

Romans 3:27-31 Giving all the glory to God for salvation

Introduction

Paul, in this letter to the Church at Rome, has stated the huge problem that has overshadowed the relationship of all human beings with their Creator, that of human sinfulness. He has explained patiently that no-one whether Jew or Gentile like us is exempt from this problem. In Romans 3:21-26, one of the most amazing passages in the New Testament, the apostle has unpacked what God's solution was to the human predicament, how He could be true to Himself and remain consistently holy yet at the same time overcome the problem of our sinfulness and bring us into a loving relationship with Him. With an economy of words he explains how God saved us, using different words that provide some insights into aspects of the meaning of Jesus' sacrifice in your place and mine. Now that he has explained this wonderful Gospel the apostle is aware that critics of his message will suggest that there are problems with what he has been saying. Therefore, he addresses three significant questions in Romans 3:27-31 that have almost certainly been put to him by interested observers or by Jews sceptical of his interpretation of the faith of Abraham.

1. Question 1: *Where, then, is boasting?* (Romans 3:27-28)

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. Because of what law? The law that requires works? No, because of the 'law' that requires faith. ²⁸ *For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law* (Romans 3:27-28). Paul has proclaimed that salvation is given as a result of God's grace which is received by faith as an unmerited gift –so this by definition excludes any ground for boasting by the recipient of God's amazing love in Jesus. The Gospel undercuts one of the biggest problems humanity experiences. (a) **The problem of pride** Medieval Churchmen spoke of the seven deadly sins and listed the one the apostle highlights on their list. Yet today it is seen as laughable to consider it a problem that needs to be addressed, in the perception of many people of our generation. With respect to this issue C.S. Lewis wrote some perceptive words: There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine they are guilty of themselves. I have heard people admit they are bad-tempered, or that they cannot keep their head about girls or drink, or that they are cowards. I do not think I have ever heard anyone who was not a Christian accuse himself of this vice. And at the same time I have very seldom met anyone, who was not a Christian, who showed the slightest mercy to it in others. There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it in ourselves, the more we dislike it in others. The vice I am talking about is pride (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p.94). By its very nature it is impossible to banish because it is like walking a tightrope between an abundance of this vice and its opposite wallowing in self-loathing and a lack of self worth. A man or woman who can retain a right sense of self respect for themselves and also a right perspective on their relationships with the people in each area of their lives has accomplished a great deal whose value cannot be underestimated. It was the sin that led to Lucifer's downfall from heaven. Isaiah 14:12-15: records these words: *How you have fallen from heaven, morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations!* ¹³ *You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon* ¹⁴ *I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.* ¹⁵ *But you are brought down to the realm of the dead, to the depths of the pit.* If only he could have been content to serve God in heaven, but no he could not resist snatching for that which was out of His grasp. This is the absolute opposite of Jesus, of whom Paul in Philippians 2:6-8 records:

who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage;⁷ rather, He made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.⁸ And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross! Hallelujah what a Saviour! It was the sin to which Satan attracted Eve in the Garden of Eden, persuading her to break her trust in the goodness of God. He arrogantly claimed that she would *be like God, knowing good and evil* (Genesis 3:4), if she only defied God and took of the fruit from the tree forbidden by God. Adam likewise fell into that sin. Instead of trusting God to mark the boundaries of his conduct he insisted through that action that he wanted to make that choice. In every generation and in each of our lives human beings have all made that choice with respect to God, with respect to our parents and, maybe with respect to an employer or other person, transgressing the appropriate boundaries of behavioural choices. (b) **The Problem of Religious Pride** It was at the heart of the parable Jesus told in Luke 18:9-14 of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. We highlighted in a previous message on propitiation the basis on which the later asked for God's forgiveness for his sins. He asked for undeserved mercy. The problem of the former character was that he believed he deserved God's blessings. God ought to be pleased that such a fine chap as he was spending time in prayer! *To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable:* ¹⁰ *'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: "God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."* ¹³ *'But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."¹⁴ 'I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted'* (Luke 18:9-14). Christianity has sunk deeply into Scottish culture. In sporting contests we instinctively go for the underdog; often this coincides with patriotism as watching the Scottish football or rugby team ensures the reinforcement of collective humility! Instinctively someone displaying arrogance in public is felt as distasteful, but crossing the boundary between legitimate delight in what we or other people have accomplished and looking down on what others have accomplished is alarmingly easy to do. Being thankful to God for the many blessings we have in our church family is right and proper, but we must always be careful not to let that transgress into inappropriately unfavourable comparisons with other congregations. There is a difference between rightly guarding and maintaining standards of belief and practice on the one hand and judging arbitrarily other people by our own preferences and taste in forms of churchmanship. When we grasp the Gospel and see the level ground at the foot of the cross we instinctively know we are no better than anyone else, but for the grace of God –where would we be? I suspect that the fact that churches over the centuries have so easily divided, but so rarely reconciled or united is in part a phenomenon to which a misplaced human or religious pride has contributed. I thank the Lord for the examples I have been aware of over the years where bridges have been built and barriers to fellowship dismantled as brothers and sisters in Christ individually or corporately showed the grace of humility to one another in a range of different situations.

(c) **What kinds of boasting has the Gospel excluded?** (i) **Salvation by works** People thinking I don't need to believe in Jesus' death on the cross being for me. I can earn my way to heaven by good works. I can gain enough merit by my good deeds outweighing my bad deeds and God must let me into heaven because I've been a good person. These are relative terms. It depends with whom we are comparing ourselves. For some people religious works are added to the list as factors to persuade God to let them into heaven. Such a list might include church attendance, financial giving to a church and /or charities; or voluntary work in the community. Now these are all good things and commended as good citizens, but such thinking is irrelevant to the issue in hand. On one occasion by mistake I took a store card out

of my wallet to use to pay a bill in a shop. The card was valid but useless. I had unintentionally pulled the wrong card out and without looking attempted to use it for payment for an item I was purchasing. Naturally I apologised and used the appropriate one correctly and the transaction was completed. Although the whole procedure took only a minute or less it seemed longer at the time. However, there are similarities here with that error and seeking to get into heaven another way. Jesus has obtained our salvation on the cross. He has paid the price in full. Who try to negotiate an alternative means of entry when God has provided the greatest gift of all through His beloved Son's sacrifice for us? (ii) 'Holier than Thou' attitudes There are times when even the best of us can look down on someone who has misbehaved repeatedly in their life and is now facing the consequences. We may never say it, but we think I'd never be so stupid as to do...? Now it may be factually true; and thank goodness for that, but our attitude to the person who has behaved in that way may not always be as gracious as it should be. This doesn't mean for a moment that we condone wrongdoing which is a growing issue in our land, but how we handle a person who has let their standards slip and how we address the actual sin or mistakes are two different things. We must always oppose the sin but love the sinner in Jesus' name. None of us are better than other people we are all on a journey of faith as Christians seeking to progress in our likeness to Jesus and in our relationships with other people. If we have the mental sign over us 'work in progress' we are enabled to recognise that other people also are on a similar journey, though each at different rates of spiritual progress. (iii) Superiority in knowledge Those of us who have been Christians for longer will inevitably have a greater Scriptural knowledge than someone not from a church background who is new to the faith. It is great to have knowledge of Scripture and its teachings; to be familiar with great themes of theology or information on key persons and events in church history. However, they are not to be the subject of boasting. We need to recognise the privilege of the opportunities we have had to gain that knowledge that might not have been open to another person. (iv) Superiority in faith In some Christian contexts people may be into spiritual one-upmanship over how long they spend in prayer in a given time period, or the number of apparent answers to prayer or the number of miracles they have allegedly performed! Or similar apparent tests of faith. The Gospel excludes them all—even the faith by which we believe in the Lord is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8-10), so how could we boast in that? It is excluded. The only thing we can have left to boast in or glory in is what Jesus has done for us. As Paul writes in Galatians 6:14-15: ***May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.***¹⁵ *Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is the new creation.* In Galatians 6:15 Paul is saying that the Jewish or Gentile background from which we come to Christ is actually not that important. What counts is that Jesus has transformed my life through the gift of His salvation; therefore any boasting I do should be concerning Him and Him alone.

2. Question 2: Is God only God of the Jews or the Gentiles too? (Romans 3:29-30)

²⁹ *Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too,* ³⁰ *since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.* ³¹ *Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.* Paul has pointed out that all, both Jews and Gentiles, ie everyone, is a sinner and in need of God's intervention in Jesus, but that Jesus' death on the cross was effective for all peoples at all times in all places and of infinite worth- therefore, the Gospel in principle is good news for everyone. We live in a world where many faith communities live side by side. In past millennia this was rarely the case and individuals often lived in blissful ignorance of the plethora of faiths being practised around the globe. This question about the way to God is hotly contested today. Some people claim all religions are a part of a greater truth and all to a

greater or lesser degree will help you get to heaven. A second view is that one religious perspective is best but that others will –with respect to their most noble adherents be sufficient to be acceptable to God. The third and historic view is that the way of salvation is through Jesus who alone is *the way, the truth and the life*. Jesus went on to say: *no-one comes to the Father except through Me* (John 14:6). This viewpoint is not denying the possibility that in His mercy God will allow others into heaven. After all Paul in Romans 2:15 indicates that some people who have never heard a clear presentation of the Gospel may be judged on the light of the knowledge they had of God in their conscience and how they responded to that knowledge. What he is saying is that there can be no certainty, no boasting that another way has been found to circumvent the necessity of Christ’s death being required to procure our salvation. What proponents of options one and two often fail to address is that if God will allow people automatically into heaven without following Jesus, then why was it necessary for Jesus to go through all He did in leading up to as well as enduring on the cross. In such a scenario the cross looks anything but an act of love and grace, in fact the absolute opposite. It is not my ethnic background or being an adherent of a particular religion or denomination or membership in a specific local congregation that causes me to boast. On the contrary because our salvation is provided through Jesus our boasting or rejoicing has to be in or through Him.

In Paul’s day some Jews boasted that they were first class believers in God and people from other backgrounds were in effect second-class citizens in the kingdom of God –the Gospel excludes such boasting. A text like Psalm 145:8-9 states: *The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love.*⁹ *The Lord is good to all; He has compassion on all he has made.* This appears clear but some Jewish commentaries of the time declared: ‘But He is only gracious to Israelites, other nations He will terrify.’ Or, ‘If a man repents God accepts him, but that applies only to Israel and no other nation’ (William Barclay, *Galatians*, p. 19). This ugly issue arose in the Church at Antioch as Paul recorded in Galatians 2:11-16: *When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.*¹² *For before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group.*¹³ *The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray.*¹⁴ *When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in front of them all, ‘You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs?’*¹⁵ *‘We who are Jews by birth and not sinful Gentiles*¹⁶ *know that a person is not justified by the works of the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law, because by the works of the law no one will be justified.* Praise God Paul’s rebuttal of this error was so thorough that it was sufficient to convince all the Jewish-Christian leaders at the Council of Jerusalem in AD48, shortly afterwards, as Acts 15:1-31 records. The Gospel must overcome ethnic divisions –otherwise it is scandalous when we are supposed to be one in Christ Jesus.

Although it is much less common today it is possible that some people might boast in the denominational label their church has at the expense of others who are viewed as practising a second-class form of Christianity. Again Paul would say, I disagree, our cause for rejoicing and celebration is in Jesus. It is true that the presentation of the Gospel is much weaker in some congregations than others; also that the quality of spiritual life and fellowship in some is higher than others. Where there are serious problems in a church it should be a cause of sadness and a matter for genuine prayer for other local believers, not a reason for quiet satisfaction that our church is growing in numbers and another in the locality is not. In my previous pastorate there was slightly more than a year in which five of us as pastors met to pray once a month for another congregation in our town that had a troubled history, in particular for God’s guidance in a pastoral settlement. Although there were no quick fixes, we believed that the specific things for which we prayed were received and that congregation

began to turn around and go forward in spiritual terms. Our motivation for praying was quite simply that God would receive greater glory in our community by that transformation. I believe He did honour our desires for His glory in that situation. The Gospel is not merely to transform congregations inside church buildings or individual lives, it also is intended to transform cultures and bring people together as God intended. Of course there are plenty of people who want to reject its claims, but we as God's ambassadors have the privilege of proclaiming a gospel of reconciliation. *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here!* ¹⁸ *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God.* (II Corinthians 5:17-20). Have you received this Gospel? Are you rejoicing in it?

3. **Question 3: Do we, then nullify the law by this faith?** (Romans 3:31)

³¹ *Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.* This is a huge question and one many people from certain religious and secular backgrounds struggle with. If we are saved unconditionally through faith in Jesus, even though the cost to Him was immense, could it not be argued what is there to stop such a recipient of God's grace living a life of wanton immorality, or some other form of inappropriate behaviour –after all if they are not able to be threatened with a ban from entering heaven – what ultimate sanction is there to compel them to live appropriately? Actually a person who thinks this way has not grasped the wonderful gospel message Paul has explained. Charles Studd (1862-1931), founder of the Heart of Africa Mission (Later called W.E.C.) famously declared: "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him." Studd, and his family were upper class Englishmen who came from a wealthy landowning and horse-racing family. His family came to faith through a mission led by D.L. Moody, the famous American Evangelist. They possessed everything they could have wished of this world's goods with the boys all educated at Eton and Cambridge University. They were star cricketers – all three playing for England. Charles inherited a fortune, £20,000, several million in today's money but gave it away to four Christian causes and went as a missionary to China, later India and finally Africa. The love of Christ constrained him to give his all in the cause of the Gospel. He had grasped the enormity of the love of God in Christ and together with his wife and close associates accomplished more for God in missionary service than most Christians would have thought possible. It was no glamour ministry. The hardships willingly endured would have daunted many a lesser man.

(a) The Law and Holy living Paul will address this issue in more detail in Romans 6:1-7: *What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning, so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. ⁵ For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we will certainly also be united with Him in a resurrection like His. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – ⁷ because anyone who has died **has been set free from sin.*** For a life of effective Christian service or indeed as a motivation for reaching out in mission not only is there no higher motive, but also no more effective one than to grasp the extent of God's love for us in Jesus. This revelation of the significance of the Gospel enables us to see that my progress in holiness is not something comparative or in any sense competitive with fellow believers; rather it is an inner passion to honour the One who has loved me and given Himself for me.

Therefore, I will want to please Him and keep my eyes fixed on Him. I will not use the excuse that my friends are less frequent in church attendance, or less committed to prayer or less enthusiastic for spreading the good news to weaken my desire to live for Jesus. I will seek to be a man or woman of God who will be a leader by my example and may on some occasions use words to encourage others in their walk with the Lord. Why is there evidence of transformation in the life of a genuine Christian? It is because the Holy Spirit is at work in the life of a person who comes to faith. He is the encourager, the enabler, who assists us to accomplish all we do achieve in His work. The Gospel is a message of liberation. No longer are we bound by sin or other things that can defeat us –in His power we can be overcomers for God.

(b) **The Law and Justification by faith** (i) It honours the law Justification by faith alone through God's grace alone honours the law of God, because it reveals that we could never attain to its standards, but cannot evade them either. We affirm says Paul in Romans 7:12: ... *the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.* We cannot but take it seriously on its own terms. (ii) It fulfils the law We are sinners facing condemnation for our sins, but a person who had honoured the law in full and attained its standards offered Himself as a substitute in our place to meet its legitimate demands. In Christ's sacrifice for us the barrier between sinners and God was destroyed so that God could *be just and the One who justifies the person who has faith in Jesus* (Romans 3:26). (iii) It establishes the law that is we willingly embrace God's righteous standards for our lives. Remember what Jesus said to John the Baptist when the latter was less than enthusiastic re baptising Him. *Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.'* Then John consented (Matthew 3:15). Paul in Philippians 3:8-9 made a similar point for the Christian believer: ⁸ *What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.* May God help us not only to believe the Gospel and share it with others, but also truly rejoice in it, for Jesus' sake, Amen.