



# Sermon Growth Guide

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## The Human Condition | Romans 3:5-20

**February 22, 2026**

**Key Verse:** "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin." (Romans 3:20)

**Big Idea:** We are all depraved due to our sinful human condition - only God is good.

### Foundations

This week we continue through Romans but start a new series, Like Him We Rise, which will take us to Easter.

Paul is wanting to hammer home the concepts of law, our depravity, and that not one of us is considered righteous. We've seen him consistently mention these same topics in the last chapters. In chapter two, Paul calls out the Jews for their faulty thinking (failing to recognize they've committed the same sins that they were judging). At the beginning of our passage, Paul again names the faulty logic they have (they're doing God a favor by sinning, for that means His grace abounds more). Then he moves to address their wrong thinking again by recognizing that they were operating like they were righteous, because of their knowledge of and adherence to the law.

Paul quotes multiple verses his audience would have been familiar with that show the law is not the final judge as to one's righteousness. Rather, all of humanity has turned away and become depraved. Paul holds up a mirror to remind the Romans that their righteousness is as filthy rags - they aren't better than anyone else. Only God knows our hearts. And as Paul points out, our hearts are filled with wretchedness and we have "... no fear of God before their eyes," as in Psalm 36:1.

### Understanding God's Word

Together, read Romans 3:5-20.

Paul quotes three Psalms and Isaiah. Why do you think he does so here?

Paul addresses both Jews and Gentiles, making sure no one is excluded. Do you tend to see yourself as individual/separate, or do you lump yourself in with all humanity?

### Applying God's Word

Our culture often encourages us to think highly of ourselves. This passage instead implores us to not put ourselves on a pedestal. How would it change your perspective to see yourself as depraved, but loved infinitely?

How does it change your perspective to see all others as depraved, but loved infinitely?

### Witnessing God's Word

A wise man once said, "Remember the sinful nature of mankind. It explains a lot." How does using the human condition as a lens affect your thinking about others?

As you go about your week, watch people. Watch yourself. What do you tend towards?

Do you see God differently when you think of His love and grace poured over you?

You are a sinner. So am I. That is good news. Well, if not good news, it is part of the good news. The gospel is good news, it is the story of what God has done in Jesus Christ to save the world, and us. The gospel is good news. We are a good news people. I am a gospel preacher, and part of the gospel is the statement, the realization, the acceptance of this truth. You are a sinner and so am I. You are a sinner; that is good news. I am going to try to hold those two things together for us. We pivot today to Lent and the beginning of the second sermon series on Romans. We are studying Romans straight through, and we come to the second series, Like Him We Rise. Get excited about Easter. Get excited about the resurrection. New life. Victory! But before the resurrection is the cross and the burial. Dark realities. If we don't accept the illness, we will never accept the cure. So, today, Romans tells us the truth about ourselves. The Human Condition.

Some philosophies take an optimistic view of the human condition. We have it in us to make the world right, we just have to apply ourselves. We just have to do better. That is on display right now in the Olympic spirit. "Faster, Higher, Stronger - Together." Wholesome athletic competition can unite the world in harmony and peace. It is inspiring. Others take a pessimistic view. Environmentalist David Attenborough called humans a "plague on the earth." Paul Watson calls us a "virus on the planet" and an "invasive species." Abuse of natural resources, overpopulation and environmental degradation will destroy the world. Darker. What about Christianity? How about the gospel? Christianity is both the most optimistic and the most pessimistic. Tim Keller put it this way: "The gospel is this: We are more sinful and flawed in ourselves than we ever dared believe, yet at the very same time we are more loved and accepted in Jesus Christ than we ever dared hope." The gospel requires acknowledging two truths at once. Without the first part (our sin), we don't understand our need for grace; without the second (God's love), we

are crushed by our flaws. The Christian says to the pessimist, "You don't know the half of it; it is even worse," and to the optimist, "You don't know the half of it; you won't believe how good it will be." It is worse than you dared imagine but you are loved more than you dared hope. The human condition.

"But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.)" (Romans 3:5) Got it? Let me decode this a little. If I sin, and that is the occasion for God's mercy to go on display, then why does God get mad and express his wrath at sin? In other words, if God looks good by forgiving my sins, isn't it great that I am giving God so much material to work with? God wants to be known for forgiving sinners. I'm here for it! It's my job to sin and God's job to forgive. Perfect partnership. Not exactly. There is an old movie called Trading Places. Eddie Murphy plays a man taken from the streets to be formed into a financial analyst. He is in this very expensive home, and he breaks a priceless vase. "That's okay," they say. "We had that vase insured for more than it is worth. See, you are making us money already." Eddie Murphy says, "Oh. Okay. Do you want me to break some more stuff?" "No!" If God's grace goes on display when I sin and he forgives, want me to sin some more? No. Sin does damage. "Someone might argue, 'If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?' Why not say—as some slanderously claim that we say—'Let us do evil that good may result?' Their condemnation is just!" (Romans 3:7-8) No. Sin always hurts, corrodes, poisons, ruins. No.

And while we would love it if we could say sin belongs to them, not us, the truth of the matter is this: we are all stuck in sin. "What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin." (Romans 3:9) Jews and Gentiles. That's everybody. That's

all of us. Under the power of sin, that is the human condition. Paul strings together a series of quotes from Psalms and Isaiah. "As it is written: 'There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.'" (Romans 3:10-12) That's Psalms 14 and 53, worth looking at in your own study. We say, "Woah, that's dark! That's not fair. I know people who do good. I've done some good." Yes. Understand, the Scripture is speaking in ultimate terms. While some people are better than others, while some of us do some good some of the time, none of us does perfect good. None of us has attained perfect, total good. The best things we do, we do with some mixed motive. The best intended deeds, even self-sacrificial ones, can wind up doing more harm than good. This is the human condition. For those of us in the Calvinist stream, we call this "total depravity." That doesn't mean we are all totally depraved! It means that sin stains everything, if even just a little. It's mid-February. My car still has little bits of blue glitter in it from a blue glitter Christmas item. Does that help? "Out damned spot." Sin infects everything.

"Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. (Psalm 5) The poison of vipers is on their lips. (Psalm 140) Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. (Isaiah 59) There is no fear of God before their eyes. (Psalm 36)." (Romans 3:13-18) This is the diagnosis. The human condition. And we are not going to overcome this on our own. We stand condemned, and like a defendant when the charges are read, like a kid who has been caught, it's better just to keep our mouths shut. "Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the

works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin." (Romans 3:19-20)

You are a sinner; so am I. That is good news. How can we hold those two together? Three ways: (1) You are not alone. "Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin." That means everybody. We will read next week, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23) You are not alone. This truth is where we need to start to find our common humanity and shared human condition. It would be nice if the sinners were over there and we were over here. Could we split the room? All the sinners go left... We are all in the same place. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn suffered horribly as a dissident of the Soviet Union. He spent eight years in the Gulag. A student of the worst of humanity, he wrote about the human condition in ways few could. He said it would be easier if there were just good people and bad people: "If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?" It infects us all. In 1910, the London Times asked for letters in reply to the question "What is wrong with the world today?" G.K. Chesterton wrote in: "Dear Sir, I am. Yours, G.K. Chesterton." Elsewhere he said, "In one sense, and that the eternal sense, the thing is plain. The answer to the question, 'What is Wrong?' is, or should be, 'I am wrong.' Until a man can give that answer his idealism is only a hobby." If you want to influence toward the ideal, it takes a lot more than standing up and shouting I'm right and you're wrong. The line runs through your own heart. Can we say that? The good news begins there. Unless we admit the disease, we will never allow the cure. You are not alone.

(2) You are seeing reality for what it is. Do you ever feel like, "Am I the only one seeing

this? Have I lost it? Am I the one slipping?" No. You are seeing the truth of the human condition. There is something wrong with this world and it needs fixed. You have got a clear-eyed look if you see this world for what it is, and if you see us, humanity, for what we are in this fallen condition. That's actually helpful. That's good news. This world is not as it is meant to be, not as it was made to be, and not as it will one day be again. People find it harmful when Christians talk about sin. That's so negative. I prefer to be positive. Actually, I find it is when we allow ourselves to get caught up in naïve optimism the damage is done. "Surely, he would never. Surely, she would not have." Sin is real. Sin is powerful. And we are all stuck under it. Glenn Packiam wrote, "To put it another way, the problem of sin is that it is a contagion and a captivity, which involves our complicity." It isn't just a bad choice here or there, or a list of errors and mistakes. It is a power that holds us down, like a big brother sitting on our chest. We are complicit, but we are also held captive, we are also infected, and we are all, equally, under it.

Third. You are a sinner; this is good news. You are not alone. You are seeing clearly. How does it get fixed? (3) You are not expected to save yourself. We would like to fix it. We would like to make up for whatever part of it we are responsible for and, also, contribute to the repair and renovation of the whole. Wouldn't we? We can't save ourselves. "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin." (Romans 3:20) We are more stuck than we realized. We cannot work, or contribute, or strive our way out of this. Although, we can and should do what we can to help, being those who see.

My friend Steve Garber just published a new book called "Hints of Hope: Essays on Making Peace with the Proximate." Steve is a Christian philosopher. He's scary smart. Sitting with him is like sitting with

Socrates. He loves the word "proximate." He likes that better than "compromised" or "tainted" or "stained." Proximate means we are growing closer, even though we are not yet there. Like seashells, life is beautiful but not perfect. Sometimes broken beyond recognition, most times close, but not perfect. Don't give up longing for the perfect and whole, but you will be crushed if you don't make peace with the proximate in this broken world. "To give ourselves to proximate justice in the public square, to proximate happiness in marriage, to proximate beauty in art, to proximate healing in medicine... is a signpost of what could be, even someday will be—and in this wounded world, so finite and so frail, that is the best we get." -Steven Garber We can and should try to do good, to try to respond to injustice, to try to minimize the damage in the ruin of sin, but we are not expected to save ourselves.

You are a sinner. So am I. That is good news. God has sent a Savior. Total depravity does not mean we are the worst we could be, but that sin has touched every aspect of our lives. It is a contagion and a captivity that involves our complicity. Taking in the reality of the situation is the beginning of hope for a change—to recognize our need for a Savior. Wouldn't it be nice if we could isolate all the sinners, like Solzhenitsyn said? Just get all the bad people grouped up. But the line between good and evil runs right through every human heart. Every heart, that is, except one. There is one. There is one who is righteous; one who understands; one who seeks God and one who does good. His words are life, he is true as true, he honors God and he does not shed blood. In fact, he allowed his own to be shed. There is one. If we took all the evil ones and set them over there, and had all the good ones over here, there would be only one standing over here: Jesus. Standing there, he said, "I give my life for them." That's the human condition. We are all in need. We all have one hope.