

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
July 10, 2016

Lesson Text: Romans 3:9-20
Lesson Title: Under Sin's Power

Introduction

Mention the word sin at the office or in public, and get ready for mixed reactions. You will likely be labeled a bigot or intolerant if you suggest anyone is doing anything displeasing to God. Even among professing Christians there is a fearful inconsistency about what defines sin and who is guilty of sin. Thankfully, neither the culture or the church has the authority to define sin. Sin is clearly defined in God's Word which is relevant for any people in any day.

In Romans 1:18-3:9, Paul has shown that pagans, Gentiles, and Jews are lost because, even though they had the witness of both nature and conscience, they suppressed God's truth to them. Paul has carefully and systematically removed the mask of religion and the law, giving sinful man nowhere to hide. The self-righteous moralists and the religious legalists attempted to hide behind their Judaism and religion thinking their righteousness would be enough to get them into heaven. Paul made it clear those who sin cannot excuse themselves, or escape the judgment of God.

Now, Paul wraps up his argument using courtroom terminology declaring the whole world under the condemnation of sin. This courtroom scene has man standing silent and guilty before God. It is a perfect indictment of sinful man and the sentence will be "that they are all under sin."

The Case (Romans 3:9)

Verse 9

"What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin;"

The Jews enjoyed certain privileges as the chosen nation of God, but these privileges did not include special treatment at the judgment bar of God. So, Paul asks a rhetorical (*a question asked for effect, no answer expected*), "What then? are we better than they?" Paul is asking, "What has all my words been saying? What is the conclusion to this?" Are any of us better than others?" Are we any better than the immoral pagan man, moral man or Jew? Are we any better?" The answer is "No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin."

“We” refers to the only remaining people Paul has not discussed in his writings, himself and the Romans, which would be representative of the believers. He is simply asking this question, “Are we any better than these other people? Are we any better than the immoral pagan? The moral religious man? The religious Jews who are condemned before God? Are we some kind of elite who are better than everybody else? Are we who are Christians by nature in ourselves any better than the rest of the condemned world?” Again, the answer is “no,” which literally means “in no way.”

“...They are all under sin” is Paul’s charge against “all.” “All” is everyone, the entire world, Jew, Gentile, everyone. There is no one outside the realm of guilt when it comes to sin. Notice Paul does not say all have sinned but all are “under sin.” This means they are all “under” the penalty as well as the power of sin. Before sinful man is saved, he is under the command, control, dominion, authority of sin and Satan. The charge is “all men are under sin.” Everybody in the human race is brought into the courtroom and arraigned for being under the dominion, the power, and the control of sin.

The Indictments (Romans 3:10-18)

Verses 10-11

“As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.”

An “indictment” is “a written statement charging a party with the commission of a crime or other offense, drawn up by a prosecuting attorney and presented in court as evidence. It is a formal written charge.” The more serious the crime, the more counts to the indictment. Paul presents no less than fourteen counts to this indictment, the total depravity of the entire world.

Paul begins his indictment with the words “it is written.” The Greek word for “written” is *grapho* {graf-o}, meaning “to write or engrave with pen.” Paul is not getting his indictment out of the newspaper, off the internet, or what he has seen and heard about people on social media. He is getting his indictment from the Word of God (Psalm 14:1-3; 119:89).

Count 1- “there is none righteous, no not one.” The bad news is men and women lack the righteousness necessary to live with God in His heavenly home. “None” means “not even you.” “Righteous” means “right or innocent.” There is no one in this world that is as good as God or Jesus Christ. There is no one in this world innocent of sin. Therefore, everyone stands guilty. It is settled!

Count 2- “there is none that understandeth” (Psalm 53:2). “Understandeth” is the Greek word *sunimi* {soon-ee-ay-mee} meaning “to set or bring together.” It

carries the idea of putting the pieces of a puzzle together, quick comprehension.” This lack of “understanding” is referring to spiritual understanding, not mental. The world is totally lacking in spiritual discernment (Ephesians 4:17-18). The natural man is incapable of spiritual understanding (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Count 3- “there is none that seeketh after God” (Psalm 53:2-3). People by nature are sinful and want nothing to do with God. It is only when sinners are drawn by God to Himself that they seek the Lord Jesus Christ in repentance and confession (John 6:44).

Note: Some may argue the world’s false religions are sinful man’s attempts to seek after God. Actually, false religion is man’s attempt to escape the true and living God (Philippians 2:21).

Verse 12

“They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.”

Count 4- “they are all gone out of the way” (Psalm 53:4). “Gone out of the way” is a reference to a camel caravan crossing the desert that has strayed from the route and cannot return to the proper path. Likewise, human beings have “lost their way” by deviating from God’s prescribed route of righteousness.

Count 5- “they are together become unprofitable.” “Unprofitable” means “useless.” The word “unprofitable” is used to describe “soured milk.” People are not useful, of no benefit without Christ (Titus 1:16). Of course, this does not mean that human beings are useless in this world. It means men and women can do nothing useful to contribute to their salvation. Certainly sinful man can do good and productive things as far as society is concerned. Doing something to merit or count toward righteousness is not possible (Ephesians 2:8).

Count 6- “there is none that doeth good, no, not one.” Again, it does not mean sinful man cannot be of benefit to society; it means no one can do anything of spiritual or eternal value. As far as righteousness is concerned, it is no good (Isaiah 64:6).

Verse 13

“Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips:”

Count 7- “Their throat is an open sepulcher.” This seventh count of the indictment is the first one that is specific. Paul addresses the main ways

through which man displays his sin. Nothing is more abominable than the stench and corruption rising from an open burial vault. The apostle graphically portrays the conversation of the wicked by comparing the filth that arises from their mouths with the smell of an open grave. Have you watched any reality television lately dealing with moral issues? Have you read the lips of any of your favorite coaches or ball players lately? It is evidence of man's sinfulness and depravity!

Count 8- "With their tongues they have used deceit." Sinful man reveals his depravity through speech. The deceitful "tongue" is characteristic of sinful people (Psalm 5:9). "Deceit," means "to lure as by baiting a hook." This truth is seen in the first speech development of children. If you are a parent or a school teacher you know children do not have to be taught to lie or say no. It is amazing! They inherently know how to do it. So even as parents we are confronted with the reality of deception in our children.

Children grow up and continue to express sinfulness in speech. As adults, the "deceitful tongue" is heard every day in every walk of life. Even in simple advertising the evidence of humankind's depravity and unrighteousness is seen.

Count 9- "The poison of asps is under their lips." The poison of the asp is stored in a bag under its "lips" (Psalm 140:3). The natural man's human speech is likened to this deadly poison. Who would have ever believed the glorious words of praise that flowed from the lips of King David were the same lips that said, "*Set ye Uriah in the forefront of the hottest battle, and retire ye from him, that he might be smitten, and die*" (2 Samuel 11:15).

Verse 14

"Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness:"

Count 10- "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness" (Psalm 10:7). This part of the indictment indicates man's mouth, which was created to speak the truth of God and praise Him continually, has been perverted to speaking the lies of Satan through "cursing and bitterness."

"Cursing" refers to wanting the worst for someone and publicly expressing that desire with unbiblical language. "Bitterness" is the open and public expression of hostility against one's enemy (Psalm 64:3-4). The key word here is "full." The "cursing" and "bitterness" characterize the lives of sinners before they come to Christ for salvation.

Verse 15

"Their feet are swift to shed blood:"

Count 11- “Their feet are swift to shed blood.” Quoting from Isaiah 59:7-8, the feet which were created to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth have in every period of history been used to carry people to commit violent injustice against their fellow humans (Proverbs 1:8-19). What a picture this is of the spirit of our day where sinful men and women are “swift” to run to war and battle but slow to seek salvation and peace.

Paul is not only speaking to the lost world in these indictments, he is speaking to everyone in general. Paul is not saying everyone literally commits murder. What he is saying is our hearts manifest a disinterest in real peace and reconciliation because of our sinfulness. Think about this. There are many of us who have serious breakdowns in relationships with other people, and we are a major contributor to the breakdown of the relationship. In some of those broken relationships we have just stopped trying. The apostle Paul is saying when it happens, you are seeing an indication of what the heart is capable of due to your sinfulness.

Verse 16

“Destruction and misery are in their ways:”

Count 12- “Destruction and misery are in their ways.” This charge speaks not only of what people are seeking but also what they shall receive if they continue in their unrighteous path. The sinners empty and futile search for happiness apart from Jesus Christ and God’s Word leads to “destruction and misery.”

“Destruction” means “to break in pieces.” It speaks of calamity and ruin. It is a vivid picture of what happens to everything sinful man touches. “Misery” means “the resulting harm” which comes as a result of sinful man’s actions against his fellow man. Look back over history and you will see “destruction and misery.” Wherever sinful man goes, ruin is sure to follow. Build a beautiful city or a brand new housing project and return a few decades later then you can see firsthand what sinful man does.

Verse 17

“And the way of peace have they not known:”

Count 13- “And the way of peace have they not known.” The word “peace” here is referring to sinful man’s inclination to live away from quietness and tranquility. Lost men and women can never find “peace” with others until they have made peace with God. The world is filled with animosity, hatred, terrorists and murderers (Isaiah 59:8).

Verse 18

“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Count 14- “There is no fear of God before their eyes” is the fourteenth and final indictment by Paul. Quoted from Psalm 36:1, this final charge is the fountain from which all the others spring. Since “*The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge*” (Proverbs 1:7) and sinners have no spiritual wisdom, they are caught in a vicious cycle. Only the power of the Holy Spirit can break that cycle of sin.

We live in a society where people go about their daily routines with absolutely “no fear of God.” In other words, man is the center of everything, not God. When there is “no fear of God” mental confusion and moral and spiritual darkness increase.

The Verdict (Romans 3:19-20)

Verse 19-20

“Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.”

Paul anticipated the line of argument the Jews will use in their defense. He knew the Jews would say that the indictments did not describe them, but the Gentiles. So Paul makes it clear “that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.”

When Paul says, “what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law,” he is speaking of those to whom the “law” has been primarily addressed. Paul is using the term “law” in this context to refer to the Scriptures, the whole of the Old Testament. “Them” are those who are in the sphere of the law’s hearing, the law’s reading, and the law’s judgment. Paul is thinking of the Jewish people, because in their minds, they are not under condemnation, only the lawless Gentiles.

Paul’s point is when the “law” speaks, it speaks to those who are the audience. Therefore, far from being exempt from the “law,” the Jewish people stand in a greater situation of condemnation, because they have plainly rejected what God has said to them in the “law.” As the Jews listen to Paul quote the Scriptures, they conclude those pagan Gentiles deserve condemnation. But Paul is saying, “Think about the fact God primarily wrote these words to you.” He wrote them to his people. The Jewish people heard God Himself give the word and they had seen Moses bring the tablets down from the mountain. They had heard

the Old Testament prophets issue warning after warning. So Paul is saying, "Do not worry about the Gentiles. Worry about yourselves!"

Ordinarily in a court the time of the defense is usually given to discrediting of witness, challenging the evidence and so on. But, this will not be the case before God. "Every mouth may be stopped" means "there will be no defense." A silent world stands guilty with nothing to say. No man will utter a word in his defense, for no one will have a defense before the righteous God.

The verdict is inevitable. "All the world may become guilty before God" means "to come under judgment." It means man is responsible for his crime and worthy of blame. "There shall no flesh be justified in his sight..." means the law cannot save you, the law cannot acquit you; the law cannot make you righteous in the sight of God. Case closed!

Paul concludes there is no law anywhere in the world that can justify any person. The law of the Gentiles, the law of nature, the law of morality, the law of conscience, the Law of Moses, none can justify a person or make him righteous in the sight of God. Even the law of Christ given in the Sermon on the Mount, cannot justify anyone alone.

If Paul's indictment and verdict was not enough to irritate the Jewish people, his words, "For by the law is the knowledge of sin" would have greatly stirred up anger in a self-righteous Jew. The Jew believed the "law" or Scriptures enlightened one to the greatness of Jehovah God. A self-righteous Jew would have responded, "What do you mean the Scriptures reveal our sin?" Paul would answer, "Far from making us right with God, the law shows us our fallen condition and how desperately we need the grace of God."

Conclusion

By nature, sinners deny their sinfulness and need of grace. The Word of God, like a mirror, stands in front of us to reveal who we really are and what we really need. An honest look into God's Word reveals all are under sin's power.

Every man, woman, boy, and girl born of Adam into this world are under sin's power. God gave the "law" to reveal our sinfulness, define sin, and convict sinners. But it cannot deliver from sin. Only the grace of God can do that. If you see yourself a sinner in need of the righteousness of God, call upon the Lord and ask Him for His saving grace. He can and will save your soul!

Amen.