

“THE LAW OF FAITH”

Romans 3:27–31

Key Verse: 3:28

“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”

What makes you feel strong and secure? We’re all seeking a source of security. Often we try to build it on our connections, achievements, or on how people see us. We love to feel accepted, welcomed, and appreciated. But when we give our best and get misunderstood, criticized, or even excluded, how do we handle it? In Romans 3 Paul repeats the gospel that God himself justifies us (3:24,26,28). That’s real security. But what does it even mean? What difference does it make? And who is this “justification” for?

Thus far in Romans, Paul told us we’ve been suppressing the truth of God, in our ingratitude and self-righteousness before him. On our own we can’t change. But last week Paul announced God’s solution: God manifested his own righteousness for us. He showed it openly, for all the world to see, when he put forward his Son “as a propitiation by his blood.” He’s the only one who could turn God’s wrath away from us. He changes us by his grace, by his indescribable gift (2 Cor.9:15). This justification, this righteousness is available for anyone by faith. Now, in the closing verses of chapter 3 Paul begins to develop this theme of faith and describes how it changes our lives. May God speak to us through his word.

Part 1: “Boasting excluded” (27)

Let’s read verse 27. “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.” Paul suddenly mentions “our boasting.” Literally he writes: “Where then the boasting?” What boasting? He’s already told us that in the godless Gentile world, people are “slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, *boastful*, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents...” (1:30). He addressed the Jews: “But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and *boast* in God” (2:17). And he said: “You who *boast* in the law dishonor God by breaking the law” (2:23). Both Jews and Gentiles boast. How? In exalting themselves, in their abilities, connections, achievements, or in their “works.” We Christians boast about the wrong things, too.

Paul uses this word “boast” elsewhere. He says God deliberately chooses the weak and the foolish, so that no human being might ever boast in his

presence. The only healthy boasting is the one Jeremiah spoke of: “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”¹ In Romans 5 he uses the word “boast” again, where it’s also translated as “rejoice” (2,3,11). We boast in our hope of God’s glory. We boast in our sufferings. We boast in God himself. When Paul himself received the gift of God’s grace in Jesus, he stopped boasting in himself or in the things of the world; he prayed that he would boast only in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, because in it, the world had been crucified to him, and he to the world (Gal. 6:14). Like Paul, we too are united with Christ in a death like his (Rom. 6:5a). In response to his grace to us on the cross, we offer our bodies in spiritual worship as a living sacrifice (12:1). Only when we live like this can we “boast” or be “proud” of our work for God (15:17).

Let’s read verse 27 again. Paul uses a strong word here: “excluded.” It means “shut out,” “permanently banned.” Why does Paul say this about boasting? It’s because we receive God’s grace in Jesus only by faith, as a gift. There’s nothing we do to deserve or repay it. In fact, God designed the gospel to get to the core of our problem, our pride, and root it out. Our tendency to quickly revert to pride—to ingratitude, self-reliance and self-righteousness—is finally put to death in the cross of Jesus. Paul explains it elsewhere, “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3). No more thirst for attention and affirmation. No more self-importance. No more self-reliance or self-assurance. Only a humble acknowledgment that I desperately need Jesus every day, moment by moment.

Paul adds that excluding boasting is not “a law of works” we strive to achieve; it’s living by “the law of faith.” Through faith in Christ we gain a new life principle. We evaluate everything we think and do, not based on comparing ourselves with others, but on reflecting on whether it’s coming from faith in Christ or not. Paul later shares this principle of faith: “For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (14:23b). So, what is this “law of faith”?

Part 2: “Justified by faith” (28)

Let’s read verse 28. “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” The word “justified” literally can mean “vindicated.” And its verb form here is saying it’s not something that just happened in the past; it’s an ongoing, continuous action (present tense). So it can be translated as: “For we

¹ 1 Cor. 1:28–31; see Jer. 9:23–24.

hold that one *is being* justified by faith...” Also, it’s not something we do to justify ourselves; it’s done by God himself (passive voice). And it appears in a string of verbs Paul writes in the indicative mood, meaning sure, absolute fact.² It gives the word “justified” here a really strong meaning: “being perpetually, absolutely vindicated by God.” How can anyone be perpetually and absolutely vindicated? Paul says, “by faith,” meaning by faith in Jesus. Wow, it’s inspiring. It still proclaims to all of us here today that “the righteous shall live by faith” (1:17b).

Paul already explained how this justification, this vindication is possible: “...and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (24). Only God’s gift of redeeming grace in Jesus can fully justify and vindicate us. Paul stresses that God is the one who justifies anyone who has faith in Jesus (26). God will continue to justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith (30). Based on this central thesis of Romans, Paul will soon tell us: “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand...” (5:1–2). Later Paul describes the people who try to justify themselves through works of the law: “...for they have a zeal for God...but being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes” (10:2–4). And it’s not just Paul’s thesis in Romans. In Galatians he writes: “...yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified” (2:16). In Acts, when he preaches his first missionary sermon, he repeats it: “Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man [Jesus] forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses” (13:38–39). In Greek, the word “freed” here has the same root as the word “justified.” This is so helpful in understanding what being justified by faith in Jesus means. It’s telling us we are freed. Freed from what? From our slavery to sin, guilt and self-condemnation. Freed from our ego and obsession with self. Freed to love and serve God and love and serve others.

² In 1:18–3:20 Paul has been using indicative verb forms to diagnose our factual problem of sin; now in 3:21–4:12 he transitions to “the indicatives of God’s grace”: “has been manifested” (3:21); “God put forward” (3:25); “he will justify” (3:30); “was counted” (4:3); “is counted” (4:5); “God counts” (4:6); “are forgiven” and “are covered” (4:7); “was counted” (4:9); “was it counted” (4:10); “he received” (4:11).

When we don't accept the gospel very deeply, we don't experience this freedom, this deep vindication in our souls. We're still trying to justify ourselves in many ways. At some point, we reach spiritual exhaustion. Eventually we need to learn, as Paul is going to tell us, to just believe in God who justifies the ungodly through faith in Jesus (4:5). When we live by faith in God who justifies, we learn the confident faith of Paul, who wrote: "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us" (8:33–34). This justification is not at all something we achieve through our own struggles. It's what Jesus achieved for us when he died and was raised and exalted to God's right hand. It's what he's still achieving for us through his constant intercession for us. That's the ultimate vindication.

Read verse 28 again. "Hold" means to consider or to "count." Paul repeats the word "hold" or "count" eleven more times in the very next chapter. That's a powerful emphasis on divine accounting. It means, "We've examined all the evidence, calculated all the results, and we conclude this is the non-negotiable truth." How can we be *sure* we're justified, vindicated? Because it's based not on our own performance, but on the facts of what God has done in Jesus. So, *are* we sure we are justified?

Part 3: "He is the God of the Gentiles also" (29–30)

Let's read verses 29–30a. "Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one..." Through these questions Paul gets to the most basic tenet of Judaism, that God is one. It's called the Shema, found in Deuteronomy 6:4: "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one." Paul takes such a fundamental truth for Jews and turns it into a mandate for the Gentiles! God who is Sovereign Creator God of the Jews is the same Sovereign Creator God of the Gentiles. This truth shatters the tendency we all have to be exclusive and to look down on others. Because God is the God of Gentiles also, of course he loves and wants to save them also. And in the gospel of Jesus, he made a way. How? Let's read verse 30b. "...who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith." It's in God's nature to want to justify, free, and restore to himself sinful human beings, all of us, on the same terms. And his terms are so simple for everyone: faith in Jesus.

One of Paul's main reasons for explaining the gospel in Romans is to help us see God's heart for all the peoples of the world. He stated it in chapter 1 when he wrote: "...I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish...For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (12–16). He mentions the Gentiles twice in chapter 2, to help Jewish Christians be more aware of them. Here in chapter 3, he penetrates deeper into their thought world, to persuade them that God loves the Gentiles just as much as he loves the Jews. Paul will continue to advocate for Gentile ministry throughout Romans.³ Who are the equivalent of the Jews today? They are all those who have the Bible and plenty of exposure to Christianity. And who are the Gentiles today? They are all those who really don't know the Bible and have no access to hear the gospel.

When we're justified by faith, vindicated, restored in a right relationship with God, we also begin to share God's heart for all the people who've never heard the good news. Just as our boasting is permanently banned, so are our ethnic pride and self-centeredness. Instead of ignoring all the human beings living far away from God, we begin to long, like God does, to help them come back to him through faith in Jesus. What a beautiful change!

Part 4: "We uphold the law" (31)

Let's read verse 31. "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law." Paul again anticipates push back to his gospel message. Some had been saying his gospel of God's grace was a direct threat to abiding by God's law. Paul says, "By no means!" "Absolutely not!" Recipients of God's grace "uphold the law." It doesn't mean we try to earn justification by works of the law. Instead, we see Christ as "the end of the law" (10:4). We realize God's law is our "guardian" to lead us to Christ, so that we might be justified by faith (Gal. 3:24). We see the law as holy, it still reveals our sin, and through the Spirit, it guides us into love, fulfilling the law's righteous requirement.⁴

³ 9:24,30; 11:11–13,25; 15:9–12,16,18,27; 16:4.

⁴ 7:12; 3:20; 7:7; 8:4; 13:8–10.

But what does this “law of faith” look like? Every once in a while in history, it transforms both individuals and a community. We can see it in the history of the Moravians. In our Romans study we’ve been singing the hymn “Jesus, Thy Blood and Righteousness.” It was written by a man named Count Zinzendorf, an aristocrat who lived in Germany in the 1700s. He experienced the power of the gift of God’s grace in Jesus. Soon, Zinzendorf heard of some Moravians in the country of Czechia. They were Christian peasants and carpenters being severely persecuted. Zinzendorf welcomed about 280 of them to his country estate called “Herrnhut.” They had to go in smaller groups and make secret trips across the border to get to Germany.

But for the first several years their community at Herrnhut was filled with problems. Zinzendorf and his aristocratic friends were German Pietists, while the Moravians were rugged farmers and carpenters. And even among them there were factions. Each thought they were more righteous than the others. Internal arguments grew so intense that one of the leaders even moved out of the main settlement. Zinzendorf started visiting all these people on his estate, house to house, talking and praying with them personally. Afterwards, he drafted a document called *The Brotherly Agreement*. It prioritized being united with Christ and mutually serving one another instead of theological debating. Soon there was a real revival, when their bickering was transformed into a spirit of grace. They’d been believers in Jesus, yet they’d been harboring conceit. But when the gospel went deeper into their souls, there was a radical leveling. They began to agree on what’s essential—the blood of Christ.

Zinzendorf began sending food from his own kitchen to the Moravians meeting in their houses. He himself came and sat at the peasants’ wooden tables and shared the same food with them. He was practicing the gospel truth that everyone falls short of the glory of God but is justified by his grace. Throughout their community they began choirs based on their life stages—singles, married couples, and so on—instead of based on social or economic background. They began to live, work, pray, and sing together as equals. They even started washing one another’s feet before taking communion. There was no more high-mindedness. They built a cemetery where everyone had the same kind of tombstone. They started a daily prayer meeting that continued for a hundred years. And Zinzendorf and his community became famous for launching the first real movement of Protestant missions. Within 20 years they sent missionaries to

native peoples around the world, to places like the Caribbean, Greenland, and North America.⁵ They began to live by the law of faith that unified them. And they learned God's heart for all the unreached people of the world.⁶

So, are we still trying to be justified by a law of works? Or are we truly resting in the law of faith, in God's ongoing and absolute vindication of us in the blood of our Lord Jesus? When this gospel goes deep, our pride and boasting are put to death, and our mission expands. This justification by faith leads us to humility and to be united with every other sinner saved by grace. Our only source of security is the blood of Christ. Let's stop trying to explain or justify ourselves. Let's look to our Lord Jesus and his constant intercession for us. Because of him we are eternally vindicated. We're free. May God help us start living every day in the freedom of the law of faith. And may God give us his heart to reach all the unreached peoples of the world with his good news in Jesus.

⁵ Caribbean (1732), Greenland (1733), North America (1734), Suriname (1735), South Africa (1737), Sri Lanka (1740), and Labrador (1752).

⁶ For a history on the Moravian movement, see Hutton, J.E. *A History of the Moravian Church*. n.p.: Adanson Press: 2018.