

**“THE KNOWLEDGE OF SIN.”**  
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**First Christian Reformed Church**  
**July 23, 2023, 10:30 AM**

**Scripture Texts: Romans 3:19-20**

**Introduction.**

It has been three weeks since I last preached from Romans. You may recall we did some heavy lifting through two and a half chapters of Romans focused on the sins of the Gentiles and the Jews, in other words, all of humanity as it is divided up in the Bible.

We got through Romans 3:20 which ends with the words, “the knowledge of sin.”

Of all the things in the world you could spend time learning about, of the top ten things in the world you would like to know more about, does sin make your list? Most people don't want to know about sin or learn more about their sin. We are resistant to knowing about sin and many churches today are happy to let you remain in your ignorance, to let you feel good about yourself.

**Why this teaching about sin?**

Why does Paul spend so much time in his letter to the Romans making this case? Doesn't he know this isn't nice, especially in his first letter to a bunch of people he has not met?

This is Paul loving the Romans and loving us. Do you feel loved by what he is saying to us? Paul is being a good pastor who loves the sheep. A pastor who tells the truth in a world that hates the truth and suppresses the truth. A pastor who tells the truth about who I am and what I am like.

I cannot say anything more loving to you than to say these things to you, to be honest with you and tell you the truth. It is my love for you and my desire that you may know true joy that compels me to preach on your sin this morning.

I hope you will see this passage in Romans as one of the most encouraging passages in Scripture because it speaks to us honestly and directly about who I am and what I am like. I am a chief among sinners, one of the worst of sinners. This is the grace of God to us.

Paul knows the resistance of the human heart to think about our own sin. We put up obstacles, we put up our defenses. When someone points a finger at us, we point fingers at others. We make excuses, we blame others, we correct others rather than repent of our

own sin. We see specks of sawdust in other people's eyes and completely miss or ignore the logs in our own eyes.

We want nice uplifting sermons about how good we are you. That's why people listen to Oprah or Dr. Phil or Joel Osteen or countless other preachers, lots of people on social media, or our friends who will pat us on the back and tell us how great we are.

Paul is giving it to us straight, he pulls no punches, he sugar coats nothing, he doesn't put a smiley face on it. Paul spends so much time focusing on our sinfulness because he knows how resistant we are to hearing it.

The culture we live in exhibits a complete lack of awareness of personal sin. We are aware of sin and evil out there in the world, and in others who treat us badly, but we have a complete absence of an awareness of our own sin.

Earlier in this service we paused for a time of silent personal confession of sin. What did you do during that time? Could you think of any specific sins to confess? Did you have trouble thinking of anything? Did you think you had been pretty good? Did you think about other people's sins?

Did you say, "Lord, forgive me of all my sins" and then just sit there waiting for Pastor Mike to start praying, or did you start naming real sins and didn't get through naming them before Pastor Mike interrupted your silent prayer? Are you one who thinks the time of silence is too long, or not long enough?

Knowledge of sin is the first part of the Gospel, which is why Paul started with this point and has spent so much time on it.

Paul wants us to feel the weight of our sin. He wants us to hear the diagnosis of stage 4 cancer of the most aggressive kind and without any human cure or treatment. We are condemned, dead in our trespasses/sin, completely lost. We are impotent, without hope of saving ourselves.

We have sinned against the righteous judge of the universe and broken His righteous law. As a righteous Judge, He cannot allow His righteous law to be broken without there being just punishment. We have brought death and destruction and hell upon ourselves. Receive this teaching as God's clear, honest truth to you for the sake of your eternal soul.

### **Romans 3:19-20.**

By the law comes knowledge of sin.

Of all the things we need to learn and know in life, sin is one of the most important. It is essential. There is a great danger to not knowing our sin, danger to ourselves, all our relationships and friendships, our marriages, our parenting, our life together in the church.

Notice the concluding logic of Paul's argument.

He is talking about those under the law, so most clearly the Jews. He has just quoted seven texts taken from the OT law.

The logical conclusion is if the Jews who are the covenant children of God cannot be saved and justified by the law then no one can. God says these things to the Jews so that every mouth will be stopped, and the whole world will be guilty.

***God never gave the law thinking anyone would ever keep it and be saved.*** He gave the law as the standard by which to convince us and convict us that we are hopelessly incapable of saving ourselves and drive us to God for His saving grace.

As Paul later says in Romans 7:7, if it wasn't for the law I wouldn't know what sin was, by the law I am conscious of sin, I learn what sin is and how sinful I am.

I am guilty before God, you are guilty before God. Who will dare defend themselves, who will argue with God, who will try to show Him the record of all the good things they have done? Who will try to justify themselves by their own righteousness? Who?

The law does not justify, the law does not make us righteous, the law only exposes our unrighteousness. The law can't make us better, it only makes us worse. The Jews had the law for fifteen hundred years and they didn't get better by it.

This applies to all you good kids who have been raised in a good Christian home in a good Christian church and gone to a good Christian school.

We think we are OK, we think we are good, we are good with God, God is cool with us. We have no fear of God or of God's wrath against our sin, we have no fear of our sin.

I was like you in high school. I was raised in a Christian home, attended a good church, went to a private school that had Christian values. I thought I was a pretty good kid.

In the summer of 1972 when I surrendered my life to Christ at the Young Life camp Malibu, my cabin counselor took me aside to share some things with me. I was a brand new Christian. What do you think he might want to share with me? How to grow in my new faith? Where to start reading the Bible? How to start praying? What a new Christian needs to know about Jesus?

No, he said he had been watching me through the week of camp and he noticed some sinful tendencies in me, how competitive I was and how impatient and quick tempered and angry I could become, how arrogant I was. Incredible, the first thing he did with me was confront my sin and sinfulness. He wanted me to start my Christian journey knowing my sin.

And what a journey it has been. A very slow journey, some years making no progress at all. But the older I get, the closer to heaven and holiness the clearer my sin has become; the more I see I really am the chief among sinners; the more I see the depravity of my soul; the more I see how desperately wicked my heart is and how hopeless I am to change, without outside help.

Getting married stepped up the pace of my becoming more aware of my sin, but again that has been an incredibly slow journey. I was so full of myself, so self-righteous, so arrogant. "I am not that bad, in fact I am pretty good, and I certainly am not the source of the problems or struggles we had in our relationship."

***If the knowledge of our sin is so important then how do we gain the strongest possible knowledge of sin?***

If God gave the law what we might know our sin, and God only gives good gifts, then true knowledge of our sin begins by humbly receiving this gift of His grace in making our sin known.

We know our sin from Scripture where we are given a comprehensive list of commands and prohibitions by which we come to know that is pleasing and displeasing to God.

We grow in this knowledge by comparing our nature and our actions with the standard of God's perfect righteousness in Scripture where we see how far our nature and actions differ from His pure, perfect, holy righteousness.

We see how sinful, corrupted, twisted, broken, impure our actions, feelings, thoughts, words, deeds, attitudes, both inward and outward.

In Scripture we learn of the original fall of our first parents, the depravity of their rebellion and how their sin spread to the entire creation, and spread eternal guilt to all human nature.

We learn this from the darkness of our minds and hearts and wills and how our inclinations, appetites, attitudes and emotions are bent against God. We learn how much our thoughts and actions are offensive to God and against His Law. We learn from the

huge number of things we have not done which the law commands us to do, and the huge number of things we have done which the law commands us not to do.

The conclusion of Paul's text and indeed of all of Scripture is that we are all guilty of sin and condemned to a just eternal punishment.

### **Knowledge of sin leads to knowledge of God's love.**

This brings us to the other reason why Paul drives home the universality of our sin and guilt, so we will be overwhelmed by the greatness of the good news, which we can't have until we have a deeper awareness of our sinfulness and hopelessness before God.

The greater our awareness of God's wrath, the greater our gratitude for his loving act in Christ. The knowledge of our sin and God's wrath is the doorway to knowing God's profoundly deep love and incomprehensible mercy and grace.

Too many of us think of our sin in categories of jaywalking or driving eight miles over the speed limit or saying swear words or thinking bad thoughts. Yeah, we know we are sinners, we know what the Bible says and what preachers preach about it. But it is all weak, lukewarm, lame, and it all leads to a lame, lukewarm worship and a casual approach to God.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ will never seem like overwhelmingly good news until we understand how helpless we are and desperately in need to be rescued from eternal damnation. We will never fully appreciate God's incomprehensible grace and mercy until we know we were beyond hope, slaves to Satan, in bondage to sin, under the wrath of God and headed for destruction.

### **Implications and application.**

What man or woman has plumbed the fathomless depths of his or her indebtedness to the God who created him and who saved him and delivered him from a justly deserved eternal hell?

Who has contemplated the truth of being dead in our trespasses, being a son of disobedience and children of wrath like all the rest of humanity?

Who has considered that the God who created us has cast us off, has cursed us, cursed our work and our childbearing, has given us over to the bondage of sin, has hated us and has driven us out of paradise and banished us from His presence?

Who has considered that this same God has loved us, has mercifully forgiven us, has gone from cursing us to blessing us, has opened our prison doors and pardoned us, has reconciled Himself to us and has poured out His hatred of sin and His wrath on Jesus and washed away our sin and guilt with clean water?

Thank God for the grace of knowing your sin. And every time He brings a greater awareness of your sin, pause and thank Him, it is grace. Fear the day God stops doing that, fear the day you resist and rebel so many times that He hands you over to your sins, to your lust, greed, pride, envy, anger, hate.

If someone finds out you are a Christian, you know what they are thinking after that. They are thinking you think you are better than everyone else, you are religious, moral, holier than thou and everyone else everyone else are sinners.

So here is an idea. Next time someone finds out you are a Christian, tell them you are a sinner and your only hope in this life is that Jesus died for all my sins. I sin every day and Jesus' blood covers up and takes away my sin. Tell them you have received the most amazing grace. You were worse than everyone else and God still loved you and forgave you.

The first lesson of the Gospel is all have sinned, all are guilty, all have fallen short of the glory of God. This truly humbles us, and prepares the way for us to comprehend the saving grace of Jesus.

If you have a clearer knowledge of your sin this morning, if you are convinced and convicted of your sinful heart, your sinful condition, your willful disobedience against God and His Word, then and only then will you now be able to hear and understand and truly appreciate the depth of what Paul is about to say in Romans 3:21 and following.

Only with a terrifying knowledge of your sin, will you be interested in and desire the saving forgiveness of Jesus. Only then will you love the cleansing power of His blood. Only then will you joyfully sing of His cross. Only then will the grace of Jesus seem truly wonderful.

“Till sin be bitter, Christ will not be sweet.” (Thomas Watson).

We must be killed by the Law, before we can be raised from the dead by the Gospel. Only by this means, only by this path will we be prepared to receive the Gospel which ...

**Romans 1:16b-17** ... 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 for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”