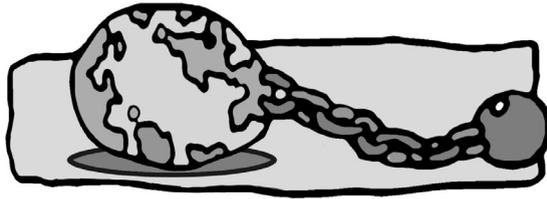


# The Human Condition



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## SABBATH AFTERNOON

**Read for This Week's Study:** *Rom. 1:16, 17, 22–32; 2:1–10, 17–24; 3:1, 2, 10–18, 23.*

**Memory Text:** “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (*Romans 3:23*).

Early on in the book of Romans, Paul seeks to establish a crucial truth, one central to the gospel—the sad state of the human condition. This truth exists because, from the Fall onward, we have all been contaminated by sin. It's wired in our genes as is the color of our eyes.

Martin Luther, in his commentary on Romans, wrote the following: “The expression ‘all are under sin’ must be taken in a spiritual sense; that is to say, not as men appear in their own eyes or in those of others, but as they stand before God. They are all under sin, those who are manifest transgressors in the eyes of men, as well as those who appear righteous in their own sight and before others. Those who perform outwardly good works do them from fear of punishment or love of gain and glory, or otherwise from pleasure in a certain object, but not from a willing and ready mind. In this way man exercises himself continually in good works outwardly, but inwardly he is totally immersed in sinful desires and evil lusts, which are opposed to good works.” —*Commentary on Romans*, p. 69.

\* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, October 21.

## The Power of God

**“I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘He who through faith is righteous shall live’” (Rom. 1:16, 17, RSV). What does Romans 1:16, 17 say to you? How have you experienced the promises and hope found in them?**

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Several key words occur in this passage:

1. *Gospel*. This word is the translation of a Greek word that means literally “good message” or “good news.” Standing alone, the word may refer to any good message; but modified as it is in this passage by the phrase “of Christ,” it means “the good news about the Messiah” (*Christ* is the transliteration of the Greek word that means “Messiah”). The good news is that the Messiah has come, and people can be saved by believing in Him. It is in Jesus and in His perfect righteousness—and not in ourselves, or even in God’s law—that one can find salvation.

2. *Righteousness*. This word refers to the quality of being “right” with God. A specialized meaning of this word is developed in the book of Romans, which we shall bring out as our study of the book proceeds. It should be pointed out that in Romans 1:17 the word is qualified by the phrase “of God.” It is righteousness that comes from God, a righteousness that God Himself has provided. As we’ll see, this is the only righteousness good enough to bring us the promise of eternal life.

3. *Faith*. In Greek the words that are translated as *believe* and *faith* (*KJV*) in this passage are the verb and noun forms of the same word: *pisteuo* (believe) and *pistis* (belief or faith). The meaning of faith as related to salvation will unfold as we progress in the study of Romans.

**Do you ever struggle with assurance? Do you have times when you truly question whether or not you are saved or even if you can be saved? What brings these fears? On what are they based? Might they be grounded in reality? That is, could you be living a lifestyle that denies your profession of faith? If so, what choices must you make in order to have the promises and assurances that are for you in Jesus?**

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## All Have Sinned

**Read** Romans 3:23. Why is this message so easy for us as Christians to believe today? At the same time, what could cause some people to question the truthfulness of this text?

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Amazingly enough, some people actually challenge the idea of human sinfulness, arguing that people are basically good. The problem, however, stems from a lack of understanding of what true goodness is. People can compare themselves to someone else and feel good about themselves. After all, we can always find someone worse than ourselves to compare ourselves with. But that hardly makes us good. When we contrast ourselves to God, and to the holiness and righteousness of God, none of us would come away with anything other than an overwhelming sense of self-loathing and disgust.

Romans 3:23 also talks about “the glory of God.” The phrase has been variously interpreted. Perhaps the simplest interpretation is to give the phrase the meaning it has in 1 Corinthians 11:7, “He [man] is the image and glory of God” (*RSV*). In Greek the word for “glory” may be considered as loosely equivalent to the word for “image.” Sin has marred the image of God in humans. Sinful humans fall far short of reflecting the image or glory of God.

**Read** Romans 3:10–18. Has anything changed today? Which of those depictions best describes you or what you would be like were it not for Christ in your life?

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As bad as we are, our situation is not hopeless. The first step is that we acknowledge our utter sinfulness and also our helplessness in and of ourselves to do anything about it. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to bring about such conviction. If the sinner does not resist Him, the Spirit will lead the sinner to tear away the mask of self-defense, pretense, and self-justification and to cast himself or herself upon Christ, pleading His mercy: “ ‘ “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” ’ ” (*Luke 18:13, NASB*).

**When was the last time you took a good, hard, cold look at yourself, your motives, your deeds, and your feelings? This can be a very distressing experience, can't it? What's your only hope?**

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## Progress?

At the turn of the twentieth century, people lived with the idea that humanity was improving, that morality would increase, and that science and technology would help usher in a utopia. Human beings, it was believed, were essentially on the path toward perfection. Through the right kind of education and moral training, it was thought that humans could greatly improve themselves and their societies. All this was supposed to start happening, en masse, as we entered into the brave new world of the twentieth century.

Unfortunately, things didn't quite turn out that way, did they? The twentieth century was one of the most violent and barbaric in all history, thanks—ironically enough—in great part to the advances of science, which made it much more possible for people to kill others on a scale that the most depraved madmen of the past could only dream about.

What was the problem?

**Read** Romans 1:22–32. In what ways do we see the things that were written in the first century being manifested today in the twenty-first century?

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We might need faith to believe a lot of things in Christianity: among them, the resurrection of the dead, the Second Coming, and a new heaven and a new earth. But who needs faith to believe in the fallen state of humanity? Today, each of us is living the consequences of that fallen state.

**Focus specifically on Romans 1:22, 23. How do we see this principle being manifested now? By rejecting God, what have twenty-first century humans come to worship and idolize instead? And in so doing, how have they become fools? Bring your answer to class on Sabbath.**

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## What Jews and Gentiles Share in Common

In Romans 1, Paul was dealing specifically with the sins of the Gentiles, the pagans, those who had lost sight of God a long time ago and, thus, had fallen into the most degrading of practices.

But he wasn't going to let his own people, his own countrymen, off the hook either. Despite all the advantages that they had been given (*Rom. 3:1, 2*), they, too, were sinners, condemned by God's law, and in need of the saving grace of Christ. In that sense—in the sense of being sinners, of having violated God's law, and of needing divine grace for salvation—Jews and Gentiles are the same.

**Read** Romans 2:1–3, 17–24. What is Paul warning against here? What message should all of us, Jew or Gentile, take from this warning?

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“After the Apostle has shown that all heathen are sinners, he now, in a special and most emphatic way, shows that also the Jews live in sin, above all because they obey the Law only outwardly, that is, according to the letter and not according to the spirit.”—Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 61.

Often it's so easy to see and point out the sins of others. How often, though, are we guilty of the same kinds of things—or even worse? The problem is that we tend to turn a blind eye on ourselves, or we make ourselves feel better by looking at just how bad others are in contrast to ourselves.

Paul would have none of that. He warned his countrymen not to be quick to judge the Gentiles, for they, the Jews—even as the chosen people—were sinners. In some cases they were even more guilty than the pagans they were so quick to condemn, because as Jews they had been given more light than the Gentiles.

Paul's point in all this is that none of us are righteous, none of us meet the divine standard, and none of us are innately good or inherently holy. Jew or Gentile, male or female, rich or poor, and God-fearing or God-rejecting, we all are condemned. And were it not for the grace of God as revealed in the gospel, there would be no hope for any of us.

**How often do you, even if only in your own mind, condemn others for things that you yourself are guilty of? By taking heed to what Paul has written here, how can you change?**

## The Gospel and Repentance

**“Despisest thou the riches of [H]is goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?” (Rom. 2:4). What message is here for us in regard to the whole question of repentance?**

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We should notice that God’s goodness leads, not forces, sinners to repentance. God uses no coercion. He is infinitely patient and seeks to draw all people by His love. A forced repentance would destroy the whole purpose of repentance, would it not? If God forced repentance, then would not everyone be saved, for why would He force some to repent and not others? Repentance must be an act of the free will, responding to the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Yes, repentance is a gift from God, but we have to be ready and open to receive it—a choice that we alone can make for ourselves.

**What comes to those who resist God’s love, refuse to repent, and remain in disobedience? Rom. 2:5–10.**

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In Romans 2:5–10, and frequently throughout the book of Romans, Paul emphasizes the place of good works. Justification by faith without the deeds of the law must never be construed to mean that good works have no place in the Christian life. For instance, in Romans 2:7, salvation is described as coming to those who seek for it “by patient continuance in well doing.” Although human effort can’t bring salvation, it is part of the whole experience of salvation. It’s hard to see how anyone can read the Bible and come away with the idea that works and deeds don’t matter at all. True repentance, the kind that comes willingly from the heart, always will be followed by a determination to overcome and put away the things that we need to repent over.

**How often are you in an attitude of repentance? Is it sincere, or do you tend just to brush off your faults, shortcomings, and sins? If the latter, how can you change? Why *must* you change?**

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**Further Thought:** “Thus the biblical terminology shows that sin is not a calamity fallen upon the human unawares, but the result of an active attitude and choice on the part of the human. Further, sin is not the absence of good, but it is ‘falling short’ of God’s expectations. It is an evil course that the human has deliberately chosen. It is not a weakness for which humans cannot be held responsible, for the human in the attitude or act of sin deliberately chooses a way of rebellion against God, in transgression against His law, and fails to hear God’s Word. Sin attempts to pass beyond the limitations God has set. In short, sin is rebellion against God.”—*The Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Publishing Association, 2000), p. 239.

“A terrible picture of the condition of the world has been presented before me. Immorality abounds everywhere. Licentiousness is the special sin of this age. Never did vice lift its deformed head with such boldness as now. The people seem to be benumbed, and the lovers of virtue and true goodness are nearly discouraged by its boldness, strength, and prevalence. The iniquity which abounds is not merely confined to the unbeliever and the scoffer. Would that this were the case, but it is not. Many men and women who profess the religion of Christ are guilty. Even some who profess to be looking for His appearing are no more prepared for that event than Satan himself. They are not cleansing themselves from all pollution. They have so long served their lust that it is natural for their thoughts to be impure and their imaginations corrupt.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 2, p. 346.

### Discussion Questions:

- 1 What answer do you give to those who, despite all that has happened, insist that humanity is improving? What arguments do they give, and how do you respond to them?
- 2 Look at the quote from Ellen G. White above. If you see yourself in it, what is the answer? Why is it important not to give up in despair but to keep claiming God’s promises—first, of forgiveness; second, of cleansing? Who is the one who wants you to say once and for all, “It’s no use. I’m too corrupt. I can never be saved, so I might as well give up”? Do you listen to him or to Jesus, who will say to us, “Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more” (*John 8:11*)?
- 3 Why is it so important for us as Christians to understand basic human sinfulness and depravity? What can happen when we lose sight of that sad but true reality? What errors can a false understanding of our true condition lead us into?
- 4 Think about the untold numbers of Protestants who chose to die rather than give up the faith. How strong are we in the faith? Strong enough to die for it?

## One Year in Mission: Part 2

As members in the local Seventh-day Adventist churches watched the enthusiastic One Year in Mission (OYIM) young people, they understood that they, too, could do something special for the community and began to follow the example of reaching out to their neighbors.

“I can tell you honestly,” Anna said, “that I didn’t used to think much about working in the big cities—I didn’t see what the real problems were. And it’s easier to go to a village. But after being involved with this project, I understand that we really, really need to be here.

“When I came back to my home church in Russia, I saw it with different eyes. I realized that we need to work differently—we need to be real Christians. Something in my mind had changed; I understood how we need to live and how to work.

“I was so inspired in New York, I began praying about what could be done in my home division of ESD [Euro-Asia Division],” Anna recalled.

In June 2013, hundreds of leaders, pastors, and evangelists from around the world descended on New York City to participate in the General Conference International Field School of Evangelism. The program included classes in the day and practical experience in evening evangelistic meetings held across the New York metropolitan area.

Leonid Rutkovsky, a pastor from the ESD, gave presentations at the Ukrainian and Russian churches in New York. When he wasn’t in class or meetings, Leonid and Victor Kozakov, the Adventist Mission director for ESD, talked about how they could do something similar in their division.

“We decided that if people were preaching in New York and having good results, then why not in our territory?” Leonid said. “If it can happen in New York, then it can happen in Moscow or Kiev.

“The field school gave us clear direction for reaching the big cities. Now we were focused, we had a purpose in mind and a goal to reach.”

When Anna met Leonid, she was excited to hear about the developing plans. “We have a goal to knock on every door in Kiev,” he told her. “There are 700,000 doors in Kiev, and we want every one. We will have special maps showing every street, every block, and every house.”

Anna was delighted. “I could see that God was leading, and I knew I needed to go to Kiev. He has His wonderful plan—we just need to follow it.”

As the Mission to the Cities director in Kiev, Leonid provides training in preaching for church members and oversees the work of Bible and literature workers and medical missionaries, who provide simple remedies to the community—including 16 classes on such topics as smoking cessation, cooking and weight loss, alcohol recovery, and mother and child health.

*To be continued in next week’s Inside Story.*

## *The Lesson in Brief*

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► **Key Text:** *Romans 3:23*

► **The Student Will:**

**Know:** Admit that humanity has fallen into a pit of sin and death from which it cannot extricate itself.

**Feel:** Sense his or her helpless condition while simultaneously nurturing the hope that God has not abandoned him or her.

**Do:** Reject those notions of human goodness and progress that insulate him or her from sensing his or her need of Christ.

► **Learning Outline:**

**I. Know: Awareness of the Problem**

**A** Why should sin be understood as a universal problem rather than as a periodic problem here or there?

**B** With the many proposed cures for humanity's evils (education, political/social means, etc.), how would you focus the solution toward what God has accomplished through Christ?

**II. Feel: Cope With the Problem.**

**A** What cultural lies keep us numb to the reality of our sin and our corresponding need of God?

**B** Because "feeling sinful" can be a self-destructive experience, how can we recast that notion as a first step toward Christ?

**III. Do: Combat Denial of the Problem.**

**A** How would you answer the charge that humanity is not all that bad (therefore not needing a Savior) in the context of kind and loving people who have no affiliation with Christianity?

**B** How does the distinction between the inner life of the heart and outward actions help answer the previous question?

► **Summary:** Humanity will have a difficult time comprehending and appreciating the glorious gospel of God's salvation if it denies or underestimates the reality of its collective sinful condition.

## Learning Cycle

### ►STEP 1—Motivate

**Spotlight on Scripture:** *Romans 2*

**Key Concept for Spiritual Growth:** When a particular community is blessed or privileged by God, that community's recognition of its own sin may become compromised. The sins of those outside the community become magnified while those within are minimized or denied. Awareness of one's need of God's righteousness in Christ is often detrimentally replaced with presumption and hypocrisy.

**Just for Teachers:** The goal is to prevent the church from walking into the same trap that Paul's dialogue partner has walked into in *Romans 2*. Adopting a double standard, with regard to sin, entails both a theological and missiological disaster. Gently strive to make those in the class admit that this subtle dimension of sin is something personally applicable to all of us. Leverage the strong denunciations of Paul (*Rom. 2:1–5, 23, 24*) to emphasize that this issue is not a minor one and that the witness of the church and the character of God are at stake (*Rom. 2:24*).

**Opening Discussion:** Maximizing the sins of others and minimizing our own has almost become second nature. Take the simple experience of driving; sometimes the words and anger we suppress as Christians when another driver commits an error are downright embarrassing. However, when we commit those *same* driving mistakes, we gently whisper to ourselves, "Oops," or "Sorry about that." It is this double standard that Paul exposes in *Romans 2*, and it is this same standard that needs to be exposed in our lives, as well.

#### Questions for Discussion:

- ① How does applying the sin problem *only* to nonbelievers set us up to misapply the gospel?
- ② How does having a double standard in terms of sin and judgment basically negate our witness to the world?

### ►STEP 2—Explore

**Just for Teachers:** *Romans 2* is a rather neglected chapter, sandwiched between the Protestant mantra of "The just shall live by faith"

**(Rom. 1:17) and the undeniable theological gemstones of Romans 3–8. Scholars have wrestled with how it fits into the broader theological structure of the book. This confusion leaves much room in Romans 2 for further reflection. Encourage your class with the exciting opportunity they have to trail blaze some uncharted territory. Be sure to highlight how the *particular* behavior outlined in Romans 2 shows that (1) sin is a universal problem and (2) the disobedience being addressed is rooted in a sinful presumption regarding God’s grace.**

## Bible Commentary

### I. Judges Under Judgment *(Review Romans 1:28–30; 2:1–11 with your class.)*

After recording a litany of sinful behavior (*Rom. 1:23–31*), one further denunciation is needed. Not only are these sins committed brazenly, but the sinners give full approval of those who commit such sin (*Rom. 1:32*). No pleas of innocence or ignorance here, just in-your-face rebellion.

Somewhat unexpectedly, Paul turns the tables on the one judging these sins. He uses a rhetorical diatribe device with an imaginary dialogue partner to drive home his point. This partner, unlike the ones who *approve* of such blatant sin, *condemns* all such wickedness (*Rom. 2:1*). There’s only one problem. This “righteous” judge commits the same acts he condemns, and with that penetrating insight, Paul is able to sweep the whole world into the same predicament (*Rom. 3:9*) in order that he might apply the solution of the gospel indiscriminately to all peoples. The Jews, understandably represented by the judgmental dialogue partner (*Rom. 2:17*), and the Gentiles, with their long list of sins, now stand on a level playing field before God’s righteous judgment (*Rom. 2:3, 5, 16; 3:19*).

But the question arises as to how a population that possesses sufficient godly knowledge to condemn evil thinks that it will “escape the judgment of God” (*Rom. 2:3*) when it commits the same sins. This question will be answered in conjunction with the following commentary section.

**Consider This:** How should Paul’s approach of bringing humanity “under sin” (*Rom. 3:9*) forever change the way we engage other people’s sins? Which character quality needs to be cultivated when addressing the sins that we see around us? Could that quality help us deal with our own sins?

### II. False Security *(Review Romans 2:17–29, 3:1 with your class.)*

The standard way in which Romans 1 and 2 are viewed is that they bring both Gentile and Jew under sin, respectively, so that the gospel in chapter 3 will be universally applicable. This approach has been emphasized

here, as well. But Romans 2 also depicts a version of false security that invokes the graciousness of God. This false security undermines sincere obedience to God, while also possibly substituting itself for the true “grace [of God] through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (*Rom. 3:24, NKJV*).

To respond to the question that we posed above, let us begin again by reiterating it: How does Paul’s dialogue partner think that he and those he represents will escape God’s judgment? The answer is a theological construal of the character of God as kind, long-suffering, and patient *toward them* (not Gentiles) so as to minimize God’s judgment on them (not Gentiles) (*Rom. 2:5*). Paul corrects this misappropriation of the gracious attributes of God by emphasizing that (1) these character qualities are meant to lead to repentance and (2) God “will render to each one according to his works” (*Rom. 2:6, ESV*). In other words, God is deaf to the praise of His grace when it is used as an excuse for disobedience or an ostensible free pass in the judgment, regardless of one’s behavior.

This flow of thought also is paralleled in the last half of Romans 2. At least ten claims are mentioned regarding being specially privileged. For example, such claims include calling yourself a Jew, boasting in God, being a guide to the blind, and so on (*Rom. 2:17–21*). Add to the list the covenant sign of circumcision (*Rom. 2:25*) and the entrustment of the oracles of God (*Rom. 3:2*), and it is admitted that being a Jew is an advantage in “every way” (*Rom. 3:2*). However, Israel’s reliance on God’s act of gracious election and the accompanying covenant privileges, while violating that law/covenant, “dishonor[s] God” and causes the Gentiles to blaspheme God (*Rom. 2:23, 24, NKJV*).

The way Paul corrects the double standard is to invoke a concept that has proved a perennial headache for scholars. Paul simply states in the middle of the chapter, “For it is not the hearers of the law [reference to Jews only] who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law [either Jews or Gentiles] who will be justified” (*Rom. 2:13, ESV*). If God weren’t this way, then a favorable outcome in the judgment would be guaranteed only for Jews, because no Gentile can claim the ethnic and religious blessings (for example, hearing the law) poured out on Israel. But according to Paul, such an outcome cannot be. God has no favorites, for He “shows no partiality” (*Rom. 2:11, ESV*).

All of these advantages of being God’s special covenant people count for little when the law is broken. One’s circumcision can be reversed (*Rom. 2:25*) and one’s Jewish identity threatened (*Rom. 2:28*).

In summary, God’s grace toward Israel, unfortunately and unnecessarily, resulted in its people having a presumptuous blindness to their own sin and hypocrisy, especially in relation to the Gentiles. Paul, as a sort of post-Cross John the Baptist, belabors that argument in order to clear the way for the coming of God’s gospel in Christ in the following chapters—a gospel for Jew and

Gentile alike, and for both you and me.

**Discussion Question:** What are the theological, false security blankets that current Christians may be holding onto that are creating obstacles to the full ministry of the gospel?

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### ►STEP 3—Apply

**Just for Teachers:** “Cheap grace,” hypocrisy, and a disregard for keeping the law are monumental problems facing today’s Christian church. Ironically, *Romans* is often used to bolster such antinomian sentiment. Encourage the class to consider current status symbols (religious membership, ethnic superiority, and so on) that may block us from realizing we are all desperate sinners in need of Christ.

**Thought Question:** How do we recognize that our church has been especially blessed by God without falling into the same superiority complex that early Judaism did?

### ►STEP 4—Create

**Just for Teachers:** Contrast the effortless needed to see the sins of others (*Rom. 1:18–32*) and the severe difficulty required to see our own (*Rom. 2:1, 21–24*). The goal is for the class to enter into the deepest reflection and humility before God. You lead the way in the activities and be the first to share from your own experience.

#### Activities:

- ❶ Invite some brave soul to share a testimony of how God revealed to him or her that he or she had a prejudice of some kind and how God graciously delivered him or her from such an attitude.
- ❷ A common experience for Seventh-day Adventists is to be labeled as legalistic for a commitment to the law and the Sabbath. Encourage a class member to utilize *Romans 2* to show the hypocrisy of claiming a saved status while violating God’s law.