

A Singular Basis for Boasting

Romans 3:25b-31

“so that no human being might boast in the presence of God...”

Introduction: Getting engaged is a supreme mixture of excitement and trepidation, being equal parts exhilarated and sober. Life changing decisions should have this level of thought and consideration. But one of the hidden areas of unease is actually shopping for and buying a ring, that symbol of commitment and future covenant that will be your brides for her whole life. Now some fortunate men are given a family heirloom and don't have to make this call, but others of us have gone through the process of picking the diamond that will be the centerpiece of a ring that will be looked at, shown off, and treasured for decades to come.

When I was looking to make this decision over 25 years ago, I was given the name of Alan Zidoff, affectionately dubbed “Al Al, the diamond pal”, a sweet man who sold whole sale diamonds in the Diamond District by Pershing Square off of 6th avenue in downtown LA. Al would not only give young college guys from the Master's College great deals on diamonds, he would spend 30-45 minutes explaining the ins and outs of what makes them valuable. He went over the “Four C's” ---- Cut, color, clarity, and carrot ---- explaining each one and answering any question the nervous twenty-something had. I had the privilege of taking about 10 different guys to Al, and there was a similar reaction to most of them. Al would ask how much they were looking to spend, what cut of diamond they were looking for, and present three hand-picked options he believed would fit the bill. Then he would show everything about those diamonds.

Diamonds get GIA certified, and the predominate differentiator is the *color and clarity* – with a letter grade for color and other letter for clarity. Now, to the naked eye, these things could not be discerned, but only under magnification can any impurities be seen, and only next to another color diamond can a “colorless” diamond be attained. In other words, to know anything beyond “wow, that's really sparkly and pretty”, one has to know what they are looking for, under magnification, to see the difference between a vs-1 and a vvs-2. But without fail, a young man who knew **nothing** about diamonds 30 minutes before was now questioning the diamond Al was showing them, declaring that they were looking for something more clear or colorless! Most times I would simply lean over and say “settle down, you know nothing!”, but Al would gently continue on and show them other diamonds (that he strangely had lying around) that fit their desires.

This always reminds me that a little knowledge can make a desperate novice think they are now an expert. There is something built into our fallen humanity that wants to make our own decisions, or contribute to the discussion, or feel like we know what we are doing. Knowledge is good, but knowledge left by itself can “puff up” (1 Cor. 8:1) when it is detached from love. Even the smallest amount of knowledge can cause us to **boast in ourselves** rather than relying on someone else.

As we come back to Romans 3, Paul addresses this issue of boasting in light of a gospel that excludes ANY kind of boasting in ourselves. This is a practical outflow of ***justification by faith alone***, a belief that we are *declared righteous* by God in Jesus Christ, saved by the work of Christ alone through the instrument of **faith alone**. If faith itself is a gift, then we cannot even boast in that! Instead, we turn our boasting to Christ, clinging to Him by faith, and never moving from the cross where our sin was nailed and Christ's righteousness was given to us. Paul ends this chapter by asking three clarifying questions, in

order that his readers would just get these truths in their mind, but as RC Sproul says, they would get them in their blood stream.

Righteousness Maintained (3:25b-26)

*This was to show God's righteousness, because in his **divine forbearance** he had **passed over former sins**.*

26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

If you missed us last week, it's important to highlight the key points from the previous text. Everyone stands condemned in their sin before a holy judge, regardless if we tried to act morally or not. Any righteousness we could point to was merely comparing ourselves to others who fell woefully short of the measure of true righteousness, which is **the glory of God** (3:23). The question asked of the text and the **universe itself is this**: *how in the world does a holy God who demands absolute obedience and holiness to match His* (1 Peter 1:16-17), and who has declared that falling short in ANY way deserves death and wrath (Rom. 6:23) **somehow welcome back sinners to Himself without compromising His own righteousness?** You see, the indelible question every person who has ever lived should be a version of that, but typically we actually ask: *why would God judge me since I am a "good" person, or are not **that** bad, or at least not as bad as many others?* In that worldview, God seems mean, vindictive, and even capricious. But what Paul has laid out, all mouths are shut and we stand accountable to the God of the universe with nothing to offer except the filthy rags of our sin.

So any righteousness that would be ours HAS TO BE FOREIGN to us, since we could not conjure it up. God's righteousness, then, was manifested **apart from the law**, meaning something that we could do or attain, and was given **through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe** (3:22). But how? It had to come to us as a **gift** that we could not earn (3:24) through the *redemption price* set by God to be paid for our release from slavery, which came through the **blood of Jesus shed on the cross**. This blood did **two monumental things for us**: 1) It satisfied the wrath of God, bringing peace; 2) It allowed God to pardon us, forgiving us and releasing us from shame and guilt. This **propitiation** in Jesus' blood then guaranteed that we could be **declared righteous** in a legal way, with OUR SIN imputed (*credited*) to Christ and His righteousness imputed to us ---- allowing us not only to break free from a guilty conscience, but now we can actually have a restored relationship with God through Christ so that we can glorify Him once again in obedient, full, and heart-driven worship (see Romans 6:17).

Now, Paul clarified two important issues of the gospel, salvation, and God's righteousness in the last part of v. 25 and 26. *What about those in the OT who were not judged immediately for their sin, and how can God be just AND offer forgiveness of that sin. Doesn't one invalidate the other?*

To answer the first question, Paul framed it this way: *"This was to show God's righteousness, because in his **divine forbearance** he had **passed over former sins**."* What did God do with sin in the OT? When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, God did NOT wipe them out, although He would have been just to do so. He instead *sent them out* so that they would not reach out to the Tree of life and live forever in their unredeemed state (Gen. 3:22). God then killed an animal as a *covering for them*, which foreshadowed a *sacrificial system* set up so that Israel could worship God in their sinful state. But the problem with this system: **sacrifices had to go on ALL the time**, since *"it is impossible for the blood of bulls or goats to take away sin"* (Heb. 10:4). Remember, God must **always have satisfaction for sin, and EVERY sin ever committed must be accounted for, either by us or by a substitute**. There were times when God did break through and show His divine justice, like when **Uzzah** died in transporting the Ark (2 Sam. 6:7), which left David afraid of the LORD (6:9).

But out of God's *compassion*, God restrained His anger and did not stir up ALL of His wrath (Psalm 78:38-39). He was willing, for a time, to pass over sins and not pour out His wrath at the time. This is what **Paul stated in Acts 17:30**:

*The times of ignorance **God overlooked**, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, 31 because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world **in righteousness** by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.*

But passing over sin did not mean *overlooking sin*. Again, all sin has to be accounted and paid for. The issue in the OT would be looking forward to the work of Christ on the cross, where we look **back** at His atoning work, which was a once for all sacrifice, "*he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption*" (Heb. 9:12). And how was someone saved in the OT or in the time before Christ? They were saved **by faith alone**, which we will see next week in the life of Abraham.

But the second question is just as important. *How can God forgive and stay just?* We said last week that often a *pardon* can be cheap or can actually **circumvent the justice system** with the wave of a pen but lacking payment. If God only offered forgiveness without justice, He'd be **just like every other supposed god created by mankind**, or nothing better than the whimsical gods of mythology. If He somehow accepted something **less than His perfect requirements** would actually make Him less than God, which would leave us all in a world of hurt. Instead, He upheld His righteousness by paying the payment Himself by pouring out His wrath on Christ, and that righteousness is given to anyone who believes by faith, which in itself is a gift of grace (Eph. 2:8-9). The cross, then, showed us God's great **righteousness but also His great grace**, which was lavished on us through Jesus Christ, since we did not deserve, earn, or have anything to offer God in terms of salvation. In this, there are absolutely no grounds of **boasting**...but as fallen, selfish, prideful sinners, we find ways.

Righteousness Boasted (3:27-28)

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

Since salvation is a work of God through faith, which is a gift of God, through the righteousness of Christ, which was the plan of God, there would be no hint or thought to boast in the law, our works, or any of our own contribution. Verse 28 builds the case that we are **justified** (declared righteous) by faith **APART** from works of the law. Though the word "*alone*" is not there, the idea is prominent. This was the centerpiece for Luther and the Reformation, since mankind and even the Catholic church wanted to **ADD works** to the pure message of salvation by faith alone. What Luther sought to reform was NOT that the church taught salvation by faith, which it did, but also taught that from faith and the work of Christ, man must add merit and his own righteousness to the mix, either by some prescribed practice or work of penance. In other words, one would have to **merit the merit of faith**. But the answer is simple but so hard for fallen man to absorb: **we bring no merit to Christ, and our righteousness is not a requirement nor does it add anything to our salvation.**

The reality is this: *If I have to be sanctified (holy) before I can be justified, we should end the service, close the doors, and throw our Bibles away because we have NO HOPE. That is why God had to declare us righteous apart from the Law, our works, or anything outside the gift of faith, which He Himself gave and thus gets all the glory.*

In the text, it seems that Paul is calling out the Jewish audience who would still find grounds for boasting in the Law, but it seems consistent to say that we today can still **boast in the wrong thing**, thinking that we are all about Christ alone but really focusing too much on ourselves:

1. We can easily forget who we **are** based on who we **were**:

1 Corinthians 1:26-31 *"For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were **wise** according to worldly standards, not many were **powerful**, not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 **God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.** 30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"*

When we walk with the LORD for any amount of time, or grew up in a moral environment, we can easily forget who we *were*, *wretched sinners deserving of God's wrath*. When this happens, we can **look down on others, or fail to give others grace, or think that there are people who are worse than us**. We make no boast in ourselves because God chose us BECAUSE we were nothing to show His power ---- since righteousness, wisdom, sanctification and redemption ALL come from Him.

2. We can easily forget to cling to the cross and instead think we are perfected by the flesh (Gal. 3:3)

Galatians 6:14 *"But far be it from me **to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ**, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world"*

Where does vibrant, ongoing, continual worship come from? It comes from our growing and deepening understanding of God's grace given to us in Christ. We boast in the cross, not ourselves. Each time we do, we not only remember that we are sinners in need of grace, but revel in the grace lavished on us.

3. We can easily forget that we still must deal with sin (1 Corinthians 5:6-7)

Your boasting is not good. *Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7 Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. **For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.***

Does the gospel by faith ALONE through Christ ALONE mean that since sin has been paid for, we do not have to deal with it? On the contrary, it means that we CAN deal with it. The city of Corinth was a highly immoral city, and that immorality infiltrated the church, to degrees that even the pagan world would have thought were wrong. Paul said it was their **arrogance or boasting** that prevented them from dealing with a man who was sleeping with his father's wife (1 Cor. 5:1-2), since they did not fully comprehend the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. We can choose not to sin now, and we are called to do so (1 John 2:1), but we also know if we DO sin, we have an Advocate who made propitiation on our behalf (1 John 2:1b-2) and we must **confess our sin**, since He is BOTH faithful AND just to forgive us AND cleanse us (1 John 1:9) ---- dealing with the payment and the shame.

4. We can easily lose our passion for proclaiming the gospel to the lost

In our culture, it is clear that people do not have a fear of the Lord, understanding of righteousness, or realization that they will have to give an account before God one day. People seem to be more infatuated with the problem of public justice more than personal justice, or at least their injustice before a holy God. If we are **boastful of salvation, we think we somehow deserved it or look down on others**, not as object of love and grace, the same grace and love given to us. When we get wrapped up into our own selfishness or pride, we begin to look inward and downward, rather than outward and upward. We fail to do what we are called to do:

Matthew 5:16 *“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they **may see your good works and give glory to your Father** who is in heaven*

1 Peter 2:9 *“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, **that you may proclaim the excellencies of him** who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”*

Notice that both **works and worship** are linked to evangelism. The gospel is not opposed to works, we are actually supposed to perform good works that God prepared for us (Eph. 2:10), which is clearly not opposed to grace by faith alone (Eph. 2:8-9). But the only way we can proclaim the excellencies of Jesus Christ is NOT by performing works but rather by **treasuring Christ. We share what is most valuable to us**. Last night's game was impressive, enjoyable, and gave reason to celebrate. It was the culmination of months of effort, sacrifice, and planning. It was enjoyed by friends and family, acknowledging that God is sovereign in the midst. But even winning a championship, while good, pales in comparison to the greatness, goodness, and excellencies of Christ! We will share when our team wins, but will we share that Christ already has! This is not some guilt trip (since that would never work, nor is it good), but rather seeing ALL of it as an opportunity to share and display the goodness of God in Christ and the cross.

Righteousness Upheld (3:29-31)

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. 31 Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law

Finally, Paul asks once again about the division between Jew and non-Jew, and the answer is that God is the God of both! In fact, God is the God of all people, all religions, all nations. He justifies all by faith, whether they have the sign of circumcision or not. Which begs the last question: *does faith nullify the Law? NOT EVEN A LITTLE*. But we know this is what the Law accomplishes:

1. It Displays God's holiness – He upholds all morality in His nature
2. It Establishes His righteousness – This is how one is right with God
3. It Drives us to the cross – The Law was not intended to save, but to give us a mirror to realize that before Christ and in Christ, we cannot be made holy without Christ (Phil. 1:6). The Law is perfect when it plays its role and is upheld in its purpose.

Conclusion: What is the takeaway from this? At my mother-in-law's memorial service, on the front of the program it had these words: ***“I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages”***, a fitting promise of hope in the midst of extreme sadness. It comes out of a hymn by Augustus Toplady from 1763, the beloved “Rock of Ages”. It shows the practical power of understanding the gospel when we understand that we need to cling to Christ and the cross, and when we do, we have comfort and hope. Here is verse 1 and 3 from the hymn.

*Rock of Ages, cleft for me
Let me hide myself in Thee
Let the water and the blood
From Thy wounded side which flowed
**Be of sin the double cure
Save from wrath and make me pure***

***Nothing in my hand I bring
Simply to the cross I cling**
Naked come to Thee for dress
Helpless look to Thee for grace
Wretched to the fount I fly
Wash me, Savior, or I die*