

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

FAITH VERSUS PRIDE

Romans 3:27-31

By

Steven J. Cole

December 5, 2010

© Steven J. Cole, 2010

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons via email go to: www.fcfonline.org/sermons

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

December 5, 2010
Romans, Lesson 19

Faith Versus Pride Romans 3:27-31

If I were to ask all of you to write down the sin that causes you the most trouble, I would probably get many responses listing anger, lust, lying, and greed (or, materialism). I might get a few entries for jealousy, hatred, gossip, and laziness. Maybe I'd get one or two for gluttony. But I wonder how many would list *pride* as the most difficult sin that they battle every day?

It ought to be at the top of our lists, because it is the root of virtually every other sin. If you get angry, it's because you want your way and you didn't get your way. The truth is, you don't like how God is dealing with you and you think you could do it better. The root of such anger is pride! If you lust, it's because you imagine that you are so sexy that this woman would want to give herself to satisfy your desires, apart from a committed, loving relationship. You want to use her, not love her. Pride is at the root of such lust.

In *Mere Christianity* [Macmillan], C. S. Lewis refers to pride as "The Great Sin" (pp. 108ff.). After mentioning that pride led to the devil's downfall, he says (p. 109), "Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind." He contends that pride is a sin that we are very much aware of and dislike when we see it in others, but most of us are blind to it in ourselves. Regarding spiritual pride, he offers this test (p. 111):

Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good—above all, that we are better than someone else—I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the devil. The real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small, dirty object. It is better to forget about yourself altogether.

I bring up pride because Paul does (3:27): "Where then is boasting?" But that leads to some questions: Why does he bring up boasting here? Why does he ask this string of other questions? Why didn't he just end the discussion of justification by faith after 3:26?

Before I address these questions, let me give a brief overview of verses 27-31. Most commentators understand Paul to be addressing three issues here: (1) Justification by faith alone excludes all boasting (3:27-28); (2) The fact that there is one God means that there is one way of salvation (justification by faith) for all people (3:29-30); (3) Justification by faith does not nullify the Law, but rather, establishes it (3:31). I'm going to differ slightly from the majority and suggest that the second point is really a continuation of the subject of boasting, aimed at the religiously proud Jew, so that Paul is saying two main things about justification by faith:

Justification by faith alone takes away all grounds for boasting and is the only doctrine that truly establishes God's Law.

In 3:27-28, Paul contends that justification by faith alone takes away all grounds of boasting about keeping the Law for salvation. In 3:29-30, he shows that justification by faith alone takes away any grounds of boasting about one's religious rituals as a basis for salvation. In 3:31, he anticipates the question that a Jewish critic may raise, "Then doesn't justification by faith nullify God's Law?" He replies, "May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law."

But let's come back to the question, why does Paul bring up boasting and these other issues here? First, we must understand that Paul is still aiming at religious Jews. Back in 2:17, after approaching them indirectly in 2:1-16, he took direct aim: "But if you bear the name 'Jew' and rely upon the Law and boast in God...." He goes on to hit them with their religious hypocrisy. In 2:23, he asks, "You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God?" And, he will go on to deal further with boasting in 4:2, where he states, "For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God."

So, why does Paul hammer on this theme? I suggest that it was because Paul knew, both from personal experience and from the Scriptures, how deeply embedded in our fallen hearts is the pride that wants to take some of the credit for being our own savior. Even if we acknowledge that God is the primary agent in our salvation, we're still prone to claim that we had something to do with it, so that we can boast.

We're like Stacey King, who played with the Chicago Bulls when Michael Jordan was at his peak. One night, Jordan scored 69 points and King scored one. He said later, "I'll always remember this as the night that Michael Jordan and I combined to score 70 points" (*Reader's Digest* [10/1991], p. 22). Of course, he was joking. But we're often serious when we take some of the credit for our own salvation: "God must have seen something in me that caused Him to pick me out of the crowd!" We even can boast in our own faith, as if we were smart enough to believe. (See Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: Atonement and Justification* [Zondervan], pp. 110-114, for four other reasons that Paul raises these questions.)

So Paul follows up his argument that we are justified by faith as a gift by God's grace (3:24) by underscoring these important implications of that crucial doctrine. If we understand this doctrine correctly, it deflates all our pride. And, it does not nullify God's Law, but rather, establishes it.

1. Justification by faith alone takes away all grounds of boasting about keeping the Law for salvation (3:27-28).

"Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law" (3:27-28).

The Jews boasted in the Law (2:23), as we just saw. The Pharisees especially prided themselves in keeping the Law: They fasted, they prayed at the required times, they observed the Sabbath, they carefully washed themselves according to the prescribed rituals, and they even tithed their table spices (Matt. 23:23)! But Jesus confronted them with the defilement of their evil hearts (Mark 7:1-23).

Paul himself, before his conversion, took great pride in his Jewish religious credentials and good works. In Galatians 1:14, he says that he was advancing in Judaism more than many of his contemporaries. C. S. Lewis observes (*ibid.*, pp. 109-110) that competition is the essence of pride. We glory in being better than others are. In Philippians 3:5-6, Paul rattles off the list that he once took great pride in: "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless."

But he goes on to say that when he met Jesus Christ, he counted all of these things to be rubbish so that he might gain Christ, adding (Phil. 3:9), “and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.”

That’s the same point that Paul is hammering home in our text: If we are justified by faith alone, apart from any human works, then we have no grounds for boasting. We can’t boast in our *moral-ity* as the reason for why we are right with God, because even if we were outwardly moral before we met Christ, our hearts were corrupt (Rom. 3:10-12). Jesus’ words to the Pharisees apply to us all (Matt. 23:27): “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.” Even if we’re outwardly moral, it won’t put us right with God because He sees our corrupt hearts.

We can’t boast in our *religious observance* as a means of salvation, because the Bible is clear that God sees through such outward rituals and looks on our hearts. You can go to church every week, be baptized, and partake of communion, but none of these things earn points toward your salvation. None of these practices qualify you as a better candidate for salvation.

The same is true of *spiritual knowledge*. It’s helpful to study the Bible and understand its doctrines and moral precepts. It’s good to study the original languages in which the Bible was written so that your knowledge is more accurate. But none of these things will get you right with God apart from faith in Jesus Christ.

In fact, some even turn *faith* itself into a work and boast about their faith, as if they believed in Christ on their own, apart from His grace! If faith is something that fallen sinners can exercise on their own, apart from God’s granting it as a free gift, then those sinners will boast in their faith. After all, what makes me differ from unbelievers? I believed in Christ and they didn’t. But, *why* did I believe in Christ? If I claim any credit for that, I’m boasting in my faith. But, as Romans 3:11 states, “There is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God.” Jesus said (John 6:44, 65), “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; ...

no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.” Saving faith isn’t something that we can produce and thus boast in. It’s a gracious, undeserved gift from God, so that we cannot boast (Eph. 2:8-9).

But, what does Paul mean when he says (3:27) that boasting is excluded by “a law of faith”? Some (e.g., Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 202; John Piper, “Justification by Faith is the End of Boasting,” on desiringGod.org) say that Paul means that “the law [of Moses] rightly understood is a law that teaches righteousness by faith.” This is further elaborated on in 4:3, where Paul cites Genesis 15:6 to show that “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

But, in the context (3:21-16, 28) Paul is contrasting the righteousness that comes through faith with the Mosaic Law. This leads to the natural question of 3:31, “Do we then nullify the Law through faith?” So, it is better to understand that Paul is making a play on words when he refers to “the law of faith.” He is saying, “It is not the Law of Moses, which required works, that excludes boasting. Rather, it is the new ‘law of faith,’ apart from works that excludes boasting” (I’m following Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], pp. 247-250).

In 3:28, Paul explains his point in 3:27, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.” Right standing with God (“justification”) is not something that we earn by doing good works. Rather, it is something that we receive as a gift through faith in Jesus Christ and His shed blood. Instead of the words, “apart from works of the Law,” we can rightly say that we are justified by faith *alone*.

But, that raises another important question: Is Paul at odds with James 2:24, “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone”? This issue was at the heart of the Protestant Reformation and it remains the major divide between the Protestant understanding of the gospel versus the Roman Catholic view. Bible-believing Protestants affirm with the Reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin, that we are justified by faith *alone*, apart from works. The Roman Catholic Church contends that we are justified by faith *plus* our works, as James seems to affirm.

When we studied James, I spent two messages dealing with this crucial question. It is crucial because the way that we are saved hinges on it! (See, "Saving Faith: Genuine or False? June 26, 2005; and, "Are We Justified by Works?" July 3, 2005, on fcfonline.org.) So here I must be brief.

First, both James and Paul affirm that we are saved by grace through faith alone. But each man was addressing a different problem. James was looking at those who professed to have faith in Christ, but their lives were void of works. James claimed that that sort of faith was not genuine and it does not save anyone. Genuine saving faith always results in a life of good works. Paul would concur (Eph. 2:8-10; Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-8). No one is saved by a faith that is mere mental agreement. The faith that justifies is obedient faith (Rom. 1:5; 15:18; 16:26).

But Paul (in Romans and Galatians) was writing to those who taught that we must add our works to faith in Christ in order to be justified. The Judaizers claimed to believe in Christ, but they insisted that Gentiles who believe must also add circumcision and keep the Law of Moses in order to be saved. Paul called this a distorted "gospel" that damns (Gal. 1:6-9). He accused these false teachers of emphasizing these things so that they could boast in the flesh (Gal. 6:12-13). If you want to boast in anything, Paul said, "Boast ... in the cross" (Gal. 6:14).

Before we leave this point, please make sure that you have applied it personally. Have you abandoned *all* attempts to earn right standing with God by your good works? Are you trusting in Jesus Christ *alone*, who shed His blood to pay the penalty that you deserved because of your sin? Is your boast *completely* in the Lord, who chose you and saved you in spite of yourself (1 Cor. 1:26-31)?

2. Justification by faith alone takes away any grounds of boasting about one's religious rituals as a basis for salvation (3:29-30).

"Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one" (3:29-30).

Paul is still zeroing in on the Jews. He takes the creed that was central for all Jews (Deut. 6:4), "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!" and argues, "If God is one, then He must be God not only of the Jews, but also of the Gentiles. And, if He is one, it is likely, isn't it, that He would have only one means of salvation for all people? Since, as we've shown, we are justified by faith in Christ apart from the works of the Law, this must apply equally to both Jews and Gentiles. God justifies all people through faith alone." Besides, the Old Testament clearly proclaimed that the God of Israel is the Lord of all the nations (e.g., Psalms 67, 96-98).

So Paul is arguing here that justification by faith means that there is only one way of salvation for all people. But, also, as I said, it seems to me that Paul is still confronting the tendency of the Jews to boast in their religion, especially in the rituals of their religion, the epitome of which was circumcision. As Paul will go on to show, God justified Abraham *before* he was circumcised, so justification cannot be based on compliance with that religious ritual. If God justified the yet-uncircumcised father of the Jewish nation by faith, then it follows that He also justifies the uncircumcised Gentiles by faith. You can't take pride in any religious rituals.

Let's apply this point: If you come from a religious background, don't trust in church membership, baptism, or communion for salvation. You must trust in Christ alone. If you don't come from a religious background, you don't need to join the church, be baptized, partake of communion, or go through other religious rituals to get right with God. In fact, doing these things to earn right standing with God would only fill you with pride, which keeps you from God! Rather, laying aside all of your good works and all religious rituals, put your trust in Jesus Christ alone. God imputes the righteousness of Christ to *all* who believe (3:22).

But if "a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law" (3:28), and if a sinner can be justified by faith apart from any religious rituals, then aren't we nullifying the Law? Paul anticipates and answers this question:

3. Justification by faith alone does not nullify the Law, but rather establishes it (3:31).

“Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law” (3:31; the NIV and ESV translate, “we uphold the Law.”)

This is a very difficult verse to interpret and every interpreter necessarily reads the verse through the lens of his own view of how the Law relates to believers in Christ. Having read many books and articles on this subject, I would say that it is one of the most difficult theological issues in the Bible to understand. It has to do with how much continuity versus discontinuity there is between the Old and New Covenants. There are verses that seemingly support the ongoing validity and benefit of the Law (Matt. 5:17-19; Rom. 3:31; 7:12; James 1:25) and other verses that say that we are not under the Law and speak negatively about it (Rom. 6:14; 10:4; 2 Cor. 3:6-18; Heb. 7:12, 22; 8:7, 13). So I do not claim infallibility here!

For sake of brevity and clarity, I'm not going to give you the various interpretations of how we establish the Law through faith. Rather, following several authors (mainly, James Boice, *Romans* [Baker], 1:421-425) I'm going to suggest three ways from the context that justification by faith establishes or upholds the Law.

First, *justification by faith establishes the Law by showing that it is impossible to attain right standing with God by keeping the Law.* This is Paul's point in 3:20, “because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.” The Law requires perfect obedience to every commandment, not only externally, but also on the heart level (Matt. 5:21-22, 27-28; Gal. 3:10; James 2:10). So if anyone is going to be saved, it can't be by keeping the Law. The Law's purpose is not to save us. Rather, the Law shows us our sin so that we will despair of being saved by works. In this way, the doctrine of justification by faith establishes or upholds the Law.

Second, *justification by faith establishes the Law by showing that the punishment which the Law demanded has been fulfilled by Jesus Christ.* That is Paul's point in 3:25, where he refers to Christ Jesus as the one “whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith.” By His death, if we trust in Him, Jesus satisfied God's just penalty for our sin, which was death.

Third, *justification by faith establishes the Law by showing that God imputes the righteousness of Christ to us so that we meet the Law's righteous demand in Him.* As we've seen, justification means that God declares us righteous. But He doesn't just do this arbitrarily. Rather, Jesus fulfilled the righteous demands of the Law on our behalf. As Dr. Boice explains (p. 424), "By saving us through this righteousness, and not by any lesser standard, God establishes the law that defines this righteousness." Thus God can now be "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (3:26).

Conclusion

The doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone has always been under attack, including at the present time. How do we know whether it is the true gospel? One test of true doctrine is that it humbles our pride and it exalts God and His grace. Conversely, false doctrine always lifts up man and pulls down God, so that we don't really need a Savior. Justification by faith alone excludes all boasting, except for boasting in Christ and Him crucified. It doesn't allow me to say, "I teamed up with Jesus to score 70 points!" No, He scored all the points. God justifies sinners totally on the merits of Jesus Christ when they abandon their own works and trust in Him alone. This is the true gospel. Believe it, stand firm in it, and proclaim it to others!

Application Questions

1. Some argue that if people are not capable of believing in Christ on their own, it is futile to tell them to believe. Your response?
2. Think through the Ten Commandments and various lists of sins (Rom. 1:29-31; Gal. 5:19-21; 1 Tim. 1:9-10). How is pride at the root of all of these sins?
3. A Roman Catholic takes you to James 2:24 to insist that we are justified by works, not by faith alone. How would you answer?
4. How would you harmonize Matt. 5:17-19; Rom. 3:31; 7:12; & James 1:25 with Rom. 6:14; 10:4; 2 Cor. 3:6-18; Heb. 7:12, 22; 8:7, & 13?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2010, All Rights Reserved.