

Romans 3:21-31

The Basics of the Gospel - #1

For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God – v. 23

To some people that are not accustomed to reading – the Bible may seem like a very large book. My Bible contains 944 double column pages in the Old testament and 289 double column pages in the New Testament – that’s a total of 1233 pages. I guess you could call the Bible a fairly large book.

On the other hand when you compare the size of the Bible to the multi-volume sets that have been written about the Bible – the Bible might not seem like such a large book after all. I recently received a 7 volume commentary set on just one book of the New Testament. And there is no end to how many commentaries and theology volumes a Christian may acquire. As I say – when you compare the Bible itself to the countless volumes that have been written about the Bible it makes the Bible seem much easier to read.

Now if you were to ask me for a summary statement pertaining to the entire Bible – I would say that Paul’s epistle to the Romans contains that summary statement. Romans has been called a Bible within the Bible – because in this epistle you find the truth of the gospel condensed into 16 chapters.

And if you were to ask me for something even more concise then I would say that the verses we’ve read this evening from Romans 3 give about as concise and yet as comprehensive a statement of the gospel as you can find. Within the scope of these 11 verses you find the message of the entire Bible in concentrated form.

I came to realize this some time ago when I read the commentary of Charles Hodge on Romans. He gives a very good analysis of these verses in that commentary. Let me share his analysis with you. He writes that in this section of Romans you find:

1. The Nature of the Gospel revealed. As to it’s nature the righteousness which is taught in this epistle is not attainable by works, but by faith, cf. 3:21,22: *But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; 22 Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference:*
2. The Ground upon which the offer of Justification is made – It is offered on the ground of redemption – or the ground of Jesus Christ as the propitiation for our sins – cf. 3:24,25: *Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: 25 Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;*
3. The Object (purpose) of the Gospel – which is to display the divine perfections, through the reconciliation of the justice of God with the exhibition of mercy to the sinner. Cf. 3:26: *To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.*

4. The Results of the Gospel – It humbles man by excluding all ground of boasting 3:27,28: *Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay: but by the law of faith. 28 Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.* It presents God in His true character as the God and father of all men, of the Gentile no less than the Jew, cf. 3:29,30: *Is he the God of the Jews only? is he not also of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also: 30 Seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith.* And it establishes the law, cf. 3:31: *Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.*

The only thing I can think of that could be added to Hodge's analysis is the statement of v. 23 which shows us the universal need of all men for the gospel of Jesus Christ – *For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.*

Under these 5 headings, then, found in the space of these 11 verses we discover the need for the gospel – the nature of the gospel – the grounds upon which the gospel is based – the purpose which the gospel serves – and the results which follow the gospel.

I can hardly think of any section of any part of the Bible that couldn't come under one of these categories. And this is why I say that these 11 verses gives us the most concise but comprehensive statement pertaining to the Bible.

This is a good portion, therefore, for Christians to master. I think this would be a very good portion of Scripture for every Christian to memorize. And what I'd like to do over a few Sunday services is to study these verses under the headings I've just listed with an aim toward being sure that we're firmly grounded in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

And I'd like you to take it upon yourselves to read these verses many times – and even to memorize them. I may test you along the way to see what kind of progress you're making on that assignment.

Let me begin our study then under the heading that I interjected into Hodge's analysis –

The Universal Need for the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

This heading doesn't come first in the verses we've read this evening – but it does come first in Romans. The first two and a half chapters are in fact devoted to establishing the universal need of sinners for the salvation that's offered in the gospel. You could say that when Paul writes in 3:23 that *all have sinned and come short of the glory of God* – he's encapsulating all that he has said in the previous section of Romans.

Let's trace Paul's argument through that first section –

Following his introductory remarks in which he expresses his desire to come to them and minister the gospel to them – Paul lays down his thesis in 1:16,17: *For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. 17 For therein is the righteousness of*

God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith. This thesis statement is very telling in that it reveals to us that the gospel is all about righteousness. Some commentators suggest that righteousness should be the theme of Romans. They note that the word *righteousness* occurs 33 times in this epistle.

And there certainly is an emphasis on righteousness. Indeed you cannot adequately understand the gospel without knowing something about righteousness. Following this thesis statement, however, Paul begins to deal with the problem that all men face – 1:18: *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness.*

This verse brings us immediately to the need of all men for salvation. Men need salvation because men are subject to the wrath of God. Verse 18 doesn't tell us that men will one day be subjected to the wrath of God – no the verse says that God's wrath is revealed right now. God's wrath hangs suspended over sinners right now.

And in fact one of the ways in which God's wrath is dealt to sinners now is by the giving over of sinners to their sin –

1:24: *Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves.*

1:26: *For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature.*

1:28: *And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient.*

This naturally leads to the question – why? Why does God's wrath hang suspended over the sinner the moment he enters into this world. And the reason is given to us in 1:18 – *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness.*

Men hold the truth in unrighteousness – or in other words – sinful men suppress the truth. What truth do they suppress? They suppress the truth of the existence of God – 1:19,20: *Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. 20 For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.* This is why I say that every atheist, so called, is really a liar at heart. Men know that God exists. Men know that God is the Creator.

Whenever a sinner challenges you on the existence of God he's revealing to you that he's suppressing the truth. *Where is the proof of God?* – they ask. And the answer is *where can you look and not see God?* His handiwork surrounds us. His deity and power is discernible by His creation. So creation proves God.

That argument, of course, holds no sway over the sinner – he thinks he can come up with other explanations for the universe. Maybe it started with a big bang and is the progression

over millions and billions of years of beneficial mutations. He knows better in his heart. But because of his sinful nature he strives to suppress the truth. And the science of evolution illustrates to what lengths he'll go to suppress the truth.

Evolution, you see, is not the result of unbiased and purely objective study of the phenomena of the universe. It's the result, rather, of utterly biased study that is desperately trying to deny God. Now a sinner may insist that he's being objective when it comes to the whole question of God's existence – and may even sincerely believe that he's being objective in his approach to that question.

But when he insists that he's being objective we need to point out to him that we don't believe him – we believe the Bible. And the Bible tells us that *God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hold the truth in unrighteousness.*

So sinful men know that God exists – and in their sin they suppress that knowledge. They seek to suppress the knowledge that God is the Creator. There's a reason they seek to suppress that knowledge. You see, not only do they know in their hearts that God exists – but they also know that they're accountable to God. 1:32: *Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them.*

Do you see all that is implied in 1:32. Man knows the truth of God's judgment. It doesn't take a Bible to teach men that. The Bible can and does reveal much more detail about that but even without a Bible men have the knowledge of God's judgment stamped on their hearts.

They also know, as the verse says, that *they which commit such things are worthy of death.* In order for men to know that certain things are worthy of death they have to have some knowledge of right and wrong. And they do have that knowledge. It's stamped on their hearts.

This knowledge of God and this knowledge of right and wrong is what enables you and me as Christians to have a common point of contact with sinners. We know, of course, from the Bible that men are dead in trespasses and sins. Man became spiritually dead when he sinned against God in the garden of Eden. He was created in the image of God and in his original state he had the knowledge of God but when he sinned he marred that image but he didn't so completely eradicate it that he doesn't know in his heart whether or not God exists. He does know and he knows his accountability to God.

But remember Paul's statement in 1:18 – he suppresses the knowledge of God. Even though he knows in his heart that God exists and that he must give account of himself to God he does his best to deny that knowledge. Look at how Paul expresses it in 1:28 *even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge.* The knowledge of God is stamped on his mind and heart but he doesn't want to retain that knowledge – he wants to discard that knowledge. He wants to suppress that knowledge.

It's not that the question of God is open to dispute – it's rather the fact that men are born sinners – which means that they're born as rebels against God. And because they have this original knowledge of God stamped on their hearts and they have a sense of right and wrong which is evident by the existence of their conscience – because they have these things – their sin is inexcusable. *They are without excuse* – Paul writes in 1:20.

This answers the question pertaining to the fairness of God condemning men who have never heard the gospel. Should they be judged by the gospel if they've never heard it? And the answer is that they will not be judged by something they've never heard. They'll be judged only on the basis of what they truly know in their hearts.

And in their hearts they know that those who sin against God are worthy of death. They show the work of the law written in their hearts – 2:14,15. *For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: 15 Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another.* The very fact that they have consciences that can function to accuse or excuse their deeds demonstrates that God's law is written in their hearts.

And so if they have nothing else – if they've never seen a Bible – if they've never heard the 10 commandments – if they've never heard a preacher or a missionary – they won't be judged by those things – they'll be judged instead by the law of their hearts and they'll be condemned by that law.

The sinner knows enough to be condemned. There's no such thing as an innocent man going to hell because there's no such thing as an innocent man. They know enough to warrant their condemnation – but they know nothing of salvation. This is why we must endeavor to send out the gospel far and wide.

Now the Jews of Paul's day would gladly affirm all that Paul says in Romans 1 and in the first 16 verses of Romans 2. But in 2:17 Paul begins to deal with the Jews who had much more than the law stamped on their hearts. They had the law of Moses. They had the Bible as it existed then. They rested in the law and they boasted in God (2:17).

Unfortunately they didn't seem to have the ability (the willingness really) to see their own sin. They had no trouble seeing the sins of others – but in their pride they held to the mistaken notion that they had or could keep the law. And so Paul begins to deal with their self righteousness in 2:21 – **{2:21-24a}**.

Paul's aim in this section of Romans is to establish the universal guilt of all mankind. And so when he finishes the section in the 2nd half of chp. 2 and the 1st part of chapter 3 dealing with the guilt of the Jews – he states his conclusion to this section beginning in 3:9 – **{3:9-12, 19-20}**.

This first section in Romans, then, teaches us the universal guilt of all mankind. We cannot have a proper understanding or appreciation for the greatness of Christ's salvation until we understand and appreciate the extent of our guilt before a thrice holy God.

And not only is the guilt universal in its extent – but the sinfulness of man encompasses all his being – in other words – he is totally depraved. It's important for us to understand the meaning of that Calvinistic phrase. Some have sought to deny the doctrine of total depravity by suggesting that men are not as sinful as they possibly can be. Men – at least some men – even many men are very wicked – but not everyone is wicked to the same degree. How can we say, then, that men are totally depraved?

And when we say that men are depraved – we're not saying that they're as wicked as they can be – but we're saying what Paul says in this first section of Romans that the total man is effected by his sinful nature.

His mind is effected – and so we read in 3:11 *There is none that understandeth*. Why don't they understand? – because the matter of righteousness is too hard to comprehend? No – they don't understand because they don't want to understand – they seek instead to suppress the knowledge of God.

His will is effected – *they are all gone out of the way* Paul says in 3:12. This is an act of their will. They deliberately go out of the way of God. As Paul says back in 1:32 they know that they which commit such things are worthy of death – and not only do they do the same things, nevertheless – but they have pleasure in them that do them.

Their words are effected by their depravity – and so they're described in v. 14 as men *whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood: Destruction and misery are in their ways: the way of peace have they not known and there is no fear of God before their eyes.*

The total man is effected by his sin nature – his deeds, his words, his attitudes, his actions, his affections, his thoughts – all of man is totally depraved. And the thing that keeps him from reaching the full potential of his wickedness is not his sinfulness being balanced by some form of inherent goodness. No – the thing that keeps him from reaching the full potential of his wickedness is the restraining grace of God.

God restrains man's sins from reaching their potential – but as sinners continue in sin and fail to heed the call of the gospel – then God in judgment begins to give them over to their sins. He lifts his hand of restraint and then sinners begin to realize more and more of their wickedness which lies in their hearts.

I've made this point before that one of the most frightful aspects of hell is this aspect of being given over completely to sin. In hell there is no restraining grace. In hell men will reach the full potential of their wickedness. This is one of the reasons why hell is forever – because sin is forever. It's not as if sinning stops and then punishment begins. Were that the case we might hope that after thousands or millions of years the sinner might have paid for every sin – but part of the punishment for sin is being given over to sin and this will leave the sinner gnashing his teeth in angry rebellion against God for ever. And it will leave him subject to the wrath of God for ever.

We really are then, a needy people. We stand helpless and hopeless before a thrice holy God. We stand in desperate need for salvation. There is no escape from the punishment our sin calls for unless God Himself sees fit to intervene.

And the good news of the gospel is that God has done that very thing. The portion of Scripture we've read this evening begins in v. 21 with *But now* – thank God for those glorious words *but now*. Apart from those words we must be damned. But in those words Paul begins his positive exposition of the gospel of Jesus Christ. *But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets.*

Paul begins in this section to introduce us to a new and different kind of righteousness. It's a righteousness outside of ourselves. It's a righteousness that was won by Christ. It's a righteousness that can be freely received by those who simply see their need for it. It's a righteousness that can change the status of a guilty and condemned sinner. This righteousness can bring that sinner into a perfect standing with God for time and for eternity.

This is the righteousness, then, that we'll have to study as we make our way through the verses we've read. In the mean time, however, it's important to know and appreciate that the gospel is for sinners. Is the gospel for you? Have you come to see your own sin? Are you willing to acknowledge your own sinfulness? Acknowledging our sin means much more than admitting that we're slightly less than perfect.

Acknowledging our sin means agreeing with God that we deserve nothing from Him but everlasting condemnation. When Christ said to the scribes and Pharisees that He didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance – He wasn't suggesting that there were those who were righteous enough to be accepted by God. What He meant was that if there are those that think they're righteous enough to gain acceptance by God – then Christ would have no further word for them. He'll meet such people on the judgment day and their righteousness will be scrutinized by the strictest demands of the law – demands which Christ Himself met.

To those that realize they fall far short of that required righteousness – Christ came to call them. He came to call sinners to repentance – not the righteous. Dr. Paisley has said on numerous occasions that the only qualification for heaven is sinnership. Do you qualify? Have you seen your sins? Have you called on Christ to save you from your sins?

What a blessing to be saved – what a glorious gospel we have to share with those who need to be saved. It's for good reason that this gospel is called good news. I trust that the goodness of it will move you to respond to it and endeavor to spread it for Christ's glory.