

# FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

*Systematic Theology Series*

## HAMARTIOLOGY

*The Doctrine of Sin*

*The Catastrophe from Which the Gospel Rescues Us*

---

### UNIT 2: THE ORIGIN OF SIN THE FALL OF ADAM

---

#### Lesson 6

## The Universal Indictment

**Romans 1–3**

*Paul's Case That All Humanity Stands Guilty Before God*

*“There is none righteous, not even one” — the most comprehensive prosecution in the history of human literature*

*Key Texts: Romans 1:18–32; 2:1–16; 3:9–20, 23; Galatians 3:22; Psalm 14:1–3; Psalm 53:1–3*

*“There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.”*

**Romans 3:10–12, NASB 1995**

**Dr. Joshua Nichols**

*Pastor, Theologian, Author*

*[faithfultotheword.com](http://faithfultotheword.com)*

## Introduction

Lessons 3 through 5 have followed the narrative of sin through the historical books of the Old Testament: from the temptation in the garden and the immediate consequences of the fall (Genesis 3), through the first murder and the escalating wickedness of the antediluvian world (Genesis 4–11). In this final lesson of Unit 2, we turn from narrative to argument, from the story of sin’s spread to the Apostle Paul’s systematic, prosecutorial demonstration that sin is not merely a feature of certain periods or populations of human history but the universal condition of the entire human race without exception. Romans 1:18 through 3:23 is, in the considered judgment of the majority of New Testament scholars across confessional traditions, the most comprehensive and rigorous statement of universal human guilt in all of Scripture. It is the passage that closes every escape route, silences every self-defense, and leaves the entire world, Jew and Gentile, religious and irreligious, moral and immoral, accountable to God without a word of excuse remaining.

The structure of Paul’s argument in Romans 1–3 is prosecutorial. He is building a case, the case that justification by grace through faith, which he announces in Romans 1:16–17 and expounds in Romans 3:21–26, is the only possible remedy for a condition of guilt that is universal, comprehensive, and inescapable. Before he can offer the remedy, he must establish the diagnosis. And the diagnosis requires that he address three distinct classes of people who might believe themselves to be exempt from the universal condemnation: the pagan Gentile world (Romans 1:18–32), the morally serious person who judges others (Romans 2:1–16), and the religiously privileged Jew who possesses the law (Romans 2:17–3:8). Having addressed each in turn, Paul delivers his comprehensive verdict in Romans 3:9–20 and his summary sentence in Romans 3:23: all have sinned. No exceptions. No exemptions. No escape routes.

This lesson’s relationship to the preceding lessons of the unit is one of apostolic confirmation. Lessons 3–5 established from Genesis 3–11 the historical and narrative account of sin’s origin and spread. This lesson establishes from Romans 1–3 the theological and juridical account of sin’s universal scope and human accountability. The two together, the Genesis narrative and the Pauline argument, constitute the full biblical case for the doctrine of original sin and total depravity that will be developed in greater depth in the later units of this series. Genesis 3–11 shows us what happened; Romans 1–3 tells us what it means and why no one can escape its implications.

The pastoral significance of this lesson cannot be overstated. Romans 1–3 is the passage that demolishes every form of self-righteous exemption from the diagnosis of sin, the Gentile’s exemption based on the absence of special revelation, the moralist’s exemption based on superior ethical standards, and the religionist’s exemption based on doctrinal privilege. In a culture that has developed an extraordinarily elaborate repertoire of strategies for avoiding moral accountability, the therapeutic strategy of reframing sin as dysfunction, the sociological strategy of attributing personal sin to systemic structures, the comparative strategy of identifying people worse than oneself, Paul’s argument in Romans 1–3 cuts through every one of these strategies with the relentless precision of a divine prosecutor whose case is airtight. The pastor who knows this passage well is equipped to engage every form of self-exemption from the gospel’s diagnosis, because Paul has already anticipated and addressed every escape route that the human heart devises.

A final methodological note: Romans 1:18–3:23 must always be read in context. It is the darkest section of the letter precisely because the letter itself is the most luminous proclamation of the gospel in the entire New Testament. Paul does not build this case against human sinfulness because he is a moralist who wants to condemn; he builds it because he is an evangelist who wants to save, and because the gospel that he is proclaiming can only be received with appropriate desperation and gratitude by those who have understood what they are being saved from. The sentence “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23) is not the conclusion of Paul’s argument; it is the preparation for the most glorious “but now” in all of Scripture: “But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested” (Romans 3:21, NASB 1995).

## I. The Wrath of God Revealed

*Romans 1:18–20, The Theological Foundation of the Argument*

### A. The Announcement of Divine Wrath

Paul opens the body of his doctrinal argument in Romans 1:18 not with the gospel of grace but with the revelation of divine wrath: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (NASB 1995). The placement of this verse immediately after the announcement of the righteousness of God in the gospel (1:17) is deliberate: the wrath of God and the righteousness of God in the gospel are both “revealed” (*apokaluptetai*, the same verb in both verses), and they are inseparable. The righteousness of God that is the remedy (1:17) can only be properly received when the wrath of God that constitutes the problem (1:18) has been properly understood. This is why Paul begins with wrath before grace, not because wrath is the final word but because it is the necessary precondition for hearing the final word rightly.

The wrath of God described in Romans 1:18 is not the emotional volatility of a temperamental deity but the settled, holy, inevitable response of infinite righteousness to moral evil. It is, in John Murray’s formulation, “the holy revulsion of God’s being against that which is the contradiction of his holiness.” This wrath is universal in its scope, it is revealed “against all ungodliness and unrighteousness”, and it is presently active, it is “revealed,” present tense, not merely threatened for the future. The wrath of God is not only the eschatological judgment of the last day; it is the present reality in which fallen human existence is conducted, expressing itself in the moral consequences of sin, in the divine “giving over” that structures the argument of Romans 1:24–32, and in the cumulative judgment of human history.

The specific ground of this wrath is stated with precision: humanity suppresses the truth in unrighteousness. The word “suppress” (*katechontōn*) is an active participle, indicating an ongoing, energetic, willful activity. The truth being suppressed is not merely the abstract truth of God’s existence but the practical truth of His moral character and claims, the truth that God is the Creator to whom all creatures owe worship, obedience, and gratitude. The suppression of this truth is the root of all subsequent moral failure described in the passage, because it removes the foundational orientation toward God that makes genuine moral life possible. Augustine’s insight applies directly here: all sin is, at its deepest level, a misdirection of love, and all misdirection of love begins with the refusal to love and honor the God who is the proper object of all love and honor.

### B. General Revelation and Universal Accountability

The basis for the charge that humanity suppresses the truth is Paul’s doctrine of general revelation in Romans 1:19–20: “because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse” (NASB 1995). Three features of this passage deserve careful theological attention.

First, the knowledge of God is “evident within them”, it is not merely available in the external world but is inscribed in the human constitution itself. This corresponds to Calvin’s doctrine of the *sensus divinitatis*, the “sense of divinity” that God has implanted in all human beings, the ineradicable awareness of divine existence and authority that characterizes all human consciousness. This internal knowledge is not the product of philosophical reflection or natural theology; it is the immediate, direct, constitutionally given perception of God’s reality that precedes all rational argument. No human being arrives at the knowledge of God’s existence through a process of reasoning from effect to cause; every human being simply knows, at the most basic level of conscious experience, that God is.

Second, God’s “invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature” are “clearly seen” through the created order. The creation is not merely evidence that might, with sufficient philosophical sophistication, lead to the inference of a creator; it is the transparent medium through which the divine character is directly displayed. The heavens declare the glory of God (Psalm 19:1); the power and wisdom of God are visible in the structures of the

natural world to those whose eyes are not closed by the willful suppression of the truth. This means that every human being who has ever stood before the night sky, or watched a sunrise, or contemplated the complexity of a living organism, has received a direct communication of God's power and majesty, a communication that the fallen mind suppresses but cannot ultimately silence.

Third and most decisively: humanity is therefore "without excuse" (*anapologetous*). This is the conclusion toward which the entire argument of verses 19–20 has been moving, and it is the most legally precise term in the passage. In the Roman judicial system, a defendant who was *anapologetos* had no remaining defense, the case against him was complete, and no further argument could avail. Paul is declaring that the Gentile world, every human being who has ever lived without the special revelation of Scripture, is, on the basis of general revelation alone, without a single remaining word of defense before the divine tribunal. The argument "I did not know" is foreclosed by the inscribed knowledge of the *sensus divinitatis*. The argument "The evidence was insufficient" is foreclosed by the clarity of the created order. No one will stand before God on the last day and successfully claim that they had insufficient grounds for belief and obedience.

*"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them."*

**Romans 1:18–19, NASB 1995**

## II. The Gentile World Under Judgment

*Romans 1:21–32, The Downward Spiral of Suppressed Truth*

### A. The Logic of the Spiral: From Knowledge to Idolatry

Having established the universal availability of the knowledge of God through general revelation and the universal suppression of that knowledge, Paul traces in Romans 1:21–23 the logical progression from suppressed truth to moral and spiritual ruin. The sequence is precise and devastating: "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures" (NASB 1995). Four steps in rapid succession: knowing without honoring → futile speculation and darkened heart → claiming wisdom while becoming fools → exchanging the glory of God for idols.

The root failure is the refusal to honor God as God and to give Him thanks. This is not primarily a failure of theological knowledge; it is a failure of worship. Humanity knows that God is; it refuses to respond to that knowledge with the love, gratitude, and obedience that the knowledge demands. And because worship is the fundamental orientation of the human person, because human beings are constitutively worshipping creatures who must have an object for their devotion, the refusal to worship God does not produce a worship-free condition but a worship-redirectioned condition. When God is displaced from the center of human devotion, something else immediately takes His place. The exchange of the incorruptible God for the image of corruptible creatures is not merely a religious error; it is the inevitable consequence of the fundamental spiritual misdirection that the suppression of truth has produced.

Calvin's observation that the human heart is "a perpetual idol factory" finds its biblical grounding precisely in this passage. The specific objects of idolatry change across cultures and generations, from stone images in the ancient world to money, power, romantic love, national identity, and self in the modern world, but the underlying dynamic is constant: the fallen human heart, having refused to worship the Creator, fashions substitute objects of worship from the materials of the created order. The modern secular person who does not bow before stone idols but who organizes his entire life around the accumulation of wealth, the pursuit of sexual fulfillment, or the cultivation of personal reputation is engaged in precisely the exchange that Paul describes in Romans 1:23, 25, the exchange of the truth of God for a lie, the exchange of the Creator for the creature.

## B. The Divine Giving Over: Judgment Within History

The most theologically distinctive element of Romans 1:18–32 is Paul’s threefold use of the verb *paradidomi*, God “gave them over” (verses 24, 26, 28), to describe God’s response to the persistent rejection of His revealed truth. This giving over is one of the most sobering doctrines in the entire New Testament because it describes divine judgment operating not merely in the eschatological future but within the present course of human history. God’s response to the persistent suppression of truth and the exchange of His glory for idols is not immediate destruction but something in certain respects more terrible: He withdraws His restraining grace and permits the sinful desires of those who have rejected Him to achieve their full, unchecked expression.

The threefold structure of the giving over is significant. The first giving over (verse 24) is to “impurity”, the unrestrained expression of bodily desires that the rejection of God’s moral order unleashes. The second (verse 26) is to “degrading passions”, the disordering of the sexual dimension of human existence that Paul describes in verses 26–27, in which the distinction between male and female as God’s creational design is exchanged for what is “against nature” (*para phusin*). The third (verse 28) is to “a depraved mind”, the cognitive corruption that produces the comprehensive catalogue of sins in verses 29–31: “wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful.”

The theological principle embedded in the structure of the giving over is that sin is its own punishment, not merely in the sense that it has unpleasant consequences but in the deeper sense that God uses the consequences of sin as an instrument of His present judgment. The person who has exchanged the truth of God for a lie finds that the lie produces the very misery and degradation that God’s truth was designed to prevent. The society that has organized itself around the rejection of the Creator finds that the idols it has substituted for Him are incapable of delivering the flourishing they promise. The divine giving over is the form that divine justice takes within history, prior to the final judgment, the removal of the restraints that God’s common grace has provided, and the permission for sin to produce, without restraint, the destruction that it always tends toward.

Verse 32 adds the most chilling element of the entire passage: not only do those who practice such things know the ordinance of God’s judgment that those who practice them are worthy of death, but they also give hearty approval to those who practice them. The final stage of moral corruption is not merely the doing of evil but the celebration of it, the culture-wide endorsement of the very sins that God has declared death-worthy, the turning of vice into virtue and the demand that everyone affirm the exchange. Paul’s description in Romans 1:32 is a description of every civilization at its moral nadir, including our own.

*“And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice.”*

**Romans 1:28–29, NASB 1995**

## III. The Moral Person Under Judgment

*Romans 2:1–16, The Self-Righteous Judge Is Also Guilty*

### A. The Condemnation of the Judge

Paul’s argument in Romans 1:18–32 might seem to leave an obvious escape route: surely the moral person, the person who does not worship idols, who does not practice the catalogue of vices listed in verses 29–31, who is in fact deeply offended by the immorality described, is exempt from the indictment. Romans 2:1 slams that door shut with startling directness: “Therefore you have no excuse, every one of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things” (NASB 1995). The word “therefore” (*dio*) connects this verse directly to the preceding argument: precisely because the moral person knows enough to judge the immorality described in chapter 1, he has no excuse for practicing the same things.

The charge that the moral judge “practices the same things” as those he condemns is not an accusation of identical behavioral sins, Paul does not mean that every moral person is secretly an idolater who practices all twenty-one vices of Romans 1:29–31. He means that the same fundamental spiritual orientation, the refusal to honor God as God, the substitution of self as the center of moral judgment, the practice of some form of the suppression of truth in unrighteousness, characterizes the moral person as surely as it characterizes the openly immoral one. The moralist who judges others is typically doing so from a position of self-exaltation rather than God-centered humility; his standards of judgment are derived from his own preferences and cultural conditioning rather than from the revealed standard of God; and his moral seriousness, however genuine in its way, is ultimately in the service of self-justification rather than the glorification of God.

Paul’s description of God’s impartial judgment in Romans 2:2—11 drives this point home with unmistakable force. God’s judgment is “according to truth” (*kata alētheian*, verse 2), that is, according to the actual reality of what people are and do, not according to their self-assessment. God’s judgment is impartial (verses 9–11), it is rendered equally to Jew and Greek, on the basis of works, with no favoritism shown to the morally serious or the religiously privileged. And God’s judgment penetrates beyond behavior to the deepest level of human motivation: it will judge “the secrets of men” (*ta krupta tōn anthrōpōn*, verse 16), the hidden counsels and suppressed intentions that external observation cannot reach but divine omniscience cannot miss. The moralist who is careful about his outward conduct while harboring pride, contempt, self-righteousness, and spiritual indifference is not exempt from God’s judgment; he is simply guilty of a different, and in certain respects more subtle, form of the same fundamental sin.

### **B. The Gentile Conscience and the Law Written on the Heart**

Romans 2:14–15 contains one of the most theologically significant statements in Paul’s anthropology: “For when Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves, in that they show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them” (NASB 1995). This passage establishes the doctrine of natural law, the moral knowledge that is inscribed in the human conscience by virtue of the image of God, and with it the basis for the moral accountability of those who have never possessed the Mosaic law.

The work of the law is “written in their hearts”, not the Mosaic law in its specific covenant form, but the moral content that the Mosaic law articulates: the basic principles of justice, truth, and the protection of human life that are universally recognized across human cultures and that witness to the moral character of the God in whose image all human beings are made. The conscience, that moral faculty that accuses or excuses, that renders internal verdicts on human behavior in the court of self-awareness, is the mechanism by which this inscribed law makes itself felt. It is not a perfect or infallible moral guide; it can be seared, distorted, and gradually silenced by persistent sin. But it is sufficient to establish the moral accountability of those who possess it, which is to say, every human being without exception.

The theological implication of Romans 2:14–15 for Hamartiology is that there is no morally neutral zone in the human condition. Even Gentiles who have never heard the Mosaic law are not without moral knowledge; they have the law written on their hearts, and their own consciences bear witness against them when they violate it. The accusatory function of the conscience, its capacity to recognize and condemn the sinner’s own violations of the moral standard, is itself testimony to the sufficiency of the moral knowledge that all human beings possess. No one will stand before God on the last day and successfully plead ignorance of the moral standard by which they are being judged; their own consciences will bear witness against them, as Paul indicates in verse 16.

## IV. The Jewish World Under Judgment

*Romans 2:17–3:8, Religious Privilege Does Not Produce Righteousness*

### A. The Indictment of the Religiously Privileged

Having closed the escape route of the moral Gentile, Paul turns in Romans 2:17 to the most privileged class of all: the Jew who possesses the law, practices circumcision, and relies upon his covenant relationship with God as the ground of his standing before the divine tribunal. The argument of this section is among the most rhetorically powerful in the entire letter: Paul systematically dismantles every claim to superiority that Jewish covenant privilege might seem to provide, not by denying the reality of the privilege but by demonstrating that the possession of the privilege without the corresponding performance of its demands is not merely insufficient, it is aggravating rather than mitigating.

Paul acknowledges the genuine privileges of the Jewish position: “You bear the name ‘Jew’ and rely upon the Law and boast in God, and know His will and approve the things that are essential, being instructed out of the Law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of the immature, having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth” (Romans 2:17–20, NASB 1995). These are not ironic; they are genuine acknowledgments of the privileges of covenant membership. The Jew who possesses the law does have a knowledge of God’s will that the Gentile lacks; the law does contain the embodiment of knowledge and truth. The problem is not the privilege but the gap between the possession of the privilege and the performance of its demands.

Paul’s four rhetorical questions in verses 21–23 expose this gap with devastating precision: “You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that one shall not steal, do you steal? You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the Law, through your breaking of the Law, do you dishonor God?” The rhetorical force of these questions lies in their escalating specificity: each question names a specific command of the Mosaic law and asks whether the one who knows and teaches that command actually obeys it. The implication is clear: the possession of superior moral knowledge does not guarantee superior moral performance. Indeed, as Paul will argue in Romans 7, the law can actually intensify the experience of sin by making its presence and power more visible.

### B. The True Circumcision and the Failure of External Covenant Signs

Romans 2:25–29 develops the argument by addressing the specific covenant sign of circumcision, which was the physical mark of Jewish covenant membership: “For indeed circumcision is of value if you practice the Law; but if you are a transgressor of the Law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision” (verse 25, NASB 1995). This is a radical claim in the context of first-century Judaism: circumcision, which was understood as the physical seal of God’s covenant with Abraham and the definitive marker of membership in the covenant people, is declared to be spiritually worthless apart from the obedience it was designed to represent. The external sign without the internal reality is not merely deficient; it is a contradiction, it makes the covenant promise the occasion of heightened condemnation rather than assured blessing.

The positive corollary of this argument is equally radical: “For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God” (Romans 2:28–29, NASB 1995). True covenant membership, the membership that actually counts before God, is not determined by physical ancestry or external rites but by the internal transformation of the heart by the Spirit of God. This does not mean that physical Israel had no privileges, Paul will insist emphatically in Romans 9–11 that the Jewish people remain the objects of God’s special covenant purposes, but it means that those privileges do not constitute a moral exemption from the universal condemnation that Paul has been building throughout chapters 1–3.

Paul’s brief anticipation of objections in Romans 3:1–8 rounds out this section by addressing the apparent tension between his argument and the doctrine of God’s faithfulness to His covenant promises. If the Jew is condemned like the Gentile, has God’s word failed? Paul’s answer is a resounding “May it never be!” (*mē genoito*, the strongest

possible Greek negation). The unfaithfulness of some Jews does not nullify the faithfulness of God; rather, it provides the occasion for God's righteousness to shine more brightly as He remains true to His purposes even when His covenant people are not. But this divine faithfulness does not produce human exemption from judgment; it is the faithfulness of a God who will ultimately be vindicated in His judgments, including the judgment upon those who have been entrusted with the greatest privileges.

*"For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter."*

**Romans 2:28–29, NASB 1995**

## V. The Universal Verdict

*Romans 3:9–20, Every Mouth Closed, All the World Accountable*

### A. The Charge: All Under Sin

After three chapters of relentless prosecutorial argument, Paul brings the case to its verdict in Romans 3:9: "What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin" (NASB 1995). The phrase "all under sin" (*pantas hup' hamartian einai*) is a compact but comprehensive legal formula: every human being, without exception of race, religion, moral seriousness, or covenant standing, is "under" sin in the sense of being subject to its dominion and under its sentence of condemnation. This is not a description of degree, some more under sin than others, but of category: all are in the same fundamental moral and legal condition before God.

To substantiate this charge, Paul marshals the catena of Old Testament quotations in Romans 3:10–18, the most concentrated assembly of scriptural testimony in the entire letter. Drawing from Psalms 14, 53, 5, 140, 10, Isaiah 59, and Psalm 36, Paul constructs a six-dimensional indictment that moves systematically through every aspect of human moral life. The indictment of character (verses 10–12): "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one." The indictment of speech (verses 13–14): "Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness." The indictment of conduct (verses 15–17): "Their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known." And the indictment of foundational orientation (verse 18): "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

The cumulative effect of this catena is the total, multi-directional, scripturally authoritative demolition of every possible claim to human self-righteousness. The defendant has been convicted by his own sacred texts, the very scriptures that the religiously privileged Jew cites as evidence of his superior standing are the scriptures that pronounce his condemnation. The law that was supposed to establish righteousness has instead established guilt; the covenant that was supposed to provide security has instead provided the most comprehensive indictment. The effect is precisely what Paul intends: the complete and final silencing of every self-righteous defense.

### B. The Conclusion: Every Mouth Closed, All the World Accountable

Romans 3:19–20 delivers the judicial conclusion with the precision of a seasoned prosecutor: "Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin" (NASB 1995). Three statements of enormous theological weight are compressed into these two verses.

First: the law silences every self-righteous defense. The phrase "every mouth may be closed" (*pan stoma phragei*) is the language of the courtroom, the closing of the mouth of a defendant who has exhausted his defenses and has nothing further to say. Paul has addressed the three classes of potential exemption, the pagan Gentile, the

moral person, the religiously privileged Jew, and he has shown that none of them has a word of self-defense remaining. The law does not merely condemn the obvious sinner; it condemns the subtle self-righteous person, the moral philosopher, the religious practitioner, and everyone in between. The entire range of human strategies for establishing one's own righteousness before God has been exhausted, and not one of them has succeeded. Every mouth is closed.

Second: all the world is accountable to God. "All the world" (*pas ho kosmos*) leaves no population outside the scope of divine accountability. This is not a special indictment of particularly wicked cultures or particularly immoral individuals; it is the universal condition of every human being who has ever lived. Paul will use the same comprehensive scope in his summary in Romans 3:23: "for all have sinned." The universality of the condemnation is the necessary counterpart of the universality of the offer that follows: the righteousness of God available through faith in Jesus Christ "to all those who believe; for there is no distinction" (Romans 3:22, NASB 1995).

Third: justification by law-keeping is impossible. "By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight." This is the formal declaration that closes the door on every form of works-righteousness: not merely on the Mosaic law specifically but on any system of moral performance as the basis for standing before God. The law's role is diagnostic ("through the Law comes the knowledge of sin"), not remedial. It can identify the disease with perfect precision; it cannot provide the cure. The cure, the justification that the law cannot produce, is what Paul will announce in the glorious "but now" of Romans 3:21.

## VI. Romans 3:23 and the "But Now" of the Gospel

*The Universal Verdict as the Necessary Prelude to Sovereign Grace*

### A. For All Have Sinned

Romans 3:23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (NASB 1995), is the most concise and comprehensive statement of the universal scope of human sin in the entire Bible. Its placement in the argument is crucial: it appears not as the conclusion of the indictment (which was delivered in 3:9–20) but as the explanatory foundation for the announcement of the universal scope of God's justifying grace in verses 21–24. The "all" of verse 23 ("all have sinned") is the same "all" of verse 22 ("there is no distinction"), the universality of the guilt provides the scope within which the universality of the offer is meaningful.

The two clauses of the verse are grammatically and theologically distinct. "All have sinned" (*pantes hemarton*) uses the aorist tense, pointing back to the single, definitive sinning of the entire race in Adam (the same aorist as in Romans 5:12: "because all sinned"). This is not merely the observation that every individual has committed personal sins, though that is true; it is the declaration of the Adamic solidarity that Paul will develop in Romans 5:12–19, that the entire human race sinned, definitively and corporately, in the person of its representative head. "Fall short of the glory of God" (*husterountai tēs doxēs tou theou*) uses the present tense, describing the ongoing condition of fallen humanity: perpetually, continuously, without intermission, falling short of the divine standard of perfect righteousness and holiness.

The "glory of God" of which all have fallen short is not merely a general standard of moral excellence but the specific moral glory of God's own character, the righteousness that is His nature, that He expressed in the law, that Adam was designed to reflect as the image of God, and that Christ perfectly bears as the Second Adam. To fall short of this glory is not merely to have room for improvement; it is to be constitutively incapable of the perfect obedience that the Creator's standard demands, and therefore to be constitutively under the condemnation that the failure to meet that standard incurs. Romans 3:23 is not a mild assessment of human imperfection; it is the declaration that the gap between what God's holiness requires and what fallen humanity can provide is infinite and unbridgeable by any human effort, and therefore that the only possible remedy is the one that God Himself provides in the imputed righteousness of His Son.

### B. The "But Now": The Gospel as the Answer to the Universal Indictment

The theological argument of Romans 1:18–3:23 does not terminate in despair. It terminates in the most glorious “but now” in all of Scripture: “But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:21–24, NASB 1995). The phrase “but now” (*nuni de*) marks the decisive turn of the entire argument, the pivot from the problem to the solution, from the universal condemnation to the universal offer, from the impossibility of human righteousness to the gift of divine righteousness.

The theological content of this “but now” is determined entirely by the comprehensive darkness that precedes it. The righteousness of God that is now manifested “apart from the Law” is glorious precisely because the law has just demonstrated its utter inability to produce righteousness by its own working. The justification that is received “as a gift” (*dáireán*, freely, without cost) is precious precisely because three chapters have established that no human being has anything to offer in exchange for it. The redemption that is in Christ Jesus is the answer to a predicament that has been established as inescapable: every mouth is closed, every escape route is sealed, every strategy of self-justification has been exposed as futile. Into that absolute silence, the gospel speaks the one word that can be heard: justification as a free gift, to all who believe, for there is no distinction.

This is why Paul’s extensive treatment of universal human sinfulness in Romans 1–3 is not, as some interpreters have suggested, a pessimistic detour from the main argument of the letter. It is the main argument of the letter in its preparatory phase. The gospel can only be heard as the extraordinary news it is by those who have understood the extraordinary condemnation from which it rescues. The free grace of justification can only be received with appropriate wonder and gratitude by those who have understood that they have nothing to bring to the transaction. The righteousness of Christ can only be embraced as the treasure it is by those who have seen their own righteousness exposed as bankrupt and inadequate. Romans 1–3 is the divine physician’s full diagnosis; Romans 3:21–26 is his prescription. And only those who have received the diagnosis in its full severity are in a position to receive the prescription with the faith, the desperation, and the gratitude that the medicine of the gospel deserves.

*“But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.”*

**Romans 3:21–24, NASB 1995**

## Theological Terms and Definitions

| Term                                            | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>General Revelation</b>                       | The knowledge of God available to all human beings through the created order and the moral constitution of the human person, as distinguished from special revelation (Scripture and the incarnation). Paul grounds his argument for Gentile accountability in Romans 1:18–20 in the doctrine of general revelation: “For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.” General revelation is sufficient to render all people accountable to God and therefore without excuse for their moral failure, but it is insufficient for salvation. It reveals God’s existence, power, and moral character; it does not reveal the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Westminster Confession (I.1) states that the light of nature and the works of creation, though “not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of His will, which is necessary unto salvation,” are nevertheless adequate to leave all people without excuse before the divine tribunal. |
| <b>Suppression of Truth</b>                     | The theological description, drawn from Romans 1:18, of the universal human response to general revelation: not ignorance of God but the active, willful suppression of a knowledge of God that is genuinely present. Paul writes that the wrath of God is revealed “against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” The Greek <i>katechontōn</i> (suppress, hold down) is an active participle, indicating that the suppression of the truth is not a passive condition but an ongoing, energetic activity of the fallen human will. The doctrine of the suppression of truth has profound apologetic implications: it means that the unbeliever’s rejection of God is never a genuinely neutral intellectual conclusion reached after fair examination of the evidence, but always the expression of a moral and spiritual orientation that is pre-committed against the God whom the evidence reveals.                                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>The Wrath of God (Orgē Theou)</b>            | The settled, holy, personal displeasure of God against sin and all that violates His righteous character. In Romans 1:18, Paul announces that the wrath of God is “revealed from heaven” against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. The wrath of God is not the emotional volatility of a capricious deity but the necessary expression of infinite holiness confronting moral evil, as inevitable as the reaction of light to darkness or of heat to cold. Reformed theology has consistently distinguished between the wrath of God as a permanent divine attribute (His necessary, holy opposition to sin) and the expression of that wrath in specific acts of judgment (the flood, the exile, the destruction of Jerusalem, and ultimately the final judgment). The cross of Jesus Christ is the place where the wrath of God against the sin of the elect was fully and finally exhausted in the person of the Son, so that those who are united to Christ by faith are no longer the objects of divine wrath but the recipients of divine favor.                                                   |
| <b>Idolatry</b>                                 | The exchange of the true God for a substitute object of worship, the redirection of the worship, trust, and love that belong to God alone toward something in the created order. Paul describes this as the central sin of the Gentile world in Romans 1:23, 25: they “exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures” and “exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.” Idolatry is not merely a feature of primitive religion; it is the universal human condition in its fallen form. As Calvin observed, the human heart is a perpetual idol factory ( <i>perpetua idolorum fabrica</i> ), and the specific objects of idolatry change across cultures and generations, from stone images to money, power, sex, reputation, and self, while the underlying dynamic remains constant: the displacement of the Creator by the creature as the center of human devotion.                                                                    |
| <b>Divine Judicial Abandonment (Paradidomi)</b> | The Greek verb <i>paradidomi</i> , translated “gave them over” in Romans 1:24, 26, 28, describes the divine judicial act by which God withdraws His restraining grace from those who persistently reject His revealed truth and abandons them to the full consequences of the sinful                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |

| Term                                                           | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                                | <p>desires they have chosen. This threefold giving over in Romans 1 is not the final judgment but a provisional judicial act within history: God gives the persistently unrepentant over to the unchecked expression of their own sinful desires (impurity, degrading passions, and a depraved mind), so that the consequences of sin become the instrument of God's present judgment upon it. This doctrine has significant implications for the understanding of cultural decline: the increasing moral darkness of a society that has systematically rejected the knowledge of God is not merely a human failure but a divine judicial response to that rejection, the removal of restraining grace as an expression of holy wrath.</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>The Catena of Old Testament Quotations (Romans 3:10–18)</b> | <p>The Greek catena (chain) refers to the extended chain of Old Testament quotations that Paul assembles in Romans 3:10–18 to establish the universal scope of human sinfulness. Drawing from Psalms 14:1–3; 53:1–3; 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; Isaiah 59:7–8; and Psalm 36:1, Paul constructs a composite indictment that moves systematically through every dimension of human moral life: character (none righteous, none who understands), spiritual direction (none who seeks God), behavior (all turned aside, none who does good), speech (throat a grave, tongue deceitful, lips with poison, mouth full of cursing), conduct (feet swift to shed blood, destruction in their paths), and foundational orientation (no fear of God). The cumulative effect is a comprehensive, multi-textual, divinely authorized verdict on the universal moral condition of the human race, a verdict from which neither Jew nor Gentile can escape.</p>                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Universal Condemnation (Romans 3:19–20)</b>                 | <p>The conclusion of Paul's extended argument from Romans 1:18 through 3:18, stated with judicial precision in verses 19–20: "Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin." The phrase "every mouth may be closed" (<i>hina pan stoma phragei</i>) is a legal term for the silencing of a defendant who has no remaining defense to offer. The whole world, Jew and Gentile alike, stands before God's tribunal without a word of self-justification available. This universal silencing is the necessary precondition for the reception of the gospel: only those who have been stripped of every self-righteous defense are in a position to receive, with the appropriate desperation and gratitude, the justification that God freely provides through the righteousness of Christ.</p>                                   |
| <b>The Law as a Mirror</b>                                     | <p>The theological characterization of the Mosaic law's diagnostic function: its capacity to reveal sin rather than to remedy it. Paul states this explicitly in Romans 3:20: "through the Law comes the knowledge of sin." This does not mean that the law is evil or that its revelation of sin is its only function, the law also reveals God's holy character, provides the moral standard for the covenant community, and functions as a guardian or schoolmaster leading to Christ (Galatians 3:24). But in the context of Paul's argument in Romans 1–3, the law's diagnostic function is what is most immediately relevant: it gives the sinner precise knowledge of the nature and extent of his sin, names the specific violations of the divine standard, and thereby renders the sinner's guilt not merely general but specific and inexcusable. The law's function as a mirror, showing the face of sinners to themselves, is the necessary preparation for the gospel's announcement of justification by grace through faith in the righteousness of Christ.</p> |
| <b>The Downward Spiral of Sin (Romans 1:21–32)</b>             | <p>The progressive, self-reinforcing moral trajectory described in Romans 1:21–32, by which the initial rejection of God leads through a series of steps to comprehensive moral and spiritual corruption. The sequence Paul traces runs: knowing God (1:21) → refusing to honor Him as God → futile thinking → darkened heart → claiming wisdom while becoming fools → exchanging God's glory for idols → divine giving over to impurity (1:24) → exchanging truth for a lie → divine giving over to degrading passions (1:26) → refusing to acknowledge God → divine giving over to a depraved mind (1:28) → every form of wickedness (1:29–31). The spiral character of this trajectory, each step making the next more likely and more severe, illustrates the principle that sin does not stand still but always tends to escalate, and that the divine</p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                |

| Term               | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|--------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                    | giving over of Romans 1:24, 26, 28 is simultaneously judgment and the mechanism by which the judgment produces its own intensification.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Romans 3:23</b> | The single verse that serves as Paul's most concise summary of the universal scope of human sin: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (NASB 1995). The verse contains two assertions. First, the universal scope: "all have sinned", <i>pantes hemarton</i> , an aorist tense pointing to the definitive sinning of the entire race in Adam (Romans 5:12). Second, the continuing condition: "fall short of the glory of God", <i>husterountai</i> , a present tense indicating the ongoing state of falling short, the perpetual condition of humanity as it currently exists. The "glory of God" of which all have fallen short is the divine standard of perfect righteousness and holiness that God's own character establishes, the standard that Adam bore before the fall as the image of God and that Christ perfectly bears as the Second Adam. The gospel's answer to Romans 3:23 is the imputation of Christ's righteousness to those who believe, the restoration of the glory that sin has forfeited. |

## Practical Application

### A. *For the Mind: What Must We Believe?*

We must believe that Paul's argument in Romans 1–3 is comprehensive, exhaustive, and admits of no exemptions. Every human being who has ever lived, the pagan Gentile, the moral philosopher, the devout religious practitioner, and the elect believer before regeneration, stands within the scope of the universal indictment that Paul delivers in Romans 3:9–20. This is not a comfortable belief, because it forecloses every strategy of self-exaltation and self-exemption that fallen human nature devises. But it is a necessary belief, because the gospel's offer of justification as a free gift is only properly received by those who have understood that they have nothing to bring to the transaction. To minimize the scope of Paul's indictment is to minimize the glory of the grace that addresses it.

We must also believe that the wrath of God announced in Romans 1:18 is not a relic of primitive religion or an embarrassing remnant of a less enlightened theological era but the necessary expression of infinite holiness confronting moral evil, as real, as present, and as morally necessary as the grace that addresses it. The contemporary evangelical tendency to proclaim grace without wrath, to offer the divine embrace without first establishing the divine condemnation, produces not genuine converts but superficial adherents who have never understood what they are being saved from and therefore have never understood what they have been saved for. The God whose wrath is revealed in Romans 1:18 is the same God whose grace is revealed in Romans 3:21–24, and neither can be properly understood or received apart from the other.

### B. *For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?*

The argument of Romans 1–3 should produce in the believing heart a profound and ongoing sense of the incongruity of grace, the realization that what was true of us before regeneration (dead in trespasses, by nature children of wrath, with no word of self-defense remaining before the divine tribunal) makes the grace of justification not merely helpful but miraculous, not merely comforting but astonishing. Paul's intention in building the case of Romans 1–3 is precisely to produce this sense of astonishment, to ensure that the “but now” of Romans 3:21 lands with the full weight of the darkness that preceded it. The believer who regularly re-reads Romans 1–3 in the light of her own pre-conversion condition, and in the light of the continuing operation of the same tendencies within her own fallen nature, is the believer who has the deepest and most stable grounds for the kind of wonder-filled, desperate-gratitude worship that the gospel always seeks to produce.

Desire, above all, the freedom from self-righteousness that Romans 2 specifically addresses. The condemnation of the moral judge who “practices the same things” he condemns in others is the most personally confronting section of the entire passage for those who take it seriously, because it addresses not the obvious sinner but the person who thinks of himself as morally serious. The temptation to rank oneself above others on the moral scale, to occupy the position of the judge rather than the defendant, is one of the most persistent and subtle forms of the self-justification that the gospel has come to expose and displace. Romans 2's verdict on the moralist is not an optional component of the passage; it is the passage's direct address to those most likely to use chapter 1 as a stick with which to beat others while exempting themselves from its diagnosis.

### C. *For the Hands: What Must We Do?*

- Read Romans 1:18–3:23 in a single sitting, at least twice. On the first reading, follow the flow of Paul's prosecutorial argument: the announcement of wrath (1:18–20), the indictment of the Gentile world (1:21–32), the condemnation of the moral judge (2:1–16), the indictment of the religious person (2:17–3:8), the universal verdict (3:9–20), and the summary sentence (3:23). On the second reading, pause at each major transition and ask: is there any class of person, any cultural, moral, or religious category, that Paul has not addressed? Is there any escape route that he has left open? The answer to both questions, carefully considered, will produce either the broken humility that the passage is designed to produce, or the resistance of a self-justifying spirit that is itself evidence of the very condition the passage diagnoses.
- Apply the three-class structure of Paul's argument to your own ministry context. Who in your congregation or sphere of influence is most likely to identify with the pagan Gentile of Romans 1, the person who has

explicitly rejected God and lives according to the desires of the flesh? Who is most likely to identify with the moral person of Romans 2, the person who is genuinely offended by gross immorality but exempts himself from the same passage's diagnosis? And who is most likely to identify with the religious person of Romans 2:17–3:8, the person who possesses theological knowledge and covenant signs but relies upon them for standing before God rather than upon the righteousness of Christ? Each class requires a different evangelistic and pastoral approach, and Romans 1–3 equips the pastor to engage each with precision.

- Study the threefold giving-over of Romans 1:24, 26, 28 as the framework for understanding cultural decline. Identify specific ways in which the cultural trajectory of your society resembles the trajectory Paul describes: the suppression of the knowledge of God, the exchange of the Creator for creaturely idols, and the successive withdrawals of divine restraint that permit the unchecked expression of the sinful desires that idolatry has produced. This is not an exercise in cultural despair but in prophetic clarity: a church that understands Romans 1's account of cultural decline is a church that is not surprised by the depths of contemporary moral confusion and is equipped to offer the only remedy that addresses the root cause rather than the symptoms.
- Memorize Romans 3:21–24 as the gospel's specific answer to the universal indictment of Romans 1–3. The "but now" of verse 21 is the pivot of the entire letter and the theological center of the Christian faith. Know it in its full richness: the righteousness of God manifested apart from the law, witnessed by the law and prophets, through faith in Jesus Christ, for all who believe, without distinction, justification as a free gift, by His grace, through the redemption in Christ Jesus. Each phrase is the specific answer to a specific aspect of the condemnation that chapters 1–3 have established, and knowing the phrase in its connection to the condemnation it answers transforms a familiar text into a living, precise, personally addressed word of grace.
- Preach and teach Romans 1–3 with the pastoral courage its content requires. The temptation, given the passage's confrontational force, is to soften its edges, to spend more time on the cultural analysis of chapter 1 than on the personal diagnosis of chapter 2, or to move quickly past the universal condemnation to the grace of chapter 3. But the glory of Romans 3:21–24 is directly proportional to the weight of Romans 1:18–3:20; the more thoroughly the diagnosis has done its work, the more irresistible the cure will appear. The congregation that has never truly heard Romans 1–3 has never been in a position to receive Romans 3:21–26 with the wonder and gratitude that the passage itself is designed to produce.

**Key Texts:** *Romans 1:18–32; 2:1–16; 2:17–3:8; 3:9–20; 3:21–24; Galatians 3:22; Psalm 14:1–3; Psalm 53:1–3; Isaiah 59:7–8*

## Study and Discussion Questions

### Opening Question

1. Before studying this lesson, how did you understand the relationship between the condemnation of Romans 1–3 and the gospel of Romans 3:21–26? Did you tend to move quickly past the condemnation to the grace, or did you find the extended diagnosis of chapters 1–3 theologically essential to your appreciation of the grace that follows? How has this lesson shaped your understanding of why Paul spends three chapters establishing universal guilt before announcing universal grace?

### Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

2. Read Romans 1:18–20 carefully and identify every assertion Paul makes about the universal knowledge of God available to all human beings. What does he say is known about God? How is it known? What is the theological conclusion he draws about human accountability? Then read Romans 1:21–23 and trace the precise steps by which the possession of this knowledge leads, without the response of worship and gratitude, to idolatry and darkened understanding. What is the logical connection between the refusal to honor God as God and the exchange of His glory for idols?
3. Read Romans 1:24, 26, and 28 and identify the three acts of divine giving-over. What specific condition does God give humanity over to in each instance? What does the repetition of *paradidomi* (“gave them over”) in all three verses suggest about the structure of Paul’s argument? What does the fact that God is the subject of all three acts of giving-over reveal about the nature of moral and cultural decline, is it primarily a human failure, a divine judgment, or both? How do these three verses relate to the doctrine of common grace?
4. Read Romans 2:1–11 and identify the precise grounds on which Paul condemns the person who judges others. The condemned person in verse 1 is not merely hypocritical; Paul says he “practices the same things.” What does this mean? Is Paul accusing the moralist of identical behavioral sins, or is he making a deeper point about the spiritual orientation that underlies the moralist’s behavior? How does Paul’s description of God’s impartial judgment according to works in verses 6–11 function in the argument? What does it establish about the standard by which all human beings will be judged?
5. Read Romans 3:10–18 and analyze the structure of the catena of Old Testament quotations. Which Old Testament books does Paul draw from? How does the catena move systematically through different dimensions of human moral life? In what sense does the source of these quotations, the Old Testament scriptures that Jewish religious privilege claimed as its own, amplify the rhetorical force of Paul’s argument? What does the cumulative effect of six different dimensions of indictment establish about the comprehensiveness of the verdict in verse 19?
6. Read Romans 3:19–24 as a unit. How does verse 19 (“every mouth may be closed”) function as the conclusion of the argument from 1:18 through 3:18? What is the relationship between the silencing of every mouth in verse 19 and the announcement of justification as a free gift in verses 22–24? In what sense does the comprehensiveness of the condemnation make the comprehensiveness of the offer possible? How does the phrase “for there is no distinction” (verse 22) carry a different weight when read against the background of the three-class structure of chapters 1–3?

### Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

7. The lesson argues that the doctrine of general revelation in Romans 1:19–20 establishes not merely that God can be inferred from the creation but that the knowledge of God is inscribed in the human constitution itself (the *sensus divinitatis*). Evaluate this interpretation. What specific features of the text support the claim that the knowledge of God is “evident within them” (1:19) in addition to being available through the created order? What are the apologetic implications of this distinction, does it mean that the unbeliever already knows God and suppresses that knowledge, rather than simply lacking evidence?

8. The lesson interprets the threefold giving-over of Romans 1:24, 26, 28 as a form of divine judgment operating within present history through the mechanism of moral consequence, that God's removal of restraining grace is itself a judicial act by which sin is both punished and intensified simultaneously. Evaluate this interpretation. Is the giving-over a passive divine withdrawal (God simply stops restraining), an active divine act (God specifically directs the consequences), or something in between? What are the pastoral and theological implications of understanding cultural moral decline as a form of present divine judgment rather than merely a human failure?
9. Romans 2:14–15 has been interpreted in two main ways: (1) as describing Gentile Christians who, through the Spirit, fulfill the law's requirements (Calvin, Moo), and (2) as describing morally serious Gentiles who, through natural conscience, observe aspects of the moral law without special revelation (Cranfield, Schreiner). Evaluate the two interpretations. What are the exegetical arguments for each? What are the theological implications of each for the doctrine of natural law and the moral accountability of those without special revelation? Which interpretation better fits the flow of Paul's argument in Romans 2?
10. The lesson argues that Paul's extended treatment of universal sin in Romans 1–3 is not a pessimistic detour but the essential preparation for the gospel of Romans 3:21–26, and that the glory of the "but now" is directly proportional to the weight of the preceding condemnation. Assess this claim homiletically and pastorally. Is there a risk that a thorough preaching of Romans 1–3 will produce despair rather than gospel-readiness in the congregation? How does the preacher navigate between the Scylla of a gospel that minimizes sin (producing shallow converts) and the Charybdis of a diagnosis that crushes without offering the remedy? What does the structure of Paul's own argument in Romans suggest about the answer?
11. Paul's indictment in Romans 2:17–3:8 is directed specifically at those who possess religious knowledge and covenant signs but rely upon them for their standing before God rather than upon the righteousness of Christ. In what ways is this indictment directly applicable to people within the contemporary evangelical church? What are the specifically evangelical forms of the religious self-righteousness that Paul diagnoses in the Jewish interlocutor of Romans 2:17–3:8? How would Paul address the person who knows correct Reformed theology, attends a faithful church, has been baptized, participates in the Lord's Supper, and yet trusts in these privileges rather than in Christ alone?

### ***Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)***

12. The lesson identifies three classes of people in Romans 1–3 who believe themselves to be exempt from the universal indictment: the pagan Gentile (who lacks special revelation), the moral person (who judges others), and the religiously privileged person (who possesses covenant signs and theological knowledge). Which of these three classes most closely describes your own pre-conversion condition or your own current temptation toward self-exemption from the gospel's diagnosis? And what does the specific form of your self-justification tell you about the specific form of the gospel's address to it?
13. Romans 2:1 declares that the person who judges others "practices the same things." In what specific areas of your own life do you recognize a gap between the moral standard you apply to others and the standard you apply to yourself, between what you readily condemn in others and what you excuse or minimize in yourself? How does Paul's diagnosis of this gap as itself evidence of the same fundamental spiritual orientation that he condemns in the obvious sinner shape the way you understand and address this tendency in your own heart?
14. The wrath of God revealed in Romans 1:18 is described in the lesson as "presently active", expressed in the moral consequences of sin within history, not merely reserved for the final judgment. How does this understanding of divine wrath as a present reality shape the way you interpret the moral confusion, relational breakdown, and cultural decline that you observe in the world around you? Does understanding cultural decline as a form of present divine judgment (the giving-over of 1:24, 26, 28) make you more or less compassionate toward those caught in it, and why?

15. The lesson concludes that the universal condemnation of Romans 1–3 is the necessary preparation for the free grace of Romans 3:21–26, and that the “but now” of verse 21 can only be received with appropriate wonder by those who have felt the full weight of the preceding “all have sinned.” In your own experience of the gospel, do you feel the weight of the “all have sinned” as fully as you feel the wonder of the “but now”? If the wonder has faded or the gratitude has become routine, what specific engagement with Romans 1–3, in personal study, in preaching, in corporate confession, in prayer, might restore the fresh apprehension of the contrast that Paul designed this passage to produce?
16. Paul’s argument in Romans 1:18–32 moves from the suppression of general revelation to idolatry to the divine giving-over to comprehensive moral degradation. This trajectory is presented not as the story of ancient paganism alone but as the structural account of what happens to any individual, family, church, or culture that systematically refuses to honor God as God. Applying this trajectory to your own congregational context: are there ways in which the church you serve or attend has functionally suppressed the truth of God in unrighteousness, accommodated itself to the therapeutic, consumerist, or moralistic frameworks of its surrounding culture at the expense of the full truth of Scripture? What would genuine repentance from this suppression look like?

## Prayer Focus

---

Open this lesson's time of prayer with a slow, meditative reading of Romans 3:9–26, the entire movement from the universal verdict to the gospel announcement. Read verses 9–20 not as a description of especially wicked people but as the authoritative divine indictment of the condition that you yourself shared before grace intervened and that the unregenerate heart around you still shares. Let the catena of verses 10–18 function as Paul intended: as the progressive, comprehensive, multi-dimensional silencing of every self-righteous claim, including your own. Which of the specific charges lands most heavily? The denial that anyone seeks God (verse 11)? The charge that the throat is an open grave (verse 13)? The indictment that there is no fear of God (verse 18)? Allow the Spirit to make the universal verdict a personal one, to apply to your specific heart the same diagnosis that the text applies to the race.

Then read verses 21–26, slowly, and receive the weight of the “but now” against the background of the darkness that the preceding eleven verses have established. “But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested.” Allow the contrast between the closed mouths of verse 19 and the free gift of verse 24 to produce the wonder and gratitude that Paul's structural arrangement was designed to evoke. You were in the condition of verses 10–18 before grace intervened; you are now in the condition of verse 24 (“being justified as a gift by His grace”) by no merit of your own. The gap between those two conditions is the measure of the grace that the gospel contains, and the measure of the gratitude that the gospel deserves. Pray in the light of that gap. Pray with the wonder of a man or woman who has stood before a tribunal with no word of self-defense remaining and has been declared righteous as a gift. This is what the gospel is; this is what prayer should always be becoming.

Pray in Trinitarian adoration structured by the specific content of Romans 3:21–26. Begin with the Father, who is the God of verse 26, the God who is both “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” The cross is the place where the divine justice that Romans 1:18 announces and the divine grace that Romans 3:21 reveals converge without contradiction: God is just, because the wrath due for sin has been fully discharged; and God is the justifier, because the discharge was accomplished not by the sinner but by the Substitute. Thank the Father for a solution to the problem of universal human guilt that satisfies both the demands of His righteousness and the desires of His love, with neither one overriding the other. Move to the Son, who is the “propitiation” of verse 25, the one whose blood is the mercy seat on which the wrath of God was fully spent so that the grace of God could flow freely to all who believe. The propitiation is the answer to the wrath of Romans 1:18; the one who is propitiated is the Judge who is also the Savior, the One against whom sin is committed who is also the One who bears its consequences. Conclude with the Spirit, whose work of conviction produces in sinners the “closed mouth” of Romans 3:19, the silencing of every self-righteous defense, that is the necessary preparation for the reception of the free gift of verse 24. Thank the Spirit for His convicting work in your own heart and in the hearts of those to whom you minister.

Pray in three directions for the application of this lesson's content. First, for those in your congregation who are living in the condition of Romans 1, suppressing the knowledge of God, exchanging the Creator for creaturely idols, and experiencing the successive giving-overs that the passage describes. Pray not primarily for the restraint of the sin but for the breakthrough of grace that alone can address the root: the Spirit's work of conviction that silences self-justification and produces the desperate reception of the free gift. Second, for those who are living in the condition of Romans 2, the morally serious, the religiously knowledgeable, the theologically sophisticated, who have found in their superiority a substitute for the righteousness of Christ. Pray that the Holy Spirit would do in them what no amount of theological instruction can do by itself: the work of genuine humiliation that strips away every self-righteous defense and leaves the sinner, however morally serious or doctrinally precise, with no word remaining and no resource available but the free grace of the One in whom alone every mouth-stopping verdict is answered. Third, for yourself: that the “all have sinned” of verse 23 would never become merely a doctrinal proposition for you but would always carry the personal weight of a verdict whose implications you felt and whose answer you received with fresh wonder at the beginning of every day.

Close with Romans 1:16–17, the thesis statement of the entire letter, read as a personal declaration of confidence: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith.” The gospel that Romans 1:18–3:23 establishes as the only possible answer to universal human guilt is the same gospel that Paul declares to be the power of God for salvation, not the power of persuasion, not the power of moral argument, not the power of cultural relevance, but the power of God, sufficient for every sinner whom the passage has diagnosed, offered to every sinner whom verse 22 declares to have no distinction, available to all who believe. This is the gospel that Unit 2 of this Hamartiology series has been establishing as necessary. Let the necessity become the occasion for renewed confidence in its power and renewed urgency in its proclamation.

*“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘But the righteous man shall live by faith.’”*

**Romans 1:16–17, NASB 1995**

**Key Texts:** Romans 1:16–32; 2:1–16; 2:17–3:8; 3:9–26; Galatians 3:22; Psalm 14:1–3; 53:1–3; Isaiah 59:7–8; Psalm 19:1–4; 2 Corinthians 5:21

---

***Soli Deo Gloria***

*To God Alone Be the Glory*

---

**FAITHFUL TO THE WORD**

**Dr. Joshua Nichols**

*josh@faithfultotheword.com | faithfultotheword.com*