

“Religion--What’s it Good For?” // Romans 3:1–20 // Romans #6

Romans 3/ Journal page #28

In Romans, Paul lays **out his case for ‘why the gospel’**. He starts in Romans 1 by showing that all of mankind has a problem—a deep inner rebellion that corrupts every one of our relationships.

And so, in **chapter 2** he anticipates an objection. Religious people, particularly religious Jews, are going to say, *“Yeah, those Gentiles (pagans) are some messed up people, but not us. We’ve got the Word of God, the heroes of the faith, the Temple. We’re different.”*

So, **Paul takes an entire chapter to show** that religion doesn’t really remedy our problem. In fact, in many ways, it **makes the problem worse**.

Now, **a lot of times** people get confused when **people like Paul**, or me, rail on religion. They say, *“But isn’t Christianity a religion? Isn’t church by definition ‘religious’? So **why you and Paul hatin’** on religion so bad?”*

Paul draws an **a distinction between religion and the gospel**, and it is indeed an important one that I **want you to understand**.

Let me introduce you to a chart (that we gave you on the way in) in which Tim Keller contrasts religion and the gospel. We’ll **walk through it before we dive into chapter 3**, because this gets at the **heart of what Paul is going after** in the book of Romans--and why he says the **gospel is the power of God** and **utterly distinct** from man-made religion.

Religion vs. The Gospel

Religion

The Gospel

I obey—therefore I’m accepted.	I’m accepted—therefore I obey.
Motivation is based on fear and insecurity.	Motivation is based on grateful joy.
I obey God in order to get things from God.	I obey God to get to God—to delight and resemble him.
When circumstances in my life go wrong, I am angry at God or myself, since I believe, like Job’s friends, that anyone who is good deserves a comfortable life.	When circumstances in my life go wrong, I struggle, but I know all my punishment fell on Jesus, and that while he may allow this for my training, he will exercise his Fatherly love within my trial.
When I am criticized, I am furious or devastated because it is critical that I think of myself as a “good person.” Threats to that self-image must be destroyed at all costs.	When I am criticized, I struggle, but it is not critical for me to think of myself as a “good person.” My identity is not built on my record or my performance but on God’s love for me in Christ. I can take criticism.
My prayer life consists largely of petition, and it only heats up when I am in a time of need. My main purpose in prayer is control of the environment.	My prayer life consists of generous stretches of praise and adoration. My main purpose is fellowship with him.
My self-view swings between two poles. If and when I am living up to my standards, I feel confident, but then I am prone to be proud and unsympathetic to failing people. If and when I am not living up to standards, I feel insecure and inadequate. I’m not confident. I feel like a failure.	My self-view is not based on a view of my self as a moral achiever. In Christ, I am <i>simul iustus et peccator</i> —simultaneously sinful and yet accepted in Christ. I am so bad he had to die for me, and I am so loved he was glad to die for me. This leads me to deeper and deeper humility and confidence at the same time. Neither swaggering nor sniveling.
My identity and self-worth are based mainly on how hard I work or how moral I am, and so I must look down on those I perceive as lazy or immoral. I disdain and feel superior to “the other.”	My identity and self-worth are centered on the One who died for his enemies, who was excluded from the city for me. I am saved by sheer grace. So I can’t look down on those who believe or practice something different from me. Only by grace, I am what I am. I have no inner need to win arguments.
Since I look to my own pedigree or performance for my spiritual acceptability, my heart manufactures idols. It may be my talents, my moral record, my personal discipline, my social status, etc. I absolutely have to have them, so they serve as my main hope, meaning, happiness, security, and significance, whatever I may say I believe about God.	I have many good things in my life—family, work, spiritual disciplines, etc., but none of these good things are ultimate things to me. None of them are things I absolutely have to have, so there is a limit to how much anxiety, bitterness, and despondency they can inflict on me when they are threatened and lost.

Original by Tim Keller

So, far from **fixing the problem of our sinfulness--our rebellion, our pride, our quest for glory, our search for security apart from God--** religion caters to it and makes it worse.

So now, as we press into chapter 3, Paul hears in his head **another objection** raised by his Jewish listeners.

So he stages this mock argument: He pictures these religious Jews standing there with their **Hebrew Bibles** saying, “Wait a minute. You are saying that **all this is worthless**? But wasn’t this book **written by God**? If it’s from God, how then can it be **of no value**? Are you **saying that all those stories of Abraham and Moses and David and Queen Esther** were of no benefit and that we should **unhitch ourselves** from them?

- Or, **we me might translate it**: “Wait, J.D. You’re telling me that growing up in church, and having my kids in church and making sure they are learning the Bible--that’s all worthless, maybe even harmful?”
- (By the way, the **fact that we feel ourselves having this objection** shows we are reading Paul correctly! **A lot of people try to soften what Paul is saying throughout Romans**. “Well, Paul doesn’t think religion is *all* bad!” But Paul *intends* to make his case against religion so strongly that you get to this question, which is why he stops to deal with it.

Does religion have any value? Religion, HUH--what is it good for?

Romans 3:1–20

3 So what advantage does the Jew have? Or what is the benefit of circumcision? ² Considerable in every way. First, they were entrusted with the very words of God.

- God **himself inspired these stories word for word**—but their purpose (and this is key) was to point Israel to their need for Jesus, not equip them with some strategy or technique that would remove their need for him.
- All the things that God gave--the stories, the rituals--they were all designed--not to give you something to master that would earn your place before God--but **to bring you to the place where you**

would cry out, “I have *no hope* of ever being restored to you apart from your grace.”

- The **rituals drive you not up with pride in your accomplishments, but down with humility** in your need.

“But (v. 3),” Paul imagines **the Jewish religious person** saying, **“if the law was supposed to lead us to Jesus, hasn’t God failed since, you know, so many Jews haven’t believed the gospel?”**

- **“Absolutely not,”** Paul says in vs. 4. “Even though Israel (in large part) failed to believe, God **still kept his promise** to bring salvation.
- **In fact, God took Israel’s unbelief** and has turned that into an opportunity for Gentile salvation! He **took Israel’s faithlessness** (vs. 3) and used it as a way to show **even greater faithfulness** on his part!”

“Well then,” they say (vs. 5), *if Israel’s rebellion led to Gentile salvation, and that was all part of God’s plan, how can God still be mad at the Jews? Didn’t they just play their part?”*

- Paul’s answer, vv. 6–7: **That’s a stupid objection.** God will judge each person for their own unbelief and rebellion.
- **How God’s sovereignty works through human choices** to accomplishes God’s purposes **is indeed a mystery**, but God still holds us each accountable for our own choices.
 - **I was trying to get back once from a trip I’d been on**—It was on a Thursday and I was scheduled to speak that night to about 2K college students at NC State. I was in the airport in Atlanta, where all my dreams go to die, and had boarded the plane and was sitting on the runway when the captain announced that there was something wrong with our plane—it was something minor, I remember, like the toilet not being able to flush right or something like that—and we couldn’t take off until that was fixed evidently the only tool in the galaxy that could fix it was located in Madagascar and they were going to bring it to us so we were going to have to pull off to the side of the tarmac and wait for it. OK, I may have

exaggerated that last part but the rest is true, and we sat there for so long I missed my speaking. So, I **called up a friend of mine** and asked if he could cover for me. Turns out he did a great job--lots of people came to Christ. In fact, I think they heard a better message than the one I had been there. So, in retrospect it is clear that God wanted my friend to preach at NCSU that night instead of me. Does that relieve my airline's responsibility in the debacle? Should the repair guy, who was apparently taking a 3-hour nap and ignoring all of his texts and pages, suddenly declare himself some sort of hero? No. If that guy was being lazy, that's still wrong." No. I can still be frustrated at my airline for the inefficiency of their repair process.

- **God was sovereign, but Delta was responsible.** Amen? That's what Paul says here.
- But **more on that in chapter 9.** This little section is just an **appetizer** of what he gets into in chapter 9.

So, Paul ends this little imaginary Q&A with his fellow Jews by concluding, So **What then? Are we** (*Jews who have the law*) **any better off?** (*in our hearts than Gentile sinners?*)

Not at all! For we have already charged that both Jews and Gentiles are all under sin, (Rom 1-2) **as it is written:** (What he does now is go through a **series of quotes from the OT** that demonstrate the **depravity of our hearts**—He's using a string of quotes from the OT to show the Jews that he's **not introducing anything new**--this has **always been what the Law is trying to teach**)

There is no one righteous, not even one.

When everything is known about who we are, none of us is going to be in a good place. This includes the most righteous people who have ever lived--Moses, Abraham, Daniel, Esther, Job, Billy Graham, Mother Theresa--whoever it is in your book.

- **When the secrets** are exposed, it's going to be terrible for everyone.
- Just think about it: How would you feel if you had a little monitor on the side of your head so that people could read what your thoughts were at any given moment? The **day is coming when all those thoughts** get exposed.
- I had a **friend named Daniel**... big family. Olan Mills pics.
- The **day is coming when all of our records** will be fully revealed and that won't be a good day for anyone.
- *There is none righteous, not even one.*
- Sin has ruined our legal standing before God.

¹¹ There is no one who understands;

Sin has corrupted our minds.

- We saw this in chapter 1: **Our self-centered hearts warp our ability** even to perceive God.
- Think of the **bigot whose prejudice** against a certain group of people causes him to look at everyone in that group in a distorted way. Our sin **makes us distort** and corrupt the truth about God.
- It's **not that our ignorance of God gives us hardness of heart**; our hardness of heart makes us ignorant of God.
- One of **postmodern philosophy's biggest contributions to modern thought** was its recognition that so much of what we perceive is determined by the shape and biases of our hearts: Two people can look at the exact same set of evidence and come to two entirely different conclusions based on the biases they bring to it.
 - **William James: *The Will to Believe*:** what we believe is determined by what we *want* to believe.
 - **Romans 1 has been saying this from the beginning.** The heart, Blaise Pascal says, has reasons of which reason knows nothing.
 - (Some of you may have gotten that little line in a Valentine's card this week. Sorry to burst your bubble, but it's not about being in love. Just translate your card to say, "*Bias is universal*")

because sin has corrupted everything about you." Doesn't seem quite as romantic now, does it.)

- **Sin warps our minds so we were unable, naturally speaking, to understand the things of God.**

Because of this...

there is no one who seeks God.

No one, naturally speaking, **even wants to know God**. We all *run FROM* him.

Now, at this point, you might say, "Wait, wait. Surely Paul goes too far. No one seeks God? I know people who aren't Christians and don't go to church who are sincerely searching for the truth. And what about people from other religions? I know some very sincere Muslims who are really passionate about knowing God."

- Paul isn't saying that **no one seeks spiritual things** or that one wants to connect to the supernatural.
- He is saying, "No one, prompted by their own decision, acting in their own ability, wants to find God—at least, not the true version of him."
- People may **seek God to get blessings from him, or they may worship a reshaped God** who conforms to their needs, prejudices and serves their agendas, but that's different than seeking the true God for his own sake.¹

BTW, this means that anyone who is truly seeking God does so because they are being sought by him.

- Jesus said, "No one comes to me **unless the Father draws him.**" (John 6:44).
- This means **if you are here seeking God** this weekend it is because God is seeking you. And that **should be encouraging.**

- **And maybe that just makes sense as I say it.** You can see that in the questions he has put in your heart, the struggles, the emptiness--or maybe even in the joys that are beckoning you to something beyond this world.
 - **Phil 2:13:** It is God... If you want to know him, it's because he is working in you.
 - **In fact, 1 Cor 12:3:** No one can recognize that Jesus is Lord apart from the HS

Apart from his **special, regenerating** grace:

¹² All have turned away; all alike have become worthless.

This, (which btw is a quote from Isa 53) is the **essence of sin**: we have all **turned away from God's truth** and each of us has sought our own way. **We preferred our way to God's.**

There is **one central lie that has propelled our rebellion** since the Garden of Eden

- One suspicion, born in unbelief, that has led to all our disaster.
- It's the lie that echoes in the heart of every teenager, every young adult: *I think my way is probably better than God's. When it comes to making decisions for my life, I'm smarter than God.*
- It's echoes in the hearts of businessmen & women, artists, husbands dissatisfied with their marriages, empty nesters, educators, home schoolers, CEO's, and retirees...: **My way is better than God's.**

There is no one who does what is good, not even one.

Again, you're like: "*Well, surely this is an overstatement...*"

- ...I mean, what about the Marine who is not a Christian and doesn't believe in God but throws himself on a grenade to save his buddy? He's not a Christian, but that's still a good deed isn't it?

¹ Tim Keller, *Romans for You*, 69–70.

- Or the woman who sacrifices everything to get her kids out of poverty--and she's not a Christian. Aren't those good things?"
- **Yes, but two things:**
 - First, The **Bible only considers a deed good** if it is pure in both form *and* in motive.²
 - **I've shown you:** If we do good deeds to try to bolster our self-image or reputation, or try to earn our standing before God, those are inherently selfish deeds, even if on the surface they are good.
 - **Spurgeon told a story: (Carrot farmer).** "But you were giving yourself the horse." If you think you're going to get or keep your salvation by doing good deeds, it's really yourself that you're serving.
 - So, a deed is only good in God's eyes if it is motivated purely by love for God and others with no self-interest at all.
 - **Second, in light of our biggest sin**—which was **replacing God's authority** in our lives with our own—good things we do don't seem that good.
 - **Say you have a guy who is committing adultery** with a woman and as he goes into the hotel to have his affair he tips the bellhop generously. That's a good deed, right? Yes, but in light of the context it's hard to see that deed as good, so wicked is the bigger act he's a part of.
 - **What if our rebellion to God was the same way in God's sight**, but a billion times worse?
 - In light of our posture of cosmic treason toward God, it's hard to even call our goodness "good."

There is none good, not even one. You say, "**But aren't we beautiful, special and precious?**" **Yes, you are.** And that's **part of the paradox** of the human race. You are a beautiful person made in the image of God, but you have been ruined by sin.

- And the **ruin by sin is greater** than the loveliness of your creation.

- J. Edwards, "The slightest sin has an infinite amount of hatefulness in it, enough to outweigh whatever loveliness the creature possessed."
- **Or, Blaise Pascal:** What a (contradiction) man is: On the one hand, judge of all things, on the other a stupid earthworm; a depository of truth and a heap of... error; the glory and refuse of the universe."

13 Their throat is an open grave; they deceive with their tongues. Vipers' venom is under their lips. 14 Their mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.

The place **our corruption most reveals itself** is probably in our words.

- Jesus said this, also: Our words, uttered in private, are the best indicators of what is going on in our hearts.
- **Consider your speech just from the last week**--what you've said to yourself or to family and close friends. And see if your words are not filled with gossip, slander, anger, boasting and half-truths.
- Our **words carry about the stench of death.**
- Jesus said that by our words alone we would be condemned.

15 Their feet are swift to shed blood; 16 ruin and wretchedness are in their paths, 17 and the path of peace they have not known.

You're like, "OK, well **finally one that doesn't apply to me.** I mean, I've **never been part of a murder troupe.**" The point is that we all have a natural reaction to get violent when people get in the way of what we want.

- **As long as we have what we want**, we're peaceable. But **let someone else get what we want**--let them get the promotion, or the recognition, or the boyfriend we feel like we deserve; let **their kids get the honors we want for our kid**, and we don't respond with excitement and gratefulness for them and contentment in the blessings we have and trust in God's good plan for them. We struggle with hating them, even wishing harm on them.

² Keller, 72.

Finally,

¹⁸ There is no fear of God before their eyes.

This kinds of sums it all up. We don't recognize God's size, goodness or importance in our lives.

Saying, "There is no fear of God before their eyes" means that **God and his authority are just not that big of a deal** to us. **Us, our needs, our desires, our agenda--that's what is most important to us and dominates our thinking.**

That's our heart.

So, ²⁰ ...No one will be justified in his sight by the works of the law, because the knowledge of sin comes through the law.

The purpose of the law, Paul said, was not to correct sin, but reveal sin.

- It was supposed to function like a mirror that **reveals to us how sinful** we are. By looking into it, we see what the shape of what our heart should be and what it isn't.
- For example, **I'm supposed to read...**
 - **Commandment 9**, "thou shalt not lie," shows me that I should love honesty so much that I'm never tempted to lie, even when doing so would gain me some advantage.
 - **Commandment 7**, "Do not commit adultery," shows me that I'm supposed to love purity so much that any sexual desire I have for someone else besides my spouse is outweighed by my love of purity and doing things God's way.
 - **Commandment 10**, "Thou shalt not covet," shows me that I'm supposed to be so satisfied with God and so trusting of his plan for me that I don't get jealous when someone else has something I want.
 - But **I read these and think**, "My heart is not like that!" Knowledge of sin comes through the law. The law shows me how messed up and spiritually rotten my heart is.

- **Or I've heard it described like an X-ray.** Joby Martin (who preaches here) said that a couple of years ago his daughter went to a birthday party at one of those "we hate kids and don't care if they die" trampoline-filled warehouses. He said that though she's normally tough as nails, she came up to them holding back tears and said, "I fell while jumping and I heard my arm pop." So they go and get an X-ray and the X-ray reveals that, indeed, she has a fractured elbow. The X-ray is what told us about that problem. But the X-ray simply reveals the problem-- it is powerless to do anything to fix it.
- The **law is like an X-ray that shows** us how spiritually broken our heart is.
- But, like an X-ray, **it is powerless** to fix it.
- And just forcing yourself to act righteous isn't changing your heart--if anything it is just covering it up.
 - **Illus.** You ever see that **Tupperware container** in the back of the refrigerator... in it is a piece of chicken from a restaurant... and you wonder, "I wonder how long that's been in there?" It's been so long that you can't remember it. So, you take it out and smell it... and then you wake up like 4 hours later? Now, how many of you when that happens, you say, "You know, the problem is it doesn't have enough spice. Little barbecue sauce should take care of that. Good! Now I can't smell the rotting meat anymore!"
 - (And **right now a couple dozen college guys** are saying, "Yeah... and what's the problem with this?")
 - **That's what the law is doing.** It sweetens up your behavior without changing your heart.
- God **wants us to be--created us to be--so naturally righteous**, in our hearts, that we wouldn't need a law to do what is right. We'd instinctively do it.
 - **I don't need a law do to the things I love.** You never have to command me to eat dessert. Or take a nap. Or kiss my wife. I love to do those things--no law required.

- The **law is only required where my heart wants to go** the wrong direction.
- Growing up, my grandad used to raise pigs. They'd take slop out to feed them, and sometimes he'd take me with him. The slop was the nastiest stuff you could imagine. Basically just rotting food from the trash can. But the pigs love it. Not one time did my grandfather ever have to say to me, "Now, J.D., I'm going to put this slop down and go grab something, but don't you eat it. If you do, you'll be punished. **I could sit there beside it all day long and I'd never touch it.** Even if he gave me permission to scoop out a handful and eat it, I wouldn't. It's nasty. The pigs, however, if they have a clear path to it, are going to devour it like it's their last meal. If you want to keep them from it, you have to restrain them.
- **The law is like the fence keeping the pig** from eating the slop it wants to eat. God doesn't want spiritual pigs in heaven who want to eat the slop of sin and only stay away from it because the law restrains them.
- He wants people in heaven with his heart who wouldn't choose sin even if they had the opportunity to.
- **He's not just after obedience, y'all. He's after a whole new kind of obedience.**

Listen: **Sin is not so much as an action as it is a condition.**

- Many people only think of sin as bad ACTIONS that we do: stealing; lying. Etc.
- But **Paul's analysis is that the reason** we do bad actions is because of our corrupt conditions. The descriptions he uses in chapter 3 are less about our action and more about our conditions.
 - **He says our hearts are "open graves"; "viper's venom;" we have "mouths full of cursing and bitterness."** The actions we do are merely symptomatic of our hearts.
 - **It's like being sick.** You're not sick because you show symptoms; you show symptoms because you're sick. You don't have the flu because you cough and sneeze and run a fever;

you cough and sneeze and run a fever because you have the flu.

- We're not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners.
- What **we say with our mouths and do with our hands** is a symptom of the rottenness in our hearts.

²¹ But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, attested by the Law and the Prophets.

This, Tim Keller says, is one of the biggest transitions in the whole Bible. God is going to change us, but it's not going to be by the law.

²¹ But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, attested by the Law and the Prophets. ²² The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe,

We're going to be made righteous by **believing** the news--the announcement--that Jesus **kept the law in our place, living the life** we were supposed to live and dying the death we were condemned to die in our place.

Romans 1:16, Paul says, I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the gospel is the power of God unto salvation.

- **For in it the righteousness of God is revealed**--and the greatest news is that the **righteousness of God in Romans is not a righteousness** by which God judges the sinner; it's gift-righteousness why which God, in his mercy, makes us righteous in his sight, **removing the record of our sin and implanting new life in our hearts that will change us** into his image.
- And it's available to **ALL. Jew/Greek; black/white; young/old; rich/poor; bad sinner/religious sinner.** All who believe.

And, to the Jews he says: This was **attested by the Law and the Prophets**. This is not something new I'm introducing! It was what God was trying to say throughout the whole Old Testament.

- It was what **God was saying through...**
 - ...the **story of Abraham** when God commanded him to sacrifice his son Isaac but at the last minute...

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- It was what God was saying through the **Passover...**
- It was what God was saying to **Israel in the wilderness** when, after he had sent in poisonous snakes because of their sin... and I told **Moses to lift up a serpent so they would be healed**. This is **what Jesus** would be.
- It was what he was picturing through **Moses when he told him to strike the rock with his staff** so that water would gush forth from the rock to slake his people's thirst as they wandered in the wilderness of sin. **Jesus was the rock** struck with the rod of God's wrath so that the water of life would come to us in the wilderness of sin.
- It was what God was illustrating through the sacrificial system I set up: you brought a perfect, innocent lamb to offer as a sacrifice for your sin
- We saw it pictured in the stories of David--like when David ran out to fight Goliath all alone while Israel stayed on the sideline. That was a picture of Jesus running out to face true giant in our lives--sin and death--all alone as we stood powerless on the sideline to defeat him.
- We saw it in the story of Naaman: dip in the Jordan River
- We heard about in Isaiah... (53)
- We saw it pictured in Jonah, the prophet cast out in the storm so we could brought to safety
- We saw it in Hosea, the ever-faithful husband loving his ever unfaithful bride.

Literally **every page of your Hebrew Bible** foretells this coming Savior.

The law was given to us both to show us our need of him and to give us a preview of him.

This salvation always been there, available for you, he tells them, and it still is, but you have to receive it.

- The Apostle John said: "He came unto his own, and his own did not receive him. But as many as did receive him..."

And to receive him, you have to admit the problem. You have to be honest about the problem of your heart.

- You have to admit that your heart is not what it should be, and that you can never reform it through religion or change it by resolution or willpower alone.
- You have to admit your desperate need for grace.

And that's **what most people won't do**.

- **Billy Graham:** What sends most people to hell is not their sins, but their good works.
- *Nothing stands anymore between you and God but your 'good works'. Nothing can keep you from Christ but your delusion about your goodness ... that you have good works of your own that can satisfy God. To come to Christ, **all you need is need**.*
 - *All you must have is nothing ... But most sinners cannot part with their 'virtues', their goodness, which is why a sense of goodness sends more people to hell than sin does.*³

Do you **have a sense of your need**? Are you **ready to come to Jesus**?

³ Adapted from John Gerstner, *Theology for Everyman*, 72–73).