

Romans 3:19-20

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Paul is pointing out that no one can obey the law perfectly; the law gives us knowledge of sin and makes us accountable to God.

Paul now addresses the law; the very thing the competing Jewish “authorities” who are slandering his message (v 8) claim to elevate: *Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God* (v 19).

Paul is saying, “You appeal to the *law*, to the *law* you will be held *accountable*, and here is what it says.” The competing Jewish “authorities” say the *law* is the final authority, so Paul will use the *law* to argue his case against their slander of his gospel message (Romans 3:8).

Paul already established that the competing Jewish “authorities” who claimed to be experts, judges, and teachers of the law were actually breakers of that same law (Romans 2:12–27). Paul repeats the point here as a prelude to the major point he is about to make in verse 21, that righteousness comes through faith, apart from the law.

The very core of Paul’s gospel message is that Jesus bore our sins so that we could be forgiven simply by believing. The competing Jewish “authorities” do not like that message: they claim that Paul is teaching that sin is ok, even desirable. They say that if we are just given righteousness or justice through faith, then everyone would throw the law overboard and would sin as much as possible.

The premise behind this thinking is that sin is a desirable and preferred way to live. It is consistent that the competing Jewish “authorities” would think this way since Paul made clear in Romans 2:21–24 that these “authorities” practice stealing and adultery, and in doing so defame God’s name and break the very law they claim to stand for. Paul will make a very powerful and compelling case that sin is just the opposite of desirable. It is death.

Paul recognizes we are incapable of escaping the clutches of sin through following rules. He will set forth an argument that we ought to avoid sin and walk in righteousness because that is what is in our best interest, both now as well as in eternity (Romans 14:12).

In verse 20, Paul makes one of the central claims of his good news message: *By the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.* First we need to know the bad news: not a single human, who has ever or will ever live, can stand before God and hear Him say, “You are not guilty of sin in My sight,” based on our own deeds. And this includes the competing Jewish “authorities” who have slandered Paul’s good news message.

The law plays a very important role. We probably have all observed a child who is completely oblivious to an object in a room until that object is pointed out and an adult says, “Do not touch this.” The object that previously generated absolutely no interest now becomes an obsession.

That is what rules do; they make us desire to break them. That is what God's law does; it informs us, giving us knowledge about what behavior in our life is wrong.

This might seem like an unwelcome bit of knowledge. But (referring back to verses 16–17) without that knowledge we would not be able to know the path of peace from the path of destruction and misery. All of us want fulfillment and peace and that is also what God wants for all His children. But God has done something quite amazing; He has given us the freedom to choose the path we will walk. The reality is that something is broken inside all of us; something that makes us choose the wrong path. We want to do the right thing, but we just don't (Galatians 5:17). Humans try to remedy this with rules. And when those rules don't work, we make more rules. Rules, however, do not change a human heart.

The Jewish "authorities" are trying to justify themselves and condemn Paul and his ministry partners, Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:3). But it is hollow and wrong. It might work in the sight of some people, but God knows the heart, and it is a fact that not a single one of us can be good enough to *be justified in His sight*.

What we ought to do is benefit from the law showing us the *knowledge of sin*, then recognize that sin leads to death (Romans 6:23). When we do this, it helps us realize that the way of life is to walk in God's ways, having faith that His ways are for our best.

Biblical Text

19 Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; 20 because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.