

God's Easter Message and Green Plans

March 15, 2009 - Romans 3:9-25

I have a confession to make today. It concerns something in our back yard. No, I haven't secretly buried bodies there. But I did cut corners on something. It happened in our first summer here 3 years ago. When the snow melted we ventured into the back yard to see what it looked like. We noticed that the paint had peeled off the deck and the fences. So they would all need painting. Well, I began scraping on our east fence which gets the brunt of the summer afternoon sun. The more I scraped, the more I realized that this fence had some rotten boards. Not only did the paint come off. Some pieces of wood came off too. When I looked more closely, I discovered that key boards holding the fence together were rotten. And some of the posts were rotting and crooked. To do this fence right, I would have to take it down, get rid of the rotten boards, straighten the old posts or maybe replace them. Then I'd have to rebuild the fence before I could even begin repainting.

But I didn't have that much time. I only had a couple of days to paint the fence and deck. I am not a master fence builder. Any project I attempt requires at least double the assembly time

recommended. So I came up with a compromise solution. First, I glued on some of the pieces of wood that fell off when I was scraping. Then I painted over it all. Two coats and she came out looking like new as long as you didn't look too close. There was only one problem. The next spring, the boards were even rottier; the fence was crookeder. The paint peeled off readily from the rotten boards beneath. Until I actually strip down that fence and pull out the rottenness, it will never be fixed.

Many people today believe that something similar has happened to this planet. They see the effects of pollution; ozone depletion; carbon emissions; global warming; habitat and species destruction; deforestation, soil erosion and increasing garbage issues. They wonder what can be done to "save the planet" from these rotting influences. Others wonder what the fuss is all about. Each one of us comes down somewhere on a scale of ecological concern. We might be skeptical about the cause of global warming yet see value in recycling. We might be convinced that we only have 50 years left on this planet unless humans make some drastic changes.

So people propose save the planet solutions. But I propose that all save the planet initiatives have a fatal flaw. They are like a coat of paint on my fence. They have the potential to improve a little. But they fail to take into account a foundational rot.

Now some of you might be saying to yourselves, “that’s all well and good Tom. But what does this have to do with us being in church today? Did you notice that Easter is coming Tom? We come to prepare for the Easter season. You’re talking about the environment?”

What does this have to do with Easter? Well at Easter, we talk about salvation a lot. There is a new salvation focus out there; the salvation of the planet. I thought it might be helpful for us to consider not only our individual salvation but our planetary salvation this Easter. In fact, God did not only send Christ to redeem us individually. He sent Christ to bring redemption and release to sinners AND the planet.

- Today – the fatal flaw in all save the planet plans.
- Next week – How Christ is saving the planet and our part in His work.

- Then we’ll talk about a “More Important Inconvenient Truth” that deals with life focus at Easter and through the rest of the year.

But today, we’re talking about this fatal flaw. Here’s what I’m going to try to prove. *God’s Easter message exposes the fatal flaw in “save the planet” plans to point us to ultimate planet savior.* So there is what I’m calling a fatal flaw. But there is also hope for the planet when we come to grips with this fatal flaw.

I know some of you here today could care less about saving the planet right now. You’re just trying to get through the week. So you might be thinking you’d be better served by excusing yourself for a nap or talking to a friend for encouragement. But the Easter message brings the good news of the Gospel and the ultimate planet savior. The God who can save the planet can save you. This same God cares for you, listens to you, sees you, helps you and comes to you through the Easter message. So if you’re struggling with life, will you watch for what God has already done through the Easter message and the power of His revelation through His word today. Then look at your struggles with that renewed perspective; the God who delivered the

Easter message is walking with you right now in your struggles.

Here's how we'll unpack.

What is the fatal flaw?

What proof is there of this flaw?

Why does it matter to save the planet plans?

How might we respond today?

Our text today is Romans 3:9-20.

God's word as He inspired the Apostle Paul to write it.

Romans 3:9-20 (ESV)

9 What then? Are we Jews¹ any better off? ² No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, ¹⁰ as it is written:

"None is righteous, no, not one;

11 no one understands;

no one seeks for God.

12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;

no one does good,

not even one."³

13 "Their throat is an open grave;

they use their tongues to deceive."⁴

"The venom of asps is under their lips."⁵

14 "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness."⁶

15 "Their feet are swift to shed blood;

16 in their paths are ruin and misery,

¹ Greek *Are we*

² Or *at any disadvantage?*

³ Ps. 14:1-3, 53:1-3; Eccl. 7:20

⁴ Ps. 5:9

⁵ Ps. 140:3

⁶ Ps. 10:7

17 and the way of peace they have not known."⁷

18 "There is no fear of God before their eyes."⁸

19 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

God's Easter message exposes the fatal flaw in "save the planet" plans

to point us to ultimate planet savior.

What is the fatal flaw?

All mankind is guilty before God of sin. Sin is any failure to

conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude or nature. – Grudem.

The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Christian church in Rome in

the first century. This church consisted of Jews and Gentiles or non-

Jews. It seems they had trouble getting along. Some thought

themselves superior to others. They judged each other within the

church and those outside too. Paul writes this most extensive

explanation of the Gospel to address this. In Romans 1:18-32, Paul

lays out the sinfulness of pagans people who worshipped other gods.

Paul reveals the evidence of sin in the society as a whole. Then in

chapter 2, he charges many in the church with a judgmental attitude

⁷ Isa. 59:7-8

⁸ Ps. 36:1

towards those pagans. It's like he says, "Yes it was true that those pagans were under God's wrath. But the way you're behaving doesn't put forth much evidence of your own holiness."

Then in the latter half of chapter 2, Paul addresses Jewish attitude that went something like this; "Certainly the pagans are under God's wrath. Maybe Gentile Christians have something to worry about, we Jews can appeal to our status as chosen people of God. We are descendents of Abraham and Moses whom God saved from the Egyptians, He gave us the law." So they were tempted to depend more on their ethnicity and law keeping than Christ for their salvation. So Paul examines Jews and their claim that simply keeping the law was enough to save them. So Paul argues that both Jews and Gentiles apart from God are guilty before God.

What argument is made to prove this flaw? It starts with the claim:

The chosen people (Jews) are under sin, just like Gentiles. (3:9-18)

In verse 9, he makes that claim. "What shall WE conclude then? All are sinners. Are WE any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are under sin."

Who is the "we?" The Greek only say "we." The NIV leaves it. The ESV adds the word Jews to identify the "we". I think the strongest evidence points to "we, the Jews." We Jews are no better off or worse off than the Gentiles.

Gentile and Jew are on equal terms when it comes to the judgment of God. Yes Jews have a salvation and historical advantage of being close to God. But they have no advantage when it comes to God's impartial judgment of every person according to his or her works. All people who have not received the Gospel through faith in Christ are under sin.

What does it mean to be "under sin?" It means we not only sin. We're under sin's power. Yes sin is transgressing or going outside of God's will. But sin is much more than sinful acts. It is part of our nature and our master. One commentator says "Paul chooses to paint the depths of human sinfulness with the picture of sin as an enslaving master." (Doug Moo) Another writes, Paul sees sin (along with death) as the most negative and dangerous force in human experience." (James Dunn). There are no exceptions. Compared to God's standard or bar, all are guilty. That's the claim.

But then that good ole' human trait of self-justification kicks in. Confronted with this we blame others, minimize our sinfulness, we compare ourselves to others and run from shame. I do it. Kids do it. Adults do it. God inspired Paul to suspect there might be some in the Roman church who would try to self-justify themselves at this moment. **So he anticipates this with devastating evidence from the Old Testament of the sinfulness of man.**

First he argues **All engage in sinful actions compared to God's holiness** in verses 10-12.

- There is no one who is righteous,
- There is no one who understands,
- There is no one who seeks for God.
- All have turned aside and together gone wrong.
- There is no one who is doing good,
- There is not even one person.

Now it might seem like Paul is overstating the case a little here. After all, Paul, "no one who does good?" I remember teaching a Bible Study on this passage early in my ministry. When we read it, the

conclusion of some was that Paul could not be talking about everyone. We cited examples of "good people" who did good things.

But Paul is quoting the Psalm 14 and Psalm 53 here. Either those passages are wrong or Paul is wrong in using them or we need to rethink our definition of good.

You see we look at people's actions and evaluate them as good depending on the end result. Was the child helped? Was peace brought to the situation? Was the problem solved? If we can say yes, that must be a good person. But even our best efforts are under sin and can be stained by thought or motive.

If we are really honest with ourselves, we know that all of us fail to be good all the time in all we do and think and say. One commentator puts it this way: "What he means is that there is not a single person who, apart from God's justifying grace, can stand as "right" before God." There is no one who can point back to his or her life and say "Lord, there's no sin there. I never failed."

Paul strips off the layers of self-justification to get the foundational rot. It's like he's looking at my fence. I'm saying it just needs a couple of coats of paint and everything will be okay. He's

saying, no. There's rot throughout the whole thing that has to be dealt with. So God through Paul starts the proof of his argument by claiming all engage in sinful actions compared to God's holiness.

Then he points out **All speak sinfully** compared to the Lord. The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times Psalm 12:6. Compare that with verses 13-14 all have to do with speech. One commentator points out that each line refers to a different organ of speech. There is the throat, tongue, lips and mouth. Notice the progression from the inner throat to the outer mouth – sharing what's revealing the sinfulness inside.

First he states "Their throat is an open grave." from Psalm 5:9 Talk about an ugly image. An open grave or tomb would allow those who pass by to see and smell what's inside. An unsaved person's open throat brings forth the decay of the heart.

"They use their tongues to deceive." The NIV says their tongues practice deceit. It's like deceit or lying or misrepresenting things becomes normal practice. Or they rehearse deceit so it becomes second nature.

Then he says the venom of snakes is under their lips from Psalm 140:3 – evil men. Asps are poisonous snakes. Some store their venom right underneath their lips so its readily available to come through the fangs. It's like the speech of a person apart from Christ is like poison.

"Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." Cited from Psalm 10:7 which describes the wicked man. Cursing is publicly expressing a desire for the worst to happen to someone else. Bitterness is open public expression of hostility against one's enemy." These speech patterns all reveal the sinfulness in man's heart. Paul uses passage to describe evil and **something** and applies them to his own people!

The final section of Paul's Old Testament quotes he argues "**All lives bear marks of sin.**" Verses 15-18 paint a broader picture of the impact of a sinful life. 15 – Their feet are swift to shed blood. They are quick to engage in violence. Verse 16 – Ruin and misery mark their ways. Man damages and destroys so many things he touches. Humankind leaves a trail of suffering and pain in its wake-
Rodney King (Time magazine).

Verse 17 – They do not know the way of peace or their way is not marked by peace. We so easily divide over things. Man fights, take up arms, posture for position and argues to advance an agenda.

Verse 18 – There is no fear of God before their eyes. Honoring and respecting God does not dominate their field of vision. Honoring God gets maybe a half hour of attention on the occasional Sunday if at all.

So Paul lays out this survey of Scripture cataloguing the sinfulness of man. Then he puts forward his conclusion. Verse 19 – “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law. But the passages Paul quotes from do not come from the obvious law passages of the Old Testament. He’s not using later Exodus or Leviticus or the Ten Commandments. He uses Psalms and the prophets. Perhaps he’s saying that even the wisdom and prophets reveal this universal guilt of man. People try to dance around the laws. You can try to find loopholes in the law. But here poetry reveals the sinfulness of man!

Perhaps Paul deliberately chose verses from the broader spectrum of Hebrew scripture to set the stage for his next dramatic point. “So that

every mouth may be stopped and the whole world may be held accountable to God.” Paul transports us into a courtroom for a verdict. Once God lays out his case, humans have no more defense. The stopping of mouths indicates the defendant has nothing to say. There is no self-justification left. The word translated “accountable” occurs nowhere else in the Scriptures. Paul pictures God as the one offended and the judge who weighs evidence and pronounces the verdict.

But how can Paul use accusations directed to the Jews from the Jewish scripture to declare the whole world guilty? Perhaps he’s using a lesser to greater argument. One Bible commentator puts it this way. “If Jews, God’s chosen people, cannot escape sin’s tyranny, then it surely follows that Gentiles, who have no claim on God’s favor are also guilty.” (Douglas Moo). God through Paul has accomplished his purpose. He has laid out the universal guilt of humankind before God. In verse 20, he ensures we get it by emphasizing that we cannot be saved by works. “For by works, no human being will be justified in his sight since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”

One commentator summarizes the passage this way. “This, then, is God’s X-ray of the human race. It reveals universal unrighteousness

(3:10); ignorance and independence toward God (3:11); waywardness, unprofitableness, and lack of any goodness (3:12). Man's throat is full of rottenness, his tongue is deceitful, his lips are venomous (3:13); his mouth is full of swearing (3:14); his feet are bent on murder (3:15); he leaves behind trouble and destruction (3:16); he doesn't know how to make peace (3:17); and he has no regard for God (3:18). Here we see the total depravity of man, by which we mean that sin has affected all of mankind and that it has affected every part of his being. Every man has not committed every sin, but he has a nature which is *capable* of committing them all."

Now why does Paul do this? Why did God inspire Paul to write this? Is he into making people feel bad? No. God inspired him to write this to strip away any false belief that a new paint job is all we humans needed. 2 Cor.10:4 "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to demolish strongholds". Then we'd stand before Jesus when He returns. He'd ask "why should I let you into heaven?" We'd say, "Look at my new paint job Lord." But He'd say "did you deal with the rotten foundation?" Because of this passage in Romans, we can't say "I didn't know about that." Paul lays

it out for us because the next verses in Romans contain the greatest news in all of history.

It is the Gospel in one of the most important paragraphs in the Bible.

Romans 3:21-26 (ESV)

21 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— 22 the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

A year ago, we looked at this passage in detail. I refer you to the link which explains the Gospel. In light of Romans 3:9-20, I hope we appreciate even more the greatness of the Gospel in Romans 3:21-26. the gospel is good news!

<http://www.svbc.ab.ca/sermons/pdf/08/feb2408outline.pdf>

Why does this matter with save the planet plans?

Now let's tie this together with the save the planet plans. How does the whole world's guilt before God affect save the planet plans?

If every human is under sin, every save the planet plan is affected by sin.

We'll think about how the sinfulness of humans hinders these initiatives. Save the planet plans arising from less than pure motives. Maybe some don't care much about the planet. They care more about getting elected. Since "green plans" are popular, they might go green with wrong motives.

Green plans get blocked by people willing to suppress legitimate concern at the altar of profits. Plans get bogged down by human beings tendency to bicker and fight and block. Then people can proclaim oneself or one's side morally superior to the other side. Because of our sinfulness, it is very possible for us to twist facts, leave out information, slander our opponents or conclude that the end justifies the means for whatever we aim at.

Many certainly are supremely passionate about green initiatives. But some make the planet into a god. Earth becomes the "Mother Earth Goddess" rather than as God's creation. That very pagan conclusion can seem natural when there is no fear of God before their eyes.

Then there is simply the matter of pride. We begin to believe that we can save the planet apart from God. It places us in the position of saviors when there is only ultimate savior. I think man's sinfulness fatally affects green plans.

But what about all the good that is being done? What about the difference that is being made in reducing pollution? What about the concern for God's earth? These can be good. But they must be tempered with the realization that we cannot save the planet by ourselves. It must be tempered with humility and with a biblical view of this planet as God's creation.

God's Easter message exposes that human sinfulness affects every "save the planet" plans to point us to ultimate planet savior. Next week we will briefly survey a biblical perspective on planet earth. We are going to see how Jesus Christ is saving the planet.

But this week we must see that any global initiative or local initiative needs to take into account the universal sinfulness of man.

But this week, if we're not Christians, we need to start by acknowledging our own sinfulness. Then by faith, put your trust in Christ.

This week we can rejoice in God's Gospel. If God could save us from our greatest need, He is present with you in whatever you face right now.

I eventually need to deal with the rottenness in my fence. But much more importantly, God has dealt with the rottenness of sin through Christ and His death on the cross. That's the Easter message. That savior saves us and will save the planet.