

Romans 3:23, The Nature of Man Without Christ

I have been teaching many Bible study classes over a long period of time, and I usually ask each class, "Is anyone here perfect?" So far this question being asked of thousands of people, no one has ever thought they were perfect. All people everywhere of every race and economic persuasion are inwardly aware that something is amiss in their character. In Romans 7, the Apostle Paul, who was possibly the most religious man who ever lived, shared his frustration with his inability to keep God's holy standard in the tenth commandment "Thou shall not covet (desire)". In Exodus 20, God gave Moses and Israel God's perfect holy standard of moral law we call "The Ten Commandments". Maybe you are thinking, "Well keeping nine out of ten of them is pretty good so I'm sure Paul is OK—NOT SO FAST. In Ephesians 5:5, Paul wrote that coveting is idolatry, which is the first of the Ten Commandments, and if you are in idolatry you have in effect broken all of the commandments. Because of the way coveting values things over the love of God, it is a breach of the first and most important commandment, and if you love something more than God, then you will break the other commandments to get that something. Again in Galatians 3:10, Paul writes, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by ALL things written in the Law". Therefore in Romans 7 Paul knew the seriousness of his sin of coveting, but he was frustrated by the fact that he could not perfectly control the desires of his flesh. Paul knew that God will not judge us on the curve, and God will not judge us based on mans' standard, but we will be judged by God's perfect holy standard. God had said many times in Leviticus and Deuteronomy 18:13 that in regard to the Law, everyone must be perfectly holy as God is perfectly holy. In case you think it doesn't apply to you, Jesus said in Matt.5:48, "You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect". This comes as a terrible shock to us because in all other areas of our life we are judged in comparison to people. Therefore we are accustomed to saying "I am a good person, I have lived a good life, etc." We will not be judged by mans' moral standard that is relative, but by God's standard that is perfect and absolute. Because our standard holds as much relevance with God as water in a minnow bucket holds, we have great reason to be, along with Paul, concerned about our imperfection. After all, who can say they have never coveted (lusted or desired)? In order to bluntly lay out the problem in Romans 3:23 Paul wrote, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God".

Let's Break Down Romans 3:23

The verse begins with “For”, which connects it to the prior “For there is no distinction” meaning God sees all people as a race and by nature we are sinners. The good news is that God also sees all people as redeemable in Christ. The next word in Romans 3:23 is “all”. I looked it up and it turns out that all means ALL. In God’s viewpoint we are all fallen sinners. In our viewpoint there are good people and bad people, but remember we are grading on the curve and if we like people, or see good deeds they do, we overlook their imperfections. It’s almost as if we think we will be the judge of people on judgment day. No, but God is the judge, and God judges absolutely according to His standard of righteousness. The next phrase in Romans 3:23 is “have sinned”, which means somewhere along the line we lusted for something, or we told a lie, or said a cuss word, etc. All of us to varying degrees routinely break God’s perfect holy Law. We are great at rationalizing and justifying our behavior, but God judges on an absolute basis. The next phrase is “and fall short of the glory of God”. God has set a standard and we have fallen short of it. God has set a target and we have missed it. Perhaps you are saying, “I don’t believe God would give us a law He knew we couldn’t keep, surely He will overlook the small sins I commit.” God gave us The Ten Commandments as a blessing so we would know what His standard is, and therefore “every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God...since through the law comes the knowledge of sin.” (Rom.3:19-20)

We Live in Denial—Narcissus and Adam

The natural man’s response to Romans 3:23 is denial and dismissal. Therefore, I ask the question, “Do we all inherently in our inner person know that we fall short of the glory of God, and that there is something missing in our lives?” In the beginning God created man in a state of perfect obedience living in subjectivity to God’s authority, but given an opportunity and a choice to know what God knows and to be their own god, man fell into a life of rebellion chasing after meaning and fulfillment apart from God. The Greek mythology version of man’s vanity is told in the story of Narcissus, who was an attractive hunter. He was very proud and had arrogant behavior toward others, so the goddess of revenge, Nemesis, attracted Narcissus to a pool, where he saw his reflection in the water and fell deeply in love with his own image. He was unable to carry on a proper life because he was obsessed with himself. His love could never be returned so Narcissus stared into his reflection until he withered away. Today psychiatrists call the fixation with oneself narcissism, and extreme cases are

referred to as Narcissistic Personality Disorder. It is characterized as egotism, love of self, vanity, and a desire for the spotlight at all times. Like him or not, today the most obvious example of this is Donald Trump. Yet you can't deny the irony that even though Trump is the greatest narcissist, the people in Hollywood, the capital of narcissism hate him with a passion. I'm speaking of Hollywood as the capital of narcissism because they are the vainest most self loving spotlight craving people in the world, but they despise the guy who shares their character flaws. It makes me wonder if people don't hate themselves in a sense. People hate liars, but all people lie. People hate conceited proud people, but everyone is proud to a certain extent, I could go on, but you see the point. God has placed a moral sense in us all, and we all have a deep seated awareness of universal sin, but we just don't want other people to go too far with it. The good news is that in spite of all of the mess we have made, God loves us and has made a provision for our sin so we can be reconciled through Christ, forgiven and saved unto eternal life!

Ephesians 2:1-9, The Before and After

Paul wrote to the churches at Ephesus to humble them and encourage them to be unified in Christ and love one another as Christ loves them. It was necessary to humble them first by reminding them who they were before Christ came into their heart, and then remind them that Christ saved them as a free gift of God, not by their works so they could never claim earning it by works (boasting). Paul told them that before they believed, they were spiritually dead, and were living according to their desires and were most influenced by the peer pressure of an evil selfish world. He summed it up in Eph.2:3 saying, "you were by nature children of wrath (deserving of God's wrath), even as the rest of the lost world". In Eph.2:4, he takes quite a pivot contrasting who they are now in Christ. All the credit goes to God who took the initiative to save them, and God did so purely out of love, "But God being rich in mercy, because of His great love...even when we were dead in our transgressions made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved." Then in v.8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works so that no one should boast." At this point you or someone you know may be saying, "I'm interested in people showing me their works instead of talking about their faith", or maybe quoting James 2:14 "What use is it if a man says he has faith, but he has no works?" If so, read on to Ephesians 2:10, "we are His workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works". What he means is it is God's will that we do good works as a result of our salvation.

God saves us, gives us His Spirit who changes our heart and empowers us to do good works. If we have the faith in Jesus, then good works will follow. Don't miss that Paul was telling them that they were not saved by works—in order to get them to do good works.

To paraphrase Ephesians 2, God took notice of our miserable condition alienated from God, and out of pure love He sent Christ to die as a substitution for our sin. Christ's atonement was the grace of God, which we received by faith and belief. The result was best explained in Romans 3:24-25. We are now forgiven of all sins past, present, and future, and we stand justified before God. We were bought or redeemed by the precious blood of Jesus. Christ's sacrifice propitiated (satisfied) God's wrath against sin, and it revealed the forbearance of God who passed over former sins. God looked forward to the cross of Christ where the full payment for sins would be made. God now indwells us with His Spirit so that our attitudes and intentions, along with our meaning and purpose all change in order to serve Him and do good works in His name.

Can you say those words, "But Now God"?

In both Ephesians 2:4, Romans 3:21, Titus 3:4 and virtually every other presentation of the Gospel, after stating the fallen position of mankind the author says "but now God" has responded because of His love by giving us the gift of Christ on the cross. The bottom line is that we have a sinful humanity and a holy God. Blaise Pascal said it well, "Grace is indeed needed to turn a man into a saint, and he who doubts it does not know what a saint or a man is". Can you remember your state of being a lost sinner before Jesus, and can you now say "but now God" has saved me. Can you relate to those words in the song "Amazing Grace", "Once I was lost but now I am found, I was blind but now I see"?

CHARLIE TAYLOR