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# **Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship**

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# “How to Resist Temptation”

By

**Joseph Tkach**



Satan tempted Jesus in the desert, and Jesus responded by quoting scripture (Matthew 4). However, as you have probably noticed, just quoting scripture does not make temptation go away, and it does not guarantee that we will resist it. After all, even Satan can quote scripture. I would like to recommend some additional strategies in our struggle against sin.

## **Stay out of trouble**

First, stay away from sin. Don't go looking for Satan just to show that you can withstand his wiles. We aren't supposed to go looking for trouble, jumping off of spiritual cliffs and expecting angels to rescue us. What I recommend is the opposite: Draw boundaries for yourself that keep you away from the danger.

By boundaries, I do not mean that you see how close you can get to sin without actually going over the line. That is stupid, for the simple reason that our strength of resistance varies from time to time. A boundary that may be safe for us one day may be hazardous to us the next, depending on our emotional state. So a boundary, if it's going to work, has to be set for our weakest moment, not our strongest.

God doesn't tell us where to put our boundaries, and we all may need slightly different levels of strictness with ourselves. For example, a photo that is sexually suggestive for one person may not even catch the eye of another. Consequently, people have differing ideas of what sort of pictures to avoid. People with a high tolerance should not look down on those with low tolerance—everyone must judge the risk for themselves.

A person with high tolerance should not “push” the boundaries of the other, saying it's OK, for

that might cause the person to sin. The person with high tolerance should also remember that it is dangerous to overestimate one's strength. Many aspects of society are designed to tempt, so don't forget that you are human.

Many of us struggle with temptation in the form of calories. Here, we can break our boundaries every now and then and still recover. Many people have trouble with alcohol, and experience has shown that the safest boundary for most is “absolutely none.” The potential danger is high; the benefits are low; it is simply not worth the risk.

Sexual temptations can also be dangerous, because the consequences of sexual sins are severe. We can't just “recover” a relationship shattered by infidelity. Here, we must set boundaries well away from the danger zone, just to make sure that nothing happens even in our weakest moments.

For example, our pastors have been given a boundary: They cannot counsel a woman alone. Although the chances of improprieties may be slim, the devastating consequences make the risk too great to allow private counselling. And for similar reasons, youth ministry workers are not to be alone with a child. Safety is too important to leave to good intentions and assumptions.

## **Avoiding danger**

Boundaries are required for pastors; they are also good advice for members. For example, it is dangerous for unmarried couples to be together in private in a bedroom. It may not be a sin, but it is not wise. Most of the time it may be “safe” (although it isn't a very good example). But no one knows in advance when a time of weakness

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will strike. The danger is too great to take an unnecessary chance.

One of our members gave me this example from his experience in construction: When working on a platform three feet off the ground, safety belts were not needed. When working on a platform 30 feet high (even though the chances of falling off were theoretically the same), safety belts were required; all workers had to be attached by rope to something secure. When working on a large flat roof, safety ropes were not required unless the worker was within 12 feet of the edge. In other words, the requirements were adjusted according to risk and the seriousness of the consequences.

The safety rules were particularly interesting for working on a large domed roof. At the top of the roof, where the surface is nearly level, the chances of falling down are practically nil, and the chances of injury are low. One could even go 20 feet out from the centre, and the slope would still be quite gentle; even if somebody tripped and fell there would be no danger.

However, one could go about halfway out and still stand up, but there, the roof has a steep slope and a small stumble might cause a person to fall off the building and die. But there was no identifiable point where danger started. Consequently, workers had to be safety-roped no matter where they were on the roof. No specific “edge” made the dome dangerous, because no one could see where the danger zone started. Lives were at stake, and the only sensible precaution was to require everyone, even people on the flat part of the roof, to be safety-roped.

That is what we must sometimes do with temptations. The more serious the consequences of failure, the more cautious we must be. When we are not sure where the danger zone is, we need to back up a bit further to make sure we do not enter it. In other words, if we want to avoid sin, we draw boundary lines for safety, not for getting as close as we can.

Some men who travel alone have a boundary in motel rooms: don't turn the television on. They find it easier to keep it off than to turn it off once it's on, and they believe that the potential for harm is too great for them to take a risk. Not all men have the same boundary, but at least these men have a boundary that works for them.

### **Avoid pride**

One lesson we should learn about resisting temptation is that we aren't very good at it. It is dangerous to trust ourselves to always say “no.” We might say “no” 98 times in a row, and weaken on the 99th time. So one of the best ways to avoid problems is to keep out of situations that test our resolve. If we are tempted, maybe that's a signal that we are already too close.

Paul advises, “Flee fornication!” Don't take pride in knowing “when to stop.” Don't trust in your strength to resist. If we are tempted to pad an expense account, we need to keep even more careful records. If we are tempted to use humour that belittles someone else, we need to back off. When we are tempted to take some forbidden fruit, we need to stay far away from it.

### **Get help**

We can resist sin better when we have help. Peer pressure can keep us honest, if we are with the right kind of peers. We are less likely to suggest something improper when we think the person with us might disapprove. Sometimes it's helpful to have friends who are more careful than we are.

When we hide certain activities, when we have secrets in our closets, we may be in danger. The more open we are, the less we hide, the better others can help us.

Scuba divers and mountain climbers know that it's better to have a buddy. God designed us to walk through life with other people, not on a solo journey. No one has all the strengths—we need the strengths that other people have, too.

Some people have “accountability partners” to help them be honest about certain areas of life. Some people have spouses who do the same thing. A formal arrangement may not be necessary, but it can be helpful. It is easier to resist temptation when we know that someone will be checking up on us. A basic principle is, don't do anything you don't want people to find out.

### **When people fall**

Last, I'd like to note that everybody falls short sometimes. Some people eat too much, some people say too much and some people do too much—and sometimes they get caught. What do we do when a member gets caught—perhaps

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taken to jail or involved in a premarital pregnancy?

How do we resist the temptation to condemn, or snub or feel superior? Jesus said, Let the person without sin throw the first stone (John 8:7). He told the sinner, "Don't do it again," but he told all the others, in effect: "Don't throw stones. You need grace, too." Forgive, just as you have been forgiven. We need to remind ourselves that we need forgiveness, too.

Forgiveness does not mean that we encourage the person to return to the situation that led to the sin. Rather, we can help the person see that better boundaries are needed.

If a person has a weakness in one area, more caution is appropriate. But what if the person doesn't set wise boundaries, and fails again, and again and again? What if the person seemingly doesn't learn from the mistakes?

Peter asked Jesus about it—how often should we forgive? Seventy-seven times, Jesus said (Matthew 18:22), but he really meant that we shouldn't keep count. God has forgiven each of us an enormous amount (an infinite amount, since we are given eternal life), and we should be equally generous in forgiving the temporary things of this life. Our attitude toward sin needs to be more lenient for others than it is for ourselves.

The best way to resist temptation is to stay away from it. That's worth thinking about. What temptations do you struggle with? Is there a better way to avoid the problems? Do you need a friend to help you? Do you need to get professional help?

And when others fail, we need to forgive. Are there certain sins that you find hard to forgive? What can you do about that? That's worth thinking about, too.

**Joseph Tkach**

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## Window on the World

From Randal Dick, superintendent of missions



### **A Word of Encouragement... To the Missing Generation of the WCG**

About a year ago someone shared a letter that they had written to their adult children. I was deeply touched by the man's words and heart, having children in the same age group. In addition to having a good message, the letter reminds us that mission is about overcoming obstacles that prevent people from coming to Christ. Our mission must include the "lost generation" of the WCG.

The letter speaks volumes, and if it helps one young person get additional spiritual traction, then it has been of value. The author granted me permission to publish his letter on the basis that he remains anonymous.

#### **To my wonderful children:**

Now that you have all departed the nest, Mom and I often reflect upon the journey, past and future, upon which each of you has embarked.

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I've decided that it is fitting that I share with you a gem of wisdom that may make a real difference in your life, as well as in the lives of your future children.

This is not an effort to “convert” any of you. Mom and I are quite secure in the assurance that you are in hands much more capable than ours. It is just that God has richly and abundantly blessed your mother and me. We want the same for you.

There was an event that stimulated me to write these things to you.... Here I am, plugged in to my Mp3 player, relaxing to some cool sounds ... and on comes Elton (John) singing a song I've always liked—but I've never really listened to the words. They are very touching. I find myself misty-eyed.

Elton is singing about a child that is not yet born.... He doesn't know if the eyes will be green or blue—but he knows that the kid will be blessed. “I promise you that,” he sings over and over—“I promise you that. You'll be blessed!”

I'm sure Elton means well, but how on earth can he promise something like that? It's obviously not his prerogative, nor in his control. Yet he is singing something that every parent, and eventually every human being will yearn for—a blessed relationship with God—the only source of real blessing.

It has been my experience that some people already have what Elton wants for this yet-to-be-born child—a blessed life. No one can demand blessing; no one earns it, yet some do seem to live blessed lives more than others (by the way, the blessings we are talking about are by no means always material in nature).

Your grandpa and grandma are examples. God just reached down into their lives, for reasons known only to him, drew them to him, blessed them and began to guide them in a way that changed the course of their lives, my life and your lives forever. Along the way, God poured blessing after blessing out upon them. The whole extended family recognizes this to be true.

Grandpa and Grandma were part of a quite homogenous family structure. If you go to a family reunion you see that life-style pattern remains intact—most of the aunts, uncles and cousins are pretty much the same as they have always been. But everybody is quick to point out

that Grandma and Grandpa (and you by extension) are different. Some say it has something to do with “that church.” But in fact they are acknowledging God, at least as it pertains to the good parts.

For whatever reason, God just took hold of Grandpa and Grandma and steered them in another direction and blessed them above measure. We, the offspring, live at a level of awareness, education and opportunity that is way above the norm of the extended family. I can testify that these things are not a result of the process of evolution! I clearly remember the difficult decisions Grandpa and Grandma made, decisions that propelled their lives in a very different direction from the relatives. It proved to be a path of blessing.

Now here's where it comes down to you. Once God bestows the blessing of a closer walk with him, the precedent, both biblical and experiential, says that God wants that state of relationship and blessing to be permanent, and extend from generation to generation. We were all created to have an eternal relationship with God. Once that relationship begins, God wants it to continue.

Look at the Old Testament for instance, and notice that consistently when he entered into a relationship with a person, he wanted the children and grandchildren to be his as well. God loves to extend that blessing from generation to generation (see Exodus 20—second commandment).

Well, I just want you to know that you are there—already in that special relationship. Since you were born into this special relationship with God, and have never known anything different, it is easy for you to take that precious benefit for granted. I want you to remember that it didn't begin with you, or even with Mom or me. But it is yours to embrace, if you will, or ignore until it goes away.

If there is exhortation to be given, it is that each generation needs to personally renew that special relationship with God through Jesus. I know that you are committed to Christ at one level, but you need to make what was your parents' walk your own walk with God.

Each one of you was formally given to God when you were a tiny baby. We meant it. You were beneficiaries of a blessing-filled relationship as a

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result. Now, you need to make that relationship your own for the sake of your spouses and our next generation.

As Mom and I pray for you, we pray for the hundreds if not thousands of other young WCG offspring, many of whom are confused, somewhat turned off to “church,” and who are spiritually adrift. They seem to have lost sight of the value of a committed walk with God, and are instead protecting themselves from the possibility of experiencing more emotional pain.

Being in a committed relationship on the path of blessing does not mean that you will never suffer trials. In fact, hindsight will one day show you that some of your worst moments were an important blessing. But what is so excellent is that even during those times you will find a close presence of God. That is a blessing that many if not most in this world do not enjoy. You experience it because although full of imperfections, there came a point where Mom and I specifically asked God to bring us into relationship directly with him, and to allow us to be a continuation of the blessing he had bestowed on our parents.

Mom and I, and Grandpa and Grandma all agree that God has flooded you all with blessing, protection, healing, opportunities and material sufficiency—it is amazing and humbling. The fourth generation from Grandpa and Grandma—that would be your children and our grandchildren—will hopefully have the same relationship of blessing that we have lived under. That is the same relationship that Elton was so passionately hoping would be available to the offspring-to-be that inspired his song “Blessed.”

It will be the case in part because each of you will have chosen to approach the throne of grace and take responsibility for the relationship bestowed upon Grandpa and Grandma, passed down and accepted by Mom and me, which has poured over you in a torrent of blessing that defines your lives.

It is possible to choose not to accept that relationship with Christ, or to ignore it to a point where it eventually becomes a “no” answer. I’ll

leave you with two pieces of advice that might help. First, I can remember the when, the where and the dorky immature manner in which I made it clear to God that I wanted to have an independent relationship with him.

I told him that I realized that what I had up to that point was an extension of my parents’ relationship with him, and that was not enough. What followed was a process that over time has defined my personal unique journey with God. He will bring you to your moment too. Don’t worry if it is not a perfect moment—just make it genuine.

That leads me to my second point. Part of your journey and that of many other young men and women of your WCG generation involved going through a period of ugliness, conflict and pain that is greater than anything Mom or I ever experienced in our youth.

I know that your generation values genuineness and considers relationship infinitely more valuable than institutions. I know there were many regrettable words and deeds that turned off many of your generation. They now drift, keeping in touch with each other, but unwilling to risk any more disillusionment or pain.

Mom and I see that they, and sometimes you, try to walk a path that is neither committed nor detached. We are concerned for you and others like you, and want to see a restoration of the joy and fulfillment that your generation once enjoyed as part of the WCG.

We are confident that Christ will draw these young folks to him in such a way as to heal the pain and make it possible to once again experience and appreciate the community of believers to which they were drawn, in spite of the flaws and imperfections. Each of you will have your own path to that point of commitment, or in some cases recommitment. My prayer is that each of you will recognize the time and the place when, with God’s patient guidance, you arrive there. I have confidence that you will.

Love,  
Dad

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# Lessons from the Bible

### The Gospel of Mark Lessons 4 and 5 (inclusive): Mark 1:9-11

#### A Lesson About Baptism

*At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

Have you ever wondered why Jesus, who was sinless, would need to be baptised? After all, baptism is a sign of our sins being washed away, and Jesus didn't have any sins to wash away. Or did he?

#### **Bore our sins**

Jesus was sinless, and yet he, the sinless one, bore the sins of the whole world. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:21 that God made Jesus to be sin for our sakes, even though Jesus himself was sinless, "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

In keeping with God's purpose, Jesus was baptised for our sakes, not for his own. His baptism, like his death and resurrection, was a dramatic expression of God's grace toward sinful humanity.

When we are baptised, we are baptised into the baptism of Jesus Christ—a baptism that is directly linked to Jesus' sinless life and his death and resurrection on our behalf.

#### **As us and for us**

The Son of God became one of us in order to represent all of us before God. This is what Christians mean by "representative atonement." Because Jesus is human, one of us, he is able to represent all of us before God. But Jesus is more than our representative. He also took all of our sins upon himself, bearing our sins and their penalty in our place. That is what Christians mean by "substitutionary atonement." Jesus represents us before God, and he also substitutes for us before God. In substituting for us, he carries away our sins; in representing us, his righteousness is attributed to us. He is our

"alpha and omega." Our salvation is in Jesus Christ, and him only, from beginning to end.

#### **God's beloved**

The voice from heaven said to Jesus, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." But remember, Jesus is God's Son, beloved of God, for our sakes and as our representative. In saying this to Jesus, God says it to every person for whom Jesus died and rose again. In Christ, God says this to you and he says it to me.

In his baptism for us, Jesus embodies from both sides the promised relationship of love between God and his people. As God, he represents God to us. As human, he represents humanity to God. And this relationship that God has created between himself and humanity in the person Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of everything God promised to Israel, to the House of David, and through Israel to all of the world. In Christ, God has demonstrated in person his utter faithfulness to his covenant of love and redemption. God saves us because he loves us and wants us saved, and he did it in Jesus Christ.

Religion teaches us to think of salvation in terms of the law, i.e., God saves the law-keepers and destroys the lawbreakers. But the gospel tells us that salvation is God's gift to sinners, i.e., God makes sinners righteous in Christ, their perfect representative before God. That's why we need to trust him for our salvation—it comes only through him, and not through our deeds. It is his commitment to us and his faithfulness to us that saves us, not our commitment and faithfulness to him. When we trust in Christ, we participate in Christ's perfect commitment and faithfulness on our behalf.

It is only because we are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, that we can clothe ourselves "with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience" (Colossians 3:12). Because God identifies us with Jesus, and this even while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8), we are freed to walk with him in the paths of his love. God acted

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in Christ to make us righteous. We receive his righteousness; we do not generate our own, and in receiving his righteousness, we begin to walk in his ways.

Remember, Jesus did not come to vindicate the law, but to vindicate people—sinners, to be precise. Christians ought not fall for the religious (as opposed to gospel) idea that God is more concerned about the law than he is about people. Paul wrote: "But when the fullness of time [the "Today" of Hebrews 3:13 and 4:7] had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children" (Galatians 4:4-5, New Revised Standard Version).

When God says to Jesus, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased," he is saying it also to all who are in Christ, because Christ has identified himself with humanity as one of us (Hebrews 2:16-17), both substituting for us and representing us in the presence of God.

### **A certain future**

Because of sin, the only future for humanity is disaster—unless, that is, God is faithful to his covenant love. All the biblical descriptions of hell, whether pictured as outer darkness or a furnace of fire, with all its torment and anguish, are exactly what we would have to look forward to were it not for God's absolute faithfulness to his promises of forgiveness and redemption.

It is precisely the horror of hell that Jesus took on himself in our place; but hell could not defeat him or hold him; he broke its power and disarmed it and led it captive in his parade of victory over all powers and authorities (Ephesians 3:8-9; Colossians 2:13-15; 1 Peter 3:18-22). Captivity of every sort whether the captivity of hell, of addiction, of human tyranny or of sin, has all been led captive by Jesus, our victorious Saviour.

### **Struggle and failure**

Yet even though we know all this, and even though we are fully committed to living godly lives in the light of Jesus Christ, we still fall short and do things that are contrary to the love of God.

But don't let that get you down. That is how things are right now, but it will not always be so. The day will come when the new creation that God has already made you to be in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15) will be fully unveiled (Colossians 3:1-4). And when that happens, there will be no more crying, no more pain and no more death (Revelation 21:4).

### **Trust him**

Even now, our hope lies in this: God has proven in Christ his love for us and his faithfulness to us (consider Romans 5:6-8). He has made our cause his own. He has taken responsibility for us—sins and all. He has taken us under his wing, and he will never let us go. That is why we trust him.

God, who proves himself faithful to faithless Israel, is exactly the same God who is faithful to faithless you and me. He is the same from the beginning, which means he has and always will be for you, working to help and to heal, and not to condemn (consider John 3:17).

If you have turned your back on God, don't ever think he has turned his back on you, quite the contrary. He's got the porch light on and dinner on the table, waiting for you to come home.

***J. Michael Feazell***

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### **For reflection:**

1. How is Jesus' baptism related to our baptism?
2. Why did the voice from heaven say, "With you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11)?
3. Is it hard for you to accept the fact that in Christ you are beloved by God (v. 11)?

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### Bible Study

#### From Guilt to Grace

A study of Romans 3



By Michael Morrison

In Romans' 2, Paul explains that both Jews and Gentiles need the gospel—everyone needs to be rescued from the condemnation that they rightly deserve. Although some Jews claimed to have an advantage in salvation, Paul explains that Jews are not immune to sin, and they are not immune to judgment. Everyone is saved in the same way.

How do people become right with God? Paul explains it in chapter 3—but first he has to answer some objections.

#### **Any advantage for Jews?**

Paul had preached in many cities, and he knew how people responded to his message. Jewish people often responded with this objection: “We are God’s chosen people. We must have some sort of advantage, but you are saying that we are condemned on the same basis as everyone else.” So Paul asks, “*What advantage, then, is there in being a Jew, or what value is there in circumcision?*” (3:1). What’s the point of being a Jew?

And Paul answers in verse 2: *Much in every way! First of all, they have been entrusted with the very words of God.* The Jews have the Scriptures. That is an advantage, but there is a downside to it—those who sin under the law will be judged by the law (2:12). The law that reveals God to the Jews also sentences them to God’s punishment.

So what’s the advantage? Paul will say more about this in chapter 9. But here in chapter 3 his goal is not to explain how special the Jews are, but to explain that they, just like everybody else, need to be saved through Jesus Christ. He’s not going to elaborate on their privileges until he has explained their need for salvation—they haven’t kept the law that they boast about.

So Paul asks: *What if some [Jews] were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God’s faithfulness? (3:3).* Will the fact that some Jews sinned by being unfaithful cause God to back out of his promises?

*Not at all! Let God be true, and every human being a liar (v. 4).* God is always true to his word, and even though we are unfaithful, he is not. He won’t let our actions turn him into a liar. He created humans for a reason, and even if we all fall short of what he wants, his plan will succeed. God chose the Jews as his people, and they fell short, but God has a way to solve the problem—and the good news is that the rescue plan applies not only to Jews, but also to everyone who falls short. God is more than faithful.

Paul then quotes a scripture about God being true: *As it is written: “So that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge” (v. 4).* This is quoted from Ps. 51:4, where David says that if God punishes him, it is because God is right. When God judges us guilty, then it is because we are guilty. He is right and faithful even when he punishes people. His covenant said he would punish sin, so a threat of punishment on the Day of Judgment is not a betrayal, but a matter of faithfulness.

#### **Reason to sin?**

Paul deals with another objection in verse 5: *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.)* Here is the argument: If we sin, we give God an opportunity to show that he is right. We are doing God a favour, so he shouldn’t punish us. It’s a silly argument, but Paul deals with it. Is God unjust? Certainly not! He says in verse 6. *If that were so, how could God judge the world?* God has

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promised to judge the world, which means that he is right in doing so.

Paul paraphrases the argument a little in verse 7: *Someone might argue, "If my falsehood enhances God's truthfulness and so increases his glory, why am I still condemned as a sinner?"* If my sin shows how good God is, why should he punish me? In verse 8 Paul gives another version of the argument: *Why not say—as we are being slanderously reported as saying and as some claim that we say—"Let us do evil that good may result"?* Paul stops dealing with the argument and repeats his conclusion by saying, *"Their condemnation is just!"* They are condemned, and rightly so. Sin (including that slander) deserves to be punished.

### All have sinned

In verse 9 Paul returns to his discussion: *What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Are we Jews better than others, or even better than people who spread lies about the gospel? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin.* Jews are not any better, and have no advantage, because we are all sinners. When it comes to God's judgment, we are all justly condemned. God does not play favourites, and he does not give salvation advantages to anyone.

In a rapid-fire conclusion, Paul quotes in verses 10 to 18 a series of scriptures to support his point that everyone is a sinner. These verses mention various body parts: mind, mouth, throat, tongue, lips, feet and eyes. The picture is that people are thoroughly evil:

- *There is no one righteous, not even one [Eccl. 7:20];*
- *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 [Ps. 14:1-3; 53:1-3].*
- *Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit [Ps. 5:9].*
- *The poison of vipers is on their lips [Ps. 140:3].*
- *Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness [Ps. 10:7].*
- *Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and*

- *The way of peace they do not know [Isaiah 57:8-9].*
- *There is no fear of God before their eyes [Ps. 36:1].*

Those scriptures are true about Gentiles, some Jews might say, but not about us. So Paul answers them in verse 19: *Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law.* In other words, all these Scriptures (the law in a larger sense) apply to people who are under the law—the Jews. They are wicked. Gentiles are wicked, too, but Paul doesn't have to prove that—his audience already knew it.

Why do the scriptures apply to the Jews? *"So that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God"*. Everyone must stand before the judgment seat of God, and the result is in verse 20: *"Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law"*. By the standard of the law, we all fall short.

What does the law do instead? Paul says: *"Rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin"*. The law sets a standard of righteousness, but because we sin, the law can never tell us that we are righteous. It tells us that we are sinners. According to the law, we are guilty and condemned.

### A righteousness from God

Paul introduces the good news in verse 21 with the important words *"But now."* He's making a contrast: We can't be declared righteous by the law, but there is a way that we can be declared righteous: *"But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify"*. Here Paul gets back to what he announced in Romans 1:17, that the gospel reveals a righteousness from God.

Since we are sinners, we cannot be declared righteous by observing the law. Therefore, it must be through some other means. God will declare us righteous in a way apart from the law. Although the law does not make us righteous, it gives evidence about another means of righteousness: *"This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile" (3:22).* We can be accounted righteous through faith in Jesus Christ. This pathway to righteousness gives no advantage to the Jew—

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all who believe are counted righteous in the same way.

There is no difference, Paul says, *“for all have sinned”*—both Jews and Gentiles have sinned—*“and [everyone] falls short of the glory of God”*. By the law, we all fall short, and we all fail to achieve the salvation that God has designed for us. But our weakness will not stop God’s plan!

*“All are justified [declared righteous] freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (v. 24)*. Because of what Jesus did, we can be made right by God’s grace. We are not made sinless and perfect, but in the courtroom of God, we are declared righteous instead of guilty. Whether we feel forgiven or not, we are forgiven if we have faith in Christ.

What permits God to change the verdict? Jesus has paid a price to rescue us from slavery. He has bought us back; that is what “redemption” means. That is one way to look at it, in financial terms. Courtroom terms have also been used, and in the next verse Paul uses words from Jewish worship:

**God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.** God himself provided the payment, the sacrifice that sets aside our sin. For “atonement,” Paul uses the Greek word *hilasterion*, the word used for the mercy seat on top of the Ark of the Covenant, where Israel’s sins were atoned every year on the Day of Atonement.

God, because of his love and mercy, provided Jesus, as the means by which we can escape the punishment he says is appropriate for sin. That atonement is received by us through faith; we believe that his death did something that allows us to be saved. Paul is talking about three aspects of salvation: The cause of our salvation is what Jesus did; the means by which it is offered to us is grace; and the way we receive it is faith.

God provided Jesus as a sacrifice, verse 25 says, *“to demonstrate his justice”*—to show that he is righteous and fair—*“because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished”*. Normally, a judge who let criminals go free would be called unjust (Ex. 23:7; Deut. 25:1). But isn’t this what God is doing? However, God is not unjust when he

justifies the wicked because he has provided Jesus as a sacrifice. He is within his legal rights, to use a human analogy, in letting people escape punishment because those sins have already been punished in the death of Jesus Christ. Even for those who lived before Christ, the payment was as good as done. In one sense, that applies to everyone, to the whole world. But it applies in a fuller sense to those who trust in Christ. When we are united with him in faith, then we have died with him, and we have suffered the penalty that our sins deserved (6:5-6).

God is not contradicting himself, giving one definition of justice to humans while he uses a different definition. When he says that sin deserves punishment, and then he doesn’t punish, he is not being inconsistent. He can do this without self-contradiction because he has punished sin, that is, in Jesus Christ. He does not condone sin—he punishes it—and in mercy, he pays the penalty for us. Jesus shows us both the justice and the grace of God.

Romans 3:26 says that God *“did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus”*. In the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God demonstrates that he is just even when he declares sinners to be just.

### All are equal

*“Where, then, is boasting?”* Paul asks in verse 27. Can the Jew boast about advantages over Gentiles? When it comes to salvation, there’s nothing to boast about. We can’t even boast about faith. Faith does not make us better than other people—we are only receiving what God gives. We can’t take credit for that, or brag about it.

Boasting is excluded. *“Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the “law” that requires faith” (v. 27)*. When it comes to salvation, boasting is excluded. If keeping the law saved people, then they could brag about how well they did. But when salvation is by grace and faith, no one can boast. Paul is making two points that reinforce each other: That no one can boast, and that righteousness is by faith rather than by the law or by works.

In verse 28, he says it again: *“For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from observing the law”*. Being counted right with God on the Day of Judgment can never be on the

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basis of the law. It can't do anything except condemn us. If we are going to be accepted by God, it will not be on the basis of the law, but on the basis of faith.

*"Is God the God of Jews only?" Paul asks. "Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God" (vv. 29-30). God is not the exclusive possession of the Jews. And according to the gospel, God "will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith." He makes Jews righteous in the same way that he makes Gentiles righteous, and that is through faith, not through the law.*

*"Do we ... nullify the law by this faith?" Of course not, Paul says in verse 31. "Rather, we uphold the law." The law says there is a standard, and there is a punishment. So does the gospel. The gospel does not contradict the law, but it puts law in its proper place. The law was never designed*

as a means of salvation. But the salvation it hinted at is now available to all through Jesus Christ.

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### Questions for discussion

- Did the Jews, by having the Scriptures, have an advantage in salvation? (v. 2)
- Does our sin give God an opportunity to be more gracious? (v. 7)
- Are people really worthless, no one good for anything? (vv. 10-12)
- If the law can't declare us righteous, what is it good for? (v. 20)
- In verses 22, 24, 26 and 28, Paul tells us how we are justified or declared righteous. What does he stress by repetition?
- How does Jesus' sacrifice demonstrate God's justice? (v. 25)
- How does Paul want us to respond to this chapter?

**Michael Morrison**

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**The Mooroolbark Christian Fellowship**

**Tel. (03) 9726 8898**