

been circumcised, the external receiving of the sacrament, which determines one's membership of God's people, but that which has become real in the heart, at the centre of the person, in the life dependent on God. "Wherever God's Word may be preached, his precepts remain a letter and dead words so long as they are not received by men with a pure heart; only where they pierce to the soul do they become, so to speak, changed into Spirit" (Calvin). Membership badges without loyalty and obedience are of no value. Attachment to the Church without discipleship is the husk without the kernel.

Does everything therefore depend on the practical life and not on religion? Rightly understood, yes. Yet not in the way a moralism of the Enlightenment understands it. In reality it is only a question of the "practical life", the doing of good. But who really does what is good? Where are the men, Jews and Gentiles, who can stand before the claim of the divine law, who at God's judgment might hope for a favourable verdict in accordance with their deeds? The right kind of doing good is the same as true religion, namely the life of the person, of the heart, from and in the Word of God—which is the same as life in the Holy Spirit. Where this happens, then everything is well with man and his relationship to God, just as God wants it to be. Man in that position is such that God can praise him: "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your master." But where is this man?

The Privilege of the Jews no Excuse (3:1-8)

¹Then what advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision? ²Much in every way. To begin with, the Jews are entrusted with the oracles of God. ³What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? ⁴By no means! Let God be true though every man be false, as it is written, "That thou mayest be justified in thy words, and prevail when thou art judged."

In the previous chapter Paul destroyed the false presumption of the pious Pharisee who considered himself superior to the rest of mankind and exempted from Divine judgment by his

knowledge of God's revealed will and the sign of the divine covenant ratified on him. Neither offers any protection against God's righteous judgment. Man cannot hide himself from God's demand either behind his theological and biblical knowledge or his Church membership and his participation in its sacraments. Where the ultimate question concerns the saving or damning relationship to God, other standards apply. But this does not mean that what the Jew actually possesses is meaningless. The difference between him and the others is indeed a tremendous one; for he has been entrusted with God's Word of revelation. To dispute this superiority, which makes Israel the chosen people, would never occur to Paul.

It has pleased God to make Israel the custodian of the divine treasure of revelation. No one can contend with Israel for this special rank in the history of mankind. Israel has the Bible, and the Bible is the fountain of revelation; whoever drinks from it is healed. This gift of God is independent of what the Jewish people, to whom it was first given, do with it. The Gospel remains God's word however corrupt may be the Church that offers it. God's truth shines only the brighter against the dark background of the human lie. God's fidelity is greater than man's faithlessness. Yes, it is in the light of the fidelity and truth of God that we first see how deeply all humanity is entangled in unfaithfulness.

⁵But if our wickedness serves to show the justice of God, what shall we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) ⁶By no means! For then how could God judge the world? ⁷But if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? ⁸And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

It is part of God's incomprehensibly wise government of the world that he can also use man's evil doings for the purpose of his kingdom, which is the essence of everything that is good. He who used the betrayal of Judas as a means for revealing his saving faithfulness can also, as Paul will demonstrate still more clearly in the eleventh chapter, include Israel's disobedience in the fabric of the history of redemption (*Heilsgeschichte*). Men's

sinfulness constitutes no hindrance to God. But shortsighted, frivolous men stumble over this most profound truth, inferring from it that sin is not contrary to God. Since they do not want to accept the message of God's unlimited grace, they attribute to its proclaimer the blasphemous doctrine that one should quietly continue to sin, for thereby one only illuminates God's greatness the more. Like this one can, by giving free rein to human logic, make a dreadful heresy out of any biblical truth. What we ought or ought not to do is one thing; what God is able to make of our wrong is another. The one, like the other, results from God taking it seriously; but human capacity of thought can never deal with it. God is the judge of every wrong; yet he is also the one who can bring good out of evil. The two things ought to remain unconfused; they both hold true, whatever our logic may do with them.

And now Paul has reached the stage where he can strike the decisive blow against every kind of human presumption, so that he may crush it before going on to speak of what the whole letter points to: God's gracious act of reconciliation in Jesus Christ.

God's Judgment on Sinful Humanity (3:9-20)

⁹What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all; for I have already charged that all men, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, ¹⁰as it is written:

"None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹no one understands, no one seeks for God.

¹²All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one."

¹³"Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive."

"The venom of asps is under their lips."

¹⁴"Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness."

¹⁵"Their feet are swift to shed blood,

¹⁶in their paths are ruin and misery,

¹⁷and the way of peace they do not know.”

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

¹⁹Now 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. ²⁰For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

The Jews and Greeks, those who know the revealed will of God from Holy Scripture and those who do not know it, the elect to whom has been entrusted the holy treasure of God’s word, who from their youth have been made familiar with it, and all the rest who do not possess this advantage—they all live “under the power of sin”. This is the common denominator of all, however great the differences may be in other respects. The difference between the people of God and the others is great and ought not to be denied; but it is nothing when the question is raised: What about the last and decisive thing? How will you appear then, before God’s judgment? The verdict then can only run: Guilty. We have to expect absolute condemnation. This terrible verdict concerns all in so far as they appeal to the Law, in so far as they wish to appear in their own righteousness.

Much still remains to be said about what “under the law” means. Meantime the final result is simply announced: Whoever wants to place himself opposite God on the ground of the Law as the one who is to fulfil God’s demand in his own strength, must now hear what his prospects are. His condemnation is certain.

Paul no longer demonstrates this from experience. He has already done so in the first and second chapters. Here it is sufficient for him to cite the verdict, of the Old Testament Scriptures. One thing is said in different ways: If one goes to the heart of the matter, then man, every man, is in a bad way. The façade may look more or less magnificent—even Paul does not overlook the difference between decent people and riff-raff—yet the inner state is the same: Godlessness. There are “moving staircases” in the undergrounds of our great cities which move downwards whether one stands still or is walking on them. Whoever happens to stand on

these stairs is on the downward move even though he is trying to walk up. The same is true of those who live “under the law”. To be sure, there are a thousand possibilities here of going up and down, differences which in their place may be quite noticeable. But it alters nothing as to the general direction. It goes down irresistibly towards the judgment. Once one stands opposite God on the ground of the Law—God demands of man that he shall fulfil his command—then the direction is fixed; godlessness is present in spite of every kind of moral or religious exertion. Why this is so we shall hear later. The question we are concerned with here is: Is there then no other possibility, no other “ground” on which we are able to stand?

Before giving an answer to this main question we must first remove the misunderstanding that the Law itself was to blame for this dreadful position of man. The Law, God’s command, cannot help us once sin is present. It is the delusion of moralism, even of religiously “deepened” moralism, that man can extricate himself from sin by treating God’s command seriously in practice, climbing up it, as it were. The following chapters will thoroughly destroy this delusion. Yet this does not mean that no importance at all is to be attached to God’s Law on the path of salvation by which God leads us. The Law cannot make us righteous, but it can reveal to us what is wrong. Through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. This is no small matter. If there still had to be something other than the way of the Law, we do not bypass the Law to reach this other thing but only go right through the Law. The Law, taken seriously, breaks the arrogance of man; yes, it breaks man himself. But only as someone who is broken, as a person who is thoroughly shaken, as someone who has come to the end of his tether, can he understand what has to be said to him now as being the one and all of the Gospel message.

B. The Redemption Through Jesus Christ (3:21-8:39)

The New Basis of Life, the Gift of Righteousness (3:21-31)

²¹But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; ²⁶it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.

²⁷Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith. ²⁸For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law. ²⁹Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of their faith and the uncircumcised because of their faith. ³¹Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

“The knowledge of sin”; that was the conclusion of the first introductory part of the letter. Whether Jew or Gentile, whether partaking of the divine instruction or not, whether with or without the law, all are under sin. However vast the differences among men may otherwise be, this at any rate they have all in common. All live “down in the dark” and therefore in night (13: 12). “But now—” —that there is this “but now”—this is the glad tidings, this is the content of the proclamation by the apostles, the very thing which makes Paul a debtor both to the Jews and the Gentiles, leading him from country to country and even to Rome, that “power of God for the salvation of all who believe”. “But now”