

SOUND DOCTRINE FOR SPIRITUAL SUCCESS – Studies in Romans

Not Even One! (Romans 3:9-20)

This portion of the epistle serves as a TRANSITION from setting the stage, to actually presenting the doctrine of justification by faith. In the immediate context, Paul identifies himself as a fellow Jew with the pronoun “we.” (v9) He no doubt is reflecting upon his former sense of superiority as a Pharisee. Prior to his conversion, he would have provided the opposite answer to the rhetorical question posed in v9a: “of course we are better than the Gentiles!” Now, the Pharisee Saul who became the apostle Paul knows better and offers a different answer: “not at all.” He supports his conclusion by appealing to the previous discourse in 1:18-2:29 (v9b), then finalizes his argument from the Old Testament, with a series of quotes from the Psalms and Isaiah –

“. . . as it is written, THERE IS NONE RIGHTEOUS, NOT EVEN ONE; THERE IS NONE WHO UNDERSTANDS, THERE IS NONE WHO SEEKS FOR GOD; ALL HAVE TURNED ASIDE, TOGETHER THEY HAVE BECOME USELESS; THERE IS NONE WHO DOES GOOD, THERE IS NOT EVEN ONE. THEIR THROAT IS AN OPEN GRAVE, WITH THEIR TONGUES THEY KEEP DECEIVING, THE POISON OF ASPS IS UNDER THEIR LIPS; WHOSE MOUTH IS FULL OF CURSING AND BITTERNESS; THEIR FEET ARE SWIFT TO SHED BLOOD, DESTRUCTION AND MISERY ARE IN THEIR PATHS, AND THE PATH OF PEACE THEY HAVE NOT KNOWN. THERE IS NO FEAR OF GOD BEFORE THEIR EYES.”

The irony in furnishing this documentation from Scripture involves Jewish familiarity with such texts, even though they often refused to identify with them. In other words, the typical self-righteous Jew of Paul’s day would have viewed these passages as referring to the pagans in the surrounding Gentile nations and not the nation of Israel, and especially not himself. In painting this picture of the total depravity of man, Paul is telling us it is both/and, NOT either/or. Jews and Gentiles alike are sinners in God’s sight, without a single exception to that rule, and liable to His judgment, which Paul confirms to us with unmistakable clarity in Romans 3:19-20 –

“Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.”

There is no clearer statement anywhere in the Word of God, in regard to the universal sinfulness of man, than what is expressed in Romans 3:9-20. As a result, “all the world,” without a single exception, is answerable to God. If someone is still under the illusion that their time of accountability will prove successful, Paul bursts that bubble in v20. No one will ever be justified in God’s sight by their attempts at self-righteousness. Those efforts will end in abysmal failure. No Gentile will ever follow their innate sense of right and wrong flawlessly, in accord with the dictates of conscience. No Jew will ever live out his or her knowledge of God’s law to perfection.

Paul, from his personal experience, offers this sobering conclusion in Romans 3:20 – Thinking that the Law was given as a means of justification is to completely misunderstand the purpose of the Law. It was given to convince us of our sinfulness and utter inability to keep the Law.