

The Law Fulfilled
Romans 3:21

1 Corinthians 3
Galatians 6
Psalm 8

This morning we are going to pick up where we left off last week in chapter 3. Paul has been building up this argument, laying brick upon brick building up to a conclusion which he begins to get at here in the last half of chapter 3. He has already been alluding to it, showing that justification before God is through faith, and such is for both the Jew and the Gentile. It is not either law, or faith, but it is faith and faith alone in Christ, and it is only by his holiness imputed to us that we may be considered righteous before God. In chapter 1 Paul points to the sins of the Gentiles and says, “The wrath of God is revealed from Heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”: “And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, gave them them over to a debased mind, to do the things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness, full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.

Paul has basically encapsulated all of mankind, and just so no one gets away he includes not just those who practice such things, but also those who approve. Then in chapter 2 he continues on, saying look, you who judge those who practice these things... ya, well you are likewise guilty of the same. For as Christ pointed out on the sermon on the mount, it isn't about the actions, but about the heart. All sin originates in the will and desire before it is acted upon, and it is that sin which condemns, for by the time the action is committed you are condemned by it already. There is none who is righteous, and none who is holy, except the one Jesus Christ. There are those who stand in judgment, who are quick to the point to the sin of another, and not recognize the sinfulness in their own heart. That is the point of Chapter 2. Chapter 1 shows the sinfulness of man, the corruption, and rebellion against God, and chapter 2 is pointing out to the pious religious person to be wary, for they to are indeed just as guilty. No one can escape the punishment of sin, all sin shall be punished and as we talked about last week, God is just and righteous in the punishment of sin. And that is the beauty of the gospel, Gods righteous judgment is doled out, but not upon those of faith, but upon his Son who he has sent on our behalf to take the wrath of God in our stead. God is just, holy, and righteous, he can not merely abide sin, or allow it, nor be a part of it. If he did so, he would not be just, he would not be holy, he would not be righteous, and he would not be God. The very nature of sin is rebellion against him, and he is just and holy in the punishment of that rebellion.

The fact of the matter is, we do not understand the vileness of our sinfulness. I think because it is a part of us, in the flesh, there is a clear and present danger that we can become a bit numb to it, that is we like to categorize, and justify in our flesh. We see that in the idea of a white lie, an innocent deception, likewise if we are not careful we can do the same with sin. Yet look how Paul categorized sin, he lists off the sinful nature of mankind in chapter 1 that we read and includes disobedient to parents. That is often a sin we don't think about much, or talk about much but it listed not a lesser, or a minor sin, but as equal to all others. For the reality is that all sin no matter how we may categorize it, leads to judgment and punishment.

For God is just, and holy and can not merely ignore our “little” rebellions. We don't understand the holiness of God, just being in his very presence would consume us, we can not endure the glory of his righteousness. But God, who is rich in mercy has prepared a way so that we may approach him, boldly. Think on that, the God of this universe, who's very presence would destroy us, is the God who says, “come to me all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” He is the same God who did not spare his own Son, and who poured out his wrath upon him in our place so that we may be reconciled to him, so that we may enter into his presence, not by our own righteousness through our own morality, but merely by the blood of Jesus Christ. There is no gift more precious, no love more gracious, then that of our heavenly Father. To make a way, for sinners to come to him. He whose very presence would consume us, has made a way for us to come to him. So really, if you think about this reality, what does it say about us Christians today who look back to the law for our guide of holiness? What does it say about those of us who are striving in the flesh through law and traditions in an attempt to be righteous before God? Don't you think that would be offensive to God? He says, here is my Son, whom I have given so that you may know me, so that by him you may come to me, and by him you may be in my very presence...and we say thanks, and then quickly turn to a morality code to fix our sinful flesh.

By our actions, in such a focus and adherence of the law, we are basically saying what God has done isn't enough. We don't truly believe that Christ is enough, we don't truly believe in the Spirit's indwelling and working in us to will and to do that which is good. We feel the need for something outside of that to guide us, so we set up new laws, we pick and chose those of the old in an attempt to create a sense of holiness. Paul says, those who are of the law, are condemned by it, just like those who do not have a law are condemned by their sin, if then, there is no righteousness found in the law, then why return to it? Doing so is to deny that the power of Christ's death on the cross for redemption is enough. To understand Christ's death as merely to enable you to adhere to the law which in turn earns you righteousness is to not understand truly what Christ has done. And this is exactly what Paul is talking about here in the last half of chapter 3. Let's read our passage this morning starting from verse 19. (READ 3:19-31)

The righteousness that has been secured is apart from the law, we have not been enabled to keep it, the righteousness imputed to us, through Christ is apart from the law, but that does not mean that the law had no purpose, Paul says here that this righteousness was revealed by he law and prophets. It is not as though the law has been annulled as if it didn't matter at all because God can not accept any arrangement, or agreement that would be unjust. This righteousness that has come through Christ, apart from the law had to still satisfy the justice that it demands. Christ's death was not a last minute, or plan B idea to save mankind because redemption through the law failed, it is the law and the prophets which testified of Christ. God's act of salvation which was foretold by the prophets would deal with sin differently then the law, no longer is there a need for the shedding of blood, for Christ the true lamb that all which came before was a picture of, has come, and by his blood our sins are forgiven and we have been made righteous before God through Christ. This is a restoration of God's eternal presence, where sin is is not tolerated, nor evil allowed access. For this righteousness provided by God has covered the sin of his people completely, so that we now have access to the most Holy, righteous, and just God.

In verse 22, there is some debate as to the translation and wording of this statement. “even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ.” Many scholars argue that for proper understanding of this passage it should read “by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ” Because as it has been translated it implies that our faith is the lynch pin, the deciding factor in our righteousness. understanding this passage as the faithfulness of Christ removes the idea of the dependency on a persons faith. The individual who is sensitive to this difference and read it as translated in many bibles, will undoubtedly arrive to the question, “Do I have enough faith, or the right kind of faith? But in the context here, Paul's statement is speaking of Christ's faithfulness on the grounds of salvation. This of course does not remove the necessity, or reality of our own faith as we see throughout the entire new testament, but understanding this passage as being the faithfulness of Christ to enable God's people to be righteous before him lays a much firmer foundation that is built upon the faithfulness of Christ, and not upon our own. We are saved by God because of the faithfulness of his Son, who achieved through obedience and death, this great work of salvation. We are sealed, in his promises, by his hand, faith in God has not become a new form of law that we must strive to keep, but rather it is a gift given to us by God. And he is faithful and sure to accomplish it, since salvation is provided and given by God, and our faith is provided and given by God, it can not, and it will not fail. It is a sure and blessed reality, that God can not reject himself, and all of those who are of Christ, are his. There are none who are lost, none who are overlooked, if you are Christs, then your salvation is secure in him, for it is by his faithfulness you have been justified and made righteous.

And this faithfulness of Christ, which brings righteousness to all those who believe, who have been given the gift of faith, is necessary because without it we would be lost in our sins, for as verse 23 says, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The Jews in Rome would hear this letter that Paul writes they would immediately understand that this statement reflects their own history. Not only does it refer to the head of the human family, Adam who by this sin brought all of those born of the flesh into a state of rebellion against God, but it also alludes to Israel in exile. God had told Israel that he had separated her out from the nations for his glory, but in exile she was a picture of shame and sinfulness. This exile, apart from God is far worse then being captives in Egypt or Babylon, for this exile is apart from God living in darkness and sin. And Paul's statement again is doubling down that there is no partiality with God, whether Jew or Gentile you will be judged for your sin. But it isn't as if there is no hope, for though all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, God has set aside a portion, a remnant for himself by who are, as verse 24 says, “justified freely by this grace through the redemption of Jesus Christ.” Though all have sinned, though all are incapable of keeping God's law, God has made a way to reconcile his people to himself having both the judgment and justice for sin being paid, and the grace and mercy of forgiveness fulfilling both God's holy and righteous justice, and his gracious and merciful love.

The final act of justification is not the result of God's people being punished for their sins, but rather Christ as our representative taking the guilt of his fellow man. Our justification and righteousness has been achieved by Christ, he is the messiah, the promised one who would come and deliver his people from bondage. Paul states, that the church was justified freely by God's grace, “through the redemption of Christ Jesus.” There is a sense in which the Jews had been justified when God delivered them from their oppressors. They were in Exile both in Egypt, and in Babylon to which God delivered them from. Paul writes in chapter 4 of Roman's that Jesus was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. God delivered, justified, and his people when he raised up his Son, the promised Seed of David.

This act of redemption far exceeds anything that God had achieved for his people in Egypt, or Babylon. On the night of the Passover, the sacrificial lambs served as a substitute for the Hebrew first born. Each family killed a lamb, and smeared its blood on the lintel and doorposts, so when the Lord came through Egypt he saw the blood and passed over their homes. Thus the blood of the Passover lamb redeemed the Jews. Their deliverance from Babylon was also another act of redemption, however there was no sacrifice offered like with Egypt. The Jewish people themselves were punished for the sins they had committed by being exiled into Babylon. Nevertheless they were released by God from bondage, when God rose up the Persians to conquer the Babylonians the Jews were then able to return home. The price of the Jews deliverance was the overthrowing of a nation, which the sovereign God of the universe used to fulfill his promise to his people.

But these are just pictures, of the redemption that we have through Jesus Christ. This redemption through Christ is different, it is one in which the covenant community is justified freely, not as a result of her own suffering but through the shedding of the blood of Jesus Christ. This redemption is the result of the grace of God. When the Jews were sent into exile, they received the punishment due, but in this deliverance and redemption we do not get such a punishment. In fact, mankind's position with God is far worse than the picture we see of Israel, for the earth is in exile in a kingdom of darkness, covenant bound to Satan who has enslaved humanity in hopeless, eternal, and inescapable bondage. When Adam disobeyed and entered into an unholy alliance with Satan the whole of creation became victim of his sin. The redemption of God's people through Christ enacted a redemption that mankind could otherwise not achieve, an act of atonement which no creature could accomplish. The redemption completed by Christ is unique. It is the result of God giving up to death the Messiah, who is King, and the Son of God. A redemption that far exceeds any other pictures we have been given.

Verse 24, "being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by his blood, through faith, to demonstrate his righteousness because in his forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time his righteousness, that he might be the just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." The death of Jesus satisfies the dilemma of how a holy God can appear to deal so lightly with sin. There have been any times in human history, where it would seem that God had not acted justly and ignored man's wrong doings. However here Paul is adamant that this was actually never the case, but rather God chose not to take immediate action because he had a plan to rescue man from his condition of exile and judgment, by sending his Son as the sacrificial lamb bringing redemption and hope to a hopeless and enslaved mankind. It isn't as though God at one time was indifferent to sin, on the contrary, he dealt patiently with sin throughout history because in his foreknowledge he had a plan to address it once and for all. The death of Christ and the atonement of his blood deals with the sins of all of God's people, past, present and future. And likewise the opposite is true, just as the Passover lamb did not protect any who disregarded the word of God and who did not partake in the lamb's death by putting its blood on the doorway, and eating the Passover lamb, likewise Christ's death does not bring atonement for unbelievers.

Now that Christ has come and accomplished redemption and atonement for his people on the cross, the punishment for sin has been settled, No one can ever question God's commitment to justice. He has dealt with the curse of Adam's sin upon man by sending his own Son to take that punishment for his own people. So they they may be delivered from exile and enslavement under Satan. By giving his only Son to death, making him the Passover victim for all his people he has demonstrated once and for all beyond any doubt that his love, and justice.

By giving of his Son, God is both just, and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. As Tom Holland says in his commentary on Romans, “When God justified Israel, she was in exile in Babylon and he rescued her. In doing this, he was justifying her claim to be his covenant people. Such a claim made by the Jews to their Babylonian captors would have been a source of much ridicule. Think of that, you are a mighty Babylonian and the people whom you have captured and enslaved are claiming to be the special people of the God who created the earth. These slaves? You can only imagine the mocking for such a claim. But when God brought Israel back to her inheritance through the overthrowing of the mighty Babylonian empire, he justified the claims that she had made, Israel was shown to the whole world to be the people of the covenant keeping God. Paul is now saying that he has likewise justified his people, those who have faith in Jesus. And since this is true, since this redemption, deliverance, and atonement has been given by God who is both Just, and the one who justifies, Paul then starts to ask rhetorical questions in verse 27. “Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what Law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith.” Paul is echoing back to the warnings of Jeremiah, who said, “let him who boast boast about this, that he understands and knows that I am the Lord.” The prophet was warning the captive Israel not to take matters into their own hands, do not seek escape from your capture through rebellion, but rather trust in God. They were to accept the judgment that God had put upon them and were not to attempt their own salvation, but rather wait in faith for God to fulfill his promise.

Paul is likewise urging believers in Rome, to not even think about boasting of their own accomplishments or understandings of the law. Such pride would indicate that they were seeing their own accomplishments to be a source of their salvation, However salvation is not based upon the works of the law, but on the basis of faith in God's intervention on their behalf. There is nothing that a believer can boast upon, other than Christ and what he has done. No amount of works, or morality will stand to justify us before this just and holy God, only the righteousness accomplished by Christ on the cross, leaving mankind nothing to boast about, for it is not by our own merit, but God and God alone. Verse 28, “therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.” Paul is repeating himself here driving home the importance of this statement. This issue is so important, there is no room for error or confusion. Deliverance from sin's domain is not a human achievement but rather it is the result of God's saving grace, and the act of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Paul is rejecting the deliverance of the old testament in which the Jews boasted, and he himself likewise being a Jew had boasted in the law, but now he is appealing to his countrymen to put all of their hope in the Messiah, whose death is the foundation for deliverance. This deliverance was for both Jews and Gentiles, and was apart from the law and is merely by faith in the one who has accomplished it.

If justification and deliverance came by the law, then the logical conclusion that salvation would be only for the Jews, for it is they who had been given the law and its ordinances, not the gentiles. But that of course is not the case, as Paul states in verse 29 “Or is he the God of the Jews only? Is he not also the God of the Gentiles Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.” God did not create the Jews, he created all of humanity and is therefore the God of all of humanity. He will judge each one and every individual, and as Paul had already stated, his people of faith shall be saved. Notice what Paul says here in verse 30, “he will judge the circumcised by faith, not of flesh, and likewise he will judge the uncircumcised by faith, not of flesh.” Genealogy, physical standing or upbringing, nationality or creed does not matter, the deciding factor of justification before God is faith. Paul here is sort of twisting the knife, he has already made claims that those who are of Israel are not all Israel, and that a true Jew is one of the Faith of Abraham, not a physical descendant.

And here he is now using the very sign and symbol that was given to Israel to separate them from the nations and applying it to Jews, and Gentiles who have believed upon Jesus Christ. God's covenant promise given to Abraham was that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through his offspring, foretelling of the Messiah to who would come and take away the sins of the world. The final rhetorical question of Paul that we are looking at today, is in verse 31, "Do we make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law." Paul was aware that the ultimate test for the Jewish believers in Rome was whether the matter being discussed was according to the law. IF he could not demonstrate the purpose and use of the law he had no chance of convincing them that the gospel he was preaching was from God. His entire argument is that the gospel of Christ upholds and fulfills the law, he is adamant in pointing out that the law was looking forward to God sending a deliverer to deliver his people from its condemnation. The promised Messiah, who would bring salvation to the world. The gospel therefore, doesn't bypass the law, but instead fulfills it, the law was nothing more than a tutor, a chaperon, a task master to show mankind's need for the Messiah. All are lost, all stand condemned before God in sin and rebellion, but God who is rich in mercy and grace sent his son to endure God's wrath for his people, so that his righteous law maybe satisfied, and his people maybe justified. Now that Christ has come, the law has been fulfilled, its purpose made complete, and we now have as Paul wrote in Galatians, the law of Christ operating within us.

The day has now come as was foretold by Jeremiah, chapter 31, "Behold the days are coming says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah. Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand out of Egypt, my covenant, which they broke, though I was a husband to them says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts, and I will be their God and they will be my people." The old covenant has been broken, not by God, but by Israel, and God has now established a new covenant through the blood of his Son, that all who believe upon him shall be saved so that it is the Israel of faith, who have Jesus Christ, the law of the new covenant written upon our hearts. We have been established, adopted, and kept by the most holy and high God, this new covenant established between God the father, and God the son is not predicated upon our ability to keep a moral law, but rather is sealed by the blood of Christ, and upheld by the promises of God, so that no man may boast, and so that no nation or creed has precedence, but that all are equal before God who is just, and the justifier of his people. By his stripes, we are healed, by his promises we are upheld, and by his sacrifice we are reconciled, it is not of anything that we have done, but it is all by God who is rich in mercy and grace who has established and fulfilled a way for his people to be brought into his very presence. This is you oh Christian, a nation established by God, for God, and through God, to be a light unto this dying world, and reflect the hope of God in this hopeless land. We are not to live as those did in the old covenant, looking to the law, but instead we look to Christ, who has fulfilled the law, and works in us, and through us to do that which is pleasing to him.