

Your Day in Court (Part 1)
Romans 3:19-20
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I still remember reading, now many years ago, a news article. It imprinted itself in my mind because, frankly, I read it and as I read it, I laughed out loud. Here's how the article read, "A New York City lawyer," that's a good start isn't it? "A New York City lawyer, Samuel Hirsch, filed suit this past Wednesday against McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy's, and K.F.C., saying that their fatty foods are responsible for his client's obesity and health related problems. The soon to be class action lawsuit alleges that the four big fast food corporations are irresponsible and deceptive in the posting of their nutritional information, that they need to offer healthier options, and that they create a de facto addiction in their customers."

Now the article goes on, but my favorite quote in the article was from a law professor at the Manhattan Institute. This is what he said, "Most people are aware that eating double cheeseburgers is not the same as celery." That's true. And why would you want to eat celery anyway? Why would you eat a food that consumes more calories digesting it than it gives you? That doesn't even make sense. Anyway, the article goes on, "He went on to say," this law professor, "that the suit was a blatant attempt to cash in on the recent publicity over obesity, along with the huge tobacco settlements." He said, "It disregarded the idea that people are responsible for their own actions." That's exactly right. That's really at the heart of it.

Now, thankfully, what was obviously a frivolous lawsuit was eventually dismissed. Unfortunately, it took eight months of legal wrangling before it was dismissed. But that someone would even consider such a lawsuit really illustrates the fact that we live in a culture that is one of the most litigious in human history. People constantly abuse the civil court system. And, frankly, the criminal court system fares no better. As one of our Elders, an attorney, reminds me, there are fallen sinners on both sides of the criminal justice system. On the one hand, there can be, unfortunately, corrupt judges and corrupt law enforcement. On the other hand, people who have clearly broken the law commonly use the system to thwart true justice. There are corrupt attorneys, there are many good attorneys, but there are corrupt attorneys who use technicalities in the law, endless delays, complex legal maneuvering, not merely to provide the kind of protection that ought to be there for our system, but really to help the truly guilty escape justice.

In addition, many people, I would even say most people, who are guilty of a crime refuse to acknowledge their guilt. I'm not talking merely about the not guilty plea, which can be a wise move legally, I'm talking about interpersonally they won't admit their guilt. When I was in college I ministered every Saturday night in a prison that was about 40 minutes away from where

I was going to school and I would preach there every Saturday night. I loved that. I loved the opportunity. But I can tell you, over the number of years that I ministered there, I only remember meeting one person who said he deserved to be there. Every other man I met, dozens, probably hundreds of men, maintained that they had been unfairly treated and they were waiting for justice to be served. Everyone wants his day in court. I think it's part of the fallen human condition to think that if I can present my case, then it will become clear that either I am not guilty or there are extenuating circumstances that ought to be considered so that I am not truly responsible for what I did.

Now, the tragic thing about this is that most people attribute this same perverted sense of justice to God. They think God's justice system works the same way. They think that they will one day stand before the all knowing, all holy God, and that they will somehow tweak the system to get out of what they deserve, that somehow God will agree, they're not responsible. I do sin, they will admit, but I just can't help it. You see, the real fault for my sin, they would argue, lies not with me but outside of me. It was my parents. It was my dysfunctional family. It's my inherited propensities. It's my environment. My addictive personality. The problem with me is my spouse, or something else.

But ultimately, all of our defenses, in regard to our sin, trace back to God. When we blame anything but ourselves we are, in reality, blaming God. People want justice. No justice, no peace. Listen, if it's justice you want, it's justice you'll get it. Because, I promise you this, based on the authority of the Scripture, there is coming a day when there truly, in every sense of the expression, will be justice for all.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, in just two brief verses, he allows us to see just what that will look like. He describes for us God's just verdict on every living person. Now, before we look at these two verses together, let me just remind you of the flow of Romans since it's been several weeks since we've looked at it together because of our Christmas study. Paul begins in the first 15 verses with a sort of general introduction in chapter 1, and then in verses 16 and 17 of chapter 1 he introduces his theme in a formal way. The theme of this letter is about the gospel. As he refers to it in verse 1, the gospel of God, the gospel that finds its source in God. The good news that God has made a way to declare sinners to be right with Himself based on the work of Christ received by faith.

But before Paul gets to the good news, he first lays out the bad news. Beginning in chapter 1 verse 18 and running down to chapter 3 verse 18, he demonstrates man's universal need for the gospel, man's universal lack of personal righteousness. He details man's depravity, man's guilt before God, and in this section he absolutely demolishes all hope that any person will ever be right with God based on his own personal merit or his own personal efforts. That's true in chapter 1 of the pagan, that is, the person who doesn't even claim to worship the true God of the Bible, the idolater. He is guilty and hopeless and utterly lacks righteousness. In chapter 2 verse

1 running through chapter 3 verse 8, the same thing is true for the Jew. The fact that they have the Scripture but don't practice it won't help them at the judgment, Paul says. So every human being needs a righteousness that they do not have.

When we get to chapter 3 verses 9 to 20, the passage that we just read together a few moments ago, Paul describes and proves from the Scripture, the moral corruption that theologians call depravity. We learn from this passage that depravity is universal. That is, there is not one human being that cannot be described from God's perspective as depraved. It's universal. It's also total, depravity. That is, not only is every human being affected, not only are you affected and am I affected, but it's total in that it permeates every part of our being. Nothing is left untouched in our being by sin.

So this paragraph then is one of the most important in the entire Bible. In fact, let me put it to you bluntly, if you don't understand this paragraph you cannot grasp the good news that begins in chapter 3 verse 21. You can't. Paul begins this key paragraph then with the formal indictment of man's depravity in verse 9, the formal indictment. "What then? Are we better than they?" I noted for you that the we there could be the Jews. Paul could be saying, are we Jews better than the Gentiles? That's possible. But there were several reasons I noted for you that I lean toward this being, am I claiming that I and my fellow Christians are somehow better by nature than everyone else I've just indicted? And he says, verse 9, "Not at all, not at all, for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin." There are no exceptions.

By the way, verse 9 then is Paul's own summary of what he has already written in this letter so far. He says, notice the word charged, this is legal language. This is the language of a formal indictment. He says, I have so far in this letter made a formal indictment that all humanity, Jews and Gentiles, are legally guilty of sin against God.

In verses 10 to 18 he moves to the second part of this paragraph, the biblical evidence for man's depravity. You know, it's interesting if you look back in the first couple of chapters, there's very little Scripture. Paul is laying out his indictment. But you come to this section and it begins in verse 10, "as it is written." Here Paul introduces his biblical evidence, the proof that all men, without exception, are under sin. He quotes seven different Old Testament passages from Psalms and from Isaiah. And in these verses he proves, from the Scripture, that all men are totally depraved, they're under sin.

Now, the evidence begins in verse 10 with a summary of that condition, "as it is written, 'THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE.'" There's not one person who measures up to God's standard. That's what that means. That is a, sort of, summary. Not one person measures up to God's standard. Then he continues, a string of references to illustrate just how deep our sinful condition goes, the depth of depravity. We looked at it, but he says, our minds are darkened, "'THERE'S NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS.'" Our wills are enslaved, "'THERE'S NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD.'" We have rebellious lifestyles; we've turned from God's way to pursue our own way.

We exhibit sinful behavior, “THERE IS NONE WHO PRACTICES,” or does “WHAT IS GOOD. NOT EVEN ONE.”

In verses 13 and 14 we have toxic speech. Everything that comes out of human mouths, it's toxic. There's cursing and bitterness and deceit and lying and we just pour out of what's in our hearts. Jesus said, “out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.” Toxic speech. As we learned, toxic speech then spills over in verses 15 to 17 into destructive relationships. We just destroy every relationship we touch. If it weren't for saving grace in those who are redeemed, and if it weren't for common grace in the lives of those who aren't, we would destroy everything we touch. That's the depth of depravity.

In verse 18 he comes to the foundation of depravity. Here's ground zero. Here's the real issue. Verse 18, “THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES.” The reason we make these choices, the reasons we are the way we are, the reason that we do what we do, is because we don't fear God our Creator. And therefore, we do what we want.

Now, today we come to the third part of this paragraph. We've seen the formal indictment of man's depravity in verse 9. We've seen the biblical evidence for man's depravity in verses 10 to 18. In verses 19 and 20 we come to the legal implications of man's depravity, the legal implications of man's depravity. These two verses reveal God's view of every man. Here is man's true status before God. In fact, in these two verses we hear God's final verdict on every human life. Don't forget, this section of Romans is charged with legal language. Paul has laid out his indictment, he has laid out the evidence, and now comes the verdict in verses 19 and 20.

What's remarkable here is that Paul, under the inspiration of the Spirit, allows us to glimpse into the future. Paul fast forwards to the day described in Revelation 20:15 and following, the day when every single unbelieving human being will stand before God, his or her Creator. It's called The Great White Throne Judgment. What happens there? What will God say to you if you get to that day without trusting in Christ? Well, Paul tells us right here.

If you have never confessed Jesus as Lord, if you have never repented of your sins and put your confidence in Christ and His work alone, these two verses describe exactly what God will say to you on the day of judgment. This will be His verdict on your life. This is your story.

If, on the other hand, you have embraced Christ as Lord and Savior, and I trust that's true for many of us here, this passage is for you as well. Remember, Paul wrote this letter to the Christians in the Roman churches. Why is such a detailed description of man's sinfulness so important for us to hear? Why is it important for us to understand what the verdict would be for us apart from Christ? Because it's only as you come to grasp the reality of what your situation would be at the judgment if it weren't for the work of Jesus Christ, that you really come to appreciate what God has done for you.

It's only as you grasp in your mind how it would really unfold for you before God your Creator if it weren't for what Jesus Christ did, it's only then that you will worship Him as you ought to worship Him. It's only then that you will love Him and serve Him and follow Him with your life. As your understanding of God's grace deepens, as it does in studying a passage like this, your love for God will grow and your pursuit of holiness will become even more intense as you get it, as you understand what Christ saved you from.

So if you're a Christian, as we walk our way through these verses, I want you for a few minutes to forget that you're a Christian and I want you to see what, apart from Christ, your day in court would really be like. If you were to stand before God, apart from His grace, this would be His verdict towards you.

His verdict here in verses 19 and 20 contains five elements or, we could say, five separate legal decisions, that together constitute God's final verdict on every man. Because we're going to celebrate communion together, we're just going to look at the first one today and then, Lord willing, we will look at the other four next Sunday.

The first decision in God's verdict toward every human being outside of Christ is this, we are responsible before God's law. We are responsible before God's law. Now think about it, that's very important. If God's about to condemn the sinner for breaking His law, He first has to establish that you are, in fact, responsible before His law, and that's where Paul begins.

Verse 19, "Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law." Clearly, Paul is making a point here about our legal relationship to God's law. He begins by saying, "Now we know." Paul uses that expression when what he's about to say, he believes his readers will largely agree with, most of them will say, that's true. And so he says, "Now we know that whatever the Law says." Clearly, in context, he's talking about God's law, and he's talking about the content of God's law. What does he mean?

Well, in context, obviously, he meant the Old Testament passages that he just quoted; that string of passages that begins in verse 10, runs down through verse 18, from the Psalms and from Isaiah, "whatever the Law says," and certainly it says that. But the phrase is probably best translated more comprehensively, something like this, "everything that the Law says," or "all that the Law says," whenever and however God's law speaks. Literally, the Greek text says, that God's law is constantly speaking, is speaking. It's a constant reality.

But to whom is God's law constantly speaking? Notice how Paul refers to them in verse 19, "it speaks to those who are under the Law." Who are these people who are under the law? Well, the phrase obviously can refer to the Jews. It's been used that way already, look back at chapter 2 verse 12. As He's indicting the Jewish people he says, "For all who have sinned without the Law," that's the Gentiles, who don't have the written law, "will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law," here he's talking to the Jews, "will be judged by that

written Law that they have.” So it can refer to the Jews. And many commentators say, the first part of verse 19 in chapter 3 is referring to the Jews, and the second half of verse 19 and verse 20 is referring to the rest of humanity, all of humanity. That’s possible.

But I don’t think so, because, remember, in verse 9 of chapter 3 Paul made a transition, a huge transition. He’s talked about the pagans in chapter 1, the Jews in chapter 2 and the first eight verses of chapter 3. Verse 9 of chapter 3 he says, “we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin.” And from that point forward he talks about all of humanity, no exceptions. In fact, notice down in verse 19, the results of the law speaking to those who are under the law. The result of this is that every mouth is shut. Verse 19, “all the world becomes accountable to God.” Verse 20, “no flesh is justified.” So, in context then, when he says, “those who are under the Law,” he must be referring to whom? Every human being, without exception, Jew and Gentile.

But how exactly does the law constantly speak? Well, obviously, the law speaks to those who have a written copy. There is the law in writing. And the law speaks to them. Throughout the first three chapters of Romans Paul refers to the entire Old Testament as the law of God. And so, those who have a written copy of the Scripture, to them the law is speaking and they are under the law.

But what about everybody else who doesn’t have a written copy? How about the billions of people who have never read the Bible, perhaps have never even seen a Bible – in history past and even today – what about them? How is the law speaking to them? Well Paul, remember, has already answered that masterfully. Go back to chapter 1, verse 32. He’s talking about idolaters, people who don’t worship the true God, and he says of them, in verse 32, “they know the ordinance of God,” they know what God requires, and “they know that those who practice the sins they’re practicing are worthy of death.” So they know God is the true God. They know that He created all things. They know that He is righteous and that He has expectations. And they know that if they sin against God’s requirements and expectations, his ordinance, then they’re going to be worthy of punishment from God. They know all of that.

But they don’t have the Bible. How do they know that? Go to chapter 2, remember, verses 14 and 15. Here’s how they know, “For when the Gentiles,” the pagans, “who do not have the written law, do instinctively,” or by nature, “the things of the law these not having a law are a law to themselves.” And here’s the key. When they do what the law requires, but they don’t have a written law,

they show the work of the law written [*where?*] in their hearts, [*it’s written in their hearts,*] their conscience bearing witness and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them on the day when, according to my gospel, God will judge the secrets of men through Christ Jesus.

How do they know? Notice that little phrase in verse 15, “the work of the law is written in their hearts.” It’s the only time in the New Testament that’s used. It means the requirement, the basic requirement of the law, is written into the soul of every man. God wired every human soul with this software. They basically know what He requires. It’s the work of the law. The thoughts, the words, the behaviors that the law requires, every person is born with the basic requirements of the law imprinted indelibly on his heart. God made sure it happened. So not one person has ever been completely ignorant of God’s requirements.

You say, wait a minute, how do we know that? I mean, obviously it says that there, but is there evidence of that? Paul says, absolutely there is. First of all, there’s evidence in man’s behavior, verse 14, “pagans do by nature the things of the law.” Those who don’t have the written Scripture often do some of the very things, or hold up as the ideal, the very things that the law requires.

Unbelievers are not immune from understanding something of what God requires. They often at least understand that they should honor and obey their parents. Unbelievers often try to be loyal to their spouses. Unbelievers try generally to speak the truth. Many unbelievers are generous with the poor. Most unbelievers never murder. Most cultures value life and honor and selflessness. All those things the law demands. But they’ve never read it in the law, so how do they know? Because it’s programmed into the software of the human soul. That’s evidence.

There’s another piece of evidence, not only their behavior shows that this work of the law is written in the soul, but their conscience shows it, verse 15, “their conscience bears witness.” The conscience shows the existence of this work of the law written on the heart because all the conscience does is it sits in judgment on how I am acting out that work of the law that’s written on the heart. And it says guilty or innocent depending on how I choose, what I choose. So, our conscience shows this reality.

Not just that, our thoughts, notice verse 15, “and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them.” This is separate from the conscience. Your conscience works automatically, without your thoughts, it just does it to you. But then, we make moral assessments of our own past decisions. We sit in judgment and say, I shouldn’t have done that, or that was good, I’m glad I made that choice. We do the same thing to the moral actions of others, we sit in judgment and we say, that was wrong. When we do that we are showing evidence of the work of the law written in our hearts. Certain things, we understand, can be measured against an objective standard.

Now go back to chapter 3. What Paul is saying here then, when he says those who are under the law, he’s talking about every human being. The Jews are under the law in the sense that they have the written law. The Gentiles, the pagans are under the law in the sense that they have the software of what God expects. They have it wired into the software of their souls. So, we are under the law. Every person who’s ever lived is under God’s law, either the written law or the

work of the law written on the heart, and we're responsible to keep it. We're responsible before God's law.

You know how this works. I mean if you like biking, for example, and you decide you're going to go to one of the busy downtown streets in Dallas and you're going to pop your bike on the sidewalk because that would be cool and you get on your bike and you say, I'm going to ride my bike down this sidewalk with all these people everywhere. And then you see a sign that says, No Biking. Or maybe there is no sign but you've studied driver, you've heard other people talk about getting tickets for riding their bike on sidewalks. You've never seen people riding on busy city sidewalks and they're, you know, except people that it's clear they're not thinking clearly. You know, so you make all of these conclusions and you know you shouldn't and then you do. What happens? Well, your conscience goes off. It accuses you. It says, wait a minute, you're breaking the law. This is wrong. You shouldn't be doing this.

But let's say that you didn't know you shouldn't ride your bike on a busy Dallas, downtown Dallas, sidewalk and the police pulls you over. The police is there and the policeman comes over and he says, "Excuse me sir, what are you doing riding your bike on the sidewalk?" "Oh, I'm sorry officer, I didn't know." What's the officer going to say to you? "Oh! That's okay, it happens all the time. Have a nice day." No, they're going to give you that little ticket, that little citation. Or maybe, if they're kind, they have some discretion, they might give you a warning. But it's not okay that you didn't know. You are just as guilty, regardless of your level of knowledge. Whether there was a sign there and you read it or whether you should have known or whether you didn't know it all.

The same thing is true when it comes to God. You live under God's government. You live in His world. You breathe His air. Your heart beats because of His action. He gives you everything you have. He gives you the food to eat. He sustains your life. And He has made His law obvious. It's in writing and the work of the law is written in your heart. So every human is fully responsible to keep all the requirements, "whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law." And that's every living person. God will grant no exceptions. No one can claim ignorance of the judgment. No one's going to show up before the judgment and say to God, "God, wait a minute. I know You're interested in justice. You just need to know I didn't know." You can't say that. You won't say that. Paul's point is, at the judgment God will come to this verdict about every person who stands before Him: You knew. You knew. And you were responsible before My law.

If you arrive at the judgment without Christ, the first legal decision that God the judge will make is that you were under His law. You have no excuse. You were completely responsible to keep it. Can you imagine this? In fact, do imagine this with me for a moment. Imagine standing before God your Creator who gives you everything you have and hearing Him say to you, I hold you completely responsible for My law. That is what He'll say if you go there without Christ. I

hold you completely responsible. You should have kept it. You owed me that. I gave you everything.

And let me tell you, He will say, from this moment on I'm going to evaluate every thought you ever had, every word you ever spoke, every action you ever took, against My law because you were responsible to My law. And from this moment on you will get from Me nothing but perfect, unwavering justice. You will get exactly what you have earned. Imagine that, because that's exactly how it will be for those outside of Christ. Because God tells us that's what He's like. In His self-revelation in Exodus 34:7, He says this about Himself, "I will by no means leave the guilty unpunished." That's what God said. That's who He is. He's just, perfectly just. That's how it will unfold apart from Christ.

But for those of us in Christ, let me take you out of that imaginary world and back to reality. Turn with me to Colossians 2, just very briefly. Colossians 2:13, Paul says, "When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh," spiritually dead, God made you alive together with Christ," that's regeneration, that Steve was talking about a couple of weeks ago. And then he uses several pictures of forgiveness. He says, "having forgiven us all our transgressions." Now notice verse 14, "having cancelled out," literally, having wiped out, having erased, "the certificate of debt consisting of God's decrees," there's God's law, "against us, which was hostile to us." Notice what he says, you've got to get the word picture. The certificate of debt is a promissory note. It's an articulation of the debts you owe someone. I owe him this and this and this and this and then you sign your name. That's a promissory note. It's an IOU in a formal sense.

Paul says, we owed God obedience, He gave us everything; we owed Him obedience and every time we failed to obey Him we accumulated debt. It's like that was, every thought, every sinful thought you've ever had, was added to the debt. Every evil word you've ever spoken, added to the debt. Every sinful action you've ever made, added to the debt. This becomes a massive document. It's what you owe God. And it's what you will pay. You're responsible before God's law.

But, for those who trust in Christ, notice what happens, verse 14, He wiped it out. He cancelled it, paid in full. How could he do that? Verse 14 goes on to say, "He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross." There's such a beautiful word picture here. You know, when someone died on a cross their crimes were nailed to the cross. Jesus had no crime, so the only thing He said was, "This is Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." But normally, their crime for which they were dying was nailed to the cross so everybody passing by knew what it was.

Paul says, if you're in Christ, God took that list of your crimes, your promissory note, your debt, every sinful thought, every sinful word, every sinful act, and He nailed that to the cross and that was the reason Jesus died, for your crimes and not His own. And therefore, the debt is wiped clean. That's what we celebrate in the Lord's table.

Our Father, we are so grateful that instead of the verdict we should receive, we receive the verdict of righteous. Not in our own righteousness, but in the righteousness of Christ. Father, we're so grateful for Your grace in Christ. Lord, may we praise You, may we worship You, may we live for Christ and love Him more profoundly and more intensely as a result of our study together in Romans 3.

And Father, I pray for those here this morning who don't know Christ, Lord, may they see that this is their story if they will not come to Christ. And may they run to Him today in repentance and faith and find that He will welcome them freely. Lord, may this be the day they turn from their own way to You in Christ. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.