

Summary: The Psalms that say support Paul’s “no one is righteous” all speak of “the righteous” (3:9-18). How can this be? Isaiah 59 holds the key: “righteousness” is not just about your personal goodness. It is about the salvation of God’s people. Israel was called to bring the righteousness of God to the nations, but Israel failed (3:9-20). The righteousness of God is not manifested in the Law – it is manifested in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ (3:21-26).

I recently met a man who openly declared  
that he had broken at least eight of the ten commandments  
(taken strictly in a literal sense!),  
and yet he proclaimed that he was a good man.

What would Paul say to such a man?

Sometimes we seem to think that we need to prove that he is not a good man.  
And we point to Romans 3 – “there is no one who does good.”

But remember that in the previous chapter Paul has said that

“when Gentiles, who do not have the law,  
by nature do the things of the law...  
they show that the work of the law is written on their hearts.” (2:14-15)

In other words, *sometimes* even unbelieving Gentiles “do the things of the law.”

So I think Paul would say to this man,

“I do not doubt that you love your wife and your children.  
I do not deny that in many respects you are a good and honorable man,  
but according to your own testimony,  
you have admitted that you are under the power of sin,  
after all, your conscience is already both accusing and defending you.”

Paul’s point is not that humanity does *nothing* good.

Paul’s point is that there is no one who does goodness.

There is no one who *only* practices goodness.

Your track record is mixed.

Sometimes you do good, sometimes you do evil –  
that’s the point of 2:15.

At the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3

Paul makes it clear that the Jew is no better.

Paul asked in v1 *What advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?*

To which he answers: *Much in every way.*

But then he asks: *What then? Are we Jews any better off?*

*No, not at all.*

The advantage of the Jews was that God had entrusted them with his oracles –  
with the word of God.

But Paul assumes that you know the history of Israel.

How did Israel do?

Was Israel faithful to God's word?

No.

And Paul used Psalm 51, the Psalm where even David, Israel's anointed king laments his sin.

Even the greatest Israelite of all time, the man after God's own heart,  
fell short.

And Paul says that God is just to inflict wrath on Israel (v5)

because through that judgment God will judge the world (v6).

Israel's faithlessness does not nullify the faithfulness of God.

Rather, God's purpose was to focus his judgment upon Israel and upon David,  
so that he might reveal his righteousness in Jesus Christ.

That is why Paul says that ultimately, Jews are no better off than Greeks.

They have the advantage of being entrusted with the oracles of God.

But they are no better.

*For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks,  
are under the power of sin, as it is written*

If you have a mixed track record –

if sometimes you sin and sometimes you do “the things of the law”

(whether Jew or Gentile) – then you are under the power of sin!

And here follows an interesting list of passages.

### **1. “No One Does Good” as It Is Written (3:9-18)**

First let's look at these passages in their OT context.

*None is righteous, no, not one;*

*no one understands;*

*no one seeks for God.*

*All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;*

*no one does good, not even one. (Psalm 14:1-3; 53:1-3)*

Psalms 14 and 53 are virtually identical (just a couple minor differences).

They both start “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”

But Psalm 14 and 53 both distinguish between the fools

(who do not seek after God)

and “my people.”

“Have they no knowledge,

all the evildoers who eat up my people as they eat bread

and do not call upon the LORD?” (14:4)  
Even more perplexing is 14:5:  
“There they are in great terror, for God is with the generation of the righteous.”

So Psalm 14 seems to make a clear distinction between the fool  
who does not seek God,  
and the righteous who call upon the LORD.

Paul goes on to quote Psalm 5:9  
*Their throat is an open grave;  
they use their tongues to deceive.* (Psalm 5:9)

In Psalm 5 the “they” is not all of humanity, but the “boastful,” the “evildoers,”  
whom the LORD abhors.  
And Psalm 5 concludes, “For you bless the righteous, O LORD;  
you cover him with favor as with a shield.”

Paul also quotes Psalm 140:3  
*The venom of asps is under their lips.* (Psalm 140:3)

Again the “they” here are “the arrogant,”  
but David asserts that “The LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted,  
and will execute justice for the needy.  
Surely the righteous shall give thanks to your name;  
the upright shall dwell in your presence.” (Psalm 140:12-13)

So again Paul is quoting from a Psalm that distinguishes between the righteous and the wicked.

So you probably won’t be surprised to hear that Romans 3:14 quotes Psalm 10:7  
*Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.* (Psalm 10:7)

which speaks of the “wicked” who pursues the poor,  
and also speaks of how God will hear the desire of the afflicted and rescue them.

And Romans 3:15  
*Their feet are swift to shed blood;  
in their paths are ruin and misery,  
and the way of peace they have not known.* (Isaiah 59:7-8)

The final quote  
*There is no fear of God before their eyes.* (Psalm 36:1)

comes from Psalm 36:1, which in verse 10 speaks of God’s faithfulness  
to “those who know him.”

All of these passages distinguish between the “righteous” and the “wicked”

clearly stating that God's people are "the righteous"  
and that those who persecute God's people are "the wicked."

So is Paul an idiot?

Does Paul think that no one will check up on him?

Does Paul not understand what these passages are saying?

Me genoito!

Absolutely not!

Rather, Paul understands that these are all talking about Israel.

Look at verse 19:

"Now we know that whatever the law says  
it speaks to those who are under the law."

When you look at all these passages,

all of them are talking about Israel.

The "righteous" are those faithful Israelites who seek God.

The "wicked" are those rebellious Israelites who do not seek God.

The key to understanding what Paul is doing is found in verses 15-17,  
where he cites Isaiah 59.

Isaiah 59 could be said to be the Romans 3 of the Old Testament.

Isaiah speaks to Israel and says

"your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God,  
and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear." (59:2)

"No one enters suit justly; no one goes to law honestly...

Their works are works of iniquity and deeds of violence are in their hands.

Their feet run to evil, and they are swift to shed innocent blood;

their thoughts are thoughts of iniquity...

The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths..."

Isaiah speaks on behalf of all Israel and says,

"Justice is turned back, and righteousness stands afar off;

for truth has stumbled in the public squares, and uprightness cannot enter.

Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil makes himself a prey." (59:14-15)

NOTICE, Isaiah also says that some *do* depart from evil.

Some do "turn from transgression" (v20).

Isaiah would agree (as would Paul) that there are some "righteous" –

namely, those who have repented of their sins and believed in God's promise!

BUT, that's NOT the point of the law.

The law was NEVER a way to earn salvation.

(Please, never think that any Israelite ever thought that he could earn salvation!)  
Rather, the purpose of the law was to establish *righteous Israel*  
(a national righteousness, or after the failure of Israel in Judges and Samuel,  
a royal righteousness of David's house).

At least, that is what Israel was called to be.

But even Moses knew that Israel would fail (Deuteronomy 29-30).

And so Paul says in Galatians that the real purpose of the law was as a paedagogue,  
a servant who disciplines the children,  
in order to discipline the son of God in his minority.  
Israel in the wilderness is the son of God in his "terrible twos."  
Israel in exile is the prodigal son in his teenage rebellion, sowing his wild oats.

The way that Paul says it here in Romans 3  
is that the law spoke to Israel (to those under the law),  
so that every mouth may be stopped,  
and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

What does that mean?

God's purpose in giving the law, was to show the whole world that the law cannot save.  
The advantage of Israel was that God spoke to them.  
But even that was not enough.

The law cannot save.

*For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight,  
since through the law comes knowledge of sin. (v20)*

Literally, by works of the law no *flesh* will be justified in his sight.

We'll hear a lot more from Paul in Romans about the "flesh."

As Paul says in Romans 8,

God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.

The flesh is weak and powerless –

and the law does not provide a way for the flesh to be justified.

The whole history of Israel demonstrates this!

So then, what is the purpose of the law?

Okay, now I'd like you to hear verses 9-18 again –

this time thinking about how Paul is weaving these passages together:

## **2. "The Whole World Held Accountable to God" by the Law (3:9-20)**

*We have already charged that all,*

*both Jews and Greeks,  
are under the power of sin, as it is written:*

*None is righteous, no, not one;  
no one understands;  
no one seeks for God.*

*All have turned aside;  
together they have become worthless;  
no one does good, not even one. (Psalm 14:1-3)*

*Their throat is an open grave;  
they use their tongues to deceive. (Psalm 5:9)*

*The venom of asps is under their lips. (Psalm 140:3)  
Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness. (Psalm 10:7)*

*Their feet are swift to shed blood;  
in their paths are ruin and misery,  
and the way of peace they have not known. (Proverbs 1:15-17; Isaiah 59:7-8)*

*There is no fear of God before their eyes. (Psalm 36:1)*

This is true of Israel.

It is true of the Gentiles.

The fact that there are a handful of people who have repented and believed  
does not change the fact that there is NO ONE  
who can bring the salvation that God had promised.

When Paul says that no one does good,  
he is not saying that no one ever does anything good.  
Rather, he is saying that no one is able to do the goodness that the law called for.  
The law called Israel to be the righteous mediator to the nations –  
But Israel has failed.  
And so God called David to succeed where Israel failed.  
But the House of David has failed.  
Truly there is no one righteous – not even one.  
If there was a righteous one,  
then he would bring about the promised salvation.

But Isaiah 59 is all about this!

*The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice.  
He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intercede;*

*Then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him.  
He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation upon his head;  
He put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak....  
And a Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression...”*

Paul's conception of the *righteousness of God* is rooted in Isaiah 59.

“Then his own arm brought him salvation, and his righteousness upheld him.  
He put on righteousness and a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation upon his head.”

The law NEVER produced a deliverer.  
The law could not produce a savior.  
Through the law comes knowledge of sin.

And so Paul says, yes, the Jews had the advantage of being entrusted with the oracles of God,  
but they are no better off in the long run,  
because that very law brings the knowledge of sin;  
that very law was designed to stop the mouths of fools,  
and hold the whole world accountable to God.

And so by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight.  
You cannot be declared righteous by the works of the law.

All, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin.

### **3. “But Now” (3:21-26)**

*But now...*

I have to stop here for a moment.  
Do you realize how important this little word “now” is?  
But NOW all that Isaiah 59 said has come true.

Very often, when Paul says “but now” he is contrasting our situation “in Christ”  
with the prior situation “under the law.”

Now is the day of salvation.  
When Paul says “now” in contrast with “then” he is talking about  
the new eschatological reality in Jesus Christ.

It is an eschatological now!  
Already, NOW, the last-days salvation of God has begun.  
In the resurrection of Jesus we have the beginning of the end.  
All that God had promised to Israel has been revealed in the gospel of Jesus.

And you see that clearly in verse 21:  
*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law,  
although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it...*

What do we mean by “the righteousness of God”?  
Could it mean simply that God is just?  
Back in 1:16-17 Paul had set forth the theme,  
*I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation  
to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*

*For in it [in the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith,  
as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith.*

Paul has been speaking of God's wrath against the unrighteousness of men.  
God's judgment has come against all men –  
all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin.  
And by the works of the law no flesh will be justified.  
In other words, if God is righteous (and he is!)  
then if he judges us according to the standard of the law,  
we will all be condemned.

So the righteousness of God cannot mean simply “that he is just.”

After all, the Law and the Prophets demonstrate that God always does what is right.  
Many, many times throughout the law and the prophets  
God manifests his “justice” against Israel and against the nations  
(and many of you have struggled with “the righteousness of God” in this sense,  
as you see how many times God punished sin with horrific judgments!)

And that is why Paul says that in the gospel –  
(and what is the gospel?)

It is the good news about what *Jesus has done*.  
The gospel in Romans 1, verses 1-4, is the gospel concerning Jesus –  
the good news that Jesus has been raised from the dead  
and seated at the right hand of the Father.)  
and so *in the gospel* – in the good news about what Jesus has done –  
the righteousness of God is revealed.

And Paul says in 3:21  
that *now*, in the gospel (apart from the law) the righteousness of God has been manifested.  
The law never *manifested* the righteousness of God.  
The law and the prophets *bore witness* to the righteousness of God.

What is the difference?

Put simply it is the difference between the resurrection of Jesus and this sermon.

This sermon is NOT the resurrection of Jesus –  
but it does bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus,  
because in this sermon I am telling you  
that the resurrection of Jesus  
is where the righteousness of God is manifested!

Likewise, in the Law and the Prophets  
you find many witnesses to the righteousness of God.  
you find many pictures portraying the coming resurrection,  
many voices declaring the gospel in advance.



But the law never manifests the righteousness of God.  
Because only in the resurrection of Jesus is the Word manifested in the flesh.

So the righteousness of God was revealed once-for-all in the death and resurrection of Jesus.  
Because it is in the cross that God showed “his righteousness at the present time,  
so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (v26)

The righteousness of God had never been manifested before,  
because never before had God put forward a propitiation for sin (v25).  
The death of Christ was “to show God’s righteousness *at the present time* –  
in other words, “now”!

We’ll talk more next time about Paul’s doctrine of justification –  
how *we* are declared righteous in Jesus Christ.  
For now we are focused on how God is righteous –  
and especially how God has demonstrated his righteousness,  
how God has manifested his righteousness,  
how God has revealed his righteousness  
in the gospel, NOW, at the present time.

God has revealed his righteousness in the resurrection of Jesus.  
God has manifested his righteousness in the atoning sacrifice of the cross.

Because in the gospel – in the good news of the resurrection –  
the righteousness of God has been revealed.

In the resurrection of Jesus  
God is revealed to be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus

There really can be only application of this message:  
believe in Jesus!

Repent of your sins – repent of thinking that you can be good enough to please God –  
and believe in Jesus!  
You can never be good enough.  
The kindness of God is meant to lead you to repentance.

So believe in Jesus,  
and be thankful for the righteousness of God revealed in the resurrection of Jesus!