

2. Justification by Faith Alone (3:27-31)

This final context in chapter three does not reflect a new direction in Paul's argumentation as some have supposed, but rather a continuation of it along a specific line. That is, verses 3:21-26 were concerned primarily with the atonement as the basis upon which God's righteousness has been vindicated and becomes the property of sinful men. Nevertheless, Paul did emphasize at the very outset of that context that the divine righteousness comes to men through the vehicle of faith (3:21-22), which emphasis serves to reengage his direct treatment of the gospel introduced in 1:17-18. It is this matter of *righteousness by faith* to which Paul now turned his attention with his Roman readers, and that focus continues through the end of the fourth chapter. In this section Paul follows a distinct pattern of explication, explaining and highlighting faith through a series of contrasts or antitheses:

- In the present context he contrasts faith with the *Law of Moses and its works* (3:27-31).
- Using Abraham as preeminent exemplar, Paul then contrasts faith with *human works* of whatever kind (4:1-8), with *circumcision* (4:9-12), with the *Law as being foreign to promise* (4:13-16), and with the normative human principle of *living by sight* (4:17-22).

By means of these contrasts, properly understood and correlated with one another, Paul intended that a marvelous portrait of faith would emerge: ***faith is shown to consist in forsaking all effort toward and sense of personal righteousness so as to entrust oneself entirely and confidently to the promises of God, regardless of what presently appears.***

Accordingly, Douglas Moo provides an excellent introduction into this great section of Paul's Roman epistle:

“With these contrasts Paul enunciates what has become a hallmark of the Reformation teaching: sola fide - that ‘faith alone’ is the means by which a person can be brought into relationship with the God of the Bible. Sola fide, Paul argues in this section, is necessary in order to maintain sola gratia: ‘by grace alone.’ But it is also necessary in order to ensure that Gentiles have equal access with Jews to the one God. The inclusion of Gentiles in the people of God has been God’s plan all along, as his dealings with Abraham demonstrate. The revelation of God’s righteousness ‘apart from the law’ (v. 21) has now opened up this possibility in a way that was not the case before.”

It is also important to note that Paul's present treatment of the topic of faith is polemical more than didactic. That is, he was continuing the approach begun in chapter two in which he insistently argued for the ultimate worthlessness of the various points of Jewish confidence before God - preeminently their sense of righteousness obtained through the *Law of Moses* and the rite of *circumcision*. Confidence in these things was a damning delusion, because they could not supply the righteousness demanded by God: *“He is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit.”*

But in taking this position Paul was neither despising these essential components of historical Judaism nor relegating them to absolute irrelevance. Quite the contrary, his intention was to show the vitally important role they served in the upward movement of redemptive history. Like everything else in God's previous dealings with men, the Law of Moses and circumcision were pointedly *Christological*. But precisely because they were preparatory and prophetic they were also necessarily inadequate. Paul's polemic against them derived not from their own innate irrelevance, but the overarching principle of *promise/fulfillment*. Whatever form they may have taken, the shadows are not the substance; they only anticipated the substance; they served the *promise* as they pointed to its fulfillment (ref. 3:21-22, 31, 4:9-24; cf. also Galatians 3:1-29; Colossians 2:6-23).

Paul's polemical orientation in 3:27-4:25 is evident first from the content of his argumentation, but also from the way in which he presented it. As with the second chapter, he again employed the literary device of *diatribe*, advancing his argument through a series of questions and answers as if he were directly interacting with an antagonist. After posing each question, he subsequently responded to it, with each response provoking still another question and response.

The context immediately at hand (3:27-31) can be partitioned around this structure. In it Paul raised three distinct arenas of questioning (3:27, 29a, 31a), with each being answered in turn (3:27-28, 29b-30, 31b).

- a. The first line of questioning pertains to a *direct implication* of the entirely unilateral nature of true righteousness in the gospel (3:27). If it is indeed true that human righteousness - with respect to both justification and sanctification - is only attributable to God's grace, mercy, and power in Christ as Paul asserted in 3:21-26, then where does that leave men in their sense of themselves: "*Where then is boasting?*"

Paul's answer to this question is precisely what would be expected given his understanding of the gospel and its implication for men: *all boasting that has reference to oneself is entirely excluded*. This insistence, in turn, raises the closely-related question concerning what sort of "law" - in other words, what sort of *governing principle* - stands behind this absolute exclusion. In response Paul observed that there are only two possible "laws" that can exclude all boasting:

- 1) The first principle that might prohibit boasting is that of **works**. Many have understood these "works" as being limited to matters of Jewish performance under the Law of Moses, especially given the emphasis of 2:1-3:3. While such works were clearly included in Paul's thinking, they comprise only a part of it. For it is evident from his subsequent argumentation regarding Abraham that he was speaking of *all human works* of whatever kind (ref. 4:1-12), even as Abraham's "works" predated the Old Covenant and so had nothing to do with it. Moreover, his reference to Abraham indicates that it was not Christ's coming that has made all boasting illegitimate; men have never had a boast with God.

Having determined that these “works” refer to every form of human effort and accomplishment, what exactly did Paul mean by asking whether all boasting is *excluded* by virtue of a “law of works”? The answer is found in the universal human insistence upon placing one’s confidence and sense of righteousness in one’s own works. In this regard it does not matter whether those works are orchestrated in conformity to the Law of Moses as was the case with Israel, in accordance with some other civil or moral code as with Gentile cultures, or even upon the basis of purely personal, self-derived ethics. Thus Paul’s point:

Does a “law of works” exclude boasting? Not at all. Quite the contrary, one’s personal performance in relation to some standard is invariably a source and instigator of human boasting. Even as pride and its boasting are the very marrow of human sin, so pride’s lifeblood is the personal sense of achievement.

2) But whereas the principle of human accomplishment insures and fuels boasting, the **law of faith** absolutely precludes it. The reason this is so is that true faith has no positive reference to self whatsoever. By its very nature faith looks entirely away from self to God, finding nothing of righteousness outside of God, and therefore seeking all personal righteousness in Him alone. *This is why Paul, throughout all of his epistles, sets out faith and works as mutually exclusive, antithetical principles of human existence and human righteousness.*

- Every human being that has ever lived has been governed by one or the other, but not both.
- It cannot be otherwise, for *faith* has reference to the true God, His righteousness, and His provision; *works* have reference to every other “god” and its righteousness and provision.
- Furthermore, because every pseudo-deity - whatever specific form it happens to take - ultimately refers back to man’s innate worship and service of himself, it is evident that the “law of works” finds its true reference point in *self*. This is precisely the reason why it is impossible for “works” to preclude boasting.

The mutual exclusivity of faith and works as principles of human life and confidence is overtly established by Paul in 3:28: “*We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.*” Again, the meaning of “works” in this context must not be limited to deeds performed in connection with the Law of Moses. Nevertheless, Paul clearly was not *excluding* such deeds, and inasmuch as his argumentation has a pointed thrust toward Jewish confidence derived from the Law, it was entirely appropriate for him to speak of the contrast between faith and works in terms of works done under the Law of Moses.

- b. Having insisted in verse 3:28 that justification is by faith apart from works, Paul proceeded to substantiate his claim by his second line of questioning: “*Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also?*” (3:29a). These rhetorical questions anticipate the obvious answer that he himself provided: “*Yes, of Gentiles also.*” Paul’s point in raising this issue was not to establish that there is but one God, but that the one God - consistent with His absolute justice and the universal predicament of men - necessarily justifies all men in the same way. God does not have one means of justification for the Jew and another for the Gentile.

Specifically, his intention was to show the Jews among his readers that if righteousness and its consequent justification come through conformity to the Law of Moses, then only those under the Law can be justified. The Gentiles, therefore, are left without hope of righteousness, and God effectively becomes the God of the Jews only. In many ways, this is precisely what the Jews believed. They had been given the Law (torah), and that covenant established them as Yahweh’s peculiar people. Because it established Israel’s *unique* relationship with God, the Law also marked out the Gentiles as “lawless,” and therefore estranged from God and His Israelite covenant sons; the torah effectively provided a wall of separation between Israel and the nations (Ephesians 2:11-16).

“In Judaism, God was the God of Gentiles only by virtue of his creative work, while only the Jews enjoy any meaningful relationship with God; this is expressed in later Jewish text: ‘I am God over all that came into the world, but I have joined my name only with you [Israel].’ Only by accepting the torah could Gentiles hope to become related to God in the same way as Jews.” (Douglas Moo)

This citation demonstrates how thoroughly the Jews associated their relationship and standing with God with their possession of and conformity to the Law of Moses. Therefore, Paul’s insistence that righteousness and justification come entirely *apart* from the Law was a radical concept, and one that was staunchly resisted, not only by the Jews, but even by some Jewish Christians (Judaizers).

Nevertheless, one of the foundations of Old Covenant Judaism was the confessional maxim, “*The Lord is one*” (ref. Deuteronomy 6:1-9). Every Jew understood and believed that Yahweh was the God of all the earth, but few Israelites recognized that His determination with respect to the Gentiles effectively nullified the Jewish conviction that justification before God came by personal conformity to the Law. For if it were indeed true that, with the coming of His kingdom, God was justifying the Gentiles as He had promised through His prophets, then one of two things must also be true: either the Gentiles were being brought under the torah, or the torah was irrelevant in the matter of justification. Although there was some pressure among Jewish Christians toward the former, the gospel and Paul’s proclamation of it made it clear that the latter was the case: “*God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one*” (3:30). Both Jew and Gentile are justified solely by faith in Christ Jesus through the propitiation in His blood.

- c. Finally, Paul concluded this context with a question-answer couplet that anticipated the likely charge to be leveled against him, namely that by insisting upon justification by faith he was advocating antinomianism: “*Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law*” (3:31). Paul’s anticipation of this charge was well founded; first because his gospel was one of free grace and righteousness by faith alone, but also because it was amply supported by his own personal experience as an ambassador of Christ.

As much as the issue of the relationship between *law* and *faith* created a firestorm in Paul’s ministry, it continues to be hotly contested to this day. The reason for the fervent debate is that this couplet has crucial implications for the two primary theological systems of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology, and each arrives at a different interpretation of Paul’s meaning. Some have sought to resolve the difficulty by finding in the word *law* in 3:31 a reference to the Old Testament scriptures in general, which interpretation has Paul simply affirming that the Scripture testified of justification by faith (cf. 1:1-4, 3:21-22). The problem is that this meaning of “law” cannot be supported by the immediate context; it is virtually certain that Paul had in mind the Law of Moses.

With respect to Dispensationalism, because it has as a fundamental tenet the absolute distinction between Old Covenant Israel and the New Covenant Church, it must find a way to understand how faith *establishes* the Law when these principles govern different people groups in different dispensations overseen by different covenants. C. I. Scofield’s comments on this text are helpful: “*The sinner establishes the law in its right use and honour by confessing his guilt, and acknowledging that by it he is justly condemned. Christ, on the sinner’s behalf, establishes the law by enduring its penalty, death.*”

Although his second statement says nothing directly about how faith establishes the Law, Scofield’s observations supply some insight into how dispensationalists understand the Law. Dispensationalism views salvation history as consisting of discrete “dispensations,” each of which is distinguished by God testing men’s obedience in relation to a specific revelation of His will. The “law dispensation” that governed theocratic Israel had as its “test” the Law of Moses. Because of this interpretive structure dispensationalists view the Law more in terms of *commandment* than *prophecy*; it was Israel’s standard of righteousness rather than a typological covenant that *itself* prophesied of Christ and His New Covenant.

For this reason Dispensationalism understands Paul’s statement to mean that the legal righteousness presented to Israel and demanded of them by the Law of Moses becomes in the “Church dispensation” the means for establishing the guilt of both Jew and Gentile. By virtue of its comprehensive righteous standard, the Law brings upon men’s consciences the awareness of their guilt and condemnation and so moves them to faith in Christ; thus, faith establishes the Law. At the same time, the Law was the governing principle for the previous dispensation, and so has no *direct* relationship to the New Covenant believer.

Although Covenant Theology starts from a radically different perspective, it arrives at some of the same conclusions. For contrary to Dispensationalism, which views biblical and revelation history from the vantage point of numerous discrete, “stand-alone” dispensations, Covenant Theology sees all of salvation history from the time of the Fall as coming under a single “covenant of grace.” Whereas Dispensationalism is a system characterized by *discontinuity*, Covenant Theology is a system constructed upon the principle of seamless *continuity*.

Accordingly, it regards the Old and New Covenants as different administrations of the *same* covenant. For this reason it cannot legitimately make any real distinction between the Mosaic Code and the New Covenant, and so is forced to make Jesus Christ essentially the final interpreter of Moses. This also means that the Law given at Sinai must remain essentially unchanged and retain the same binding authority over the Christian as it had over the former Israelite “Church.” As observed previously, the way that this is accomplished is by separating out a “moral” partition of the Law of Moses and making it perpetually binding while allowing the passing of the Law’s other aspects. The result of this perspective is that *law* stands as Covenant Theology’s governing hermeneutical principle.

This being so, it ought to be obvious how most Reformed individuals interpret Paul’s words: *faith establishes the Law in that it teaches the Christian that the Mosaic “moral” Law continues in force and with the same authority as it did under the previous, Israelite administration of the “covenant of grace.”* Unlike Dispensationalism, which has the Law simply leading men to faith, Covenant Theology preserves the binding authority of the Law under the New Covenant.

While dispensationalists are closer to Paul’s meaning in this passage, they nonetheless overlook the *prophetic* role of the Law, which is an important aspect of Paul’s redemptive-historical perspective (cf. 1:1-4, 3:21-22). For this reason it cannot be omitted from any valid interpretation of his words. When viewed in this light, it becomes evident that central to Paul’s meaning is that faith establishes the Law in that *the Law spoke of Christ, and therefore promised its own fulfillment in Him*. For the same reason, it also promised that it would find its fulfillment in men through their union with Him; as it regards men, the Law was to be fulfilled through the righteousness that is by faith. In this way the Law *promised* faith, and faith *fulfills* the Law; each mutually “establishes” the other.

This is precisely Paul’s argument later in 8:1-4 when he insists that the righteousness required by the Law is fully met *in* those who are in Christ. The Law established Israel’s relationship with God and showed the nation what it is to be a true covenant son living in perfect communion with Yahweh. *Thus, by its demands the Law revealed the truth of who man is as divine image-bearer*. This is the overarching sense in which the Law prophesied of Christ; it pointed to the true Man and true covenant Son, and so finds its fulfillment in Him. But in the same way it points to and finds its fulfillment in those who are joined to Him and, by His Spirit, are being progressively and certainly transformed into His likeness.