

**WHO ME?  
ROMANS 3:9-20**

**By Pastor John Carlini, D.Mn**

**M.I. IF IN ANY WAY, WE THINK THERE IS ANYTHING GOOD IN US THEN WE HAVE PROBABLY MISSED SALVATION.**

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## **WHO ME? ROMANS 3:9-20**

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So far in the book of Romans, we have heard a lot of bad news. The Apostle Paul made it clear that there is none of us who deserve to go to heaven; in fact, he says that God would be justified in sending us all to hell for eternity.

I think the problem is that we all tend to read the Bible in the third person, and many times the intended meaning goes right over our heads. So, as we have studied through these first chapters of Romans, we may see Paul's logic, and how it applies to this church in Rome. We can see how all of them would fit into these categories that Paul laid out. We sit back intellectually and say, "Yes, all of those people were sinners and deserved to go to hell" and we may even be able to intellectually admit that perhaps we deserved hell at one time, but certainly not now.

I think Paul's intent in this passage is to remind us as Christians, even though we received Christ, and are now headed for heaven; we still, even right now deserve hell. You see that's the problem with a distorted, or legalistic view of Christianity. Listen to this very carefully; if somehow we come to think we are doing pretty good, and we are now worthy of being in God's family, then we don't understand salvation, and perhaps, we are not saved.

Please, listen to where this logic takes us, if we base our salvation on our present behavior, we either have to lie to ourselves if we think we are saved, ... or ... we will always feel condemned, and never able to enjoy our salvation.

Let me invite you to examine your life as I examine mine. If God were to clean my slate clean right now, ... and then were to judge me based on my thoughts and behaviors from now on, I don't think it would take more than an hour for me to lose my salvation. I think if we are

all honest with ourselves, we can see that if God graded us on our thoughts and behaviors, then we are all totally lost.

Paul is going to invite us to do a little self-examination today. It's easy for us to see the faults of others, and it's easy for us to identify the sins of the characters in the Bible, but it's often hard for us to be honest with ourselves we often hold others to a higher standard than we do ourselves. Let me give you an example. One cold, rainy, awful night my telephone rang it was one of my deacons, he said, "Pastor, my wife is kind of sick and I would like you to come right over and pray for her." Even though it was late, I decided to go and visit her so I told the deacon, "I'd be happy to come and pray for your wife but I have one problem my car is in the repair shop so will you come and pick me up?"

Angrily, the deacon responded, "What? Are you crazy? In this weather?" I think it's always easier to judge others, than to judge our selves.

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As we study through today's passage, let's continue to remind ourselves that the church in Rome consisted of people who came to know Christ from many different backgrounds and situations. From chapter 1 verse 18 up to this passage, Paul made it clear that no one is innocent before God. He wants to remind this church in Rome, and us, that **IF IN ANY WAY, WE THINK THERE IS ANYTHING GOOD IN US THEN WE HAVE PROBABLY MISSED SALVATION.** In other words, as they read this letter, they may have been in total agreement with Paul they could see how immoral people deserved judgment, they may have been able to see how good people fell short of God's standards and they could see how religious people missed the boat. But they were Christians surely they were good to go. Well maybe they, like us, breathed a sigh of relief too quickly.

I. TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT (Vs.9)  
**SINCE WE ARE ALL CHILDREN OF ADAM AND EVE, WE ARE ALL BORN WITH A NATURAL ADDICTION TO SIN.**

In verse 9, Paul is going to get a little too close for comfort and it is critical that we have correct theology. Here is the truth: **SINCE WE ARE ALL CHILDREN OF ADAM AND EVE, WE ARE ALL BORN WITH A NATURAL ADDICTION TO SIN.** Paul will go into detail about this later in the letter but for now, let me state it like this; there is something in us that draws us like a magnet to sin. Paul will later label this the flesh and to underestimate its power is a fatal mistake.

Paul wants this church to ask itself, “If everybody else is sinful and deserving of hell, then why not me?” Verse 9 starts out by asking, “Then what is the upshot of all of this?” Paul had painstakingly laid out the argument that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God he described why out and out evil people deserved God’s judgment, and then he described why good decent people fell short of God’s judgment. And, finally Paul described why religious people also fell under God’s judgment. What’s the conclusion? What’s the upshot? The natural conclusion would be that all Jews and Gentiles are lost and headed for hell but I think Paul’s argument is a bit subtler. Don’t forget this letter is written to a Christian church, like ours.

A. IF EVERYBY ELSE

Look at the next phrase. There is a lot of debate how to interpret this next question. It can be translated, “Are we any worse off?” or “Are we any better?” The argument focuses on the word better or worse. Most commentators translate it like the NIV, the NASB, and the NLT. They go with, “Are we any better?” I think this sounds right if we have been following Paul’s arguments throughout these 3 chapters. But I think the better question is, “Who does the ‘we’ refer to?” Now the NLT assumes the ‘we’ refers to Jews. In other words, Paul is identifying

himself with the Jews. most commentators believe Paul is referring to a specific group of Jewish people.

#### B. THEN WHY NOT ME?

However, I am going to go with the idea that Paul is referring to himself as a Christian and identifying himself with the church in Rome. So what I think Paul is saying is this, “If we recognize that if God were to judge all people by their thoughts, behaviors and attitudes, and find them guilty, then why not us? If God were to judge us by our thoughts, behaviors, and attitudes, then we would be just as lost, just as condemned.” So Paul is saying, “We have already made the case against Jew and Gentile alike but if God were to judge us in the same way, using the same ruler, we too are goners, without hope.

We are all under sin. Notice this phrase, under sin. The NLT says, “under the power of sin” we are not just people who sin. Committing individual sins is not our problem the problem is we are under the power of sin, we are under the control of sin, and we are addicted to sin. If we were to try and break the power of sin by doing good, we are doomed to failure. We are in bondage, and have to be set free from an outside force, a force that is greater than sin. Do you see where Paul is going with this?

Even as Christians who have the Holy Spirit, if God were to now judge us according to our thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors, we would be lost. Paul wants us to understand this with all our being. There is nothing good in us. We do not have any ability to be good. The brutal fact is that **SINCE WE ARE ALL CHILDREN OF ADAM AND EVE, WE ARE ALL BORN WITH A NATURAL ADDICTION TO SIN.** Paul has come too close for comfort and he has now identified us with all of humanity. Based on our ability to think, act, and be good, we are lost and headed for hell. If God judges us according to our works, we are all lost.

I want us to understand how radically different from other religions Christianity is. Other religions say that we have to be good to go to heaven but Christianity says that is impossible.

## II. TOO ACCURATE FOR COMFORT (Vs. 10-18) **OUR NATURAL INCLINATION IS TOWARDS EVIL.**

Now Paul is going to get a little too accurate for comfort in verses 10-18. He invites us to examine his assessment of our condition. That is, **OUR NATURAL INCLINATION IS TOWARDS EVIL.** What Paul does in these 9 verses is what the ancient rabbis and the early church called pearl stringing. They would start with a theme and then string a bunch of Scripture texts together that would shed light on their point. Now if we were to go back and examine the context of all of these Old Testament passages, we would immediately recognize that many of these verses refer to the enemies of God and Israel. What Paul wants to demonstrate is that in our natural state, we are all born as enemies of God. We are going to be introduced to some very important theology that Paul will draw on later in the book of Romans, and in the rest of his New Testament books.

### A. ALL OF HUMANITY (Vs. 10-12)

In verses 10-12, we are introduced to the subject of original sin. The Bible says that because Adam and Eve rebelled against God, we as their human descendants are born guilty. In contradiction to the humanists, who say we are born good, and others who say we are born morally neutral, the Bible says that we are born guilty and our natural inclination is towards evil, and self-centeredness, not God. I want you to see how bleak Paul paints the picture. Look at verse 10. He starts this section with, “There is no one righteous, not even one.” And he ends this section with, look at verse 18, “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Since every human being is an ancestor of Adam and Eve, every human, including you and I, were born

sinners, ... lost, ... enemies of God, ... condemned to spend eternity in hell there is no such thing as innocent people when it comes to God's standard of holiness and good.

Look how dramatic Paul phrases this in verses 10-12. Let's ask Paul a series of questions, and let him answer them. Paul, isn't there even one righteous person on earth, in the whole history of humankind? Paul's answer is, "No! Zip! Nada! Not even one."

You mean that no one wants to find God and understand what He is all about? Again, Paul emphatically responds, "No, ... Not one."

Paul, I know some pretty good people who do some pretty good things. You mean no one does good? Paul again answers, "Nope!" Look at verse 12. If you were to go back and look up the Old Testament quote, you would notice that the words "does good" do not appear, since those words were added by Paul. So if you were to compare this verse with verses 10-11, Paul defines the righteous person with someone who does good. Listen to his verdict. There is no human being that is good. No Not One!

If we don't feel bad enough yet, look at the first phrase in verse 12 Paul says that all of us together are worthless. The word for worthless here is used to describe both rotten fruit, and something that is utterly useless. In our natural states, we are utterly and totally useless we are rotten to the core. Is that bleak enough for you? So in rebuttal to all the politicians and educators that assume people are naturally good, Paul says, "Hogwash." You see any educational, economic, or political system that assumes the natural goodness of people, is doomed to failure, because it has assessed the situation inaccurately. The problem with the world is that every human being is born as a slave to sin, with a natural bent towards sin, selfishness, and the desire to make our selves a god.

#### B. ALL OF EACH HUMAN (Vs. 13-18)

So we have seen that every human being born since Adam and Eve, right up to the present is born as an enemy of God with a natural bent towards evil. Now, in verses 13-18 we are going to see that all humans are tainted by evil, the theologians refer to this as total depravity. Now I know there's a lot of misunderstanding, zeal, and emotion that goes along with this doctrine. Let me first explain what total depravity is not; it does not mean that each of us is as bad as we could possibly be. What it does mean is that sin has touched, tainted, and affected every part of our being and sin has touched us physically, spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually. It doesn't mean that I am as bad physically as I could be, it doesn't mean that I am as bad spiritually, emotionally, or intellectually as I could be, it simply means that all these areas are touched and clouded by sin. Paul will discuss three areas that sin has invaded, and they are our words, actions and attitudes. You know it's amazing to me that as smart as most of us are, some of us use our minds we are really good at justifying all sorts of sinful behaviors. Aren't we?

#### 1. OUR WORDS (Vs. 13-14)

Verses 13-14 are descriptive in how we use our words. God gave us the ability of speech to communicate with Him and one another. The Bible makes it very clear that our speech should be kind, gentle, uplifting, encouraging, and healing. Our speech should be used to sing praises to God. What a privilege to be able to speak. But look what Paul says we do with our great talents and abilities; our throats are like open graves. I think Paul has two things in mind. Jesus said that out of the fullness of our hearts, our mouths speak so Paul is pointing first of all to the source of our speech we are rotten to the core and we are spiritually dead. But secondly Paul is pointing to the results of our speech where we leave dead bodies lying all around.

Next, we use our speech for selfish reasons. We practice deceit with our tongues. I love the fact that he used the word practice, ... because as we all know, practice makes perfect. We have perfected the art of flattery and deception. It is very 'in vogue' in our culture to avoid truth telling, we are not supposed to tell people the truth because it is uncomfortable for us to hear the truth. Now let me put a quick boundary on that because I know there are many of you who are eager to tell the truth, as you perceive it to be. You'd better be pretty humble as you tell the truth because many of you think truth has to do with what you like and dislike. To you, Paul puts in the third description where he says, "Poison of vipers is on their lips." The viper is like a middle-eastern version of the cobra whose bite is poisonous, and highly deadly. Just blurting out what you determine is right or wrong is a deadly bite. Criticism, gossip, words spoken in anger, stupid talk, dirty talk, is all poison.

The New Testament writer James looks at Paul's conclusion here in verse 14, namely that our mouths are full of cursing and bitterness and wonders, "How can praise for God and filthy talk come out of the same mouth?" So Paul says that our ability to communicate has been tainted by sin. I do a lot of premarital counseling and believe me it doesn't take a lot of extensive research to demonstrate that we all have been communication challenged.

## 2. OUR ACTIONS (Vs. 15-16)

In verses 15-16 Paul demonstrates that our actions have been tainted by sin. We pride ourselves since the enlightenment, in how smart, creative, and ingenious we are as human beings. There is no problem or illness that we cannot conquer with a little more research, a little more science, and a little more money. We have created all sorts of technology and then we look at ourselves and pat ourselves on the back.

But if we were to honestly assess where we have come, according to God's measurements, we could easily see what we have left behind. Because of greed, oil, money, power, etc., how many people have been killed? How many people continue to be killed in stupid wars? We have used our technology to find more efficient ways to kill people. In the colonialist period when Europe and the west occupied countries, we enslaved other human beings, and when we finally pulled out of these countries, we left behind chaos and poverty. One only need do a little traveling to see the misery we left behind. Look at the mess in India, Pakistan, the Middle East, and African nations, most notably South Africa. In the Caribbean, countries like Jamaica have been given independence, but economically the people are still slaves to European and American money. Asia has been left divided, poor, and in ruins.

If we think we have progressed so far, then why have polluted we the earth so badly, especially since one of our primary reasons for existence is to care for God's creation? No, I think that we can see the only issues we get interested in or are willing to fight for are issues that affect us directly. We are selfish, self-centered, and self-serving. I think all we need to do is to look at how we evaluate situations. My feeling is, at least I'm willing to admit that is the case in my life, that we think about how this decision is going to affect me, my family, and my friends and then only after all of that, I might give some thought as to how it affects others.

### 3. OUR ATTITUDES (Vs. 17-18)

You may be saying, "Well pastor, I'm certainly not as selfish or sinful as you I have control over my mouth and my actions, I do good stuff." Well hold on. ... Paul is not through yet. He says in verses 17-18 that our attitudes have been tainted by sin as well. We do a lot of good things. We give money to the church and charities. We help our neighbors, we serve as pastors, we teach Sunday school, serve on the board, clean the church, and we do many kind

things. But Paul would invite us to examine our attitudes. Paul says, that if we were to take a good look at ourselves, ... if we dared to look inward, we almost always have ulterior motives. Some people do religious stuff to make them feel better about themselves. Some people get religious and do good things because they feel guilty. Some people do good stuff and religious stuff because they want others to see them and make them think they are good. When we do religious stuff, and when we do good stuff, Paul invites us to examine ourselves because the only kind of peace we want, is the peace to know that everybody around me should think and act like I do. Everything should work out the way I think it should.

Think for a moment how we approach God sometimes. We say, “Lord, I think I’ve been doing pretty good, so will you please answer this prayer?” If God doesn’t answer our prayer, we get a little annoyed with God and we get frustrated.

Paul means to paint a very bleak picture here. He is saying that if we think that we are good because we are pastors, or church leaders, or helpers, ... or because we give money to the church, ... then we might as well stop doing these things. If we think we are doing good because we read our Bibles or come to church, or behave in a certain way, we are deluded. We might as well save our time, money, and energy because none of this can be a measure of our goodness. Paul says right here, that not only is every part of our being tainted by sin, ... all human beings are tainted by sin. Paul’s conclusion is, **OUR NATURAL INCLINATION IS TOWARDS EVIL**. Now I know this is really depressing and discouraging and in fact, I know it’s also confusing.

My mother asked an excellent question as we have been studying through this section. She said, “Why would anyone want to do anything in church or why would we want to do good things?” I think that is both an insightful and an excellent observation. That is exactly what Paul

wants us to ask. You see we are a very pragmatic people and if I'm not getting any credit for giving up worldly comforts to be a pastor, then why do it? If I'm not getting any credit for serving on the board, then why do it? If I'm not getting any credit for giving money, volunteering my time and energy, then why am I doing it? Now I'm sure, we are all religious enough not to say it quite that way and that we are religious enough to say, "I'm doing this for God." But I'll bet if each of us were to examine our motives, there would be some place in us where we find this thought or attitude, "I'm doing this for God, ... but I'm expecting Him to do something for me in return. Or I'm doing this for God and I expect to be blessed." Or we think, "If I do my devotions, if I act right, and talk right, and behave the way I'm supposed to, then everything should be rosy."

Here is the problem with that thinking. When I don't appear to be blessed by God, when bad things happen to me, when I start to suffer, then I do one of two things, first, I might blame myself and doubt my salvation. I might say something like, "I must not have faith. I must be doing something wrong. God is not happy with me." Do you get that line of legalistic reasoning? It says that if I am good, then God should bless me.

The second reason is even more sinister. I start to blame God for not being fair. I may say something like, "I don't deserve this. I've been good. Why would God do something like this to me?"

### III. TOO HARSH FOR COMFORT (Vs. 19-20)

#### **GOD'S LAWS ARE MEANT TO DEMONSTRATE HOW EVIL WE CAN BE, AND THE HOPELESSNESS OF BEING GOOD ON OUR OWN**

You'll have to put these thoughts in your own words. I know that's how they come out of my mouth. In verses 19-20 Paul will refute this kind of thinking and he will sound much too harsh for comfort. He will demonstrate that **GOD'S LAWS ARE MEANT TO**

**DEMONSTRATE HOW EVIL WE CAN BE, AND THE HOPELESSNESS OF BEING GOOD ON OUR OWN**, and by thinking about our good works in a way that makes us feel righteous or loved more by God is futile.

A. THE VERDICT OF THE LAW (V.19)

In verse 19, we see the verdict of the law. I think Paul started out talking about the Mosaic Law Paul is referring to the religious laws the Jews of his time tried to follow. He has already established the impossibility of keeping all of those religious laws, but then he goes on to say that because of the Jews' inability to obey the religious law, everybody in the world is declared to be guilty by God. Now please follow this. He started by saying that Pagans had natural law, by observing the nature of creation, they should have recognized and sought after God, but they didn't. He then went on to say that a group of people recognized the moral law built into the universe and they should have obeyed and submitted to the law, thereby finding God but, they didn't. Finally, he said that the Jews were privileged to have the written law of God, yet they too failed to submit and obey God. So by saying the Jews failed to live up to the clearest revelation of God's will, Paul lumps all humanity into the category of having God's law, yet rebelling against it.

Look carefully at the wording in the last half of the verse, because now we Christians are included; if we in any way come to think that we are good, we are deceived. In other words, even if we think we were saved by grace, but somehow now earn God's favor or blessing by doing good works, then we are sadly mistaken.

Paul has painted this as a courtroom scene. If we get to the judgment seat of God with the story of our good works, we better have a lunch with us, because it's going to be a long day. By the time God reads out the law, and all our violations of the law, our mouths will be shut.

There will be no excuse. There is only one way to come into the presence of God. That is to simply say, "I am guilty. I throw myself on the mercy of the court." So we might say, "What's the purpose of God giving us the laws then?"

#### B. THE PURPOSE OF THE LAW (Vs. 20)

Verse 20 describes the purpose and intent of the law. Look at the very last phrase of verse 20. The intent of the law is to demonstrate how sinful, hopeless, and pathetic we are, and it is meant to demonstrate how deeply in bondage to sin we are. It is meant to show us how entrenched we are in sinful thoughts, words, and behaviors and it is meant to show us that without the mighty power of Jesus, we are eternally lost without any hope of redemption.

Let me give you an example from the workplace. Let's say we didn't have any formalized rules or policies, everybody did their job and worked conscientiously yet there was a lot of freedom. However, if people started to abuse this freedom by not showing up for work, or coming in late, then rules would have to be made, formalized, and enforced. The more abuses of freedom, the more rules are necessary. God's intent in creation was for us to be free. However, because of Adam and Eve's sin, and because of our personal rebellion, we have sold ourselves as slaves to sin.

The rules, the laws, the list of do's and don'ts are meant to show us how far short of God's standard we fall. As we read the Bible and get an idea of how holy God is and how holy He expects us to be, ... and as we try to live up to that standard, ... we should immediately come to the conclusion that we are hopelessly lost. If you don't believe me, try it. If you give 10% of your money, then think about what Jesus said, "Give all your money away and follow Him." Can you live up to that? Just read through Matthew 5,6, & 7. Can you live up to that? We can

never give enough or do enough to make God say, “Not guilty.” No! The fact is that when each of us stands before God based on our good works, we will all hear, “Guilty as charged.”

**GOD’S LAWS ARE MEANT TO DEMONSTRATE HOW EVIL WE CAN BE, AND THE HOPELESSNESS OF BEING GOOD ON OUR OWN.**

Listen, this journey through Romans 1, 2, & 3 have been very difficult for me to preach through because I also have to come to the place where I confess with my mouth and believe in my heart that I am totally and hopelessly lost and that no amount of good works can earn me anything. Here is the bad news, ... no, the tragic news. **IF IN ANY WAY, WE THINK THERE IS ANYTHING GOOD IN US, THEN WE HAVE PROBABLY MISSED SALVATION.**

Listen to what Martin Luther said.

**“The principal point ... of the law ... is to make men not better, ... but worse; that is to say, it shows unto them their sin, that by the knowledge thereof, they may be humbled, terrified, bruised and broken, and by this means may be driven to seek grace, and so come to that blessed seed, ... Christ.”**

This is good for us to always remember, even as Christians. If at any time we think we are good or deserving of God’s blessings because we are pretty good people, we should immediately become humbled, terrified, bruised and broken. If we want God to judge us or to reward us based on our goodness, we are totally and hopelessly lost.

This horrible terrifying news sets the stage for God’s good news, that Jesus came to break the chains, to redeem us and set us free from sin and death. But unless we truly understand the bad news, ... we will never be able to receive and understand how good the good news is.