

Oct. 29, 2017

Salvation by Grace Alone

Romans 3:19-28

“By grace you have been saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, so that no one may boast.”

LTS: Psa.

In chapter three of Romans Paul has revealed to us the nature of man's status before God. Yes, man was created to image forth the Glory of God. But the verdict is “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23). The fall, however, that mankind experienced was no accidental misstep. To say that man “falls short” of the glory of God may seem to communicate that man was trying his best to attain a kind of life that glorifies God but he just couldn't quite get there. The target was just too far to reach regardless of our best efforts. But that is not how Paul presents it.

Back in chapter one of Romans Paul explains (1:23) that far from accidentally falling short of the goal of glorifying God, man actively suppresses the truth about God in unrighteousness. We are his creation. He made us as an expression of His infinite delight and eternal joy. He formed you as a representation of Himself, sharing with you attributes that can be found nowhere else but in Him. I can love because God is love. I can experience the joy of holiness because God is holy. I can create things because God is the Creator. Of all that He has made, Man is by far most like God. He even designed into the fabric of our being an irresistible urge to worship so that you could fellowship with Him and find life in Him.

Nevertheless, at the very first opportunity man rebelled. He believed Satan's lie that God was holding out on him some good thing they needed to be completely happy and whole. He began suppressing the truth about God's goodness, His holiness, His kindness. He ran from God, and hid from God. So deep was man's rebellion that our very nature became twisted by sin guaranteeing that all of our children would be naturally inclined to share in his rebellion.

Unless God did something miraculous man would be forever lost. But what can be done? God had made it clear that his holiness demands a righteous penalty for sin. “For the wages of sin is death.” How can it be otherwise? How could anything sinful – even in the highest order of God's creation – stand in His presence and not be consumed?

But what alternative is there. God's law cannot save you. “For (3:20), by the works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” not forgiveness. But if law-keeping cannot save a person from the punishment sin deserves and God's holiness demands, how can the unrighteous be saved?

This is a question that demands an answer from each one of us. For just a moment think about your own rebellion against God. Think of your anger, your pride, your self-righteousness. Consider how you, like our first parents, Adam and Eve, have run from God in shame rather

than to God for mercy. Think of your past immorality and unrighteousness. Consider the idolatrous worship of your heart, those secret sins that no one else knows about. They gnaw at your soul in the quiet moments when you are alone. You know its true but you have hidden them for so long they have just become part of who you are. And beside that, you can't imagine what to do with them, but O how you wish to be rid of them!

And then consider, is not God just to condemn what you yourself know is contemptible and wicked in your heart? How can the unrighteous be saved? How can the ungodly be reconciled to Holy God? How can the condemned be justified?

Beginning with the second half of Romans chapter three, Paul explains God's marvelous solution.

Read Rom. 3:21-28

What is Paul saying? Well, as we have learned over the past couple of weeks, Paul teaches us here that no one can be justified by law-keeping. You can't earn back what has been lost by trying really hard to obey God's word. Its too late! You have committed the crime, and justice demands satisfaction.

Nevertheless, God is NOT willing that sinners should perish. I think one of the most significant and hope-giving phrases in the Bible is found in Ephesians 2:4 where Paul is writing to a different church about the same issue. (Turn to Eph. 2)

First (Beginning with v. 1) he describes the perdition that sinners are in. We are "dead in our trespasses and sins. We have given ourselves over to the passions and the desires of the flesh and are by nature" deserving of wrath. This is a frightening picture of humanity. It is a hopeless scenario. And then, just as Paul gets to the darkest part of his Spirit-inspired assessment of man's hopeless condition, without warning he says two of the most magnificent words a human being can hear: But God. "But God, being rich in mercy because of the great love with which He loved us," He did something that we can hardly imagine. He sent his only Son to stand in our place and bear the crushing wrath that we deserve.

Puritan Pastor, John Flavel, attempted to help us feel the glory of what God did for sinners when he wrote what is called "The Father's Bargain." [I have edited the language slightly to make it more understandable to our modern ears].

The Father begins: My son, here is a company of poor miserable souls, that have utterly undone themselves, and now lie open to my justice! Justice demands satisfaction for them, or will satisfy itself in the eternal ruin of them: What shall be done for these souls?

Son. O my Father, such is my love to, and pity for them, that rather than they shall perish eternally, I will be responsible for them as their Surety; bring in all their bills, that I may see what they owe thee; Lord, bring them all in, that there may be no after-reckonings with them; at my hand, you shall require it. I will rather choose to suffer thy wrath than they should suffer it: upon me, my Father, upon me be all their debt.

Father. But, my Son, if you undertake [this] for them, you must reckon to pay the [very] last mite, expect no mercy; if I spare them, I will not spare you.

Son. Content, Father, let it be so; charge it all upon me, I am able to discharge it: and though it prove a kind of undoing to me, though it impoverish all my riches, empty all my treasures... yet I am content to undertake it.¹

This is what Paul is describing for us in Romans 3. No amount of law-keeping, no amount of sorrow for sin, no amount of confession, no amount of penance could ever reconcile us to God. How then can sinners be justified in God's sight? Only through the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

In 1776, Augustus Toplady wrote the following lyrics in that old Hymn the church has sung for generations:

Not the labor of my hands
Can fulfill Thy law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know,
Could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone;
Thou must save, and Thou alone.²

As James Montgomery Boice used to say, "All the other doctrines of the Reformation find their meaning in Jesus Christ and Him crucified."

And so we have learned from Paul the justification that God offers the ungodly comes to us by Faith Alone, through Christ Alone. But Faith Alone and Christ Alone are not the only essential threads in this great salvation described in Rom. 3. The reason I keep coming back to the same passage week after week is because Paul has braided together three strands of divine truth in one passage. The First strand is the doctrine of Faith Alone. The second is Christ alone, and the third is...

III. Justification through Grace Alone:

Read Rom. 3:23-24

1. The biblical truth of the grace of God toward sinners is one of the most beloved teachings the church has ever embraced. Christians have always loved the grace of God in the gospel. Of all the words that Paul uses in his gospel language besides the name of Jesus Himself, grace is the sweetest to us because it is at the very foundation of all else.

- It is because of grace that Christ has come.

¹ The Cross Is All We Need website. John Flavel, *The Father's Bargain*. <https://annawood.wordpress.com/2012/01/07/the-fathers-bargain-with-the-son-by-john-flavel/>

² Augustus Toplady, *Rock of Ages*, 1776.

- It is because of grace that he has died as the propitiation for our sins.
- It is because of grace that the gospel is being preached to us.
- It is because of grace that faith is born in our hearts.
- Indeed, everything that we have from God comes to us because of God's grace.

2. We love NOT only to think of it and talk about it, we love to sing about it! We love to sing about the grace of God in the gospel. As Sinclair Ferguson says, "Grace is not something you can be content merely to speak about. It is something that we must sing about!" It is, as another old song declared, "Grace that is greater than all our sin."

3. What is Grace?

Grace: "Unmerited Favor"

Grace: "God's Riches At Christ's Expense"

4. This is the "Good News." The definition of the word "gospel" is literally good news! And the news is that the ground of God's justification of the ungodly is NOT law-keeping. Rather, the ground of our justification is God's grace to us in Jesus Christ.

5. Notice how Paul says it in v. 23-24.

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified by His grace as a gift through the redemption that is through Jesus Christ."

6. One thing that is worthy of note here is that it is God the Father whose grace is being given. Many people, even good Christians, have the mistaken idea that God did not love sinners until Jesus died for us. But the truth is, Jesus died for us BECAUSE God loved us.

Witness:

- John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son."
- Rom 5:8 "But God demonstrated His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us."
- Eph. 2:5, When did God love us with His "great love"? "even when we were dead in our trespasses."

7. On a historical Reformation note: have you ever wondered why, when in the thunder storm Luther was nearly struck by lightning, he cried out "Save me St. Ann! I'll become a monk!" Why didn't he say, "God of mercy, Save me! I'll become a monk" or "Jesus, save me! I'll become a monk"? There is a theological reason he called out to St. Anne.

8. The RCC gives its followers the distinct impression that the Father is transcendent and so angry with sinner that he is completely unapproachable. Jesus, on the other hand is not as remote as the Father, but as our judge, He too is hard and unapproachable. So you don't dare attempt to approach Jesus directly. He won't give you an audience. But here's the thing, if you want to communicate with Jesus, Pray to Mary because while Jesus may be hard, not even He can resist His own mother.

9. As time went on, however, and Mary was exalted more and more in the RCC, even she became less approachable. So now, if you want Mary to mediate between you and Jesus, don't ask her for help. Go to her mother, Jesus' grandmother, whom the RCC and Orthodox Churches say is none other than St. Anne.

10. This is blasphemous teaching, but it is what all good Catholics believed. The Bible, however, doesn't portray God the Father as an angry, loveless deity. The fact is, it was the great love and mercy of the Father toward sinners that initiated the whole plan of salvation to begin with.

11. Now, back to Rom. three. If you look carefully at Paul's word choices you might say that Paul is being rather redundant, because the words grace and free gift mean the same thing. To say it is a grace gift is like saying either that it is a "gift gift," or a "grace grace." But Paul has good precedent for his redundancy, because John the Apostles, when speaking about Jesus said, "Of His fullness we have all received and grace upon grace" (John 1:16).

12. Paul Himself picks up the theme of grace again in chapter 5:15-17

Read 5:15-17

13. Once again he speaks of "the free gift" (15), the "grace of God and the free gift by grace. Again, he calls it the "free gift" (16) and the "abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness" (17).

14. When it comes to salvation the essential characteristic of grace is its freeness. It must be given freely and accepted without payment or merit otherwise it is not grace. As Paul will say in chapter 11:6, "If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace."

15. As Americans most of our interactions with other people are not based on grace but on commerce. We understand buying and selling, earning and trading. We understand tipping a waiter for his attentive service. But receiving something of value for free makes us uncomfortable. If the person behind you in the grocery line sees you fumbling with your wallet for the last couple dollars you need to pay, and he pulls out a wad of cash and offers to pay your bill, you will be embarrassed and tell that person rather matter-of-factly, "No, thank you." If you purchase a house it feels exciting and wonderful. But what if someone offers to give you their house, that would feel awkward to say the least. We don't like to receive something without payment, or at least without making a fair bargain.

16. There is something inside of us that chafes at the thought of being dependent upon someone else for what we need. We want to pick ourselves up by our own bootstraps, pay our own way in the world, be the quintessential self-made man. The idea of having to depend upon someone else for what we need is repulsive. It's humbling, odious, even demeaning. It announces to the world that we are insufficient to meet our own needs.

17. So, for all our singing about grace, preaching about grace, and rejoicing in grace, when understood rightly, the offer of grace is something that may make a person uncomfortable. We

would rather earn it by gritting our teeth and trying harder to attain the righteousness we so desperately need.

18. This becomes most apparent as soon as we begin talking about those passages that say things like,

- God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4)
- He predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:6)
- He predestined us according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of His will” (Eph. 1:11)
- 14. This is God’s sovereign grace at work, and no one is justified apart from it. Grace is not merely a warm, sentimental disposition of God whereby He chooses to be nice to us. No! Grace is a powerful thing. In the prophet Ezekiel’s vocabulary, it removes the heart of stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh.” It makes one who dead come to life.

19. The way of salvation isn’t like trying harder or resolving to do better. It’s more like surrender. It’s more like the declaration of another verse in the hymn I mention earlier,

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Savior, or I die.

20. Coming to Jesus for salvation isn’t some kind of evangelical bargain wherein God agrees to do something for you if you will do something for him. No! It is a complete abandonment of your own righteousness and any hope that you can earn God’s favor. It is merely lifting up your empty hands of faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

21. And when you do that, you will soon realize that even that faith was a free gift of grace. Here’s how Paul says in Ephesians 2:8-9 (Turn there with me)

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.”

22. Peter affirms this in 2 Pet. 1:1 where he addresses his letter “to those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours...”

23. You may ask, Why? Why does God demand that justification be received as an act of God’s grace alone? The answer is this: Salvation is by grace alone so that it will to the glory of God alone.

24. O my friend. Do you see the free offer of justifying grace which God lays before you today? The only way you can be reconciled to God is by Faith alone, in Christ alone, and by Grace Alone. And that is so it will all be to the glory of God alone.

25. And so I say to you once again, Do want this great salvation that God provides? Then stop trying to smuggle your own works, your own righteousness, your own good intentions into the equation. Rather, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.*" And the Father will be marvelously glorified.