THROUGH THE LAW COMES KNOWLEDGE OF SIN

Romans 3:9–20

Key Verse: 3:20

“For by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”

What do you know? There are some things we really would *like* to know, but other things we’d rather *not*. So we have the expression “TMI.” Some people think they know everything. But Paul tells us that some knowledge “puffs up.” And he writes, “If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know” (1Co 8:1,2). What is it that we “ought to know”? In today’s passage Paul mentions the “knowledge of sin.” What *is* that? And why do we all *need* it? This is what we want to think about most today.

As we’ve seen thus far, in this letter to the Romans Paul is eager to share the gospel with as many people as possible. He’s convinced that it’s the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, regardless of race, social class or education (1:14–16). It’s the good news that “the righteous will live by faith” (1:17b). But to explain this gospel Paul first shows how all people are living under the wrath of God and desperately need God’s help. Generally speaking, people refuse to honor God as God or give thanks to him, and then sin begins to destroy their lives (1:18–32). Those who know God’s laws tend not to repent but to judge, yet live in hypocrisy and foolishly rely on circumcision to save them. Despite all their knowledge of God’s laws, their hypocrisy turns people away from God (2:1–29). Smart people try to say that the Jews’ failure is God’s failure, that God is unrighteous for inflicting wrath on us, or that if we do evil, good will come. But all such clever reasoning ends in their own condemnation (3:1–8). Now Paul concludes by showing how all people are “under sin” and how not even the law can justify us (3:9–20). In this study we want to think about what it means to be “under sin,” how sin affects our lives practically, and especially, how God’s law helps us have the knowledge of sin.

Read verse 9. Paul began this chapter by showing how the Jews have the advantages of an identity as God’s people through circumcision, and, of having been “entrusted with the oracles of God.” But despite these amazing spiritual advantages, Paul says here that Jews are no better off than Gentiles. He emphasizes it by saying, “No, not at all.” And in this verse he uses the expression “already charged,” as if he’s made an inescapable and totally convicting legal case. Paul has proven that all people, “both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.”

What does he mean by this expression “under sin”? In the most basic sense he means “guilty as charged.” But “under sin” is no abstract concept; in Paul’s mind it’s a vivid reality for all people. Fundamentally, the word “under” suggests that sin is “over” us. We all would like to think that we’re in control. But in reality, sin has control over us and, spiritually speaking, we’re locked up under it (Gal3:22). Later in Romans Paul writes that sin “reigns” over us, has “dominion over” (5:21; 6:12) and enslaves us (6:6,16,17,20). To be “under sin” means to be under sin’s power, but with no way out, no escape. Later Paul uses his own honest, personal example. His letters reveal that he was a highly intelligent, disciplined, strong-willed person. But he writes, “For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate” (7:15). And he repeats, “For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (7:19). He confesses that “sin…dwells within me” (7:20). He describes it as a war being waged within him, making him a captive and a wretched man (7:23,24). If even a man like Paul was like this, then being “under sin” isn’t just about addicts or weak people; it’s the common experience of us all.

It’s important to note that God didn’t make us this way. God created all human beings in his own image, to be full of his goodness and power, to use all our God-given gifts and talents for his glory, and to be a blessing in the world. But when we’re “under sin,” tragically, we lose the ability to do good, we become full of evil, we dishonor God, and we become a source of curse.

To make his conclusion even more weighty and persuasive, Paul wraps things up by stringing together various quotes from the Old Testament, showing how sin affects us all. Read verses 10–12. This is a quotation from Psalms 14:1–3 and 53:1–3. Sin robs us of understanding. Sin keeps us from seeking for God. Sin turns us aside from God. Though we all get together, sin makes us all worthless. Sin prevents us from doing good. It’s emphasized everywhere in these three verses: at the beginning, “no, not one” (10b); in the middle, “no one” (three times, 11–12a); and at the end, “not even one” (12b). Isn’t there *anyone* who’s good? To us it might seem there are *some*; but Paul says, “Nope, nobody.”

This is a hard pill to swallow, so he goes on. Read verse 13. This is a quote from Psalms 5:9 and 140:3. The words that stand out here are “throat,” “tongues” and “lips.” There’s a progression from what’s inside to what comes out. As our Lord Jesus once said, “For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks” (Mt 12:34), and he was talking mainly about evil. Sin is within us, affecting our hearts and our minds, our desires and our way of thinking. We express our thoughts and desires through our words. So our sin comes out in our speech. To speak, we use our throat, tongue and lips.

Someone whose “throat is an open grave” is a stark and disturbing metaphor for a person who may seem nice outwardly, but who has all kinds of unclean and dirty things within them, just under the surface. The tongue enables us to utter words. But our tongue can be used for either good or evil. If we’re going to live as God’s people, our tongue is the first thing we need to control (Jas 1:26). But on our own, no one can tame the tongue (Jas 3:8). The Bible says our tongue can torch our entire lives (Jas 3:6). Here verse 13 emphasizes that we use our tongues “to deceive.” It may mean to blatantly tell a lie, or, to say something to hide, mislead, or even manipulate. To have “the venom of asps” under our lips is a metaphor for saying poisonous things. We can do this in many ways, such as gossiping, using hurtful words to put others down, or, like the serpent in the garden, planting mistrust of God or of others, or pride, or relativism, tempting people to go ahead and sin against God.

Read verse 14. This is a quote from Psalm 10:7. To have a mouth “full of curses and bitterness” means to be full of complaints. We’re meant to be full of thanks and praise to God. But we so easily curse, like when we get really frustrated or impatient and start using all kinds of swear words. Our curses aren’t really about our situation; they’re usually aimed at somebody. After being afflicted with great suffering, Job’s wife encouraged him to “curse God and die” (Job 2:9). Using our mouths to complain about our situation is, in some sense, a way of cursing God. We also can use our mouths to curse people, to complain about them, to see them as the problem and cause of all our troubles. The more we complain, the more we curse, the more bitterness takes root within us.

Read verses 15–17. These are quotes from Proverbs 1:16 and Isaiah 59:7,8. What stands out here are the words “feet,” “path” and “way.” They describe the direction our lives take. Our thoughts, desires and words are one thing, but our actions are quite another. When sin takes control, our lives really start going in the wrong direction. “Swift to shed blood” isn’t just about murder or brutal warfare; it can mean being eager to hurt others or to get revenge. “Ruin and misery” aren’t just personal experiences, but what we bring on other people, even those we dearly love, by our sinful actions. “The way of peace” is a poetic expression for walking with God in daily fellowship and for loving and forgiving everyone around us. But when we’re under sin, we don’t know how to get on this “way of peace.” Verses 15–17 aren’t just about poetic words; they describe the real life experience of people everywhere today. Read verse 18. This is a quote from Psalm 36:1, and it summarizes all that Paul has been saying. At the root of all our sinful thoughts, words and behavior is a basic lack of reverence for God. The fear or reverence of God is meant to keep us from sinning (Ex20:20). But without this healthy fear, we ignore God, we say evil things and choose evil paths. Paul’s point here is not to help us save ourselves from our sinful tendencies, but to show us how depraved and helpless we are.

Read verse 19. All the Scripture Paul just quoted can be summarized in his expression “whatever the law says.” God’s law speaks to us all; we’re all “under” it. And what is its purpose? Verse 19b says, “…so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.” It means it makes us utterly convicted. It shows us we’re so guilty we can’t say anything. It causes us to stop making excuses and blaming others. It helps us realize how futile it is to try to escape; we really are accountable to God. God created each one of us; he gave us life and any good thing we may experience. But what we do in return is dishonor him and violate his purpose for our lives. To people we may look pretty good, but before God our Creator we deserve condemnation.

Read verse 20. The Jews thought that by works of the law they could justify themselves before God. “Works of the law” means good works, as well as keeping all kinds of religious rules and rituals. Paul is going to mention “works of the law” in this chapter again (3:27,28; cf. Gal 2:16). It has to do with something deep in the Jewish mentality. As the Pharisee famously said in Jesus’ parable, good Jews fasted twice a week and gave a tenth of all their income (Lk 18:12). But they ignored their inner sins of pride and selfishness. It wasn’t just a Jewish problem. Jewish Christians were asking Gentile Christians also to adopt these works of the law as most important. Today, this still takes the form of various kinds of legalism in the church and in Christian life. But Paul says not only that it doesn’t work, it doesn’t justify us before God at all, but also that it’s not necessary. We don’t need to try to justify ourselves to God by various “works of the law.” In fact, it was never God’s intention in giving the law in the first place.

Then what *was* God’s intention in giving us the law? Verse 20b says, “…since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” The Greek word here for “knowledge” is more intense than our English word. It refers to a vivid realization, awareness or awakening. Paul explains this in 7:7, where he writes: “Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.” He writes again in 7:13: “…in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure.” God’s law is like a bright light shining on the darkness of the sin within us. Instead of throwing it out, we need to turn on its light, no matter how painful or how ugly it may make us feel.

Our culture has increasingly thrown out the whole notion of sin. More and more people think of it as moral behavior that’s socially conditioned and archaically banned. But sin is way more real than most people think. Sin pertains not only to our morality but also to our ethics, the way we treat our fellow human beings, to social justice, as well as to our own inner human experience. Sin makes us selfish and clueless. It leaves us lonely, restless, ashamed and meaningless. More than anything else, sin gives us a broken relationship with God and a superficial view of him. It’s a spiritual disease, and the law is like a spiritual blood test, showing us the true state of our souls. We may be afraid or embarrassed, but it’s the only way we can know how spiritually sick we are. We need the law not only to drive us to the spiritual medicine that is Jesus, but also to keep being aware of our sins as we walk the path of sanctification by faith.

Read verse 20 again. May God help us give up trying to justify ourselves in various ways. May he help us go through the painful experience of letting his law show us how much I am “under sin,” how sin-sick I am, and how desperately I really do need Jesus.