



## Sermon Transcript October 4, 2020

### The Gospel What is the Problem? Romans 3:9-20



This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on October 4, 2020 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio and video version of this sermon may also be found on the church website at [www.wethefc.com](http://www.wethefc.com).

**Sermon Text**  
**Romans 3:9-20**

<sup>9</sup> 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, <sup>10</sup> as it is written:

“None is righteous, no, not one;

<sup>11</sup> no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

<sup>12</sup> All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;

no one does good,

not even one.”

<sup>13</sup> “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.”

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

<sup>14</sup> “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

<sup>15</sup> “Their feet are swift to shed blood; <sup>16</sup> in their paths are ruin and misery,

<sup>17</sup> and the way of peace they have not known.”

<sup>18</sup> There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

<sup>19</sup> Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. <sup>20</sup> For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

## Introduction

I'm operating under the premise this morning that I don't need to convince you that there is something fundamentally wrong with the world. Whenever I get to this point in sharing the gospel with someone, I talk about how we have made a mess of our world and our society and our families and our lives. More often than not, when I get to this point, the person I am talking with is nodding their head in agreement. And if ever there was a year to press this point home, 2020 has become a self-authenticating piece of evidence to prove the point. It sure does feel like things are a mess. It sure does seem self-evident that there is something fundamentally wrong with this world.

So, what is it? What is wrong with this world? As Christians, we have an answer to this question. Plain and simple; it is sin. That is the point Paul has been making in the first three chapters of Romans. Our passage this morning has us jumping in at the end of the argument that he has been making in the first three chapters of Romans. At the beginning of our passage this morning, verse 9, we hear Paul say that he has already made the case, he has already come to the conclusion, or as he says it, "*we have already charged that all, both Jew and Greeks, are under sin.*" A few verses after our passage this morning we have that familiar verse that further affirms his conclusion, "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*" Paul would concur with us this morning that there is something fundamentally wrong with the world. And in his mind, he has identified the problem. The problem is sin.

Now that is not always a popular answer to the question: "What is wrong with the world?" In fact, some consider it to be an offensive statement to make. I remember doing a funeral where I eulogized the person who had died—speaking to some of the good qualities and contributions this person made in life. But as I always do, I pointed out that our hope does not rest in the good things we do in life. Our hope rests in Jesus who died for us. And so I tactfully alluded to the fact that the deceased knew that he was a sinner and that in faith he had put his trust in Jesus. After the service I was confronted by a friend of this man and she was highly offended that I spoke of such things. The reason this answer offends is because sin is not just some abstract thought or principle. Rather it is very personal. If the case has been proved that *all are under sin* then the real answer to the question "What is wrong this world?" is . . . . "You are what is wrong with this world." "I am what is wrong with this world." It has been said that when C. K. Chesterton was asked to contribute an essay answering this very question; "What is wrong with this world?" he simply responded: "Dear Sir: Regarding your article 'What's wrong with the world?' I am. Yours truly, C. K. Chesterton."

The Christian thinker, Francis Schaeffer, captured some of the tension we feel when we think about man. He said one of the dilemmas of man is the contrast between his nobility and his cruelty.<sup>1</sup> On one hand, we see the “nobility” of man in the many “good things” he does and accomplishes for the good of mankind. This is part of how we reflect what it means to bear the image of God. And yet, time and time again, the cruelty of man is very much on display. And here is part of the dilemma. Often these two things co-mingle together. Great “advancement” can often come at the expense of others. And furthermore, some of the great advancements made by man have given an increased opportunity for the cruelty of man to be expressed in ways we had not fully anticipated. For example, the invention of the internet is a great advancement, highlighting the nobility of man. But it has also become a tool that has given new ways for the cruelty of man to be put on display.

H. G. Wells captured this dilemma in what he wrote about man before World War II and what he then wrote about humanity after the war. Prior to the war he was filled with great optimism about man. He wrote, “Can we doubt that presently our race will more than realize our boldest imaginations, that it will achieve unity and peace, and that our children will live in a world made more splendid and lovely than any palace or garden than we know, going on from strength to strength in an ever-widening circle of achievement.”<sup>3</sup> We echo the same sentiment when we express the desire to “make the world a better place for the generation that follows us.” Just two years after he expressed his confidence in the advancement of man, the war started. The year after the war ended, he was set back on his heels having seen the cruelty of man. He wrote, “The cold blooded massacres of the defenseless, the return of deliberate and organized torture, mental torment, and fear to a world from which such things had seemed well nigh banished—has come near to breaking my spirit altogether.”<sup>4</sup> In spite of all the advancements we have made down through the years, the fundamental problem still exists. Our problem is sin and it lives in every heart.

Last week we began putting together the gospel by starting with God. There is a God. He made the world. He made us. Life is to be lived in relationship to God. In fact, we said last week that **you can't find yourself until you find God.**



This morning we want to acknowledge that there is something keeping us from knowing God. Something has gone wrong with the world God has made. **You can't know what the solution is if you don't know what the problem is.** The problem is sin. Perhaps as Christians, we might readily confess to believe that sin is the problem,

but I wonder what you understand about sin when you confess sin to be the problem. From our passage this morning, I want to answer three questions. *What is sin? How bad is it? What is the result of our sin?* The answer to these questions are critical if we want to know what the solution is to our problem. **You can't know what the solution is if you don't know what the problem is.**



## The Problem: What is Sin?

What is sin? I think most people would be inclined to say that sin is “doing something wrong” or the “breaking of a command.” When the New City Catechism asks, “What does the law of God require?” the answer given is a call to obey God. “What God forbids should never be done and what God commands should always be done.”<sup>4</sup> But sin is more than the “breaking of a rule” or “or failing to do what is right.” In fact, when the very same catechism asks the question, “What is sin?” the answer gets much more to the root and the essence of sin. “Sin is **rejecting or ignoring God** in the world he created, rebelling against him by **living without reference to him.**”<sup>5</sup>

Paul captures the essence of sin when he says in verses 11-12, “*no one seeks for God. All have turned aside.*” What does Paul mean when he says “*no one seeks for God*”? Fundamentally, it is an issue of worship. We are not just called to believe in God. Many people would say that in some kind of general way they believe in God. But to *seek God* means that you love him supremely. It means that God is at the center of your life. It is the mindset of Psalm 42:1-2, “*As the deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*” And so the essence of sin is to “thirst for” or find your identity in something other than God. Tim Keller summarizes it this way. He says, “So, according to the Bible, the primary way to define sin is not just the doing of bad things, but the making of good things into ultimate things.”<sup>6</sup>

I mentioned earlier in the sermon that our passage is the end of Paul's argument that everyone is a sinner. He definitely leaves no wiggle room in our passage with his sweeping statements: “***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.***” Paul first built his case by talking about people outside of the Jewish faith, the Gentiles. In Romans 1 he said that the human heart has rejected God and instead is inclined to worship what God has made. And he says of the human heart in Romans 1:25 that *they exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.* In other words, we all worship something. We all find our ultimate meaning in something. The essence of

sin is finding our ultimate meaning in something other than God.

It is what Rocky said in the movie *Rocky* when he was pressed by his girlfriend as to why he keeps fighting and pushing things to the limit. He said, “Then I’ll know I’m not a bum.” His whole life was built around what happened in that ring. Or in *Chariots of Fire* one of the main characters explains why he trains so hard to compete in the 100 yard dash in the Olympics. His response was, “I have ten lonely seconds to justify my existence.” He is trying to find his meaning and his purpose in something other than God. This always leaves you empty. But we do it all the time. Good things like marriage, how well our kids turn out, my career, my success, sex, money, nature, sports, politics—they are all vying for the center of our affections. These are the things we tend to worship. These are the things we tend to thirst for more than God. That is the essence of our sin.

John Lin illustrates it this way. He compares our lives to our solar system. All the planets in our solar system orbit the same thing, the sun. He said, if the planets decided for themselves what to orbit or if they decided not to orbit anything, then the solar system would fall apart.<sup>6</sup> His point was that our lives were meant to orbit around God and when our lives are orbiting around something other than God, then the whole thing unravels. And that is the problem. That is exactly why there is something fundamentally wrong with the world.

Now what is really striking about this passage is that Paul is not just talking about irreligious Gentiles. He is lumping religious Jews in this universal indictment that *no one seeks God*. That is the point of Romans 2. Paul makes the assertion here that the religious Jew is just as guilty as the Gentile. It is interesting that Romans 3:10-18 is a collection of quotes from the Old Testament. There are six different Old Testament passages that are quoted in these verses. All of them but one are taken from the Psalms. Romans 3:15-17 is a quote from Isaiah 59. What is really fascinating about this is that the quotes from the Psalms are what the people of God would say about the godless nations around them. For example, Paul is quoting from Psalm 14 when he says *no one seeks after God*. Psalm 14 begins by talking about those who say there is no God. So how can Paul take religious Jews and lump them together in this category of people who do not seek God?

The difference between the Jew and the Gentile is not what rests in the heart but in what the Jew was given. God gave the people of Israel the commandments. In fact, Paul raises the question in Romans 3:1, “*What advantage has the Jew?*” His answer,

*“Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God.”* And what was the first commandment they were given? *“You shall have no other gods before me.”* In other words, God was to be the ultimate object of their love and desire. Their lives were to orbit around God.

It is interesting to me that the one Old Testament passage quoted in this section that is not from the Psalms is from Isaiah. Isaiah is a book that pronounces God’s judgment against the people of Israel. At the core of their problem was that they did not *seek God*. He says of them in Isaiah 2:7 that their *land is filled with silver and gold . . . with horses, and there is no end to their chariots*. In other words, money and power was their god. He said in the next verse that *they bow down to the work of their hands*. And that is Paul’s point at the end of our passage this morning. In Romans 3:20 Paul recognizes that the Jews had the law of God. But he said *by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin*. They have the same heart problem as everyone else.

Even religion can be used to shape God into our image or to get God to serve our ends. Immanuel Kant said we are built from “crooked timber.” He said, “Out of the crooked timber of humanity, no straight thing was ever made.”<sup>7</sup> So sure, there are people who are “spiritual” and who would say that they pray to God. But to seek God means to bow down to God and to allow him to shape us as we serve him. So the final verse Paul quotes from the Old Testament offers this summary of man—both Jew and Gentile—*“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”* Our “crooked timber” is not bent towards God. Our lives are not prone to orbit around God. That is the essence of sin.

### The Problem: How Bad is It?



How bad is it? On one hand we can say that it is all pervasive. It has already been seen that we all reject God by loving other things more than God. It is something that is true of all of us. But Paul says something in verse 9 that sheds light on the nature of our problem. He says, *“For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.”* He says that we are all *under sin*. Douglas Moo makes a very insightful observation about this point. He says that Paul did not just say that all people commit sins as if to convey that it is an occasional problem the we have from time to time. Nor did he simply say that we are all sinners, though that is true. But there is more to it if we want to understand “how bad it is.” Rather, he says, all people are under sin. In other words, “the problem is that people are helpless

prisoners of sin.”<sup>8</sup> We are born with a natural inclination to find our ultimate worth in other things than God. In other words, we can’t fix it. We are naturally self-centered.

In his famous commencement speech at Kenyon College in 2005, David Foster Wallace made this observation about man. “Everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest, most vivid and important person in existence.” (In other words, everything orbits around what David Brooks calls—The Big Me.). Wallace goes on to admit that we don’t like to talk about this because when you put it that way it sounds repulsive. And it is repulsive. It is pride. But it is real. We think of ourselves more highly than others. We size ourselves against others. We seek recognition. We are sensitive when we don’t get it. But this is what caught my attention the most. Where does this self-centeredness come from? Wallace said, “It is our default setting, hard wired into our boards at birth.”<sup>9</sup> That is a secular observation of a spiritual principle. We are enslaved to sin—*under sin*. It is hard-wired in us.

I mentioned Carl Sagan last week, the brilliant astronomer who believed that there was no God. He wrote a book called *Pale Blue Dot*. It was his way of pointing out that the earth is but a “dot” compared to the vast universe. And so, if the earth is but a dot, what are humans who occupy space on this small dot? He couldn’t get over the pride of man in light of how small man is compared to the vast universe. It was a secular way to express what David expressed in Psalm 8 when he looked at the heavens and wondered, *what is man?* And yet Sagan couldn’t help but reflect on what he called “the cruelty of man.” He wrote, “Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, . . . Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot.”<sup>10</sup> He said the problem of man is “our imagined self-importance.” He is saying the same thing Paul is saying. We are all “under sin.” Sagan is telling you what he thinks is wrong with this world. It is the pride of man! But then he said something that almost made me fall out of my seat. Looking at the problem of man’s pride and all the atrocities that are the result of man’s pride, he said, “there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.”<sup>11</sup>

Sagan was pretty good at identifying the problem. But because in his worldview there is no God, there is no hope. His hope was that perhaps this would motivate us to be more



kind to each other and to cherish this planet. But like H. G. Wells discovered at the end of the war, that is a fleeting hope. Our pride keeps rearing its ugly head. So this is why you need to **know what the problem is before you can identify the solution.** Moo writes, “People, by nature are addicted to sin. They are imprisoned under it, unable to free themselves by anything they can do. Knowing this, then, God has sent to us not a teacher or a politician but a liberator—one who has the power to set us free from our sins.”<sup>12</sup> That person who can set us free is Jesus. Whether you are a Jew or a Gentile, only Jesus can set you free from the bondage of sin.



### The Problem: What is the Result?

At the beginning of the sermon I mentioned the observation Francis Schaeffer made about the dilemma of man: “the contrast between his nobility and his cruelty.” The cruelty of man is also something noted by Carl Sagan. It is a constant in the human story from generation to generation. When we don’t live with God as our reference it leads to death and destruction. We become destructive. Or to put it this way, we make a mess of ourselves, our society and our world.

Paul gives two examples of how we do that. First he talks about the words that come out of our mouths. Look at verses 13-14, “*Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of asps is under their lips. Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.*” Paul is using the sequence of organs people use when they speak—from the throat to the tongue to the lips to the mouth. Chuck Swindoll referred to the tongue as “that two ounce slab of mucous membrane.” It is amazing the damage that has been done by a very small part of the body.

James said that the tongue *stains the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life.* No man can tame it. He adds that it is *a restless evil, full of deadly poison.* James said that the reason man can’t tame the tongue is because the tongue is simply expressing what is in the heart. Jesus said that same thing when he said that it is from our heart that our mouth speaks. What is in the heart? James says that the heart is full of *bitter jealousy and selfish ambition.* In other words, it is pride. We may think what David Foster Wallace said is repulsive—“that I am the absolute center of the universe, the realest and most vivid and important person in existence.” But our mouths betray us and they destroy others and ourselves.

The second example Paul gives of the result of not having God at the center of our lives is broken relationships. He says, “*Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their*

*paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known.*” Everyone who is listening to me today can speak to the reality of this truth. We all know broken relationships. We have all been the victim of hurtful and broken relationships and we have the scars to go with it. And at the same time, we have contributed to broken relationships. Every family has a story. Every community has headlines. Every church has to work at maintaining unity. Every generation can point to injustice. This world is broken and at the core of our brokenness is our pride. The summary of the commandments is to love God and to love others. We can't fully love others if our lives don't orbit around God.

## Conclusion

**You can't know what the solution is if you don't know what the problem is.** So what is the problem? *No one seeks God.* We are all under sin. Our sin brings death and destruction to us and all of life. And so Paul says at the end of our passage that we can fix ourselves. Our solution is not found in being a little kinder to each other. We need someone to liberate us from our sin.

Tim Keller said that the Christian view of sin is actually a hopeful thing we believe because the moment you acknowledge this fact you can find hope. God seeks after us. God sent his Son, Jesus who died for us. How do we come to God? We start by repenting of our sin and we look outside of ourselves to Jesus.

Jesus is the solution to what is wrong with this world. He brings us to God. He aligns our lives around God. When God is at the center of our lives, his love shines through us and it impacts what comes out of our mouths and we become agents of his peace.

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- <sup>1</sup>Francis Schaeffer *He is There and He is Not Silent* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1972) 3
- <sup>2</sup>H. G. Wells *A Short History of the World*, 1937 quoted in Tim Keller *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008) 159
- <sup>3</sup>H. G. Wells *A Mind At the End of Its Tether*, 1946 quoted in Keller, 159
- <sup>4</sup>Collin Hansen, editor *The New City Catechism Devotional* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017) Question 7, Kindle Reader Location 399
- <sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, Question 16, Kindle Reader Location 785
- <sup>6</sup>Tim Keller *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008) 162
- <sup>7</sup>Immanuel Kant quoted in David Brooks *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015) 11
- <sup>8</sup>Douglas Moo *Romans: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 122
- <sup>9</sup>David Foster Wallace quoted in David Brooks *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015) 10
- <sup>10</sup>Carl Sagan *Pale Blue Dot* (New York: Pallentine Books, 1994)
- <sup>11</sup>Moo, 122

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COMMUNITY  
**GROUPS**

## **Getting To Know Me Questions**

1. What is one accomplishment that gives you great satisfaction?
2. What do you think are the most common misconceptions people have about God?

## **Diving Into The Word**

3. Read Romans 1:25 and 3:10-12. What do you learn about sin from these passages? How would you explain what sin is to someone?
4. Read Romans 3:9 and Ephesians 2:1-3. How do you feel about Paul's claim that all are under sin? Why do you feel like that?
5. Read Romans 3:13-15 and James 3:5-12, 16. What is a consequence of sin according to these passages and how do you see this play out in your life?
6. Read Romans 3:16-18. Why do you think there is a connection between loving God and loving others? Where do you see evidence of what Paul is talking about in these verses?
7. How do you respond to the truth that God sought you out before you sought him out? What difference will that make to you?

## **Taking It Home**

8. What is one thing you are taking with you as a result of your conversation?
9. As a group develop a prayer list of people you would like to see turn in faith to Jesus.