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The Shape of Water - A Gospel Perspective

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Romans 8:1-11

8 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, 2 because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. 3 For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

5 Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. 6 The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. 7 The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. 8 Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.

9 You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. 10 But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. 11 And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you.

New International Version

For our new series over the next five weeks I'm going to review three new films currently being circulated. The first is *The Shape of Water* which won the 2018 Academy Award for Best Picture of the Year. The second is the *Post* and the third and only Christian movie I'll be reviewing; *Paul, Apostle of Christ*. It's the story of the relationship between Paul and Luke. For that we'll be studying the last chapters of Acts.

But I doubt that you came to church for a movie review. Church is the one place where you should be able to come and learn something from God's Word and I don't want to mislead you. Today we're going to be in Romans 8 after I do a brief review of *The Shape of Water*.

To begin with, *The Shape of Water* is not a Christian film in any way shape or form. In fact it's R rated and is not for young family viewing so please don't leave here thinking I'm endorsing this movie. It has several sex scenes including one with a human and a fish all of which was not necessary for the film but I guess sells tickets. There's also some gory scenes of fingers being pulled out of the sockets. Again not necessary for the plot but I suppose it sells tickets. Fortunately there are some interesting biblical references in the film that I want to point out.

The film is set in 1962 Baltimore during the cold war and civil rights era. It paints a picture of a divided America in which straight white Christian men are considered the norm, and all "deviants" who fail to conform to that mainstream standard are marginalized.

The film has a heroine. Her name is Elisa Esposito and she's mute, meaning she can't speak. She literally has no voice which makes her the perfect symbol of the marginalized and powerless. The film surrounds her with other metaphorically voiceless characters: women janitors, African Americans, homosexuals, manual laborers, and foreigners.

The film blends a wide variety of sources — from fairy tales to classic Hollywood movies to the Bible — to tell a love story about a humanoid fishlike

monster captured in the Amazon and a woman who works as a janitor in a secret government laboratory where the fish-man is being held captive.

The Creature is sort of portrayed as a symbolical Christ figure; someone who comes to earth from another world, who has the power to perform miracles, who is misunderstood and persecuted, who dies and rises again to save his friends. In fact he even has a dual nature — truly man and truly fish. Interestingly, the fish has historically been a symbol of Christianity. And like Christ, this Creature graciously loves and accepts society's outcasts.

There's even a bad guy that sort of reminds us of the strict Pharisees who Jesus battled. His name is Col. Richard Strickland who's fixated with external appearances and is always careful to follow the letter of the law (or "protocol" as he calls it). One senses he believes he can earn his salvation and be rewarded with a Norman Rockwell like family — two kids who idolize him, a dutiful wife, a house in the suburbs, and a shiny new Cadillac. But he's haunted by the need to measure up to his image of perfect manhood. He worries that even one mistake could preclude him from achieving the American dream. Again that's similar to the legalism Jesus battled.

Like the Pharisees, Col Strickland is portrayed as having a limited view of what God is like. He believes God made mankind in His image, but he erroneously concludes from this that God must also be the image of an able-bodied man meaning that an able bodied white man looks more like God than a woman, a black person, a homosexual person or a disabled person does.

Instead the picture of God this film portrays is more like water. Just as water takes the shape of anything it touches and sometimes molds by its sheer force so God is portrayed as being more like our flawed selves. Like water, God is portrayed as powerful, beautiful, sometimes dangerous and sometimes hard to contain. Rather than God being projected as a legalistic, educated, white shirt and tie wearing white male who feels superior to those born with

physical challenges or born with dark skin, or born a woman or someone other than a heterosexual, God in this film is the shape of whomever God is near. The shape of water.

The word that kept coming back to me over and over with this film is condemnation. The white male scientists are trying to learn as much as they can from the Creature but they've condemned it to death for being violent and different. They see no redemption for it or anyone different than themselves. The black women, the handicapped and the homosexual were condemned in their minds to a life of servitude with no chance for redemption.

That's where I wanted to stand up and shout "but that's not the Christ of the Bible." That may have been that writer's experience with Christianity but that's not what Christ stood for. Which led me to Romans 7 & 8 which were written by a white male named Paul who once stood for everything Col Strickland stood for. He was harsh, legalistic, born in the right family, received the right training, and was assured of his standing with God because he thought God was like him. That is until the day on the road to Damascus when he was blinded by the light of God and understood grace for the first time.

In Romans 7 we see an intimate side of the struggle the apostle Paul went through before grace was revealed to him. He would try to do good, but in his doing good he knew in his heart that he never quite met God's standard. He would try to do the right thing, but somehow always missed the mark. What that did was leave him with emotional turmoil and no way to resolve it. That's the battle many in our society inside and outside church are struggling with and that's displayed in the movie with Col Strickland.

Paul wrote in Romans 7:21-24 *"So I find this law at work: when I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my*

members.” What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

It’s that conflict of conscience, when we know the right thing to do but still for whatever reason don’t do it, that damage our psychological well being. It doesn’t make us feel very good. And what do we do when we don’t feel good? We either pop a pill, take a drink or do some good works to counter the bad that we’re doing. Or in some cases just redefine God to be more like water conforming to our image.

I knew a pastor years ago who believed it was God’s will for him to remain married to the same woman he had been married to for twenty five years. But he was unhappy and didn’t want to remain married to her. She no longer brought joy to his life. So he reinterpreted the Bible to say that divorce wasn’t wrong for him, it was just God’s lesser will for his life. He reasoned that our joy was God’s greatest goal in life which couldn’t be farther from the biblical truth. But that’s how he took care of his guilty conscience.

Another way to deal with a guilty conscience is to outweigh the bad. Of course that never works but we sometimes can convince ourselves otherwise. If cheating on my wife is worth ten negative points, how many positive points is serving in a soup kitchen or tutoring a wayward youth? That may fool us for awhile but deep within us, God has planted in all people the knowledge of good and evil.

So when the conscience accuses us and we refuse to reverse our course, or consciously dismiss it and rebel against God’s standard, that conscience will continually accuse us. The matter will not be closed even if we don’t open the Bible or go to church. The result is going to be ongoing guilt that we either admit to and deal with or consciously try to suppress. When more and more issues are left unresolved, a guilty conscience eventually leads to fear and anxiety, which can then lead to frustration and even anger, or several types of emotional paralysis.

We have a good example of this in Genesis 4 with the story of Adam and Eve's two sons Cain and Abel. In verse 4: *Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. 3 In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. 4 And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, 5 but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.*

I don't know why the Lord looked on favor at meat and not at vegetables for an offering. But sometimes we just don't know why things happen. They can seem so random and unfair. There's no way we can control all our circumstances. But it's our reaction to our circumstances that determines our mental health.

6 Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? 7 If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."

From what we can tell maybe Cain hadn't done anything wrong but he felt an injustice from God. He felt wronged. That stirred his anger. Understandable. Anger will motivate us to do things we internally know are wrong and that we will later regret. Col Strickland will get increasingly violent as the movie progresses, his worth as a top notch security chief is being threatened by a mute woman laborer and his anger increases. The mistake Cain made was giving in to the anger. Sure you want to be angry. Maybe you're justified in being angry. But anger always wants to replace our Lord. Greed wants to replace our Lord. Pride wants to replace our Lord. Pursuit of happiness wants to replace our Lord.

8 Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

Cain's conscience told him that killing is wrong. The Lord told him that it was wrong and he needed to rule over his anger and yet he allowed the emotion of anger to override what he knew was the right thing to do. That's the battle that goes on in our heads much of the time. Hopefully not to the extreme of Cain. But when we do something that puts our conscience in conflict, unhealthy behavior will follow. But there's hope and I wished that I could have given that hope to the writer of *The Shape of Water*.

Paul writes in 8:1-4: *Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, 2 because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. 3 For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he **condemned** sin in the flesh, 4 in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.*

There's that word "condemned" again. Only this time it's sin that's condemned. By condemned he means its power over us is condemned. When the Lord told Cain he needed to overpower the anger because it was trying to derail him, the Lord knew it was possible to do right. It was possible but difficult. Sin like anger can overcome us so much that we can't even see straight. A woman drove from San Diego last week so angry with YouTube for censoring her exercise videos that she wanted to fire off a gun at their headquarters. That's when untreated anger had gotten to the level where she needed some outside help.

The good news for us that the legalistic Col Strickland didn't get is that sin is condemned, not us. That means we don't have to live with a conflicted conscience. If you're doing something you know is the wrong thing to do, you don't have to rationalize it. You don't have to justify it. You just need to know that God loves you very much and may have condemned your actions but not

you. The power to do the wrong thing has already been condemned in Jesus Christ. It's ready for demolition.

Paul wrote in Romans 8:5 *Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. 6 The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace.*

It's the conflict of conscience that so wears us out and keeps therapists like my wife in business. Doing what we know is the wrong thing is what wears us emotionally and takes its toll on our body. But the good news for today is that there are three positive things that can happen with Jesus living in your heart. 1) You have the potential to resolve in your heart to do what the Bible says is the right thing to do. 2) You can call on the name of Jesus when you're tempted to do the wrong thing. "In the name of Jesus get behind me" and then name whatever evil is tempting you. 3) You can tell your mentor, someone mature that you spiritually trust that you're having a struggle with something. God formed the church to give us an opportunity to build close relationships with people who can listen and hold us accountable. If you don't have someone like that there are professionally trained counselors and therapists who can work with you.

The main thing you need to know is that no one is more loved by God than you are. Proof of that is Jesus Christ dying on the cross. If your society thinks that you're flawed because you're old, you're handicapped, your sexual preference deviates from the traditional, then stop listening to that society and start listening to God's Word. In the words of the Apostle Paul have your mind set on what the Spirit desires and not what your neighbors think. Read God's Word. Believe God's Word. Live God's Word. God is not like water conforming to our shape but has taken our condemnation on himself so we're free of that.

If you have Jesus Christ living in your heart, God's word won't condemn you because in Jesus Christ we are not only forgiven but equipped to overcome whatever temptations try to bring us down. We are becoming the shape of God. Amen.

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To learn and encourage one another

IF YOU'D LIKE TO KNOW HOW TO GET STARTED IN FAITH

1. Recognize that everyone has sinned and fallen short of God's ideal

Romans 3:23-24

2. Know that the wages or payment for sinning is death

Romans 6:23

3. But God loved us so much that He sent His only Son to die for us

Romans 5:8

4. It is our responsibility to accept Jesus Christ as our Savior and allow Him to become the master of our life

Romans 10:13

Invite Jesus into your heart by praying something like the prayer below...

"Dear Lord Jesus, in many ways I have sinned against you. I am sorry and want to turn from my sinful ways. I invite you to come into my heart and begin to make me like yourself. I commit my life wholeheartedly to you now. Thank you for saving me."