



Text: Romans 3:9-20 (v.19-20)¹

Series: Right Living – God’s Righteousness Transforming Our Lives

Title: Part 4 -- "*Horseshoes or Bull's-eyes?*" Is Close Enough Good Enough?

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We have a lot of different ways to measure things. It’s important to use the right one for the right job.

The voltmeter -- used to measure a cars' electrical system. Measures volts passing through a system – slight fluctuations will throw off the car’s computer and cause the vehicle to malfunction. **Accuracy is required.**

The level -- used to measure the level of things that are being built. If a door isn't hung level, it won't close properly. If a laneway doesn't slope away from the house or garage it can cause water to back up into the house causing damage. **Accuracy is required.**

The square - used to make sure lines, edges and corners are accurately cut. **Accuracy is required**

The target -- used to measure the accuracy of a shooter. If you are a member of the tactical squad, someone's life might depend on the accuracy of your shooting. How do you know if you come up to standard? By measuring yourself against the target -- either you shoot bull’s-eyes or you don't. **Accuracy is required.**

The guitar tuner -- used to measure the accuracy of the pitch of my guitar. If I'm not tuned in agreement with the piano, instead of music, I'll just produce dissonance and noise. **Accuracy is required.**

We are accustomed to other types of standards in our lives that are less exacting.

In **baking** -- it's according taste. A pinch here to there. **Close is good enough.**

In **English** classes – marks are often a matter of opinion. An A, B, C or D – it’s all very relative. Sometimes a C+ is enough to pass the course. I well remember during my school days calculating what I needed to get on the final exam just to pass the class. **Close is good enough.**

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In **driving** -- the speed limit is 110 km/h and we're doing 120 -- **Close enough!**

In **horseshoes** -- close counts. You know the old saying: "Close only counts in horseshoes and nuclear war."

It's important to know by what kind of standard we are being judged. **Is close enough good enough?**

If you stand there and fire off your rifle in the general direction of the target and get a few hits on the paper and think, "I'm doing OK -- I hit the target" but then find out that they're measuring the number of bull's-eyes you make, all of a sudden close isn't good enough.

Or, if you're driving along at 120 km/h in a 110 km/h zone thinking, "Close enough -- I'm OK" only to be pulled over by the RCMP and find out that you were driving through a "zero tolerance" zone -- 120 is not "close enough! You may have read the signs: "100 means 100."

Measuring ourselves against the right standard is the only way to really know where we stand.

I have a friend who graduated top of her High School class in business and accounting and so she decided to major on accounting in university. But after her first few results came back in university, her confidence was really shaken. Instead of being top of the class, she was failing badly. She couldn't understand what was happening! So much of what she was learning was completely new to her that she felt as if she'd never studied accounting before! Then the university noticed a strange thing -- all of her classmates from High School who had chosen the same major and had done well in High School were also failing badly. The professors of the department found each of these students so badly prepared for the requirements of their courses that they finally invited the High School teacher to come in for a discussion. It was discovered that these students had been badly prepared for university because their teacher had been using the wrong standards!

God wants us to know where we stand in relation to His standards.

He does not want us to be misled with false hopes.

He does not want us to spend our energies on false leads.

He does not want us to think that "close enough" is good enough, if it isn't!

Is God's standard more like throwing horseshoes or shooting bull's-eyes?

In Romans 3:9, Paul begins his section of his letter with these words...

"What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin" Romans 3:9



From chapter one, verse 18 right through to these verses, Paul has been exposing the condition of the entire human race before God. He's described sin of all kinds and types – it's been a pretty sad story!

He's warned us of God's judgment against sin...

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” Romans 1:18

He's told us that we are responsible for our sin...

“Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.” Romans 2:1

Up to now in this letter, Paul has used two words to describe sin and you find them both in chapter 1, verse 18: asebia which means “ungodliness” and adikia which means “unrighteousness.”

But now for the first time, he introduces another term to describe our problem with sin. It's the word hamartia.

Knowing the human desire to escape responsibility, Paul chooses a word to drive home his argument in such a way that no one can escape!

Hamartia is a word that means, "to miss the mark." It is drawn from the world of archery. To miss the mark is to miss the target that God has set for us. Everyone, Jews and Gentiles alike, Paul says, have missed the target!

We can sit here all day and debate HOW bad we are – whether we're relatively better or worse than Charles Manson or Mother Theresa, but there's one point we can't debate – we have all missed the target!

As the saying goes, "Nobody's perfect." But while we toss that off in a way designed to excuse ourselves for our failure, the reality is that by failing to hit the target we are in serious danger! As we saw last week, minimizing our sin problem won't save us from the wrath of God against sin.

God's standard is an exacting one. In the Old Testament there are 606 laws of God. We could easily find ways in which we've failed any one of these laws but I'm going to make it even more simple for us this morning. Jesus summarized this massive standard into two simple, but exacting statements. They may sound easy, but if you read them carefully, they are demanding.



Jesus was asked...

“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?’ And he said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.’” Matthew 22:36-40

On the surface this might sound easy – “Love God, love your neighbor,” what can be so hard about that?! Then let me ask you the following: Do you keep these commandments:

a) Always b) Frequently c) Seldom d) Never?

If someone wants to gain standing with God by keeping His standards the only answer that is acceptable is **a) always**. Here is the standard according to God’s Word. The Apostle James wrote...

“If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing well. But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.” James 2:8-10

My answer is not “a)”! One week, not long ago, God gave me three chances to love my neighbor. On Tuesday night, I got a call from a man. He told me that he and his wife were stranded in a nearby city; they had arrived from Southern Manitoba, had no money and needed a meal and a place to stay. I directed them to a local ministry in the city that assists those in trouble, but they said they had tried all those avenues and couldn't get help. I said I couldn't help them beyond that and that was the end of our conversation. I don't think I did enough! On Thursday God brought a man off the street into my office with a similar story. I gave him what money I could. On Friday, God gave me a third opportunity to help some others who had a need and I gave them what help I could. Two out of three is not bad, BUT it's not "always."

According to the Apostle James, keeping God's Law requires bull’s-eyes. A miss is as good as a mile: **“For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.”** I have not hit the target! I missed. I have broken His Law at one point and therefore I am guilty of breaking the whole Law.

God wants me to know where I stand with respect to His standard and He wants you to know the same.



But could we hit the target better if we just practiced more? Got more zealous? Really tried harder? Memorized more Scripture? Created a social structure that kept us on track? The answer is: No.

Paul not only introduces a new word to describe sin – hamartia, missing the target – but he introduces a new picture of our relationship with sin. Notice the little phrase, “under sin.” (v.9)

In his letter to the believers in Galatia, Paul uses the same expression and the way he uses it there gives us some clarity about what it means to be “under sin.” I’m using the NIV translation which brings the picture of “under sin” into sharp focus. Paul wrote...

“But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.” Galatians 3:22

The ESV reads...

“But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.” Galatians 3:22

Our problem isn’t just that we commit sins because our aim is faulty. We can’t just try harder – we are prisoners of sin and there is no escape for us on our own. We are addicted to sin, we are indelibly marked by sin – every move we make is tainted by it. We don’t need someone to teach us how to be better people so that we can hit the mark God has set for us – we need Someone to liberate us from our prison! And that is why Jesus came – not just to teach us how to be better people, but to free us from our slavery to sin.

Before Paul lays out the plan of liberation that God has set in place in Jesus Christ, Paul wants us to clearly understand how serious a problem sin is for us.

Christian teachers over the centuries have taught a doctrine that’s been called, **“total depravity:**” Some people have misunderstood this teaching to state that man is totally and absolutely evil -- there is no good at all in him. Because of this false understanding of “total depravity” some Christian teachers have wrongly condemned the good acts of people who don’t have faith in Christ. **Hear me clearly:** people who **don’t** know Jesus do good things – but those good things are never good enough to merit God’s forgiveness and mercy. **Hear me again:** People who **do** know Jesus do good things – but those good things are never good enough to merit God’s forgiveness and mercy.

If “total depravity” meant that there was no good thing in anyone, then there would be no difference between demons and humans. There would be no love, there would be no self-sacrifice, there would be no kindness or justice at all,



anywhere, at any time! Human beings are not "absolutely depraved," but we are "totally depraved."

What "total depravity" means is that every part our person has been touched by sin: **our total being, our minds, our souls, our spirit, our bodies, is tainted by sin so that we are unable to gain merit in God's sight**; every part of us has missed the mark of perfection.

First of all, God wants us to know that according to His standard, every one of us has missed the mark. In verses 10 to 12, Paul outlines...

The Total Depravity of Our Character

Let's read verses 10 to 12 together.

"As it is written: 'None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.'" Romans 3:10-12

Notice how emphatic Paul is about the universality of our problem: "no one" – 4 times; "not even one" 2 times; "all" – once; "together" – once: What do you think is Paul's point?

How many have hit the mark? No one!

How many 'have met God's standard of righteousness? No one!

How many are good enough? No one!

Sin affects our minds: "no one understands" God's will and character.

Sin affects our spirits: "no one seeks for God"

Sin affects our wills: "no one does good."

Notice that little phrase: "As it is written:"

Paul pulls together quotes from the Old Testament: from the Psalms, from Isaiah and from Ecclesiastes. The Old Testament was the Bible of Paul's day. The New Testament was being written as Paul wrote this letter.

The most important first step of faith that we make when we become Christians is **to accept the evaluation of the Word of God about us**. We need to accept God's statement that we -- that **I** am a sinner. I need to accept the authority of the Word of God when it speaks about me. Instead of arguing and trying to find a way out, we simply need to bow to its evaluation and acknowledge our guilt.

That simple, faithful, humble admission that I have missed the target and will continue to miss it is my key to freedom. I am guilty.



The story is told of a prince who visited the galley slaves in his imperial navy. These men had been sentenced to serve out their punishment by rowing the oars that propelled his warships. As the prince made his way down the isle in the galley he asked each man why he was there. Over and over again he heard the same declarations, "I'm innocent!" "I was framed!" "I didn't do it!" Finally, he came to one man. "Why are you here?" the prince asked. "Sire, I am guilty of the crime of which I am charged and I am serving my punishment." "Guards," the prince called out, "remove this vile criminal from this galley so that he does not corrupt all these fine, innocent men!" The man was released to freedom.

We may find someone who does righteous things -- but no one is righteous enough.

We may find someone who does good things -- but no one is good enough!

We may find religious people who seem to seek God -- but no one seeks him with ALL of their mind, and heart and soul and strength. And the sad truth is that most seekers for God end up creating a god that meets and satisfies their own sin-twisted understanding of what God should be. Our world is awash in spirituality – but it all misses the mark unless it finds Jesus!

If the Word of God stopped at this point you might conclude that since no one seeks after God, since no one is good enough -- then the situation is hopeless! NO it's not! We don't seek after God, but "thanks be to God" that He seeks after us! Jesus said...

"Today salvation has come to this house For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." Luke 19:10

We have all lost our way, we have missed the path – we have turned this way and that way looking for a way out -- AND WE CAN'T FIND IT! But Jesus has come to free us from our bondage to sin, Jesus has come to liberate us!

Secondly, God wants us to know that according to His standard every part of us misses the mark. In verses 13 to 14, Paul outlines for us...

The Total Depravity of Our Conduct

Paul shows us that **our mouths** and our speech display the marks of sin. Read with me...

"Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.' 'The venom of asps is under their lips.' 'Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.'" Romans 3:13-14



Our speech misses the mark. The same mouth we use to say "Praise the Lord" is the same mouth that speaks lies, bitterness, criticism, rage, malice, gossip.

Who here today can say that their mouths have kept to God's standard of loving speech? I can't!

But by the grace of God, this same mouth can confess that **"Jesus Christ is Lord!"** and I can be saved. (**Romans 10:9**)

In verses 15 & 16 Paul show us that **our feet** are led astray by sin. Read with me...

"Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery"
Romans 3:15-16

Wherever we walk, we leave the impression of sin in the sand. Everywhere we go we leave a trail of broken relationships, of dishonesty, of betrayal, of lies and even of death. The historian Will Durant, writing in the mid-twentieth century, calculated that in the last 3,421 years of recorded human history there have been only 268 years without war. I think Durant's estimate is too generous! In many places of the world "recorded" history doesn't exist – but war does! And bloodshed stains the pages of our daily newspapers – it may not be war between nations, but blood is still shed in our streets every day and misery and ruin is spread in its wake.

Wherever we go we leave the stain of our presence. But by the grace of God, these same feet can spread the beautiful good news of Jesus Christ!

When we become Christians, God gives us new shoes to wear! Paul tells us to put on our feet the shoes of "the gospel of peace." (Eph. 6:15) By God's intervention in our lives, we can be the people of whom Isaiah wrote...

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'" Isaiah 52:7

In verse 17 Paul tells us that sin has affected **our minds**. Read with me...

"and the way of peace they have not known." Romans 3:17

But when we become Christians, Paul will tell us later in this letter, that we can...

"be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."
Romans 12:2



As God's Spirit recreate us and renews us, our can come to know God's way of peace through Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:1)

In verse 18 Paul tells us that **our eyes** are the victims of sin. Read with me...

“There is no fear of God before their eyes.” Romans 3:18

But when Jesus Christ, the Light of the world, comes into our lives, "the blind" are made to see!" (Luke 4:18)

God wants us to know that every part of us from head to toe misses the mark. But our source of hope is that God wants to make us new in very part of our being...

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.” 2 Corinthians 5:17

Finally, God wants us to know that according to His law, everyone of us is without excuse and subject to judgment. Paul outlines for us in verses 19 & 20...

The Consequence of Our Total Depravity

Read with me...

“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. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.”
Romans 3:19-20

"That every mouth may be stopped" -- I like J.B. Phillips translation of this phrase: **"that every excuse may die on the lips of him who makes it...."**

Have you ever been caught so dead to rights that you've been completely unable to attempt an excuse?

Our High School football team made it to the city finals. Some of the guys on the team were so confident of victory that they bought a whole bunch of cigars for after the game. Well, we got our tails beaten pretty well and we lost, but when we got back to the school we still had all these cigars left over. The guys passed them around and out of curiosity I took one. They were those little Colt cigarillos - the wine-dipped kind. Even though smoking was not allowed by my family, I tried one. I made the mistake of standing in the hallway to smoke it -- and my dad came to pick me up. He took one look at me and turned and headed for the car -- NO WORDS! I got in -- NO WORDS! We drove home - NO WORDS! There was nothing to say -- he had me cold! What excuse could I offer: "everyone else was



doing it?" I still remember the silence of that drive home and I think it made a major contribution to my never developing the smoking habit!

One day, God is going to hold our lives up to the standard of His Word and we are going to be without excuse -- there's going to be silence in heaven.

No excuses! God's records will open and the full story will be displayed. And all of humanity will be silent – and guilty.

A counselor who works with men who have been convicted of battering their wives once told me that in his opinion, the key to his client's recovery and to the ending of the cycle of violence in their lives was their admission of responsibility. When his clients finally gave up saying, "I beat my wife because my parents were cruel to me or because she burnt the toast, or because I was drunk" and finally admitted "I did it because I chose to do it," that was the beginning of their transformation.

A prison guard once told me that, in his experience, it was the inmates who admitted their guilt without making excuses who were the ones most likely not to reoffend.

The Phillips translation of verse 20 really captures the essence of Paul's teaching:

“No man can justify himself before God' by a perfect performance of the Law's demands – indeed it is the straightedge of the Law that shows us how crooked we are.” Romans 3:20 (Phillips Translation)

When we admit we're crooked, then God can begin the work of straightening us out.

How do you measure up against God's standard?

Remember, close enough is not good enough. God does not play horseshoes – he shoots bull's-eyes.

If God holds "the straightedge" of His Word against you, how crooked will you look?

If God holds the target of his perfect righteousness up against us, is there anybody here who will claim a perfect score?

Relax – every one of us here has missed the target. Once we admit that fact, God has so much more He wants to show us. But as long as we say that our performance is good enough, we're going to miss the rest of the story.



What's the rest of the story? Paul tells us in the very next verses...

“But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:...” Romans 3:21-22

Say it with me:

“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” Romans 3:23-24

Next week: We turn a corner in Paul's presentation of the Gospel. We move from a focus on the destructive presence of sin to the renewing promise of salvation. Next week we'll focus on some great Bible words of hope and security: "faith," "justified," "grace," and "redemption."

- **Invitation to prayer**
- **Final Song:** Only Trust Him (#480)
- **Benediction**