it. If you try to use the law to find forgiveness, you're misusing it. You're pressing the mirror into your face, hoping the dirt will go away. What you need is water. Something that truly cleanses. What you need is grace. Christ is the only one who can make you clean.

We are convicted by the law. The law exposes our heart, but we can't be vindicated by the law. We will devote all our attention to verse 20 when I get back in August, but I want you to see how Paul wraps up this section. He wants us to know that all the world is accountable to God for all of this sin that we've seen previously.

He says "all the world." Paul has really shown now that this is a problem for all of us. Whether you are a Jew or whether you are a Gentile, sin really is a problem for everyone.

Conclusion

And it is ultimately a problem for us, because as Paul puts it, the whole world will be held accountable to God. Here is my question: have you reckoned with your own accountability? You will have to give an account. Whatever age you are, have you considered that deep down, apart from Christ, we love ourselves and not God. Deep down, we are self-oriented and not God oriented. Deep down we love ourselves, not God or our neighbor. And this shows up in how we talk, how we think, how we feel, and how we act.

No good deed can change it, no act or ceremony can repair it. We will see this when we get back, that there are limits to the law and what it can do. There are good uses for it, but we cannot be justified by it. But for today what we need is to see the bigger truth Paul is delivering to us.

I mentioned, this is like the closing argument of a prosecutor before a jury. We are guilty. And he's shown that clearly. We think, feel, talk, and act sinfully because by nature at rock bottom, we are not well. After the evidence has been presented, Paul stands before the jury and summarizes everything that we have seen. In this case, he has shown the guilt of the Gentiles even though they don't have the written law. Then he showed the guilt of the Jews even though they do have the written law. In both cases all are guilty.

Where is this leading? Well I want to close with two applications: first, as a Christian, do you find yourself timid about telling people about the problem of sin? Before fully laying out the way of the gospel and salvation, Paul spent two chapters seeking to remove obstacles from his listeners. You need to see peoples' inclination to see themselves as good as a huge obstacle to the gospel. It has to be dealt with.

How will someone listen to the gospel if they don't think they need it? Often our evangelism will require us to help the person we are talking to so they can see their need for Jesus. They will need to see their insufficiency. And yes, sometimes people will be offended by this. Recognizing sin is a necessary part of sharing the gospel.

Paul knows this. He anticipates being offensive to people in this letter. Here's the thing: Paul's a very skillful preaching. And if Paul isn't able to avoid giving offense, we shouldn't expect to be able to avoid it, either.

So my application for Christians is this: Let's settle in our minds that we *are* willing to talk about sin, and the coming judgment. If we don't, we are like the person who doesn't show someone else that danger is coming.

Now, you could be listening to this as someone who has never turned to Christ yet. You have felt pretty good about yourself, maybe you feel good because you have good intentions and try not to make trouble, or because you've kept your nose clean for the most part. Paul is showing us all: sin is still a problem; especially for the moralistic person. None of us can say that we are sinless.

The call here is crystal clear: only Christ can save you from your sins. You will never do enough, be enough, love enough, think enough, feel enough, empathize enough, or perform enough in order to experience this peace and salvation that Jesus gives as a gift.

And this is why the love of Jesus is so powerful and amazing: in the gospel Jesus comes to totally helpless people with no leverage before God, and he loves us with a great love and says,

“Come to me, believe on my name, repent of your sins, and I will take your sin upon myself, and give you clean robes, and a good name before my father who is in heaven.”

Let's pray.