

I don't know if any of you are fans of legal dramas, also known as courtroom procedurals, but they have a long and rich history as an entertainment genre. You've got the television series like Perry Mason and Matlock, or the more recent ones like The Practice and Boston Legal and Law & Order (which is technically half police show/half courtroom drama). And those are great. I've watched some of those. But I really like the movies. Classic films like "To Kill a Mockingbird." John Grisham-inspired movies like "A Time to Kill." Comedies like "My Cousin Vinny." All-time blockbusters like "A Few Good Men." And here's what I like about these kinds of films (and the shows as well, to some extent): there comes a point in each movie where the trial seems to be kind of up in the air, and then, at the last moment, the heroic attorney reveals this one, huge, final, unassailable piece of evidence that clinches the

case. It either convicts the guilty person who looked like he was going to go free, or it exonerates the innocent person who looked like they might go to prison. If you're familiar with the movie I mentioned a second ago, *A Few Good Men*, it's the moment when Colonel Nathan Jessup (played by Jack Nicholson) screams at Lt. Daniel Kaffee (played by Tom Cruise), "You want answers?" And Kaffee yells back, "I want the truth!" And Jessup thunders back...let me hear it..."YOU CAN'T HANDLE THE TRUTH!!!" And the case kind of unravels from there. But it's always build the case, build the case, brick by brick, row by row, line by line, and then the big finish, the final piece of evidence offered, the last argument made, and BOOM, case closed! And because it's Hollywood, that case is so convincing, so airtight, so persuasive, so

unimpeachable, that there's nothing left to say, no further argument to be made.

In the Apostle Paul's letter to the church at Rome – the NT **book of Romans** in your Bible – Paul began by introducing himself as one set apart to and for the message of the gospel, good news. He went on to outline the content of this good news, that the eternal Son of God took on humanity and came to earth as the Son-of-God-in-flesh to live and die as a perfect man for the sins of imperfect men, and to rise again as the Son-of-God-in-power so that He might rule and to reign as King. Then Paul highlighted the aim of the gospel, saying that it is the power of God to save anyone who believes, because it reveals the righteousness from God that comes by faith alone in Christ alone. And then, beginning in 1:18, Paul

puts on his attorney hat and begins building his case for why we even need this gospel in the first place. He starts with mankind in general, saying that God revealed the truth about Himself in creation, but people, in their unrighteousness and ungodliness, traded that truth in for lies and traded God's glory in for the worship of idols. And so God handed them over to the control and the consequences of their desires. Now some of Paul's audience who would have read all this were from a religious Jewish background. And he could anticipate them saying, "Yeah, that's true of those Gentiles out there. They are the worst! God should go ahead and pour out His wrath on them now." And so Paul narrows his focus from the world in general – inhabited mostly by Gentiles – to the world of religious Jews. And he tells them that even though God gave them every advantage and every

opportunity to know Him when He gave them His law and made His promises to them and gave them these ritual observances like circumcision, instead of practicing the law and trusting in those promises and letting circumcision affect their hearts as well as their bodies, they repeatedly ignored law and trusted in their religious pedigree to protect them from God's judgment. They presumed that God would continue to show kindness to them simply because they were Jews physically, ethnically, and it made their hearts hard toward God.

So Paul, up to this point, has alleged that the world (mankind as a whole) is guilty. And he's alleged that the Jews as a whole are guilty. But so far, he's only spoken in generalities about categories of people, collective groups of people. But what do we like to do in those situations?

We like to make exceptions for ourselves. Yeah, everybody else is terrible...but not me. Back in 2006 we took a group to Brazil to do some evangelistic work, and I was visiting with this Brazilian woman in her home, very Roman Catholic, statues and altars and pictures of Mary and the saints everywhere. And I took her through the parts of the Bible that indicated that everyone had sinned and was in need of forgiveness. And I asked her if she understood that, to which she said yes. And then I asked, "So are you willing to admit that you are a sinner in need of a Savior?" And she said, "Oh, no no no." So we hit rewind and went back to the Bible verse and went through them again. All have sinned. Do you understand? Yes. So are you willing to confess that you are a sinner? Oh, no no no. And it went on like this for 30 minutes. She was willing to acknowledge that everyone in general was a sinner, but

not her individually. And Paul has even said some things that might be misunderstood to mean that someone somewhere has and is keeping the law [READ ROMANS 2:7,10,13]. And so, for his closing argument, Paul is going to narrow it down even more to an individual level. It's not just the whole world in general, it's not just Jews collectively, but each and every person without exception stands guilty, condemned and helpless under the wrath of God. Every single individual is judged by the law as unrighteous and is in need of something other than their own works to justify them before God.

Now I'm going to do something I never do and give the end away at the beginning. Before you hear it, please understand that this is how I want this sermon to apply to you. Here's how I hope and pray you will respond to this

message. If you are here this morning and you are not a believer in Jesus – you have not had an intimate spiritual encounter in which you have trusted in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ – my prayer for you is that you would be driven to your knees in despair over your sin and your guilt and would cry out to God to save you. And if you ARE a believer – if you DO know Jesus personally, intimately – my prayer is that you would remember what and where you were, that you would rejoice in what Jesus did to save you from that, and that you would sense an urgency to take that same message to those who ARE where you WERE, under the wrath and judgment and condemnation of God. So I want to invite you, if you have not already, to take a Bible and turn with me to Romans 3 and follow along as I read vv.9-20 [READ].

Paul begins in v.9 by restating and then expanding on the point he's been making for nearly two chapters: all categories, all groups, all kinds of people are under sin. Having just made the case that the Jews were given every privilege and every opportunity to know and obey God, Paul asks if he's suggesting that the Jews have an advantage in their standing before God in the final judgment. Or, because Paul originally wrote this in Greek, and the wording here is kind of vague, he might be asking the opposite: if, in light of the fact that the Jews failed to live up to the covenant and squandered their privileges, they are at a DISADVANTAGE. But whichever way Paul intended it, the answer is a resounding NO! Are the Jews better off? NO! Are they worse off? NO! Whatever privilege they had as God's covenant people, being recipients of God's law and God's promises, and no matter how

egregiously you violated the spirit behind those, you are no better or worse off than anyone else when it comes to God's final judgment. Jew and Gentile stands on equal footing, both equally under God's wrath. It is a comprehensive indictment. ALL who sin are accountable to God for their transgressions and are deserving of and destined for judgment.

But the reason is not primarily because of what you did or didn't do. Paul charges that both Jew and Gentile **are under sin**. Sin is portrayed as a controlling, ruling spiritual principle that opposes God's word and God's will and God's way. To be under sin is to be under its authority, under its enslaving power so that you are unable to please God. So it's not just that both Jew and Gentile are sinners; they are helpless under sin's dominion. It's not just that

they commit sin; they are slaves to sin. We are naturally, inherently powerless to change ourselves. We might be able to alter some behaviors, adjust some habits. But left to ourselves, sin – this insidious, corrupting, corrosive force – has its tentacles wrapped around us and there is no loosing them. That's the charge. That's the accusation. The whole world – Jew and Gentile – is equally, fully in bondage to sin.

But then Paul shifts a little. Up to this point, he's spoken in categories, in generalities. Here, he begins to narrow his focus. It's not just that every group is guilty; every individual is guilty. And the whole of the Scriptures testifies to that reality. Paul sets out to prove his charge (especially to the Jews) by appealing to the OT that there are no exceptions or exemptions to the guilt every single

individual bears before God. Beginning in v.10 he puts forward a series of claims regarding how sin **impacts every person** and every part of every person. Look at what he says. None is righteous, no, not one. How many? None. Not one. That comes from Ecclesiastes 7:20. No one understands. Who understands? No one. No one seeks for God. Who seeks for God? No one. All have turned aside. How many have turned aside? All. Together they have become worthless. How have they become worthless? Together. No one does good. Who does good? No one. Not even one. How many? Not even one (by the way, those come from Psalm 14:1-3). Over and over and over. None. No one. Not one. You see the stress on the individual and it's all-encompassing. None is righteous. No individual is right before God in their own power and righteousness. No one understands. The mind of every

single person is blinded to the truth. No one understands spiritual truth on their own. No one is out there seeking for the one true God apart from God's grace. They might be looking for the things God gives, but no one seeks after God Himself on their own. Everyone turns away from Him. Instead of seeking after Him, we run from Him to worship created things. All together have become worthless, useless, corrupted, like salt that has lost its flavor or a rotten piece of fruit. No one does good. No individual practices what is truly good.

And then he begins to get specific, like he's done before by naming certain sins. Paul shows how sin manifests itself in specific speech. He says the throat of men is an open grave, and they use their tongues to deceive. That's from Psalm 5:9. He's describing the inner rotting

corruption that makes its way out of our mouths and the deadly effects it has on those around us, as well as the dishonesty we peddle for our own advantage. Man's heart is full of death, and it comes out of their mouths and brings death to its hearers. I know it's out there all the time, but I'm most attuned to it around political campaigns and election season. Hateful, corrupt, vile, dehumanizing, angry, dishonest words coming out of the mouths of people who should know better, coming out of OUR mouths. Snake venom is under their lips. Deadly poison. That's from Psalm 140:3. We say sharp words that cut and strike and wound, often thoughtlessly, casually. Mouths full of curses and bitterness. That's from Psalm 10:7. He's talking about resentment, malice, threats. Scroll through social media and tell me that's not the case. Listen to the

way we talk about our enemies, about people we don't like or who don't like us.

And last, Paul shows how sin expresses itself in violent behavior. Feet swift to shed blood. Ruin and misery in their path. No knowledge of peace. These are all from Isaiah 59:7-8. It's a description of savagery, leaving brokenness in their wake, always at war with one another. You see it in global conflicts. In Israel and Gaza. In Ukraine. And those are just the big ones, the ones that make the news. There are currently over 110 armed conflicts in the world right now. You look at the riots that have taken place over the last 5 years here in our country. Death, destruction, violence.

Sin infects every one of us, and it impacts every part of us. And the root of it all, Paul says in v.18, is that there is no fear of God before their eyes. That phrase comes from Psalm 36:1. It refers to a failure to regard and reverence God as He deserves. The one who does not fear God decenters Him. He de-Gods God. Rejects His rule over our lives. Gives no thought to Him. That's the indictment Scripture makes against every single individual apart from the grace of God. Depraved in our nature, depraved in our speech, depraved in our behavior. Every person. Every part. Corrupt.

Which brings Paul to his final statement, the final nail in the coffin, the final brick in the wall. It's the culmination of everything he's said up to this point. Case closed. He says we know that whatever the law – ALL those OT passages

he just referenced, along with the rest of the OT – says, **it speaks** to those under the law, or in the law. He’s referring here to Jews, the people of the law, because the law was given to them. He’s declaring, once again, that Jews are not excluded from these accusations, these charges, these allegations, just because they have the law. In fact, their possession of and familiarity with the law should make them MORE convinced that it applies equally to them when it speaks.

And WHY does the law speak? Why does the law say what it does? You might think the answer is, “So people will obey it.” And that would be a good guess. But it’s wrong. Paul says the law says what it says so that every mouth might be closed and the whole world called to account before God. The law is given to show us what

God demands and thereby to prove to us that we are guilty of breaking it. Look at the 10 Commandments. Have you ever told a lie? What do you call a person who tells lies? Have you ever taken something that doesn't belong to you? What do you call someone who does that? Have you ever used God's name in vain? The Bible calls that person a blasphemer. Have you ever lusted after another person? Jesus said if you've done that, you're guilty of adultery. Have you ever hated someone? Jesus said if you've done that, you've guilty of murder. So if you were honest, every one of us just admitted to being a lying, thieving blasphemer and an adulterer and murderer at heart. Here's the courtroom image. All the evidence has been laid out. All the testimony has been given. Every witness has been heard. And there is no defense left, no excuse left to answer the charges. Every possible

refutation that might be offered by ANYONE is exhausted.

All humanity, every single person, stands before a holy God, the Judge of the earth, guilty of willful and inexcusable crimes against Him, against His word, against His will. And we await sentencing.

And I know if you find yourself in that situation, you might get desperate. What can I do? Can I work off my debt? Can I commit my life to good deeds? But Paul says in v.20 that, in light of the universal hold sin has on every individual, no human being can be made right with God by works of the law, by good deeds, by their own effort. He's speaking here about the final judgment, God's ultimate pronouncement of our destiny. No one can gain right standing with God by anything they do. Not anyone. Not anything. People under the power of sin are unable to

produce any works adequate to secure right standing before God. Nothing a person can do can bring them into God's favor. That's what the law CANNOT do.

What DOES the law do? It brings knowledge of sin. I mentioned this a second ago, but the law issues the demand, and in our constant failure to meet the demand, we recognize ourselves as sinners, utterly condemned.

Martin Luther said the law was given, not to justify, but to terrify. The law is like a mirror that shows you your face is dirty. But you don't rub your dirty face on the mirror to get it clean. It doesn't work. That's not what a mirror is for. The law is like a thermometer. It tells you you're sick. But it doesn't offer a solution. The thermometer is not the remedy. The law shows us our sin and then leaves us desperate and helpless. That's why 2 Corinthians 3

describes the 10 Commandments, the law, as a ministry of condemnation and a ministry of death carved in letters on stone. It serves to remind and accuse and condemn us of our sin. Every single person.

So is there any hope? Is there any way that we might be spared the punishment we rightly deserve? If the law can't justify us, what can? Who can? Well Paul answers that in the very next verse, but I don't want to make you wait until next week to hear it. You need to hear it this morning.

Every single person from every single background is guilty before God and subject to His wrath. And nothing we can do – no amount of good works or obedience – can erase our guilt. But look at vv.21-22 [READ]. God will exchange our guilt for His righteousness if we will trust in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus on our behalf. By His life,

Jesus earned the righteousness we could not accomplish. By His death, He paid the penalty we deserved for our sin. And by His resurrection, He secured the life we were intended to live from the beginning. That's the gospel. That's the good news. But we miss it if we don't see ourselves as guilty or if we see ourselves as too guilty. If you don't know Jesus this morning, you need to understand that you are guilty and subject to God's wrath and are unable to save yourself. But you also need to understand that Jesus has done everything that is necessary to rescue you, if you will trust Him. And then, if you do know Jesus, if you have been forgiven of your sin and made new, let me encourage you to remember where you were, what you were. Rejoice in what Jesus did to redeem you. And commit to take that message to those who are crushed by the weight of their sin and guilt like

you were once. Let them know that guilt doesn't have to have the final word. God has provided hope and rescue in the person and work of Jesus.