

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

<b>Series:</b>	<b>Special Messages</b>		Pastor/Teacher
<b>Text:</b>	<b>Romans 3:9-20</b>		Gary L. W. Johnson
<b>Date:</b>	<b>January 28, 2024 (a.m.)</b>		

### ALL HUMANITY IS GUILTY

The Book of Common Prayer is a devotional gem. The General Confession begins with “Almighty and most merciful Father; We have erred and strayed from thy ways, like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders.”<sup>1</sup> The fact that it is called “General” points to the universality of the confession of sin. Commenting upon this, D. R. Davies remarks, “The very title, *General Confession*, is striking and significant. It is not a private or merely sectional confession, true of particular persons or of groups and classes, but of every human being without any exception whatsoever. It is a confession, which applies to the total condition of the adulterer, the thief, the swindler, the criminal of any sort. But it is equally applicable to the philanthropist, to the just, the merciful, to the most devout and exalted saint. It is true of the plumber, the lawyer, the stockbroker, the statesman, the soldier, and the bishop—especially the bishop.”<sup>2</sup> The universal prevalence of sacrifice illustrates it, as Davies points out. “Whatever the differences between ancient religions—and they are very many,” he says, “they were united in their recognition that man had offended his gods and that their anger must be placated.”<sup>3</sup> Further, the fact of guilt is the ever-present theme of the world’s literature, whether in Greek drama or in the work of a Dostoevsky or a Conrad. How true is the beautifully apt remark of Davies, “There is no democracy like the democracy of original sin.”<sup>4</sup> And, if I may be permitted a final citation from the same author, which explains in many ways the current human predicament, listen to this, “The supreme irony of the human situation in every age is that the one thing, and only thing, in which all mankind is concretely at one is sin. And the irrational paradox of it is that it makes any other sort of unity impossible. The unity for which men strive in various ways is always being negated by the unity for which they never need to strive—their unity in sin.”<sup>5</sup> Noted psychiatrist, Karl Menninger’s book, the subject of which got the public’s attention a few decades back, had this intriguing title *Whatever Became of Sin?*<sup>6</sup> In it he argues essentially that, while the word *sin* has almost disappeared from our vocabulary, the sense of guilt remains in our minds and hearts. It is an honest admission and laudable for that reason, although one must not look for a solution to the problem of sin in Menninger’s work. In that respect it is a totally skeptical book, granting its moral earnestness and aims. Nevertheless, it is a testimony to the universality of sin and guilt. As Francis Schaeffer so eloquently put it, “It isn’t just Paul who says that all humans are sinners. Quoting from Psalms 14:1-3 and 53:1-3, he shows that the Old Testament, the Bible of his Jewish readers, says it too. And as we saw earlier, Isaiah says it too: *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way* (Isa. 53:6). The person without the Bible hasn’t kept his own standards perfectly, so he deserves the wrath of God. But those of us who have the Bible, who have had even higher moral standards, haven’t kept our standards either. This is not a theological abstraction, coming from a metaphysical mood. Moral corruption is the result of individual immoral desires. Paul describes a concrete tragedy of sinful desires, not a human state or definition.”<sup>7</sup>

#### I. THE INDICTMENT OF ALL MEN.

- A. *A question* (Rom. 3:9a-b). The apostle asks, “What then? Do we excel?” The ninth verse contains Paul’s indictment of the race, and with these words begins his exposition. In the light of the charge that both Jews and Greek are guilty, it may be concluded that all men are under sin. What does

*under sin* mean? To be under sin means to be under its (1) guilt, (2) power, (3) condemnation, (4) doom. The sense of the text is clear in its major features, but the precise force of the words has been the subject of considerable difference of opinion, due primarily to debate over the force of the verb rendered by “Are we better *than they*” in the KJV and the New American Standard Version. In the light of the context, which has to do with Jewish advantage, this rendering seems accurate. I have given it the same meaning in rendering it by “Do we excel.”<sup>8</sup>

- B. ***The answer*** (Rom. 3:9c). The meaning of the words that follow the verb discussed above bear on the interpretation of the verb. The two words, *ou pantos*, may mean *not altogether* (cf. 1 Cor. 5:10), or *not at all* in other ancient literature. In view of the context, which suggests a limited advantage for the nation Israel, I am inclined to take the words in the sense of *not altogether*. As far as sin is concerned, there is no difference between Jew and Gentile. “Paul insists categorically that the Jews have no advantage over Gentiles. Does this contradict the claim in 3:1 that the Jews possess an advantage? At a superficial level it does, but at another level the verses relate to two different realities. Verses 1-3 affirm the salvation-historical priority of the Jews and the promises made to them will be fulfilled. Verse 9 reminds the Jews in a way reminiscent of Amos 3:2 that these saving promises do not exempt them from responsibility for their sin. Those who sin are accountable to God for their transgression and are deserving of and destined for judgment.”<sup>9</sup>

**NOTE:** Romans 3 makes it clear that sin is pervasive. It infects every faculty – the mind, will, emotions, affections, even the sense of humor. Romans 3:13-17 focuses on sins of the throat, tongue, lips, and mouth. But Paul points out that feet run in the wrong direction, toward bloodshed, ruin, and misery, while the eyes focus on the wrong objects. So evil corrupts every physical and mental faculty. The term for this is *total depravity*. This doctrine does not hold that everyone is corrupt in every way, nor does it deny that unbelievers can act lawfully (Romans 2:14-15, 27). It means that the whole of human nature is fallen, that sin corrupts every faculty, and that our best deeds are tainted by imperfect motives. Wickedness is ordinarily restrained by factors such as social disapproval, fear of punishment, conscience, and the influence of peers. We see the extent of human depravity when these restraints fall off, as they do for violent monarchs who will never face punishment or hear any disapproval. For example, Lavrentiy Beria (1899-1953), Joseph Stalin’s depraved but effective administrator, committed vile deeds because Stalin found him useful and did not care to restrain his wickedness.<sup>10</sup>

## II. THE EVIDENCE FOR THE INDICTMENT.

- A. ***The character of men*** (Rom. 3:10-12). The noose of 1:18—3:8 is now drawn tight. After the accusation comes the demonstration. Critics of evangelical theologians and expositors frequently express outrage at the use of “proof-texts” to support scriptural truths. Every student of any kind of literature, of course, grants that texts taken out of context are an outrageous distortion of an author’s thought and should never be cited in support of ideas that are not found in the writings cited. At the same time, it must be asserted that “proof-texts,” support the statement of verse 9. The cento, or patchwork of passages, may have come from the apostle’s memory, for sometimes it is exact, and sometimes it is not. The collection of citations does not require a great deal of comment, but we must not pass on before calling attention to the two great emphases that are found in it. In the first place, there is a clear testimony here to the universality of sin. All are under its power and condemnation, and the inclusiveness of this judgment is strongly stressed, for over and over again he comments that not even one person is excluded from the indictment (cf. vv. 10-12). The opening part of this section, vv. 10-12, lays a great deal of stress on the character of men. Men are not righteous. Men do not understand and seek after God of themselves. And men do not do good, not a one of them. Isaiah put it this way, “all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (cf. 64:6). Two facts are true of filthy rags. First, they are usually foul-smelling, a dreadful odor arising from them. That is expressive of the opinion of God concerning our human deeds, which do not arise out of faith in the Triune God nor are intended to glorify Him. Second, filthy rags fail to cover the poor beggar’s flesh. And it is thus with the finest human righteousness that a sinner is able to

offer God. It does not cover his iniquity. Speaking of the biblical teaching on sin, Berkouwer says, “It gives voice to a very *general* divine indictment and a truly *universal* testimony in which no man can find a legitimate excuse.”<sup>11</sup>

- B. ***The conduct of men*** (Rom. 3:13-17). A second emphasis in the catena of quotations is upon the intensity of sin; there is a total depravity manifested. All aspects of the life of man are affected by sin, his words, and his work. “Paul wishes to make one other point, namely, the degree of human depravity. This he does by taking different parts of the human body and speaking metaphorically of their powers of evil or corruption. His point is well made, for it shows that the entire psyche has come under the influence of sin. Sinners are not only barren of righteousness and possessed of guilt, but corrupt in nature. The indictment is complete.”<sup>12</sup> Man is a deserted and ruined temple of God. In verses 13-14 the words of men are discussed by Paul (cf. Mark 7:18-23; Exodus 20:7). Cf. Psa. 14:1, 2-3; Jas. 3:1-12. In verses 15-17 their ways are in view, the verses being something of an abridgement of Isaiah 59:7-8a. The verses from Isaiah describe the sins of the Jewish people.
- C. ***The cause of their sin*** (Rom. 3:18). The root of their sin is expressed in the final verse of the section, “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Cranfield calls it “the root of their evil deeds and also of their evil words—in fact, the very essence of their sinfulness. It is by his eyes that a man directs his steps. So to say that there is no fear of God before his eyes is a figurative way of saying that the fear of God has no part in directing his life, that God is left out of his reckoning, that he is a practical, whether or not he is a theoretical, atheist.”<sup>13</sup> Quoting Psalm 36:1, Paul summarizes the chief problem of sinful humanity: “There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Rom. 3:18). Rather than fearing the Lord, which is the beginning of knowledge (Prov. 1:7), and hating evil (Prov. 8:13), humanity proudly stands before its Maker and spews forth curses and sings its own praise as people violently strike one another and lather their hands in the blood of their fellow man.<sup>14</sup>

**III. THE DIVINE VERDICT.** The “now” (Greek *de*) is transitional, and with it Paul moves to the conclusion of the section, the application of the truth of the teaching of the Old Testament regarding the guilt and power of sin to the whole world. The word “law” often refers to the Mosaic Law, of course, but here it may refer to the entire Old Testament. In the light of the fact that the apostle has just cited from the Psalms and Isaiah, this interpretation gains force. The application of the passages however, is surprisingly broad. It involves “all the world.” In the light of the fact the Old Testament was given primarily for the nation of Israel, it seems strange to argue from the guilt of the Jews to the guilt of the whole world. But Barrett is on the right track when he writes, “The Old Testament proves that the Jews, and *a fortiori* all other men, are guilty before God.”<sup>15</sup> It is as if the nation Israel were a sample of the human race and, after testing, has been found wanting. The judgment would implicate the whole from which they have come. Or, to use a common illustration, it is as if one were testing a lake for impurity. It would not be necessary to pass the entire contents of the lake through the testing equipment, due to the essential oneness of the water in the lake. In similar fashion, it is not necessary to test the entire human race by putting all under the Law. Due to the fact that a choice section of the race has been taken as a testable unit and has had the benefit of every conceivable divine blessing, far beyond that of the race as a whole, and has been found guilty, it is only reasonable to conclude that “all the world” have been brought under the judgment of God. The KJV has verse 20 beginning with “Therefore,” but the Greek word *dioti* almost always in the New Testament means because. Thus, the verse is not an inference derived from the preceding, but is the ground of the preceding statement of guilt. Paul is not drawing a conclusion; he is seeking to destroy the last stronghold of the Jew, his Law. Its office is not to save, but to give the knowledge of sin. The Law, when seen in its rightful office as representative of the holiness of God, brings to the enlightened human heart such a sense of sin and guilt that the mouth is stopped and all hope of human righteousness flees. It is here that the life must begin. “You do not begin to be a Christian,” Martyn Lloyd-Jones points out, “until your mouth is shut, is stopped, and you are speechless and have nothing to say. You put up your arguments, and produce

all your righteousness; then the Law speaks and it all withers to nothing—becomes *filthy rags and dung* and you have nothing to say.”<sup>16</sup> As far as the Jew, then, is concerned, “His death warrant is, as it were, written into his own birth certificate.”<sup>17</sup> That which was thought by many to be a means of salvation is really the means of condemnation, and not of the Jew alone, but also of the Gentile.

**CONCLUSION:** “Nothing,” observed David Wells, “offends modern sensibilities quite so much as the biblical notion of sin and the consequences of not believing.”<sup>18</sup> The scope of Paul’s indictment is the whole of humanity. And the way is now prepared for Paul to introduce the saving work of Christ. Perhaps the greatest transition in Holy Scripture is the one from Rom. 3:20 to 3:21. Up to Rom 3:20, Paul labored hard to establish the indictment of the race as both sinful and guilty. Then in Rom 3:21 he inserts with no connectives at all the great redeeming work of Christ. This in turn causes us to reflect on the thesis that the entire indictment is not in focus until Christ and His redemptive work is introduced. “It is then redemption in Christ that leads us to look backwards over the history of the indictment to know specifically what the indictment amounts to.”<sup>19</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Common Prayer* (The Reformed Episcopal Publication Society, 1932), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> D. R. Davies, *Down Peacock’s Feathers: Studies in the Contemporary Significance of the General Confession* (Harper, 1946), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Menninger, *Whatever Became of Sin?* (Hawthorn Books, 1973). Filled with quotable facts, Menninger’s book is, nevertheless, a very disappointing book. Its skepticism is mirrored in its last sentence, a pitiful pliant of the great riddle of sin, when considered without the aid of divine revelation. “Yet, how is it, as Socrates wondered, that *men know what is good but do what is bad?*” (p. 230), a very Pelagian concept.

<sup>7</sup> F. A. Schaeffer, *The Finished Work of Christ: The Truth of Romans 1-8* (Crossway, 1998), p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> The noted German New Testament scholar, Adolf Schlatter, argues convincingly that Paul is underscoring that the Jews actually make themselves all the more obvious. “Paul argued: We Jews are sinners because our knowledge does not turn out to be volition, nor does our teaching become action. Therefore we are not freed from the divine judgment on account of our advantage; rather, because of our advantage we are closely bound to divine judgment. How do we draw the conclusion from our situation that is appropriate and, at the same time, conforms to the truth? Does it push us into fear, despair, and misery? No! *Proechesthai* makes that entirely impossible. Apart from the frequent *proechein*, “to have an advantage in something, stand out, surpass,” the usage of the middle voice is not clear. Pre-umably Paul places *proechesthai* over against *proechein*, similar to *apechesthai* and *apechein*; his emphasis was upon the active part of *proechein*, namely, that we do not merely stand out, but we make ourselves prominent and we do not merely have the seat of priority, but we lay claim and apply ourselves to it. Yet is it truly possible to assume superiority over others? Paul deems it to be altogether im-possible.” *Romans: The Righteousness of God* (rpt. Hendrickson, 1996), p. 82.

<sup>9</sup> T. R. Schreiner, *Romans: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Baker, 1998), p. 163.

<sup>10</sup> D. M. Doriani, *Romans: Reformed Expository Commentary* (P&R, 2021), p. 93.

<sup>11</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies In Dogmatics: Sin* (Eerdmans, 1971), p. 485.

<sup>12</sup> B. Ramm, *Offense To Reason: The Theology of Sin* (Harper & Row, 1985), p. 45.

<sup>13</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans I* (T&T Clark, 1973), p. 195.

<sup>14</sup> J. V. Fesko, *Romans: The Lectio Continues Expository Commentary On The New Testament* (RHB, 2018), p. 75.

<sup>15</sup> Barrett, p. 70.

<sup>16</sup> M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 3:20-4:25: Atonement and Justification* (Eerdmans, 1971), p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Davies, p. 45.

<sup>18</sup> D. F. Wells, *Losing Our Virtue: Why The Church Must Recover Its Moral Vision* (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> Ramm, op. cit.

---