

Homiletics Analysis: Romans 3:1–36

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Romans 3 falls within the larger prosecutorial argument of Romans 1–3, in which Paul systematically dismantles every basis for human boasting before God. Chapter 1 exposed Gentile guilt — the world abandoned God and God gave them over. Chapter 2 exposed Jewish guilt — possession of the law and covenant privilege does not produce exemption from judgment; it intensifies accountability. Romans 3 now brings the indictment to its verdict and then pivots to the only solution that can answer it.

The chapter divides into two major movements. In 3:1–20, Paul handles two objections that arise from his argument in chapter 2: Does Jewish privilege count for nothing? (vv. 1–8) And what follows for the universal condition of humanity? (vv. 9–20). Paul's answer to the first objection is carefully calibrated — Jewish privilege is real and significant (the oracles of God were entrusted to Israel), but it does not create a category of the unjudgeable. God's faithfulness to His covenant is not in question even when Israel is unfaithful; God's judgment of Israel is not a failure of His promises but a vindication of His justice. The second objection leads to the great catena of Old Testament quotations in vv. 14–18, drawn from Psalms, Isaiah, and Ecclesiastes, which function as a scriptural verdict: *all*, Jew and Gentile alike, are under sin. The law speaks to those under the law — which means the law's indictment is the indictment of those most advantaged. No one is righteous. No one seeks God. No one is good. The mouth is open graves and vipers. Feet run to shed blood. There is no fear of God. The law stops every mouth and holds the whole world accountable before God (v. 19). This is not rhetorical excess — it is the theological prerequisite for everything that follows.

The second major movement (3:21–31) is the passage's great turn: *But now* (v. 21). The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law — witnessed by the law and the prophets — through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. There is no distinction (v. 22), because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (v. 23). And all are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (v. 24). God put forward Christ as a propitiation by His blood (v. 25) — a sacrifice that satisfied the just demands of God against sin — so that God might be both just *and* the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (v. 26). Boasting is excluded (v. 27). Justification is by faith and not by works of the law (v. 28). God is God of Gentiles as well as Jews (vv. 29–30). And the law is not overthrown — it is established (v. 31), because the very sacrificial system and prophetic witness of the law pointed to this moment.

This Text — Intent

God's intent through Romans 3 is to leave the reader with no ground on which to stand before God except the ground Christ provides. The first movement is designed to crush every foothold — Jewish covenant privilege, moral effort, ritual observance, comparative righteousness. The scriptural catena is not an academic citation exercise; it is God speaking through Paul to make the reader feel the weight of total condemnation. The second movement then provides the only exit from that condemnation — not as a lesser alternative but as a far greater one. God's intent is not merely to inform the reader that justification by faith exists; it is to drive them to it by first removing every other option, then displaying its glory. The reader is meant to arrive at verse 21 having run out of every other refuge, so that the righteousness of God revealed in Christ is received not merely as theological doctrine but as the only rescue from a demonstrated catastrophe.

Subject Sentence: Universal human guilt answered only by God's righteousness revealed in Christ.

Primary Claim: Every human being stands condemned before a just God with no resource of their own — and God Himself has provided the only righteousness that saves, through the propitiation of Jesus Christ, received by faith alone.

Interpretive Evaluation

The scope of “all have sinned” (v. 23) and the universal indictment

The question is whether vv. 10–18 describe unregenerate humanity universally or speak of practical patterns that admit of exceptions. Some traditions, particularly Wesleyan-Arminian and Catholic readings, qualify the universal indictment by noting that Paul is describing humanity *apart from grace* — which is formally correct but functionally risks softening the rhetorical and theological force of the passage. Paul's point is not merely descriptive (“this is what happens without grace”) but structural: the entire argument of 1–3 depends on *no exceptions* before the bar of judgment. Any qualification that introduces a class of persons who partially escape the indictment undermines the logic of v. 22 (“there is no distinction”) and v. 28 (justification by faith *not* works). The Reformed reading insists that the indictment is total and that this totality is not incidental but essential — it is the theological prerequisite for grace being grace and not augmentation of human capacity. This reading should be affirmed without qualification.

Propitiation vs. expiation (v. 25)

This is one of the most consequential interpretive decisions in the New Testament. The Greek *hilastērion* in v. 25 was translated “expiation” in the RSV (following C.H. Dodd's argument that the concept of propitiating divine wrath is a pagan notion incompatible with

the biblical God), and “propitiation” in ESV, NASB, and NIV. The distinction matters enormously. Expiation addresses the removal of sin’s pollution — sin is cleansed. Propitiation addresses the satisfaction of divine wrath — God’s just anger against sin is satisfied. Leon Morris’s detailed rebuttal of Dodd demonstrated persuasively that the *hilask*- word group in both the LXX and Greek literature consistently involves the turning away of wrath, not merely the removal of defilement. More importantly, Paul’s argument in Romans 1:18–3:20 has been building precisely on the *wrath* of God — “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness” (1:18). If v. 25 does not address that wrath, the argument structure breaks. Propitiation is not a pagan importation — it is the only reading that takes Paul’s argument seriously on its own terms. The Reformed reading insists on propitiation as the primary meaning, while acknowledging that expiation is an entailed consequence (when wrath is propitiated, sin is also cleansed). This reading is not merely preferred — it is required by the passage’s own logic.

“Faith of Christ” vs. “faith in Christ” (v. 22, 26)

A significant exegetical debate concerns whether *pistis Christou* in vv. 22 and 26 is an objective genitive (“faith *in* Christ”) or a subjective genitive (“faith *of* Christ” — Christ’s own faithfulness). The subjective genitive reading has been championed by Richard Hays and others in the New Perspective tradition, arguing that Paul refers to Christ’s own covenant faithfulness as the basis of justification. The reading has an appealing Christological richness — Christ’s own faithfulness executes the new covenant. However, it creates redundancy problems in v. 22 (“through the faith of Christ for all who believe”) and in v. 26 (“justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus”), where the objective genitive reading gives the phrase doing distinct work. The context of vv. 27–28 — where boasting is excluded precisely because justification is by faith and not works — makes most sense when faith is contrasted with human works as the *instrument* of reception, not as Christ’s own virtue. The Reformed reading takes the objective genitive (“faith in Christ”) as primary — faith is the God-given instrument through which sinners receive the righteousness Christ provides — while acknowledging that Christ’s own covenant faithfulness is a real and important theme in Paul, simply not the primary referent here.

The New Perspective on Paul and “works of the law”

N.T. Wright, James Dunn, and the New Perspective tradition argue that “works of the law” (v. 28) refer primarily to Jewish boundary markers — circumcision, food laws, purity codes — that created ethnic division between Jew and Gentile, not to moral effort as a means of earning divine favor. The New Perspective reading has genuine exegetical force in identifying the ethnic dimension of the argument: Paul is concerned with Jew/Gentile unity in Romans, and the discussion of circumcision in 3:29–31 does address this directly. However, the reading narrows “works of the law” in a way the text does not warrant. The catena in vv. 10–18 addresses moral failure — violence, deceit, bloodshed, godlessness — not merely ethnic exclusivism. The universal condemnation of v. 23 (“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”) addresses the condition of standing before God, not merely table fellowship. The Reformers were right to read “works of the law” as encompassing any

human moral effort as a ground of justification before God. The ethnic dimension is a genuine included application, not the exhaustive meaning. The Reformed reading acknowledges the New Perspective's contribution (the ethnic and ecclesial dimensions of justification are real and present) while refusing to reduce the passage's primary concern — how a guilty sinner is made right before a holy God — to a first-century sociological question about Jewish identity markers.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 15:6** — “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” Paul will deploy this directly in Romans 4; it establishes that justification by faith apart from works is not a Pauline novelty but the original form of God's covenant grace, predating both circumcision and the Mosaic law.
- **Isaiah 53:4–6, 10–11** — The Servant bears the iniquities of the many; the LORD makes His soul a guilt offering; by His knowledge the righteous Servant makes many righteous. Romans 3:25–26 is the New Testament identification of the mechanism the Servant's suffering accomplishes — propitiation — and the instrument through which its benefit is received.
- **Psalms 143:2** — “Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.” Paul's catena draws from Psalms precisely because the Psalter, the prayer book of Israel, already concedes what the law's indictment demonstrates: no human being can stand in God's court on their own righteousness.
- **Habakkuk 2:4** — “The righteous shall live by his faith.” Romans 1:17 cites this as the theme of the whole letter; Romans 3:21–31 is its full elaboration. The righteousness that produces life is received by faith — a thread running from the minor prophets to the gospel.
- **Leviticus 16 (the Day of Atonement)** — The *hilastērion* of Romans 3:25 echoes the mercy seat language of Leviticus 16 — the place where blood was applied to turn away God's wrath and restore covenant standing. Christ is presented as the fulfillment and termination of the entire sacrificial system: the sacrifice, the priest, and the mercy seat simultaneously.

Aim: To drive every reader — regardless of moral, religious, or social standing — to the conclusion that Christ's righteousness received by faith is not merely an option among options but the only ground on which anyone has ever stood before God or ever will.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
3:1–2	What advantage does the Jew have? Much — the oracles of God were entrusted to them	Paul forestalls the objection that his argument in ch. 2 renders Jewish covenant privilege meaningless
3:3–4	Jewish unfaithfulness does not nullify God’s faithfulness; God will be vindicated when judged	“Let God be true though every one were a liar” — God’s covenant integrity is not contingent on Israel’s performance
3:5–8	Objection: if our unrighteousness commends God’s righteousness, why judge us? Paul dismisses this as slander and circular self-justification	Paul signals this objection is a dead end; it will be answered more fully in ch. 6
3:9	Transition verdict: Jews and Greeks alike are under sin — all are under the same indictment	“Under sin” is legal-forensic: under sin’s jurisdiction and condemnation
3:10–12	Catena I — from Psalms: none righteous, none who seeks God, all turned aside, none who does good	Total depravity of orientation — not merely individual acts but the direction of the whole person
3:13–14	Catena II — from Psalms: throat/tongue/lips/mouth as instruments of death and deceit	Speech as diagnostic of the heart — the words of humanity reveal what lies within
3:15–17	Catena III — from Isaiah: feet swift to shed blood, destruction and misery in their paths, no peace	The whole embodied life directed toward destruction — not just intention but action
3:18	Catena climax — from Psalms: no fear of God before their eyes	The root diagnosis: all the above flows from the absence of the fear of God — not a symptom but the source
3:19–20	Conclusion of the indictment: the law speaks to silence every mouth and	The law’s function is to condemn, not to save; this is the final brick in the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	hold the whole world accountable; no one is justified by works of the law — only the knowledge of sin comes through law	prosecutorial case
3:21	“But now” — the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, witnessed by law and prophets	Pivot of the entire letter; temporal (“in this new age”) and logical (“given everything above”)
3:22–23	This righteousness comes through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe — no distinction — all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God	The universal condemnation of v. 23 establishes the universal scope of v. 22: the same “all” who are condemned are the “all” for whom faith is the pathway
3:24	All are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus	Three terms: “justified” (forensic — declared righteous), “freely by grace” (source — not earned), “redemption” (imagery — purchased out of bondage)
3:25a	God put forward Christ as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith	<i>Hilastērion</i> — mercy seat / propitiatory sacrifice; God is both the one offended and the one who provides the satisfaction
3:25b–26	This was to show God’s righteousness — He had passed over former sins in divine forbearance; it was to show His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier	The cross resolves the problem of apparent divine leniency throughout redemptive history; God is shown to be simultaneously just (sin punished) and justifier (sinners declared righteous)
3:27–28	Boasting is excluded — by the law of faith, not works; a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law	The exclusion of boasting is the logical proof that justification is by grace: if works contributed, boasting would be warranted
3:29–30	God is God of Gentiles as	The oneness of God

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	well as Jews — one God who justifies circumcision and uncircumcision by faith	demands one way of salvation: ethnic and religious categories do not create separate justification pathways
3:31	Does faith overthrow the law? No — we uphold the law	The law, rightly understood, pointed to this all along; the gospel is the law's fulfillment, not its cancellation

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	3:1–8	Jewish Privilege Is Real — and Insufficient: covenant advantage does not exempt Israel from judgment or God from faithfulness
2	3:9–20	The Verdict Is Universal: the catena of Scripture delivers the indictment — all are under sin, no exceptions, mouths stopped
3	3:21–26	But Now — The Righteousness of God: the divine solution to the universal condemnation, through propitiation received by faith
4	3:27–31	Boasting Excluded, Unity Established, Law Upheld: the logical implications of justification by faith alone — no pride, no ethnic distinction, no cancellation of Scripture

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Universal human guilt answered only by God's righteousness revealed in Christ.

Primary Claim: Every human being stands condemned before a just God with no resource of their own — and God Himself has provided the only righteousness that saves, through the propitiation of Jesus Christ, received by faith alone.

Applications (Five)

1. Stop measuring your standing before God against other people. (Mind/Belief)

Romans 3 eliminates comparative righteousness as a category. The catena does not say “most are unrighteous” or “the especially wicked are unrighteous” — it says *none*. The religious person who has built their spiritual confidence on being better than the person in the news, more devout than the nominal Christian next door, or less guilty than their younger selves has constructed a righteousness that the text explicitly dismantles. The law stops every mouth — including the mouths of people who have spent their lives in church. The only meaningful comparison is with the glory of God (v. 23), and by that standard the entire field is level. Belief about standing before God must be rebuilt from the ground up on the objective righteousness of Christ, not on the relative distance between yourself and the worst person you can think of.

2. Receive the cross as the answer to the specific problem of God's wrath against you.

(Affections/Worship) The propitiation of Romans 3:25 is not an abstraction — it is God satisfying His own just wrath against your specific sin through the blood of His Son. The problem Paul has been building since 1:18 is not primarily psychological guilt or social shame or moral failure in the abstract; it is the revealed wrath of a holy God against the specific record of a specific person. When Christ is received as propitiation by faith, that wrath is not suspended, deferred, or overlooked — it is exhausted. It has nowhere left to go. The believer who has grasped this does not approach God as someone on probation; they approach as someone for whom the bill has been paid in full by a more-than-sufficient payment. This should not produce complacency — it should produce a love and worship that behavioral constraint could never generate.

3. Abandon every religious system or moral effort you are trusting alongside faith in Christ.

(Will/Behavior) Verse 28 is uncompromising: justification is by faith *apart from* works of the law. This does not exclude all traditions and practices as meaningless — Paul has already said Jewish covenant privilege is “much in every way.” What it excludes is any system, practice, tradition, or moral record as a *ground* of standing before God. The person who trusts Christ but also trusts their church attendance, their theological correctness, their family heritage, their charitable giving, or their comparative decency to provide a supplementary justification has not yet understood Romans 3. The practical application is concrete: identify the specific thing you reach for when you need reassurance of your

standing before God. If that thing is anything other than the righteousness of Christ received by faith, it needs to be removed from that function — not necessarily from your life, but from that seat.

4. Let the comprehensiveness of grace reshape how you see people outside the faith.

(Affections/Worship) Romans 3:29–30 draws an ecclesiological and missional conclusion from the theology of justification: there is one God, therefore one way of justification, therefore no people-group excluded from its reach. The same gospel that reached the Jew reaches the Gentile — and Paul’s logic runs in both directions. If grace is for the Jew who had every covenant advantage and still needed it, it is for the Gentile who had none of those advantages. If grace is for the Gentile who was entirely outside the covenant and still received it by faith, it is for the morally upright person who has built their life on decent values and never thought they needed it. The believer who has grasped Romans 3 should find in it not a reason for complacency about the lost but an expansion of hope: no background disqualifies, no record exceeds the reach of propitiation, no category of person is exempt from either the indictment or the offer.

5. Preach the whole problem before offering the whole solution — in your own heart first. (Mind/Belief) The structure of Romans 3 is not accidental. Paul does not arrive at “but now” until the reader has been through the catena, heard the mouths stopped, and felt the weight of universal accountability. The application for the believer and teacher is that the goodness of the gospel is inseparable from the comprehensiveness of the diagnosis. A person who has been only lightly disturbed by the indictment of vv. 10–20 will receive the solution of vv. 21–26 only lightly. The pastoral and homiletical lesson is this: do not rush to comfort before the wound has been made. In your own heart, revisit vv. 10–18 not as a description of others but as the Spirit’s diagnosis of what you were and what you would be apart from grace. Then let “but now” land with its full weight.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Romans 3 establishes what may be the New Testament’s most concentrated and precise account of how a sinful human being is made right before a holy God. The passage teaches that the righteousness by which sinners are justified is not native to them — it is God’s own righteousness, manifested in Christ and received by faith. It teaches that God’s justice and God’s mercy are not in tension; they are simultaneously displayed in the cross — God is *just* in that sin is fully punished, and He is the *justifier* in that the punishment falls on Christ in the sinner’s place. The propitiation of v. 25 means that no future sin, no residual guilt, and no further accusation can reach the person who is in Christ — the wrath that would have executed it has already been exhausted. And the universality of v. 23 — “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” — establishes that the standard by which humanity is judged is not a cultural, legal, or comparative standard but the unveiled glory of God Himself, which is simultaneously the only standard

that renders grace genuinely necessary and the only one that makes grace genuinely glorious.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Romans 3 is the exegetical spine of the Reformation's recovery of the gospel. Luther's discovery that "the righteousness of God" in 1:17 is not the righteousness by which God punishes sinners but the righteousness He gives freely to sinners was precisely the breakthrough this passage demands — and that discovery is fully vindicated in 3:21–26, where the righteousness of God is "manifested" and "given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." The five *solas* of the Reformation are not imposed onto this passage — they are drawn from it: *sola gratia* (v. 24 — "freely by His grace"), *sola fide* (v. 28 — "by faith apart from works"), *solus Christus* (v. 25 — Christ as the propitiation), *sola scriptura* (the catena of vv. 10–18 — the Old Testament scriptures function as God's own prosecutorial brief), and *solus Deo gloria* (vv. 26–27 — boasting is excluded; God alone is vindicated). The Reformed insistence that justification is forensic — a declaration of righteous status rather than an infusion of moral virtue — rests substantially on the legal vocabulary of this passage: "justified," "righteousness reckoned," "under sin," "accountable before God." And the Reformed understanding of total depravity — not that human beings are as bad as they could be, but that every dimension of the person is under the dominion of sin and no part is a foothold for self-salvation — is scripturally grounded in the catena of vv. 10–18 more than almost anywhere else in the canon.

Main Takeaway

There is no version of you — no moral record, no religious credential, no spiritual résumé — that can stand before God on its own. The entire case of Romans 3 is built to establish that. But God has not left the verdict as the final word: He put forward His own Son as the full payment for His own just wrath, and He offers that righteousness to anyone who stops reaching for their own and receives His by faith. You are either standing before God in your own righteousness — which the text has already told you is nothing — or you are standing before Him in Christ's. There is no third option, and there is no middle ground.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the catena (vv. 10–18) as rhetorical decoration rather than as theological load-bearing.** The string of Old Testament quotations is often read quickly as familiar hyperbole — "yes, we know, everyone sins." But Paul's purpose is architectural: this is God's own scriptural verdict, delivered by the very law that

Israel was trusting for advantage, proving that the advantage counted for nothing at the bar of judgment. If the catena does not land with weight — if the congregation does not feel the mouths stopped and the whole world held accountable — then “but now” will be received merely as good news rather than as rescue from a confirmed catastrophe. Preach vv. 10–20 at full weight.

- **Softening “propitiation” to “expiation” or generic “atonement” and losing the wrath-satisfying force.** When preachers avoid the concept of God’s wrath being satisfied at the cross — either because it sounds harsh or because they are following a translation that removes the concept — they sever the logical connection between 1:18 and 3:25. Paul’s entire prosecutorial argument is built on the wrath of God being revealed against sin; the cross is not a general expression of love but the specific place where that specific wrath was specifically exhausted. Removing propitiation does not make the passage warmer — it makes it incoherent.
- **Reducing “works of the law” to Jewish ethnic markers and missing the universal application.** The New Perspective reading is partially right — there is an ethnic dimension to Paul’s argument — but if the preacher follows it exclusively, the congregation walks away thinking Romans 3 is mainly about ancient Jewish social dynamics, not about their own strenuous efforts to build a righteousness that can pass divine inspection. The moral strivers, the self-improvers, the exhausted religious performers in every congregation need to hear that their own works fall under the same verdict. The New Perspective contribution is a real addition; as a replacement for the Reformation reading it is a pastoral failure.
- **Preaching “all have sinned” (v. 23) without naming the glory-standard that makes it significant.** “All have sinned” can become a platitude — everyone nods and moves on. The precision of Paul’s statement is “fall short of the glory of God” — the standard is not moral decency, cultural expectation, or even the law at its face value. It is the unveiled glory of God Himself. When preachers name that standard concretely — the holiness, the majesty, the absolute moral perfection of God — “all have sinned” stops being a truism and becomes a devastating evaluation of even the best human moral performance.
- **Using Romans 3:23 as an evangelistic entry point while treating 3:24–26 as the theological section “for mature believers.”** The passage does not break on those lines. The propitiation of v. 25 is not advanced doctrine — it is the answer to v. 23. A congregation that has heard “all have sinned” a hundred times as an evangelistic formula but has never been taught what Christ actually did to answer that condemnation has received half a gospel. Preach the mechanism of redemption, not just its availability.
- **Concluding with “therefore try harder” or “therefore be grateful and live better” rather than with the exclusive sufficiency of Christ.** The logic of 3:27–28 is that boasting is *excluded* — the passage ends not with a new to-do list but with the

elimination of every self-generated basis of confidence before God. Applications that reintroduce human effort as the takeaway (even sanctified human effort) undercut the primary claim. The takeaway of Romans 3 is not “now that you are justified, go produce the righteousness you lacked” but “the righteousness you lacked has been provided — receive it, rest in it, and let everything flow from that.” Sanctification matters enormously in Romans — but it is the subject of chapter 6, not chapter 3.