



ROMANS

ROMANS 3:9-31

PAUL'S SHATTERING SUMMATION – ROMANS 3:9-20	31
LET THE GOSPEL MUSIC BEGIN! – ROMANS 3:21-26	32
BY FAITH ALONE – ROMANS 3:27-31	33
FINAL THOUGHTS ON FAITH AND GOOD WORKS	33
PERSONAL APPLICATION – ROMANS 4:1-25	34

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*In Christ's sacrificial death, we
are made one with God again.*
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SOLA FIDE: THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

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Sola Fide. “By faith alone.” If ever there was a Lutheran denominational motto, this is it! Many a poster on Sunday school walls bears those two Latin words that few of the students can read and fewer can translate. Many a stained glass window has a bright Luther rose surrounded by a golden halo with the words “Faith alone / Grace alone / Word alone.” Lutherans love those words.

We have come to the pulsing heart of Romans, to the place where Luther discovered the dynamite, to the engine that powered the Reformation. It all emanates from Romans 3, where Luther famously translated a key phrase in verse 28 “by faith alone.” *Sola Fide* became shorthand for the doctrine of justification by faith. According to the *Augsburg Confession* (article IV), justification is the teaching that “we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith.” Luther called it “the article by which the church stands or falls,” and he willingly risked his life for it.

One can hardly do justice to such a chapter in a single lesson. Many of the words that have formed our foundational understanding of the Gospel are here: law, sin, righteousness, faith, justified, grace, redemption, and especially Jesus Christ. We must read slowly and meditate carefully as we encounter this portion of the Word of God. Mother got it right when she told us, “Chew your food well”!



PAUL'S SHATTERING SUMMATION*ROMANS 3:9-20*

As if he were in a courtroom, Paul has painstakingly laid the groundwork for justification by faith by showing its absolute necessity. In Chapters 1-2, he has made God's case against a sinful world in this progression:

God pronounces judgment against all the unrighteous, who are "without excuse" because the creation itself reveals Him plainly to them (1:18-32).

God pronounces judgment against all who judge others, whether Jews or Greeks, since all act against what they know to be right (2:1-16).

God pronounces judgment in particular against the Jew who relies on the Law, since he breaks that selfsame Law (2:17-3:8).

Now he comes, like a prosecutor, to his shattering summation of the lawbreakers, an indictment of "the whole world" (v. 19). The indictment leaves no one out. In verses 9-12, Paul uses the pronouns "none" or "no one" no less than 5 times. None is righteous! No one at all. To say it the other way, all are guilty. The pronoun "all" is used twice to underline the breath-taking scope of sin's devastation. *The Formula of Concord* sums it up as our "total depravity" (FC SD II 10, 12). The headline from God's courtroom reads: THE WHOLE WORLD STANDS CONDEMNED BEFORE GOD!

Prosecutors review the evidence for the jury. Jewish rabbis liked to underscore their points with a collection of Scripture quotes called a *charatz*, which means a "string of pearls." There are seven "pearls" on Paul's string in verses 10-18, all quoted from the Septuagint. Listen to the prosecutor's charges against a sinful world:

Rom. 3:10 – "None is righteous, no, not one" (from Eccl. 7:20).

Rom. 3:11-12 – "No one understands; no one

seeks for God" (from Ps. 14:1-3).

Rom. 3:13a – "Their throat is an open grave" (from Ps. 5:9).

Rom. 3:13b – "The venom of asps is under their lips" (from Ps. 140:3).

Rom. 3:14 – "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness" (from Ps. 10:7).

Rom. 3:15-17 – "Their feet are swift to shed blood" (from Is. 59:7-8).

Rom. 3:18 – "There is no fear of God before their eyes" (from Ps. 36:1)

Normally, "fear of God" means a basic respect, even a sense of awe as we humans consider our standing before a holy God. But God gets not even that. He gets "no respect" from us!

This listing of scriptural charges is striking because it includes not a single quote from the Torah (the books of Moses). Most are from the Psalms. It's clear that when Paul, in summary fashion, observes, "whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law" (v. 19), he is meaning "law" in a very broad sense as "the entire witness of Scripture."

And what does the law show? The final phrase in Paul's summation sounds almost academic: "through the law comes knowledge of sin" (v. 20). But this is no mere string of facts to be processed! This word, this "law," is God's mirror, held before us to show us the hideous truth about how far we have fallen. The "knowledge of sin" is to be a very personal realization of who we are in our encounter with God and His Word. At what point in your life did "sin" become more than an academic issue? Adam and Eve hid in dread among the trees of Eden after their fateful disobedience. Martin Luther says he "hated that righteous God." Have you known a time when you wanted to run and hide, to crawl in a hole to avoid the gaze of God? If you say yes, you are ready to hear the next word.

LET THE GOSPEL MUSIC BEGIN!

ROMANS 3:21-26

On The Tonight Show, Ed McMahon used to introduce Johnny Carson with, “And now, heeeere’s Johnny!” Verse 21 begins with the electric words “But now...” Paul is introducing new music in a new key. The band begins to play. The joy of good news overtakes the recitation of sin and its shame in the first portion of the epistle. Middendorf suggests that whoever divided the chapters in Romans got it wrong. A new chapter ought to begin right here. “But now the righteousness of God has been manifested”!

The word righteousness is courtroom language. The discovery that brought the Gospel home to Luther was that this righteousness is not simply “of God,” that is to say, something that God possesses (and we don’t!). Rather, he realized it is righteousness “from God,” given to us! What seemed, at first, like bad news, was in fact the very best news. The verb “justified” (v. 24), from the same root as the noun “righteousness,” indicates not a process but a declaration. Justification is not the gradual “washing clean” of a sinner but a declaration from the Judge who says, “Not guilty!” In that moment, the accused becomes innocent.

God has not ignored sin but dealt with it finally and fully. Justice has been fully served in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, in the shedding of His blood. Paul uses the wonderful word “redemption” in v. 24. The Greek term is borrowed from the slave market, where a slave’s freedom could be purchased by a ransom paid to the slave’s owner. The congregation at Rome, a city full of slaves, would understand this term well. Clearly, we sinners are the slaves under the power of sin, our dreadful master. Jesus’ blood is the enormously expensive price that was paid. First Peter 1:18-19 says it beautifully: “You were ransomed... not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb.”

Paul picks up the sacrificial note as well with the word “propitiation” (v. 25, rendered “sacrifice of atonement” in the NIV), an offering that appeases or satisfies the wrath of God against us. It is a word from Israel’s worship. Leviticus 16:14ff. describes how, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest put the blood of that atoning sacrifice on the very mercy seat covering the ark of the covenant. Teachers have often put the word atonement before their students in this fashion: at-one-ment. In Christ’s sacrificial death, we are made one with God again.

All of this is sheer gift! This good news is not for a limited time or a selected few. This gift of grace is for everyone, from now on. When Paul says there is “no distinction,” he almost certainly means “no distinction” between Jews and Gentiles. Both are guilty. He says memorably “all have sinned and fall short” (v. 23). Isaiah long ago opined that our sins have “made a separation” between us and God. It’s a Grand Canyon-sized gulf that not even an Olympian long jumper can begin to clear. And both Jews and Gentiles will be saved by faith. He says it explicitly in the next section (vv. 29-30).

BY FAITH ALONE*ROMANS 3:27-31*

Good as it is, this news will always meet resistance in human beings. We like to claim responsibility, especially for the good things that happen. Paul anticipates one objection when he asks, “Then what becomes of our boasting?” (v. 27). There was a kind of Judaism, William Barclay points out, that kept a kind of profit and loss account with God. In the end, a person might even think that God was in his debt! But the Jews had no monopoly on that kind of thinking. We say, or at least think, the same thing. “I deserve better than this!” we complain, as if God owes us something.

Ah, but He does not! Boasting, says Paul simply, “is excluded” (by God). By the sheer necessity of our total depravity, boasting has been tossed from the playing field of human endeavor. All is (and must be!) a gift. As Paul elaborates on his response, he shows that there are two contradictory and competing ways to get into a right relationship with God. The “law [or principle] of works” and the “law of faith.” Choosing one eliminates the other as a way to get right with God. That’s why, when he translated verse 28 to read “by faith alone,” Luther demonstrated that he understood the mutual exclusivity of those two ways to get right with God.

Such a dramatic pronouncement, of course, was bound to raise a serious objection from the Jews, an objection spelled out in verse 31: “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?” The questioner is asking, “Then what’s the good of the Law, if all you need is faith?” In his day, Luther was accused by his Roman Catholic opponents of being an “antinomian” (against the Law) and making good works of no importance.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON FAITH AND GOOD WORKS

It’s a charge we ought not lightly dismiss. The Christian life is a way of walking, not simply a way of talking! Jesus Himself warned that the one who

finally entered the Kingdom would not be the one who mouthed, “Lord, Lord” but the one “who does the will of my Father” (Matt. 7:21). James 2:17 famously declares, “faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

How do we put the two together? It will not do to count how many passages stress faith and how many stress works. It is the purpose each serves which we ought to explore. A simple way some teachers explain their relationship is the picture of a garden plant. Faith is the “root” and works are the “fruit.” A more nuanced answer is that the purpose of faith is to lay hold of the offered gift of righteousness God provides; the purpose of good works is not to get right with God but simply to please Him and help our neighbor. The works grow naturally when faith is alive and well. We Lutherans often quote Ephesians 2:8-9: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast” (NIV). But we forget to finish the thought that follows in verse 10: “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works.”

Luther put it simply when he said that “Faith is never alone” and somewhere else, “We are not saved by faith and works, but by a faith that works.” There is, obviously, a dead sort of faith that produces nothing, and a living faith that is fruitfully at work, as James is at pains to demonstrate.

It would be well to ponder this matter for now. It would be beneficial to ask, “How fruitful am I? How eager is my faith to serve my great God and the neighbor who is near me?” If we do not take the Word personally, we’re not listening yet as we should! This question will return in the next chapter as we have a look at Abraham. Once more, we will address the question of the relationship between faith and works in his life and ours.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

ROMANS 4:1-25

Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word; curb those who by deceit or sword would wrest the kingdom from Your Son and bring to naught all He has done! In Jesus' name. Amen. (from a hymn by Martin Luther, LSB #655)

For Review:

1. What is the “shattering summation” of Paul’s case against humanity?

2. From what settings were the following words taken:

Justified?

Redemption?

Propitiation

3. Describe a helpful way to relate faith and works.

Romans 4:1-8

4. What comes to your mind when you hear “Father Abraham”? Are there any famous Americans with a similar stature?

5. Why does Paul choose Abraham as his example of faith?

6. Review the story of Abraham (Abram) in Genesis 15-17. What part of the promise God had made earlier (Genesis 12) did He repeat in 15:1-5?

What was Abram's response?

Abram was 75 when he first heard God’s promises (Genesis 12:4). How old were Abram and Sarai when Ishmael was born (16:16)? _____

7. In verse 4, Paul contrasts “gift” with “wages.” How would religion change for you if it were all a matter of “wages” instead of “gift”?

8. What’s the point of the quote from Psalm 32 in verses 7-8?

Romans 4:9-15

9. How old was Abram when he was finally circumcised? (re-visit Chapter 17) _____

10. "Father" Abraham is spoken of here as the father of TWO groups.

Which group is mentioned in v. 11? _____

Which group in v. 12? _____

11. Is there some other person who is a model believer for you?

12. What does "where there is no law there is no transgression" (v. 15) mean?

Romans 4:16-25

13. Paul is referencing Abraham's name change in verse 17. (Also Gen. 17:5).

If the word "Ab" means "father," what does "Ab-ram" mean? _____

How about "Ab-raham"? (Genesis 17:5). _____

(For both, check the footnotes in Genesis 17 or other reference)

14. What does the word "dead" refer to in v. 19?

In v. 24?

15. What have you been waiting on God for? Is there anything you hope for that seems "as good as dead"?

16. What in Abraham's life could you see as instructive for you personally?

Memory Verse Challenge for Chapter 4:

Romans 4:20 *No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God.*