

**CAN YOU MAKE YOURSELF RIGHT WITH GOD?
ROMANS 3:19–20**

INTRODUCTION

Can you make yourself right with God?

We will all face God's future/ final judgement.

The problem is that you're not a good person.

Therefore, you will stand guilty and condemned.

As we learnt this past Sunday, man is totally depraved.

Man's nature is completely corrupted by sin.

Therefore, man has an absolute inability to do what is right in God's eyes.

So can you save yourself from God's wrath?

Paul certainly tried.

In fact, among all people who have ever lived, Paul may have come the closest of any to establishing a righteousness of his own.

Philippians 3:3-6

3 For we are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh,

4 although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more:

5 circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee;

6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

On a relative scale, according to human judgement, without fault.

1 Timothy 1:15—chief of all sinners.

Philippians 3:7-9

7 But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

8 More than that, I count all things to be loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ

9 and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own which is from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God upon faith.

What made Paul abandon his efforts to make himself righteous with God and rely on the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ?

We find the answer in the larger section of **Romans 3:9–20**—

According to Paul's view of man, you are not able to make yourself right with God because it is not within your power—

You are totally depraved.

According to Paul's view of the Law, you are not able to make yourself right with God because it is not within the Law's power—

The Law cannot make you righteous.

The Law cannot change your heart—

It can only reveal the state of your heart.

The Law cannot make you righteous, but it can reveal your lack of righteousness.

In order to understand the text before us today, we need to understand Paul's view of the Law—

We have an anti-Law view that comes from Luther's view of the Law/ the Reformation.

The Lutheran view contrasts the Law with the Gospel.

That was not Paul's view of the Law.

Paul's view of the Law corresponded to Moses' view of the Law/ Torah.

Paul wasn't trying to correct Moses—

He was defending Moses from the misuse of the Law by legalistic Jews.

So what was Moses' view of the Law/ Torah?

In order to understand that, let's look briefly at **Exodus 19:3-6**

³ Moses went up to God, and Yahweh called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel:

⁴ 'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I lifted you up on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself.

⁵ So now then, if you will indeed listen to My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine;

⁶ and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel."

What is essential to understand—and what Israel misunderstood—is that the Law doesn't create a saving/ covenant relationship—

The Law was given to govern an existing relationship.

Therefore, the Law, properly understand and applied, is grace/ Gospel—not a legalistic means to earn salvation.

Daniel I. Block—“The law is preceded by gospel; obedience to God’s will as outlined in the commands that follow represents a supreme act of worship, involving reverential human acts of submission and homage before the divine Sovereign in response to his gracious revelation of himself.”¹

The Law/ Torah is not the opposite of grace/ Gospel.

Contrary to the Reformation heritage passed down from Luther.

Deuteronomy 30:6-8

⁶ Moreover Yahweh your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your seed, to love Yahweh your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live.

⁷ And Yahweh your God will inflict all these curses on your enemies and on those who hate you, who persecuted you.

⁸ And you shall return and listen to the voice of Yahweh, and you shall do all His commandments which I am commanding you today.

According to both Moses and Paul, the Law doesn't change/ regenerate hearts.

The Law reveals and instructs hearts.

¹ Daniel I. Block, *The NIV Application Commentary: Deuteronomy*, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 160.

That is the theology/ nature of the Law that is essential to understand as we study Paul's conclusion to both the shorter section of **3:9–18** and the larger section of **1:18–3:18**.

After establishing the universal need for the gospel by demonstrating the “bad news” of man's universal corruption and condemnation, Paul concludes by arguing that you cannot save yourself—you need God to save you.

The Law will be no help to you if you want to misuse it to save yourself.

No amount of effort to keep the Law will ever make you right with God.

You cannot make yourself right with God—
you need God to make you righteous/ justify you.

PROPOSITION

In **Romans 3:19–20**, Paul explains both—

The message of the Law, and the
The misuse of the Law

in order to prove that **you cannot make yourself right with God.**

1. THE MESSAGE OF THE LAW (19)

¹⁹ **Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are in the Law.**

Paul refers back to his preceding argument and the string of Scriptures that support his understanding that man, by nature, is totally depraved.

Completely corrupted by sin so that all people lack the power/ ability to please God.

Since this argument was supported by the OT Scriptures, that is what Paul referred to as “**whatever the Law says.**”

“**Law**” used more broadly to refer to the entire OT canon.

The Law has a message of man’s corruption and resultant condemnation.

According to Paul in **2 Corinthians 3:7–9**, the Law had a **ministry and condemnation and death.**

But who does the Law address when it speaks this message?

Here Paul answers that the Law “**speaks to those who are in the Law.**”

Who are those “**in the Law**”?

Those “**in the Law**” are the Jews, who live within the sphere of the Law as the recipients of the Mosaic covenant.

Exodus 19:3–6

Romans 9:4

Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises

This is clarified and confirmed by **Romans 2:12**—

For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under [lit: “in”] the Law will be judged by the Law.

Even though the primary focus of the Law’s condemning message is the Jews, that does not mean that Gentiles are exonerated.

Paul seems to argue **from the greater to the lesser**—

If the advantaged Jews are unrighteous before God, Gentiles are also unrighteous before God.²

The OT Scriptures have a message of their corruption and condemnation.

To both Jews and Gentiles since God is a God of impartiality.

Broader OT canon teaches total depravity of all.

² Andrew David Naselli, *Romans: A Concise Guide to the Greatest Letter Ever Written* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2022), 48–49

1 Peter 1:17

...the One who impartially judges according to each one's work...

¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are in the Law, **so that every mouth may be shut and all the world may become accountable to God.**

In the future and final judgement of God, the Law/**OT Scriptures** will serve as a witness against sinners in the heavenly courtroom.

Again, from the greater to the lesser, if the Law/**OT Scriptures** will serve to condemn the Jew then most certainly it will condemn the Gentile.

The universality of the application is clear in “**every mouth**” and “**all the world.**”

The Law will provide an objective measure and an irrefutable witness so that after its message/ testimony, there will be no arguing in the court.

The guilt of the sinner, whether Jew or Gentile, will be establishing listed beyond any doubt or question.

Every mouth that might protest its innocence will be shut.

The purpose of the Law, then, is to reveal the state of every heart and whether it is righteous or unrighteousness according to God's standards.

However, when Paul writes, “**may become accountable to God,**” he expects that the verdict that God will render is “**guilty.**”

There is no uncertainty about whether or not anyone will come before God in His final judgement.

The Law is not like a bounty hunter trying to wrangle up the fugitives who might otherwise escape God's justice.

The Law is like the expert witness called in to establish the guilt of the accused beyond anyone's doubt.

So then, the Law serves to deliver a message to every sinner, whether Jew or Gentile, of their corruption and condemnation.

How did the Jews use it then?

2. THE MISUSE OF THE LAW (20)

²⁰ **because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight**

The reason why the Law brings a message of condemnation is NOT because the Law is contrary to grace/ gospel.

The Law was never intended to bring one into a saving/ covenant relationship.

The Law was given to govern an existing relationship.

But when the grace of God does not precede the Law, then the Law is misused.

The Law is misused when it is used legalistically.

“**Works of the Law**” refer to acts of obedience, or at least external conformity, to the Law.

By “**works of the Law**,” Paul is not referring to legalism in itself.

However, there is clearly an argument against trying to achieve salvation by human effort.

That is clear from the links between works of law and justification.

To substantiate his argument, Paul draws on OT Scripture by alluding to **Psalm 143:2**—

**And do not enter into judgment with Your slave,
For no one living is righteous in Your sight.**

In the context of the Psalm, David appeals to God's righteousness because he knows any examination of his own righteousness would result in condemnation.

Therefore, David appeals to God's grace instead of his own efforts to justify himself.

The most immediate reason that no one can be justified/ made right by the Law is that total depravity leaves man far short of God's perfect standard.

Matthew 5:48

Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Because of the complete corruption of sin, no one is able to please God and therefore no one is able to keep the Law perfectly.

James 2:10-11

¹⁰ **For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.**

¹¹ **For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.**

What we should also remember, though, is that God never intended for the Law to be a means of legalistic self-righteousness.

The Law was never designed by God to make anyone righteous.

Galatians 3:10-11

¹⁰ For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse, for it is written, “CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO DOES NOT ABIDE BY ALL THINGS WRITTEN IN THE BOOK OF THE LAW, TO DO THEM.”

¹¹ Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident, for “The righteous shall live by faith.”

That is precisely what the Jews missed!

Even while making broad application to all people, Paul still had the Jew primarily in mind because they misused the Law in a legalistic attempt to make themselves right with God.

He knew because that is exactly what he tried to do before turning to Christ and the righteousness of God in the gospel.

As Paul explains later in his letter—

Romans 9:30-32

³⁰ **What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, laid hold of righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith;**

³¹ **but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not attain that law.**

³² **Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone**

Romans 10:2-5

² **For I testify about them that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.**

³ **For not knowing about the righteousness of God and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God.**

⁴ **For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.**

As Paul will spend the **remainder of Romans 3–4** arguing comprehensively, **justification is not by works**—

Humans cannot earn justification.

You cannot earn a right standing before God based on how you live.

God does not declare humans to be righteous based on their good works—even works of the Law.

If the Jews misused the Law by trying to use it legalistically, then what is a legitimate use of the Law?

Remember again, the Law does not bring one into a saving relationship with God, but it governs an existing covenant relationship.

For those who are already justified, the Law instructs their hearts in how to live, bearing the fruit/ evidence of God's work in changing their hearts.

However, for those who are not justified and in a saving relationship, the Law points to one's need to be made right with God.

²⁰ because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight, **for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.**

The law doesn't provide the ability to be righteous but reveals our wickedness.

By "**the knowledge of sin**," Paul means that the Law reveals both God's righteous standards and man's failure to meet them.

Romans 7:7

What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! Rather, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law. For I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "You shall not covet."

The Law is meant to drive you from your own efforts to save yourself to God's promise to save you by the grace of Christ.

Romans 7:24-25

²⁴ Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from the body of this death?

²⁵ Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, on the one hand I myself with my mind am serving the law of God, but on the other, with my flesh the law of sin.

So Paul concludes his argument for the universal need of the gospel by opposing the delusion of those who think they can earn merit before God by their obedience to the Law, even though they fail to obey it.³

You cannot make yourself right with God—you need God to make you righteous/ justify you.

³ Thomas R. Schreiner, "'Works of Law' in Paul," *Novum Testamentum* 33, no. 3 (1991): 244. Testing 123.

CONCLUSION

Because of man's corruption, he lacks the ability to keep the Law.

Because the Law was never intended to make one righteous, it is legalistic even to try.

You lack the power to obey the Law and the Law lacks the power to change your heart.

On the basis of the nature of man and the nature of the Law, we can now confidently answer the question—

Can you make yourself right with God?

No! You need God to make you right with Him.

You need God to justify you because the Law is unable to.

If anyone could have earned merit with God/

If anyone could have saved themselves from His wrath

If anyone could have made themselves right

Then it was Paul.

But as he discovered the good news of the gospel and God who justifies by grace alone through faith alone, he abandoned his attempts to save himself and embraced the salvation that is in Christ.

Hymn by Bob Kauflin, **Not in Me**—

*No list of sins I have not done
No list of virtues I pursue
No list of those I am not like
Can earn myself a place with You
O God, be merciful to me
I am a sinner through and through
My only hope of righteousness
Is not in me, but only You*

Romans 1:16-17—

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “But the righteous will live by faith.”

BENEDICTION

2 Corinthians 13:14

**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
and the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
e with you all.**