

Sermons through

Romans

The Law of Faith

Romans 3:27-31

With Study Questions

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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. 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. ³¹ Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law (Romans 3:27-31).

Introduction

Parents are generally very careful to avoid showing favoritism to their children. This is well-advised since the notion that you may not be the favored child can easily breed rebellion. It is somewhat shocking that Jacob (below referred to as Israel) did not exercise such wisdom.

Now Israel loved Joseph more than all his children, because he *was* the son of his old age. Also he made him a tunic of *many* colors. ⁴ But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him (Genesis 37:3, 4).

We see, at least in some sense, that the entire story of the atrocious behavior of Joseph's brothers (the conspiring to kill him, then to sell him into slavery, the lying to their father, etc.) begins with the knowledge that none of them were the favored of the father. The father loved Joseph more and Joseph was the recipient of a beautiful coat that daily reminded the brothers that they were lacking—understudies in the drama produced by their father's heart.

The passage we are studying this morning is thick with doctrine, and in our brief time we will unpack what we can. But I think it would be a great

error for us to ignore the Apostle Paul's pastoral concern for those who would read his words (including us). It would be an even greater error to miss how this message, while deflating to the pride of man, is correspondingly glorifying to the power and grace of God in the cross of Christ. As Calvin wrote:

...it was necessary that the Holy Spirit should loudly thunder, in order to lay prostrate our loftiness. ¹

It has also been said:

It is a fundamental requisite of all true religion that it tend to humble the sinner and exalt God; and every system which breeds self-righteousness, or cherishes boasting, bears falsehood on its face²

I think it is no stretch to suggest that all Christian comfort and all Christian conduct find their genesis in the message of this passage. If we, like Joseph's brothers, are not confident of the loving Fatherhood of God, we cannot be confident to find peace that the one who "**did not spare His own Son**" will, with that sacrifice, "**freely give us all things.**" (**Romans 8:32**). The great peace (so often at odds with our flesh) of knowing that even the talons of darkness which so often seek to scratch away at our comfort, cannot work independently of the sovereign power of our heavenly Father.

When Paul pleaded three times that the harassing messenger of Satan (whatever that might have been) would leave him, the answer he received from God was "**My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness**" (**2 Corinthians 12:9**). Paul knew that even the devil was a tool in the hand of God to keep him humble (2 Corinthians 12:7). Perhaps Paul was hoping there would be an easier way to achieve said humility.

¹ Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed.). Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 3:27). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

² Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 3:31). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

But when we speak of the sufficiency of God's grace (if we are to comprehend the magnitude of God's grace) it is as if the Father is saying to Paul "You have my favor—the favor of the one true living Almighty God in whose hands Satan is a puppet and the nations like a drop from a bucket (Isaiah 40:15)—and that is more than adequate for the task."

And it is in light of this deep and unsearchable mercy—this pardoned and favored status in which all who trust in Christ can rest—that Paul will later call us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1). It is in light of passage before us that the Christian has both the great comfort as well as the highest call.

The doctrine contained in this passage was also a source of great controversy for our brothers and sisters in ages past. The doctrine which delivers all who believe from the frustrated and secondary status of Joseph's brothers and makes them one with Joseph as a favored body (Joseph being a type of Christ), was a doctrine which threatened the power of certain clergy and power mongers. It is a doctrine for which we must fight. It was said of the Reformation:

To make good this doctrine, and reseal it in the faith and affection of the Church, was worth all the bloody struggles that it cost our fathers, and it will be the wisdom and safety, the life and vigor of the churches, to "stand fast in this liberty wherewith Christ hath made them free, and not be again entangled"—in the very least degree—"with the yoke of bondage" (Ga 5:1).³

Where *is* boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith (Romans 3:27).

Where Then the Brag?

In light of everything Paul has been teaching, he now makes an obvious statement in the form of a question: **"Where is boasting then?"**

³ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 3:31). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

In light of the universal sinfulness of man, in light of the universal need for a righteousness that comes from God by faith in Christ, in light of God being both just and justifier of sinners who trust in Christ, in light of the witness of the Law and Prophets (the Scriptures) regarding these matters, Paul asks, **“Where then the brag?”** How can any glory or boast or put confidence in the flesh?

For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh (Philippians 3:3).

The word used by Paul, **“boasting”** *kauchesis* carries the idea of either boasting or glorying in something, but here it means the congratulations of self. It is not that one is merely called not to boast (that is certainly true) but it is that there is no legitimate way one can boast. Paul answers his own question with the emphatic statement **“It is excluded.”** *exekleisthe*. It is closed out. The idea of being “shut out.” The door to think kind of thinking is shut!

And what is the operating principle by which this door is shut? Could the door of boasting be shut if man were justified (pardoned of God) by the law of works—by anything originating from the self or even found in the self? Certainly not! The door of boasting is shut when we realize that the principle applied is the **“law of faith,”** a God-given gracious faith. For if faith is generated from the will of man, the door of boasting re-opens. The Lord says it nicely in Jeremiah:

Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, ²⁴ but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD (Jeremiah 9:23, 24).

The law of faith works in such a way as to jettison what C. S. Lewis called “the great sin,” pride. Paul then draws the conclusion—the banner which hangs over the Reformation:

Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law (Romans 3:28)

Faith Alone

There has been speculation as to what Paul means by “**deeds of the law.**” Is it the ceremonial law? The law which distinguished Jew from gentile? The moral law? I tend to think, based upon the chapters leading up to this statement that Paul has the moral law in mind. Be that as it may, whether he is speaking of ceremonies, laws which insulated Israel from the gentile nations or the Ten Commandments, it is safe to say that peace with God is through faith in Christ and through faith in Christ alone—a notion anathematized by the Roman Catholics during the Reformation.

Prior to a Reformation Day celebration I was besieged by an individual with a web-page entitled “by faith, but not by faith alone.” His argument is that the phrase “faith alone” for justification is only imposed upon the Scriptures by those who are overly influenced by the Reformers. But in the passage before us it looks more like a necessary inference. Justification is by “**faith apart from the deeds of the law.**” Paul eliminates the works of man from the equation and we are, therefore, left with faith alone.

So obvious was this conclusion that some translations actually state the necessary conclusion “by faith *alone*...” This would include Luther but also predated Luther in the Nuremberg Bible of 1483 and the Italian Bibles of Geneva and Venice in 1476 and 1538. They perhaps took a bit too much liberty with the translation, but the point is taken. If the boasting is shut out and the full benefits of being a child of God is to be appreciated then the only true introspection is not introspection at all but a fixing of our

eyes outside of ourselves and upon Jesus, the author and finisher of faith (Hebrews 12:2). If we continually examine our deeds as a means by which we find the favor of God, we can draw no other conclusion than that of being one of Joseph's insecure, bitter, angry and envious brothers.

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 (Romans 3:29, 30).

God of Jews—God of Gentiles

Many believe that Paul's reference to "one God" is looking back to the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4—perhaps the single most significant phrase among the Jews—"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." There is little doubt that there was a struggle, even among Jewish Christians, to view the gentiles as:

...aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world (Ephesians 2:12).

But Paul brings the redefinition:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Ephesians 2:13).

So, in a very tight context, Paul is writing against the natural, ethnic division that was seeking to tear the church asunder. There is a oneness to the body of Christ which must be acknowledged and pursued. It is a unity that flows from being like minded...having the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16) regardless of the necessary division that might cause (1 Corinthians 11:19).

And there is a brotherhood which recognizes that there is “no difference” when it comes to sinful men needing the blood of Christ. This may speak, at some level, to churches that pursue and cater to an isolated cross-section of culture—a singles church, a rock church, a family church, etc. It would be difficult to find cultures more distinct than the Jewish/Gentile culture of Paul’s day. They probably both would have preferred their own church. It is not always an easy task, but the true church is a church that transcends these secondary and often petty things.

But why does Paul write that the Jew is justified by *ek* faith where as the Gentile is justified through *dia* faith? People offer guesses. It could simply be a ‘tongue-in-cheek’ way for Paul to note their paltry grumbling. You want a distinction? Here’s one!

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

Establish the Law

There are a few possibilities Paul has in mind when he writes that it is through faith that the law is established. He could be referring (as he has for three chapters) to the work of the law in condemning sinners—it certainly does that. He could also be repeating what he had said earlier, that faith in Christ established what was written in the Law and the Prophets, i.e. the Old Testament—faith in Christ has always been the message! He also might be anticipating that antinomian spirit that so often rears its ugly head in the body of Christ—I just recently spoke to a pastor who knew another pastor who viewed the law as abrogated to the extent that he felt perfectly justified marrying multiple wives. Paul would suffer no such folly. The law of God is established as reflecting the moral will of God, a will that every Christian is called to walk in—an argument that he will make in detail come chapter 6.

But as we move to our hymn, and prepare for the Lord’s Table, let us rejoice in the knowledge that it is by faith alone in Christ alone that we enjoy the favor of a Father whose mercies are the deepest well and whose

grace is supremely sufficient. A God who calls us His children not because He esteems our station in life as impressive before His holy gaze, but because He has simply chosen to love us and grant us hearts that would seek to love Him in return.

Questions for Study

1. What was one thing that caused Joseph's brothers to behave so poorly and how does that speak to Christians in general (page 2)?
2. Explain how a passage like this is the genesis of Christian comfort and conduct (pages 3).
3. Why should Christians fight for the message found in this passage (page 4)?
4. How does Paul's message eliminate boasting (pages 4, 5)?
5. Discuss the law of faith and the law of works as it relates to boasting. In what should Christians boast (pages 5, 6)?
6. Is "faith alone" a proper way to understand how a person is justified (pardoned) before God? Does this mean Christians can disregard the law of God (page 6)?
7. From what does the unity of the church flow (page 7)?
8. How does faith "establish the law" (page 8)?