

Romans | The Gift of Righteousness (part 2 of 5)

The Glories of the Gospel

Romans 3:27-31

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²⁷ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. ³¹ Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law. (Romans 8:27-31, ESV).

Why do we love diamonds so much? I have a little card on the bulletin board by my desk at home that reminds me what the five greatest needs of women are. I have it posted there because we men need such reminders. The card says: communication, honesty, affection, trust . . . and diamonds. A few years ago, our daughter crossed out the first four and just wrote diamonds, diamonds, diamonds. We love them because they're valuable; we love them because they indicate commitment. But really we love them intrinsically because they're beautiful. But how do you see the full beauty of a diamond? You have to turn it . . . As you create new angles and different perspectives, the light shines through in new and brilliant ways. A diamond is just a stone — but as it is cut and refined and more sharply defined, as new angles are created, the beauty inside it becomes more vibrant and vivid and even breathtaking.

That's how it is with the Gospel. It is the greatest treasure in the universe; it is the most valuable thing that God could have given to us, His creatures. And yet, by this point in the book of Romans, some of us, I suspect, are getting a bit bored with the Gospel. It's been ten sermons already, for goodness sake, and the message is beginning to sound numbingly the same. So what Paul does in our text for today is pick up the Gospel like a diamond, and rotates it, looking at it from different angles, getting sharper definition on issues that flow out of the Gospel so that the Gospel itself would become clearer, so that more light could shine through it, and so we would be even more amazed at the glories of the Gospel — and the grace of the God who gifted it to us.

Notice his change of style. Like a good speaker, Paul's changing up the pace so as not to lose his audience. He's asking questions again, like he did at the beginning of chapter 3. As one commentator said, there is here some stylistic relief after the "intensity of the log-jam of prepositional phrases and tortuous syntax of the preceding sentence."

He has just unloaded a bombshell on his Jewish readers. The questions he asks are ones that he anticipates they would ask upon hearing this strange teaching. He writes as if he were in a debate, arguing with a Jewish viewpoint: here are your questions/objections, here's the answer. And in so doing, he helps us see new glories in the Gospel.

Here is a summary of the Gospel, which Paul has just explained in 3:21-26: Sinful man is justified by grace through faith in Christ alone. Sinful man (who couldn't keep the law) is justified (made right in God's sight) by grace (it is a gift; it cannot be earned) through faith (it takes a personal response) in Christ alone (in the fact that He died in your place). For some of you, this may be a new message. You think that the way to please God, to avoid His punishment, is to be good, or at least to be better than most people, and that if you do at least that much, then surely God won't punish you in hell because He's a loving and fair God.

That makes so much sense to us in the 21st century, it just feels right. A good God would not send good people to hell, would He? And the answer, of course, is that He wouldn't. But the little tiny problem with that, is that of all 4,000 of us here this morning, of all seven billion in the world, of all the billions who have ever lived, how many are good? Exactly zero. (Rom. 3:10-18) There is none righteous: even the best of us is like an open grave. All have sinned (3:23) and fallen short of God's holy standard. We need something outside of ourselves to come and save us from our own mess. The Gospel is that Jesus is that Savior, for He appeased God's anger at our sin by dying for us on the cross, and that by faith in Him we can receive forgiveness. This is the Good News of the Gospel! And now Paul goes on to look at three glorious implications of this wonderful message.

I. Excludes Boasting, vv. 27,28

Paul uses a very interesting phrase in v. 27: "the law of faith." All along he has been contrasting law with faith, that the law says you should do this and you will live, and faith says all you can do is trust what Jesus has done. Yet here he combines the two words in what might be a confusing way. I think what he is doing is saying that there are two ways of looking at salvation. One is the way of works, which means you try to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, you achieve, you accomplish, you git 'er done. That way, he has just shown to be completely impossible. The other way is the way of faith, the principle of faith, or as he describes it with a little twist of irony, the "law" of faith. This law says, since you couldn't make it by your own efforts, let me do it for you and all you have to do is trust me.

This is what he means in v. 28, a summary of the Gospel. Luther added the word "alone" (*sola fide*) in his translation, although it's not in the Greek. . But it is what the text means. The law of faith means that you throw aside all your works, and you cling to Christ alone, by faith, because all of your works are pitiful and wretched and worthless and poisonous and stinking — but Christ was the perfect sacrifice, who by His blood, v. 25, turned away the wrath of God for those who believe.

So where now is boasting, Paul asks? If you understand the law of faith, the answer is obvious. It is tossed out the door — and the door is slammed on it, preventing it from ever coming back in. Boasting is turned out of court once and forever and must never make an appearance again. Yet it's sneaky, like the salesman, who when you close the front door shows up again at the back.

The Jews took great pride in their observance of the Law. Paul himself, before his conversion, kept track of all the ways he obeyed the law (Phil. 3:4-6), so that he had confidence in the flesh. But now, he says, he counts them as rubbish — just a pile of filthy rags, which is what Isaiah says our "righteous" acts are in God's sight. And you're going to boast of that?! No, no, no. All of those things are only to our shame.

Calvin said, "Paul is not concerned with the diminution or moderation of merit, but does not leave a single particle remaining. The Law deprives us of all glory and covers us with shame" (p. 78).

What does spiritual boasting look like? Jesus gave us a good picture of it in Luke 18:9-14, in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus, "God I thank you that I am not like other men . . . I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector stood far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." I

tell you the truth, Jesus said, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other. You can't have it both ways. If you are going to boast in who you are and what you have done, you cannot be justified. But if you empty yourself of all of your achievements and throw yourself on Christ alone, you will receive His mercy.

John MacArthur wrote, "The greatest lie in the world is that by certain works of their own doing men are able to make themselves acceptable to God. The greatest error of that belief is its impossibility. The greatest evil of that belief is that it robs God of His glory" (p. 221). Eph. 2:8,9 states, ". . . not of works lest any man should boast."

According to 1 Cor. 1: 28, 29, 31, "God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. . . Therefore, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"

Boasting is so distasteful --- for example, NBA players and chest thumping. But you know what — they have a right to boast, they are out there on the court, and I'm a couch potato at home. So they legitimately can boast, and while maybe they shouldn't, I can't! That's what Paul's point here is. In regards to salvation, we can do nothing! All we've ever done is mess up.

Boasting is so out of place, so inappropriate, it stifles our worship and makes too much of us and not enough of God. In example, when you flew all the way across the ocean to land in London or anywhere for that matter, it was not you—it was the plane and the pilot who should get the credit. As Gal 6:14 confirms, "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Finally, boasting is so tiring. What do I mean by that? Well, think about it: our accomplishments are so inconsistent. We may do well, we think, for awhile, but then when things are tough and we're down and not producing, what do we feel then? If we were trying to make it on our own fuel, we'd feel like we'd run out, like we couldn't do it anymore. This will happen, eventually, to anyone who tries to be good enough to get into heaven. And then we see someone else jet by us, and we get even more discouraged, because there is always someone "better" than we are. Do you see how freeing the law of faith is?! It is equal for everyone, it is fail-proof, it is guaranteed for all of eternity — exactly because it's based not on what we fickle, inconsistent, weak humans do, but what our great God has done for us in His Son Jesus Christ!

II. Includes Everybody, vv. 29,30

Paul continues his engagement with his Jewish readers by asking two more questions. Here is his point: If justification (salvation) is by works of the law, and only the Jews have the law — then God must be the God of only the Jews. Or is there some other God for the Gentiles? No, there can't be, because God is one, as the Jews regularly confessed in the shema, from Deut. 6:4: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One." Paul uses the core of their own theology on them, and here's the implication: If He is one, He must be the God of the Gentiles as well, or else they would be left with no God and no way of salvation.

We need to understand the Jewish perspective. They of course knew that God created the whole world and everybody in it but that only the Jews enjoyed any meaningful relationship with Him. They were extremely conscious of their special covenant relationship with God which the Gentiles did not share. Only by accepting the Torah, the Jews believed, could Gentiles hope to become related to God in a way similar to the Jews and receive His blessings.

For instance, Rabbi Simeon Ben Jochai (A.D. 160) said, "God spoke to the Israelites: I am God over all who come into the world, but by my name I have associated only with you. I do not call myself the God of the nations of the world, but the God of Israel." And this perspective was understandable, for God had chosen

Abraham in Gen. 12, and God had said in Deut. 7:6 that out of all the peoples on the face of the earth He had chosen the Jews to be his treasured possession, a very tender word, they were the apple of His eye. But what the Jews had forgotten over the years was that their privilege was not intended for the exclusion of the Gentiles but for their ultimate inclusion (Gen. 12:3).

Paul points out here that Jewish pride in their own election is actually at odds with their own monotheism. He is arguing that God's lordship as Creator of all is even more fundamental than His covenant choosing of Abraham. God is a universal God because He is the only God, the One who created heaven and earth and all who live therein. God is the God of all, so the salvation He provides must be for all. God is a universal God, not a national God. Monotheism must mean that all of God's creatures have equal access to His grace, and this can only be guaranteed if faith, and not works, is made the entrance requirement, because everybody can have faith. The one God is an equal opportunity Savior!

This is why Paul said in Rom. 1:16 that the Gospel was the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile. God is the God of all, and so the salvation He provides is for all. The circumcision/uncircumcision distinction, so important in the past to Jews, is no longer relevant. Because God justifies people, all people, the exact same way. By faith. Or through faith. No distinction is meant here, simply a touch of irony that, okay, if you have to be different, then you're justified by faith and the Gentiles through faith.

Can you imagine what awful news the Gospel would be if this were not the case? If you had come to the end of yourself and realized your own efforts are only good enough to roundly condemn you, and then you hear about the sacrifice of Jesus for you, and you want to receive the gift of eternal life — only to be told your skin was the wrong color or your last name was the wrong name or you came from the wrong part of town, and so you were shut out of the grace party?!

But, my friends, this is the second glory of the Gospel, that it includes everyone! According to N. T. Wright, "The message is simple: all who believe in Jesus belong to the same family and should be eating at the same table. That is what Paul's doctrine of justification is all about" (p. 168). Stott adds, "If the Gospel of justification by faith alone excludes all boasting, it excludes all elitism and discrimination also" (p. 120).

But be careful what you hear here. While all have equal access to this justification, since it is by faith alone, Paul is not saying that all will have equal participation. He's not saying what so many in our day and age believe, that God is at the top of a mountain and there are many different paths up that mountain, it doesn't much matter which one you take. No, there is one path — and it is faith, but not just a generic "faith." It is faith in Jesus Christ, v. 22. The Gospel is universally accessible to all of God's creation; but it is exclusively for those who put their faith in Jesus Christ.

So let's think about this now. First of all, you Gentiles — and that includes most of us — do we understand how glorious this Good News is?! We don't have to become Jews to be saved, we don't have to be circumcised; we simply have to have faith —in Jesus. Praise Him for this grace!

But then, second, now that you're in, how do you feel about, think about, reach out to those who are currently "out"? Are you, either by your attitude or by your actions, leaving some people out of the glorious light of the Gospel? The theological roots of mission are established right here. The reason we reach out to the unchurched in our neighborhoods and through CPC Next, the reason we show Christ's love to the underserved of our city in Brookside, the reason we go and take the message of this glorious Gospel to the 2.8 billion who have never heard in the 10/40 window, is that God is one. He is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance, and He has provided one way of salvation for all — faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross. As Calvin said, "It was of great importance that this point should be

urged, in order that a free passage might be made for the Kingdom of Christ through the whole world" (p. 80).

Do you believe this? Are you living it out in some way or other?

III. Upholds the Law, v. 31

Paul now asks his final question in this section, and while the question is easy to understand, the answer is not. Paul throughout has been setting law and faith in opposition to each other, and in the process seems to exalt faith at the expense of the law, to even nullify the law altogether. If the old law has just been replaced by a new "law" of faith, then it seems that we are jettisoning the old law.

Paul is responding to a potential objection by his Jewish readers, as in 3:1. So you're now chucking out the window what God gave us and what we have been operating on for the last 1400 years?! In his response, Paul's goal is not just to mollify these Jewish concerns — he actually is rotating the diamond of the Gospel another turn and letting some more glorious light shine through it to delight our souls.

His short answer is, "By no means!", a favorite expression of Paul's that means "Not a chance, no way," (literally, "may it never be"). On the contrary, he says, we uphold the law. And if you're a good Bible student, you'll be asking, what in the world do you mean by that? You've just said in v. 21 that the righteousness of God is "apart from the law" and in v. 28 that one is justified by faith "apart from the works of the law," so how now can you possibly say, "We uphold the law"?

The really challenging thing about this question is that Paul does not go on to explain himself; he instead moves into a new topic in chapter 4. Notice that he will pick up the matter of boasting again in Rom. 4:1,2; the theme of justification apart from the works of the law in Rom. 4:3-8; and the fact that both the circumcised and the uncircumcised are justified by faith in Rom. 4:9ff. But he doesn't expand, unfortunately for us, on what it means that we uphold the law.

1. **The moral demands of the law.** This view says that the essence of the law has not changed, that even after being justified we are not free to do whatever we want; there is still a moral law that is binding on us, particularly the law of love. While Christ has set us free from the ceremonial law, we are still slaves of Christ and His law. While this is true, Paul doesn't begin to speak of our lives in Christ and the need for obedience until the end of chapter 5 and into 6 and 7.

2. **The tutelage of the law.** By that I mean what Paul explains in more detail in Gal. 3:19-25, that the function of the law is to bring us to Christ, to show us that we are unworthy and incapable, to reveal our sin and our desperate need of a Savior, to prepare the way for us to receive all that Christ did to save us. While this also is true, it has not been at all the function of the law that Paul has been talking about in the first 3 chapters of Romans.

3. **The fulfillment of the law.** In this view, what Paul is saying is this: the law was perfectly right and good in everything it demanded (Rom. 7:12; 8:4), there was nothing wrong in the law, nor have its moral requirements ever changed. But now all the demands of the law have been met — in Christ. How so? In two ways, I believe:

First, it is clear that we have not upheld the righteous law, vv. 10-18 — but there is Someone who has. Jesus fully obeyed the Law, He met its every requirement. This is what Christ meant in Mt. 5: 17 when He said He had not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it. He upheld it, He fulfilled it by doing it! Not by erasing it. And in the offer of justification by faith He makes us an amazing deal: I will take your sin on me, and I will put my righteousness on you, I will credit my keeping of the law to your account. In the great exchange of

justification, we get his obedience credited to our account. For those of you who are accountants, it's like a journal entry, a debit here goes to a debit there, and a credit there becomes a credit here. When we come to Christ, we find in Him the exact righteousness the law required and it becomes ours by imputation (2 Cor. 5:21).

But there's a second way in which the doctrine of justification upholds the law. I found it explained best in a commentary by William Newell. The Law said, for example, in Ex. 31:14, "You shall keep the Sabbath, because it is holy for you. Everyone who profanes it shall be put to death. Whoever does any work on it, that soul shall be cut off from among his people." So here's what happened in Num. 15:32-34 ³² *While the people of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath day.* ³³ *And those who found him gathering sticks brought him to Moses and Aaron and to all the congregation.* ³⁴ *They put him in custody, because it had not been made clear what should be done to him.*

How could the law be upheld in this situation? By letting him off, saying you know he didn't really mean it? No. By making him promise to never do it again? No. By changing the law to say he should only, say, serve 30 days in prison instead of dying? No. None of these uphold the law, they all diminish it, demean it, trivialize it. What is the only way to uphold the law? Num:15-35-36 ³⁵ *And the LORD said to Moses, "The man shall be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp."* ³⁶ *And all the congregation brought him outside the camp and stoned him to death with stones, as the LORD commanded Moses.*

The only way that the law could be upheld was by the execution of the penalty prescribed by the law. And this is precisely what Paul's doctrine of justification by faith does. It says, yes, the law was right; yes, in the day you eat of it you shall surely die; yes, the wages of sin is death; yes, without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. But rather than the sinner's death, it becomes the Savior's death that fulfills the law. It is the propitiation by His blood (v. 25) that fully meets the demands of the law — and so justifies the sinner who puts his or her faith in that substitutionary death. When Christ died, it showed that God took the law with full seriousness. "Can there be any greater respect shown to the Law, than that when God determines to save men from its curse, He makes His own Son sustain its curse in their stead, and fulfill for them all its demands?" (Robert Haldane, p. 157)

William Newell shares, "Paul preached Christ crucified: that Christ died for our sins, that 'He tasted death for every man.' And that Israel, who were under the Law, He redeemed from the curse of that Law by being made a curse for them. Thus the cross established law; for the full penalty of all that was against the Divine majesty, against God's holiness. His righteousness, His truth, was forever met, and that not according to man's conception of what sin and its penalty should be, but according to God's judgment, according to the measure of the sanctuary, of high heaven itself!" (*Romans Verse-by-Verse*).

So our faith in Christ provides for the full satisfaction of the demands of the law. Rom. 8:3,4, the righteous requirements of the law are fully met in us.

Conclusion

We have looked again today at the Gospel. We have seen Paul rotate this diamond for us, in response to Jewish objections, such that we have seen new facets of its glory. The Gospel is beautiful because it puts everything in its proper place: us, God, and the law of God. It excludes boasting — and brings rest. It includes everybody — and brings equality. It upholds the law — and declares God to be righteous from beginning to end, and gracious beyond description.

So how do we respond? First, if you have never understood this before, there's good news. It's for you! It takes the burden of performance away from you. But you must believe. You must turn from what you do to what Christ has done and throw the full weight of your trust on Him alone.

If you have already been justified by faith, hear these words from John Stott, "Praising, not boasting, is the characteristic activity of justified believers, now and throughout eternity" (p. 120).

Then let me take you to this passage as we close. In Joshua 24, Joshua rehearses for the people of Israel before he dies the great things God did for them in redeeming them out of Egypt, in delivering them from dangers along the way and in bringing them into the Promised Land. It's a beautiful picture of our own salvation, our justification. In view of all of that, Joshua charges the people in v. 14, "Now fear the Lord and serve Him with all faithfulness." Because of His goodness to you, "Throw away the foreign gods that are among you and yield your hearts to the Lord" (v. 23). And the people said, "We will serve the Lord our God and obey him" (v.24).

Further Questions

1. How can Rom. 3:28, "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" be reconciled with what we saw in 2:13, "For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified"? Great question! This is the fun part of doing biblical theology. Think about it or discuss it in your small group before you read my answer below.

I think 2:13 is speaking of a theoretical possibility—the doers of the law will, in fact, be justified. If you "do" the law perfectly, you will be saved. There will be nothing to condemn you. Paul says in Rom. 10:5, quoting Lev. 18:5, "The man who does these things will live by them."

What, then, is the problem? You should know by now in our study of Romans! The problem is that exactly how many people have obeyed the law, are "the doers of the law"? You're right—exactly zero (Rom. 3:10-18). So, in light of what proved to be a practical impossibility (2:13), God has now created a new way that is a gracious possibility, for us sinners to be justified "apart from the works of the law" through faith in Jesus' work on the cross (3:28).

2. If the Gospel is now available to all people equally, Jew and Gentile, how are we to understand God's sovereign election of some in Rom. 9:15,16? There's a discussion starter for your small group! Although you might want to wait until we have a chance to go through chapter 9 in detail.

Regardless of what Paul is teaching about election in chapter 9, what Paul is saying here in chapter 3 is that there is no distinction between any of God's created people, Jew or Gentile, in terms of their access to the justification that is by faith. The offer is for all, and all who have faith will be justified in exactly the same way.

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