

Lesson 35 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 3:19, Continued

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 stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

When we ended last week, we had noticed that Paul refers to both of the books he just quoted, the Psalms and Isaiah, as the law in verse 19. And we looked at other verses where Paul did the same thing and where Jesus did the same thing.

Yes, the Psalms are poetry, but the Psalms are also law. And likewise with the prophets — yes, we sometimes see a reference to the law and the prophets, with law used in a narrower sense — but that does not mean that the prophetic books are not themselves law in a broader sense. Paul calls Isaiah the law right here in verse 19.

God's word is truth, but God's word is also law. And that law is written. We can hold it in our hands; we can read it; and we can obey it or we can disobey it. That is the way law works — both then and now. Law is written. Law requires notice.

Now usually that notice is visible written notice — the laws are published for all to see with their own eyes. But Paul has also told us in Romans 2:15 about a law written on people's hearts — but even there we have that word “written.” And remember how Paul introduced his quotations from the old law back in verse 10 — “as it is written.”

Verse 10 was the fourth time in three chapters that Paul reminded us that the law is written, and the fifth time if we include the law written on the Gentiles' hearts. And that emphasis will continue in this letter — just look at the Handout for Lesson 35. Paul will mention the written law 17 times in this letter, along with 20 times in his other epistles. As it is written! That was certainly one of Paul's favorite phrases — and perhaps his most commonly used phrase.

Why do I mention all of this? Because there is a direct connection between the law being written and Paul's argument here in Romans 1-3. And there is a reason why Paul makes sure to use that word "written" both for the law that the Jews had been given and the law that the Gentiles had been given. Both are described as "written." Law requires notice, and that notice is written.

But how is notice of the law connected to Paul's argument here? Why is notice so important? Well, think for a moment about what would happen if notice was not required. What if the legislature could pass hidden laws and then fine us or imprison us for breaking those laws that had never been provided to us? (It is said that the Roman emperor Caligula posted laws in small print high up on columns so that no one could read them!) Or what if the legislature could pass a retroactive law that criminalized past actions that were legal when we did them?

Yes, the general principle is that ignorance of the law is no excuse, but that general principle depends on that law having been published for all to see. That written notice of the law is why ignorance of the law is no excuse. If the law had never been published, then ignorance of the law is a perfect excuse!

But we should note that having notice of the law does not require me to have read the law. It only requires that I **could** have read the law; that it was **available** for me to read. That is certainly true today. If I had to have read the Texas criminal code to be convicted of a crime, then the only people in our prisons would be first-year law students! The Texas criminal code has been published, and that means I have notice of the law.

A foundational maxim of Western jurisprudence is that there can be no punishment without law. And Article I, Section 9 of the U.S. Constitution prohibits ex post facto laws — laws that prohibit prior activities. And the Courts tell us that vague laws violate due process. Why? Because vague laws fail to provide adequate notice.

But that principle of notice is not the invention of man; it is also the way that the law of God works. God has given us his law in writing — both the old law and the new law.

And even those Gentiles who lived in Old Testament times and who did not have the written law of God nevertheless had a written law. Paul told us all about it in Romans 2:15. And why does Romans stress that point? Because of notice. Even they were without excuse — why? Because they had notice of the law, and they broke the law. That written notice is why they had no excuse. God wrote it on their hearts.

And why is this point so important? Two reasons.

First, this notice is important because it is the basis for what Paul says later in this same verse: “so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.”

What that means is that no one can claim ignorance of God's law. No one can say, "I didn't know." In short, there is no defense — that is what it means when Paul says every mouth is stopped. They have nothing to say because there is nothing that they can say. It is like the end of a *Columbo* episode when the murderer is left speechless. But if they had never been given notice of the law, then they would definitely have had something to say in their defense — "How could I have known I was breaking a law that you never told us about?" Notice removes that excuse.

But there is a second reason why notice is so important. It confirms what we said earlier — God's law is **written** law. Before Christ, it was written on tablets of stone for some, and it was written on tablets of the heart for others — but it was written. And now the law is written with ink on paper for every person on earth. Unlike the Gentiles of old, we do not have to rely on a law written on our hearts. We today, like the Jews of old, have a law written with ink.

The law we live under today is a **written** law. Paul refers to that law that we have today as "the law of faith" in Romans 3:27, as "the law of the Spirit of life" in Romans 8:2, and as "the law of Christ" in 1 Corinthians 9:21. And James, the brother of Jesus, refers to that law as "the perfect law of liberty" in James 1:25.

And what is that law of Christ? What is that law of faith? What is that perfect law of liberty? What else could it be? What else could it be if notice is the basis for holding us all accountable to that law? The law of Christ is the New Testament — and not just the red letters! The law of Christ is the complete, rightly divided word of God. The law of Christ is the New Testament that we hold in our hands and to which we are all accountable.

And the fact that the whole world has the New Testament is why “the whole world may be held accountable to God,” as Paul says at the end of verse 19. That worldwide notice is why “every mouth may be stopped.” That written law of God is why there is no excuse.

Now, let’s look at the remaining fact about the law that we find here in verse 19 — “whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law.”

That statement points to another foundational principle about law — the principle of jurisdiction. Does a particular law apply to me? Does a particular Court have authority over me? The answers to those questions depend on jurisdiction.

And jurisdictions can overlap. For example, those of us here today are under at least four different earthly jurisdictions — federal, state, county, and city — all of which could prosecute us if we committed some offense that violated one of their laws.

But what if I committed some action here in Texas that violated some law in France? France would likely have a tough time with that prosecution — why? Because of a lack of jurisdiction.

I am not under French law, but I am under United States law and I am under Texas law. Federal courts and Texas courts have jurisdiction over me. French courts do not. (I am speaking in generalities here, and nothing I say should be construed as legal advice! Jurisdiction can be a very complicated area of the law, and there are such things as long-arm statutes.)

But now let's get back to the most important jurisdiction of all — God's jurisdiction! Does the law of God apply to me? Does God's Court have jurisdiction over me?

Geographically, the answer is always yes. Paul, in fact, makes that point right here — “the whole world may be held accountable to God.” No one on earth can argue that they live outside the jurisdiction of God. No one can say to God, “But I live in France!”

But what if we look at jurisdiction in a different way — not based on a map, but rather based on a calendar? Yes, I am under the jurisdiction of Texas law in 2026, but I am not under the jurisdiction of Texas law in 1926. For example, I can legally sell liquor under Texas law in 2026, but I could not legally sell liquor in Texas in 1926. (Prohibition in many parts of Texas started before and ended after federal prohibition — and it also had harsher penalties. Texas law on that subject has changed, even though God's law on that subject has not changed.) I am under jurisdiction based both on **where** I live and **when** I live.

God's jurisdiction includes everyone on earth when it is based on **where** we live, but what about when that jurisdiction is based on **when** we live? There we get a different answer — today we are not under the old law. The old law does not have jurisdiction over us. Why not? Because the old law is just that — old. It has been replaced with something new.

Paul elsewhere makes that same point about himself as clearly as it can be made. Was Paul under the old law? No, Paul was not under the old law.

1 Corinthians 9:20-21 — To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (**though not being myself under the law**) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (**not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ**) that I might win those outside the law.

Paul, although a Jew, was not under the law of Moses. But that does not mean that Paul was not under the law of God. Why not? Because Paul was under the law of Christ. That is what we just read.

And when did that change happen? When did Paul start living under the law of Christ and stop living under the law of Moses? I think the answer must be at the cross.

Colossians 2:14 — By canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.

Luke 22:20 — And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.”

Hebrews 8:13 — In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

We know that Paul was living under the law of Christ prior to his meeting with Christ on the road to Damascus. Why? Because of what Jesus said to him on that road — “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting” (Acts 9:5). Paul was guilty of breaking the law of Christ — so he must have been living under the law of Christ.

But that raises a question — why does Paul rely on the old law as he does here in Romans 3 if Paul was not under the old law?

I'm sure we all know the answer to that question. As we said earlier, yes, God's word is law, but God's word is also truth (John 17:17). And what that means is that God's word is the most reliable evidence that we have on whatever subject it considers. Paul tells us elsewhere about the importance of the old law for those living under the new law.

Romans 15:4 — For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

1 Corinthians 10:11 — Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 — All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

So that is why Paul relied on the old law in his arguments, and also why we should do the same thing. But the fact that Paul was not under the old law leaves us with another big question — who are these people in verse 19 who are under the old law? And who were those people under the law in 1 Corinthians 9:20-21? I think there are at least three possibilities.

First, at least with verse 19, they could be the Jews to whom the Psalms and Isaiah were originally directed. Those Jews were certainly under

the old law. And, more broadly, it could be the entire nation of Israel, which was under the old law for as long as the old law was in effect.

Second, verse 19 could include those, like Paul, who had lived part of their lives under the law of Moses prior to the cross of Christ. Those Jews had certainly sinned under the law of Moses while they were under that law.

But third, and perhaps best, verse 19 could include the large group of Jews (as we still have today) who **thought** they were still living under the law of Moses even after the cross of Christ. That group included both those Jews who rejected Christ and those Jewish Christians who believed they were still obligated to keep the law of Moses (a group to which Paul has much to say!). Even if they were not technically under the old law, perhaps we could say that they were *effectively* under the old law. They tried to follow the old law, and they could be punished by the authorities when they failed to do so (as, for example, Paul (then Saul) did when he punished Christians for following Christ).

Such Jews believed that the old law still applied to them, and so Paul could remind them here that “whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law.” In other words, if you really think you are still under the law of Moses, then why aren’t you listening to what that law is saying to you?

And I think we could ask that same question today. There are many people today calling themselves “Christians” who think they are subject to the Ten Commandments. They are not. The Ten Commandments were nailed to the cross of Christ along with the rest of the old law. Paul was not living under the ten commandments — we just read

it a moment ago: “though not being myself under the law” (1 Corinthians 9:20).

So does that mean it is okay now to commit murder? No, it just means that if I commit that sin, then God will judge me under the law of Christ rather than under the law of Moses — just like I will be judged for that same crime under the law of Texas rather than under the law of France. I am not under the law of Moses, just like I am not under the law of France. But murder is also a crime under the law of Christ and under the law of Texas.

Those are three possibilities for the identity of these people in verse 19 under the old law — but let me briefly mention what some see as a fourth possibility.

There are many theories about the status of the law of Moses after the cross but before the destruction of Jerusalem about 40 years later. For example, let’s read Hebrews 8:13 again:

Hebrews 8:13 — In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

Note the verse tenses in that verse. Not that it **is** obsolete and **has** vanished away, but that it is **becoming** obsolete and **is ready** to vanish away. And not that he **made** the first one obsolete, but that he **makes** the first one obsolete.

Why the present tense? An immediate answer comes from noticing that the verses prior to Hebrews 8:13 are quoting the prophecy of Jeremiah. When verse 13 says “he makes,” it is referring to something

God said through Jeremiah, which may explain the present tense — it was present tense in the days of Jeremiah.

But what if the present tense in Hebrews 8:13 was intended to be present tense in the days when that book was written? Do we have a problem? After all, Colossians 2:14 uses the *past* tense: “This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.”

So, if the present tense in Hebrews 8 was present tense in the first century, then which is it? Did the old law vanish away in AD 70 even though it was nailed to the cross 40 years earlier? And if the old law did not vanish away at the cross, were people still living under the old law after the cross? And if that was true, then why did Paul have so much to say against those who sought to impose the old law?

I think that the jurisdiction of the old law ended at the cross, which means that after the cross all men everywhere were under the new law, including all of the Jews. We know that was true of Paul because he was held accountable for breaking the law of Christ and was told by Ananias to obey the law of Christ, as were those Jews in Acts 2 who were told by Peter to repent and be baptized.

But how then could it have been said that the old law did not vanish until AD 70? Simple — that was when the temple was destroyed, along with all of the genealogical records in the temple that were required to maintain the Levitical priesthood. To this day, no Jew has been able to follow the entirety of the law of Moses. It is impossible for anyone to do so, and that has been true ever since AD 70.

The Jewish sacrificial system **ended** at the cross, but it **vanished** in AD 70. And that event was right around the corner. If this letter to

the Romans was written in 57 AD, then the fall of Jerusalem was only 13 years away.

And so Paul, a Jew, could tell the Corinthians prior to AD 70 that he was not under the law of Moses but was instead under the law of Christ. I think what was true of Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:20-21 was true of all Jews at that time and since that time — as well as everyone else. I think we have all been subject to the law of Christ ever since the cross of Christ.

And that view, of course, makes perfect sense with Paul's major theme in these chapters — that we are all in the same boat! There is no partiality. There is no difference. There is no distinction.

Romans 3:20

Romans 3:20 — For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

If we look at the ESV translation of verses 19 and 20, here is what we see:

“Now we know that whatever **the law** says it speaks to those who are under **the law** ... For by works of **the law** no human being will be justified in his sight, since through **the law** comes knowledge of sin.”

But that is not what the Greek text says. Instead, the Greek text says:

“Now we know that whatever **the law** says it speaks to those who are under **the law** ... For by works of **law** no

human being will be justified in his sight, since through **law** comes knowledge of sin.”

While the word “law” is preceded by the definite article “the” in verse 19, the word “law” is not preceded by the definite article “the” in verse 20.

And why is that important? It is important because it shows that Paul has broadened his argument back to both the Jews and the Gentiles — each of which Paul has already told us had a law from God. Prior to Christ, the Jews had the written law of Moses (2:12), and the Gentiles had the law written on their hearts (2:14-15).

Verse 19 was still talking to the Jews about the law of Moses, but verse 20 is now talking to both the Jews and the Gentiles about whatever law they each had from God.

And what is Paul telling them here about whatever law they each had from God?

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

I think we can all agree that doesn’t sound very good at all, but what does it mean? Let’s start with the first half.

“For by works of law no human being will be justified in his sight.”

What does that mean? Does it mean, as so many denominations teach today, that we play no role in our own salvation? That there is nothing we must do to be saved? Of course not! How could it possibly mean that?

For starters, we have an answer to the question of what we must do to be saved — and the answer is not “nothing.” Peter’s listeners in Acts 2 asked that same question in verse 37 on that day when the church of Christ was established, and Peter answered that question in verse 38. (And note that the church of Christ is the description of the church rather than the name of the church, as we see, for example, later in Romans 16:16.)

But that is not the only reason why we know those denominations are wrong about verse 20. They are also wrong because of the context of verse 20.

What has Paul been doing ever since chapter 1? What point has he been proving step by step — first for the Gentiles and then for the Jews? Paul has been proving that they are all lawbreakers. He has been proving that they each had a law from God, and they each broke that law.

And so, having proven that fact, what follows next? What is the conclusion that follows from the fact that both the Jews and the Gentiles are lawbreakers? Simple — “for by works of law no human being will be justified in his sight.” That statement is simply the logical conclusion of what Paul has painstakingly proven.

- God has given a law to the Jews and a law to the Gentiles that they must follow to be justified in his sight (Romans 2:13).
- But, the Jews and the Gentiles have broken the law they were given. They are all lawbreakers.

- Therefore, no human being (neither Jew nor Gentile) will be justified by works of law.

Once again, that is just Paul the logician at work. Yes, theoretically we could be justified by works of law if we were able to keep the law perfectly (Romans 2:13), but no one (other than Jesus) is able to do that. We have all broken the law — and what that means is that we cannot rely on the law to save us. That path to God is permanently closed as soon as we commit our first sin.

Paul is giving us both the theoretical view of the law and the practical view of the law. We find the theoretical view of the law in Romans 2:13 — “for it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.” Theoretically, if you keep the law perfectly, then you will be justified.

But we find the practical view of the law here in verse 20 — “for by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight.” Yes, in theory the law could justify us — but only if we never broke it. And so, in practice, the law can never justify us because we can never keep it perfectly.

In short, lawbreakers cannot rely on the law. And why is that? Paul has already answered that question — but Paul answers it again in the second half of verse 20.

“Since through law comes knowledge of sin.”

The English translation might leave us with the impression that Paul is just telling us here that we know what is illegal by reading the law. Is murder illegal in Texas? Well, let’s read Section 19.02 of the Texas

Penal Code and find out — and after we do that, we find that murder is in fact illegal in Texas. And so, through law comes knowledge of sin.

But is that what Paul is telling us here? That we can get an academic knowledge of sin by reading the law? No. Although it is obviously true, that is not Paul's point here. Paul has something deeper in mind, as we can see when we look at the Greek text.

The usual Greek word for knowledge is *gnosis*, but that is not the word we find here in verse 20. Instead, Paul adds the prefix “*epi*” so that we instead find the word *epignosis*. Here is how one dictionary describes the difference between *gnosis* and *epignosis*:

Epignosis is more intensive than *gnosis* because it expresses a more thorough participation in the acquiring of knowledge on the part of the learner. In the New Testament, it often refers to knowledge which very powerfully influences the form of religious life, a knowledge laying claim to personal involvement.

The difference between *gnosis* and *epignosis* is personal involvement. When you tell a child not to use bad words, that child has knowledge (*gnosis*) of what is wrong. But when the child gets his mouth washed out with soap, he has *epignosis*. In short, I get *gnosis* when I learn something, but I get *epignosis* when I learn something the hard way!

And so Paul is telling us more here than simply that the law makes us aware of what is right and what is wrong. Of course that is true, but Paul is speaking about a deeper knowledge than that. This knowledge is not just a knowledge of what sin is; instead, this knowledge is a

knowledge of what sin means, a knowledge of what sin does, and a knowledge of the consequences of sin.

So where are we at the end of verse 20?

At the end of verse 20, all of mankind stands condemned before God. All men are under law, and all men have violated that law. And no lawbreaker can be justified by law. The Jews and Gentiles are in the same boat – and that boat is sinking. That is where we are at the end of verse 20.

I think anyone reading or hearing this letter up to this point would now likely be feeling very bad about themselves. But is that a bad thing?

I have heard it said that we should never make anyone feel bad about themselves. But is that right? Was that Paul's approach in these first three chapters of Romans? Was that Peter's approach in Acts 2? In fact, aren't we told in Acts 2 that those who were listening to Peter were "cut to the heart"? And isn't that why they then asked Peter what they needed to do? Would they have ever asked that question if Peter had instead made them all feel good about themselves?

I have said it before, and I will say it again: no one will ever believe the good news until they first believe the bad news. No one will look for salvation until they first understand their need for salvation. No one will look for a solution to the problem of sin until they first understand that they have a problem with sin.

We see that in Acts 2 with Peter, and we see that right here with Paul. At the end of verse 20, Paul has convicted the entire world of sin. We are all sinners. We are all lawbreakers. None of us can rely on the law

for justification. None of us can say to God, “I kept the law you gave me perfectly, and so you owe me.” We can never earn our salvation.

If my salvation depends only on me, then I will never be saved. But is that where we are? Does my salvation depend only on me? That is the big question at the end of verse 20. And that is the question that Paul turns to in the next verse, which is also the beginning of the next major section of Romans.

Romans 3:21

Romans 3:21 — But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it -

Verse 21 gives us a blessing that should be at the top of everyone’s list when we count our many blessings. But perhaps the form of this blessing is a little surprising — this blessing is a conjunction. Specifically, this blessing is a coordinating conjunction used in an adversative sense. This great blessing is the first word in verse 21 — the word “but.”

Now that we have reached Lesson 35 in our study of Romans, there may be some who wish we were closer to the end of the book. Well, absent Jesus, we would be there! Absent Jesus, the book of Romans would have ended with verse 20. Absent Jesus, the only message of Romans would be the message we have seen so far — that you are lost in your sins, and there is nothing you can do about it.

But! We should thank God every day for that short little word at the beginning of verse 21. **But!** You are lost in your sins, and there is

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nothing you can do about it — **but God has done something about it!** Amen!