



SESSION 3

ONE GREAT PROBLEM

▶ **The Point**

Without Christ, we are condemned forever.

▶ **The Passage**

Romans 3:9-12,19-20,23

▶ **The Bible Meets Life**

Some things fail to live up to their intended purpose.

When the city of Vancouver, British Columbia, purchased its first motorized ambulance in 1909, it paid a huge sum of \$4,000. (That's close to \$100,000 by today's standard.) Yet when the city crew took the ambulance on a test run, they hit a pedestrian—and killed him. This expensive purchase, meant to save lives, ended up transporting its first passenger to the morgue.³

God created us for a specific purpose: to live in a joyous relationship with Him and bring Him glory. Like the ambulance, however, we have not lived up to that purpose. The Bible tells us clearly where the problem lies—inside our hearts.

Thankfully, the Bible is also clear on the only answer to our great problem. We can read about that answer in Romans 3.

▶ **The Setting**

Paul wrote the Book of Romans to believers in Rome. He had not yet been to Rome, so he was not involved in starting the church. He wrote this letter near the end of his third missionary journey. After distributing the collection he had been gathering for the famine-afflicted Christians in Judea, Paul intended to visit Rome on his way to preaching in Spain. This book introduced him and spelled out his theology in preparation for that visit.

What does the Bible say?

Justified (v. 20)—This term comes from a courtroom context. Paul used it to mean a guilty sinner was declared righteous by God because of Christ’s sacrificial death.

Fall short (v. 23)—The phrase points to the inability of sinners to meet God’s standard of righteous behavior and properly reflect His glory.

Romans 3:9-12,19-20,23

⁹ What then? Are we any better? Not at all! For we have previously charged that both Jews and Gentiles are all under sin,

¹⁰ as it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one.

¹¹ There is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.

¹² All have turned away; all alike have become useless. There is no one who does what is good, not even one.”

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says speaks to those who are subject to the law, so that every mouth may be shut and the whole world may become subject to God’s judgment.

²⁰ For no one will be justified in His sight by the works of the law, because the knowledge of sin comes through the law.

²³ For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.



STUDY THE BIBLE

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Romans 3:9-12

⁹ What then? Are we any better? Not at all! For we have previously charged that both Jews and Gentiles are all under sin, ¹⁰ as it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one. ¹¹ There is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. ¹² All have turned away; all alike have become useless. There is no one who does what is good, not even one."

READ: Romans 3:9-12 on page 31 of the PSG. Read the text out loud or ask a volunteer to do so.

SUMMARIZE: Help group members work through the main points on pages 31-32 of the PSG:

1. "In the opening chapters of the Book of Romans, Paul identified those who have sinned and are under the wrath of God."
2. "Evil runs rampant among us because humanity as a whole loves sin and despises righteousness. Many want to blame God for the state of the world, but the blame is ours."
3. "In short, we've all broken the commandments of God. We've all fallen short of Christ's righteous standard. Sin reigns in our hearts."

GUIDE: Use the final paragraph on page 43 of this Leader Guide to reinforce Paul's statement that no person is righteous according to God's standard.

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 31 of the PSG: **"What evidence points to sin as a universal problem?"**

Note: Group members can talk about evidence of sin in the world today, evidence of sin throughout history, evidence of sin in their own lives, and so on.

TRANSITION: We saw in verses 9-12 that all people are guilty of sin. As we jump to verses 19-20, we'll see the natural consequence of our sin: all people are subject to God's judgment.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

How do these verses contrast with our culture's view on right and wrong?

Romans 3:9-12 Commentary

[Verse 9] Paul asked two interrelated questions. First, **What then?** Second, **Are we any better?** Meaning, did **Jews** have an advantage over **Gentiles** by virtue of being Jews? In a sense, the Jews did have an advantage because they had a special revelation from God—the Scriptures. At the same time, they did not have a practical advantage because Jews and Gentiles alike are sinners and need the salvation provided through Jesus. Paul's **"Not at all!"** makes it clear that the universal sinfulness of humanity trumps any temporary "advantage" the Jews had. Both Jews and Gentiles are **under sin**.

[Verse 10] Knowing there were Jewish Christians in the church at Rome, Paul supported his argument about the sin problem faced by all of humanity with a series of quotations from the Old Testament. He introduced these quotations with the phrase **as it is written**. Some Bible scholars think he was quoting the Septuagint—the Greek translation of the Old Testament widely used among Greek-speaking Jews in the first century. This would explain why some of the quotations in verses 11-18 might not match word for word with our translations of the Hebrew texts.

Paul's first quotation came from Psalm 14:1-3 or Psalm 53:1-3 which are very similar. Both begin by quoting a "fool" who said God does not exist (see Pss. 14:1; 53:1). The main point is that no one is **righteous**. The term "righteous" in relation to people typically means adherence to high moral standards set by God.

[Verse 11] Paul reinforced his argument by noting that nobody **understands**. Paul did not mean intellectual understanding or cognition. The psalm he quoted had begun with a quotation from a "fool." In the Old Testament, a "fool" could be intelligent, yet still lacking in moral or spiritual discernment. Paul declared that no one **seeks God**. He likely meant no one was seriously searching for the true God. Our sins distance us from God. The Bible teaches that God takes the initiative in creating a relation with sinners. As Paul wrote later, "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

[Verse 12] All sinful humans **have turned away** from God and His plan for their lives. Paul easily could have quoted Isaiah 53:6: "We all went astray like sheep; we all have turned to our own way." Paul also noted that sinful humans have become **useless**. The Greek word could be translated "worthless" or "gone bad," like milk that turned sour. This is one of the consequences of our sinfulness. Paul ended verse 12 with the point that no one does what is good. On the human level, many of us would say some family members, friends, and co-workers are "good" people. Paul stressed the divine perspective on people who did not yet know Jesus as Lord and Savior. In short, no one is good without Jesus.



STUDY THE BIBLE

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Romans 3:19-20

19 Now we know that whatever the law says speaks to those who are subject to the law, so that every mouth may be shut and the whole world may become subject to God's judgment. **20** For no one will be justified in His sight by the works of the law, because the knowledge of sin comes through the law.

DO: Direct group members to complete the activity "Picturing Sin" on page 33 of the PSG. If time permits, encourage volunteers to share their responses. (Be sure not to force anything, however, given the sensitive topic of the activity.)



Which of the following images best represents the presence of sin in your life? Use the space below the images to explain your choice.



Who are some people in your life who need to experience God's forgiveness? List three.

READ: Romans 3:19-20 on page 32 of the PSG.

RECAP: Highlight the second and third paragraphs on page 34 of the PSG:

The evidence stacked against us regarding sin is overwhelming—and we have no defense. So-called "moral" people might argue, "But I do good things." Religious people might add, "I go to church." Yet no matter how moral or religious we may be, we all stand guilty of sin before a holy God.

And here's the really bad news: guilt always leads to judgment. When it comes to our sin, the evidence has been presented, and the Judge has handed down His verdict. No amount of good works can change it. Humanity stands justly condemned before a holy God.

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 34 of the PSG: **"What are some ways people try to explain away God's judgments?"**

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

What do these verses teach us about God's law?

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Romans 3:19-20 Commentary

[Verse 19] Paul devoted most of three chapters to demonstrating that all humans are sinners. Here, he reminded Jews they were obligated to the law. They were all under the law's jurisdiction, or they were all **subject** to the law. Whenever we find the "law" mentioned in Paul's writings, we need to be sure what kind of law he means. Some Christians would think of distinctively Jewish rules such as circumcision or keeping the Sabbath. Earlier in this letter, however, Paul identified a law written on the heart, referring to the basic human ability to distinguish right and wrong (see 2:14-15). Paul had just illustrated that Jews were sinners by quoting Old Testament texts, none of them from the Torah (or Pentateuch), which were the five "law" books. So Paul apparently used "law" here in the general sense of God's expectations for all humans.

If Paul's readers truly realized they were sinners, they should also have acknowledged they were **subject to God's judgment**. They were in trouble and needed God's help. They should have acknowledged the overwhelming evidence against them and kept their mouths shut rather than launch a defense. As sinners, we are all under God's judgment. Jesus made the same point with Nicodemus: "Anyone who does not believe is already condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the One and Only Son of God" (John 3:18).

Some people excuse their sins. Others deny they are sinners. But if we take Paul's word as the truth it really is, we should be concerned about God's eternal judgment on us and others.

[Verse 20] Paul knew some people would respond to sin by saying they could fix their problem on their own. They would insist **works of the law** would make things right with God. Although only Paul used this exact phrase in the New Testament, the idea occurs in other places. Jesus told of the Pharisee and tax collector who prayed (see Luke 18:9-14). The parable was directed to people who "trusted in themselves that they were righteous" (v. 9). People like the self-righteous, arrogant Pharisee thought they could be justified in God's sight by doing good deeds described in the Jewish law.

Paul rejected this attempt to escape the sin problem. One purpose of the law was to bring the **knowledge of sin**, but the law was not designed to solve that problem. The law only makes us more aware of God's expectations. Paul used **justified** to describe salvation. This term fits the analogy of a sinner being on trial and clearly guilty. But God, because of Jesus' death on the cross, declared the sinner acquitted. Jesus used the term to describe the tax collector who was repentant of his sins (see Luke 18:14). Justification was one of Paul's favorite terms for salvation (see Rom. 3:24,28; 4:2,25).



STUDY THE BIBLE

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Dotted lines for taking notes.

Romans 3:23

²³ *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

READ: Romans 3:23 on page 35 of the PSG.

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 35 of the PSG: **“When have you felt the reality of sin in your own life?”**

SUMMARIZE: Call attention to the main points on page 35 of the PSG:

1. “Our sinfulness is further magnified by the reality that we ‘fall short of the glory of God.’”
2. “What exactly is God’s glory? The glory of God is wrapped up in the totality of who He is and what He does. When we put all God’s attributes together, we see His glory.”
3. “To say we ‘fall short of the glory of God’ means we fail to measure up to the righteousness of Christ.”
4. “Trying to match God’s standard of righteousness on our own is like trying to swim the Atlantic Ocean. Some may make it further than others, but even the world’s best swimmer would eventually drown.”

DISCUSS: Question #5 on page 35 of the PSG: **“How does sin prevent us from living in a way that glorifies God?”**

GUIDE: Direct group members to read the final paragraph on page 35 of the PSG. Encourage them to be diligent about praying for the people in their lives who still need to experience the forgiveness and salvation that is available only through Jesus Christ.

GUIDE: Refer back to “The Point” for this session: **“Without Christ, we are condemned forever.”** As time permits, encourage volunteers to share any final thoughts and questions.

ALTERNATE QUESTION:

In light of verse 23, what helps you find hope?

Romans 3:23 Commentary

[Verse 23] This is a familiar verse for many readers, and for good reason. Paul provided a clear summary of his main point: **For all have sinned**. The primary meaning of the word “sinned” is to miss the mark. A friend once described sin as an “air ball.” This basketball term refers to a ball that misses the goal and backboard completely. Sinners do not come close to fulfilling God’s expectations!

Paul also noted that sinners **fall short of the glory of God**. On our own strength or ingenuity, we can never fulfill God’s purpose for our lives. In last week’s session we saw that God created people to glorify Him (see Isa. 43:7). David noted that God crowned humans with “glory and honor” (see Ps. 8:5). When Adam and Eve sinned, however, the sin problem entered human history. No matter how “good” we might be by human standards, we cannot save ourselves by doing good deeds.

When we acknowledge our sinful condition, we need to repent and ask for God’s forgiveness. Jesus’ healing of the paralyzed man illustrates our deepest need is God’s forgiveness. The paralytic’s friends brought him to Jesus to be healed, but Jesus addressed his deepest need (see Mark 2:1-12).

God’s “glory” is often depicted in the Bible through a radiance or light, symbolizing His presence. Although we never become divine, being glorified is one aspect of our eternal destiny. Later in this letter, Paul noted that our present sufferings are a prelude to “the glory that is going to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18). When Paul mentioned different aspects of our salvation experience, he referred to our glorification (see v. 30). Without a personal relationship with Jesus as Lord and Savior, we will always “fall short of the glory of God.”

How do you react to Paul’s message? A lot of his message so far sounds like bad news rather than good news. Paul was like a medical doctor telling you that you have a serious condition before telling you about the cure. We are all sinners and will experience God’s judgment unless we repent and receive the offer of salvation through Jesus. Thankfully, our next session will focus on God’s gift of salvation!



Read the article “‘Justified,’ the Meaning” in the Fall 2016 issue of *Biblical Illustrator*. Previous *Biblical Illustrator* articles “The Glory of God” (Winter 2008-2009), “The Meaning of ‘Justified’” (Spring 1998), and “Sin and Evil in Paul’s Theology” (Spring 1988) relate to this lesson and can be purchased, along with other articles for this quarter, at lifeway.com/biblicalillustrator.



5 minutes

LIVE IT OUT

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GUIDE: Direct group members to page 36 in the PSG. Encourage them to consider the following options for responding to the reality of sin:

- ▶ **Confess.** Ask God to reveal any areas of sin in your life that have not been dealt with. Confess those sins and do whatever is necessary to turn away from them.

- ▶ **Pray.** Pray daily for the three people you listed in the “Picturing Sin” activity. Ask that the Holy Spirit would confront them with their sinfulness and their need to turn to Christ.

- ▶ **Worship.** Spend 30 minutes this week praising God for His offer of grace and forgiveness. Thank Him for the work of Christ in your life and in the lives of those you love.



Wrap It Up

TRANSITION: Read or restate the Conclusion from page 36 of the PSG:

The city of Vancouver spent the equivalent of \$100,000 in an effort to save lives. Christ paid a much greater price to save those who had no hope of saving themselves—including you and me.

PRAY: Conclude by thanking Jesus for saving you out of the depths of your sin. Pray that you and your group members will have the courage to share the good news of the gospels with others in the days to come.



Free additional ideas for your group are available at

BibleStudiesforLife.com/AdultExtra