

I. Introduction to Justification by Faith

A. Prayer

B. Where have we been? Where are we going?

1. At the beginning of our study of Romans, I said that the first 2½ chapters provide an important foundation for properly understanding justification by faith, salvation by grace, and living by faith.
 - a. And in these first 2½ chapters, Paul makes it clear that justification by faith, God's gift of salvation, and living by faith are not to be trivialized or treated superficially. And to drive this message home, Paul warns us away from thinking that the obedience of faith, or obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ, can be removed from justification and salvation by faith.
 - b. Now one of the reasons for these first 2½ chapters is the strong influence of the Jews in the church at that time. You see, many Jews believed and therefore taught that God would justify them and guarantee them eternal life even if they continued in the unrepented practice of sin. And God would do this for them because they were sons of Abraham, they had been given the Law of Moses, they practiced their religious observances, and they kept the covenant seal of circumcision.
2. Therefore, Paul uses Romans 2:1-3:20 to crush any beliefs and resulting teachings that trivialize the keeping of God's law, and in so doing, turn justifying faith and godly living into a superficial religious experience. With this in mind, I want to give you a quick review of the main foundational truths in Romans 1:16-3:18.
 - a. First, our world has grown increasingly evil, and a primary reason is that as mankind has progressively turned away from God, God has pulled back His sin-inhibiting boundaries, which has allowed sinners to commit increasingly greater evil. Now, God has not done this to punish us, but to show us the evil of sin in order to turn us back to Himself and godly living.
 - b. Second, God's wrath will come upon everyone who unrepentantly practices sin – regardless of their religious affiliation, Bible knowledge, claim of faith in God and Jesus Christ, conversion experience, theology, or religious practices (*i.e., circumcision, baptism*).

- c. Third, in the final judgment, God will impartially judge everyone according to their deeds.
 - d. Fourth, God universally justifies and gives the gift of eternal salvation to anyone who repents, yields obedience to His will, and perseveres in living a righteous life.
3. Now the reason to put an emphasis on these first 2½ chapters is because they provide the balance to the next 2½ chapters – so that we do not turn the faith that justifies into a superficial faith that sidesteps righteous behavior, or turn the grace that saves into a trivialized grace that makes holiness in all our behavior, optional.
- a. And what is superficial faith? It is faith that believes we can be saved without repentance, and that we can have a conversion experience without being converted from a selfishly sinful life to a holy and loving life in the likeness of Christ.
 - (1) Now, should you think that Paul’s message in these first 2½ chapters no longer applies to us today, let me remind you that John the Baptist made it clear that the natural outcome of repentance was bearing fruit or performing deeds appropriate to repentance (Matthew 3:8).
 - (2) James said faith without the works of righteous living is useless, and therefore unable to save us (James 2:14-26).
 - (3) Jesus said: “Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter” (Matt 7:21).
 - (4) My point is that Paul is not standing alone in emphasizing the inseparable connection between obedience and faith. He has the support of other scriptures when he teaches that the faith that leads to salvation is a life transforming faith, and if it isn’t life transforming, it is not saving faith.
 - b. And what is trivialized grace? It is grace that claims we have fulfilled the condition of salvation through our profession of faith (*the Sinner’s Prayer*) while at the same time claiming that holiness of life is unrelated to salvation and therefore of no consequence when it comes to being saved by grace.
 - (1) Here again, Paul teaches just the opposite. For example, in Romans 2:13 Paul says: “For it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified.” In Romans 6:1-2, Paul asks: “What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?” And to this Paul answers: “May it never be! How shall we

who died to sin still live in it?” And again in Romans 6:15, Paul asks: “Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!”

(2) In Titus 2:11-12, Paul explains what God’s grace does: “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, [12] instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, [13] looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, [14] who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

4. With these truths in mind, I want to give a quick overview of where Paul is taking us in the next 2½ chapters. In Romans 3:21-5:21, Paul is addressing three related truths.
 - a. First, Paul is confirming that all have sinned – at least once in their life. Therefore, all owe the penalty for sin – which is death. And since the penalty for sin is death, only death can pay the penalty. Therefore, to be justified and given the gift of eternal life, repentant sinners need someone to die in their place – and God has provided that someone in the person of Jesus Christ. Therefore, Christ’s redeeming work is the “method” by which God pays the penalty on behalf of repentant sinners in order to save them.
 - b. Second, Paul is correcting false doctrines about justification and eternal salvation by comparing them to the truth. In doing this, Paul uses two competing terms:
 - (1) The “works of the Law” – a term which Paul uses to describe those who make an honest effort to keep the Law and also those who focus on the superficial and ceremonial aspects of the Law while trivializing the keeping of the whole Law and the spirit of the Law.
 - (2) In contrast, Paul speaks of “justification by faith” – a term which Paul uses to describe those who trust in the redeeming work of our Lord Jesus Christ coupled with obedience to His teachings. Related to this term are the terms: grace of God, free gift, and credited or imputed righteousness.
 - c. Third, Paul begins making it clear that if you have heard about Jesus Christ, then faith in Jesus Christ is now part of God’s conditions for who He justifies and gives the gift of eternal life.

- C. The last point I want to make before reading Romans 3:19-31 is that it will be easy to get mired in the details, and in so doing, lose sight of the fuller message Paul is presenting. And without question, these next 2½ chapters are full of details. So we must proceed with prayerful caution.
- D. Romans 3:19-31 . . . Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; [20] because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. [21] But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, [22] even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; [23] for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [24] being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; [25] whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; [26] for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. [27] Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. [28] For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. [29] Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, [30] since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one. [31] Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.

II. Justification by faith, apart from the Law

- A. Romans 3:19-20 . . . Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; [20] because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.
1. Verses 19-20 form a transition from Paul's foundational truths to his teaching on justification by faith. And to understand verse 19, we need to see it through the lense of three previously stated truths in the first 2½ chapters.
 - a. First, the Jews believed that because they were special to God, He would judge them differently, that is, with grace and mercy,

whereas God will show no grace and no mercy to the Gentiles. Therefore, the Jews believed the Gentiles could only stand silently before God on the judgment day whereas they could confidently claim their heritage, their possession of the Law, their covenant relationship with God, and their seal of circumcision as reasons to be given eternal life.

- b. Second, Paul has just quoted portions of the Psalms to prove from the OT scriptures that all have sinned and therefore, no one is exempt from God's judgment on sin – including those who are highly religious, like the Jews.
 - c. Third, from the beginning of creation, God has placed His law within us, He has revealed Himself and His law through nature, He has given us a conscience to affirm right and wrong, and since Moses, He has made the written word available. Therefore, everyone has a sufficient knowledge of God and His will to justly be condemned for failing to live according to what they know.
2. With these three truths in mind, we can see that verse 19 is telling us that the Jews – who represent those who are highly religious – will also be judged according to their deeds based on what they know. And this is why, on judgment day, all will stand silent for failing to live up to what they know.
 3. In the first half of verse 20, Paul moves forward in presenting the gospel truth that justification and eternal salvation do not come through keeping the Law, but through faith in Jesus Christ.
 - a. Therefore, when Paul says “because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in God's sight,” he is not distinguishing between a superficial keeping of the Law and a sincere, whole-hearted, whole-life keeping of the Law.
 - b. Rather, Paul is informing us that any kind of keeping the Law cannot satisfy God's penalty for sin. Only dying can satisfy the penalty. Therefore, we must either pay the penalty ourselves or have a perfectly sinless person (*Jesus Christ*) die in our place so we can live – which is why justification is by faith and salvation is a gift of grace rather than by the works of the Law.
 4. Does this mean the Mosaic Law was only for the OT Jews? NO, it is for all mankind for all time.
 - a. Does this mean the Law no longer applies to NT Christians? After all, we are saved by grace through faith. NO, the Law applies to Christians – though not the ceremonial portions of the Law,

as the NT teaches, but certainly the Ten Commandments, and the moral, relational, and business parts of the Law.

- b. To affirm this, we need only look at the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus made no reference to keeping the ceremonial parts of the Law, but He spoke much about keeping the moral parts of the Law. And He said: “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill. [18] For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass from the Law until all is accomplished. [19] Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:17-19).
 - c. But doesn't God's grace and our faith make the Law, including the Ten Commandments, obsolete, or at least unnecessary? NO! And why not? Because the Law has never had the purpose or the ability of paying the penalty for anyone's sin. It has the responsibility to expose our sin and point us toward a righteousness that pleases God.
 - d. But doesn't trying to obey the Law produce self-righteousness, and isn't self-righteousness detestable to God? Yes and no. If we obey the Law to earn eternal life, then yes. But if we obey the Law to please God, to bring honor to His name, and to work out our salvation with fear and trembling – while trusting in Christ's redemptive work for salvation, then no.
- B. In the second half of verse 20, Paul explains why no one is justified in the sight of God by keeping the Law, and his explanation is simple: justification of sinners is not the purpose of the Law. The purpose of the Law is to educate us about sin – as much through teaching as through experiencing the challenges of living according to the Law, and experiencing the blessings of keeping the Law, and experiencing the discipline and suffering that comes from breaking the Law.
1. It is the Law that teaches us that sin is rebellion against God. That it is disobedience to the rule of God (*lawlessness*), and distrust of the goodness and faithfulness of God (*unfaithfulness*).
 2. It is the Law that shows us that God blesses those who live according to the Law, and brings discipline and trouble to those who break the

- Law. And it is the Law that tells us that God will eventually punish those who unrepentantly and repeatedly break the Law.
3. It is the Law that makes us aware of God's wrath toward sin and unrepentant sinners, along with His mercy and compassion toward repentant sinners. It is the Law that makes us aware of God's grace and blessing on those who persevere in doing what they know is right.
 4. It is the Law that engages our mind and conscience in determining what is right in given situations, in choosing what is right when some desire within us is driving us to do what is wrong, and in having a sense of conviction when we do what is wrong.
 5. It is our experience with trying to keep the Law – whole-heartedly and in all our behavior – that teaches us how strong our fleshly desires are, how morally and spiritually weak we are, how powerful the world's influences are, how much we crave man's acceptance and approval over God's, how persistently the devil tempts us, how foolish it is to give in to his temptations, and how much we need help from God to do what is right.
 6. Therefore, it was never the Law's purpose that by keeping it (*doing the works of the Law*) you could offset or somehow compensate for the debt owed for sins committed (*penalty of sin*).

III. Conclusion

- A. Some, without keeping the commandments, think they are living by faith, while others, keeping the commandments, expect to receive the kingdom as a reward owed to them. Neither will be given the gift of eternal life.
- B. Mark the Monk put it this way: "The Lord, wishing to show that every commandment is obligatory but that sonship is a gift bestowed on human beings by means of His own blood, says, "When you have done everything that you were commanded to do, say, 'We are unworthy slaves, we have done only that which we ought to have done' (Luke 17:10). Thus the kingdom of heaven is not a reward for works, but is rather a master's gift prepared for His faithful servants."