

Unit 2: Paul's Letter to the Romans

Lesson 7 | October 18, 2026

Our Need for Salvation

Study Text

Romans 1:18–32; 3:1–20

Central Truth

The whole world is guilty before God.

Key Verse—Romans 3:11

There is none that understandeth; there is none that seeketh after God (KJV).

No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will recognize that no one is righteous apart from God.
- Students will consider the weight of sin and the depth of God's grace.
- Students will thank God for His faithfulness and justice.

Introducing the Lesson

Over the coming weeks, we will look closely at perhaps the most influential letter ever written. Paul's letter to the Romans contributed to the conversion experiences of major figures in church history like Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Wesley. It shaped the theology of major Christian denominations and fellowships, sparking countless renewal movements and revivals. Romans presents us with a challenging study, and we can expect God's Spirit to continually transform us by the power of His Word. Let's all pray for new growth and understanding as we start this journey!

Discussion Starter—Good News, Bad News

Has anyone ever asked you, "Which do you want first: the good news or the bad news?" What are the pros and cons of each choice? Which do you typically choose?

In Romans, Paul gives the bad news first. Don't worry! The good news is coming.

In this passage, Paul identifies humanity's primary problem: sin. Left to our own devices, we ignore God's self-revelation in creation and worship created things instead. God, in His infinite wisdom, allowed humanity to go down this path according to our own free choices. As Paul notes, this proves that we have no excuse for our sinfulness. But God does not give up on His creation. No way! Our rebellion did not surprise Him. Before the creation of the universe, He already planned to provide redemption through His Son.

Part 1—Reasons for God's Judgement

Without Excuse

Romans 1:19–23

Paul's powerful statement in Romans 1:16–17 provides perhaps the best introduction to the first passage we'll be looking at today. Paul writes, "I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ.

It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile. This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, ‘It is through faith that a righteous person has life.’”

The *gospel*, which means “good news,” is God’s saving power for everyone who believes (Rom 1:16). It tells us, from start to finish, how God makes us righteous in His sight by faith. So, why doesn’t everyone simply believe and receive salvation? As we’ll see in Romans 1, many people don’t even realize they need salvation. They have yet to admit they are sinful and deserve God’s righteous judgment.

Paul teaches that human beings suppress the truth about God because of their sinfulness (v. 18). By looking at creation, however, people can know God exists and see some aspects of His nature. Theologians call this “natural revelation,” and Paul claims it sufficiently teaches the basics about God (v. 20). (“Special revelation” fills out the picture of God’s nature via avenues like Scripture and the Incarnation.)

Instead of glorifying and thanking God, which would be appropriate responses to natural revelation, people arrogantly refused to worship Him and started worshipping created things instead. They looked for “truth” elsewhere, and “their minds became dark and confused” (v. 21). Darkness and confusion still surround us in this rebellious world that refuses to acknowledge its Creator. People still look for anything and everything to worship instead of the true God (v. 23). Paul’s verdict against sinful humanity remains just as true today as it has ever been: “Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools” (v. 22).

(Play the Unit 2 intro video, “Paul’s Friends in Rome.” You can download it for free at radiantlifecurriculum.com/resources.)

- ? What is “natural revelation”? What can we learn about God in this way?
- ? Why do you think humans are drawn to worship idols and other substitutes for the one true God?

The Sin Spiral

Romans 1:24–32

Denying and suppressing the truth about God sets off a spiral of depravity that deserves God’s judgment. Even so, we must never forget that God’s judgment against sin is part of His love. Sin angers God because it spoils the goodness He intended for us.

When humanity turned away from God and worshipped idols, God allowed them to continue on that sinful path and experience its consequences. He “abandoned them” to their shameful impulses (Rom 1:24), their twisted desires (v. 26), and their foolish thinking (v. 28). Other versions use the phrase “gave them up.” The idea is that God gave them complete self-control because of their sinfulness.¹ Untethered from truth, they devoted themselves to their chosen lies and drifted far from the righteousness God intended (v. 25).

¹ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8*, Word Biblical Commentary 38a (Word, 1988), 62.

This passage includes Scripture's most extensive discussion of homosexuality. As we examine it in a bit more detail, recall that homosexuality is just one in a full catalog of sins. Paul also lists other sins like envy, boastfulness, quarreling, gossip, lying, disobedience to parents, and a lack of mercy (vv. 29–31). All of these sins are products of foolish thinking (v. 28) and deserve God's justice, which "requires that those who do these things deserve to die" (v. 32).

Paul describes both female and male homosexual behavior as being "against the natural way" (v. 26). He was likely alluding to Genesis 1:26–28, where God created both the man and the woman in His image and then blessed them with His command to procreate. Although parts of Western society have normalized homosexual activity, God's Word lists it alongside other sins that also violate God's good gift of sex within marriage (1 Cor 6:9–10). As with any sin, someone tempted to engage in homosexuality can and should resist and overcome the temptation by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The outcome of the sin spiral in Romans 1:28–31 is that people not only get swept up in their own sin, but they also encourage others to sin (v. 32). Paul observed this pattern in the first century, and we can see it at work in the twenty-first century as well.

Resource Packet Item 1: Resisting Sexual Temptation

Students will review an excerpt from the Assemblies of God position paper, "Homosexuality, Marriage, and Sexual Identity," and consider how to interact with people who deal with same-sex attraction.

? What are some sins our culture (or even church) turns a blind eye toward?

? Do you think most non-Christians understand their need for salvation? Why or why not?

Part 2—God's Faithfulness and Justice

God is Faithful

Romans 3:1–4

In Romans 2, Paul explains how his people, the Jews, deserved God's judgment right alongside the Gentiles. He redefines what it means to be "a true Jew" (vv. 28–29). According to Paul, matters of ethnicity, tradition, or law-keeping do not determine one's Jewishness. Belonging to God's family depends on the transforming work of God's Spirit in people's hearts. Here in Romans 3, Paul continues to respond to potential objections.

Paul used an ancient rhetorical teaching device called "diatribe" in which the speaker fields questions from an imaginary dialogue partner. In this case, the imaginary questioner is a Jew who responded to Paul's redefinition of true Jewishness and true circumcision (Rom 2:28–29) by asking what advantage there is in being a literal Jew. Were the Jews not God's chosen people? Surely there must be some added value for those whose physical circumcision marked their inclusion in God's covenant (3:1).

In his reply, Paul reaffirms the considerable benefits of being a Jew: God gave the Jewish people "the whole revelation of God" (v. 2). Through His holy Word, they could know God and His will. God entrusted the Jewish people with a role in His plan to redeem the world from sin's destruction. Their chosen status, however, did not guarantee that every Jewish person would act as a faithful

covenant partner. Instead, Paul later observes that God always preserved a “remnant”: a smaller subgroup within larger Israel who remained faithful when others did not (11:1–5).

Paul’s imaginary dialogue partner responds in Romans 3:3: “True, some of them were unfaithful; but just because they were unfaithful, does that mean God will be unfaithful?” Paul responds emphatically: “God forbid!” (v. 4, KJV; “Of course not!” NLT). Even if humans are deceitful, God remains faithful and keeps His promises. God’s covenant faithfulness, however, never offers a blank check to excuse whatever sin His people might commit. Paul reinforces his point by citing Psalm 51:4, where David confesses his sin and acknowledges God’s righteous judgment. If David, Israel’s greatest king, discovered that God’s covenant faithfulness coexists with God’s righteousness, so too should every Jew and Gentile hearing the gospel.² The Lord’s judgment will invariably be right and true.

Resource Packet Item 2: Memory Verse—Psalm 51:4, 10

Students will be encouraged to memorize these powerful verses.

? How may we reconcile the judgment of God with His mercy and grace?

? Have you ever gone through something that caused you to question the faithfulness of God? If so, what helped you to stand firm in your faith?

God’s Justice

Romans 3:5–8

God is faithful and just. As Paul explains in Romans 1, human beings deserve God’s wrath because of sin. No rationale justifies ignoring the truth of God’s self-revelation.

Paul next imagines another objection to his argument: “Our sinfulness serves a good purpose, for it helps people see how righteous God is. Isn’t it unfair, then, for him to punish us?” (Rom 3:5). Paul declares this response foolish by describing it as “merely a human point of view” (v. 5). He responds yet again with an emphatic negative: “Of course not!” (v. 6).

Paul uses plural pronouns: “our sinfulness” and “punish us” (v. 5). Though Paul holds a position of authority, he identifies himself as a sinner just like his audience. He then points to God’s widely acknowledged role as Judge of the world (v. 6; see Gen 18:25; Job 34:17). How does God’s role as judge of the world support His righteous judgment of unbelieving Jews? Paul concludes, and wants his audience to agree, that just as God will rightly judge the sins of the entire world, He can rightly judge unbelieving Jews.³

Next, Paul raises another potential objection closely related to the one in verse 5: “How can God condemn me as a sinner if my dishonesty highlights his truthfulness and brings him more glory?” (v. 7). (By contrast, see how one does in fact glorify God by holiness in 1 Corinthians 6:18–20.) This line of reasoning leads the imaginary dialogue partner to accuse Paul of teaching people that “the more we sin, the better it is!” (v. 8). Paul found the suggestion ludicrous that humans should sin more to increase God’s glory. Furthermore, he considered it slanderous that people

² Craig S. Keener, *Romans*, New Covenant Commentary Series (Cascade Books, 2009), 52.

³ Leander Keck, *Romans* (Abingdon Press, 2005), 92–93.

accused him of teaching this type of belief. Rather than offer an extended defense of his position, Paul essentially dismisses the accusations as absurd and expects his readers to do the same. Yes, Paul maintains that God saves us by faith, not by works, but he never said we can sin as much as we like. (Though aspects of the argument differ, Paul offers a fuller defense of his position on these matters in Romans 6).⁴

? How might Paul rephrase these questions and answer them in a culture that does not assume God will judge the world justly?

? Have you ever been tempted to think that sin does not matter because of God's abundant grace? How did you address that wrong thinking?

Part 3—Human depravity and Sinfulness

There is None Righteous

Romans 3:9–18

Sin is an equal opportunity oppressor. If we were to read the terms of agreement for sin, we might find the following well-known legal statement: Sin does not “discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, sex . . . national origin, disability, age . . . or genetic information.” In this passage, Paul makes himself clear: no one is exempt from sin.

In Romans 3:9, Paul returns to the question he asked in verse 1: “Should we conclude that we Jews are better than others?” Paul responds in the negative. Jews cannot claim an advantage over Gentiles in terms of sinfulness or guilt before God. Yes, in one sense the Jews’ possession of God’s Word provided advantages (v. 2). However, possession of God’s Word does not excuse sin. Additionally, Paul explains that greater knowledge brings greater responsibility. Since Jews also sin against God, they cannot claim any advantage over the Gentiles. Instead, as Paul insists, all people sin against God and deserve judgment (see Paul’s arguments in 2:17–29).

Drawing mostly from the Psalms, but also from Ecclesiastes and Isaiah, Paul assembles evidence to prove the universality of sin. Following the Jewish tradition of compiling texts based on key words or concepts, Paul gathers his list of passages based on (1) their connections to sin and death (3:10–18) and (2) their vivid use of body parts (vv. 13–14).⁵ These passages paint a bleak picture. No one is righteous; all have turned away. People are known for lies, cursing, bitterness, bloodshed, ruin, and misery. This mounting evidence forces readers to hang their heads and agree when, only a few verses later, Paul famously declares, “Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard” (v. 23).

Let’s reflect for a moment on what Paul accomplishes in these first few chapters of Romans, skillfully dismantling any Jewish notion of superiority. He begins by highlighting the Gentiles’ sinfulness. He uses their sexual immorality to illustrate their moral depravity, a matter which many Jews found repulsive.⁶ However, just when the Jewish members of his audience might think, “Yes, see how bad Gentiles are!” he widens the scope to demonstrate that everyone, both Jew and Gentile, stands condemned and enslaved to sin without God’s grace.

⁴ Keck, *Romans*, 93.

⁵ Keener, *Romans*, 54.

Resource Packet Item 3: Reactions to Sin

Students will analyze their reactions to the sins listed in Romans 1:21–32 and consider whether their response to sin matches God’s response.

- ? Do you think people who have been Christians for a long time have any advantage over others when it comes to sin? What do you think Paul might say?
- ? In what ways are some sins worse than others? How are all sins the same?

The Entire World is Guilty

Romans 3:19–20

It’s hard to fully appreciate good news without hearing the bad news first. Remember, Paul uses much of Romans 1–3 to explain the bad news of human sinfulness. Before turning his attention to the good news in Romans 3:21, Paul concludes this section with a summary statement. The bottom line is that the entire world is guilty before the Lord.

After listing Scriptures that prove humanity’s sinfulness, Paul declares that God’s law silences every objection and holds all people accountable to God (Rom 3:19). Notice the two clever rhetorical techniques Paul uses to reinforce his point. First, he stops using his imaginary Jewish dialogue partner. Just as the Law silences every objection, Paul’s imaginary objector can no longer speak in this section. Second, Paul picks up on the vivid body language that had been part of his list of evidence in verses 11–18. While the *New Living Translation* says the law’s purpose “is to keep people from having excuses,” the King James Version translates the Greek more literally: “that every mouth may be stopped.” No one, Jew or Gentile, can honestly claim to be innocent. We are all sinful.

Paul takes his argument a step further when he claims that the law’s commandments—holy, just, and good though they are (7:12)—can never justify someone before God. The Law simply doesn’t work that way. Instead, God uses it to reveal our sinfulness (3:21).

Verses 19–20 mark the end of a long section in which Paul painstakingly proves humanity’s sinfulness. You might describe this section as the “bad news.” In the next passage, he transitions to the heart of the good news. As Paul explains the good news in the remainder of Romans, he clarifies that “God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin’s control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit” (8:3–4).

Before we transition to the good news, we need to remember the bad news: The entire world is guilty before God. We cannot fully appreciate the good news of Jesus Christ until we sit with the grim reality of our sinful situation.

- ? Why do we need to understand bad news to appreciate good news?
- ? What excuses do we sometimes make for our sin? How do we move past making excuses so that we can receive forgiveness and celebrate God’s grace?

What Is God Saying to Us?

We typically make one of two errors when we consider our sin. First, we downplay it. We refuse to admit our guilt and need for salvation. Second, we feel our guilt so intensely that we lose hope. We convince ourselves that we lie beyond the reach of God's love. For those of us who tend to downplay our sin, may God remind us of His holiness and the righteous demands of His law. For those of us who struggle with condemnation over past sin, may God remind us of His faithfulness and undeserved grace!

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Ask God to make your conscience appropriately sensitive to sin.
- Be intentional to include confession of your sins and repentance in daily prayer this week.
- Share the good news or invite someone to church.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

Unintentional vs. Brazen Sins.

Numbers 15:22–31

Tuesday:

Wicked Priests.

1 Samuel 2:12–17

Wednesday:

Multiplying Abominations.

Ezekiel 16:44–52

Thursday:

Woe to Sinful Leaders.

Matthew 23:13–15, 23–28

Friday:

Rebellious Hearts.

Hebrews 3:12–18

Saturday:

Captive to Sin.

2 Peter 2:12–22