

All Roads Lead Here: The Melting Pot
By Jason Huff
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Daniel 9:7-16; Matthew 5:17-20; Romans 3:9-20

Friends, our final Scripture today comes from Romans 3:9-20. May God's Word be a lamp to our feet and a light to our path through Jesus Christ, our Lord. "What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." "The poison of vipers is on their lips." "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know." "There is no fear of God before their eyes." Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin."

When I was young, I was taught that America was the great melting pot. The idea was that when people immigrated here and became Americans, old identities and rivalries faded away as people became not Europeans or Asians or Africans but Americans. It started during the Revolution, when the founders of our nation decided they were no longer British but American. For many who escaped persecution in their homelands, the melting pot was a welcome idea.

But it was never fully true; many immigrants kept their original languages and lived among people of similar backgrounds. We saw that a lot in Detroit itself, what with Hamtramck and Mexicantown and Dearborn. I had a professor in college who taught that we weren't a melting pot but a fruit salad, where everyone brought their own unique flavors to the mix. And it makes sense: we as Americans are fiercely individualistic, and we don't like having to give up our own identity to fit into someone else's mold for us. We like to pick and choose who we are and what we like and what we identify with.

But today's passage warns us there is another melting pot, and it's not about America or any one country. It's about all of us together. There is one thing that united the human race, and that is sin. Today we'll finish this portion of Paul's letter to the Romans, which summarizes everything he's said up to this point. Up to now, Paul has been locking each window and bolting each door that we might try to use to escape our guilt before God. Today's passage is his final proof. He's sealed the room airtight. We cannot evade it any more. We are sinners cut off from any means of making ourselves right with God. Paul finishes detailing the bad news so that we are desperate for the good news, which he'll launch into next week.

Now, what is Paul's final attack? It's this: "Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin." He launches into a full frontal assault with wave after wave of Scripture, first from a variety of the Psalms. Then he weaves in Ecclesiastes, he jabs us with more Psalms, then smacks us back and forth with God's words from Isaiah. Why does Paul use all these quotes? Because he wants to show he isn't saying anything new.

The truths that Paul points out from the Old Testament shouldn't surprise his Jewish listeners; they have the law; they know these passages. For the Greeks in the audience, it's proof that even though they don't know the Scriptures, this verdict has been a long time coming. Paul's viewpoint on sin isn't new or creative. It's based on the Word of God over hundreds and thousands of years. And Scripture's indictment of us is devastating.

Here's Paul's argument in a nutshell: *sin is ungodly to the core, it is ubiquitous in our beings, and it is universal in the human race.* It is ungodly, ubiquitous, and universal – three Us.

First, *sin is ungodly.* It is the rejection of God for one's own choices. Sin is not just doing bad things or making wrong choices, though it includes that. It ultimately is ignoring and denying God. Here's how Paul puts it: "There is no one who seeks God. All have turned away [from Him]...there is no fear of God before their eyes." Everything else flows from that. We have fled from God and His ways. Paul tells us that "through the law we become conscious of sin." Our inability to follow the law of God shows us just how far from God we are.

When we understand this definition of sin, that sin is first and foremost about not pursuing God, we lose a lot of the things we use to excuse other people. I often hear about people who've died, "Oh, well, they really didn't go to church and they really weren't interested in the Bible, oh, but they were so nice, so good, they've got to be OK." We want to assure ourselves about their future. But Paul doesn't leave room for wishful thinking.

Sin's prime definition, by the very first of the Ten Commandments, is putting something else in the place of God. You either worship Him or something else. You either come to Him or you don't. Jesus didn't die on a cross to save nice people who thought they were fine. He came to save sinners who knew they weren't fine and would turn to Him. Can people be nice without God? Absolutely. They can function in society; they can pay their taxes; they can decide not to cheat at their work or on their wives. Some of the nicest people are unbelievers. But God hasn't called us to be nice. He has called us to His perfect standard. And none of us matches up to it. God isn't grading on a curve. You either live up to it or you don't. And only one person – Jesus – has done that.

And while we can be nice enough, we can avoid hurting people too badly, we can be friendly and kind to an extent, without Christ, we don't do much that isn't self-centered and self-focused. *That's because sin is ubiquitous inside of us.* It affects every last part of us. Note the way that Paul focuses on actual, physical parts of the body as he describes our state: "Their *throats* are open graves; their *tongues* practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their *lips*. Their *mouths* are full of cursing and bitterness; their *feet* are swift to shed blood." That physicality is really important because it makes us feel it. No part of us is immune. It's not like my eyes are affected but my knees aren't. Every part of our bodies is under the curse of sin and death.

And remember, body and spirit aren't separate. One is not pure and the other flawed. We believe in resurrection, which is a bringing back together of body and soul after death. What we do in the body affects the soul. What you do with your body matters because our bodies and souls are intertwined. In Revelation 6, the martyred saints who died for their faith, ask, "How long until judgment?" Essentially, how long until we are whole? Because our bodies matter.

If the problem is ubiquitous – if it’s everywhere inside of us – it’s incredibly dangerous. Because sin is like the worst kind of cancer imaginable. It’s hard to speak of a good cancer, but there are much easier cancers to deal with than others. Many skin cancers, you zap it, it never comes back, you watch it, but problem solved. Remove that little piece of the body and you’re fine. Worse cancers take bigger parts of the body. But the real problem is when it spreads to where you can’t get at it. Sin is like that. It invades every part of us, and we can’t get rid of it.

With my eyes, I lust. With my arms and legs, I’m lazy; I don’t want to work, which is something is good because God gave Adam work well before Adam’s fall into sin. As Paul clearly points out, I use my tongue in ways that hurt others; I malign them; I insult them; I wound them. I use it to lie, to get ahead, to make myself look better. With my ears, I eavesdrop and listen to people who make me laugh or charm me in some way rather than keeping my ears open for the Word of God. Some of us feed our stomachs with way too much food because we can and we distort and harm our bodies; others don’t have those problems, they exercise all the time and then they are proud and a different problem springs up.

Every part of our being is overwhelmed with the desire to cross God. And when I say “our being”, I mean it affects everyone. That’s the third thing Paul sees: *sin is universal*. Paul says, “There is *no one* righteous, not even *one*; there is *no one* who understands, *no one* who seeks God. *All* have turned away, they have *together* become worthless; there is *no one* who does good, not even *one*.”

Nobody gets a free pass. Not people born into Jewish or Christian homes; not smart people; not spiritually-minded people; not strong people; not advantaged people; not oppressed people; not rich people; not poor people. No one is immune because of their race or color or heritage. If sin is a cancer that affects our whole bodies, then everybody’s got the disease.

There’s a board game my family plays every now and then called Pandemic. It’s a game where you work together on a board of the globe, and as the game starts, different dangerous diseases are spreading to different countries. Everyone works together to build medical bases and research facilities to deal with the threat. You win or lose together; either you eradicate the diseases that plague humanity, or humanity falls prey to the latest superbug.

There’s a pandemic on earth, and it’s sin. It will kill every last one of us because as Romans 6:23 tells us, “the wages of sin is death.” Everybody sins, so everybody dies. It doesn’t matter if you become a monk, a priest, a pastor, or a nun; it doesn’t matter if you become president or a master criminal (or both!) There’s no escaping it. All turn away from God, and we together become worthless. No one does what is truly good in God’s sight.

And while we don’t like it, it explains the world’s situation. Why are there wars? Why do people kill other people? Why do people hurt one another in too many ways to imagine? Why is there suffering and pain? We want to blame God because we want to shift responsibility. But the real answer is right here in front of us: the universality of sin explains why anywhere you go around the world, even in the very best places, it’s a disaster of epic proportions.

Without God's grace, we are doomed. Even the law, God's good and holy and righteous law, goes to prove it. Every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God, Paul says, because we can't keep the law. The law tells us what God expects and how He defines true morals and ethics. The good thing about the law is not that it makes us moral people; the good thing is that it shows us our flaws. The law proves that we need to be saved from ourselves and our unrighteousness before God.

Now that we've reached the end of Paul's description of sin and the sheer and utter mess of it, what are we supposed to do with it? Our human reaction is to groan and complain. Believe me, preaching the last month through Paul's argument has not been my idea of easy or fun. Our natural inclination is to say, "This again? More of it? Didn't we talk about sin enough already?" I'm right there with you. In our hardness, even those of us who are believers still have to deal with the sin nature, and we want to shrink back from more talk of sin. We want to run away.

But I'm going to encourage you not to do that. The topic of sin and its effects is so important that we've just scratched the surface of it. More importantly, if we have been listening with ears opened by the Holy Spirit, we're going to have heard more than "sin blah blah gotta do better blah blah."

If our hearts are open to Paul's message in Romans, we'll see some effects. Here's the first one: *we will begin to genuinely fear God*. When God's messengers come to give God's Word to God's people, the first thing they say is, "Do not be afraid." As a pastor, I've taught that the fear of God is a healthy, awestruck, total respect for God, not sheer panic. That's true. In Jesus, God makes Himself relatable to us, not so incomprehensible and terrifying.

Yet to be blunt, we need some genuine fear of God. He is unlike us. He is so beyond us that when He appeared on the mountain before the Israelites, when they saw the effects of God's glory, they sent Moses up alone to talk to God because they were so completely terrified of Him. He is totally righteous, totally holy, totally loving and at the same time, totally justified in bringing His wrath to bear on our disobedience. We were created to reflect His image, and instead, we do everything we can to distort and destroy that image. In Luke 12, Jesus said, "I'm telling you, friends, don't worry about those who can kill the body but can't do anything else to you. Do you know who you should fear? Fear Him who can kill and then has the authority to send to hell. Yes, fear Him!"

If we believe in Christ and are saved from God's wrath, eventually, our fear grows into awe and wonder. We want to serve God out of love, not out of fear. We learn that we are not just servants but sons; we are brothers and sisters through Christ. That perfect love eventually drives out fear. But we should never lose sight of God's immensity, His power, His might. The fear of God makes us wise to pursue Him. Our fear of Him is actually incredibly good, because once we fear God, nothing else makes us afraid.

The second thing we'll notice if we have godly ears is this: *we'll be cut to the heart*. That's how Acts 2 describes the crowd when they realized for the first time that they had rejected the Messiah and crucified Him, making them utterly guilty and without excuse. They immediately responded with, "What are we to do, brothers?" If we really grasp the enormity, the immensity, and the calamity of sin, we're going to be on edge. We are going to want a solution. And because of what we've learned, we're going to know that the solution isn't going to lie with us. It's going to have to lie with God, outside of us, because we can't set things right. We are going to be grieved until we get right with God.

And if we know the solution and have faith, if we've become followers of Jesus Christ and want to know Him more, this should cut us to the heart for others. Not to shame them or call them out as sinners, because that's all of us. No, it's because we recognize that we all need the answer. And next week is going to be beautiful, because Paul is going to show us the answer in Christ, and he'll keep talking that for some time. But we need to be cut to the heart that those who are close to us are in the same melting pot, that none of us has hope without Jesus. If we're listening to the Spirit, we're going to want to reach them with the news – the bad news that sin is real and guilt is real and judgment is real, but also the good news that there is a way out, there is grace, there is salvation and new life in Jesus Christ. The more we believe that sin is going to destroy every one of us, the more we are going to want to share the only cure.

That leads me to a third effect of the Spirit's work: *a firm embrace of the difficult truth of judgment*. When we look at someone and know they aren't a Christian, that should make us mourn. We should grieve and take them to the feet of Jesus in prayer and ask for their salvation and then let them know about the love of Jesus. As Jude's letter says, "Have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire." We are God's workers called to do His business, and His business is saving His people from the just punishment we all deserve.

We can't play around with this any longer. It isn't kindness to never speak of your faith to coworkers and friends who don't know God. It's cowardice. I have it; you probably have it. We don't want to be disliked; we don't want to be seen as the Bible thumper or the spoilsport or the fundamentalist; we don't want to lose friends. But eternity is at stake. I don't ever want any of us to have to resort to saying, "Oh, they were a nice person, I'm sure they'll be fine." That's a lie from the pit of hell. No one will be fine at judgment without Jesus. And what glory will await those who have Him! We aren't good friends, we aren't truly loving our neighbors as ourselves, unless we reach out to them with Jesus. And if CrossWay is to continue and fulfill its calling, we must help others find Him.

Friends, sin is overwhelming, it's everywhere, it infects everything. But this is not the end of the story. The good news is coming. The next word in Paul's letter is "but." Everything is going to turn around as we talk together about the righteousness of God that can be ours in Christ Jesus. Be here next week as we look at the blessings of His salvation together.