

Romans: The Good News of God

Does Faith Overthrow the Law?

Romans 3:31

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Does Faith Overthrow the Law?

Scripture

Let's read Romans 3:27-31, to get the context of Paul's comments, bearing in mind that today's text is Romans 3:31:

²⁷ Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. ³¹ **Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.** (Romans 3:31)

Introduction

A young husband called his pastor late at night and asked if he would meet with him the next morning. They made arrangements to have breakfast at a nearby restaurant.

The next morning the young man told his pastor that on a recent business trip he had stayed too late at the hotel bar with a woman colleague. The alcohol, distance from home, and easy laughter the two shared had led to the obvious. They ended up in bed together. "Now what?" asked the young man.

The pastor took a deep breath. He thought of the young wife and small children whose lives could be so terribly affected by a night of indiscretion. To preserve the family, he briefly considered advising the young man to cover up the error.

But then the eternal consequences of establishing such a wrong spiritual pattern convinced him that honesty was the path to

follow. To make the young man think biblically about what he must do, the minister asked him a series of questions:

- Had he prayed to ask God’s forgiveness and pardon?
- Had he confessed his sin to the young woman involved and told her that the intimacy would never happen again?
- Had he confessed his wrong to his wife and asked her forgiveness?
- And, if he was not yet ready to do this, had he at least arranged to have an AIDS test? For until he had been tested, he could not approach the marriage bed without endangering his wife and the child she was expecting.

The young man listened to each of the questions without expression or comment. When the pastor finished, the young man pushed his breakfast plate away from him, leaned back in his seat, and said, “I came for grace, not for discipline. You disappoint me, Pastor.”

The words cut the pastor to the heart. He did not wonder if what he had said on this occasion was wrong. He wondered, rather, what he had said in the past that would lead an intelligent, capable man such as this to believe the promises of grace mean we will never have to face any consequences of wrongdoing. Even after confessing his infidelity, the young businessman seemed to be more interested in accusing the pastor of hypocrisy than of assuming any responsibility for his own actions. He said to the pastor, “You say you believe in grace, but you judge people according to their works just like the rest of the world.”

In essence the businessman was saying, “God and those who communicate his grace must do their part to make sure that life does not become difficult or inconvenient for me no matter what I do.” This, we must make clear, is not the nature of biblical grace. As much as we might at times wish that God’s free pardon permitted freedom from all his requirements and our responsibilities, God makes no such promise.¹

¹ Bryan Chapell, *Holiness by Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 159-160.

Faith in Jesus Christ does not mean that we are free from the requirements of the law.

Lesson

In Romans 3:21-26 the Apostle Paul taught that God saves people by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. As a result of this salvation there are three implications, which are developed in Romans 3:27-31. These implications are that salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone:

1. Excludes boasting (vv. 27-28),
2. Excludes favoritism (vv. 29-30), and
3. Upholds the law (v. 31).

In today's lesson we shall learn that faith does not overthrow the law but, rather, upholds the law.

I. The Question (3:31a)

First, let's begin with the question. The Apostle Paul asks, **“Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?”** (Romans 3:31a).

In order to understand this question, let me give the background to it. Paul argues strenuously that God saves people by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. We are not saved by our works or merit or effort or by any supposed obedience to the law of God. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

“Well,” someone might argue, “if we are saved by faith alone, **do we then overthrow the law by this faith?**”

In other words, if we are saved by faith apart from the law, are we then free to do whatever we want to do?

The Apostle Paul imagines one person saying, “If we are saved by faith apart from the law, let us continue in sin that grace may abound” (cf. Romans 6:1). He imagines another person saying, “If we are saved by faith apart from the law, let us use our freedom as an opportunity for the flesh” (cf. Galatians 5:13).

In both cases, as James Montgomery Boice says, the argument is, “If we do not have to keep the law of God in order to be saved, why should any of us want to keep it? If we are saved by grace apart from obeying the law, we must be free to sin. So let’s all sin. Let’s indulge ourselves by doing any and every sinful thing we want to do—because, after all, we will get to heaven anyway.”²

II. The Answer (3:31b)

Paul’s answer is a most emphatic “No!” He says, “**By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law**” (Romans 3:31b).

A natural question then is, “How is the law upheld?”

The law is not upheld by “our faith” in the sense of sanctification but, rather, by the “faith” of justification. Paul is talking about God who saves us by declaring us “Not Guilty!” on the grounds of Christ’s obedience. When we believe that our salvation is based on Christ’s finished and perfect obedience and not on our own unfinished and imperfect obedience we are justified by faith. And it is this “faith”—justifying faith—that Paul is talking about.

The law then is upheld by Jesus who died to pay the penalty for our breaking of the law.

Or, to put it another way, God upholds the law by seeing that the demands of the law were met in the way he provided salvation for us by his death on the cross.

James Montgomery Boice suggests that there are three ways to look at how faith upholds the law.

A. *Justification by Faith Upholds the Law by Showing that the Law is So Perfect That We Could Never Have Fulfilled It*

First, the doctrine of justification by faith upholds the law by showing that the law is so perfect that we could never have fulfilled it.

² James Montgomery Boice, *Romans*, Vol. 1, Justification by Faith, Romans 1-4, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 420.

Paul teaches that God's law is perfect. He demands perfection from us. However, we are sinners and are incapable, even with our best efforts, from attaining perfect obedience to the law.

To see this more clearly, imagine the opposite for a moment. Suppose God said, "I know that people are imperfect. I know that they keep insisting on getting into heaven by their own effort and achievement. Therefore, I am going to lower the standard. Perfection is no longer the standard in order to get into heaven. I am going to set a 'passing score' that is lower than 100% perfection."

Now, if God did that, the law would no longer be upheld but, rather, would be diminished. Or, at least, parts of the law that are no longer necessary would be diminished.

Suppose God set the "passing score" at 70%. That would mean that God will have nullified 30% of the law, right?

Or suppose God set the "passing score" at 50%. Half of the law will be set aside.

Or, suppose God set the "passing score" at just 10%. Then 90% of the law will have been nullified.

Now, as soon as I talk about establishing a standard at less than 100% I am sure that you realize that there really is a significant problem. If imperfection—even at 99%—is allowed into heaven, then heaven would no longer be perfect, and God would no longer be perfect.

But, actually the situation would be even worse than we can imagine. According to the Bible, no-one keeps even the tiniest part of God's law. Everything we do is tainted with sin. By ourselves, we cannot obey even ½ of 1% of God's law.

If God said that he would set aside a portion of the law, that would in reality be a terrible thing. We would not know which part of the law we should obey and which is not necessary.

But, instead, the doctrine of justification by faith upholds the law. It shows that God takes each requirement of the law seriously. He does not have a variable standard. His standard is perfection. And it shows that we are incapable of obeying God's law.

B. Justification by Faith Upholds the Law by Showing that the Punishment of Sinners by Death, as Required by the Law, has been Carried Out

Second, the doctrine of justification by faith upholds the law by showing that the punishment of sinners by death, as required by the law, has been carried out.

The law of God was given to govern every area of civil, religious and moral life. There were two specific functions that flowed from this.

First, the law teaches that we are all sinners. It is important to note that one function of the law is to teach us specifically that we are sinners. The reason we need to be taught this is because one effect of sin is to blind us to our true condition. So, Paul teaches us in the New Testament what the Psalmist taught in the Old Testament, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God” (Romans 3:10-11; cf. Psalm 14:1-2; 53:1-3).

And second, the law teaches that the punishment for sin is death. God taught this from the very beginning, where he said to Adam and Eve, “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17). God said through the Prophet Ezekiel, “The soul who sins shall die” (Ezekiel 18:4). God repeats this teaching throughout the entire Bible.

Suppose for a moment that God said, “I know that no one can obey my law. I know that none is righteous, no, not one. So, I will exercise my grace and bring people into heaven apart from meeting the law’s requirements. I will just love sinners into heaven.”

If God did that he would be saying in effect that the punishment for disobeying the law in the end is dispensable. There would in fact be no consequence for breaking the law.

Worse, if there was a “passing score” of, say, 70%, can you imagine the unbelievable amount of comparing there would be?

Many of you who are students have just finished taking exams. I know that you want to know how you did in comparison to

the rest of your class. Let's say you got 91% on a test. Naturally, you want to know who got more than 91%, and to a lesser extent you want to know who got less than 91%. We are always comparing ourselves to one another.

If God set a "passing score" of anything less than 100%, we would be constantly comparing ourselves to each other. We would also fret and worry that we might not achieve the "passing score."

I am so thankful that God's "passing score" is perfection—100%. God is not arbitrary, and he does not show favoritism to anyone by lowering the standard. The standard is exactly the same for everyone.

When Jesus died on the cross, it demonstrated that God took the law with full seriousness. The law demanded death for infractions. We should have died to pay the penalty for our sin. But Jesus died in our place. He paid the penalty for our sin.

I love the way commentator Robert Haldane affirmed this truth when he asks, "Can there be any greater respect shown to the law, than that when God determines to save men from its curse, he makes his own Son sustain its curse in their stead, and fulfill for them all its demands?"³

C. Justification by Faith Upholds the Law by Showing that It Is on the Basis of True Righteousness, Righteousness that is an Exact Fulfillment of the Law, that we are Justified

And third, the doctrine of justification by faith upholds the law by showing that it is on the basis of true righteousness, righteousness that is an exact fulfillment of the law, that we are justified.

Justification by faith means that we are justified by faith in Christ. And Christ fulfilled the law perfectly.

Jesus was born to Mary some two thousand years ago. He lived for thirty three years. During the entire time of his earthly ex-

³ Robert Haldane, *An exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (MacDill AFB: MacDonald Publishing, 1958), 157.

istence he faced every temptation that is common to man. He also faced trials and difficulties that you and I will never face. And yet, he was without sin (cf. Hebrews 4:15).

Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for sin. But not for his sin, for he had no sin. No. He died on the cross to the penalty for *our* sin.

Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus down from the cross and buried him in his own tomb (Matthew 27:57-61).

Three days later God raised Jesus back to life. This was a sign to the entire world that God vindicated the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus is God, and he completely and perfectly obeyed the entire law of God.

And it is on the basis of Jesus' obedience and righteousness that we are justified.

I am so thankful that God did not lower the standard. I am so thankful that the "passing grade" is not less than 100%. By saving sinners such ourselves through the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ, God established that the law defines this righteousness.

Conclusion

We have just come to the end of one of the most important passages in Scripture. In fact, James Montgomery Boice, along with several other commentators, says this at the conclusion of Romans 3:31, "This section of Romans is the very heart of the Bible, the most important and critical passage in all Scripture."⁴

Boice says that Romans 3:21-31 teaches four great truths. They are as follows.

First, God has provided a righteousness of his own for us, a righteousness that we do not possess ourselves. This is the very heart or theme of the Word of God.

Second, the righteousness that God provides is by grace. We do not deserve it. Instead, we deserve nothing but God's wrath and

⁴ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans*, Vol. 1, Justification by Faith, Romans 1-4, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 425.

condemnation. And there is nothing that we can ever do to deserve God's grace.

Third, God's grace is made possible by the work of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in dying for his people and paying the penalty for their sin. God's standard is 100% perfection. God did not lower his standard or set a "passing grade" of anything less than 100%. By his grace God sent his Son to pay the penalty for all of our sin, thereby providing for our salvation and maintaining his justice.

And finally, the righteousness which God graciously provides becomes ours through simple faith in Jesus Christ. The only way that anyone—whether Jew or Gentile—is saved is by simply trusting in who Jesus is and what he has done for our salvation.

But getting to heaven is not automatic. You must receive God's grace by believing in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Ruthanna Metzgar, a professional singer, tells a story that illustrates the importance of having our names written in the Book.

Several years ago, she was asked to sing at the wedding of a very wealthy man. According to the invitation, the reception would be held on the top two floors of Seattle's Columbia Tower, the Northwest's tallest skyscraper. She and her husband, Roy, were excited about attending.

At the reception, waiters in tuxedos offered luscious hors d'oeuvres and exotic beverages. The bride and groom approached a beautiful glass and grass staircase that led to the top floor—followed by their guests.

At the top of the stairs, a maitre d' with a bound book greeted the guests outside the doors.

"May I have your name, please?"

"I am Ruthanna Metzgar. And this is my husband, Roy."

He searched the M's. "I'm not finding it. Would you spell it please?"

Ruthanna spelled her name slowly. After searching the book, the maitre d' looked up and said, "I'm sorry, but your name isn't here."

“There must be some mistake,” Ruthanna replied. “I’m the singer. I sang for this wedding!”

The gentleman answered, “It doesn’t matter who you are or what you did. Without your name in the book you cannot attend the banquet.”

He motioned to a waiter and said, “Show these people to the service elevator, please.”

The Metzgars followed the waiter past beautifully decorated tables laden with shrimp, whole smoked salmon, and magnificent carved ice sculptures. Adjacent to the banquet area, an orchestra was preparing to perform, the musicians all dressed in dazzling white tuxedos.

The waiter led Ruthanna and Roy to the service elevator, ushered them in, and pushed G for the parking garage.

After locating their car and driving several miles in silence, Roy reached over and put his hand on Ruthanna’s arm. “Sweetheart, what just happened?”

“When the invitation arrived, I was busy,” Ruthanna replied. “I never bothered to RSVP. Besides, I was the singer. Surely I could go to the reception without returning the RSVP!”⁵

Just as Ruthanna and Roy could not go to the reception without returning the RSVP, so we cannot go to heaven with returning God’s RSVP. In order to get to heaven we must respond to God’s gracious invitation by repenting of our sin and believing in Jesus Christ.

Have you ever done that?

If not, I invite you to do so today. Amen.

⁵ Randy Alcorn, *Heaven* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Publishers, 2004), 31-32.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Father, we sing with great enthusiasm, “Joy to the world, the Lord has come, let earth receive her King.”

Yet as we review the true desires of our hearts we confess that we are more prone to seek the gifts and benefits that Christ can grant than actually receive him deep within our lives.

There are times when we are frightened by what might happen if we truly took Jesus seriously and resolved to invite him into all the diverse dimensions of our lives.

Lord, have mercy upon us and cleanse us.

Your Word teaches that we are saved by Jesus and not by our own works or efforts.

Enable us therefore to repent of our sin and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ so that we might spend eternity with you.

Forgive the distorted images we hold of Christ which prevent us from living with him with the same trust as his disciples.

Renew your sustaining Spirit within us that we might truly know and live in your joy through Jesus’ redeeming name. Amen!⁶

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

⁶Robert Webber, *The Services of the Christian Year* (Nashville: Star Song Pub. Group, 1994), 166.