

All Have Sinned



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Rom. 1:16, 17, 22–32; 2:1–10, 17–23; 3:1, 2, 10–18, 23.*

Memory Text: “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (*Romans 3:23*).

Unless a person acknowledges that he or she is unrighteous, that person will sense no need for justification (God’s declaration of a sinner as righteous in His eyes). Therefore, for Paul, the first step in justification is that a person recognize himself or herself as a helpless, hopeless sinner. In building this argument, Paul presents first the terrible depravity of the Gentiles. These have sunk as low as they have because they have pushed God from their memories. Paul then shows that the Jews are just as bad, the point being that none can save themselves with their good works.

Ellen G. White makes it so clear: “Let no one take the limited, narrow position that any of the works of man can help in the least possible way to liquidate the debt of his transgression. This is a fatal deception. If you would understand it, you must cease haggling over your pet ideas, and with humble hearts survey the atonement.

“This matter is so dimly comprehended that thousands upon thousands claiming to be sons of God are children of the wicked one, because they will depend on their own works. God always demanded good works, the law demands it, but because man placed himself in sin where his good works were valueless, Jesus’ righteousness alone can avail. Christ is able to save to the uttermost because He ever liveth to make intercession for us.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1071.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 17.*

Not Ashamed of the Gospel

“I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live’ ” (Rom. 1:16, 17, RSV). What do these verses say to you? How have you experienced the promises and hope found in them?

Several key words occur in this passage:

1. *Gospel*. This word is the translation of a Greek word meaning literally “good message” or “good news.” Standing alone, the word may refer to any good message; but modified as it is in this passage by the phrase “of Christ,” it means “the good news about the Messiah” (*Christ* is the transliteration of the Greek word meaning “Messiah”). The good news is that the Messiah has come and all people may be saved by believing in Him. In Jesus and in His perfect righteousness—and not in ourselves, or even in God’s law—can one find salvation.

2. *Righteousness*. This word refers to the quality of being “right” with God. A specialized meaning of this word is developed in the book of Romans, which we shall bring out as our study of the book proceeds. It should be pointed out that in Romans 1:17, the word is qualified by the phrase “of God.” It is righteousness that comes from God, a righteousness that God Himself has provided. As we’ll see, this is the only righteousness good enough to bring us the promise of eternal life.

3. *Faith*. In Greek the words translated *believe* and *faith* (*KJV*) in this passage are the verb and noun forms of the same word: *pisteuo* (“believe”), *pistis* (“belief” or “faith”). The meaning of faith as related to salvation will unfold as we progress in the study of Romans.

Do you ever struggle with assurance? Do you have times when you truly question whether or not you are saved, or even if you can be saved? What brings these fears? What are they grounded on? Might they be grounded in reality? That is, could you be living a lifestyle that denies your profession of faith? If so, what choices must you make in order to have the promises and assurances that are for you in Jesus?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Romans 3:23*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Describe the depth of depravity of both pagans and professed Christians without Christ.

Feel: Sense the desperate need for a saving relationship with Christ.

Do: Fall on Christ in acknowledgment of our complete brokenness and of His power and willingness to save.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Hopeless Without Christ

A Why must we first recognize our utter brokenness and the impossibility of any hope or help outside of God's saving power?

B How could those who have been blessed with a knowledge of God but are not intimate with Him be in even deeper trouble than those who don't know God?

II. Feel: Looking Up

A As we sense the horror of our depravity and our great need for God, we could choose to lose ourselves in feelings of discouragement and despair, or we could throw ourselves on God's goodness. What have we experienced in our own lives that demonstrates our great need of God and our daily need of a Savior?

B What have we experienced that demonstrates God's great love and His compassion toward us?

III. Do: Relying on Christ

A How do we respond to the overwhelming evidence of our sinful nature?

B How can we express daily, in prayer, not only the reality of our need but our acceptance of Christ's provisions for our salvation?

► **Summary:** Christians and pagans alike must acknowledge their utter need and complete reliance on Christ's power to save them from their sinful natures.

The Human Condition

Read Romans 3:23. Why is this message so easy for us, as Christians, to believe today? At the same time, what could cause some people to question the truthfulness of this text?

Amazingly enough, some folk actually challenge the idea of human sinfulness, arguing that people are basically good. The problem, however, stems from not understanding what true goodness is. People can compare themselves to someone else and feel good about themselves. Even the mobster Al Capone was a saint compared to Adolph Hitler. However, when we contrast ourselves to God, and to the holiness and righteousness of God, none of us would come away with anything other than an overwhelming sense of self-loathing and disgust.

The verse also talks about “the glory of God.” The phrase has been variously interpreted. Perhaps the simplest interpretation is to give the phrase the meaning it has in 1 Corinthians 11:7, “He [man] is the image and glory of God” (*RSV*). In Greek, the word for “glory” may be considered as loosely equivalent to the word for “image.” Sin has marred the image of God in man. Sinful man falls far short of reflecting the image or glory of God.

Read Romans 3:10–18. Has anything changed today? Which of those depictions best describes you, or what you would be like were it not for Christ in your life?

As bad as we are, our situation is not hopeless. The first step is for us to acknowledge our utter sinfulness and also our helplessness in and of ourselves to do anything about it. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to bring about such conviction. If the sinner does not resist Him, the Spirit will lead the sinner to tear away the mask of self-defense, pretense, and self-justification and to cast himself or herself upon Christ, pleading His mercy: “ ‘ “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” ’ ” (*Luke 18:13, NASB*).

When was the last time you took a good hard cold look at yourself, your motives, your deeds, and your feelings? This can be a very distressing experience, can't it? What's your only hope?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: *It only is through the grace of God that we receive the gift of salvation.*

Just for Teachers: *In this week’s lesson, we discuss and explore the fact that mere human goodness does not measure up to the righteousness of God.*

In the eighteenth century thoughtful people began to look around at Western society and realized that, despite all the pretensions to Christianity and morality, people still were not good. In fact, they were pretty bad, and maybe civilization—emphatically including the church—was at fault. Was it possible, they asked, that people in what they called “the state of nature” were essentially good and that it was the church, state, and society that made people appear to be bad?

As explorers came back from other regions with reports of diverse societies that seemed to live in idyllic harmony with nature, these thinkers took the reports as confirmation of their suspicions. From this marriage of legitimate dissatisfaction with the status quo and poorly understood and patronizing accounts of other societies, the concept of the noble savage was born.

Since then, varieties of ideologies and philosophies have attempted to return humanity to its natural, virtuous, and happy state. Most attempts have ended in disappointment or catastrophe. Personal and social morality appears to be in free fall. If society makes us bad and nature makes us bad, what hope is there? Read on!

Consider This: Why is the fact of our sinful nature so hard for us to accept?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. Not Ashamed of the Gospel (*Review with your class Romans 1:16, 17 and 1 Corinthians 1:23.*)

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From the First to the Twenty-first Century

At the turn of the twentieth century, folk lived with the idea that humanity was improving, that morality would increase, and that science and technology would help usher in a utopia. Human beings, it was believed, were essentially on the path toward perfection; that is, through the right kind of education and moral training, humans could improve themselves and their society. All this was supposed to start happening, *en masse*, as we entered into the brave new world of the twentieth century.

Unfortunately, things didn't quite turn out that way, did they? The twentieth century was one of the most violent and barbaric in all history, thanks—ironically enough—in great part to the advances of science, which made it much more possible for people to kill others on a scale that the most depraved madmen of the past could only dream about.

What was the problem?

Read Romans 1:22–32. In what ways do we see the things written there, in the first century, being manifested today in the twenty-first century?

When humanity lost sight of God, a floodgate of sin and error and degradation opened. We, today, each of us, are living the consequences of that problem. In fact, unless we are moment by moment surrendered to God, we become part of the problem, as well.

Focus specifically on Romans 1:22, 23. How do we see this principle being manifested now? By rejecting God, what have humans in our century come to worship and idolize instead? And, in so doing, how have they become fools? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

In Paul's time, as now, there were many voices preaching many different gospels. Some of them were Christian, plus something else. Perhaps it was some form of legalism inherited from the Pharisees. Or maybe it was a mixture of the teachings of Christ plus unique cosmologies and road maps of the afterworld that enabled the bearer to get to heaven just a little bit faster. All these things were presented as "the gospel" but with just a little more power, supposedly.

With all these choices, why would the prospective believer want to *settle* for Paul's gospel, which was simply Christ crucified and resurrected? It was just so simple! Too simple. Or so it might have seemed to one viewing it without the eyes of faith.

In reality, Paul's gospel was *the* gospel. The gospel not of Paul but of Christ. And it did not need supplementation from outmoded legalisms or speculative cosmologies. It did not need more power; it was the very power of God. And here's the really shocking thing: it not only wasn't helped by the addition of "something else"; it could not coexist with that "something else."


However, there was, in fact, something else: faith, the new sense that God gives us so we can perceive His mighty works. To the person without it, the gospel was simplistic and illogical. How could the death of a historical individual in a remote outpost of the Roman Empire achieve salvation for *me*? This thinking was in direct contrast to the philosophical and religious systems—then and now—that appealed to the hearer with powerful logic, flattery, and complex explanations of the meaning of life.

The gospel of Paul—and Christ—may have seemed weak and foolish to the intellectuals of late antiquity, as it does to many postmoderns today; yet its true power can be seen in the lives of those people who allow God to give them the new sense known as faith and to change them through it. All of us want to be better than we are, but only God can do that for us, and the gospel is His means.

Consider This: Why is the gospel of Christ crucified and resurrected all that we need for salvation?

II. Leading to Repentance *(Review with your class Romans 2:4–12.)*

In this passage Paul is addressing people who believe that they are justified by their works, look down on other people who are presumably less righteous than they are (but are really just less knowledgeable),

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Jews and Gentiles Together

In Romans 1, Paul was dealing specifically with the sins of the Gentiles, the pagans, those who had lost sight of God a long time ago and, thus, fallen into the most degrading practices.

But he wasn't going to let his own people, his own countrymen, off the hook either. Despite all the advantages that they had been given (*Rom. 3:1, 2*), they, too, were sinners, condemned by God's law, and in need of the saving grace of Christ. In that sense, in the sense of being sinners, of having violated God's law, and of needing divine grace for salvation, Jews and Gentiles are the same.

Read Romans 2:1–3, 17–24. What is Paul warning against here? What message should all of us, Jew or Gentile, take from this warning?

“Do not think yourself better than other men, and set yourself up as their judge. Since you cannot discern motive, you are incapable of judging another. In criticizing him, you are passing sentence upon yourself; for you show that you are a participant with Satan, the accuser of the brethren.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 314.

It's often so easy to see the sins of others and to point them out. How often, though, are we guilty of the same kinds of things, or even worse? The problem is that we tend to turn a blind eye on ourselves, or we make ourselves feel better by looking at just how bad others are in contrast to ourselves.

Paul will have none of that. He warns his countrymen not to be quick to judge the Gentiles, for they, the Jews—even as the chosen people—were sinners, in some cases even more guilty than the pagans they were so quick to condemn because, as Jews, they had been given more light than the Gentiles.

Paul's point in all this is that none of us is righteous, none of us meets the divine standard, none of us is innately good or inherently holy. Jew or Gentile, male or female, rich or poor, God-fearing or God-rejecting, we all are condemned, and were it not for the grace of God, as revealed in the gospel, there would be no hope for any of us.

How big of a hypocrite are you? That is, how often do you, even if only in your own mind, condemn others for things that you, yourself, are guilty of? How, by taking heed of what Paul has written here, can you change?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

and yet themselves fail to meet their own standards. We can imagine them rationalizing—giving themselves leeway that they never would give others—because they are somehow God’s favorites. Surely God would overlook their tiny transgressions, because they are otherwise so exemplary.

Paul rightly points out that their transgressions are not so tiny and that they, in fact, do all or most of what they condemn others for doing. In assuming that they are somehow exempt from judgment, they are contradicting their own theology and condemning, not others, but themselves. They are, in fact, worse off than an ignorant person who has a rudimentary sense of right and wrong and attempts to live by it.

Another point is that while we are all sinners and fail to keep the law, our failure is not something we can take lightly. Everyone sins, but there is no safety in numbers. Obedience to the law is expected, and if we fail, we are condemned. God has redeemed us through His grace, but the steep price was the bloody, painful, and lonely death of His Son.

Consider This: Why did Paul, in referring to the rewards and punishments of obeying or disobeying the law, emphasize that these things would come to “the Jew first and also of the Greek”? (*Rom. 2:9, NKJV*).

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Just for Teachers: Encourage your students to use these questions to think about the Christian hope as it relates to their own lives and to the world at large.

Thought Questions:

① Paul makes it a point to refer to the “gospel of Christ” in Romans 1:16, as well as later in 1 Corinthians 9:16–18. For most of us, there is only one gospel, and it pertains to Jesus Christ. But clearly, Paul thought that there were other, competing (and false) gospels. He makes this more explicit later on in Galatians 1:6–9. In recent decades we have seen that this was literally true in the discovery of *gospels* that served mainly to use Christ to espouse some pet idea or doctrine. What kind of false gospels exist today?

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Repentance

A five-year-old boy pushed his little sister down, and the parents made him say he was sorry. He didn't want to, and out of the side of his mouth, with no sincerity and gaze boring into the ground, he barely squeezed out, "Sorry." Hardly true repentance, for sure.

With that story in mind, read the following: “Despiset thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?” (*Rom. 2:4*). What message is here for us?

We should notice that God's goodness leads, not forces, sinners to repentance. God uses no coercion. He is infinitely patient and seeks to draw all men by His love. A forced repentance would destroy the whole purpose of repentance, would it not? If God forced repentance, then would not everyone be saved, for why would He force some and not others to repent?

What comes to those who resist God's love, refuse to repent, and remain in disobedience? *Rom. 2:5–10*.

In these verses, and frequently throughout the book of Romans, Paul emphasizes the place of good works. Justification by faith without the deeds of the law must never be construed to mean that good works have no place in the Christian life. For instance, in verse 7, salvation is described as coming to those who seek for it “by patient continuance in well doing.” Though human effort can't bring salvation, it is part of the whole experience of salvation. It's hard to see how anyone can read the Bible and come away with the idea that works and deeds don't matter at all. True repentance, the kind that comes willingly from the heart, always will be followed by a determination to overcome and put away the things that we need to repent of.

How often are you in an attitude of repentance? Is it sincere, or do you tend just to brush off your faults, shortcomings, and sins? If the latter, how can you change? Why *must* you change?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

2 It has been preached from the pulpit that “you don’t have to be good to be saved, but you have to be saved to be good.” Do you agree or disagree? Why? Is it possible to be good without being saved, and if so, what is meant by “good” in this context?

Application Questions:

1 Why is it so difficult to convince people today of human sinfulness? Why is it crucial to a saving acceptance of Jesus Christ? How would you tactfully present this concept to those who do not understand or accept it?

2 What are the dangers of a too-acute perception of the sins of *others*? See Romans 2.

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: This week we have learned that none of us is acceptable in the eyes of God without the intercession of Christ. But in His infinite mercy God the Father accepted Christ’s willing sacrifice, and through this offering we are accepted as though we never had sinned. Emphasize that just as all are equally sinners on their own merits, all are equally righteous if they accept Christ’s sacrifice on their behalf.

To emphasize the level of holiness we would have to reach to be acceptable to God on our own merits, do the following: Fill a pitcher with water. Label it in big block letters as “*Almost Pure Water.*” If that doesn’t get the idea across, be sure to ask your class if anyone wants a drink of “*almost pure water.*” Have cups or glasses available. They almost certainly will ask what makes the water almost pure rather than pure. Say that it contains about 1 percent silt, pesticide runoff, and unidentified chemical waste, but that the other 99 percent is definitely the finest, purest spring water. Ask again if anyone wants to drink it. They probably won’t.

Make the point that our almost-goodness is the same to God. Even if we are 99 percent righteous—and we probably aren’t—we are also 1 percent poison. For the water to be fit to drink, it has to be filtered or distilled to remove the impurities. Jesus is our filter or distiller.

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “The Lord’s Vineyard,” pp. 291–294, in *Christ’s Object Lessons*; “God’s Love for Man,” pp. 9–15; “The Sinner’s Need of Christ,” pp. 17–22, in *Steps to Christ*; “In Contact With Others,” pp. 492–494, in *The Ministry of Healing*; “Agents of Satan,” pp. 146, 147, in *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5.

“Many are deceived concerning the condition of their hearts. They do not realize that the natural heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. They wrap themselves about with their own righteousness, and are satisfied in reaching their own human standard of character; but how fatally they fail when they do not reach the divine standard, and of themselves they cannot meet the requirements of God.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 320.

“A terrible picture of the condition of the world has been presented before me. Immorality abounds everywhere. Licentiousness is the special sin of this age. Never did vice lift its deformed head with such boldness as now. The people seem to be benumbed, and the lovers of virtue and true goodness are nearly discouraged by its boldness, strength, and prevalence. The iniquity which abounds is not merely confined to the unbeliever and the scoffer. Would that this were the case, but it is not. Many men and women who profess the religion of Christ are guilty. Even some who profess to be looking for His appearing are no more prepared for that event than Satan himself. They are not cleansing themselves from all pollution. They have so long served their lust that it is natural for their thoughts to be impure and their imaginations corrupt.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 346.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ In class, go over your answers to Tuesday’s question. How do we see this principle manifested in today’s society?
- ❷ Look at the second quote from Ellen G. White in Friday’s study. If you see yourself in there, what is the answer? Why is it important not to give up in despair but to keep claiming God’s promises—first, of forgiveness; second, of cleansing? Who is the one that wants you to say, once and for all, “It’s no use. I’m too corrupt. I can never be saved, so I might as well give up”? Do you listen to him or to Jesus, who will say to us, “Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more”? *John 8:11*.
- ❸ Why is it so important for us as Christians to understand basic human sinfulness and depravity? What can happen when we lose sight of that sad but true reality? Into what errors can a false understanding of our true condition lead us?