

Romans 3:19 Commentary

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Romans 3:19 **Now** we know that **whatever** the **Law** says, it **speaks** to **those** who are **under** the **Law**, **so** that **every mouth** may be **closed** and **all** the **world** may **become accountable** to **God**; (**NASB: Lockman**)

Greek: oidamen (1PRAI) de hoti osa o nomos legei (3SPAI) tois en to nomo lalei (3SPAI), hina pan stoma phrage (3SAPS) kai hupodikos genetai (3SAMS) pas o kosmos to theo

Amplified: Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that [the murmurs and excuses of] every mouth may be hushed and all the world may be held accountable to God. ([Amplified Bible - Lockman](#))

NLT: Obviously, the law applies to those to whom it was given, for its purpose is to keep people from having excuses and to bring the entire world into judgment before God. ([NLT - Tyndale House](#))

Phillips: We know what the message of the Law is, to those who live under it - that every excuse may die on the lips of him who makes it and no living man may think himself beyond the judgment of God. ([Phillips: Touchstone](#))

Wuest: But we know absolutely that whatever things the law says, it says to those within the sphere of the law,

in order that every mouth may be closed up and the whole world may become liable to pay penalty to God.

Young's Literal: And we have known that as many things as the law saith, to those in the law it doth speak, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may come under judgment to God

ROMANS ROAD to RIGHTEOUSNESS

Romans 1:18-3:20	Romans 3:21-5:21	Romans 6:1-8:39	Romans 9:1-11:36	Romans 12:1-16:27
SIN	SALVATION	SANCTIFICATION	SOVEREIGNTY	SERVICE
NEED FOR SALVATION	WAY OF SALVATION	LIFE OF SALVATION	SCOPE OF SALVATION	SERVICE OF SALVATION
God's Holiness In Condemning Sin	God's Grace In Justifying Sinners	God's Power In Sanctifying Believers	God's Sovereignty In Saving Jew and Gentile	God's Glory The Object of Service
Deadliness of Sin	Design of Grace	Demonstration of Salvation		
		Power Given	Promises Fulfilled	Paths Pursued
Righteousness Needed	Righteousness Credited	Righteousness Demonstrated	Righteousness Restored to Israel	Righteousness Applied
God's Righteousness IN LAW	God's Righteousness IMPUTED	God's Righteousness OBEYED	God's Righteousness IN ELECTION	God's Righteousness DISPLAYED
Slaves to Sin	Slaves to God			Slaves Serving God
Doctrine				Duty
Life by Faith				Service by Faith
Modified from Irving L. Jensen's excellent work " Jensen's Survey of the NT "				

NOW WE KNOW THAT WHATEVER THE LAW SAYS: oidamen (1PRAI) de hoti osa o nomos legei (3SPAI)

- Ro 3:2; 2:12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18; Jn 10:34,35; 15:25; 1Cor 9:20,21; Gal 3:23; 4:5,21; 5:18
- Romans 3 Resources - Multiple Sermons and Commentaries

What Paul is saying here is that we know intuitively for it is a matter of common knowledge. The principle is obvious. It is clear in itself, and universally conceded.

Know ([1492](#)) (**eido**) means to know by perception and refers to a sure or positive knowledge, knowledge which is certain and complete. It is from the same root as **eidon**, to see, and is in the perfect tense with a present meaning, signifying, primarily, to have seen- or perceived; hence, to know, to have knowledge of, whether absolutely, as in Divine knowledge or in the case of human knowledge, to know from observation.

Ginosko which also means "to know" is distinct from the knowing associated with **eido** because ginosko frequently suggests progress in knowledge, while **eido** suggests fulness of knowledge.

Furthermore, while ginosko frequently implies an active relation between the one who knows and the person or thing known, **eido** expresses the fact that the object has simply come within the scope of the knower's perception. In sum **eido** refers to an absolute, sure, positive knowledge that is certain and complete.

Law ([3551](#)) (**nomos**) ([click](#) for purpose of the Law illustrated) is etymologically something parceled out, allotted, what one has in use and possession; hence, usage, custom. In context **nomos** is analogous to Hebrew **torah** or law which means teaching or direction.

Plumbines are not meant to straighten the building but to tell one how crooked it is and where change is needed. The Law was given as a plumbline to tutor us (cp Gal 3:24,25) and is profitable for teaching for reproof for correction for training in righteousness. (see summary of the Purpose of the Law) ([Click](#) for an excellent discussion of the purpose of the Law by William Newell)

Vine reasons that "The preceding quotations, taken from the Psalms and Isaiah, indicate that by the **Law** is to be understood the Old Testament as a whole." [Vine, W. Collected writings of W. E. Vine. Nashville: Thomas Nelson](#))

Hendricksen adds that "Since in the preceding series of quotations the apostle has never quoted from the Decalog (Ten Commandments) or even, in general, from the Pentateuch, but only from the Psalms, Prophets, and Writings, it is clear that the term "the law" must refer to the Old Testament as a whole." ([Hendricksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. New Testament Commentary Set, 12 Volumes. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House](#))

Most naturally from the context, this statement refers to the words Paul has just quoted from the OT.

Says (3004) (lego) means to speak or talk, with apparent focus upon content of what is said. It refers to the meaning or the substance of that which is spoken. (compare **laleo** below) Paul's personifies the "**Law**" (the Word of God) which is a further indication that he sees Scripture as the living voice of the living and true God. The verb is in the **present tense** which indicates that the Law speaks continually.

Denny explains the distinction between the two verbs that refer to speaking, noting that **lego** emphasizes "the object is the main thing" and **laleo** is used when "the speaker and the mode of utterance are made prominent."

Note that Paul uses two different words to express speech (**lego** and **laleo**), **laleo** used of speaking, in contrast with or as a breaking of silence, voluntary or imposed. Thus in the gospels, the dumb man, after he was healed, spake (**laleo**) and Zacharias, when his tongue was loosed, began to speak (**laleo**). **Laleo** refers to the utterance rather than the substance of speech.

Lego refers to the matter of speech, declaring what the speaker actually says. **Lego** originally means to pick out, and hence to use words selected as appropriate expressions of thought, and to put such words together in orderly discourse.

IT SPEAKS TO THOSE WHO ARE UNDER THE LAW: *tois en to nomo lalei* (3SPA1):

- Romans 3 Resources - Multiple Sermons and Commentaries

Speaks (2980) (laleo) refers to the expression or the act of expressing the substance (**lego** above refers to "the substance of what is spoken"). As discussed briefly above, **laleo** pictures the breaking of silence.

Vincent adds that in the present context **lego** "contemplates the substance, (whereas **laleo** contemplates) the expression of the law." ([Romans 3 Greek Word Studies](#))

The difference is subtle but real.

Godet feels that in v19-20, Paul is focusing primarily on the Jews, reasoning that

"they only could attempt to protest against (his prior conclusions about the depravity of men), and put themselves outside this delineation of human corruption. They could object in particular, that many of the sayings quoted referred not to them, but to the Gentiles. Paul foresees this objection, and takes care to set it aside, so that nothing may impair the sweep of the sentence which God pronounces on the state of mankind." (Godet, F. Commentary on Romans).

There is probably some truth in this since the phrase "under the Law" would be applied most easily to the Jews but as discussed below, the Gentiles can also be included in this declaration for they have the work of the Law written in their hearts.

Regarding the phrase **the things which the law says**, **Denney** writes that...

It is most natural to suppose that by "the things the law says" Paul means the words he has just quoted from the OT. These words cannot be evaded by the very persons to whom the OT was given (the Jews) and who have in it, so to speak, the spiritual environment of their life. In this case **ho nomos** (the law) is used in the wider sense of the old revelation generally, not specifically the Pentateuch, or even the statutory part of the Scripture. (cp 1Co 14:21). ([Expositor's Greek Testament](#))

Under (1722) (en) means "in" in the sense of locative of sphere. Think of a dot within a circle. In the present context those who hear the Law spoken (Jews audibly, Gentiles in their heart through their conscience and thoughts) are "the dot" and they are surrounded by the Law. In other words, those referred to here are **within the sphere of** the law, that is, practically speaking they are **legally within** its jurisdiction.

Related Resource:

- See study of meaning and significance of locative of sphere

Expositor's Bible Commentary - Under the law is more literally "in the law"; so the thought is probably not so much that the Jew is **under** the law's authority and dominion in the legal sense as that he is involved **in** Scripture, which has relevance to him at every point. ([Gaebelein, F. Editor: Expositor's Bible Commentary](#))

Wuest accurately translates this as "it says to those within the sphere of the law".

Who is within the sphere of the Law? The next section says "**every mouth**". Every unredeemed human being. **Jews** hear the written law through Moses (In Ro 3:2-note Paul reminded his readers that "being a Jew has many advantages. First of all, the Jews were entrusted with the whole revelation of God." NLT)

Gentiles hear it through their own conscience and thoughts, for they "show the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness, and their thoughts alternately accusing or else defending them." (Ro 2:15-note)

In sum, **both** Jew and Gentile stand accountable to the Most Holy God.

***Not the labours of my hands
Can fulfill thy law's demands***

THAT EVERY MOUTH MAY BE CLOSED: hina pan stoma phrage (3SAPS):

- Romans 3:4; 1:20; 2:1; 1Sa 2:9; Job 5:16; 9:2,3; Ps 107:42; Ezek 6:63; Mt 22:12,13; Jn 8:9; 1Cor 1:29
- Romans 3 Resources - Multiple Sermons and Commentaries

This is not a new revelation for even in one of the most ancient of books in the OT, Job asks "In truth I know that this is so, But how can a man be in the right before God?" (Job 9:2)

Other renderings...

"so that [the murmurs and excuses of] every mouth may be hushed" (Amplified)

"so that no one may have anything to say in self-defense" (NEB)

That ([2443](#)) (**hina**) expresses the purpose of Paul's all inclusive statement about the Law. Whenever you encounter a purpose clause, pause and ponder, asking "What purpose?", and similar questions. In this case, Paul concludes that every man knows he is guilty as charged and therefore has nothing to say by way of excuse! God has seen every crime we have ever committed so what can we say in defense? Nothing! We are guilty as charged (Review the scene in Jn 8:3-9 where the Scribes and Pharisees appealed to the Law, but then silently walked away!)

Every ([3956](#)) (**pas**) means all, any, every, the whole. The point is that there are no "exception clauses" in this declaration. No "legal asterisks!" No "escape hatches!"

Spurgeon - That is the true condition of the whole world, "GUILTY BEFORE GOD." This is the right attitude for the whole human race, to stand with its finger on its lip, having nothing to say as to why it should not be condemned... The nineteenth-century world as well as the world of the first century, all the world, in all time, has "**become guilty before God.**"

Closed ([5420](#)) (**phrasso** akin to **phragmos** = a fence) means to fence, to enclose with a fence, hedge or wall, to block up, stop up, close up and so to keep from opening.

This word was used in Greek meaning to fence in, hedge round, especially for protection or defence, to fence, secure, fortify.

It was used in the idiomatic phrase "stop the mouth" meaning put to silence, to muzzle or to remove any reason to speak. Here in Romans 3:19, the meaning of phrasso is that all excuse is taken away for all people, both Jew and Gentile.

It is used two other times in the NT, both referring to the mouth being stopped.

The writer of Hebrews describes those who by faith "**shut** the mouths of lions (Heb 11:33-note)

In his letter to the Corinthians Paul wrote "As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine (about his ministering free of charge)

will not **be stopped** (meaning to cause his speech to cease or stop) in the regions of Achaia." (2Cor 11:10)

Phrasso is found 6 times in the Septuagint (LXX) (Job 38:8; Pr 21:13; 25:26; Song 7:2; Da 8:26; Ho 2:6)

Phrasso pictures the effect of the Law speaking against sinners, who like a defendant in court are rendered speechless by the evidence brought against them. It has the same effect that overwhelming evidence has against an accused party in a court of law.

Solomon records that "He who shuts his ear to the cry of the poor Will also cry himself and not be answered. (Pr 21:13)

KJV says "**that every mouth may be stopped**" to which Robertson quips "Stopping mouths is a difficult business." (Word Pictures in the New Testament)

Ray Stedman notes that "You can always tell someone is close to becoming a Christian when they shut up and stop arguing back. Self-righteous people are always saying, "But -- but this -- but I -- yes, but I do this -- and I do that." They are always arguing. But when they see the true meaning of the Law, their mouth is shut. When you read a statement like this, there is really nothing left to say, is there?" (Stedman, R. [Sermon Notes](#))

Paul although using a different verb conveys the same idea to Titus, writing that

there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be **silenced** (epistomizo - muzzled, curbed) because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach, for the sake of sordid gain." (Titus 1:10-11 - notes)

At the Day of Judgment (read Re 20:11, 12, 13, 14 [\[see notes\]](#) for a sobering description of the '**Great White Throne Judgment**' where all unbelievers will be tried and sentenced), no one will be able to say that God has been unfair in His judgment.

Haldane commenting on "every mouth may be stopped" writes "This expression should be carefully remarked. For if a man had fulfilled the law, he would have something to allege before the Divine tribunal, to answer to the demands of justice; but when convicted as a sinner, he can only be silent—he can have nothing to answer to the accusations against him; he must remain convicted. **This silence, then, is a silence of confession, of astonishment, and of conviction.** (Haldane, R: An Exposition of Romans) (Bolding added for emphasis)

Wiersbe - When human achievement is measured against what God requires, there is no place for pride or boasting but only for silence that lends consent to the verdict of guilty. In the various biblical scenes of judgment, the silence of those who are being judged is a notable feature. ([Wiersbe, W: Bible Exposition Commentary. 1989. Victor](#))

Hendriksen - "The figure used is dramatic, fear-inspiring, unforgettable. Everybody is standing in front of God, the Judge. The records are read, and as it were one by one the accused are given an opportunity to answer the charges made against them. However, their guilt having been exposed, they have no answer. Their mouths are silenced, stopped." ([Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. New Testament Commentary Set, 12 Volumes. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House](#))

Why will no one be will be able to open his mouth in his own defense? To repeat, the Jews had God's written Law in the Old Testament Scripture and the Gentiles had God's Law of moral standards written in their hearts. In short, **no unbeliever will have an excuse**. This thought is an extension of Paul's earlier declarations

(1) that "since the creation of the world (God's) invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are **without excuse**." ([Romans 1:20](#)-note) and

(2) that "therefore you are **without excuse**, every man of you who passes judgment, for in that you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things." ([Ro 2:1](#)-note)

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones commenting on "**every mouth... closed**" writes that "You do not begin to be a Christian, until your mouth is shut, is stopped, and you are speechless and have nothing to say. You put up your arguments, and produce all your righteousness; then the Law speaks and it all withers to nothing—becomes 'filthy rags' and 'dung,' and you have nothing to say. (Amen)

The "law" (Ro 3:19), referring to the OT, was designed to silence all mankind under the conviction that they have nothing to say against the charge of sin. Likewise, the law was intended to convince all men of their guilt, or liability to punishment, before God.

Paul concludes that since all men are guilty, they cannot be "justified" by their own personal character or conduct (Ro 3:20). Justification is a legal term meaning to remove the guilt (liability to punishment) of the sinner. It does not involve making one inwardly holy, but merely declares that the demands of justice have been satisfied. Hence, there is no grounds for condemnation (Ro 8:1-note). Not even obedience to the law can justify one before God, Paul reasons, because the very nature of the law is to prove to

man that he is sinful and deserves God's punishment. Thus, the purpose of the law is to lead man to renounce his own righteousness and trust in the imputation of Christ's righteousness as the only grounds for acceptance with God.

J Vernon McGee - "Man cannot attain righteousness by the Mosaic Law. It is as if mankind in desperation grabbed for the Law as the proverbial straw when drowning. The Law won't lift him up. Actually, it does the opposite. To hold onto the Law is like a man jumping out of an airplane, and instead of taking a parachute, he takes a sack of cement with him. Well, believe me, the Law will pull you down. It condemns man. It's a ministration of death." ([McGee, J V: Thru the Bible Commentary: Nashville: Thomas Nelson](#))

AND ALL THE WORLD MAY BECOME ACCOUNTABLE TO GOD: kai hupodikos genetai (3SAMS) pas o kosmos to theo:

- Ro 3:9,23; 2:1,2; Gal 3:10,22
- Romans 3 Resources - Multiple Sermons and Commentaries

"the whole world may become liable to pay penalty to God" (Wuest)

All (pas) again leaves no room for exceptions, be they a religious Jew or rank pagan.

World ([2889](#)) (**kosmos**) in this context stands for humanity in general.

Accountable ([5267](#)) (**hupodikos** from **hupó** = under + **dike** = justice, what is right, judicial hearing or decision especially sentence of condemnation, execution of a sentence) literally means under justice or under judgment, and thus liable to judgment or punishment and in the present context is answerable to God the Judge of all men. Romans 3:19 is the only use in Scripture.

Hupodikos is a forensic or legal technical term and is used to describe one who has lost all possibility of disproving a charge against him and thus has already lost his case. In classic Greek this word described on who was liable to action from another person. It signifies one is guilty, culpable, accountable, subject to trial or subject to condemnation.

Vine comments that "Man, being without excuse for sin, remains exposed to punishment from God, under the searchlight of divine revelation, such revelation being given whether by creation (see **note** Romans 1:20) and being made known to conscience (see **note** Romans 2:14-15), or by the written Law itself. ([Vine, W. Collected writings of W. E. Vine. Nashville: Thomas Nelson](#))

TDNT says that in Romans 3:19 **hupodikos** "applies to accused persons who cannot refute the charges leveled against them. Since Jews no less than Gentiles are in this position, all fall under God's condemnation apart from the new right that God establishes for them in Christ. ([Kittel, G., Friedrich, G., & Bromiley, G. W. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. Eerdmans](#))

Vincent - The rendering, **brought under judgment** regards God as the Judge; but He is rather to be regarded as the injured party. Not God's judgments, but His rights are referred to here. The better rendering is **liable to pay penalty to God**.

Godet says that **hupódikos** means "placed under the stroke of justice, like one whom the judge has declared guilty, and who owes satisfaction to the law he has violated. The word is frequently used in this sense in the classics; it is a judicial term, corresponding to the word Paul had used to denote the accusation (proaitiaomai Ro 3:9). (Godet, F. Commentary on Romans)

Godet comments that this last phrase "**to God**" is full of solemnity; it is into the hands of His justice that the whole guilty world falls. (ibid.)

In other words, every one is answerable to or liable to God in God's court. It is God we have offended and we all lie under His sentence of death.

Haldane commenting on the phrase "**to God**" (or as KJV translates it "**before God**") writes that "When the question respects appearing before men, people find many ways of escape, either by concealing their actions, by disguising facts, or by disputing what is right. And even when men pass in review before themselves, self-love finds excuses, and various shifts are resorted to, and false reasonings, which deceive. But nothing of this sort can have place before God. For although the Jews flattered themselves in the confidence of their own righteousness, and on this point all men try to deceive themselves, it will be entirely different in the day when they shall appear before the tribunal of God; for then there will be no more illusions of conscience, no more excuses, no way to escape condemnation. His knowledge is infinite, His hand is omnipotent, His justice is incorruptible, and from Him nothing can be concealed. Before Him, therefore, every mouth will be stopped, and all the world must confess themselves guilty. ([Romans 3 Commentary](#)).

Hodge - The conclusion to which the apostle's argument, from experience and Scripture, has led so far is that all men are guilty in the sight of God, and if guilty, they cannot be justified on the basis of their personal character or behavior. To justify is to declare not

guilty, and therefore the guilty cannot, on the basis of character, be justified. ([Romans 3 Commentary](#))

There is no defense against the guilty verdict God pronounces on the entire human race. No one, whether Jew or Gentile, has grounds for appeal; none can claim to be free from guilt before God. All are lost.

Barnes - "The idea (inherent in **hupódikos**) is that of subjection to punishment; but always because the man personally deserves it, and because being unable to vindicate himself, he ought to be punished. It is never used to denote simply an obligation to punishment, but with reference to the fact that the punishment is personally deserved."

Godet - "The apostle in drawing this picture, which is only a grouping together of strokes of the pencil, made by the hands of psalmists and prophets, does not certainly mean that each of those characteristics is found equally developed in every man. Some, even the most of them, may remain latent in many men; but they all exist in germ in the selfishness and natural pride of the ego, and the least circumstance may cause them to pass into the active state, when the fear of God does not govern the heart. Such is the cause of the divine condemnation which is suspended over the human race." ([Romans Commentary on 3:9-20](#))

Newell sums up the preceding section noting that ""In verse 19, we repeat, and not till then, does Paul turn again to the Jews as those who were under law to shut off their possible escape from that general arraignment by Scripture of "both Jews and Greeks" beginning at the ninth verse. Thus every mouth was "stopped." Men's mouths keep talking of their own goodness or of someone else's badness, or of both, -as, for example, the Pharisee in [Lk 18:9-14](#). But the moral history of mankind delineated in [Chapter One](#); and the stern principles of God's judgment which considered neither man's high notions of himself, nor his religious professions, as shown in [Chapter Two](#); and now, in [Chapter Three](#), the fourteen sweeping statements of Scripture concerning the whole guilty human race, with the double conviction of the Jews as not only sinners, but also transgressors of the very Law they gloried in, -all this stops men's vain mouths! For they are all brought into the presence of their Judge, and the sentence of guilty is upon them all. Not that they are brought in to have their just penalty executed upon them; but that they may be silent while God their Judge announces-astonishing thing!- that He has himself already dealt with the world's sin upon a sin-offering, Jesus, His Son; whom, we shall soon see, He set forth at the cross as a righteous meeting-ground between Himself in all His holiness and righteousness; and the sinner, whether Jew or Gentile, in all his guilt, -through simple faith in the shed blood of this Redeemer!" ([Romans 3 Commentary](#))

Torrey's Topic Condemnation

- The sentence of God against sin -Matthew 25:41
- Universal, caused by the offence of Adam -Romans 5:12,16,18
- Inseparable consequence of sin -Proverbs 12:2; Romans 6:23

INCREASED BY

- Impenitence -Matthew 11:20, 21, 22, 23, 24
- Unbelief -John 3:18,19
- Pride -1 Timothy 3:6
- Oppression -James 5:1-5
- Hypocrisy -Matthew 23:14
- Conscience testifies to the justice of -Job 9:20; Romans 2:1; Titus 3:11
- The law testifies to the justice of -Romans 3:19
- According to men's deserts -Matthew 12:37; 2 Corinthians 11:15
- Saints are delivered from, by Christ -John 3:18; 5:24; Romans 8:1,33,34
- Of the wicked, an example -2 Peter 2:7; Jude 1:7
- Chastisements are designed to rescue us from -Psalms 94:12,13; 1 Corinthians 11:32
- Apostates ordained to -Jude 1:4
- Unbelievers remain under -John 3:18,36
- The law is the ministration of -2 Corinthians 3:9

Thompson Chain Reference Condemnation

General References to

- John 3:19 Romans 5:18 1 Corinthians 11:34 1 Timothy 3:6 Titus 3:11 James 5:12

Men under

- 2 Samuel 24:10 Job 42:6 Psalms 31:10 Psalms 32:3 Ezekiel 33:10

Of Self

- Job 9:20 Psalms 64:8 Matthew 23:31 Luke 19:22 John 8:9 Romans 2:1 1 John 3:20

NO CONDEMNATION, for the righteous

- Isaiah 50:9 Luke 6:37 John 3:18 John 5:24 Romans 8:1 Romans 8:34 1 John 3:21

Related Resources:

- ISBE Article on Condemnation - [Condemn, Condemnation](#)
- Baker's Evangelical Dictionary - [Condemnation](#)
- Hastings' Dictionary of the NT [Condemnation Condemnation \(2\)](#)
- Girdlestone's Lexicon of OT Synonyms - [Judgment, Condemnation](#)
- [What does it mean that there is no condemnation in Christ \(Romans 8:1\)?](#)
- [Why does the Bible contain so much condemnation?](#)
- [What was the purpose of the Levitical Law?](#)
- [What should Christians learn from the Mosaic Law?](#)
- [What is the difference between the ceremonial law, the moral law, and the judicial law in the Old Testament?](#)
- [What is natural law?](#)
- [What does it mean that Christians are not under the law?](#)

THE LAW

William Newell

From his comments on Romans 3:20 "In this verse we meet by far the most difficult Divine utterance for the human heart to yield to, that we have met in the entire Epistle. Even those "without law, "--" Gentiles that have not the Law" (of Moses- Ro 2:14), we find throughout history so committed to their own ideas of what is "right," and what will propitiate the demons that they worship, that they will desperately fight for their convictions... And how much more difficult the task becomes in dealing with those who, as the Jews, know that they have had a direct revelation from God, --"Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not, " and, "He that doeth these things shall live by them. When Paul told the Athenians that he acknowledged them to be "very religious" (their city indeed being filled with idols), but that they were ignorant of God, the Creator, who had raised up from the dead One who would be Judge in righteousness: "Some mocked: others said, We will hear thee concerning this yet again."

Now, we say, if men are brought off only with great difficulty from the follies of idolatry, how much greater the task to persuade men to abandon their trust in a holy Law they know to have been given by the true God, from heaven, and on the fulfillment of which all their hopes for eternity have been dependent! (Someone says, "It is not the good works men have done so much as the good works they persuade themselves they some time will do, in which they hope." For almost all know themselves to have failed; yet they promise themselves that they will be "better"; and the thought of being declared righteous by a work altogether outside of themselves, never once occurs to them!) In Just the same way Christendom has become fixed in its defense of its "religious" convictions. Scripture names, doctrines and ordinances--falsely explained--have seized hold upon the convictions of men, so that it is more difficult to dislodge them from their position than the heathen themselves.

We know from Scripture, for example, that "days, seasons, months and years, " do not belong to the Christian position in the least degree, but are Jewish or pagan in origin. Christmas, Lent, Easter, the whole "church calendar, " forms, ritualism... --where are these found in the Epistles of the New Testament ? They are not found! Yet try once to dislodge them from those in whose hearts

they have been planted! For their heart-hopes are bound up with these false traditions. None but those taught of God, and they with extreme difficulty and constant watchfulness, escape legal hope. For the question ever before the conscience is, If keeping God's Law avails me nothing for righteousness in His sight, why did He give it?

WHY DID HE GIVE IT? And this difficulty becomes all the greater, the more the excellency of the Law is discovered! For our judgment sees these things of the Law to be "holy, and righteous, and good." And we know (if we are honest) that "God spake all these words"--of the Law. Therefore, the heart's only relief is to hear God's own Word concerning seven questions; to all of which the coming chapters of Romans will give answer:

- (1) To what nation did He give the Law;**
- (2) Why He gave the Law;**
- (3) What the Law's ministry was;**
- (4) How it was set aside, or "annulled, " for another principle entirely;**
- (5) What is meant by the words "under grace";**
- (6) How the walk "in the Spirit" takes the place of walking by external enactments; and,**
- (7) How that only in those not under law is "the righteous state" (dikaïoma) of the Law fulfilled!**

Now it is apparent that to bring men off from their false hopes in their law-obedience, three things must become evident to them:

- (a) That law, having been broken, can only condemn.
- (b) That even were men enabled now to begin keeping perfectly any law of God, that could not make up for past disobedience, or remove present guilt.
- (c) That keeping law is NOT God's way of salvation, or of blessing.

In connection with verse 20, we will emphasize only the third of these points, for that is what is insisted upon in this verse. We quote in the footnote below verse 20, and then a number of plain statements of Scripture to the same effect, that we may compare Scripture with Scripture:

(Ed note: Here are the verses Newell quotes)

"By works of law shall no flesh be Justified in his sight; for through law cometh the recognition of sin (Ro 3:20).

A man is justified by faith, apart from works of law (Ro 3:28).

To him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is reckoned for righteousness (Ro 4.5).

Not through the Law was the promise made to Abraham ... but through the righteousness of faith (Ro 4.13).

For if they that are of the Law are heirs, faith is made void, and the promise is made of none effect (Ro 4.14).

Through the obedience of the One shall the many be constituted righteous. And law came in alongside, that the trespass might abound (Ro 5:19,20).

Ye are not under law, but under grace (Ro 6:14).

Ye were made dead to the Law through the body of Christ (Ro 7:4).

We have been discharged from the Law (Ro 7:6).

Christ is the end of the Law for righteousness to every one that believeth (Ro 10:4).

Until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remaineth, it not being revealed to them that it is done away in Christ (2Cor 3:14).

A man is not justified by works of law but through faith in Jesus Christ (Gal 2:16)

If ye are led by the Spirit, ye are not under law (Gal 5:18).

Law is not made for a righteous man (1Ti 1:9).

For there is a disannulling of a foregoing commandment [by Him who gave it] because of its weakness and unprofitableness (for

the Law made nothing perfect), and a bringing in thereupon of a better hope, [Christ's work] through which we draw nigh unto God (Heb 7:18,19)

The knowledge (or recognition) of sin comes through law, --by (1) its revealing what God approved in man, and what God disapproved and forbade; (2) causing man to undertake obedience; and (3) condemning him for failure to obey.

To all seven of the questions above, the coming chapters of Romans, compared with other Scriptures, will, as we have said, fully give the answers. But it will be wise, perhaps, to look a moment more, in this place, at questions 2, 3 and 4:

As to **Question Two**, Why God gave the Law, we call attention now, as elsewhere, to the fact that in His dealing with Abraham, and, in fact, in all His ways with the patriarchs, there was not the Law, but simply and only the promise. We plainly see in [Romans 5:14](#) that they were not under law. They walked by simple faith, which is, of course, the only principle according to which God has saving relations with man since he became a sinner. But (and this is important) God must show man his sinner hood and this could not be done but by His revealing His holiness and righteousness, and asking man to conform his life and ways to that holy and righteous rule. God knew he would not and could not do this; but man did not know it, and must discover it through failure. Therefore and thereunto did God give the Law. "By the Law is the knowledge of sin."

We have now partly answered **Question Three**, as to what was the appointed ministry of the Law. But the matter needs to be further emphasized. God names the Law a "ministration of condemnation and death" and not of righteousness. As Paul says in Chapter Seven, "Sin, that it might be shown to be sin, wrought death to me through that which was good" (the Law).

As to **Question Four**, the Law was set aside or "disannulled." We have God's oft-repeated and most emphatic assertion, that this has been done: "There is a disannulling of a foregoing commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness (for the Law made nothing perfect), and a bringing in thereupon of a better hope, [Christ's death, burial and resurrection], through which we draw nigh unto God" ([Heb 7:18,19](#)). We repeat this over and over, because that is the way God does--He asserts and re-asserts this great fact: knowing man's self-righteousness will hardly suffer the Law to be taken away.

Now it was not that God changed His plan, though to the thoughtless mind He might seem to have done so:

- (1) by beginning with man on the faith principle--from Abel onward; then
- (2) conditioning Israel's relationship and blessing upon their legal obedience; and then
- (3) "changing back" again, since the cross, to the way of simple faith apart from law. No, there has been no "change" in God. God's way with man has always been that of faith.

Neither was the Law a thing additional to faith to secure God's favor; nor was God's "disannulling the foregoing commandment" an evidence that He had been seeking and expecting righteousness in man by the Law; and that now since the Law had failed He resorted to grace, apart from works of the Law. Not at all!

The Law came in simply that the trespass might abound, --that is, that by breaking it man might discover his guilt and sinfulness; and his helplessness to relieve himself. Moses had prophesied in Leviticus and Deuteronomy that Israel would utterly fail, and that they would be provoked to jealousy by God's bringing in the Gentiles, "a foolish nation"; and that the remnant of Israel finally, its whole legal hope cut off, would be restored by God in sovereign mercy (Romans 11:31,32). We know we are saying these things over and over. An old German educator said:

"The first principle of teaching is repetition; and the second principle of teaching is repetition; and the third principle is repetition."

So we come to the next great section of the Epistle, Chapter Three, verses 21 to 31. This will describe God's righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ." ([Newell, W: Romans: Verse by Verse](#))

Alexander Maclaren's Sermon on Romans 3:19-26

World-Wide Sin And World-Wide Redemption

LET US note in general terms the large truths which this passage contains. We may mass these under four heads:

I. Paul's View Of The Purpose Of The Law.

He has been quoting a mosaic of Old Testament passages from the Psalms and Isaiah. He regards these as part of 'the law,' which term, therefore, in his view, here includes the whole previous revelation, considered as making known God's will as to man's

conduct. Every word of God, whether promise, or doctrine, or specific command, has in it some element bearing on conduct. God reveals nothing only in order that we may know, but all that, knowing, we may do and be what is pleasing in His sight. All His words are law.

But Paul sets forth another view of its purpose here; namely, to drive home to men's consciences the conviction of sin. That is not the only purpose, for God reveals duty primarily in order that men may do it, and His law is meant to be obeyed. But, failing obedience, this second purpose comes into action, and His law is a swift witness against sin. The more clearly we know our duty, the more poignant will be our consciousness of failure. The light which shines to show the path of right, shines to show our deviations from it. And that conviction of sin, which it was the very purpose of all the previous Revelation to produce, is a merciful gift; for, as the Apostle implies, it is the prerequisite to the faith which saves.

As a matter of fact, there was a far profounder and more inward conviction of sin among the Jews than in any heathen nation. Contrast the wailings of many a psalm with the tone in Greek or Roman literature. No doubt there is a law written on men's hearts which evokes a lower measure of the same consciousness of sin. There are prayers among the Assyrian and Babylonian tablets which might almost stand beside the Fifty-first Psalm; but, on the whole, the deep sense of sin was the product of the revealed law. The best use of our consciousness of what we ought to be, is when it rouses conscience to feel the discordance with it of what we are, and so drives us to Christ. Law, whether in the Old Testament, or as written in our hearts by their very make, is the slave whose task is to bring us to Christ, who will give us power to keep God's commandments.

Another purpose of the law is stated in Romans 3:21, as being to bear witness, in conjunction with the prophets, to a future more perfect revelation of God's righteousness. Much of the law was symbolic and prophetic. The ideal it set forth could not always remain unfulfilled. The whole attitude of that system was one of forward-looking expectancy. There is much danger lest, in modern investigations as to the authorship, date, and genesis of the Old Testament revelation, its central characteristic should be lost sight of; namely, its pointing onwards to a more perfect revelation which should supersede it.

II. Paul's View Of Universal Sinfulness.

He states that twice in this passage (Romans 3:20, 21, 22, 23, 24), and it underlies his view of the purpose of law. In Romans 3:20 he asserts that 'by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified,' and in Romans 3:23, 24 he advances from that negative Statement to the positive assertion that all have sinned. The impossibility of justification by the works of the law may be shown from two considerations: one, that, as a matter of fact, no flesh has ever done them all with absolute completeness and purity; and, second, that, even if they had ever been so done, they would not have availed to secure acquittal at a tribunal where motive counts for more than deed. The former is the main point with Paul.

In Romans 3:23 the same fact of universal experience is contemplated as both positive sin and negative falling short of the 'glory' (which here seems to mean, as in John 5:44, John 12:43, approbation from God). 'There is no distinction,' but all varieties of condition, character, attainment, are alike in this, that the fatal taint is upon them all. 'We have, all of us, one human heart.' We are alike in physical necessities, in primal instincts, and, most tragically of all, in the common experience of sinfulness.

Paul does not mean to bring all varieties of character down to one dead level, but he does mean to assert that none is free from the taint. A man need only be honest in self-examination to endorse the statement, so far as he himself is concerned. The Gospel would be better understood if the fact of universal sinfulness were more deeply felt. Its superiority to all schemes for making everybody happy by rearrangements of property, or increase of culture, would be seen through; and the only cure for human misery would be discerned to be what cures universal sinfulness.

III. So We Have Next Paul's View Of The Remedy For Man's Sin.

That is stated in general terms in Romans 3:21, 22. Into a world of sinful men comes streaming the light of a 'righteousness of God.' That expression is here used to mean a moral state of conformity with God's will, imparted by God. The great, joyful message, which Paul felt himself sent to proclaim, is that the true way to reach the state of conformity which law requires, and which the unsophisticated, universal conscience acknowledges not to have been reached, is the way of faith.

The message is so familiar to us that we may easily fail to realise its essential greatness and wonderfulness when first proclaimed. That God should give righteousness, that it should be 'of God,' not only as coming from Him, but as, in some real way, being kindred with His own perfection; that it should be brought to men by Jesus Christ, as ancient legends told that a beneficent Titan brought from heaven, in a hollow cane, the gift of fire; and that it should become ours by the simple process of trusting in Jesus Christ, are truths which custom has largely robbed of their wonderfulness. Let us meditate more on them till they regain, by our own experience of their power, some of the celestial light which belongs to them.

Observe that in Romans 3:22 the universality of the redemption which is in Christ is deduced from the universality of sin. The remedy must reach as far as the disease. If there is no difference in regard to sin, there can be none in regard to the sweep of

redemption. The doleful universality of the covering spread over all nations, has corresponding to it the blessed universality of the light which is sent forth to flood them all. Sin's empire cannot stretch farther than Christ's kingdom.

IV. Paul's View Of What Makes The Gospel The Remedy.

In Romans 3:21, 22 it was stated generally that Christ was the channel, and faith the condition, of righteousness. The personal object of faith was declared, but not the special thing in Christ which was to be trusted in. That is fully set forth in Romans 3:24–26. We cannot attempt to discuss the great words in these verses, each of which would want a volume. But we may note that 'justified' here means to be accounted or declared righteous, as a judicial act; and that justification is traced in its ultimate source to God's 'grace,'—His own loving disposition—which bends to unworthy and lowly creatures, and is regarded as having for the medium of its bestowal the 'redemption' that is in Christ Jesus. That is the channel through which grace comes from God.

'Redemption' implies captivity, liberation, and a price paid. The metaphor of slaves set free by ransom is exchanged in Romans 3:25 for a sacrificial reference. A propitiatory sacrifice averts punishment from the offerer. The death of the victim procures the life of the worshipper. So, a propitiatory or atoning sacrifice is offered by Christ's blood, or death. That sacrifice is the ransom-price through which our captivity is ended, and our liberty assured. As His redemption is the channel through which God's grace comes to men, so faith is the condition through which (Romans 3:25) we make that grace ours.

Note, then, that Paul does not merely point to Jesus Christ as Saviour, but to His death as the saving power. We are to have faith in Jesus Christ (Romans 3:22). But that is not a complete statement. It must be faith in His propitiation, if it is to bring us into living contact with His redemption. A gospel which says much of Christ, but little of His Cross, or which dilates on the beauty of His life, but stammers when it begins to speak of the sacrifice in His death, is not Paul's Gospel, and it will have little power to deal with the universal sickness of sin.

The last verses of the passage set forth another purpose attained by Christ's sacrifice; namely, the vindication of God's righteousness in forbearing to inflict punishment on sins committed before the advent of Jesus. That Cross rayed out its power in all directions to the heights of the heavens; to the depths of Hades (Col 1:20); to the ages that were to come, and to those that were past. The suspension of punishment through all generations, from the beginning till that day when the Cross was reared on Calvary, was due to that Cross having been present to the divine mind from the beginning. 'The judge is condemned when the guilty is acquitted,' or left unpunished. There would be a blot on God's government, not because it was so severe, but because it was so forbearing, unless His justice was vindicated, and the fatal consequences of sin shown in the sacrifice of Christ. God could not have shown Himself just, in view either of age-long forbearance, or of now justifying the sinner, unless the Cross had shown that He was not immorally indulgent toward sin.