

GOOD NEWS YEAR

Series #1: Romans chapters 1-4

The heart of the gospel

STUDY 6 | GUILTY AS CHARGED!

No one's perfect. So what's the big deal if I'm a "sinner"?

PREPARATION - BEFORE YOU TACKLE THE STUDY

On a BBC panel discussion, UK comedian Ben Elton was asked "What do you think of humanity?" His reply was "I believe the sum total of good in humanity outweighs the sum total of evil - despite evidence to the contrary."

Like many in our society he clings to the view that deep down, all people are fundamentally good. But it's hard to believe when we take a good look around. There's plenty of "evidence to the contrary"! What is that 'evidence'? Why would people prefer to cling to the idea that humans are essentially 'good' when there's so much that says we're not?

A. INTRODUCTION

In this study Paul concludes an argument that he started back in chapter 1 verse 18. Like a prosecutor in a court of law, he's been arguing strongly that humans aren't essentially good. Here's how the argument has flowed:

- In 1:16-17, Paul introduces what will be a major theme of his letter: *the righteousness of God*. This 'righteousness' is multi-faceted. It describes God's "rightness", how he always acts rightly, and how he puts things right – either in judgment or salvation. In the context of his wider argument, this righteousness of God seems to refer to the right standing he gives to people, through faith in Jesus.
- In the rest of chapter 1, he shows how God, in his righteousness, is angry with all the "godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (1:18). All people know that God exists, but wilfully suppress that truth, and replace love for the true God with love for idols – false gods that we pursue to meet our deepest heart needs.
- In chapter 2, Paul anticipates that certain Jews in Rome might consider themselves to be more 'righteous' than the godless people talked about in chapter 1. But Paul says God's righteous judgement will come upon them too, because having the law and external signs of religiosity is no advantage if you don't obey God consistently – which they don't!

The sad verdict about the unrighteousness of all people in these opening chapters then leads Paul to deal with a serious question about righteousness—*God's righteousness*. Is it fair of God to condemn the Jews? After all, they had been promised the blessing of God! God had made covenants with them. He said that he would be their God, and that they'd be his people. How is it fair if God turns around and judges them?

In Romans 3:1-8 Paul denies any injustice on God's part. In 3:3 Paul says that even though a number of Jews were not faithful, it doesn't mean that God's faithfulness will fail. God still loves Abraham's people, and desires them to place their faith in the Messiah. But their continual rebellion (and rejection of Jesus) means that their unfaithfulness will be met with God's righteous wrath (v. 5). God doesn't play favourites when it comes to continual sinful rebellion.

Now Paul again broadens the focus, to speak of the plight of both Jew and Gentile alike. Like a skilled lawyer, Paul now brings his stinging indictment of the human condition to a close.

GUILTY AS CHARGED!

B. CONSIDER GOD'S WORD

1. Read Romans 3:9-20

Who is unrighteous? What does it mean to be unrighteous?

2. What sense does Paul convey by saying 'all are *under sin*.' Can you think of other parts of the Bible that teach this?
3. In verse 11 Paul says 'no one seeks God.' In the context of Paul's teaching up to this point, how can he say that?
4. 'No one does good.' (v.12) Surely Paul knows that people do good things all the time! How could people be doing good things that are, in some way, not truly good?

Paul's conclusions about human nature are startling and disturbing. And while they might seem to be a little harsh, they are also true. Paul not only makes the point that we're all sinners - unrighteous in God's eyes - but he also points out how our sin affects us. It primarily affects our relationship with God, but also our relationships with others, and our understanding of ourselves. Even the good we do, and the attempts to "seek God" are marred by impure motives that are often more self-interested than we'd like to admit. No matter how good we think we are, God does not consider us 'in the right' with him. We stand before him, without excuse. That's hard to take.

C. APPLY THE WORD

5. How do you think our sin is expressed in the following areas of life:

Our thought life?

Our general attitude?

Our behaviour in public?

Our relationships with others?

Our relationship with God?

GUILTY AS CHARGED!

6. We can easily forget that we're sinners. Why are we not more mindful of this, and how do we show it?

7. How can our knowledge of human sinfulness actually help us to live life more faithfully for Christ?

Since verse 18 of chapter 1, Paul has been explaining our human predicament. God has made humanity, yet we do not truly recognise him as God. Both Gentiles and Jews alike have “all turned away” (3:12). Even the Jews—whom God especially chose to be his people in the Old Testament—have been unfaithful. Before God we are all without excuse.

This is incredibly important to know, for a number of reasons. Our knowledge of the inherent sinfulness of humanity gives us realistic expectations of others. It helps us to be humble, and not think of ourselves as being “better” than others. It gives us insight into why people don't relate to God properly, or each other. And most of all, it makes us hungry for God's solution - the gospel! In our next study Paul will explain why the gospel is such good news.

PRAY . . .

D. GOING FURTHER

Among the many myths held by our culture, we are taught that virtually all people are inherently good. Yes, there are a few 'bad eggs' in society. But as for the rest of us, we're told that, deep down, everyone is a good person who generally seeks to do good.

The French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) believed this. He believed that human beings are naturally good. He thought the reason any of us end up being 'bad' is due to external influences – things like society, education and religion. He said that things *external to us* all play their part in dumbing us down, and turn us from our natural goodness.

What might the Apostle Paul say to his view? Is the Christian view of sinful human nature degrading? And what role do you think Christians should have shaping the moral/ethical tone of our society?

EXTRA #5: What is the doctrine of 'Total Depravity'

Every aspect of our humanity has been affected by a deep moral and spiritual reality called 'sin'. We are not, by God's grace, as bad as we could be. But our natural bent is not to choose God, nor seek to obey him. As Paul points out in Romans, this affects every part of life - spiritual, moral, social, etc. Theologians have a doctrine that sums up our sinfulness. It's called “Total Depravity.” On the next page is a summary of it, taken (mainly) from a popular theology website:

www.theopedia.com/total-depravity

GUILTY AS CHARGED!

Total depravity (also called total inability or total corruption) is a biblical doctrine closely linked with the doctrine of original sin as formalized by Augustine and advocated in many Protestant confessions of faith and catechisms, especially in Calvinism. The doctrine understands the Bible to teach that, as a consequence of the Fall of man, every person born into the world is morally corrupt, enslaved to sin and is, apart from the grace of God, utterly unable to choose to follow God or choose to turn to Christ in faith for salvation.

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath.”
(Ephesians 2:1-3, NIV)

Summary of the doctrine

The doctrine of total inability teaches that people are not by nature inclined to love God with their whole heart, mind, or strength, as he requires, but rather all are inclined to serve their own interests and to reject the rule of God. Even religion and philanthropy are destructive to the extent that these originate from a human imagination, passions, and will.

Total depravity does not mean, however, that people are as bad as possible. Rather, it means that even the good which a person may intend is faulty in its premise, false in its motive, and weak in its implementation; and there is no mere refinement of natural capacities that can correct this condition. Although it's often misunderstood, this doctrine teaches optimism concerning God's love for what he has made and God's ability to accomplish the ultimate good that he intends for his creation. In particular, in the process of salvation, it is argued that God overcomes man's inability with his divine grace and enables men and women to choose to follow him, though the precise means of this overcoming varies between the theological systems.

Biblical evidence for the doctrine

A number of passages are put forth to support the doctrine, including (quotations are from the ESV except where noted):

“The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” Genesis 6:5

“Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil.” Jeremiah 13:23 (NIV)

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” John 6:44a

“None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.” Romans 3:10-11

“For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”
Romans 8:7-9

“The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel that displays the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.” 2 Corinthians 4:4 (NIV)

“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.” 1 Corinthians 2:14

STUDY 7 | THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

What's the solution to the human condition?

PREPARATION - BEFORE YOU TACKLE THE STUDY

Consider some of the most popular movies of all time. Think, too, of the most popular novels. Often what you'll find in these stories is an element of 'redemption' - where a problem is experienced and then resolved in some way. Usually in each story there's one key 'hero' who saves the day. Why do we like these kinds of stories? Why do they appeal to us? Cast your mind back to a movie you have seen in recent years that you liked - what impacted you the most about it?

A. INTRODUCTION

The letter to the Romans is about the gospel. The gospel is a message - a true story - about what God's done in the world through Jesus. But so far in Romans we've encountered mainly bad news! Since chapter 1 verse 18, Paul argued that all humanity is unrighteous in God's eyes. And because of our wilful rejection of our Creator, he would be perfectly fair to leave us awaiting his just judgement and wrath. Thankfully, we know that's not where this story ends.

But the idea of God forgiving people is surrounded on every side by one monumental problem: **how can a holy God forgive us and be a righteous judge of wickedness?** If God is righteous (in that he always does what is right, and he works to set things right), how can he *not* judge us? Because God's hatred of wrongdoing is so intense (Ps. 5:5) and all have sinned (Rom. 3:10), it seems that God cannot forgive us without contradicting himself! If he's a perfectly holy and just God, he cannot let one sin go unpunished. If we've all wilfully rebelled against our Maker, then we deserve the full consequences! This problem is addressed in today's passage, which the Protestant reformer Martin Luther called "the very central place of this letter, and of the whole Bible."

This small part of this letter is clearly important, because, for the first time since chapter 1 verse 17, the expression "the righteousness of God" appears again. We've already discussed in an earlier study just how important the idea of 'righteousness' is. By picking up the term here, Paul reminds us of an idea that is absolutely basic to Romans, and central in God's gospel story for the world.

B. CONSIDER GOD'S WORD

1. Read Romans 3:21-31

Since Romans 1:18, Paul has been arguing one key idea about what people are like. What is it, and how convincing do you think this argument has been?

2. The word 'But' in 3:21 means that Paul is now moving on to make a new point. He does so using a lot of words like "righteous" and "justified". In the Greek manuscripts the word here for "justified" is basically a verbal form of the word "righteous". Therefore to "justify" someone means to "righteousify" them, or judge them to be in the right. So what do you think "justified freely by his grace" means (v.24)?

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

3. Paul says that our new right standing with God is 'to be received by faith' (v.25). Why use the word 'received'? Why faith? And how is this different from other worldviews?

4. According to Paul's argument in Romans 3:21-26, how does the cross manage to demonstrate both God's mercy and his justice?

5. Scanning down to verse 27-31, why can't Jews or Gentiles boast about their right standing before God?

By picking up the phrase 'righteousness of God' here, Paul reminds us of an idea that is absolutely basic to Romans: how God's righteousness is known and laid hold of by sinful people. From 1:18-3:20 various tempting possibilities for gaining righteousness (or possibly avoiding its demands!) have been considered and rejected. Now, for the first time since the beginning of the letter (vv.1-7), Paul returns to consider the work of Christ on the cross.

While these few verses don't explain *everything* that Jesus achieved on the cross on our behalf, we do find in these verses why the gospel is good news! It's about grace. It's about how broken people who've been alienated from God and other people can find a new kind of life. By transferring our trust from ourselves to Jesus, God declares that we are right in his sight. In giving Jesus the run of our lives, we find that our story of sin and brokenness is now being transformed as we come into God's big story of redemption. In relationship with God through Jesus, our hearts can now begin to find what they've been searching for our whole lives.

C. APPLY THE WORD

6. What effect should God's action in Jesus (3:21-26) on our behalf have on . . .
 - our sense of worth?
 - our feelings about the future?
 - our attitude to people outside the church?
 - our need to impress others?
 - our motivation to do good things in everyday life?

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

7. When you read these verses and consider what God did for you in Christ, what do you feel?

8. Imagine you're in a coffee shop and you happen to be reading through the Bible (Romans, actually). A person at the table next to you sees what you're doing. They lean over and say "I see you're reading the Bible there. What's all that stuff about anyway?" What have you read today that would help you give a simple, God-honouring answer?

There's no question that what Paul says here is utterly basic to the story of the Bible, and the central reality conveyed in the gospel. **The heart of the gospel is God's grace**, which is freely shown to those who realise their predicament before God, and humbly turn to him - trusting that Jesus' death is enough to bring them into a right relationship with God, for free, forever.

The wonder of the gospel is that through Jesus' death, God has righteously dealt with the problem of our unrighteousness, and his righteous wrath against our wilful sin. Now, we can finally see the story of our lives, in light of the story of God, revealed in Jesus. In the story of the gospel, our broken and restless hearts find their true home.

PRAY . . .

D. GOING FURTHER

Consider and comment on the following statements. In light of what Paul's taught so far in Romans, think about the extent to which these things are true. If you could change or add anything to these, what would it be?

"On the cross God forgave all our sins."

"Being a Christian is about being 'washed in the blood of the lamb.'"

"Jesus took our sins away."

*"Grace stands for **God's Riches At Christ's Expense.**"*

"God has overcome his justice with his love."

"Being 'justified' is being 'just as if I'd never sinned.'"

STUDY 8 | YOU GOTTA HAVE FAITH

What does faith have to do with my relationship with God?

PREPARATION - BEFORE YOU TACKLE THE STUDY

Think back over the first few chapters of Romans that we have studied so far. Next to the passages below, try to write one key thing you think you learned from each part:

1:1-7

1:8-15

1:16-17

1:18-32

2:1-29

3:1-20

3:21-31

A. INTRODUCTION

In Romans 1:18-3:20 Paul argues that everyone has rebelled against God, even the Jews who had God's law. In Romans 3:21-31 he explains how God can make rebels right with himself, while still remaining just and fair. This forgiveness and justification comes through Jesus, apart from the Law. In fact the Law shows us that none of us could ever live a righteous life before him.

Paul has said that the Old Testament points us forward to the "righteousness of God apart from the law" (3:21). That the law of Moses could not bring justification; the only thing that could put us right with God was faith in the risen Lord Jesus Christ. The law, in which pious Jews had placed so much hope, is of no use at all in creating or fostering relationship with God, except in pointing out their need for God's grace and forgiveness. To prove his point, Paul masterfully turns to the example of Abraham, the father of the Jews and the man who received God's promises. Paul argues that Abraham demonstrates the very thing that he has been explaining – that righteousness comes by faith, not by "works" or religious performance.

B. CONSIDER GOD'S WORD

1. Read Romans chapter 4

Verse 3 says "Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness." Reflecting on the last study, what do you think it means to be 'credited' as righteous?

2. Abraham didn't simply believe *in* God - he *believed* God. What's the difference, and why does it matter?
3. Looking especially at verses 4-5, is Paul saying that people who trust God don't need to pursue obedience and good works? Explain.

YOU GOTTA HAVE FAITH

4. How does the example of David (and the quote from Psalm 32) in verses 7-8, back up Paul's message about how we get right with God?

Paul is trying to prove the point that the law of Moses could not bring justification; **the only thing that can put us right with God was faith in the risen Lord Jesus Christ.** For people who believe that your moral performance or religious background get you “across the line” with God, Paul has a news flash. Justification is available to everyone who believes, regardless of your moral or religious background!

This is a revolutionary idea. Paul is saying that our relationship with God is restored - as an act of grace on God's part - by transferring our trust away from ourselves and our works, to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Faith, then, is the empty hand that receives new life from God as a gift. It is a state of the human heart where we finally realise that all our attempts to “save ourselves” will inevitably fail, and we receive the salvation that God offers in Christ.

C. APPLY THE WORD

5. Some think having ‘faith in God’ is like a power that we possess to get God to do what we ask for. What might Abraham have said to this?
6. In what ways do you feel you are sometimes tempted to try to earn God's approval by your own good works? Why do you think we do this?
7. Why do you think faith in Jesus brings glory to God (v. 20)?
8. What are the hallmarks of a person who's truly trusting in Jesus?

Paul knows the default position of the human heart is ‘works-righteousness’ - where our hearts seek a life where we feel ‘in the right’ by our own efforts, possessions or circumstances. In suppressing the truth about the God we know exists, we seek to control our own lives and ‘save’ ourselves. We all want to feel justified in ruling our own lives. But it doesn't work. It alienates us from God and others, and it brings us under the power of sin's slave-driving rule. We end up “worshipping and serving created things” (1:25). It's exhausting.

But there's another way. It's called the gospel. The good news is that the deepest needs of our hearts can be met in transferring our trust from ourselves to God's victorious King, Jesus. Using the example of Abraham, we see that a new standing in life can only be found in trusting our promise-making God. God offers forgiveness and new life if we simply realize that we've been going in the wrong direction, and turn back to him - and we do that by *trusting God in Christ*. It's all by faith, not by works, so that no one can boast. We get eternal life, security, hope, joy, and peace. And God gets the glory. That's the heart of the gospel.

YOU GOTTA HAVE FAITH

PRAY . . .

D. GOING FURTHER

At the beginning of our exploration of Romans chapters 1-4, we started with a simple little study called *Where the gospel belongs*. We saw that the heart is the centre of a person. Because of that, what our hearts most love and desire, will be what our wills and actions are driven towards. In our hearts we have a picture of what is most lovely and worthy. It might be a picture of the happy family, or having perfect health, or sipping cocktails on a tropical beach. Whatever our hearts love the most, that's what we'll tend to live for. And if we can't get it we'll be immensely dissatisfied, and even angry.

That's why the gospel belongs in the heart. When our hearts truly see and trust in Jesus' death for our sin, new life springs up deep inside us! When we see that his death was *for us*, to bring us back to God - to live life under his loving rule - our hearts should melt! The gospel of Jesus is God's way of renewing and reshaping the loves of our hearts. As that happens, how we act begins to slowly change. How we respond to life begins to change. And most importantly, what (or *who*) we love the most, begins to change. **The gospel belongs deep in our hearts.** That's how we become the people God wants us to be!

During the coming week, consider once again what your heart is most set on. What do you love the most? When you daydream, what scenario do you imagine will bring total fulfilment or satisfaction? God calls us to repent of our God-excluding dreams, and to have him as our highest joy. **In God, through Christ, we find what is most worthy of worship and service. We find what our hearts have been searching for this whole time.**

In the coming week, why not ask God to make your faith stronger? Ask him to help you see and understand the depths of the gospel more clearly. Pray that this growth will cause you to love Christ more than anything. And as you grow in love for him, ask that (by his Holy Spirit's power) he'll help you to show that love to others in smiles, kind words, acts of service, and unashamed witness to the gospel of Christ.

Soli Deo Gloria