

GUILTY AS CHARGED

Text: Romans 3:9-20

Readings: Isaiah 59; Romans 3:9-26

Belgic Confession Art 14a

Theme: Paul demonstrates the universality of sin.

Purpose: To show that we are all sinners held accountable to God and in need of God's righteousness.

At times there are high profile court cases that attract a lot of media attention. The accused is often a well-known public figure. The court case continues for a few months.

In some cases the accused presents his own defence, but that is rare. Most of the time the accused is represented by a lawyer whose task it is to defend his client of the charges laid against him.

On the other side it is the task of the prosecution to put forward the case against the accused. The chief prosecutor presents evidence to demonstrate that the accused is guilty as charged. When he has finished presenting his case the prosecutor will stand up in court and sum up the case for the prosecution; he will pull together all the evidence.

The first three chapters of Romans can be compared to a courtroom.

We are the accused; we are standing in the dock. There is a case against us. The charge against us is that we have sinned against God and against our neighbour and have failed to keep God's law.

The chief prosecutor is the apostle Paul. He is highly intelligent, a clear thinker with an expert legal mind.

He began presenting his case against all mankind back in chapter 1:18, first against all those who were Gentiles, and then, in chapters 2 and 3, against the Jews.

In these verses, 9-20, he comes to the end of his presentation and sums up his argument; he gathers the evidence and summarises his case.

Here in verse 9 he sums up what he had already presented: "We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles are all under sin".

This includes us all the people of the world - all are "under sin".

This means that all people are under the *power* of sin. All who live in the kingdom of Satan are under his dominion; they are under the control of sin and they cannot break free. No one can break free from the grip of sin, only God can do that.

Being "under sin" also means that all are subject to the *condemnation* of sin. God condemns all mankind because they are sinners, they are under God's judgement.

Everything he says drives to this one conclusion: all of us are guilty. Everyone is accountable to God. Sin is universal, it includes everyone, no one is excluded.

Paul demonstrates this from the Old Testament Scriptures and from the law.

1. He first lists a number of **OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES** to demonstrate that everyone is a sinner. The quotes come mainly from the psalms and from Isaiah 59.

a. He begins by showing that we have sinned **against God**. (vs 11-12).

i. "*No one is righteous, no not one.*" All of us stand before a God who is holy and righteous and pure, who is without sin. Compared to him we are unrighteous. We are not right in ourselves and we are not in a right relationship with him.

ii. Verse 11; "*There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God.*"

This quote from Psalm 14 takes us to the essence of sin. We do not know God as we should. We don't understand his character and his ways and his law. We don't know him with any depth of understanding or any closeness of relationship. And unless the HS works in our hearts we are content with that situation.

We don't seek God; we don't go looking for him; instead, we hide from him, like Adam and Eve did in the Garden (cf. Heb 11:6).

Think of all the unbelievers you know. How many of them are earnestly seeking God? How many of them want to know him? How many are reading the Bible to find out more about him? Sadly, very few, if any. This is sin.

iii. Instead of seeking God "All have turned away" (v 12). They turn away from God the Creator and they turn to the creation; they turn away from their Maker and become caught up with what he has made. People by nature are rebels against God. The root of sin is rebellion against God; sin begins with godlessness, with turning away from God (1:18).

Sin is disobedience against the first four commandments; we do not give God what we owe him.

b. But this shows itself in sins against **other people**.

i. In verses 13-14 Paul describes sins in our speech. Again he quotes from the psalms using very graphic language.

Think about your own life and speech. How many times do you sin against others by what you say? How often is your speech marred by gossip and slander and by words that are nasty and bitter. And then think about the speech of unbelievers around you: "Their tongues practice deceit"; their language and conversation is "full of cursing and bitterness" (v 13f).

ii. Then in verses 15-17 Paul quotes from Isaiah 59 to show how all have sinned by their treatment of other people.

The history of humanity is one of man's inhumanity to man; it is one of brutality, torture, destruction, misery and countless acts of violence and evil. Here is further evidence that sin is universal, affecting everyone in the world. And this is the plain teaching of the Bible - sin is a universal human condition.

2. Paul proves that all are sinful from the Scriptures and, secondly, from THE LAW.

a. Some people who believe in God or a god want to get into a right relationship with him by **keeping the law**.

i. The Jews in Jesus' day were proud of their law, the Torah, and they were proud of their law-keeping. This was especially true of the Pharisees. They believed that they could keep the law of God and that it would make them right with him.

ii. Martin Luther believed the same thing when he was still a monk in the Roman Catholic Church. On the basis of the teaching of that church he thought he could gain salvation by his good works - by penance, by buying an indulgence, by saying prayers, by fasting, by visiting cathedrals that were full of holy relics, by making a pilgrimage to Rome and climbing the steps of St Peter's Cathedral.

iii. This is a feature of all the non-Christian religions today; they are all works-based religions; they teach that you can earn your way into heaven by your religious practices and your good deeds.

The men of one religious group in Japan believe they can purify their souls by praying and immersing themselves in ice-cold water in the middle of winter.

Buddhist monks believe that they will find the Way of Deliverance by dressing in rags covered by a yellow cloak, by eating only once a day, by living off only what they can beg, and by living in the forest for part of the year with only a tree for shelter.

Muslims believe that if they want to enter heaven they must believe in Allah and his prophet Mohammed, pray five times a day, give alms to the poor, fast during the month of Ramadan and make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. They must also not drink alcohol, nor gamble, nor have more than four wives.

But the Bible teaches us that we cannot get right with God by keeping the law; "no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law" (v 20). God will not accept you on the basis of your good deeds; you can't enter heaven by your holy living.

"Not the labours of my hands,
can fulfil thy laws demands;
could my zeal no languor know,
could my tears forever flow,
all for sin could not atone;
Thou must save and thou alone."

b. You cannot be saved by keeping the law, rather the law **silences you**.

Verse 19; "Now we know that whatever the law says it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God."

We are all good at making excuses when we are accused of doing wrong. This goes a long way back; think of Adam and Eve after their sin, think of their blame-shifting; Adam blamed Eve and Eve blamed the serpent.

We are quick to make excuses and to explain away our sins; "I didn't mean to! She made me do it! It's his fault! I couldn't help it. I'm doing my best!"

But when you really understand your guilt you are silent.

That occasionally happens in families. You are confronted by something you have said or done and you have nothing to say; you know it is true; you know you did wrong.

That happens in court at times. A person is confronted by the case against him and he has nothing to say. The evidence is damning - he is guilty and is silent.

This must happen when you and I stand before God and appreciate the full demand of his law. There are no excuses. We are overwhelmed by the evidence. We have nothing further to say.

c. The law silences us and **condemns us**: "The whole world [is] held accountable to God" (v 19b) - Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, you and me.

We do not love God with all our heart, soul and strength, nor do we love our neighbour as ourselves.

We are held accountable to God, we are guilty before him, we are condemned by his law and liable to the punishment of hell.

d. The law silences us, condemns us and **exposes us**: "through the law we become conscious of sin" (v 20b).

i. The Reformers compared the law to a mirror. When we look in the mirror we see what we look like. It's not usually that flattering - more wrinkles, a few less hairs!

The same is true when you look at God's law: you see what you are like and you see your sin for what it is.

ii. Or think of when you go to the dentist. You sit in that chair. He tilts you back and turns on a bright light and shines it in your face. Then he begins poking around your teeth looking for signs of decay - picking and probing. He then takes an x-ray to make sure he hasn't missed anything.

In the same way the Holy Spirit turns the bright light of God's law on your life and he finds every stain and mark and blemish of sin.

iii. Or think those hotel programmes where someone goes around checking for dust and dirt. They don't do this casually; no, they put on white gloves and run their fingers over every surface. When God examines our lives with the white gloves of his law he exposes all the sin and dirt and evil of our hearts.

We are silenced, condemned, and exposed.

We are on trial before a holy God, before the just Judge of all the world. When the judge announces his verdict we are condemned as guilty, guilty as charged! There is no escaping our sin, no excusing it, no minimising our position.

The apostle Paul wants you to understand this clearly because it is only when you understand this thoroughly that you will understand God's salvation.

JB Phillips translates verse 20; "it is the straight-edge of the law that shows us how crooked we are." The law shows us our need of a Saviour; it drives us to Christ. The law forces us to look outside of ourselves to the Lord Jesus.

The people of Israel experienced this in the days of Isaiah the prophet. Their situation was hopeless. There was no truth, no justice and no one to help, no one to intervene (v 12-16).

So the Lord himself "worked salvation" (v 16).

He delivered his people, he rescued them, he saved them.

God has done the same for his New Testament people. You could not make yourself righteous but God has given you the righteousness of His Son, Jesus. While we were still sinners Christ died for us (Rom 5:8). What you could not do, God has done, through the work of his Son.

God has provided a way of making you right with Him, through faith in Jesus Christ.

If you believe in the Lord Jesus and what he has done then you are no longer condemned, the power of sin has been broken, you are right with God and you have the gift of eternal life.

On the basis of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ you are justified, pardoned and forgiven!

Amen