

I clicked on a link to a story this week about the death of inmate Christopher Monfort in a Washington State prison. Monfort was serving a life sentence for ambushing and killing Seattle police officer Timothy Brenton on Halloween night in 2009. Among the comments left in response to the report was this one, from a troll self-identified as “Trigger Like A Hairpin”:

According to Christian mythology, if he truly (and I mean TRULY) found Christ before died, he's in heaven for all eternity just like grandma, being that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the only unforgivable sin. I don't make the rules, I'm just here to let you know how fair and moral your religious beliefs are.

If the commenter actually knew what the Bible teaches, he'd be even *more upset* with Christianity. He doesn't realize that from God's perspective, even a kind, generic grandma doesn't deserve to be in heaven either. Actually, based on our own merit, *no one* qualifies for heaven.

While *we* evaluate human behavior and goodness on a relative, sliding scale, *God* evaluates us by the absolute standard of His own Holiness. And whether you are more like a convicted murderer, or a sweet grandma, the words of Paul that we read last week apply:

Read Romans 3:20a

*** ²⁰ because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight;**

As a result, left to our own resources, each and every one of us is under divine judgment:

Read Romans 3:22b-23

*** ²² ...for there is no distinction; ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,**

In *fairness*, we *all* deserve death, because sin is a capital spiritual offence in the divine court, and a failure to see *this* as being fair is a result of a failure to understand the gravity and horror of sin – of *any* and *all* sin. From a relativistic human perspective, you can understand that it's not fair that bad people get into heaven. But from a divine, absolute perspective, you can make a case that it's not fair that *anyone* gets in!

So, how *can* we get heaven? How *can* we be forgiven? How *can* we be justified before God? **[Turn to Romans 3]**

As we noted last time, justification is God's work, not ours. Paul put it this way:

Read v.24

*** ²⁴ being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;**

Our justification is based on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus that satisfied God's wrath and paid our spiritual debt, setting us free from sin's condemnation. No one is so bad that they *can't* be saved that way – nor is anyone so good that they don't *need* to be saved that way.

God activity on our behalf demonstrates both His own righteousness and His authority of justifying us in His sight. As Paul said:

Read Romans 3:26b

*** ²⁶ ... so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.**

We are justified before God, not by our *works*, but through our *faith* in Jesus. That's why Paul could describe it as a **gift**. And to underscore his point that our justification is by grace through faith, Paul continues:

Read v.27

*** ²⁷ Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith.**

If our salvation – our justification – is by grace through faith, *** Where then is boasting?** What kind of **boasting** does Paul have in mind? Any **boasting** that suggests our justification is based on human privilege or achievement – any **boasting** based on anything other than the atoning sacrifice of Jesus – any other boasting *** is excluded.**

That rules out boasting by Jews who might base their hope of justification on being a physical descendant of Abraham, a recipient of the Law, and a bearer of the sign of circumcision. That rules out boasting by Jews who take pride in their zeal and fastidiousness in trying to keep the Law given Moses. That would *also* rule out boasting on the part of Gentiles who might base their hope of justification on their sincerity and/or effort in trying to live up to what they believe to be divine standards.

Not every Jew was seeking to earn salvation, but the tendency toward legalism was appealing to many, as it is to all of humanity. We are prone to boast in that which we do and accomplish to make ourselves respectable, not only before other people, but before God.

Why is such boasting **excluded**?

Read v.27b

* ²⁷ ... **By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith.**

What does Paul mean here by the word **law**? Although **law** sometimes refers to the Mosaic Law or the OT Scriptures as a whole, it's used here in the sense of **law** as a *rule* or *principle*, as in the *laws* of gravity and thermodynamics.

We've noted that Paul's been drawing a contrast between **faith** and **works**. And he's shown us the **law/principle of works** condemns us (because not all our works or deeds are good). He's shown us that the **law/principle of works** cannot save or justify us. Neither the greatest privileges nor our best efforts at doing good, can lay claim to our being declared righteous in the eyes of God. As we Paul stated earlier:

Read Romans 3:20a

* ²⁰ **because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight;**

But Paul has also stressed that the **law/principle of faith** *does* what the **law/principle of works** *cannot*. As Paul states in v.28:

Read 3:28

* ²⁸ **For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.**

Horace Greely, 19th century journalist and founder of the New York Tribune, also served in Congress for 3 months. One day he was speaking to a fellow congressman who was going on and on about himself and his accomplishments, boasting that he was a self-made man. To which Greely wryly replied: "*That, sir, relieves the Almighty of a great responsibility.*"

Self-made people may be able to accomplish many things, but they *can't* transform themselves from unrighteous to righteous – from a sinner into a saint. Only God can do that through the work of His Son and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. That's why boasting in ourselves and our accomplishments is excluded when it comes to salvation. That's why Paul could write:

Read v.27,28

* 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.**

Justification is *not* based on **the law/principle of works**, as expressed in doing the **works of the**

Law, but on **the law/principle of faith**, as expressed in trusting the promise of God which finds fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus.

And Paul wants to make sure that we know is the means of salvation for both Jews and Gentiles. He especially wants Jews in Rome to grasp that they have no advantage based on their genes, their possession of the Law, or their efforts to keep it. Things which cause Jews to boast may be hindering them from recognizing that with the coming of Jesus, what matters in being justified before God is faith in Jesus and what He has accomplished for us.

And those same things in which they are prone to boast may be causing them to still look down on Gentiles. Paul earlier made clear that Jews and Gentiles are both on *the outside* looking in because of their sin, but now he wants to make sure his readers realize that the way *in* is the same for both – since God is the God of Jews *and* Gentiles:

Read vs.29,30

* 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.**

God made it clear to Israel that there was only one true God – and Israel took pride in the relationship that God initiated with Abraham and his descendants. And the opening words of the Shema, a prayer the children of Israel would commonly repeat each morning and evening, were these:

Read Deuteronomy 6:4

* ⁴ **"Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!**

God was Israel's God, but not exclusively so. He is the Creator of all, and all people are accountable to Him, whether they acknowledge Him or not. Paul wants his readers to know what the coming of Jesus made clear: that justification before Him is the same for Jew and Gentile alike. As Paul wrote:

Read v.30

* ³⁰ **since indeed God who will justify the circumcised [a reference to Jews] by faith and the uncircumcised [a reference to Gentiles/Greeks] through faith is one.**

If justification were only possible for those given the Law, than salvation would only be for Jews. But to emphasize that Gentiles can also be saved by God *as Gentiles* (without becoming Jews), Paul refers to Jews as **the circumcised** and Gentiles as **the uncircumcised**. Both groups can be **justified** before God in the very same way – a way which as Paul’s stated in v28, **apart from the works of the Law**.

Read v.28

* ²⁸ **For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.**

And as Paul has already made clear, the object of that faith is Jesus:

Read vs.21.22

* 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;**

We are saved **by faith** – not some nebulous, hazy, wishful hope in an unknown God, but **by faith** in God’s Son, Jesus Christ, who was the atoning sacrifice for our sin. And with the coming of Jesus, both Jew and Gentile are justified *before* God – and *by* God – in the very same way.

That’s why Paul could write in v.27 (where we started this morning):

Read v.27

* ²⁷ **Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith.**

Stuart Townend wrote the words of the hymn we are going to sing at the conclusion of this message. The last verse reads like this:

**I will not boast in anything,
No gifts, no power, no wisdom;
But I will boast in Jesus Christ,
His death and resurrection.
Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer;
But this I know with all my heart -
His wounds have paid my ransom.**

There is no reason for any believer to boast in anything but Jesus Christ, and Him alone. Our salvation is based on what *He* has accomplished *on our behalf* to atone for our sin.

As Paul’s been doing all along in chapters 2 and 3, he once again anticipates an objection from some of his fellow Jews:

Read v.31a

* ³¹ **Do we then nullify the Law through faith?**

Do we then nullify the Law through faith?

Does justification by faith in Jesus render **the Law** of no value and ineffective? Since Paul has been clear that we are not saved on the basis of the Law, many Jews would interpret Paul to be claiming that the Law is without authority and value.

What’s Paul’s answer to the question...

Read v.31b

³¹ **Do we then nullify the Law through faith?**

* **May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.**

Paul answers the question in the strongest of negative terms: **May it never be!** Paul makes the point that even though the Law is *not* our means of justification before God, it *is* of value. Paul says, **On the contrary, we establish the Law**. He says that through faith in Jesus we **establish** [NAU, KJV], **uphold** [ESV, NET, NIV], or **fulfill** [NLT] the Law.

What Paul means here is the topic of much discussion. Exactly what does Paul mean by the words translated **nullify** and **establish** in the NAU? What is meant by “**the Law**” (Mosaic Law? Pentateuch? OT?). Is Paul contradicting Himself, one moment saying the Law is of no value regarding salvation, yet now saying the Law is established by the gospel?

It’s not clear to me exactly how to understand Paul’s thought here. Instead of dealing with a host of legitimate options, I’ll just share with you my sense of what Paul is saying here.

One of the points Paul made earlier about the Law is that those who are under it stand condemned by their sin. Remember?

Read v.19

* ¹⁹ **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;**

Paul’s pictures a courtroom scene, with the **mouths** of the defendants being **closed** because they can offer nothing in their defense before God, to whom they are **accountable**. The Law is evidence that we’re under condemnation. It

confirms that we all fall short – that our works aren't a means of justification.

In Galatians Paul wrote about the role the Law served until the coming of Jesus:

Read Galatians 3:21b-22

* ²¹ ...For if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law. ²² But the Scripture has shut up everyone under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.

As Paul's stressed in Romans, the Law can't impart righteousness – it can't save us. But one the things the Law effectively did was to make us aware of our imprisonment by sin. It prepared us for Jesus, the ultimate solution to our problem.

Read Galatians 3:23-26

* ²³ But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed.

²⁴ Therefore the Law has become our tutor *to lead us to Christ* [better translated *until Christ* (ESV, new NIV, NET)], so that we may be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. ²⁶ For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

The Law served a role similar to that of a servant who took the role of a **tutor**/guardian who'd train a young man for adulthood. The Law served a similar role, temporarily guiding, training, and protecting His people until the promised one came – until Jesus came.

The Law was not the be all and end all, but it served a purpose until the coming of Jesus. With the coming of Jesus the value of the Law as a tutor is established. The value of the Law in anticipating God's ultimate solution to our problem is established. But as Paul says reminds the believers in Galatia, **For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.**

Let me close by reading the words of Stuart Townend that we are going to sing. I think they capture the essence of what we've been looking at in Romans 3:21-27 these past 2 weeks:

**How deep the Father's love for us,
How vast beyond all measure,
That He should give His only Son
To make a wretch His treasure.
How great the pain of searing loss -**

**The Father turns His face away,
As wounds which mar the Chosen One
Bring many sons to glory.**

**Behold the man upon a cross,
My sin upon His shoulders;
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice
Call out among the scoffers.
It was my sin that held Him there
Until it was accomplished;
His dying breath has brought me life -
I know that it is finished.**

**I will not boast in anything,
No gifts, no power, no wisdom;
But I will boast in Jesus Christ,
His death and resurrection.
Why should I gain from His reward?
I cannot give an answer;
But this I know with all my heart -
His wounds have paid my ransom.**