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Romans 3:20, 27-31 “Justified by Faith Alone”

Intro. Suppose you were to die today, and your soul was taken to the gates of heaven. The gate is closed & locked. Suppose God met you there and asked, “Why should I let you into heaven?” What would you say? Would you try to convince God that He should let you into heaven because you have tried to be a good person? Would you say you have tried to keep the 10 Commandments? Would you say that you have been baptized & joined the church? Do you think a lifetime of church attendance will get you into heaven? What if you actively follow the do’s and don’t of some religion? Will that get you in? Well, a 2006 Barna report of unchurched Americans indicated that 62 percent believe that a good person can earn eternal salvation. Are they right? What do you think?

I believe that in Romans 3:20-31 Paul gives the right answer. Here the apostle Paul teaches that that we are made right with God, not by works, but by faith. Here Paul describes the doctrine of justification by faith. This text is the first major treatment in Romans of the doctrine of justification, which is mentioned 5 times in vv.20-30. The fact is, we are sinners. We are *not* right with God. But we can become right with God based on the wonderful doctrine of justification by faith. Justification is the act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous on the basis of the finished work of Christ on the cross. Justification is a legal matter. God puts the righteousness of Christ on our record in the place of our own sinfulness. Tragically, that important doctrine was lost in the Church for almost a 1,000 years before it was rediscovered by Martin Luther and other reformers during the Protestant Reformation. Justification by faith is an essential doctrine.

This morning we will consider the subject of what we must do to be made right with God. Paul examines two basic approaches. They are mutually exclusive. Both cannot be right. So consider with me first of all:

I. THE AFFIRMATION OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

It is very clear what the apostle Paul believes is the right approach to becoming right with God. He states:

A. We Are Justified by Faith – Paul says in v.28, “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith....” It is by faith alone that men receive the righteous status which God bestows by His grace. Likewise, we are saved by faith according to v.22. There Paul says that the righteousness of God is bestowed “to all and on all who believe.” In v.26 we read that God is “the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” Galatians 2:16 affirms this same truth: “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ....” Likewise, Eph. 2:8 says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith....” The biggest lie of false religion across the earth is that men are justified by their works. Islam teaches salvation by works. The cults all teach justification by works. However, Paul is emphatic in his statements that faith is the way to be right with God, not works.

We are not made right with God simply by faith itself. Faith is only as good as the *object* of your faith. We must put our faith *in Jesus* (v.22) Christ, and what He did for us on the cross. I will talk about that next Sunday from vv.24-25. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross made our justification possible. That provided man's only hope for deliverance from the penalty, the power, and ultimately, the presence of sin. The death of Jesus Christ is at the very heart of our faith.

Edward Mote wrote the following in the hymn, "The Solid Rock":

My hope is built on nothing less
Than Jesus' blood and righteousness.
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
But holy lean on Jesus' name.

Have you placed your faith in Jesus for the forgiveness of sin and eternal life? Or are you counting on keeping the 10 Commandments, or doing good works? The Jews believed that they were made right with God by carefully living by the Law of Moses. Other religions teach you are saved by doing the things prescribed by that religion. Well Paul states what he believes about such common approaches to salvation. He says:

B. We are Not Justified by Trying to Keep the Law – In the last of v.28 Paul affirms that we are justified "apart from the deeds of the law." Likewise, v.20 says, "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight...." You cannot achieve a right standing before God by keeping the Law. Even when a man keeps the law tolerably well, he is not thereby justified in God's sight. You just can't achieve the perfect standard of obedience that God requires. We all fall far too short. James 2:10 says, "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." In Matthew 5:48 He said, "Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."

Imagine a man whom a judge has given the choice of paying \$100 or serving 90 days in jail. The man doesn't have any money, but he does have an invalid wife and five hungry children at home who are depending on him and him alone. He tells such a heartrending story that the courtroom spectators are moved with pity. They take up a collection to help pay the man's fine. Although it is unlike him, even the judge chips in. Altogether they raise \$99.95. Even though they are only five cents short, the judge declares that the entire \$100 must be paid, and orders the bailiff to take the man to jail. He dejectedly walks out of the courtroom, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets—where he finds a nickel! Elated, he rushed back into the courtroom and slaps it on the bar before the judge, declaring, "I'm free, I'm free!" In his mind, what had saved him? The \$99.95 provided by others, or the measly five cents he contributed? Even so, any works that we might add to our salvation do not even add up to 5¢. The fact is that we can do nothing to earn our salvation. Jesus paid it all.¹

Are you trusting in what you can do to save yourself from eternal condemnation? The apostle Paul wants you to know that is not the right way to be saved. However, the question remains: Is Paul right? Well let's consider next of all:

¹ Insights from Bill Bright in *Pulpit Helps*.

II. THE REASONS FOR JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Paul gives 2 of the reasons why we are saved by faith, and not by the works of the Law. First of all:

A. Salvation by Faith Glorifies God, Not Man - Paul says in v.27, “Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law²? Of works? No, but by the law of faith.” If we were saved by works, then we would be able to boast about what we did to obtain salvation. The boasting in mind is that of self-congratulation. Look down at 4:2, “For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about....” Justification by works always finds its ground in that which the person is and does. If salvation came by works, we would all be boasting to each other how we accomplished it. Salvation by works feeds the pride of man, which itself is a major sin in the eyes of God. How could God approve a method of salvation that only leads to more sin?

In contrast, the principle of salvation by faith excludes boasting. Again, Paul says in v.27, “Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith.” The tense used has the force, “it is shut out once for all.” Why is boasting excluded? Since salvation is by faith, and not works, what did you do to gain a right standing with God? You did nothing. Then Eph. 2:8-9 says, “For by grace you have been saved...; it is the gift of God, not of works, *lest anyone should boast*” [emphasis added]. God designed a plan of salvation that would exalt His great grace, and not allow man to boast.

There’s another reason why salvation by faith glorifies God. The specific quality of faith is trust and commitment to *another*. It has more to do with the character of the object of your faith than anything else. If you really trust someone, that says a lot about the character of the one you trust. Faith looks to who God is, and what He has done; works have respect to what *we* are, and what we can do.

I have told the story of a childhood experience while my family was on vacation in Florida as a boy. The surf was rough that day, and as I attempted to swim back to shore, I felt the rip tides carrying me out. In spite of my best efforts, I could not make it to shore. I did not know what to do but cry out for help. A friend of the family on shore heard my cry, took his wallet and keys out of his pants, then ran to the water & swam out to me. Of course, I gladly put my trust in him, and he rescued me. Now when we reached shore, a crowd had gathered around. Who was the one who received praise? Not I! We had been warned about the rip currents. The one who received the words of praise and congratulations was my rescuer. Even so, throughout eternity, God is the One who will be praised for our salvation. No man will be able to boast in what they did to save themselves.

Do you boast about your religious accomplishments? If so, you may be trusting in your works instead of placing your faith in Christ. Be sure you are trusting in the right way of salvation.

Paul gives a second reason why we are saved by faith, not works:

B. We Are Saved by Faith, not by Law, Because of the Oneness of God - Paul preached justification by faith. The vast majority of the Jews believed you were justified by works (or law).

² The word “law” in v.27 is used in a different sense from that used so far in this epistle. But it is used later on in this same sense (7:21, 23; 8:2). It is obvious that when Paul speaks of “the law of faith”, he cannot mean the Old Testament Law, which is opposed to faith (cf. vs. 19, 20, 21, 28). Here “law” in both instances, when applied to “works” and “faith”, must mean “system”, “principle”, or “method.” The contrast instituted is that between the method in which works are the medium of justification and that in which justification is exclusively by faith.

In v.29 Paul attacks that belief in a very interesting way. He asks, “Is He the God of the Jews only?” Of course the answer is “No.” The Jewish people would have to say no because there is only one God. The oneness of God was the first article of Jewish faith. They would repeat again and again Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord” (cf. Isa. 45:5). Likewise, Paul affirms in v.30 that there is only one God. Now if there is only one God, then He must be the God of the Jew and the Gentile. After all, He created the whole human race. Since He is the Creator of all men, then surely He cares for all men, not just the Jews. Even the Jewish Scriptures affirmed that. Isaiah 45:22 says, “Look unto Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none else.” Paul is pressing the Jew to agree with him that there is one God for both the Jew & the Gentile.

Now if God is God of the Jew and the Gentile, then the mode of salvation must be essentially the same for both. It couldn't be law-keeping because the Gentiles weren't given the law. The covenant of law was made specifically with Israel. If there were many gods, there could be many religions; but since there is only one God, there can only be one way to approach Him. Acts 4:12 confirms this, “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” There is only one God, one way, and one mode of approach. He doesn't have a works system for the Jewish people and a faith system for the Gentiles. “There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man, Christ Jesus” (I Tim. 2:5). Paul makes a similar argument in Ephesians 4:5-6, which says, there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all....” Hence, Paul concludes in v.30 that since there is one God for all humanity, He “will justify³ the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through⁴ faith.”

Were people saved by faith in the Old Testament, or by works? They were saved by faith. That is the only way anybody has ever been saved. For example: Genesis 6:8 says, “But Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.” If he hadn't found grace, he would have been drowned like everybody else. Romans 4:3 says that Abraham was saved by faith. Habakkuk said, “...but the just shall live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4b). Hebrews 11 begins with the faith of Enoch and discusses the faith of many Old Testament heroes. True faith is manifested by works, but faith in the saving grace of God is the first step.

So don't look for several different ways of salvation. There is only one God, and one way of salvation. Have you begun your journey on the one way of salvation, which is faith in Jesus?

I believe Paul has stated the true way of salvation, and he has given enough reasons to demonstrate that we are made right with God by faith in Jesus Christ, and not by the works of the law. Now in v.30 he addresses a common objection he must have heard many times. “Do we then make void the law through faith?” “Make void” means “to render inactive,” but here it is used in the sense of rendering invalid, “to abrogate,” “to abolish.” So does the principle of salvation by faith make the Law useless? Is it abrogated? Does this make the law irrelevant and inoperative? Does this mean that we can ignore God's Law and live as we please? Paul is well aware of the danger of the antinomian inference from the doctrines of grace. So my final point is to consider:

³ The future tense “will justify” is used not with reference to the final judgment but, is to be understood as in **v.20** of every case of justification to be accomplished.

⁴ The variation of prepositions “by faith” and “through faith” are not to be interpreted as indicating any real difference respecting the faith intended. Paul uses both forms elsewhere. It is a kind of Hebrew parallelism by which to say the same thing in different words. On the other hand, Paul may say “out of” in reference to the Jews because they had the Scriptures as a resource for faith, which was lacking for the Gentiles.

III. THE DEFENSE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

Paul's answer in v.31 is in terms of his most emphatic formula of denial, translated, "Certainly not!" Then he says the affirmative opposite: "On the contrary, we establish the law." We cause it to stand. Paul saw Christ as the end or logical goal (*telos*) of the law. The thought appears to be that the faith system announced in the gospel sets up the law and makes it stand firm, because it puts the law upon its proper foundation.

In Matthew 5:17 Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill." The gospel of Christ establishes the law in three simple ways:

A. By Imposing the Penalty of the Law - The law said that sin brings death. The law demands that sin be paid for. Faith trusts in the saving work of Christ on the cross. Well in the death of Jesus Christ, the penalty of the law was paid, and the validity of the law was established.

What happens when the legislature passes a law, but it is not enforced? Most everyone will ignore the law, and not obey it. The law is no good unless it is enforced with a penalty for violating the law. For example, did you know that the code of Virginia (18.2-344) still has a law against fornication? It says, "Any person, not being married, who voluntarily shall have sexual intercourse with any other person, shall be guilty of fornication, punishable as a Class 4 misdemeanor." I doubt if anyone is enforcing that law. But when law enforcement & the courts impose penalties for violating the law, they establish the law.

Even so, when Jesus died for our sin, He established that the Law of God must be obeyed, or the penalty of death must be imposed. Christ accepted that penalty when He died in our place. God enforces His law. He upholds His law in the Gospel way of salvation.

Furthermore, the Gospel of faith upholds God's law:

B. By Fulfilling One Main Purpose of the Law - The law had one main purpose, and that was to bring us to Christ. Galatians 3:24 says, "Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith." The Law was never given to save you. You say, "What was it given for?" It shows you that you need to be saved. V.20 says, "...by the law is the knowledge of sin." The law can't cure sin—it just makes it manifest. It starts the process of salvation. The law drives you to the point where you say, "I can't live up to Your standards, God. What will I do?" At that point, God intervenes in His mercy and grace, and says, "I see your sin. Because you are broken over your sin, I offer you grace, forgiveness, and healing through faith."

Has the law of God fulfilled its purpose in your own life? Have you come to realize that you are a sinner in need of a Savior?

Finally, the gospel of salvation by faith establishes the law:

C. By Fulfilling the Potential of the Law - Chapters 6-8 also show that the just demands of the law are fulfilled in believers only. When you put your faith in Jesus Christ, then you *can* fulfill the law. Romans 8:3-4 says, "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son, in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit." Once we are saved by faith, we are given a new nature, with new desires. We can keep the law by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit & by the motivation of the love of God in our hearts. In fact, Paul says that love is the fulfillment of the law (see Rom. 8:4; 10:4; 13:10).

Conclusion: Now I am going to rephrase the question I began my message with. “On what basis are you hoping to obtain eternal life? Are you trusting in your works, or in what Christ did for you on the cross? I hope you have been convinced that the only way of salvation is faith in Christ. If you have not repented of your sin and place your faith in Christ, then I invite you to do so today!

Sources: F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); Stephen Felker, [*Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible*](#) (Col. Hgts, VA: Published by Author), 2008; Hershel Hobbs, *Romans: A Verse by Verse Study* (Waco: Word Books, 1977); John MacArthur, Jr., *Justified by Faith: Study Notes on Romans 3:20-4:25* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1984); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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