

No Good

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[0 : 00] Well, if you notice on the front of the notice sheet today, the sermon on Romans 3, 1 to 20 is called No Good.

So we better pray that the sermon isn't no good. Heavenly Father, your word is powerful. And we pray that as we come under it tonight, its power may be evidenced in our hearts and minds, in our tongues, in our actions, that we may live by your gospel and trust in the righteousness of Christ alone.

Amen. The lawyer asked his client, do you want the good news or the bad news? And of course, there are millions of jokes like these. The bad news, he says, your DNA is found all over the crime scene.

What's the good news? Well, your cholesterol is down to 13. Well, sometimes good news only makes sense in the light of bad news.

It was a bad joke, I know. And you're already thinking, well, that prayer wasn't effective because the sermon is no good. But anyway, let's keep going. Sometimes good news only makes sense in the light of bad news.

[1 : 21] So, Carl Williams gets a 30-year prison sentence or something. Well, that's good news in the light that he may act for him anyway, not for us, for him, that he may actually get out of prison before he's dead.

So, I suppose it's good news. 51% in your exam result may be good news if you expected to fail. Maybe particularly good news if you didn't even sit the exam.

You might lose a leg, but that might actually be good news because it means that the gangrene is not going to spread to the rest of your body. So, the bad news and the good news need to be held together.

However, similar with Christian faith, to understand the good news of Christian faith best and properly, we need to understand and realise truly what the bad news is.

And sometimes I think our problem is that we do not realise just how bad the bad news really is.

[2 : 20] So, we fail then to appreciate the goodness of the good news of the gospel. The bad news is that every person without fail who ever lives on this earth will face the judgment seat of the Lord Jesus Christ and will fail based on their own actions and record.

There are no excuses, there are no exceptions, and there are no exemptions. And we've seen in the last few weeks that argument being played out in Paul writing to the Romans.

Ignorance is no excuse. The evidence for God is clear in this world. Self-righteousness is no excuse. Because those people are no better than the rest of the world.

Religious privilege is no excuse. Because God demands doers, not hearers, of the word only. Now, having argued thus far, Paul anticipates some objections to the argument and the conclusion that he's driving towards.

And so, in the first eight verses of Romans 3, he anticipates some of those objections to what he's writing. In particular, three possible objections raised by religious Jews.

[3 : 44] If the law that was given to the Jews in the Old Testament and circumcision, which is a key aspect of that law that we dealt with at the end of chapter 2 last week, if they do not guarantee eternal safety, which is the argument of the end of Romans 2, then what advantage has the Jew got?

What's the point of it all? The whole of the history of God dealing with people up to the point of Jesus is meaningless and nonsense. Why did he give them the law?

Why did he give them a command of circumcision? If it doesn't guarantee their eternal safety, then what's the point? And Paul says, well, actually, there is a point. There is benefit. There is advantage to the Jew who's been given the law and circumcision.

We might expect Paul to say there is no advantage at all, given what he'd argued at the end of Romans 2. But see how chapter 3 begins. What advantage has the Jew or what is the value of circumcision?

We expect him to say nothing at all. And he says the opposite, much in every way. For in the first place, the Jews were entrusted with the oracles of God. What Paul is saying is that having the oracles of God, the word of God, is a huge advantage.

[4 : 58] To a person on earth. Receiving God's words is a great privilege indeed. It does put people at an advantage. It doesn't guarantee them eternal safety.

It doesn't give you a leg up into heaven. But it gives you an advantage in making even clearer the revelation of the gospel of God. That's Paul's argument.

And what a privilege for us then to be recipients of both covenants of the Bible, the Old and the New Testaments. What an added privilege for us to receive them both. But just because we've got the Bible, even if we've read the Bible or we've got a pocket-sized version that never leaves our pockets or whatever, that's no guarantee of eternal safety at all.

It's no help in one sense, although it's an advantage to have received the Bible because of the clarity of the gospel revelation of God. Another objection comes in verse 3.

What if some were unfaithful? Will their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? That is, having been entrusted with the oracles of God, the Old Testament in Jewish language, but they're untrustworthy, doesn't that lead then to the nullifying of God's trustworthiness?

[6 : 15] If God's made promises to the Jews, but they've been untrustworthy, doesn't that therefore somehow stymie or thwart God's own faithfulness to his promises?

Doesn't it prevent them from being fulfilled? Well, that's an important question to get right. You see, many Christians too think that our failure ties God's hands.

That somehow our sin thwarts God's purposes. That God cannot act unless we don't sin. You hear it sometimes in all sorts of Christian preaching and Christian counseling type situations.

Unless you get this area of your life right, God can't act. He can't do this through you or he can't do this in you. But it's a heresy to think that.

You see, God is not stymied or limited by our lack of obedience and faithfulness. And all Israel's history of faithlessness does not in any way nullify the faithfulness of God.

[7 : 22] God is God. He's not bound by us, whether we obey or don't obey, whether we believe or don't believe. He is sovereign. And so even if every person were a liar, God's faithfulness still continues.

He's still true to his word. And Paul alludes here to the example of King David. King David, if you remember, was a great king of ancient Israel, the second king, but committed adultery with Bathsheba.

In Psalm 51, David reflects on that and confesses his sin and acknowledges the mercy he's received from God. David knew that he deserved God's punishment for his sin and failure.

And then Paul quotes from that Psalm in verse 4. By no means, although everyone a liar, let God be proved true as it is written, so that you may be justified in your words and prevail in your judging.

What David is saying there in that Psalm, which Paul is quoting, is that David's sin does not mean that God is unfaithful in his dealings with David. God is actually right to punish David.

[8 : 27] And God's promises to him are not thwarted by David's adulterous sin. That ought to give us confidence in God. You see, sometimes we lose our confidence because of our sin and our failure, our sense of unworthiness.

We think that somehow God can't use us or can't work through us. But he can. His promises are not thwarted by our sins. We ought to be repentant always and confessing our sins, of course, but not demolishing our confidence that God can still actually use us despite our sin.

Our sin never means that God fails to keep his word to us. The third objection that Paul anticipates is another common mistake. If our sins and our mistakes, in effect, show up in brighter light God's righteousness, then isn't it unfair of God to punish us for our sins where our sins are actually doing, in one sense, the right thing by highlighting rightly the righteousness of God, which ought to be a good thing.

I mean, God wants his righteousness to be beamed out across this universe. So if our sins contribute to an exposure of God's righteousness, then isn't it somehow wrong or perverse of God to actually punish us, whereby our sins have actually contributed to a good end in God's purposes?

Well, if that were the case, God would never judge anyone, of course. See what Paul says in verses 5 and 6. If our injustice serves to confirm the justice of God, what should we say that God is unjust to inflict wrath on us?

[10 : 16] Paul says, I really am speaking in a human way here. By no means, he says. For then, how could God judge the world? Indeed, he wouldn't.

Now, the simple mistake here is, in effect, the mistake of the means and the end. If good comes out of wrong, that doesn't mean that wrong is okay.

That's, in effect, the objection that's being anticipated in these verses. Some even might be accusing Paul of undermining morality here. See how he goes on in verses 7 and 8.

If through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? And why not say, as some people slander us by saying that we say, let us do evil so that good may come.

They've misunderstood the gospel at this point, clearly. A point that Paul will come back to later in Romans 6. Their condemnation is deserved. He's fairly dismissive of this objection. The point is, the end never justifies the means.

[11 : 13] That is, if our sin in some way highlights the glory of God, it doesn't in any way exonerate us from our sin. The end, that is the glory of God, does not in any way mean that the means to getting to that end are okay.

Same arguments are found elsewhere in Scripture. Judas' great sin of betrayal of Jesus and so on. Judas is condemned most severely by Jesus for that, even though the crucifixion of Christ was the greatest revelation of the glory of God in human history.

The fact that the right end came from that does not in any way exonerate Judas for his sin. But that's a very common argument that we use to excuse our sin.

That is, the end was a good one, so therefore the means to get to the end, it doesn't matter. However, I've lied about this because I wanted to protect this person.

The end justifying the means. Wrong. I've still stolen something in order to give to somebody in greater need. The end does not justify the means.

[12 : 25] Never in Christian ethics is that the case. That is, our behavior must be right and the end will be right under God's sovereignty. And just because God is so sovereign, so good and so committed to his purposes that he even brings our sins to bring greater glory to himself, does not in any way mean that we can just carry on sinning willy-nilly.

Never. Not in any way. Just because our sin might somehow contribute to the exposure of God's righteousness does not mean we have an excuse to keep on sinning.

That's Paul's argument in verses 5 through to 8. There is no excuse to do wrong. No exemption or exception. The end never justifies the means.

And evil and sin actually in the end never rightly fully promote the glory of God. So the verdict then comes in verse 9. What then? Are we any better off?

No, not at all. For we've already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, that is non-Jews, a general word, are under the power of sin.

[13 : 34] That is what we might call the bad news. All people, without exception, without exemption, are under the power of sin.

That includes the Jews who've received the oracles of God. They're actually, in some senses, no better off. They are under the power of sin. Knowledge doesn't always help.

And that's the case here. Now, this is a hard diagnosis to accept, I think. There are Christians who sort of buckle against this in a way.

Sometimes we believe it fully, but as we go on in our Christian life, we begin to resent or reject this bad news diagnosis that we're under the power of sin.

After all, when you look around the world, there is so much that is good and noble. There are so many great people in this world who are so loving and sacrificial, and they're not all Christians. There's so much love and beauty and honor in our world.

[14 : 37] Surely this cannot really be totally correct. Can this bad news actually be right? Maybe we should get a second opinion. Well, the detail that follows is damning, and it supports Paul's verdict, especially in his argument against Jews who reject this verdict, that all, including Jews, are under the power of sin.

What follows is a series of Old Testament quotes, mainly from Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Isaiah, to make the point. And he's making the point for Jews, and he's making it from their own scriptures to show that they too are under the power of sin, without exception, without exemption, without excuse.

The basic problem summed up in verses 10 to 12. There is no one who is righteous. Not one. There is no one who has understanding.

There is no one who seeks God. All have turned aside. Together they've become worthless. There is no one who shows kindness.

There is not even one. At the root of that diagnosis is the absence of seeking God. Notice the emphatic language.

[15 : 55] There is no one, no one, no one, no one. All have done the wrong thing. No one, no one, no one has done the right thing. It can hardly be stronger.

Human rejection of God is universal. And no one is exempt. Not even a Mother Teresa figure. Not me. Not you.

Oh yes, there are isolated acts of kindness round about. Often they're self-serving. But basically, human beings, apart from God's work of grace, which is where Paul's driving to in this letter, are not seeking God.

In recent years, the United Kingdom has had periodic bouts of foot and mouth disease in their cattle. And lots of cattle have had to be slaughtered in different periods. Their industry has been in turmoil.

And that's something that's spread also in parts to Europe in recent years as well. And it's possible that even some humans have died from this spread of cattle foot and mouth disease.

[16 : 59] But that's actually nothing to spiritual foot and mouth. And that's what's described in the verses that follow. Verse 13, their throats are opened graves.

They use their tongues to deceive. The venom of vipers is under their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Note the emphasis on the mouth, quoting their three psalms.

You see, it's for out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks. It betrays our innermost thoughts. Those of us on the camp this weekend have seen that demonstrated in various ways in the book of Proverbs.

So language is deceptive. Language is poisonous, destructive, malicious. It's full of cursing and blasphemy. Not a pretty picture that's painted in these verses.

But isn't that a fair description of our society? How many leaders deceive us with their words? Political leaders?

[17 : 57] Business leaders? Sporting leaders? You see the way they twist and turn words. And I'm not wanting to make a political statement here. But the way that the spin is placed on Iraq.

On David Hicks. Focus on whether the British withdrawal of troops from Iraq, which is the opposite of what Australian troops are doing. How are they consistent? And the spin that is placed.

The deceptive nature of words. But I don't mean it just from leaders. It's there all the time in our own language. In the way we relate to people as well. How often we engage in backbiting malicious gossip that's destructive.

How often we hear filth from people's lips. I remember playing for club cricket for a year when I was an assistant minister. And the language I heard amongst the people playing.

But not language under sort of provocation. Just the general language as they arrived and said hello. And as we bowled in the nets. And as we had a drink afterwards. And so on. It's language I would expect never to hear at church.

[18 : 59] And I would never hopefully use myself. 20 years ago we'd probably never hear the F word on TV. Now we do. Fewer and fewer words are blocked out when you read the papers.

Or beaked over on television. Foul language is becoming more and more okay. And even in our courts. The use of foul language now is not reason to dismiss staff.

For example in some places. And the feet are no better than the mouths. You see this is the foot and the mouth disease. We've had the mouths. And now the feet in verses 15 to 17.

Their feet are swift to shed blood. Ruin and misery are in their paths. And the way of peace they've not known. They are swift. Eager to shed blood.

Not somebody who does it reluctantly or under provocation. But full of intent and desire. And that's of course been the pattern of human history from Cain. And the first family through to Bin Laden and beyond.

[19 : 55] And the cause as in verse 10. So in verse 18. There is no fear of God. Before their eyes.

Again a theme that we saw this weekend from the book of Proverbs. For those away at the camp. Now this is bad news. And it's difficult to swallow. There are other diagnoses that are more common.

And often more preferable. There's the political diagnosis. All my faults are actually the government's faults. They're the ones to blame. They're the ones who've put us in this situation.

Or they're sociological. That is we just blame other people. My therapist or my teacher. Or this person or that person. My neighbour. Or they're environmental. We blame our parents for lots of stuff.

Or they might be economic. We blame the rich. The powerful. The greedy. They might be medical. Because we blame our genes. They might be educational. We blame our ignorance.

[20 : 53] Our lack of knowledge. Our schools. If I had a terminal illness. It would be no long term comfort to be told you'll be okay.

An optimistic but false diagnosis is a terrible lie. And what a cold comfort to be told you'll be okay when they know that you won't.

What deceptive words they would be. There used to be a race caller in Melbourne who's dead now called Bill Collins. And he was called the accurate one.

It's God who's the accurate one. And this is his diagnosis. And that's why we'd better pay attention to it. No other diagnosis even if it might seem preferable is.

No other diagnosis is actually gets to the heart and the root of the matter. This is God's diagnosis not even Paul's. So don't blame Paul for having a bad day in writing this chapter.

[21 : 56] It's God's diagnosis. He's quoting it from God's words. All without exception without exemption are under the power of sin. We are in the grip of its tentacles.

We are unable to break free. And we have no excuse at all. The reason that we Christians along with Jews in Paul's day have an advantage is that we've received the oracles of God.

The scriptures that is. As verse 2 said. And that means that we're at an advantage because we've been given the real diagnosis. You see we're at an advantage because the scriptures tell us we are without excuse for our sin.

The scriptures tell us we are facing a terminal illness. Sin. Sin. That's our advantage. It doesn't mean that we're better off.

But it's our advantage because we've been given the truth of the matter. In the scriptures. We are sinners. And we cannot shake it off. And we cannot pay for our own sin.

[23 : 04] So Paul says in verses 19 and 20. Now we know. Now we know. That whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law. So that every mouth may be silenced.

And the whole world may be held accountable to God. For no human being will be justified in his sight. By deeds prescribed by the law. For through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

Oh yes there are periodic acts of nobility and kindness and love that people do. But under the law of God. We all fail. Whether it's 0% or 99%.

We actually fail. Under the law of God. Without excuse. To be justified. In God's sight. In verse 20. Is to be declared righteous.

None of us. Face that verdict. Naturally. You see what Paul is saying here. Is that the advantage is that. The law of God.

[24 : 05] Given to God's people. Both to Jews in the Old Testament. And now to us in the scriptures. In the New Testament as well. Exposes our knowledge of sin. It makes us aware that we are sinners without excuse.

And you read God's word. And it ought to lead us to a conviction. Of sin. Doesn't always do that. But sometimes it does.

There's an English preacher called J. John. He's an evangelist. He preaches the gospel to people who are not believers. And some time ago he had a mission at Liverpool Cathedral in England.

This was a mission that had stunning effect on people's lives. He preached through the Ten Commandments. When he preached on the Eighth Commandment. Thou shalt not steal.

He asked the 3,000 people who were there hearing him preach. To place their stolen goods in amnesty bins that were set up outside the cathedral. Two wheelie bins on the steps of the Anglican Cathedral in Liverpool were filled to overflowing.

[25 : 11] With the National Health Service crutches that people had stolen. Videotapes. Company pens. Ashtrays. CDs. Library books. 400 pounds.

400 pounds in cash. And several letters of confession. The bulk of the items consisted of bathrobes and towels which were being posted back to hotels all around the world where they had the insignia of the hotel on them.

And anything that couldn't be returned to the owner went to charity. J. John said apparently that he was amazed by the response.

He said he'd received a letter from a carer in a nursing home who said that she had returned jewelry she'd stolen from elderly women. And two others told him that they had been inspired to return money received through fraudulent insurance claims.

The word of God exposes our sin. Doesn't make us in a sense better off. But it shows us the right diagnosis.

[26 : 14] I've heard of situations where couples are living together. They're not married. They become Christians. And the word of God exposes and convicts them of their sin. And they separate. And then get married and move back together again.

What about this story? A business owner who, as a non-believer, had employed scores of Christians in his company, reported this.

He watched them, you see. And he was naturally drawn to God by observing Christian workers who were conscientious and kind and thorough and aggressive on the job.

But he said, I'll tell you what really impressed me. One day a guy I knew to be a new Christian asked if he could see me after work. And I agreed to meet him. And later in the day I started to worry that this religious zealot, new Christian, would somehow try to convert him.

He came into this man's office with his head hanging low and said, Sir, I'll only take a few minutes, but I'm here to ask your forgiveness. Over the years I've worked for you, I've done what a lot of other employees do, like borrowing a few company products here and there.

[27 : 22] And I've taken some extra supplies. I've abused telephone privileges. I've cheated the time clock now and then. But now that I've become a Christian, and it's real, it's not a fake thing, I want to make amends to you and to the company for the things I've done wrong.

So could we figure out a way to do that? If you want to fire me for what I've done, I'll understand because I deserve it. If you want to dock my pay, dock it, whatever figure you think is appropriate. If you want to give me extra work to do on my own time, that would be okay too.

I just want to make things right with God in between us. And things worked out. And the business owner, who wasn't a Christian, said that this conversation had such a deep impact on him, more than anything else, as a demonstration of what true Christianity is about.

The illustrations are that the word of God exposes our sin. It exposes the fact that God's diagnosis in Romans chapter 3 is real.

We are sinners without excuse. All of us have failed. And as we'll see next week in the language of verse 23, all have fallen short of the glory of God.

[28 : 27] If you were to take out a piece of blank paper and draw a straight line across it, for many of us, it would look fairly straight. Put a ruler alongside it and we realise how much we deviate from being a straight line.

God's word is the straight line. It shows us our deviation from what is right and true. We may think we live lives that are relatively right and true, but they're not. A builder doesn't just build a building by eye and think, oh, that looks pretty straight.

We'll keep going like that. You'll end up with lots of leaning towers of Pisa if you do that. And they probably won't stand for hundreds of years either. You see, our eyes and our senses are not actually attuned as God's are to exactly what is right and true and straight.

But God tells us what is right and true and straight with the plumb line of the truth of his scriptures. And it's an exposing light. We realise that we have no excuse.

There are no exceptions to this diagnosis. We are without a plea. And as verse 19 says, we ought to be, in a sense, silenced. Silenced by the evidence.

[29 : 34] In effect, that's what happened to Carl Williams. The evidence was so overwhelming, he gave in and pleaded guilty. And that's the evidence of the scriptures before us.

So as we read the scriptures of God's word, which is our advantage to have, we come out and say, God, I am guilty.

I have no excuse. No one to blame but myself. I take responsibility. I am guilty. See, on trial before God, we could reel out lots of excuses.

All the rubbish that Shane Warne excused his sins by. And so many others in public office the same. We can pass blame to somebody else, but it doesn't stand in God's trial.

When we use God's law as our diagnosis, our sin is glaring in front of us. Have you loved God with all your heart? No, I haven't.

[30 : 34] Have you loved your neighbor as yourself all the time? No, I haven't. Have you honored God as God in your life all the time? No, I haven't. Have you exchanged the truth of God for a lie?

Well, yes, in the end, I have at times. Have you exchanged the glory of God for some idolatry? Well, actually, yes, I have. So what do you say in your defense?

There's nothing to say. It's silence. It's silence. Let all mortal flesh keep silence and with fear and trembling stand.

No merit of my own, I claim. Not the labors of my hands can fulfill thy law's demands. This is bad news.

This is bad news. Indeed. And it's precisely for that reason that Jesus is such good news.

[31 : 40] No merit of my own, I claim. But holy trust in Jesus' name. Nothing in my hand I bring but simply to thy cross I cling.

My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness. suo

How do you play? I have no defense. we are silenced before the throne of God. No excuse.

But the good news is this. Before the throne of God above I have a strong and a perfect plea. A great high priest whose name is love who ever lives and pleads for me.

My name is graven on his hands and my name is written on his heart and I know that while in heaven he stands no tongue can bid me thence depart.