

Sermon 21: Romans 3:27-31: Soli Deo Gloria! Why boasting is impossible!

OUTLINE

The nature of faith
The nature of God
The nature of the law

INTRODUCTION

When people ask me, 'What is a Reformed Baptist, and how do they differ from a regular Baptist?' There are several ways to answer, the first thing I like to point out is that the word 'Reformed' is a word that identifies us with the truths of the Bible rediscovered at the time of the Reformation. Various summaries for these truths have been put together but the first one I like to introduce people to is the 5 'Solas' of the Reformation. Basically put they are these: Sola Scriptura or Scripture alone that the Bible alone is our sole authority for what we believe and how we are to live and worship. We do not allow any traditions of men, or so called office bearers in the church to Lord it over the consciences of the people of God. Sola Fide or Faith alone this is the biblical teaching that we are saved by faith apart from any added works of our own. Sola Gratia, by Grace alone, this is the teaching that God's decision to save us was by grace. His decision to save was not coerced by anything in us actual or potential. We were His enemies who deserved to be punished and saved those who did not deserve it in any way. Sola Christus or Christ alone, here we are confessing that Jesus is the only mediator between God and man and the only sufficient saviour by His life and single sacrifice of death. The fifth 'Sola' is Soli Deo Gloria! To God alone be the glory! If any one of the 5 solas has to be chosen as central and driving the others it would be this one. God is God and no one else He does not and will not share His glory with another. He is the author and finisher of our salvation, and He should be credited, worshipped and adored for His great actions in saving us. It is because God's glory is the goal that His word, the Bible is the rule of our faith and living. It is because we are unable to save ourselves by works that we magnify God's gracious provision in emphasizing the gift of faith, and that it is the sole instrument of our justification. It is because we submit to the Bible's teaching about our sinfulness and pollution that we see that it can only be by Grace that God has chosen to save us, that there is no goodness in us at any level which puts God in our debt. Therefore it can only be by Christ that our sins can be fully paid for and God's justice fully satisfied in the forgiveness of sins. And so when it has all been said and done, who gets the glory? God alone be praised for the wonderful salvation He has wrought without our help and coercion! To paraphrase Luther, he said something like this, 'If I don't know who does what in salvation, I don't know who to thank, God or myself.'

As we come to the end of this vital section that has shown us so much of the good news, Paul is now going to draw out some implications. He is now going to spell out how this should affect our thinking, and in truth turn our religious ways of thinking on their heads. Our default setting in all of our thinking is to proceed with ourselves as the centre of the universe around which, even God, everything must be arranged. This man-centredness is

what lies at the heart of every false religion and it is driven by our selfish tendency to put ourselves at the fulcrum. Our sinful disposition is to dethrone God from His rightful place at the centre around which all things should be arranged, and in His place we put ourselves. So that in false religion we create the anti-solas. We do not accept the Bible alone but the Bible and reason, philosophy, revelations, traditions, etc. When it comes to faith alone, we add works of obedience, works of repentance, religious works, denominational works, etc. When it comes to grace alone we insist that God *had* to save us and was not free because of our future believing, our cooperation with our free will, our intrinsic worth, our potential, etc. And when it comes to Christ alone we add all manner of mediators in Mary, angels, and saints, other sacrifices like the Mass, penance, our tears, etc. Our greatest temptation in religion is to add something of our own to Christ's exclusive work whether it is by our choice, our obedience, our cooperation, our sacrifice, our martyrdom, etc. And so when it comes to thanking God for saving us, we steal His glory by saying that it was because I freely chose, or He had to save me. We think of ourselves as better than others for having believed and so steal God's glory. He alone is the saviour who has provided all that that was needed for our salvation. He provided the sacrifice in His Son, His Spirit to help us see and believe enabling us to receive by faith what we could never do for ourselves, by a faith that was enabled to begin with. Soli Deo Gloria!

Paul is anticipating this self-centred approach to the Gospel, especially from a Judaistic oriented way of thinking. He knows the way in which the religious Jew would be thinking about the Gospel, the problems that they would have, for he was one of them. So in this final section of chapter 3 he is going to ask a lot of penetrating questions trying to pry the Jews from their self-enthroned religious system to one where God gets the glory not us. The spiritual problem that Paul is dealing with in the Jews is a universal problem and something all of us need to hear.

Paul is going to show that God alone should receive the glory in salvation not man. He proves this by showing that faith glorifies God, but law earned salvation glorifies man. He also argues for this way of faith on the basis of God's character. And finally he will address the question that the Jew would be thinking, 'What about the law?'

The nature of faith

Paul begins with the central question in v27, 'Then what becomes of boasting?' Paul knew too well that the Jewish system of salvation in the 1st century was mixture of grace and law. They believed that God put you in the covenant by grace, but that you then had to keep yourself in the covenant all the way until heaven by law keeping. So that the way *in* is grace, but the way *on* is works. The name for this mixed form of religion has come to be known as 'covenantal nomism.' The word 'nomism' comes from the Greek word for law, so that the words capture the dual mix of grace and law. Now anytime you make salvation depend upon yourself in any way boasting is inevitable. Paul knew very well how prevalent boasting was in his old religion. The boasting would have come in various forms. The Jews boasted in the fact that they had the right religion and others did not. Look back at 2:17 where Paul tells us that the Jews boasted in God. The Jews also boasted in the fact that

they had the law. Jewish tradition has it that the law was offered to every nation of the world, but it was only the Jews who were willing to accept it. This of course made them feel superior for they had the law because they by their own choice accepted it. Paul draws our attention to this boasting in 2:23. Paul gives us a record of the things that the Jews would have put their confidence in in Philippians 3:5-6, 'circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.' Here we see boasting and confidence in circumcision which made the Jews the covenant people of God. And also we see a boasting in an outward and external blamelessness that would have been taken up predominantly with ceremonies. Jesus gives an example of this boasting in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, Luke 18:11-12, '11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' So then the boasting that flows from being attached to the right religion, from having the correct head knowledge, from having various religious privileges, from being outwardly attached to God's covenant community, and from performing a level of religious deeds that you appear better than your fellow men. All of these things are disqualified by Paul in his opening question.

Paul answers the question for us, 'It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith.' The Jews thought that knowledge of the law, possession of the law, and performance of the law were what gave them rightstanding before God and opened the door of heaven for them. But this possession and performance was a law-grace mix, a covenantal nomism. And if it is dependant in part on law and my performance of them, then there is a place for boasting. And so Paul clarifies that the reason there is no boasting is because we are brought into rightstanding before God, not on the basis of possessing or performing the law, but by receiving a free gift of righteousness that Christ has won for us by His life and death. So Paul contrasts for us the principle of works and the principle of faith to show this vital distinction; (the word 'law' in this verse is best understood in the sense of principle). Earning our rightstanding by law keeping puts the source or even a contributing factor towards our salvation in ourselves. Faith on the other hand is a receiving act not an earning act. It is when we bring nothing to God but take salvation from His hand; when we come as beggars not buyers. Empty hands that receive not full hands which offer anything. Salvation is something that is located outside of us not within us, this is seen in the way in which Paul contrasts boasting with receiving something from God, 1 Cor 4:7, 'For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?' Boasting and receiving cannot go together, only boasting and giving. The Jews thought that they were giving something to God in their law keeping, instead of receiving the gift of righteousness that God is offering in the Gospel. Paul highlights this wrong way of thinking again later in Romans 10:1-3, 'Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. 2 For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. 3 For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness.'

Paul states his case unequivocally in v28, 'For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.' Now this verse has an interesting history for Martin Luther when he translated the Bible into German added the 'alone' so that it read, 'For we hold that one is justified by faith *alone* apart from works of the law.' The Roman Catholics of course took issue with this translation. Similar to the Jews the RCC taught and still teaches a mix of grace and works. They teach that you receive a justifying grace in your baptism which washes away original sin and infuses the righteousness of God into you. You then cooperate with this infused grace to produce works of love which will further justify you. Sacraments and works have replaced faith as the instrument by which we receive righteousness from God. Although Luther was wrong in adding a word to the Bible he was not wrong in understanding what this verse actually teaches. It is indeed an emphatic statement that we are saved by faith alone. Although the word 'alone' is not there it is certainly implied in the phrase, 'apart from works.' Paul may as well have said 'alone', but in order to be specific about the fact that the law has no part in our justification he phrased it in the way he did.

There is a modern day attack on the Gospel which has tried to say that Paul has been misread all these years by the church reading the Bible through Luther's lenses. They are called the New Perspective on Paul (NPP). And what they teach is that Paul was against Israel defining who could and could not be part of the people of God on the basis of certain laws like circumcision and the food laws. However, they hold that Paul was not against the Christian adding some works to his/her own salvation. That our works in obedience to the law, when they are enabled by the Holy Spirit, these will add to our justification on the last day. Friends, this is a heresy, it is a mixture of grace and law. It is not by grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone, to God alone be the glory. Instead our Spirit enabled works are inserted as having the final say on judgement day as to who will and will not get in to heaven. This is just another self-centred religious attempt to place man at the centre and share the glory of God in salvation. Paul has stated himself in such a way as to exclude any works that will determine our justification it is 'by faith apart from works.'

Do you know what this means? It means that you are fully accepted before God not because you are so holy, so obedient, so faithful, and diligent. Or because you help old people, work hard, try to be a good husband and provider, or wife and support. You are fully accepted by God not on the basis of what you do but what Jesus has done!

The nature of God

Trying to get the Jewish mind to swallow the reality that we are made righteous by what we receive and not by what we give, by what Jesus has done and not what we do, by God providing righteousness not us fitting ourselves out would have been very difficult. So Paul continues to show why it is by faith and not by law that we are justified. He does this by reminding the Jews of the nature of God. Romans 3:29-30, 'Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, 30 since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.' The Jews did not have a correct view of salvation, but they would have had an Orthodox view of the nature of God.

Similar to the way in which the RCC does not have a correct view of salvation but an excellent doctrine of the Trinity. So Paul uses this common ground to help them think through and accept why being justified has to be by faith and not by law. Let me spell some of these assumptions out so we can see why Paul takes this approach. Firstly, there is only one God over all the earth YHWH. So in v29 Paul says, 'Or is God the God of Jews only?' The Jews would answered, 'of course not!' And so they would have agreed that God is the God of the whole earth, even over the Gentiles who are presently denying Him by serving idols. Paul is agreeing with the politically incorrect notion that there is only one God over all, and it is not some nameless faceless deity that anyone can believe in and gloss over with the cheap lie that we are all worshipping the same god. No, YHWH is the only true God, and if anyone is to worship the true God they need to worship the God of the Bible. How does this help Paul's argument? Well, if salvation depends on possessing the 10 Commandments, being circumcised, observing Sabbath and food laws as outlines in the OT, the God is only God of the Jews and not the whole earth. And part of the Abrahamic promise was that through Abraham's seed the whole world would be blessed not just one nation. Secondly, in v30 Paul quotes the sentiment of the Shema, 'God is one.' This means there is only one God, He is unique, but it also means He is not divided in parts. In other words He is not double minded and variable but consistent with Himself. He will not simply say that the blood of goats can forgive sins, and then say it can only be by the blood of Jesus. He is consistent with Himself He is one, He is not double minded, vacillating and arbitrary. So He will not save the Jews by law and the Gentiles by faith. He saves no one by law and everyone by faith. This is Paul's conclusion from this statement in the second part of v30, 'since God is one—who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.' One true God, one true religion, one way of salvation—God is one! It seems that Paul might have been anticipating the view amongst the Jewish Christians that salvation by faith might be good for Gentiles, but we Jews will stick to the law. Paul will not allow any squeeze room for a compromise between these two ways of salvation; there is only faith alone, not faith and.... Romans 4 exists as a further proof by Paul that God has always saved sinners by faith and never by law.

The nature of the law

Unless you know that Paul is addressing Jewish concerns this would seem a very strange ending in v31 for this chapter, 'Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.' Paul is bringing the Jewish house of salvation down around their ears; he is turning everything they ever thought about salvation on its head. Salvation is something God does not us, something God gives we do not earn it, something free apart from performance. This leaves the glaring issue of the law in question. To the Jewish mind the law was given as a means of attaining salvation, and any attempt to give salvation apart from works of the law would appear to make the whole giving of the law redundant and an argue against such a case. Paul does not launch into a full biblical explanation of the purpose of the law here he merely makes an affirmation and will pick up this thread a little later on. His affirmation is that salvation by faith does not overthrow the law, but rather it upholds the law. This establishing of the law would be a necessary part of

Paul's polemic in settling the Jewish mind, and in investigating it ourselves we see once again the many marvellous truths of the Gospel and how God is glorified.

For the remainder of this message let me show you at least 6 ways in which the Gospel upholds the law and does not do away with it. Firstly, the death of Christ pays the penalty of the law. The wages of sin is death and Christ offered His life as a propitiating sacrifice to remove God's holy anger towards our sin. In this way the law is honoured and fulfilled. Sin is not forgiven at the expense of the law but to the upholding of the law. Secondly, Christ's obedient life as my representative imputed to me ensures that I have a full life of righteousness in accordance with the law on my account. Since Christ not only died on my behalf but also lived on my behalf, and all of His law keeping life is attributed to me when I put my faith in Christ, that I can be clothed in the garment of His righteousness. In this way the law is not violated in the sinner's life but fulfilled. Thirdly, the OT law was full of types and shadows that were pointing forward in anticipation of the sacrifice of Christ and salvation through faith in His sacrifice. In the Gospel we have the fulfilment of all of the types and shadows of the law; in this way too the law is upheld as it is fulfilled. Fourthly, the OT made many promises and prophecies about the inclusion of the Gentiles in the people of God. We have already mentioned the promise to Abraham as an example. In this way the law's promises to include the Gentiles are fulfilled. Fifthly, the law's original purpose as a mirror and not as a stairway to heaven is fulfilled in the Gospel. The law was never given as a means of salvation; it can never perform that function in the hands of a sinner. So then, its main purpose is not to save but to expose and condemn the sinner as deeply sinful causing them to feel deeply conscious of their sin and see their need for Christ as the only sufficient saviour. Paul claims that the law has shut up every mouth before God (3:19-20). Sixthly, although a sinner cannot perform the law perfectly in order to earn salvation, once saved the law does become a rule of life for the believer. The law continues to aid the believer as a lamp to the feet opening up the will of God to us. When the Christian uses the law as a rule of life, but not as a means of salvation, the true purpose of the law is upheld.

From beginning to end salvation belongs to our God and He should be glorified appropriately for saving us. He elected to save an unworthy people by free grace. He graciously gave the immeasurably valuable sacrifice of Christ as our ransom. He sent His Spirit to bear witness to this work of Christ. He enables the faith and repentance of those who believe in Christ for salvation; causing the greatest miracle of regeneration to be wrought through poor sinful preachers. He freely gives righteousness to any who believe, justifying them completely in Christ. God adopts us into His family and entitles us to Christ's riches to be enjoyed for all of eternity as we are invited to live in the perfect love of God that He has for His Son. Everything that we needed He has supplied. Everything that He has required He has given in His Son. It is all of Him and there is nothing that I have contributed. Salvation is by grace alone, through Christ alone, by faith alone, to God alone be the glory!