

**ONE GOD WHO JUSTIFIES**  
**(SUNDAY, JANUARY 29, 2012)**

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**Scripture Reading:** Exodus 19; Rom. 3:27-31

The Apostle Paul wrote the book of Romans from the city of Corinth in approximately the year A.D. 57,<sup>1</sup> some 27 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And then approximately three years later, Paul came to Rome as a prisoner where he lived under house arrest for two years.

Acts 28:23-29 gives a brief window into Paul's ministry in Rome and also important background for understanding the book of Romans.

**Acts 28:23** So when they [Jews] had appointed him a day, many came to him at *his* lodging, to whom he explained and solemnly testified of the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus from both the Law of Moses and the Prophets, from morning till evening. **24** And some were persuaded by the things which were spoken, and some disbelieved. **25** So when they did not agree among themselves, they departed after Paul had said one word: "The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers, **26** saying,

*"Go to this people and say:  
'Hearing you will hear, and shall not understand;  
And seeing you will see, and not perceive;*

**27** *For the hearts of this people have grown dull.  
Their ears are hard of hearing,  
And their eyes they have closed,  
Lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears,  
Lest they should understand with their hearts and turn,  
So that I should heal them."*

**Acts 28:28** "Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!" **29** And when he had said these words, the Jews departed and had a great dispute among themselves.

It is often said that Christianity is a break off from Judaism. But do you think the Apostle Paul would have viewed it this way? The truth is that Judaism is a rejection of God's truth established in the OT and then fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Judaism is a breakoff from faith in Jesus Christ and the proper understanding of the Law of Moses and the Prophets.

Thankfully as we see from the end of the book of Acts, there were Jews who were persuaded by the truth as presented by Paul. They were brought to saving faith in Jesus Christ. But those who rejected the truth followed in the same pattern of unbelief that the prophet Isaiah confronted.

What we see in the book of Romans, I think confidently we can say, is the same message that Paul shared with the Jews who came to see him in Rome.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the chronology provided by William Ramsay in *St. Paul the Roman Traveler*.

And we also confess that this same message continues to speak to all people today — the hope that is found in Jesus Christ and the relevant and severe warning against any form of self-trust, self-confidence, or any other form of boasting.

### **There is no place for boasting before the One God who justifies.**

We will look at Romans 3:27-31 in three parts, vv. 27-28, vv. 29-30, and v. 31.

#### **1. THERE IS NO PLACE FOR BOASTING, VV. 27-28**

**Rom. 3:27** Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. **28** Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.

Before we look in greater detail at verses 27-31, it is good to see Paul's purpose in these final verses of chapter 3. After giving such a beautiful introduction to the gospel message in verses 21-26, we see Paul dealing with questions and remaining misconceptions in verses 27-31. Paul resumes the style of writing we have seen before, sometimes called diatribe, the use of questions and answers.

The end of chapter 3 also prepares the way for the first half of chapter 4. Paul deals with boasting in verse 27. That is the subject of 4:1-2. Paul in verse 27b and 28 speaks again of justification by faith and not by works. It is this same point that Paul explains using the examples of Abraham and David in 4:3-8. Finally, in verses 29-30, Paul deals with the basis for unity between Jews and Gentiles. It is this same point that is given fuller explanation in 4:9-17.<sup>2</sup>

There is significant debate today about the nature of Jewish belief in what is called the second temple period, which includes the time in Israel's history when the NT was written. Part of this debate involves what is called the **New Perspective on Paul** movement. What is most important in this debate is what does Scripture show about the belief of the Jewish people at the time of Christ? Like in other areas of human thought, many people place supposed scientific and historical research above the truth of Scripture. This is not to say that there is no value in historical studies, but they must be guided by the testimony of Scripture if they are to have any value.

For example, Paul in verse 27 speaks of boasting? The question is what is the nature of that boasting? Paul obviously wasn't talking about boasting about athletics or the world of entertainment. So what is the boasting of verse 27? Well, already we have seen Paul speak about boasting.

**Rom. 2:17** Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God,

**Rom. 2:23** You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?

And then just a few verses later in Romans 4, Paul also speaks about boasting.

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

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<sup>2</sup> Moo, 245.

It makes good sense, then, to see that in verse 27 Paul is speaking particularly about Jewish boasting. And more specifically we can say based on Romans 4:2 and other places in the NT, that it was boasting related to obedience and salvation.<sup>3</sup>

There is very good evidence coming from Jewish writings that spoke of God's grace in electing Israel and yet that also emphasized the importance of obedience as essential to final salvation. One Jewish writing from about the time of the NT, 2 Baruch, in chapter 51 verse 3 speaks of those who at the last judgment are justified because of their obedience to the Law.<sup>4</sup>

This fits very well with the parable that Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector. Why did Jesus tell that parable? **Luke 18:9** says that Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others.

Remember the prayer of the Pharisee?

“God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.”

Was Jesus saying that every single Jewish person was like this? No. Jesus was speaking to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous. The prayer of the Pharisee is an excellent example of what some Jews certainly did believe – Yes, they were in a special way chosen by God, but their obedience to the Law would be part of their justification when they stood before God.

**Is there any room for boasting when it comes to finding favor with God?** Is there any room for even just a little bit of human effort in terms of being able to stand in righteousness before a holy God?

There is absolutely no room! It is God who shuts the door on any form of boasting.

I think one observation that can be made here is the continued danger of the sin of pride. Even those who have been shown God's grace must be on the guard against the insidious nature of pride.

John Calvin stated:

The Apostle, after having, with reasons abundantly strong, cast down men from their confidence in works, now triumphs over their folly: and this exulting conclusion was necessary; for on this subject, to teach us would not have been enough; it was necessary that the Holy Spirit should loudly thunder, in order to lay prostrate our loftiness.

Looking further at verse 27, what is the reason that Paul says that there is no room for boasting? He asks the question, **by what law?** And here there is some difficulty in knowing precisely what Paul means here by the word law. The word law is used 74 times in the book of Romans. It doesn't always have the same identical meaning. It probably is best to understand that in verse 27, the word law means **principle** or **rule**.<sup>5</sup> It is the law or principle of faith that shows that there is absolutely no room for boasting.

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<sup>3</sup> Moo, 246-247.

<sup>4</sup> 2 Baruch 51:3 Also (as for) the glory of those who have now been justified in My law, who have had understanding in their life, and who have planted in their heart the root of wisdom, then their splendor shall be glorified in changes, and the form of their face shall be turned into the light of their beauty, that they may be able to acquire and receive the world which does not die, which is then promised to them. See also Witherington, 103.

<sup>5</sup> Moo, 249.

Faith, as I have mentioned before, is often used today to mean something very different from how it is used here in Romans. The different religions today are commonly called faith traditions. We are the faith community, the people of faith.

Another way that faith is often used today means something you believe in without any evidence, something that would be even in opposition to science.

But the faith of verse 27 is not some nebulous belief in something of which there is no evidence, a wish or a hope that something might be true. No, saving faith is a gift that God gives to a believer so that you are directed to trust and rest entirely in the work of the Triune God for salvation.

**Eph. 2:8** For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, **9** not of works, lest anyone should boast. **10** For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

So no one that has been given saving faith has any reason for boasting. No, the response that true faith produces is humility, thankfulness, and the desire that God be glorified and that others also would also be given saving faith.

Verse 28 in the NKJV begins with the word **therefore**. Other translations here read **for**, which might be a better translation here.<sup>6</sup> Verse 28 then is another reason why there is no place for boasting, for we **conclude** or we **hold** that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds or the works of the law.

Verse 28 and the truth that we discussed last week are truly some of the most important things that we believe about salvation. The truth of verse 28 is summarized in the one of the important summary statements of the Reformation – sola fide – by faith alone. The word alone is not directly part of verse 28, but it certainly is in line with verse 28.

And as I have mentioned before, the phrase works of the law should not be just restricted to mean certain ceremonial laws like circumcision, food laws, and the like. In terms of being able to stand righteous before God, the only way possible is to be justified, declared righteous, because your sin was placed on Christ and His righteousness was counted as your righteousness. So what work of man could ever add to or be compared to the perfect work and righteousness of Jesus Christ?

Some have accused the Reformers of wrongly seeing a connection between Jewish legalism and the false teaching of the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation. I don't know of anybody who says that they are identical, but certainly we rightfully recognize similarities.

The Council of Trent which set forth the official position of the Roman Catholic Church in opposition to the teachings of the Reformation declared the following, which I quote.

Canon 24: "If any one saith, that the justice received is not preserved and also increased before God through good works; but that the said works are merely the fruits and signs of Justification obtained, but not a cause of the increase thereof; let him be anathema."

Canon 30: "If any one saith, that, after the grace of Justification has been received, to every penitent sinner the guilt is remitted, and the debt of eternal punishment is blotted out in such wise, that there remains not any debt of temporal punishment to be discharged either

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<sup>6</sup> There is a textual variant that results in the different translations.

in this world, or in the next in Purgatory, before the entrance to the kingdom of heaven can be opened (to him); let him be anathema."

There is, as you know, much more that was part of the recovery of the truth that was part of the Reformation, but it was the doctrine of justification by grace alone on account of Christ alone through faith alone that was *the* truth of the standing or the falling of the church.<sup>7</sup>

If the Reformers viewed this as being so important, how dare we neglect its importance. We must seek to understand these most critical issues as best we can.

## **2. THERE IS ONE GOD WHO WILL JUSTIFY, VV. 29-30**

**Romans 3:29** Or is *He* the God of the Jews only? Is *He* not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, **30** since *there is* one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

Some who are critical of Reformation thought seek to argue that justification is not so much about being declared right before God but more a principle of unity between Jew and Gentile. They say that the reason why Paul emphasized the teaching of justification was that it was a way to bring about unity and fellowship between Jews and Gentiles.

But correctly we should understand justification is both about the salvation of individual believers and the basis for true unity between Jew and Gentile.

Certainly at the heart of Paul's discussion is how Jews and Gentiles relate to each other and how both Jews and Gentiles have only one hope of salvation.

**Rom. 1:16** For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

Then as we spent a number of weeks considering, Paul in Romans 1:18-3:20 shows that both Jews and Gentiles apart from Christ are under the wrath of God because of their sin. What is the summary verse of this entire section?

**Rom. 3:23** for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

If justification is by works, then only those under the covenant of the law can be justified and God would be only the God of the Jews. But since justification is not by the works of the law, then God is God of both Jews and Gentiles.

**Deut. 6:4** "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!

Paul declares, "There is one God who justifies." Paul takes one of the basic tenants of Jewish belief and turns it against Judaism.<sup>8</sup>

Note verse 30 – **circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith**. It is probably best to see this just as stylistic variation rather than try to make a point based on different prepositions.<sup>9</sup> Prepositions are very important for theology, but in this case it is best to see stylistic

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<sup>7</sup> Cornelis Venema, *The Gospel of Free Acceptance in Christ*, 12. Emphasis original.

<sup>8</sup> Moo, 251.

<sup>9</sup> Moo, 252. John Calvin took a different position, but his argument is not convincing in this case.

variation, rather than some different way of justification for Jews and Gentiles or another point being made.

This is a familiar point, but verses 29 and 30 are some of the most important verses **for us** as those from the nations. How very important that this truth has been clearly spelled out for us. It is in the OT, but here it is made absolutely clear for us!

We see here the importance of unity based on the truth and God's Work of grace. It is dangerous when men bring unity at the expense of truth. This should grieve us. Let us also trust that God is working in ways greater than we can appreciate and see.

### **3. WE ESTABLISH THE LAW THROUGH FAITH, V. 31**

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

You can see how through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul moves very carefully when dealing with such important issues. In Romans 6, two times, Paul also stops to ask a critical question, one that might have come from misunderstanding.

Since the righteousness of God apart from the law is now revealed and since justification never has come through obedience to the law, the question then remains, does faith nullify, cancel, overthrow, or make the law void, as various translations read?

The very clear and powerful answer is, certainly not!

The more difficult question is what exactly is meant by the law in verse 31? And then, second, what does it mean that the law is established or upheld?

It would seem that the best understanding of the law in this verse is that it refers to the commands found throughout the Pentateuch as summarized in the 10 Commandments.

Faith does not make these commandments to be nullified or canceled. Rather true faith in God establishes the law.

What is the meaning of establish or what I think is a better translation, uphold?

Douglas Moo suggests three options for this.

- 1) Does Paul mean that Christians are obliged to continue to obey the moral demands of the law?
- 2) Is Paul anticipating Romans 13:8-10 where the command to love is set forth as the fulfillment of the law?
- 3) Is Paul speaking how the full satisfaction of the demands of the law are found through faith in Christ?<sup>10</sup>

I think we rightfully say, yes, to each one of these aspects.

**Rom. 8:4** that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

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<sup>10</sup> Moo, 254-255.

**Rom. 13:8** Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. **9** For the commandments, “*You shall not commit adultery,*” “*You shall not murder,*” “*You shall not steal,*” “*You shall not bear false witness,*” “*You shall not covet,*” and if *there is* any other commandment, are *all* summed up in this saying, namely, “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” **10** Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

The answer to the first question concerning the continued validity of OT law can also be demonstrated in many examples where Paul turns to the OT to deal with different situations in the churches he oversaw.

In 2 Corinthians 6:14, Paul speaking about unequal marriages between a believer and unbeliever is citing a principle from Deut. 22:10. When Paul dealt with the horrific situation in Corinth where a man was living in great sin, Paul was applying Leviticus 18:8 and Deut. 22:30.<sup>11</sup> When James in James 5:4 was dealing with fraud committed against workers, he was applying Lev. 19:13 and Deut. 24:14-15.<sup>12</sup>

Now we recognize that there are ceremonial commands that we do not keep in the same way as when they were first given. These laws, which in a special way were shadows of the great work that Jesus would accomplish in His perfect life and in His death, are now no longer kept in the same outward forms as they were given. But even in this we can still say that in faith these principles are upheld. They are upheld in the finished work of Jesus Christ. It is not simply that they no longer have relevance and can be cut out of our Bibles.

We have discussed these matters at many times over the years. Lord willing we can continue to give attention to some of these difficult questions for they are very relevant for 21<sup>st</sup> century living.

## CONCLUSION

As we close I would like us to return to the second word found in the book of Romans, where Paul described himself as a slave to Jesus Christ.

We talked about the significance of this identification in light of Paul’s great calling and following in the example of OT believers who in certain cases were also known as slaves or servants of God.

In light of especially Romans 3:21-31, can you see why Paul would call himself a slave to Jesus Christ? Is it not one of the most appropriate descriptions for those who have been redeemed from the power of sin by the shed blood of Jesus Christ?

Perhaps if you just had a merely human master, you might think you could do enough to really impress him and maybe he would in the end say, you are really too good of a slave for me to own you, I will give you your freedom so that you no longer have to serve me.

But who can ever compare their obedience, determination, and faithfulness to that of Jesus Christ? Do you ever think you can impress Jesus with your obedience, with your accomplishments? I am not saying that Jesus is an impossible taskmaster, but will your obedience ever match up to His perfection? Of course not. And this means there is no sense of trying to earn enough favor to pay back what Jesus Christ has done for you. There is no sense of trying to get even with the debt you owe. No, forever, you are to be a slave to him.

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<sup>11</sup> Greg Bahnsen, *By This Standard*, 128-129.

<sup>12</sup> Bahnsen, 130.

This is both the path of true freedom and also the call to whole-hearted commitment and obedience to Him.

Isaac Watts in the hymn, “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross,” expressed it this way.

Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were a present far too small; Love so amazing,  
so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.

**There is no place for boasting before the One God who justifies.**

**Prayer**

**Hymn – 440**

**BENEDICTION – EPHESIANS 3:20-21**

Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.