

Romans 3:9-20
(Psalm 119:169-176; Luke 16:16-17)
“What the Law Can and Cannot Do”

Introduction

Paul’s letter to Rome is undoubtedly the most majestic and complete exposition of the gospel of grace in all of Scripture. We’ve taken our time with the first two-and-a-half chapters to let Paul show us why we all need the gospel, why indeed it is the best news ever told. In chapter one, he declared, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes ... For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith’” (1:16-17).

But the gospel of salvation is not heard as good news by those who do not realize their need of it, so Paul sets about explaining how desperately lost we all are apart from God’s great mercy and grace. He first convicts the immoral of this world, and then shows that the moral and upstanding are no better off. Finally, he turns to his own people, and shows that for all the benefits enjoyed by the Jewish people, simply being Jewish, knowing God’s Word and being a part of the community of faith is not enough to make them right with God. We showed that Paul’s argument applies equally to those of us who grow up in Christian homes, know the gospel and have been baptized. Those things, good as they are, are insufficient to make us right with God.

Paul now comes to the end of his argument. He sums up human brokenness and need and shows that, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23). Of course, such language is offensive to many in our day. Back in the 1970s, noted psychiatrist, Karl Menninger of the Menninger clinic, wrote a best-selling book with the provocative title, *Whatever Became of Sin?* He pointed out that we were at that time rapidly becoming a society that refused to accept responsibility for our actions. We increasingly saw ourselves as victims of various pressures and stresses, forces and addictions that explained our bad behavior. It wasn’t really our fault.

More recently, David Brook, the always-thoughtful New York Times columnist noted, in a January 2011 column entitled “Tree of Failure,” that the growing incivility in public discourse is partly due to the fact that “over the past few decades, people have lost a sense of their own sinfulness. ... Beneath all the other things that have contributed to polarization and the loss of civility, the most important is this: The roots of modesty have been carved away.”

The apostle Paul is never reluctant to condemn our pride or to call sin by its name, to show us its horrifying effects, to identify its source, and then to prepare us for the gospel of grace by making clear what the law *can* do, and what it *can never* do.

Body

- 1. Paul shows us, first, the all-pervasive effects of our sin.**
Sin is crushing in its effect: It holds down all who are "under sin" (3:9b).
Sin affects every person without exception (3:9-12).
Sin affects every part of every person without exception (3:13-18).
- 2. Paul then shows us the source of our sin.**
The source of unrighteousness is always ungodliness (3:11&18).
- 3. Paul shows us, next, what the law *can* do.**
The law silences us before God (3:19a).
The law holds us accountable to God (3:19b).
The law makes us conscious of our sin (3:20b).
- 4. Finally, Paul shows us what the law *cannot* do.**
The law cannot justify us before God (3:20a).

Conclusion

What of you today? Has the law had its way with you? Has it done its work, silencing your self-justification and holding you accountable to God? Has it identified the most obvious symptoms of your rebellion against God, of your desire to be your own Lord and Master? Or do you still think well of yourself? Do you still think that you have much to commend you to God? Are you still trusting your own good works, your knowledge of Scripture, your godly family, your generosity, your standing in the community? Until the law has its way with you, until it silences you and puts you to death, you will never understand the gospel or cast yourself utterly upon God's grace.

As Paul wrote to the Galatians, "For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if justification were through the law, then Christ died to no purpose" (Galatians 2:19-21). Do you see this? All appeals to religion or morality or any other form of self-salvation are denials of the gospel, and find no reason for the cross of Christ.

Let the law have its way with you, let it silence you, condemn you, kill you, so that the gospel may revive you, and in Christ you may be raised to everlasting life. Until the law has done its work, you are not ready for the gospel. But when you despair of life, when you come to an end of yourself, then you will see the glory of the gospel of grace, the wonder of the cross, and the triumph of the resurrection.

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