

The “Dark Side” of the Gospel – Rom 3:9-23

The Strong Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ #8

Introduction – Star Wars theology imagines the “dark side” of the force as something external to people that can come upon us; so is the theology of much of American modern culture. But the Scripture speaks of a corruption that is within, something far darker and far more evil than we are willing to believe. This part of the theology of the Bible is necessary to understand and embrace in order to realize the strength of the Good News of God through Jesus Christ. In this passage, Paul is shutting us all up under sin and then providing justification/salvation through faith alone in Jesus Christ. The apostle is no flatterer of anyone, especially the religious types.

All Under Sin (Rom 3:9-18) – The point is not that man is “absolutely” depraved. Rom 2:14 even mentions those who do not know the law but keep it at some points. The point is that at our very core, there is nothing to commend us to God or to prepare us to become commendable. The law has been declared, and in Adam, we all find ourselves guilty. In verses 9-11 particularly we are told there are –

None Righteous – Apart from the imputation of Christ’s perfect righteousness, we cannot remove the stain of our sin, the will to rebel, nor the self-centeredness of all our actions (we are our own gods).

None Who Understand – Like a quantum physics problem written out on the board, we may be able to observe all of the various components, but we cannot make any sense of what He is saying (1 Cor 2:14). Our spiritual mind is dead so a man may analyze the causes of the Reformation, or explain the doctrine of justification, but his nature will declare these things “spiritual nonsense.”

No God-Seekers – Mankind is incredibly religious. But at the core of the unregenerate heart, everything he does is simply imitating Adam and Eve when they discovered the shame of their nakedness. We are running and hiding from God, and trying to cover ourselves, even if we use religious activities as fig-leaves.

The Context of These Quotations – Paul is arguing that every last person is shut up under the law and sin (Rom 1-3). Some argue that Paul wrenched these verses out of context to make his point and this is worth considering. This passage is a collection of verses from six Psalms and Isaiah (and a hat-tip to Eccles 7:20). But in these psalms one regularly finds sinners on the one hand and “my people” on the other (i.e. Psalm 14:1-4, Psalm 5:9-11). Does condemnation apply to the good people? This is the heart of the gospel. We are all of us, by nature, objects of wrath (Eph 2:3) and the ones who acknowledge this, the ones who recognize that they do not qualify to receive God’s grace are the ones who can. Jesus said that He came for the sick and not the righteous (Matt 9:12-13) and only when His disciples despaired of their own efforts before God did they ask, “*Who then can be saved?*” To which, Jesus replied, “*With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible*” (Matt 19:26).

Stopping Mouths and Saving Sinners (vv19-22) – In order to be saved, you have to realize that the law is simply a messenger of trouble. The law is no ladder to heaven. But good, religious people don’t think the law was given to make them worse. Many covenant children believe the Ten Commandments – and then they feel sin creep into their thought lives producing envy, bitterness, covetousness, lust and such – and all manner of sin breaks out. Then they feel guilty at the Lord’s Service and at His Table and they make resolutions to be better. They make more stringent laws for themselves (or their parents do). But the law and the flesh are terrible chemicals to mix. The flesh is like the dry brush and glowing embers in the Sonoma Valley and the law is like the 50mph winds that whips them awake – and everything is burned. This is the great temptation for conservative people and churches. The more conservative, apart from the gospel, the more hypocritical it will become. Understanding this is the point of vv19-20 where Paul concludes, “*all the world may become guilty before God...for by the law is the knowledge of sin.*”

You don’t need more law. You don’t need more of your own so-called righteousness because you don’t have any. You need Jesus Christ and His righteousness. Do you know the difference between good advice and good news? Good advice tells you how to be better (or tells you how you could have been better). This is no help at all on the day of judgment. Good advice is a weak gospel. Good news, that Someone has passed through the judgment for you, is a strong gospel.

The Righteousness of God – Here is the Good News (vv21-22). This is talking about Christ’s righteousness becoming ours without us having to keep the law. This righteousness has a destination. It is “*to all and on all who believe.*” The vehicle by which we arrive at that destination is “*through faith in Jesus Christ.*”

The World in Which We Live – We do not live in a world that is normal and “good” the way God created it. It is a world that has been shaped in our image, our corrupted image. Calvin taught that self-knowledge consists of grasping first how great the creation of man was, “*how great the excellence of our nature would have been had its integrity remained*” and then secondly how miserable our condition is since Adam’s fall such that “*we blush for shame, and feel truly humble.*”

This greatly affects how civil governments are structured and how parents instruct and discipline their children. It determines whether we address sins as sins or disorders brought on by one’s environment or education. It changes the way we observe and solve race relations and wars between nations. But it all starts in hearts – your heart. There was a glory in our past, we have all fallen short of that glory, horribly short (Rom 3:23). And in the new Adam and only there, a new humanity is being formed – in Christ, by faith alone.