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Romans

Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law. Romans 3:31

Based on his argument that it is faith apart from deeds of the law by which we are justified, Paul now asks, "Do we then make void the law through faith?" The question is obvious and the answer, unfortunately will be misunderstood unless looked at through the work of Jesus on our behalf. Let us first consider Jesus' words from Matthew 5:17 -

"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill."

Using Paul's response, and/or the first half of Matthew 5:17, some teach that we are bound by the precepts of the law. This is taken to varying degrees by different sects and denominations, but in the end, it is entirely contrary to the tenor of the rest of the New Testament. Time and time again, we are instructed by Paul and others that the law is over and done with in Christ Jesus. Here are a few of the many examples of this -

"For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. John 1:17

Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more.." Rom 5:20

"For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace." Rom 6:14

"I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain." Gal 2:21

"You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace." Gal 5:4

"For on the one hand there is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness, for the law made nothing perfect; on the other hand, there is the bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God." Heb 7:18, 19

That the law is obsolete and set aside in Christ is explicitly stated. This means the entire body of the law; no distinction is ever made between a "moral law" and a "ceremonial law." However, many attempt to find such a distinction. The "moral law" would include the Ten Commandments and the "ceremonial law" would include such things as eating pork, sacrificing at the altar in Jerusalem, etc.

By looking for such a distinction, the body of law found in the Old Testament becomes a "pick and choose" code for Christians. Some denominations still teach tithing, or they may pick "no pork" for example. And even those who say only the Ten Commandments still apply will normally worship on a Sunday instead of observing a Saturday Sabbath. Thus they violate their own premise in retaining the Ten Commandments. It is all or none and the answer is "none." The former commandment is annulled in its entirety.

However, this sits uncomfortably with the masses. Does this mean that murder is ok? Of course not. Nine of the ten commandments are explicitly restated in the New Testament and are therefore binding; they are a part of the New Covenant. However, the Sabbath is noted as having been fulfilled. We now enter into God's rest (Hebrews 4:3) and therefore we are free from a specific Sabbath observance.

Understanding this, we must now return to Paul's question, "Do we then make void the law through faith?" Paul says, "Certainly not!" So is there a disconnect in what Paul is saying here and the rest of the New Testament? Certainly not! Instead, it is our misunderstanding of his next comment - "On the contrary, we establish the law." The word translated here as "establish" is *histanomen*. It has been variously translated as strengthen, uphold, fulfill, establish, support, etc.

The law of faith which Paul has been speaking of is a means of validating or strengthening the law. We have failed at fulfilling it, but Jesus fulfilled it on our behalf. Return again to Jesus' words in Matthew 5:17 - "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill." And fulfill it He did!

Now, by faith in His work we are free from the very law which He fulfilled on our behalf. His merits are credited to us when we place our faith in what He did. Thus the law is established in us; it is upheld in us; and thus it is obsolete to us. When something is fulfilled, it is no longer necessary. As He fulfilled it in our stead, we are free from its constraints. This is the amazing work of Jesus on our behalf.

Life application: Do not reinsert the law where it does not belong. Jesus established the New Covenant at the Last Supper. The book of Hebrews tells us that the former commandment is annulled. We cannot mix that which is annulled into what is newly established without showing a lack of trust in Jesus' work. Give God the glory for what He has done through Jesus and then go forward in the power and strength of that which Jesus established for us.

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? Romans 4:1

Paul begins chapter 4 in a manner similar to chapter 3 (the original letter contained no chapter or verse divisions, but these are logical points of demarcation which were later added) by introducing a pertinent question. He has built an argument and defended it in a precise and exacting manner, introducing legal terms and processes in order to validate his points. Each step has been introduced to confirm the concept of justification by faith.

During the progression, he has shown the nature of sin and the nature of fallen man, both under natural law and the Mosaic law. All are bound under sin and none have an innate righteousness. Because of this, none can attain to it by their own works; something external is needed.

And so now he introduces Abraham as a living example of his argument. As Abraham is the father of the Hebrew nation and because he lived hundreds of years before the introduction of the law, he will demonstrate that what occurred between God and Abraham was apart from the law or any deeds of the law. This will confirm his statements at the end of chapter 3 which concerned boasting before God.

He now asks "What shall we say that Abraham our father has found...?" Paul is clearly indicating that Abraham is the father of the faith, a point not missed by those under the law when speaking to Jesus such as during this exchange in John 8 -

"I know that you are Abraham's descendants, but you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. I speak what I have seen with My Father, and you do what you have seen with your father." They answered and said to Him, "Abraham is our father." (vs. 38, 39)

Even the Lord acknowledged this to the people of Israel when He spoke to them through Isaiah -

"Listen to Me, you who follow after righteousness,
You who seek the Lord:
Look to the rock from which you were hewn,
And to the hole of the pit from which you were dug.
Look to Abraham your father,
And to Sarah who bore you;
For I called him alone,
And blessed him and increased him." Isaiah 51:1, 2

Because this is testified to the nation, even from their own Scriptures which established them as a people, then what is deduced concerning Abraham will be all the more sure and binding if it is a demonstrable truth. Paul's next words will begin to establish what Abraham "has found according to the flesh."

The introduction of this phrase "according to the flesh" has been debated and two options are most disputed -

1) That Abraham is the physical father of the people; he is their ancestor and they are his descendants.

2) That "according to the flesh" is tied to the words "has found." In other words, "What thing in the person of Abraham is found to be true concerning our previous argument?"

The second is the obvious and correct option. Paul has been speaking about how righteousness is found and how one stands justified before God. He will continue with this thought by giving the practical example of Abraham. The fact that he is the father of the faithful is true, but how he became that way is what is of importance to Paul and his argument. The first is dependent on the second, but the reciprocal is not the case.

Life application: Use caution when reading commentaries, particularly in biblical matters. Don't bind yourself to one interpretation until you have researched other possibilities. The Bible is a unified whole and it will always internally validate itself. Logical arguments must rest on ultimate truths and the conclusions must be in line with the overall objectives presented in Scripture.

For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. Romans 4:2

Paul's words today would be set against the thought of the Jew who says, "Abraham was justified through circumcision." And again, "Abraham was justified by the offering of his son on Mount Moriah." To argue against this, he will introduce Scripture which will stand against this thought.

It's important to note here though that James 2:21 seems to indicate contrary to this -

"Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?"

There are important concepts which must be understood clearly before we can grab the words of James 2 and stand before God and boast in our deeds. The first is that the term ek or "out of" is used by both Paul and James concerning works, not the term dia or "through." Although the difference may seem small, Paul consistently shows that justification does not come "through" works. The second thing to note about James 2 is that the example of Abraham and the others given (such as Rahab the harlot) are fully explained in Hebrews 11. There, they are clearly described as deeds of faith. "By faith Abraham..."

In other words, the faith in God's word led to the deed, not the other way around. The deed had no part in the justification of righteousness. So where did the justification come from? Paul will explain it quite clearly in the following verse. To set it up though, he gives today's verse. "If Abraham was justified by works..." The words "if Abraham was" implies that he wasn't, but the introduction is proper to show why. Therefore, "If Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about."

Of course, if we do something to merit favor, then we can boast in what we've done. If we are in a battle and everyone is certain to die unless an immediate source of relief is found, then the actions of the person providing the relief could lead to boasting. "Johnny charged the hill alone, took out the enemy guns, destroyed the mine field with a blasting charge, and had lunch waiting for us when we arrived at the bunker..." Well, Johnny can boast. He didn't have faith that he would make it though. In fact, he probably thought he would die trying. He simply saw no other action and took it. It was a step in the dark.

Faith is not a step in the dark. Rather it is a step into God's revealed light; it is trust that what He has said is true and will come to pass. This is why Paul finishes today's verse with, "but not before God." It is the introduction into verse 3 which will explain why Abraham's faith was not a step into the dark, nor was it a point on which he could boast. He bore no part of his justification, but rather it was an act of God based on his faith alone.

This leads to the final point today. Faith... faith is not a deed. Exercising one's faith is not somehow usurping God's gift as many Calvinists would claim. Their idea is that God regenerates us to believe, we then believe, and then are saved and justified. This is nonsense of the highest order and it crosses the lines of reason. It also violates the tenor of Scripture on a multitude of levels.

When man fell, he gained the "knowledge of good and evil" and, as God said, "the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil." Something was lost, but something was gained. Using reason is a part of what we are. There may be nothing inherently good in us, but we can "see the good" in God and accept it. This reason, leading to faith, is not a work and it in no way diminishes the glory God deserves. On the contrary, it exalts Him because we use our free will, granted by Him, to choose Him. God regenerating somebody in order for them to be saved does the opposite. It would demonstrate God's need to be glorified. But God lacks nothing, including the need to be glorified.

By mixing categories of what occurs in our salvation, we come up with confusion and a loss of what has happened in creation since the beginning; it skews the plan of redemption which is laid out in Scripture. Man chose to disobey and this is in no way laid at the feet of the Creator. Man chooses to accept His offer and it is completely and absolutely a gift for which God alone receives the glory. It is belief in what God says, not mere belief in God as we will see in verse 3.

Life application: Jesus and the apostles, throughout the New Testament, state time and time again words such as "believe," "call on," "have faith," "trust," etc. These are things that we do throughout our lives. The ability to do these things establishes us as rational, free-willed beings. This is a gift of God and therefore when we exercise them "for" God, it is still ultimately "of" God, not ourselves. Today, take time to revel in what God has given you... choice. Now go and give Him the glory for the choice of accepting what He has done for You - the giving of Jesus!