

**The Village Church – Rancho Santa Fe
Adult Bible Study – Week #4 – 2026 & 2027**

Romans 3:9 - 20

October 6 & 7, 2026

****FOUR MOVEMENTS OF PAUL’S ARGUMENT****

In Romans 3:9–20, the Apostle Paul offers a powerful and sobering conclusion to his examination of humanity's condition. His argument unfolds in a structured manner, comprising four distinct steps or movements, particularly evident in verses 19 and 20.

This section emphasizes the universal nature of sin, reminding us of our shared human condition. It calls for introspection and understanding, acknowledging that we all fall short and need grace. The weight of his message resonates deeply, inviting us to reflect on our lives and relationships with others and to cultivate greater compassion and humility.

Movement 1: The Audience of the Law (v. 19a) — Paul states that *"whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law,"* specifically addressing the Jewish people who possess the Mosaic Law and reminding them that its direct scrutiny applies to them first.

Movement 2: The Silencing of Humanity (v. 19b) — The law's effect is "so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable [guilty] before God", stripping away all human excuses, boasts, and self-justification.

Movement 3: The Impossibility of Legal Justification (v. 20a) — Paul concludes that "by the works of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight," demonstrating that obedience or moral record-keeping cannot secure a righteous standing before God.

Movement 4: The True Purpose of the Law (v. 20b) — He defines the law's function: "through the law comes the knowledge of sin"; the law serves as a mirror that exposes human corruption rather than a remedy to cure it.

****KEY CONCEPTS****

1. Shared Condition Under Sin

- Romans 3:9: All people, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin.
- Sin operates not just as individual actions but as a dominion or controlling force.

2. The Meaning of “Under Sin”

- Being "under sin" suggests living beneath its influence and lordship.
- It’s not something we can simply will or educate ourselves out of.

3. Impact of Sin

- Paul's use of Old Testament quotes in verses 10-18 outlines the widespread problem of sin:
 - Inner Corruption: Human minds and spirits are disoriented. (vv. 10-12)
 - Destructive Speech: Language can cause harm rather than healing. (vv. 13-14)
 - Harmful Actions: Sin leads to violence and disorder in society. (vv. 15-18)

4. The Law's Role

- **Verses 19-20 explain the purpose of the Law:**
 - The Law speaks to those under it, highlighting the universal need for accountability.
 - No one can be justified by their deeds under the Law; it reveals the knowledge of sin.

5. From Diagnosis to Good News

- The passage prepares us for the good news in verse 21, which emphasizes God's righteousness and the hope for salvation.

REFLECTIONS

1. Paul strings together various Psalms and prophetic texts to argue that "there is no one righteous, not even one" (v. 10).

- How does viewing this passage through the lens of **systemic and structural injustice** (like racism, poverty, or corporate greed) shift our understanding of "sin" from purely individual moral failures to collective societal brokenness?
- If "no one is righteous" because we are all embedded in broken worldly systems, how does this challenge the myth of the "self-made" or perfectly innocent person?

2. Paul is explicitly speaking to a context where some Jewish believers felt inherently superior to Gentiles due to having the Law (v. 9).

- In what ways do modern religious communities fall into the trap of exceptionalism or spiritual superiority?
- How can this text be used to deconstruct modern religious, nationalistic, or cultural "in-group vs. out-group" dynamics?

3. Paul asserts that "no human being will be justified in [God's] sight by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (v. 20).

- Laws and policies are necessary to expose injustice (the "knowledge of sin"), yet they cannot fully transform human hearts or bring about true reconciliation. What are the limits of relying solely on legalism or secular policy to achieve a just society?
- How do we balance Paul's critique of "the Law" with a Christian commitment to advocating for just laws and social equity?

4. Verses 13–14 focus heavily on the sins of speech: "Their throats are open graves; they use their tongues to deceive. The venom of vipers is on their lips."

- In our current era of digital media, political polarization, and online discourse, how do these verses speak to rhetoric's power to dehumanize others?
- What does a Christian ethics of speech look like when confronting systems of oppression without adopting the venomous language Paul condemns?

5. This passage serves as the dark backdrop before Paul transitions to a message of universal grace and justification by faith apart from the law (starting in v. 21).

- If verses 9–20 aim to put everyone "on the same level" regarding human frailty, how does leveling the playing field prepare us for a more inclusive, liberating theology of grace?
- How can acknowledging our shared capacity for harm actually foster deeper empathy and solidarity across different human divides?

MAIN LITERARY AND RHETORICAL DEVICES

The Apostle Paul uses several key literary and rhetorical devices in Romans 3:9-20 to prove that all people are under the power of sin.

- **Catena (Chain of Quotations) / "Pearl Stringing":** Paul strings together a rapid sequence of six Old Testament quotations (from Psalms and Isaiah) like a chain to build an undeniable legal case.
- **Personification:** Paul treats "sin" as a cruel, living master or taskmaster that holds humanity in active slavery.
- **Metaphorical Imagery (Somatization):** He uses specific physical body parts (throat, tongue, lips, mouth, feet, eyes) to vividly portray human corruption spreading through action and speech.
- **Courtroom Metaphor (Forensic Motif):** Paul frames the passage like a courtroom trial. The law acts as a prosecutor, and its ultimate goal is to "stop every mouth" so that the whole world pleads guilty before God.

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Primary Source: Romans, Interpretation Commentary, Paul Achtemeier

Other Sources: The Anchor Yale Bible Commentary: Fitzmyer, The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Hermenia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible