

Romans 3:13-16

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/rom/rom-3/romans-313-16/>

Paul continues pointing out the sinfulness of mankind by quoting from the Old Testament.

In verse 13, Paul shifts to quoting Psalm 5, but continues to drive home the same theme: humanity on its own tends to do evil. *Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips* (v 13). The poison noted here is falsehood, lying, and deception. People lie for different reasons, but it seems for the most part it is either to attempt to gain control of others, extract something from others, or escape accountability for our actions.

A world where everyone lies is a world without love, without human connection, it is a world where everyone is alone. It is a world full of death.

Paul has already made clear that the competing Hebrew “authorities” are exercising deception when they are slandering Paul’s message, misrepresenting his gospel (v 8). But Paul made it clear that he is no better than they are (v 9). It is only because of the power of the Spirit. By trusting, obeying, and following the Spirit can Paul avoid living a life of sin, a life of deceit. That is why the gospel is such good news—it brings us power to walk apart from enslaving, destructive sin.

In verse 14, Paul moves to Psalm 10, but is still focusing on destructive words (*Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness*), as the words of the competing Jewish “authorities” were intended to tear down Paul and his ministry to the Gentiles.

The Bible is consistent in emphasizing the power of words. Jesus Himself is called the Word (John 1:1). The Word of God is said to be an instrument of judgment that divides between soul and spirit and discerns the thoughts and intents of the heart (Hebrews 4:12).

The words of men also have immense power. James 3:5–12 describes the human tongue as being an untamable instrument of destruction, like a small flame that ignites a forest fire. Paul, in this section, is reinforcing his assertion that it is not only the condemnable, slandering, competing Jewish “authorities” who have a sin problem, but this is a human problem that every single person has, including Paul.

In verse 15, Paul quotes Isaiah 59:7 (*Their feet are swift to shed blood*) which is part of a passage that describes unrighteous and unjust behavior. Sin separates us from God, and because the essence of sin is doing things “my way,” it inevitably leads to deception. Once we resort to deceiving others, we are headed down a road to advance the destruction and enslavement of other people.

The competing Jewish “authorities” have come to the most influential place on earth, Rome, to convince the Gentile believers in Rome whose “faith is being proclaimed throughout the world” (Romans 1:8) that Paul’s teaching of grace is wrong. They seek to destroy Paul’s ministry by

judging him and slandering his teaching. They seek to destroy the ministry of his partners in the gospel, like Aquila and Priscilla (Romans 16:3).

Paul is exposing the competing Jewish “authorities” for who they are: sinful slanderers bent on destruction.

But Paul is also very adamant that this is a human condition. The very grace the competing Jewish “authorities” condemn is the grace every one of us needs to cover our sin problem. Paul will insist that this grace of God is what we rely on every single moment of every day, not only at the time of our new birth when we receive the gift (of a new birth) through faith.

In verse 16, Paul continues to quote Isaiah 59:7 which explores unrighteous or unjust behavior, and how it begins with sin and separation. Once we commit to following “my way” instead of God’s way (which is the essence of sin) we naturally follow a path of deception which leads to destruction and violence to others: *Destruction and misery are in their paths* (v 16). It might be reputational, as with these competing Jewish “authorities” slandering Paul. Or it might be physical, as Paul experienced numerous times from enemies during his ministry (2 Corinthians 11:22–28).

This lifestyle, a lifestyle of making life about “me” and “my way,” leads to a path of destruction and misery. It turns out that when we focus on controlling and extracting from others, we end up enslaving ourselves. When we are intent on exploiting others for our own benefit, we ensure our own destruction.

As an example, when we decide to punish someone by being bitter, they suffer little and our soul corrodes. When we use anger or rage to attempt to control others, it is our blood pressure that boils, our attitude that is ruined, and our happiness that is sacrificed. When we allow the light of the gospel into our soul, we can live in reality. Reality is that we need to trust in God’s ways in order to gain our greatest fulfillment in life. The great news is that Jesus gives us the resurrection power to live by faith (Romans 1:16-17).

Biblical Text

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16 Destruction and misery are in their paths,**