

No Room for Boasting

Romans 3:27-31

July 9, 2017

Introduction:

A sightseeing bus was making the rounds through Washington, D. C., and the driver was pointing out spots of interest. As they passed the Pentagon building, he mentioned that it cost taxpayers millions of dollars and it took a year and a half to build. A little old woman on the bus piped up: "In Peoria we could have built the same building for less, and it would have been completed even sooner than that!" The next sight on the tour was the Justice Department building. Once again, the bus driver said that it cost so many millions to build and took almost two years to complete. The woman repeated: "In Peoria we would have done it for less money, and it would have been finished sooner." The tour finally came to the Washington Monument, and the driver passed on by without saying a word. The old woman shouted to the driver, "Hey, what's that building back there?" The driver looked out the window, waited a moment, and said, "Beats me, lady. It wasn't there yesterday."

Boasting is something we all have a tendency to engage in. We can boast about where we live, like that old woman on the sightseeing bus did about her hometown of Peoria. We can boast about our achievements in areas like sports or our careers. We can boast about our grades at school. We can boast about the famous people we've met or the places we've been to. There's no shortage of things we can and do boast about.

But in our passage today, Paul wants us to recognize that when it comes to our salvation, we have nothing to boast about. If we're declared righteous by faith alone and not by our works, then all boasting must cease. The gospel of God's grace precludes all prideful boasting on our part because we did absolutely nothing to earn it.

So then, today we're going to see Paul begin to unpack some of the implications of the good news that we're justified by faith alone. Paul laid out the very heart of the gospel in v. 21-26 of Romans 3, proclaiming that a righteousness has come apart from the law and is by grace through faith in Christ's redemptive work on the cross. Now Paul explains what that means and answers objections he anticipates may come up, especially among his Jewish recipients. Let take a look at what he has to say by opening your Bibles to Romans 3, which can be found on pg. 941 of the pew Bibles should you be using one of those this morning. We're at the very end of chapter, focusing on v. 27-31. So please follow along as I read starting at v. 27 to the end of the chapter. **"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. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one - who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law."**

As you can see, Paul quickly answers a number of questions that arise from his teaching on justification by faith. This passage can be broken down into three parts which will serve as our three main points today. So the first point we need to consider is that...

1. Justification by faith excludes boasting

Paul raises his first question in v. 27 asking, **“Then what becomes of our boasting?”** In light of what he said in v. 21-26, that justification comes apart from the law and comes instead by faith in Christ, is there anything then which we can boast in? Does the gospel give us any bragging rights?

We all like to point out our achievements, don't we? In my office I have a number of diplomas proudly displayed. I have my high school diploma, my undergraduate one from Moody Bible Institute, and my Master of Divinity that I received from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Those represent years of hard work: of reading and studying, of writing papers and taking exams and learning difficult subjects like Greek and Hebrew. I can boast of those degrees because they were earned by me. Those diplomas aren't gifts. They aren't honorary degrees. I didn't pull them out of a Cracker Jack box. I worked long and hard to achieve the level of education they represent. As a result, I can boast in my achievements because they were earned, not given.

But is the gospel like that? Is our salvation something we can point to and say, “Look at what I did in order to achieve this?” Well, how does Paul answer the question? He asks, **“What then becomes of our boasting? It is excluded.”** There are achievements we can boast in, but our salvation is not one of them. The gospel excludes boasting. Why? Paul explores that next by asking **“By what kind of law (is boasting excluded)? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.”**

The word **“law”** here carries with it the idea of a principle. Does the principle of works or of faith exclude boasting? When it comes to works, Paul says **“No,”** and rightfully so. If our right standing before God came as a result of our deeds, then we would indeed have reason to boast. Let's say for the sake of argument that God let people into heaven on the basis of their good works. Let's even use the commonly assumed notion that provided your good deeds outweigh your bad deeds, you'll go to heaven. That means anyone who was wise enough and moral enough and resisted temptation often enough would have earned his or her ticket to heaven. They could boast, “I'm here because of what I did. I did so many nice things and avoided all those bad habits and so I earned this. This is what is due me for all the good deeds I did throughout my life.” If our salvation was something we achieved by our own moral efforts, then boasting would be justified for anyone who gained heaven.

So then, if salvation was achieved by works, then boasting could not be excluded. But Paul gives us another option. Paul says it is the **“the law (or principle) of faith”** that excludes any human boasting. Why? Because our justification is gained not by what we have done but by what Christ has done for us. Instead of giving us what we truly earned for our sin, God gave us his Son, to suffer for our sin as our substitute. God considers the perfect righteousness of Christ to be our righteousness. Then by grace he causes us to be born again so that our spiritually blind eyes can see and believe. He owes us none of this and yet gives it to us freely by his grace. Therefore, since our salvation is given to us and not earned by us, we cannot boast because we have done nothing to earn it or merit it in any way. Salvation by grace through faith excludes any boasting on our part.

This is of course exactly what Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9. I know many of you know these verses but listen to them once again. *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”* Our salvation comes as a gift, and not as a reward for our works, therefore no one can boast. Boasting is excluded because we did nothing to earn it.

And I think it is important to emphasize here that even your faith is not your own doing; that also is a gift of God. If it were otherwise, if we had within us the power to believe the gospel in accordance with our own wisdom and understanding, that would be a work in which we could boast. We could then brag, “Well I believed because I was smarter and less corrupt than that other fellow who couldn’t figure out he needed to repent and trust in Christ.” If faith is something you had to muster up all on your own, then it would be a work that you merited by your own efforts and thus you’d be able to boast.

But if even the faith to believe is a gift of God, given to you through the new birth in which the Holy Spirit grants you repentance and the ability to see Christ as your all-sufficient savior, then we can boast of nothing. We need to respond in faith to the gift of Christ’s atoning work on the cross, but that faith itself is a gift, given freely according to God’s electing grace to those he chose before the foundations of the world.

So then, why is boasting excluded? Because our salvation comes by faith in Christ and this is not from ourselves, but is a gift of God, not by any works on our part, so that no one can boast. As a result, we have no right to look down our nose at unbelievers. We can’t think, “God saved me because I’m sure a heck of a lot better than that creep.” You aren’t a Christian because you happened to be wiser or more virtuous or voted for better candidates. There are many well-educated, morally upright people who never believe and many despicable sinners who come to faith quite in spite of their sin. God’s calling has nothing to do with how morally superior we think we were.

In fact, Paul address just this in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29. He reminds us that God’s choosing of us has nothing to do with anything in us, saying this: *“...Consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 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.”*

So when it comes to salvation, we’ve got nothing to brag about because we contributed nothing to it. The only thing we’ve all earned is the wrath of God for our sins, which is nothing to boast of! But our salvation is a gift, given by grace through faith in Christ, and so if we’re going to boast, it certainly can’t be about us. Our only boast is in Christ, in what he did for us freely by grace alone. But moving on now, we need to see that Paul’s teaching on justification by faith alone means his gospel cannot be merely a Jewish gospel but rather a gospel that is good news for all mankind, Jews and Gentiles alike. So let’s press forward to our next point which is this...

2. Justification by faith includes Jews and Gentiles

Paul raises more questions in v. 29. First, he asks, “**Or is God the God of Jews only?**” If observance of the Mosaic law was the means by which one became right with God, then one might conclude God was God of only the Jews because you would need to become a Jew in order to live in obedience to the law. The Mosaic law had all kinds of rules and regulations about what it meant to properly worship God, including things like circumcision, dietary laws, feasts, and sacrifices that needed to be made. To be in a right relationship with God one needed to do these distinctly Jewish things.

But then Paul asks his second question in v. 29 saying, “**Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one - who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.**” God is not some tribal God who only rules over the Jewish people. Back in the ancient world, polytheism was the normal way most people thought about religion. Not only did a particular nation have their own gods, such as the Egyptians having their own set of deities and the Greeks their own and the Babylonians their group of gods and goddesses, but they believed those gods held sway only over certain places or people. Thus, often when one nation conquered another, they would add the conquered nation’s gods to their own. The Romans were especially sensitive to this: they often allowed the people they conquered to continue worshipping whatever gods they had worshipped previously, provided they gave proper honor to the Roman gods as well. Thus we find in the NT that the Jews continue to have a Temple and celebrate the Passover and openly practice their faith even though they were a subjugated people. The Romans were willing to add the God of the Jewish people into the larger hodge-podge of gods they already recognized.

So this idea that God, Yahweh, would be the God of the Jews only was a conclusion that people could have easily made. But Paul warns us, “Don’t think so narrowly.” God is God of the Jews *and* the Gentiles. He’s God over all people. Paul then refers to the famous passage in Deuteronomy 6:4 that says, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” There aren’t many gods. God is not one out of a dozen options. God is the one true God, the only God. And if so, “**since God is one**” then he can’t merely be a tribal God for one group of people and not another. He is therefore the God of both Jews and Gentiles and therefore salvation is not limited to only Jews and not Gentiles.

As a result Paul says in v. 30 that God is the one “**...who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.**” It doesn’t matter whether you’re circumcised (referring to Jews) or uncircumcised (referring to Gentiles) because God will justify each group by the same means: faith. Not by the Law, which would imply God is a distinctly Jewish God that demands you become Jewish to be saved, but by faith which is the universal means of salvation for all people. God is the God over all people and the One true God saves though one means and one means only: by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Thus when Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me,” he’s communicating the very thing Paul is communicating to us here: salvation comes to all people only by faith in the person and work of Christ.

Living in a pluralistic culture, where we are frequently confronted with differing truth claims and religious beliefs, it can be easy to deny this truth. In fact, we can be as polytheistic as those in the ancient world were, willing to accept multiple ways to God and multiple beliefs in God or gods as part of our cultural tolerance. So for example, a person may not be a Muslim personally, but will insist that belief to be a valid path to God for those who believe it. Or while they aren't Hindu, they're unwilling to say that such an understanding is wrong. We'll say thing like, "It's true for them, but not for me" or "Everyone needs to discover their own spiritual path to God." In our culture, it comes across as the height of intolerance to say, "Your particular religious belief is wrong and mine is right." Our culture expects us to accept everyone and affirm their truth claims as relative to the individual. "What is true for them may not be true for you, but by golly don't you dare try to impose your belief on them by telling them they're wrong!" We've reverted back to a form of polytheism that demands we embrace every view out there without exception or rejection.

But this passage won't allow for that. There is one God who justifies all people by the same means: faith in Christ. There is no plan B. There's not other equally valid options to choose from. There aren't multiple ways to salvation randomly distributed to various people groups across the globe. There's only one God, one humanity, one Savior, and one means by which we are saved: faith. You don't get to forge your own trail to God. Salvation is not a buffet in which you chose a god of your own liking. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, and that means by logical necessity that any other approach to God, whether it be Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist or new age teachings, is wrong. Our culture may not like that but it's what Scripture teaches: there is no other God than the Father God of our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom men are redeemed from their sins by faith.

But moving on now, there is one more question Paul asks that we need to consider together and so that brings us to our third and final point...

3. Justification by faith upholds the law

Look back in your Bibles at v. 31. The final question Paul raises is this, "**Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.**" This is a reasonable question to ask in light of what Paul has said over the past three chapters of Romans. Paul has been making his case that righteousness has come "apart from the law." He has demonstrated that in spite of the Jews possession and reliance upon the law, they still were guilty of violating it. And for Gentiles who did not have the Mosaic law but rather had the moral precepts of the law written on their hearts, they also fell short of obeying it and, like the Jews, were under the wrath of God as a result. Then finally in 3:20 Paul sums it up saying no one will be justified by the works of the law. Instead, Paul tells us in v 21, that now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law through faith in Christ.

So given all of that, one could readily conclude, "I guess the law doesn't matter. If faith is the only thing that saves us, then the law is functionally worthless." So when Paul asks, "**Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?**" the expected answer would

seem to be, “Yes. The law doesn’t matter; only faith in Christ. Might as well toss out your OT because it has no use anymore.”

But that’s not Paul’s answer, is it? Has faith overthrown the law? **“By no means!”** Paul says. Quite to the contrary, he says, **“We uphold the law.”** One of the constant accusations Paul had to deal with from his Jewish opponents was that of being against the law. His emphasis on justification by faith alone, apart from work of the law, led people to assume that Paul thought the law was worthless. So it comes as no surprise that he wants to address that objection right out of the gate. The gospel message that we’re made righteous not by our obedience to the law but by faith does not render the law obsolete such that it can be throw into the trash bin of history as yesterday’s news.

So how does this work? Although as a means of salvation, the law fails (and has always failed to bring about salvation: that was never its purpose to begin with); but it nevertheless still exists and has a purpose in our lives. So then, how is it the gospel still upholds the law without expecting the law to save us? Let me give you three ways the law functions for our benefit in the Christian life.

First, *the law reveals to us our sin.* Things like the Ten Commandments and other passages that communicate the moral expectations of God are incredibly helpful in serving as a mirror showing us how far short we fall from obeying it. Ray Comfort and Kirk Cameron popularized an evangelistic method that uses the law for this very purpose. They will go out to college campuses and other public spaces and engage people with the Ten Commandments in order to help them recognize that by their own admission, they are liars, adulterers, murderers, and so on. As I’ve often said, people need to recognize they’re a sinner before they can see their need for a Savior. So the law of God is still incredibly helpful because it lays the necessary groundwork for the gospel in that it shows us that we’re sinners who have fallen short of God’s righteous expectations of us.

Second, *the law points us to Christ.* The law isn’t meant to make us feel great about ourselves. It doesn’t hand out Participation Trophies to everyone just because they tried. After it reveals to us just how sinful we actually are, it should move us to ask, “Where then can my salvation come?” It’s at this point the law provides us pictures of salvation. Every spotless lamb and unblemished goat that was offered was a picture of the ultimate sinless Lamb of God who would become our substitute on the cross. The law always pointed ahead to the true Passover lamb, to the true exodus from our slavery to sin, to the true king who would sit on the eternal throne and bring about an everlasting peace. So the law is still upheld because it points us to Christ.

Then third, *the law shows us how to live a life pleasing to God.* Just because we have not been saved by good works doesn’t mean we are exempt from doing good works. After Paul lays out for us in Ephesians 2 that we’re saved by grace, through faith, apart from work so that no one can boast, he then goes on to say in v. 10, “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” The law lays out for us those good works we are to do, not as a means of gaining salvation but as our joyful response to the salvation we’ve

already received by grace. Thus, God's moral law as revealed throughout the OT in the Ten Commandments and in many other places, both by precept and by example, are still useful. They are there to help us live the kind of life that is honoring to God and reflects in image in us.

So brothers and sisters here at Grace Fellowship, don't throw out your Old Testament! It may be old in that what it promises and anticipates has found its fulfillment in Christ, but it still serves a very real and beneficial role in your Christian life. It shows you your sin, it points you to Christ, and its moral laws are still a reflection of the will of God for his people that we should be willing to obey as we seek to honor Christ in our words and deeds.

Conclusion

So then, as I draw this to a close, my hopeful encouragement to you is to neither boast in the law nor neglect the law. The law has its place, but the one thing it cannot do is save us. As a means to achieve the righteousness God's requires, the law cannot save. We cannot do what it requires perfectly and as a result, there is no room to boast. Salvation comes apart from any works of the law on our part, but only by faith in the perfect life and substitutionary sacrifice of Christ. So if we must boast, let us not boast in ourselves and our good deeds, because they've only earned for us wrath. Instead, let us boast in Christ alone, who perfectly obeyed the law for us and who graciously saved us, not by our works, but by faith alone. Let's go to him now in prayer. Let's pray.