

Romans 3: Sin and Men

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Romans 3 begins by asking and answering an important question: if all law condemns, including both the Law of the Jews (the law of Moses) and the law of the Gentiles (perhaps the law of Noah), of what benefit is the Jewish practice in the law? Paul reminds them that they have been blessed with the most beneficial aspect God can give men: His inspired words. The gentiles had messages from God, but never a written inspired message, one which could be studied and understood.

The benefit of this is only to the person who diligently seeks God. Recall that in Romans 2:7-8 we are told that those who are righteous are those who pursue righteousness, and those who are evil are those who behave selfishly. Imagine being given a task to accomplish, such as digging a ditch. If your desire is to please the one who has hired you, what is better: to be given a vague or imprecise description of the task, or to be given precise measurements and duties? So it is with God. The precision of the law is of great benefit, but only to those who pursue righteousness. Those who are selfish find the law burdensome (Malachi 1:13). Those who truly want to please God are glad to know precisely what God desires.

Paul makes two comments in the chapter that are sometimes misunderstood. The first is his quote of Psalms 14 at verse 10: there are none that are righteous. Secondly, his statement in verse 23: all fall short of the glory of God. These passages are often misunderstood when they are applied to present the idea that all men are sinners (even from birth), and that man has a sinful nature. However, the context of these statements is not correctly applied. Paul's quote in Romans 3:10 from Psalm 14 actually refers to the atheist (the practical atheist; perhaps one who claims and thinks they believe in God, but behave in a manner that denies God). Paul's statement in verse 23 refers not to every person who has lived individually, but to the Jewish people and the Gentile peoples (verse 9). This is important as we know that children do not sin, nor are they accountable for the sins of their parents or ancestors (Ezekiel 18). We know too that Jesus was a man with our nature, but without sin.

What is the nature of man then? Man's nature is threefold: Body, Soul and Spirit (1 Thessalonians 5:23, Hebrews 4:12). We also know that God's nature is threefold (Matthew 28:19). Therefore, when we describe man as made in the image of God, one way this is seen is that man is created in God's (plural) image (Genesis 1:26-27). Yet man is NOT God, and only through Christ can man be a partaker of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). Only Jesus was a Son of the divine nature; the term "only begotten" used several times exclusively of Jesus means "one nature"; Jesus is God's only Son of Divine Nature.

Man's flesh desires without control; Paul will later call it "sinful" for this reason (not that it has a sinful nature, but that its desires, uncontrolled, lead to sin) in Romans 7:5. Yet Jesus too partook of that flesh (Romans 8:3), and He was tempted in the flesh, but did not sin (Hebrews 4:15).

The big question is this: if it is not truly our nature to sin, and not all are automatically sinners, why is it that, generally speaking, everyone sins? We can clarify this by saying that it is not necessary that we sin; no one must sin or cannot help sinning. But practically speaking, it is the case that everyone who can does sin. It is not easy to say why this is. In fact, we note in Genesis 6:3 that God observes that the longer we live, the harder it is not to sin.

This means everyone we know needs the Gospel. This is the ultimately point of Romans 3. No one is justified (meaning, judged by the rule and found to be righteous) except Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 3:16).

Therefore, God in His divine mercy sought to justify men not by law, but by Faith. This required a New Covenant.