

Help for the Helpless  
Romans 3:9-30

As the world falls apart around us, it is becoming more and more difficult to deny the desperate nature of human sin. From drug-addled thieves and vandals in our biggest cities to violent terrorists hiding behind human shields in Gaza, those who refuse to live according to God's law of love are revealing their true colors, exposing the brutal, vicious reality that lies within those who are living only for themselves, their own pleasures, their own fanatical dreams. Yes, it is increasingly easy to see the terrible consequences of trying to live apart from the One True God.

But can Paul really be serious when he says that there is none who is righteous? Is it really true that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God? What about us nice, respectable, Presbyterians? Surely, he can't be talking about us!

Well, let's think again about what sin actually is. After all, you can look at sin in one of two ways. One way is legal: for all sin involves breaking God's Law in one way or another. We sin either by doing things God has told us not to do, or by leaving undone things God has told us to do.

So, can anyone here claim that he or she has perfectly kept God's law all our lives? Let's think especially about how King Jesus explained the law to us. He said, for example, that we are to love all our neighbors, even our enemies, just as much and in the same way that we love ourselves. So, given all our disagreements and misunderstandings, given the way we cling to old grudges and refuse to reach out to those we have hurt, have any of us even come close to such a high standard?

But why is such law-breaking such a big deal? Well, let's think about Who God is: the sovereign King and Creator of the whole world. That means that whenever we break His law we are actually rebelling against His glorious majesty.

Now, we all know that those who break human laws have to be removed from the society whose morals they have spurned: either by going to prison or, in the most extreme cases, by being put to death. But since God is the King of the whole world, the only way we can be expelled from His realm is to be removed from the world He has made: and that means we have to die. That's why all sin deserves the death penalty.

And that really does make sense, if you think about it: for if traitors against merely human kingdoms deserve to be executed, how much more should traitors against our heavenly king deserve to die? No, the more we know about God's law, the less room any of us has to insist on our innocence, much less deny that we deserve the worst sort of punishment for our rebellion.

But if we can understand our sin problem in this sort of legal way, we can also see it in commercial terms, as a debt we owe to God that we cannot pay. After all, because God created all of us for His own glory, we all owe Him all our love and obedience. In fact, King Jesus said we are to love God with all we are and all we have, even more than we love our family and friends. But in living for ourselves and in focusing on our own interests and desires, we have not paid that debt. We have not given God the exclusive devotion He deserves: instead we have cheated Him. We are holding out on Him.

And so we can see, if we are really honest with ourselves, that what Paul says in verse 23 absolutely applies to us. We are all guilty, deserving God's wrath and curse. We are all debtors, owing

God a holy life that we cannot live. We all have a terrible sin problem, a problem none of us can do anything about.

And that means that we are, in a sense, very much like infants. When an infant is wet, he can't put on dry clothes. When he is hungry, he can't feed himself. If he had to defend himself, he couldn't. He's completely helpless in the face of his problems, just as we are helpless in the face of our sins.

So, how can what Paul says in verses 21 and 22 possibly be good news for us? How can we rejoice that Christ has revealed the righteousness of God? After all, a guilty criminal doesn't want the judge to be righteous and to do justice; no, he wants the judge to be lenient and show him some mercy. Just so, we've already seen that if God were to do the righteous thing with us sinners, we would all be condemned. So, how could God's righteousness possibly be good news for anyone?

Verse 25 gives us the answer, when it tells us that God displayed Jesus as a propitiation in His blood for us. For you see, a propitiation is a sacrifice which satisfies God's justice. Yes, the bad news is that we all deserve the death penalty, but the good news is that Jesus Himself is the propitiation, the substitute that pays that penalty for us. This is what John the Baptist meant when he said that Jesus is the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world. Just like one of those sacrificial animals in Old Testament times, Jesus died in our place, taking our punishment upon Himself.

But, remember, there are two ways to look at our sin problem: we have broken God's law, but we have also failed to pay God the love and obedience that we owe to Him. Well, Jesus solves that problem for us too. For verse 24 says that we also have redemption in Jesus Christ.

Okay, so what does that mean? Well, if propitiation is a judicial word, meaning that Christ takes upon Himself the death penalty we all deserve, redemption is a commercial word meaning that Christ buys something on our behalf.

So, what does Jesus buy? Well, in a very real sense, He purchases us. For from the time we were born, all of us have been captured by sin and are its helpless slaves. Well, at the cost of His own blood, Jesus is the One Who comes to the slave market and buys us and sets us free: free from bondage to sin and death and thus free to love and serve God and one another. But at the same time, Jesus makes another payment: not to sin but to God. For Jesus is the One Who fulfills the Law on our behalf, living the life of perfect obedience that we cannot live, and thus paying to God the debt of love and service we can never hope to pay.

And so once again we see an apt comparison with a little infant. For the fact is that Jesus Christ does everything for helpless sinners like us, just like parents do everything for their babies. Parents make sure that their helpless babies are safe and warm and dry and well-fed. In a very real sense, good parents thus model for their children what it means to experience the redeeming grace and love of God.

But even the best parents can't take care of all the children in the world. Instead, their own children, whether born or adopted, receive all these blessings because of their special family relationship. Yes, parents naturally reserve their greatest blessings, the lion's portion of their limited time and resources, for their own children. And so we might reasonably ask, "So, what does it take for me to become part of God's family? Who exactly are the ones whom Christ has redeemed, the ones for whom Christ has paid the death penalty?"

Well, Paul gives us the answer over and over again in this passage, an answer which would have been quite a surprise to most of his original readers. After all, the Jews of Paul's day had come to believe they had to keep all of God's Law in order to be righteous in God's sight. And the Gentile

polytheists of Paul's day had come to a similar understanding: they thought they had to perform all sorts of strange rituals, worshipping all sorts of false gods in order to be safe from harm and to receive worldly prosperity.

And Paul's answer continues to surprise many people who are alive today. For aren't we all tempted to feel better about ourselves because of the good things that we do: making contributions to the Church, performing acts of service, or even being baptized or taking the Lord's Supper? Yes, most people throughout the history of the world have lived with the burden of thinking that we have to do something to save ourselves from sin, something that we have seen is just as impossible as an infant trying to care for itself.

But verse 22 speaks the simple, if shocking truth: the righteousness of God is given by faith, given to all who believe in Christ, given to all who trust in Christ. Verse 25 says that we gain access to the propitiation Christ offers to us through faith in his blood, simply by trusting in His perfect sacrifice for us. Verse 28 clearly says that a man is justified, declared righteous in the sight of God by faith in Christ alone, completely apart from any good works he might do.

Yes, that's what Paul is saying. We are not saved by our hard work or our good intentions. We are not saved by being nice people and going to church and putting offerings in the plate. We are saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. That's why verse 27 says there is no room for anyone to boast or feel good about himself, just as it doesn't make sense for an infant to be proud of his warm crib or his full stomach or his dry diaper. He didn't earn any of those things, and he couldn't get any of those things for himself if he tried. No, the proper response to an undeserved, unearned free gift is not pride; it is instead humble gratitude.

But we can also be thankful that God's free grace is not restricted to those who happen to be the biological descendants of Abraham. Instead, verses 29 and 30 make it clear that God's grace is available to everyone in the world who trusts in Christ, whether Jew or Gentile. Moreover, verse 25 reminds us that salvation has always come through this kind of faith. It reminds us that the complete, final sacrifice provided in Christ is the reason that God passed over the sins of all the generations who preceded Jesus. For on this side of the cross we can see that Jesus was the One perfect sacrifice to Whom all the animal sacrifices of the Law of Moses were pointing.

So, what's the solution to the problem of helplessly sinful human beings living in a world created by a perfectly holy and righteous God? Verse 26 summarizes the good news: the answer is faith alone in Christ alone. Yes, God is just, and that means that God must always do justice. And so the only way He can justify, or declare sinful human beings like us to be innocent and blameless in His sight is for Christ to take our punishment. The only way God can declare human beings to be righteous, fulfilling all the demands of His law, is for Christ to pay on our behalf the debt of love and obedience that we owe to our Creator. And verse 26 makes it clear that the work of Christ is only applied to the one who believes in, the one who has faith in Jesus.

But Paul wasn't the only person who taught all of this. After all, didn't we read the same thing from John's gospel as well? For what did John say? "Whoever would do good works will not perish?" Nope. "Whoever tries as hard as he can will not perish?" Nope. "Whoever tries to be socially acceptable and nice to everyone will not perish?" Nope. It's "whosoever believeth in Him," whoever trusts in Jesus: those are the ones who will not perish. It's those who trust in Jesus who are blessed with the free, unmerited, gracious gift of eternal life.

So what does it mean to trust Jesus, to have saving faith in Christ? Think again about our example of a little baby. When he's hungry or tired or wet, he knows that mama or daddy will solve that problem for him. He knows them and he trusts them, and his trust is not disappointed. That's what faith means: it's that sort of supreme confidence in God, that sort of assurance that He will care for us no matter what happens.

And so that is the best news of all. If we are trusting Jesus Christ to save us, we can be assured that He will do just that. For when we look at the cross, the blood He shed for us, how can we doubt His love? When we remember the empty tomb, the way He broke the bonds that sin and death have laid on us, how can we doubt His power? When we think of the tremendous price He paid for us, laying down His own life so that we might live with Him forever, how can we doubt His grace? And given His love, His power, and His grace, how could we ever imagine that He would turn away anyone who comes to him in faith, regardless of how helpless we are?