

I greatly longed to understand Paul's epistle to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression "the righteousness of God," because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and deals righteously in punishing the unrighteous. . . . Night and day I pondered until . . . I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Thereupon, I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before "the righteousness of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven.

Paul's eagerness to preach the gospel arose from his recognition that the gospel was (a) an unpaid debt, and (b) the saving power of God. The first gave him a sense of obligation because he had been put in trust with the gospel, and the second, a sense of conviction because the gospel had saved him and it could save others.

Today, the gospel is still both a debt to discharge and a power to experience. Only when we have grasped these truths shall we be able to say with Paul "I am not ashamed of the gospel. I am under obligation. I am eager to share the gospel with the world."

## BIBLE STUDIES ON ROMANS 1-5

# The World's Guilt

John Stott

Nothing keeps people away from Christ more than their inability to see their need of him, or their unwillingness to admit it. As Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). This does not mean that some people are righteous and do not need salvation, but that some people *think* they are. In that condition of self-righteousness, they will never come to Christ. Just as we go to the doctor only when we admit that we are ill and cannot heal ourselves, we go to Christ only when we admit that we are guilty sinners and cannot save ourselves.

This is the principle which lies behind the long passage before us. Paul's purpose is to "lay the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin" (3:9) and that "there is no difference" between us (3:22). Paul does more than bring an accusation; he marshals the evidence against us, proves our guilt, and secures a conviction. All men and women, without exception, from both the Jewish and the Gentile worlds are sinful, guilty, and without excuse before God. Therefore, they are under his wrath. Already they stand condemned. It is a theme of great solemnity and an indispensable foundation for world evangelization.

Paul demonstrates the universality of sin and guilt by dividing the human race into several sections, and then arraigns them one by one. In each case his procedure is identical. He reminds each group of their knowledge of God and of goodness. He then confronts them with the uncomfortable fact that they have not lived up to their knowledge. Instead, they have suppressed it, and even contradicted it, by continuing to live in unrighteousness. And, therefore, they are guilty, inexcusably guilty, before God. No one can plead innocence, because no one can plead ignorance. This is the thrust of Paul's argument throughout.

He addresses four sections of people. He describes the depraved Gentile world in its idolatry, immorality, and anti-social behavior. He addresses critical moralists (both Gentiles and Jews), who profess high ethical standards and apply them to everybody except themselves. He turns to self-righteous Jews who boast of their knowledge of God's Law, but do not obey it. And then, he encompasses the whole human race and concludes that we are all guilty before God.

To each group his message is substantially the same:

You know the righteous character and requirements of God. Yet you have persisted in your unrighteousness, so you are guilty. You have no excuse. You have no hope either—apart from the grace of God who justifies those who believe in Jesus.

## The Depraved Gentile World (Romans 1:18–32)

In verses 16–20, the apostle develops an argument of relentless logic as he refers successively to the power of God, the righteousness of God, the wrath of God, and the glory of God in creation.

Our text begins with verse 18, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven.” This reference to God’s wrath raises three questions:

1. *What is the wrath of God?* It does not mean God loses his temper or is malicious or spiteful. God’s wrath is his righteous hostility to evil, his refusal to condone it, and his just judgment upon it.
2. *Against what is God’s wrath revealed?* Paul answers that it is revealed “against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (v. 18). In other words, all human beings know something of God from the creation. The creation is a visible disclosure of the invisible God. That is why godless people are without excuse. They deliberately suppress the truth about God which they know. It is against this willful rebellion that God’s wrath is revealed.

Idolators are also inexcusable, for “although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God” (v. 21). Instead, they exchanged the glory of God for images of human beings, birds, beasts, and reptiles (v. 23). “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (v. 25); indeed, the supreme lie of worshipping created things as if they were the Creator. This condemnation applies not only to primitive idolatry but equally to the more sophisticated idolatry of Western materialism. It is a deliberate denial of the transcendent reality of God.

3. *How is God’s wrath revealed?* God’s wrath will be revealed in the future, in the judgment of the Last Day, for there is such a thing as “the wrath to come.” But meanwhile, there is a present disclosure of the wrath of God, which Paul describes in his terrible threefold refrain:

- God gave them over to immorality (v. 24).
- God gave them over to “shameful lusts” (v. 26). In particular to homosexual practices which are against nature and are a violation of God’s created order.
- God gave them over to “a depraved mind” (v. 28) which leads to antisocial behavior. Paul lists twenty-one examples such as greed, envy, slander, malice, and murder. He concludes that people practice these things and encourage others to do so, even though they know God’s righteous decree is that those who practice them deserve death.

In summary, Paul describes the wrath of God as: (a) God’s righteous hostility to evil, (b) directed against people who know something of God’s truth and righteousness but deliberately suppress it, and (c) it is being revealed in the process of moral and social degeneration.

## Critical Moralists (2:1–16)

Paul turns from a world characterized by shameless immorality to a world characterized by self-conscious moralism. Far from approving of lawless behavior (1:32), these people deplore and condemn it (2:1–3). Who are they? Twice in the Greek

sentence (which is obscured by the NIV), Paul addresses them as, “O man” (vv. 1,3, KJV), indeed, “O [critical] man.” He is referring to every human being, whether Jew or Gentile, male or female, who is a moralist and passes moral judgments on other people.

Paul’s argument is basically the same with moralizers as with those who are openly immoral: both groups have a certain knowledge of righteousness; both contradict their knowledge by their behavior; and both are, therefore, without excuse (1:20; 2:1).

Paul draws attention to three things about the moralizers, which are surely true of us:

1. *Our hypocrisy (2:1–3).* Paul uncovers a strange human foible. It is our tendency to be critical of everybody except ourselves. We are as harsh in our judgment of others as we are lenient towards ourselves. We work ourselves up into a state of self-righteous indignation over the disgraceful behavior of others, while somehow the very same behavior seems not nearly as serious when it is ours and not theirs. We even gain a vicarious satisfaction from condemning in others the very faults which we excuse in ourselves. Freud called this moral gymnastic “projection,” but Paul described it centuries before Freud.

This practice, Paul argues, leaves us without excuse. If our critical faculties are so well-developed that we become experts in the moral evaluation of others, we can hardly plead ignorance of moral issues in ourselves. On the contrary, in judging others (v. 1), we thereby condemn ourselves who do the very same things. This is the hypocrisy of the double standard—a high standard for others, but a conveniently low one for ourselves.

2. *Our impenitence (vv. 4–5).* Sometimes, Paul says, we take refuge in the theological argument that in the “riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience” (v. 4) God will condone our sin. That is, he is too kind and loving to punish anybody. But such trust in God’s patience is not faith; it is presumption. The kindness of God is intended to lead us to repentance, not to give us an excuse for sinning. If it does not lead us to repent, then because of our stubbornness and unrepentant hearts (v. 5), we are storing up wrath, God’s holy wrath, against ourselves on the Day of Wrath when his righteous judgment will be revealed.
3. *Our works (vv. 6–11).* Paul emphasizes the indispensable necessity of good works if we are to escape the judgment of God. In verse 6, he states the inflexible principle, laid down in the Old Testament (e.g., Psalm 62:12; Proverbs 24:12) and repeated by Jesus and his apostles, that God will give to “each person according to what he has done” or God will “requite a man according to his work” (RSV).

Some people are immediately indignant at this statement. “Have you taken leave of your senses, Paul?” they ask. “Do you begin by affirming salvation by faith alone, and then destroy your own gospel by saying that it is by good works after all?” Paul is not contradicting himself. He is describing God’s universal principle of judgment that, although his justification is by faith alone, his judgment will be according to our works.

The reason for this is not hard to find. The Day of Judgment will be a public occasion. Its purpose will be less to determine God’s judgment than to declare and vindicate it. The divine process of judgment, which is a process of separation, is secretly

going on all the time; but on the Day of Judgment, its consequences will be made public. The day of God's wrath will be a "revelation" of the righteous judgment of God (v. 5).

Such a public occasion (on which a public verdict will be given and a public sentence passed) will require public appeals and verifiable evidence to support them. The only public evidence available will be our works—what we have done and have been seen to do. The presence or absence of saving faith in our hearts will be disclosed by the presence or absence of good works of love in our lives. Paul and James teach the same truth: saving faith issues in good works, and if it does not, it is bogus or dead. Verses 7–10 enlarge on this: our works will be the basis of God's judgment.

Paul applies this general principle of God's judgment according to works applies in particular to Jews and Gentiles (vv. 12–16). They differ from one another in that while Jews possess the Mosaic Law, the Gentiles do not. Yet, there is no distinction between them either in the sin they have committed, in the guilt they have incurred, or in the judgment they will receive, unless they cry to God for mercy. Gentiles, although they do not possess God's Law as an external revelation, sometimes "do by nature things required by the law" (v. 14). God has created them as self-conscious moral beings, on account of which they do not have the law in their hands (as the Jews do), but nevertheless, they show by their behavior that they have it in their hearts (v. 15). For God has written it there, not in the sense that he has regenerated them, but in the sense that he has created them with a moral instinct. Moreover, their conscience also bears its witness, their thoughts accuse them and sometimes even defend them.

This teaching is important. The same moral law which God has revealed in Scripture is also stamped on human nature. God has in fact written his law twice: once on stone tablets and once on human hearts. There is a fundamental correspondence between God's Law in the Bible and God's law in our hearts. Therefore, we are authentically human only when we obey the law of God. If we disobey it, we contradict not only what we know to be right, but our own human being. To do this is to be without sense as well as without excuse.

Let's remember in our evangelism that the other person's conscience is on our side!

### Self-righteous Jews (2:17–3:8)

In 2:1, Paul addressed human beings, "O man." In 2:17, he addresses a Jew, "Now you, if you call yourself a Jew." He anticipates Jewish objections to what he has written:

Surely, Paul, you cannot possibly treat us as if we were the same as those Gentile outsiders? Have you forgotten that we have both the Law (the revelation of God) and circumcision (the sign of the covenant of God)? Are you saying that we Jews are no better off than Gentiles?

Paul answers these objections by referring to the Law in verses 17–24 and to circumcision in verses 25–29. He insists that neither gives the Jews any immunity to the judgment of God.

1. *The Law* (vv. 17–24). Paul gives a full description of Jewish self-righteousness:

You rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God. . . . you know his will. . . . you are convinced that you are a guide, "a light," an instructor of the foolish, . . . you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? (vv. 17–21).

It is the same argument as at the beginning of the chapter: If we judge others, we should judge ourselves; if we teach others, we should teach ourselves. If we set ourselves up as either judge or teacher, we cannot possibly claim to be ignorant of morality. Instead, we invite God's condemnation of our hypocrisy.

2. *Circumcision* (vv. 25–29). Jewish knowledge of the Law did not exempt them from the judgment of God, neither did their circumcision. Circumcision was the God-given sign of his covenant, but it was not a magical ceremony and was no substitute for obedience. On the contrary, the true Jew is one inwardly, not outwardly, and the true circumcision is in the heart, not the body (v. 29). One could say the same of the true Christian and of the true baptism.

It is not difficult to imagine that Jewish people would listen to Paul's teaching with incredulity and indignation, so Paul responds to further questions about the character of God. Would God's judgment on Israel contradict his faithfulness and his justice? Paul emphatically denies it. God's faithfulness is not nullified by Israel's unfaithfulness (3:3–4) and God's justice is equally unstained (3:5–8). God is going to judge the world, how could he possibly be guilty of injustice? (v. 6).

### The Whole Human Race (3:9–20)

Paul is approaching the conclusion of his argument. He has exposed in succession the blatant unrighteousness of much of the ancient Gentile world, the hypocritical righteousness of moralizers, and the legal self-righteousness of Jews who boast of God's Law. "We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin," that is, "under the power of sin" (v. 9, RSV, NEB). Sin is personified as a tyrant who holds all human beings imprisoned in guilt and under judgment.

Paul goes on to support this fact of the universal bondage of guilt from Scripture. In verses 10–19, he gives a list of six Old Testament quotations, all of which bear witness in different ways to the universality of human sin and guilt. Two features of this biblical portrait stand out:

1. *It teaches the ungodliness of sin.* For example, there is "no one who seeks God" (v. 11) and "there is no fear of God before their eyes" (v. 18). Sin is fundamentally the revolt of the self against God, the dethronement of God and the enthronement of self. Sin is "getting rid of the Lord God" (Brunner), in order to proclaim our own sovereignty. Ultimately, sin is self-deification.
2. *It teaches the pervasiveness of sin.* Sin affects every part of our human constitution—every human faculty and function. In the Old Testament quotations there seems to be a deliberate listing of these: our "throats are open graves"; our tongues deceive; our lips spread poison; our "mouths are full of cursing and bitterness"; our "feet are swift to shed blood," scattering ruin and misery in our paths instead of walking in the path of peace; and, we do not keep God before our eyes or reverence him (vv. 13–18).

All of these parts of our bodies—our throat, tongue, lips, mouth, feet, and eyes—were created and given to us to glorify God, and are in rebellion against him. This is the biblical doctrine of total depravity, which is rejected only by those who misunderstand it. It has never meant that all human beings are as depraved as they could possibly be. Such a notion is manifestly

absurd and untrue, for we are not all drunkards, thieves, adulterers, and murderers. The “totality” of our corruption refers to its extent (affecting every part of us), not its degree (depraving every part of us absolutely). As Dr. J. I. Packer has said, total depravity means, “Not that at every point man is as bad as he could be, but that at no point is he as good as he should be.”

These six texts certainly describe Gentile sinners but in verse 19, Paul argues that they apply to Jews also, “those who are under the law.” In fact, they are God’s portrait of all humankind. Their purpose is to stop every mouth, silence every excuse, and make the whole world “accountable to God” and liable to his just judgment. The words *that every mouth may be silenced* (v. 19), comments Professor Charles Cranfield:

Evoked the picture of the defendant in court who, given the opportunity to speak in his own defense, is speechless because of the weight of the evidence which has been brought against him.

This is the point toward which Paul has been steadily moving: the idolatrous and immoral Gentiles are “without excuse” (1:20); all critical moralists, whether Jewish or Gentile, are also “without excuse” (2:1); in fact, “the whole world” and all its inhabitants, without any exception, are inexcusable (3:19).

And the reason? All have known God’s law to some degree, and all have disregarded it. That is why “no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law” (v. 20). Rather, what the law brings is the knowledge of sin, not the forgiveness of sin. Its function, as Luther said, is not to justify, but to terrify, and so to drive us into the arms of Christ.

How should we respond to this devastating exposure of universal human sin and guilt? We need to be as certain as we can that we have accepted the divine diagnosis as true, and that we have fled from the judgment of God to the only refuge there is—Jesus Christ. We have no merit to plead. We have no excuse to make. We stand before God condemned and speechless. But God in Christ on the cross has borne our condemnation. This is the only way that we can be justified, if we take refuge in Jesus.

And we simply cannot keep this Good News to ourselves. All around us are men and women who know enough about God’s glory and holiness to make their rejection of him and his law inexcusable. They too stand condemned. Their only hope of justification is in Christ. How can we keep this Good News from them? Let us speak boldly to them of him! Their mouths are closed in guilt; let our mouths be opened in testimony!

## BIBLE STUDIES ON ROMANS 1–5

# Amazing Grace

John Stott

All human beings are sinful and guilty before God—the moral and the immoral, the educated and the uneducated, the religious and the irreligious. “There is no one righteous, not even one” (3:10). “All have turned away” (3:12). That was Paul’s terrible theme. There was no ray of light, no flicker of hope, no prospect of salvation. There was nothing but darkness, nothing to do but to wait speechless for the final outpouring of the wrath of God.

“But now,” Paul suddenly breaks in (v. 21), God himself has intervened. After the long and starless night, the sun has risen and a new day has dawned. For “now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known” (v. 21). Over the unrighteousness and self-righteousness of human beings, Paul sets the righteousness of God. Over God’s wrath revealed from heaven, he sets God’s righteousness revealed in the gospel. Over against our pitiful works, he sets the atoning work of Jesus Christ, appropriated by faith. Over our guilt he sets God’s grace—his free and unmerited favor towards sinners.

### The Manifestation of God’s Grace (Romans 3:21–26)

“The righteousness of God,” which has been made known in the gospel, is God’s righteous way of “making right” the unrighteous—his justifying grace which alone can overcome our guilt. Paul describes its source (where it comes from), its ground (on what it rests), and its means (how we receive it):

1. *The source of our justification is God and his grace.* Justification is God coming to the rescue—God coming in Christ to put the unrighteous right with himself.

Fundamental to the gospel of salvation is the truth that the saving initiative, from beginning to end, belongs to God the Father. No formula is biblical which takes the initiative away from him and attributes it to us, or even to Christ. It is certain that we did not take the initiative; for we were sinful, guilty and condemned, helpless and hopeless. Nor was the initiative Jesus Christ’s, as if he did something which the Father was reluctant or unwilling to do. The initiative was God the Father’s. If we are justified, then we are justified “freely by his grace” (v. 24). Grace is God loving, God stooping, God coming, and God giving.

2. *The ground of our justification is Christ and the Cross.* If God justifies sinners freely by his grace, then on what grounds does he do so? How can