

Aug. 1, 2021

God in the Hands of Angry Sinners

Romans 3:9-18

LTS: Matt. 15:10-20

The gospel of Jesus Christ cures the terminal “disease” of sin, but only in those who humbly confess they need it.

Jonathan Edwards is commonly referred to as the greatest theological and philosophical mind America has ever produced. In the early 1700’s he served as pastor to a small church in Northampton Massachusetts where he preached the word of God faithfully for many years. If you are at all familiar with his name it is probably because your high school American literature teacher required you to read a sermon that he preached on July 8, 1731. The name of the sermon was

Sinners In the Hands of an Angry God.

The preaching of this sermon proved to be the catalyst for the first great awakening in New England – a gospel firestorm that began in “Old” England under the preaching of George Whitefield and spread like wildfire throughout the whole of Britain and the American Colonies as well.

As you can probably deduce from the title of the sermon, it was a strong (if not shocking) appeal for sinners to own their sin, embrace the gospel, and escape the otherwise inescapable wrath of God. The very first words of this sermon give us a taste. Edwards begins...

THERE is nothing that keeps wicked men at any one moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God.

He asks” What are we, that we should think to stand before Him, at whose rebuke the earth trembles, and before whom the rocks are thrown down?

They deserve to be cast into hell; so that divine justice never stands in the way; it makes no objection against God’s using his power at any moment to destroy them. Yea, on the contrary, justice calls aloud for an infinite punishment of their sins.¹

I suspect Edwards got the idea of a sermon like this from Paul’s letter to the Romans. Like Edwards, Paul was attempting to show the recipients of his letter in Rome that God’s wrath

¹ Wikisource: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Sinners_in_the_Hands_of_an_Angry_God

against sinners is just and deserved. It could come at any moment, and when it comes it will be a terrible act of divine justice against sin.

The Jews, however, took offense at Paul's gospel. They found it impossible to believe that God would judge and condemn the very people whom he called to Himself and chose as his own precious possession. They railed against the teaching that God is no respecter of persons when it comes to divine judgment. They preferred a kinder, gentler God who would overlook their sin and give them a pass while the rest of the world suffered under His wrath.

Many people who hear this message reject it out of hand because it strikes them as unloving and judgmental. But consider this: if you were at home with your wife and children one evening and unbeknownst to you, your house caught on fire, would it be unloving and judgmental for a neighbor to pound frantically on your front door begging you to wake up, snatch up your children and run for your life?

Or imagine a doctor who while examining your child discovers a cancerous tumor. Would it be unloving and judgmental to tell the parents that their child has cancer and needs immediate treatment?

On one of my first trips to Ukraine, the team I was serving with took us into the Chernobyl Zone to minister to the poor villagers and orphans who lived there. The trip into that part of Ukraine took about two hours during which time I engaged in conversation with a young Pediatrician. I asked him what it was like after the nuclear power plant exploded. His response was mainly about the children.

He told me that whenever a child was brought to the clinic and it was clear that they had terminal radiation poisoning, they were instructed to withhold the truth from the family and simply prescribe medication to address some of the symptoms and manage the pain until their untimely death. But what if you had the cure. Wouldn't you run to that village and pound on every door pleading with them to accept the cure?

In Romans 1-3 this is what Paul is doing. He is pounding upon the doors of his fellow Jews pleading with them to leave everything behind and run to the remedy! But they are hesitant. Why? The bad news about their standing with God is offensive to them. They are too proud to confess that they have contracted – even before they were born, the terminal disease called S.I.N.

I see two major points in this text. First, Paul talks about...

I. The People Infected with the "Disease."

II. The symptoms that identify the "Disease" But before we unpack these two themes, let's take a moment to read the text before us.

Read Rom. 3:9-18

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.

¹⁰ as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." ¹³ "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." ¹⁴ "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." ¹⁵ "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ¹⁶ in their paths are ruin and misery, ¹⁷ and the way of peace they have not known."

¹⁸ "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Paul was determined to awaken these Jewish men and women to the danger they were in before the day God's just and holy wrath is unleashed upon sinners.

You see, mankind has a disease that is infinitely more serious than radiation poisoning and the terminal cancers that result. We are sinners by birth and sinners by choice. This, however, is not welcome news. No one wants to hear that they have a terminal disease and no one wants to be told that their whole being is stained by sin. But that's what makes the good news so great! Why? As destructive, painful, and deadly as sin is, there is a cure. What's more, though the production of the antidote was extremely costly, it has been completely paid for by the only person in the world who had sufficient resources to pay the bill in full. Because of this gracious sacrifice, the treatment is available as a gift of grace to all who will believe and receive it.

But there is a catch. In order to receive the antidote, one has to freely admit that they are hopelessly infected with the disease (SIN). They have to believe that the cure God offers is absolutely sufficient for their healing. And finally, they must personally and humbly ask for and receive it by faith.

Now, as we begin wading into this text, we hear Paul announcing the identities of...

I. The People Infected with the "Disease."

Read 3:9

⁹ What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.

1. Paul wants us to know who has contracted the SIN disease. Verse 9 tells us that the infected people are Jews and Greeks. Now that may sound like a narrow swath of the population of the world, but it's really not. In the minds of the Jews to whom Paul is writing, there were only two kinds of people in the world. There were the Jews and there were Gentiles. No one else existed. So, when the Jews referenced the Greeks, they really meant everyone who was not Jewish. They

were the nations, the Greeks, the Gentiles. So, Jews and Gentiles were the only two people groups in that culture.

2. Nevertheless, there may be a third group here that Paul refers to. If you are reading the New American Standard version, this is clear, but the ESV has muddled it some by inserting into verse 9 the word “Jews.” This is not translation but interpretation. The word “Jews” is inserted because the translators made the interpretive decision that even though the word “Jews” is not in the original, it is what Paul meant. But perhaps that is NOT what Paul meant.

3. Notice with me in v 9 where Paul asks. “Are WE better than they?” The question is, who is the We? Glance back at verse 8 for a moment and notice that Paul complains that some people have spread a slanderous report about what “We say.” In this statement “we” clearly refers to Paul and His companions in ministry. In other words, it may be that Paul is now referencing NOT Jews or Gentiles, but Christians. He may be implying that while he is calling all Gentiles and Jews to repent, we Christians were likewise born with the same terminal illness. No one is immune to the S.I.N. disease. From conception we have the same nature and the same propensity to sin. The whole world is universally infected, and no one is excluded. This is the one area of theological thought where its appropriate to believe in universalism. We believe in the universal sinfulness of mankind.

4. So, in verse 9 Paul seems to be saying: Are we [Christians] inherently better off than the Jews or the Gentiles? “Not at all!, Paul says.” for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are under sin. So, whether Paul is adding a third category of people into the equation or not, the point he is establishing is that the S.I.N disease is a universal problem. No one born into the world (except Jesus) is immune to this spiritual contagion. All of us are terminally ill with sin. And none of us will enter into eternal life with God until the antidote is humbly received and applied.

5. So Paul has taken pains to reveal who is infected with the S.I.N. disease. In a word – Everyone without exception. And Paul makes this clear in his definitive word choices. He says things like,

- V. 9 “None is righteous. No, not one. Someone will ask, “What about me? I mean I’m pretty Good!” NO! not you!
- V. 11 “No one understands
- V. 11 “No one seeks for God
- V. 12 “All have turned aside.
- V. 12 No one does good, not even one.

6. You see, Paul isn’t picking on the Jews. Rome is on fire! Everyone without exception is in danger! Paul is pounding on every door! It doesn’t matter if you were born into a Jewish home, a Gentile home, or even a Christian home! You must hear the BAD NEWS that your spiritual house is on fire! Proclaiming the bad news is the most loving thing we can do – even if people mock, scoff, and rail against the message. It is the only message that can awaken one to his need to repent, believe, and be saved.

Here is a sample of how Edwards presented the bad news. He said,

Your wickedness makes you, as it were, heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink, and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf; and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold you, and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock. Were it not for the sovereign pleasure of God, the earth would not bear you one moment, for you are a burden to it.

7. In the 1740's, sermons like this transformed the American colonies because they awakened thousands upon thousands of men and women to their need to flee from the wrath of God and fly to Christ for salvation. And yet, the bad news of mankind's perilous standing before God in Paul's day (and ours) was largely despised.

8. Witness the complexity of the arguments the Jews came up with in the previous passage.

- O Paul! If your gospel is correct, God is unfaithful
- O Paul! If your gospel is right God is unrighteous
- O Paul! If your Gospel is true, God is unjust.
- O God, we just can't trust you any more!

8. This is what R.C. Sproul called "God in the Hands of Angry Sinners. It parallels what we read in Psalm 2 where the Psalmist points out that the nations rage, plot, and scheme against the Lord and his anointed. They hate his holiness. They despise his law. They loath His rule. And apart from the transforming power of the Spirit, all people join in the rebellion.

9. Here's how Paul presents it (v.9) We have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks are all under sin.

A. "Under sin" means not only 'to be a sinner'; it means to be a helpless slave to the power of sin (cf. 6:15–23).²

B. John R.W. Stott suggests that Paul appears almost to personify sin as a cruel tyrant who holds the human race imprisoned in guilt and under judgment. Sin is on top of us, weighs us down, and is a crushing burden."

² Douglas J. Moo, "[Romans](#)," in *New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, ed. D. A. Carson et al., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 1127.

³There is nothing good about sin. Sometimes it makes us feel good for a moment, but in the end it leads to judgment.

C. The remaining verses in this passage tell us what it means to live under sin. To say it a different way, it reveals...

II. The symptoms that identify the "Disease"

1. During the first year of the covid-19 pandemic, it was common to find on the doors of many businesses a list of symptoms that indicate that one may have the virus. Something similar is happening here in Romans 3:10-18

2. People infected with the S.I.N. disease are marked by five characteristics that expose how truly sinful humans are. To use the appropriate theological term, this passage teaches that man is Totally Depraved.

3. What does the doctrine of Total Depravity tell us about mankind? Well, it doesn't teach that all people are as bad as we can possibly be. Rather, it teaches that every aspect of our being is stained by sin. The remaining verses in this text reveal five categories of human depravity. First, Paul introduces us to the

A. Depraved Mind.

Read v. 10-11

"As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God."

- 1) The phrase "As it is written" indicates that the author is about to substantiate his argument with O.T. Scripture. In fact, Paul appeals to what may be Seven O.T. texts to support his description of a sinful humanity. We won't have time this morning to look at all of them, but several will be highlighted for discussion in your small groups this week.
- 2) First, he appeals to Ecc. 7:20 which reads, "Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins."
- 3) This affirms the extent of human depravity. Everyone without exception is captivated by sin.
- 4) Sinners don't understand God nor do they even seek for God. To be under Sin ruins our relationship with God.
- 5) You may say you are religious and spiritual but that doesn't mean that you are seeking God.
- 6) Rather, it means you are living in rebellion against God who has clearly and sufficiently revealed Himself in his World and in His Word. No one really seeks for God. He is not hiding from you. He is NOT difficult to find. He is everywhere you go. You just don't want

³ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 99.

the God who has revealed Himself in the Bible. In fact, as One theologian suggests that “If God were to expose His life to our hands, He would not be safe for a second. We would not ignore Him; we would destroy Him.”⁴ We know this is true, because this is exactly what we did. These are manifestations of a depraved mind.

B. Depraved Behavior: Sin Ruins how we live. Sin causes us to despise God’s wisdom and counsel.

- 1) Here Paul appeals to Psalm 53:2-3 to declare that all have turned aside. Isaiah 53 says, “All of us like sheep have gone astray. Everyone of us has turned to His own way.” This is rebellion against God. We don’t seek His counsel. we don’t follow Him. We prefer to be led by our feelings and impulses.
- 2) Paul says we have become “worthless,” which means corrupt. We love the things that God hates. Apart from Christ we desire and pursue the very things that he has forbidden.
- 3) Mankind bears the marks (scars) of a depraved mind, and our depraved minds drive us toward Depraved behavior.

C. Depraved Speech. Sin ruins our speech . (13-14). When I was young, my friends and I labored to outdo one another in filthy speech.

- 1) Paul says of sinners “THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE, WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING,” “THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS”;¹⁴ “WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS”
- 2) Paul finds this warning in Psa. 5:9; Psa 10:7; and Psa. 140:3
- 3) Notice the key words: Throat, Tongues; lips, Mouth. One of the things that the Spirit changes when we are Redeemed is our language - the way we speak to each other and about one another. For “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.”
- 4) Think about it, the biggest problems in relationships are speech problems. We talk when we should be silent, and we are silent when we should speak. The tongue is like a sword that can kill. The tongue has the power to kill marriages and shipwreck families.
- 5) Depraved speech always leads to...

D. Depraved relationships (15-17). Sin Ruins our relationships

Paul draws this point from Isa. 59:7 and Prov. 1:16; “THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD,¹⁶ DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS,¹⁷ AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN.”

⁴ R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, (Wheaton, Ill, Tyndale House Publishers, 1985), 230

- 1) Consider the state of American society today. Our relationships with one another have become unhinged. The murder rate in our country is off the chart!
- 2) Sadly, over the years I have counseled many married couples who were so embittered toward one another that they descended into physical abuse, not only against wives, but children as well.
- 3) One of the fruits of the Spirit is “Peace.” But for the unregenerate man or woman, there is often a total lack of peace... even when not manifested in verbal hostility.

E. Depraved Theology (18) once again, Sin ruins how we think about God.

- 1) Psalm 36:1. Transgression speaks to the ungodly within his heart; There is no fear of God before his eyes.
- 2) Where there is no fear of God there is no restraint. There are no boundaries that keeps one’s flesh in check.
- 3) And when you think about it, everything begins here. It all starts with our theology – whether we believe there is a God to whom we will all have to give an account or not
- 4) So there it is. Five symptoms that one is Under Sin.

A Depraved mind
 Depraved behavior
 Depraved Speech
 Depraved Relationships
 Depraved Theology

Because of these things the wrath of God is coming. But the truly wonderful things is that there is a Remedy. There is a cure for the S.I.N. disease.

When Jonathan Edwards got to the end of his sermon he concluded with the following words of hope. He said,

And now we have an extraordinary opportunity, a Day wherein Christ has flung the door of mercy wide open, and stands in the Door calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners; a Day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God; many are daily coming from the East, West, North, and South; many that were very lately in the same miserable condition that you are in, are now in a happy state, with their hearts filled with love to Him who has loved them and washed them from their sin in His own blood, and rejoicing in Hope of the Glory of God. How awful it is to be left behind at such a Day! To see so many others feasting, while you are pining and perishing. To see many rejoicing and singing for Joy of Heart, while you have cause to mourn for sorrow of heart...

How can you rest one Moment in such a condition? Therefore, let everyone that is out of Christ, now awake and fly from the Wrath to come.⁵

The gospel of Jesus Christ cures the terminal “disease” of sin, but only in those who humbly confess they need it.

⁵ Ibid, Edwards