

## Are Good Works Good Enough?

Rev. Brian Bill

August 10-11, 2019

Last month in Virginia I had the opportunity to run a 10K race with our daughter Lydia on a hot and humid day. While I've labored through the Bix course twice I had never run an official 10K. Pip also participated, though he was pushed in the stroller by Lydia.

I did OK for the first mile or two but began to struggle as the sun rose higher in the sky. It was so hot my fingernails were sweating. Whenever I slowed down, Lydia would let off the gas and encourage me to keep going.

When we finished, I found out I had won my age division! When they called out my name I went up to the award stand and received my medal [hold up]. After taking a few bows I strutted back through the crowd. I thought to myself, *"I'm pretty good and getting better with age."*

The question we're addressing this weekend is, *"Are good works good enough?"* As we saw in the video, many people believe good people will go to heaven. I had a conversation just this week with someone who insisted being good is good enough.

According to a Pew Research Center study, roughly seven-in-ten (72%) Americans believe in heaven as a place *"where people who have led good lives are eternally rewarded."* Another recent poll discovered for every American who believes they are so bad they are going to Hell, there are 120 others who believe they're good enough to go to Heaven.

There are some problems with that view: *How do you know when you've done enough? How good do you have to be? What standard do we measure ourselves against?*

Grab your Bibles and turn to Romans 3:9-20. We will see good works are not good enough because we must deal with our depravity if we ever hope to be delivered. The gospel will only be good news when we first understand the bad news. Mercy only makes sense when we commiserate about our misery. Grace is amazing only to those who are annihilated by guilt.

Let's put this text in context by summarizing the sections that precede it.

- The whole world is under God's wrath (1:1-18)
- Gentiles are guilty (1:18-32)
- Moralists are guilty (2:1-16)
- Jews are guilty (2:17-29)
- No excuses will be accepted (3:1-8)

Let's read this together.

*What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes." Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.*

The Apostle Paul is fond of using diatribes in Romans, where he asks and answers questions. In our culture, we might refer to them as FAQ's, or Frequently Asked Questions. This section begins with two simple questions, which are quickly answered. Then, utilizing a string of Scripture expertly woven together, we'll see how sinful we really are. Interestingly, Paul does not begin with an introduction, but with his conclusion.

### **The Conclusion (3:9)**

In verse 9 Paul restates the basic charge he made in the opening chapters: ***"What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin."*** When it comes to sin, no one has a pass. Whether Jewish or Gentile, moral or immoral, religious or irreligious, including anyone who cheers for the Vikings or the Bears...all people (including Packer fans) are under sin. No group is guiltier than another and no individual is

exempt. We've all blown it and we're all busted. I'm a sinner...and so are you. I like what that famous theologian Pogo once said, "*We have met the enemy and he is us.*"

Paul is making the "**charge**" which is a legal term used to describe someone who was indicted for a certain offense. The phrase "**under sin**" is a military term meaning, "*under the authority of someone.*" The idea is similar to Galatians 3:10: "**For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse...**" We are first introduced to the controlling nature of sin when it is personified as a master in Genesis 4:7: "**Sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it.**" Jesus adds in John 8:34: "**Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.**" Paul uses the word "sin" approximately 48 times in Romans, not in the plural to denote sinful acts, but in the singular to refer to the human condition. We sin because we *are* sinners.

After stating his conclusion, Paul presents a 13-count indictment, which covers our condition, conversation, conduct, and complacency.

### **Our Condition (3:10-12)**

Earlier in Romans, Paul appealed to creation and our conscience and now he drives home the conviction, which comes from Scripture itself. Notice the phrase in verse 10: "**As it is written...**" This is a common expression in the Book of Romans, stated on 16 different occasions. It's in the present tense, meaning the Bible still speaks, right now, into our situation. It's not a dead book, but rather is "**living and active**" as Hebrews 4:12 says. Paul is not speaking from his own authority but from the authority of the Word of God.

Most of the passages Paul quotes are from the Book of Psalms, with one from Isaiah and one from Ecclesiastes. Before we consider our condition, notice the words "**none,**" "**not one,**" "**no one,**" "**all,**" "**not even one**" in these two verses. Let's read them together: "**None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.**"

- **None is righteous.** God judges according to His own perfection and compared to His holiness we are not even close to His righteousness. *We're not all equally sinful but all of us are equally sinners.*

- **No one understands.** Apart from God’s enablement, no one can fully understand Him. 1 Corinthians 2:14: ***“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”***
- **No one seeks for God.** To **“seek”** means to **“search with determination.”** While it may appear some are actually seeking after God, on our own, the Bible says we are actually running *from* God.
- **All have turned aside.** This phrase was used to describe a soldier who deserted his post. When God looked at His people in Exodus 32:8, He declared: ***“They have turned aside quickly out of the way that I commanded them...”*** We have a bias toward disobedience and want to do things our own way as Isaiah 53:6 says: ***“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way...”***
- **Together they have become worthless.** The word **“worthless”** was used to describe something rancid like sour milk. One year when I took our daughters fishing, I left the night crawlers out in the sun a little too long and they became slimy and smelly. When I opened the cover the next morning I almost passed out. In a similar way God is grossed out by our rancid unrighteousness.
- **No one does good.** Wanting to make sure we get the point, Paul repeats the refrain that not even one person does good. Ecclesiastes 7:20: ***“Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins.”***

### **Our Conversation (3:13-14)**

After describing our condition, Paul turns next to our conversation in verses 13-14: ***“Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”*** Paul traces how depravity has infected our anatomy:

- **Throats.** One paraphrase captures it this way: ***“Their talk is foul and filthy like the stench of an open grave.”*** Using a very graphic word picture, the throat is to the heart what an open grave is to the corpse within it. The phrase **“open grave”** literally means a yawning grave. BTW, this means we should be careful when yawning so people don’t see down our throats into our decaying hearts.
- **Tongues.** The tongue is used to **“deceive.”** Have you noticed you don’t have to teach a child how to lie? It just comes naturally.

- **Lips.** The poison of an asp, or viper, is very destructive. Similar to rattlesnakes an asp has a sac full of venom in its throat that is unleashed through hollow fangs when provoked. Our lips can unleash venomous verbiage, which ends up poisoning the people around us.
- **Mouths.** Before I was saved I had a very foul mouth, out of which came both cursing and bitterness. The word “*cursing*” carries the idea of desiring the worst for a person by open criticism and public defamation. “*Bitterness*” describes outbursts of emotional hostility toward someone. Out of the bitterness of the heart flows the cursing of the mouth.

### **Our Conduct (3:15-17)**

Because of our depraved condition, our conversations are filled with decaying and depraved words. But it doesn't stop there because by nature we also end up doing destructive deeds. Look at verses 15-16: “*Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery.*” Our world history is filled with mass extermination, wars, and out-of-control crime.

We are a very violent society as evidenced by all the recent mass shootings and now a knife attack in California. While I'm no expert on all the contributing causes, I would submit the core of the condition is the human heart. The sin in one's heart often works its way out through one's hands and feet, resulting in the shedding of blood.

The ultimate answer is the gospel of Jesus Christ because only Jesus can transform a human heart, turning it from hatred to love. There was a visual display of this at the end of the Celebrate Recovery Anniversary event at Schwiebert Park last Saturday when a number of people displayed “before” and “after” testimonies while these song lyrics rang out: “*There ain't no grave that's gonna hold my body down!*” BTW, you can still add names of people you're praying to follow Christ on the wall in the worship center this weekend – there are now more than 1800 names (thanks to Sheila Mills for counting them!).

Sin has permeated everything, from our head to our hands and feet. Verse 17 ends by stating most of us are peace-breakers instead of peacemakers: “*and the way of peace they have not known.*”

## Our Complacency (3:18)

Why is our condition so messed up? Why are our conversations filled with decay and death? Why is our conduct so violent? The answer is found in verse 18 where we read of yet one more body part tainted by sin: ***“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”*** We have become complacent towards God. We take our sin too lightly because we take God too lightly. This could be paraphrased: *“They care nothing about God or what He thinks about them.”*

In his book called “The Discipline of Grace,” Jerry Bridges writes: *“When we sin we are in effect treating God and His Word with disdain or contempt.”* We could say it this way: *Every sin has its roots in our rejection of God and our refusal to revere Him.*

I’m convinced the best way to experience victory over sin in our lives is to cultivate a healthy fear of God. After the giving of the 10 Commandments, the people became afraid of the quaking mountain, the thunder and the lightning. Moses tried to settle their nerves by telling them they didn’t have to be afraid, but they did need to fear God. Listen to Exodus 20:20: ***“Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of Him may be before you, that you may not sin.”***

The early church learned about this after Ananias and Sapphira lost their lives because of lying to the Holy Spirit in Acts 5:11: ***“Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events.”*** Acts 9:31: ***“So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.”*** BTW, our next series will be called, “On Mission: A Journey Through the Book of Acts.”

Sin has infected and affected our condition, our conversation, our conduct, and our complacency. *We are totally depraved, not just deprived.*

## Our Condemnation (3:19-20)

After spelling out this multiple-count indictment, Paul makes his closing argument in verses 19-20 to show we are all condemned: ***“Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of***

*the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”*

- **We will be silenced before God.** As we come face-to-face with the mirror of God’s Word and see how repugnant our rebellion is, we will be silenced before Him. This word literally means, *“To stop muttering.”* There is nothing we can say and no excuse we can make up. Psalm 107:42: *“...all the wicked shut their mouths.”* Salvation comes only to those who are silenced by their sinfulness. Until you and I stop complaining, blaming and making excuses, we cannot be saved.
- **We are accountable to the Almighty.** This is a legal term, which means we are liable before the Lord. We are guilty as charged. Everyone will appear before the Almighty and give an account of their lives. Are you ready for judgment day?
- **The Law helps us see we are lawbreakers.** J.B. Philips renders verse 21 this way: *“It is the straightedge of the law that shows us how crooked we are.”* Contrary to popular belief, the keeping of God’s Law is ultimately impossible because it was given to expose sin and lead people to the Savior.

Martin Luther made a really strong statement in this regard: *“The most damnable and pernicious heresy that has ever plagued the mind of man is the idea that somehow he could make himself good enough to deserve to live with an all-holy God.”* Another Bible teacher was fond of saying, *“Man is incurably addicted to doing something for his own salvation.”*

Here’s a summary of our situation:

1. **All of us have sinned.** Romans 3:23: *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*
2. **Our good deeds are gross to God.** Isaiah 64:6: *“We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.”*
3. **We’re separated from God.** Isaiah 59:2: *“But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.”*
4. **We deserve death.** Romans 6:23: *“For the wages of sin is death...”*

Let me go back to the 10K race and fill in an important detail. The reason I won my age division was not because of my gazelle-like speed, it was actually because I was the only one in my division that day! Instead of strutting after receiving my award I actually slithered away from the award stand out of embarrassment. I had been declared the winner by default. That's why I keep this award in my sock drawer.

When it comes to the race of life, a lot of people think everything will somehow work out, that they'll get a participation prize and be ushered into Heaven. Let's be clear. Our default destination is not Heaven; our default is Hell.

Let me stretch the analogy. How would I have done had this not been a 10K but a 10,000K race and the only way to medal would be to finish in under 10 minutes? It wouldn't matter how good a runner I was because the distance and time required to get there would be impossible and insurmountable.

That's a picture of how absurd it is to think we're good enough to get to Heaven on our own! We need help, don't we?

Here's the gospel message in three simple sentences:

- **What God demands, we don't have.** Matthew 5:48: ***"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."***
- **What we don't have, Jesus has provided as a gift.** Some of us are hoping that God grades on a scale. Actually, He grades on the Savior. Ephesians 2:8-9: ***"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."***
- **What Jesus has provided, we must receive by faith.** Romans 10:9-10: ***"Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved."***

*We're not saved by our good works but by Jesus' great work! Salvation is not based on our goodness but on Jesus' goodness. When Jesus died on the cross, He*

took upon Himself the Hell we deserve so we could experience the Heaven we don't deserve.

Our only hope is to put our faith and trust in Christ who completed the course in record time. He is the only sinless Son of God who died as our substitute on the Cross. When we place our faith and trust in Him by repenting and receiving Him into our life, His time is credited to our account and we are rewarded with righteousness, not because of the good works we have done but because of the great work He has done!

Every other religion is all about what we must "Do." Christianity is about what has been "Done" for us. Our condition, conversation, conduct and complacency have all been covered by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The race of redemption has been run. The debt has been paid. It's time to stop trying and start trusting. Instead of working for the gift, it's time to receive it.

### **Invitation**

*"Lord Jesus, I'm silenced by my sinfulness. I admit I've blown it big time and my sins are repugnant to You. I confess I have not feared You. I repent and turn to You right now. I believe You died the death I deserved and You were raised on the third day. I receive Your perfect score and ask You to come into my life. Make me into the person You want me to be. In the name of Jesus, I pray. Amen."*

### **Communion Setup**

Adrian Rogers often said, *"We ought to be living as if Jesus died yesterday, rose this morning, and is coming back this afternoon."*

One way we're brought back to this reality is through the celebration of communion as we're reminded of the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the second coming of Jesus Christ.

We see four "Communion Correctives" in 1 Corinthians 11– I've mentioned these before but they bear repeating.

**1. To Remember – "Look Back"** (23-25). Paul received these instructions from Jesus Himself: *"I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had*

*given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’”* Twice in this passage we’re told to remember what Jesus did for us.

**2. To Rejoice – “Look Forward” (26).** *“For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.”* We’re to look back and remember the cross and also look forward to the crown.

To “proclaim” means, “to announce publicly, to declare, publish, and perpetuate.” The bread and the cup tell the story of redemption and look ahead to the culmination of history. We eat and drink now in anticipation of a glorious banquet to come.

A couple months ago, Duane Rosener, an Edgewood member, suggested we focus on some celebratory truths as we reflect on what Christ has done for us on the cross. During communion we’re called to reflect with reverence but it’s also a time to rejoice at the results of the death and resurrection of Christ. If you are saved, here are some things that are true about you. In Christ...

1. I am a saint (Eph. 1:1)
2. I have been given every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3)
3. I am holy and blameless (Eph. 1:4)
4. I am redeemed through His blood, and my sins are forgiven (Eph. 1:7)
5. I am sealed with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13)
6. I am seated with Him in Heaven (Eph. 2:6)
7. I am His workmanship (Eph. 2:20)
8. I am righteous and holy (Eph. 4:22-24)
9. I am dead to sin and alive to God (Rom. 6:11)
10. I am not condemned (Rom. 8:1)
11. I am a co-heir with Christ (Rom. 8:17)
12. I am never separated from the love of God (Rom. 8:34)
13. I am sanctified (1 Cor. 1:2)
14. I am given God’s grace (1 Cor. 1:4)
15. I am given wisdom from God (1 Cor. 1:30)
16. I am united with Christ (1 Cor. 6:17; Eph. 2:6,13)
17. I am a temple (1 Cor. 6:19)
18. I am a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17)

19. I am Christ's ambassador (2 Cor. 5:20)
20. I am free (Gal. 2:4)
21. I am right with God (Gal. 2:16)
22. I am justified by faith (Gal. 2:16; Rom. 5:1-5)
23. I am a child of God (Gal. 3:26)
24. I am joyful (Phil. 1:26)
25. I am a citizen of Heaven (Phil. 3:20)
26. I am given the promise of life (Rom. 5:10)
27. I am saved (2 Tim. 2:10)
28. I am going to suffer persecution (2 Tim. 3:12)
29. I am an overcomer (1 John 4:4)
30. I am valuable (Luke 12:24)
31. I am salt and light (Mat. 5:13-14)

**3. To Repent – “Look Within” (27-28).** *“Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.”* Once we remember by looking back, and rejoice by looking forward, we can't help but look inside and see our need to repent. We're cautioned about approaching the Lord's Table in a trite manner.

**4. To Reconcile – “Look Around” (28-29, 33-34).** *“Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself...so then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another -- if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment.”* Before taking communion, be sure you're living in union with those you're in community with because communion is communal.

Sometimes when we distribute the elements, we do so without any music. Other times we have a song to help us focus on what Christ has done. Today we'll have a time of silence and then we'll move into an acoustical arrangement of *Christ the Solid Rock*.

## **Distribution of Elements**

## **Closing Prayer**