

Romans 3:1-12

There is no-one righteous!

Right at the beginning of Romans Paul puts the spotlight on Jesus Christ and the gospel of God (Romans 1:1-4). In 1:17 he compresses the gospel into a nutshell: this is the gospel that reveals a righteousness from God, which is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe. But before unpacking this gospel, Paul has to convince us of our need, which he proceeds to do in 1:18-3:20. Only after the diagnosis of sin are we likely to accept the cure.

The diagnosis analogy is a good one, but here I want to use the analogy of Paul driving a combine harvester! Like Jeremiah, he has to root out, and pull down, and destroy, and overthrow, before he can build and plant (Jeremiah 1:10). Paul must demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God (2Corinthians 10:4).

He begins in 1:18-31 with the heaving mass of humanity, who ought at least to recognise and honour God through the witness of creation, but who have instead turned away to sensual pleasures. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity etc. (Romans 1:29-31). Paul's combine harvester goes chop, chop, chop etc. if we take the things he is saying to heart, none of us will come out unscathed.

But the proud and self-righteous may feel unaffected. In 2:1-16 Paul is back on his harvester, chop, chop, chop etc! "You therefore, have no excuse," he says, "You who sit in your ivory tower judging others." He then goes on to illuminate his readers on the nature of God's judgments.

Paul is preparing the way for the Lord: *every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed* (Isaiah 40:4-5).

But maybe the religious man still feels intact, "We have Abraham as our father!" "We go to church every week!" Paul comes along and starts chopping away at the roots of false religion and religious hypocrisy (Romans 2:17-29).

It doesn't matter who you are, Paul shows convincingly that *all are under sin* (Romans 3:9). But he's not quite done. He continues to talk about the Jew, even though what he says is relevant to us all. They have the advantage of circumcision (covenant with God), and have been entrusted with the very words of God, given at Sinai (Romans 3:1-2).

He then raises a key question for the book of Romans, and in the early church,

Romans 3:3 *But what if some did not have faith?*

Why did God's chosen people lack faith? And especially, why didn't some (most of them), believe in Jesus as Messiah? (Also see John 1:11). It wasn't the first time God's people lacked faith. After the Exodus, even though they had the gospel preached to them, it was of no value to them because they didn't mix God's promises with faith (Hebrews 4:2). As a result that generation spent 40 years in the wilderness and never entered the Promised Land. But did their lack of faith nullify God's promises. No! God fulfilled his promises to the next generation (Joshua 21:45). Paul is saying something similar (Romans 3:3-4).

The promises of God for Israel were not cancelled out or given to the church with the coming of Jesus, even though many did not believe, and still don't. This is very important, because if God doesn't keep his promises for Israel, how can we be sure He will keep His promises to us?

Even though we fail, God remains true. He is the only true God (John 17:3). Let God be true and every man a liar (Romans 3:4). God's assessment of human beings is true. When we look into the perfect law that brings freedom (James 1:25), we will also find that the word of God reveals and convicts us of our sin (Romans 3:20, Psalm 116:11). Until we acknowledge our sin, we are liars and God is true (1John 1:10).

King David came to this realisation after he committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband killed. Eventually David confessed, "I have sinned" (2Samuel 12:13). Why? *So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge* (Psalm 51:4, which is David's confession, quoted in Romans 3:4.) Our confession proves God to be true and glorifies him. Paul's choppers are now getting close to the bone.

Paul knows he is leaving himself open to accusation. Some may exclaim, "That's not fair! How can God judge me if my unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly?" (Romans 3:5). Paul is appalled by the suggestion and asks, how then can God judge the world? (Romans 3:6). But the accuser may come back again and say, *If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases His glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?* (Romans 3:7). Paul has no time for this: can we do evil that good may result? (Romans 3:8).

The strange thing is that good often does result from evil, for example the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). But there's a big difference between God doing something wonderful in someone's sinful and broken life, and deliberately doing evil to try and find God's grace! The fact is that when, like the prodigal we come to our senses, confess and return to our heavenly Father, His love, grace and mercy is glorified.

Usually broken things are not admired (e.g. a chipped vase.) But God is pleased with broken things, with a broken spirit and a contrite heart, and King David knew so well (Psalm 51:17).

What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? (Romans 3:9). Can you imagine Paul on his combine harvester in today's world? Greedy bankers who take huge bonuses; politicians and expenses scandals; the police and Hillsborough; redefining marriage; media and phone hacking; the NHS and abortion; Rotherham and child abuse; the church and false doctrine. Are we any better? Not at all! As it is written, there is no-one righteous, not even one! (Romans 3:12).

The heart of the problem is the problem of the heart – sin in the human heart. The environment has a part to play (e.g. a plant), but even the best environment won't make a plant grow if the seed is corrupted. The problem is the corruptible seed of sin in each one of us. This is the reason Jesus came, to die for our sins, and to rise again from the dead, so that the incorruptible seed of the word of God, which lives and abides forever, can be planted into our lives to give us new life. Even though we are sinners, God loved us so much he sent his only begotten Son, that whoever believes, shall not perish, but have everlasting life (John 3:16). But we have to own up to sins, and confess, "I have sinned." Until we do we are in effect saying, "I am true, and God is a liar!" And for those who say that, *Their condemnation is deserved* (Romans 3:8).