

Boasting Excluded: Romans 3:27-31

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The third phrase in our mission statement says we exist to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We have an especially powerful opportunity to pursue this goal in our study of Romans. It's our hope to preach and teach the Gospel from all different parts of Scripture. But we find ourselves right now in a particularly Gospel-rich section of the Bible, and I pray that God will make us unusually attentive to His Word and unusually sensitive to the Spirit. We, as a church, want to ignite a joyful passion for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is Good News, and for those who have eyes to see, it is News that should set our hearts ablaze with a joyful passion for what God has done on our behalf.

I want to begin by summarizing again the passage we looked at last week, the very center of the message of Romans. And I want to point out from that paragraph that the Gospel is God-centered. It is about God's glory. It's about His righteousness. It's about His justice and His mercy. This should prompt us to ask ourselves how we view the Gospel. Do we have a man-centered view of the Gospel? Do we think that God owes it to us to forgive our sins? Do we think it harsh that God sends people to hell? Do we think, "Well, of course, God should have mercy on me. That's what He does, right. He's merciful and forgiving. And nobody's perfect, but I'm doing my best. Of course God will let me into heaven." I want to tell you that that kind of thinking about the Gospel is man-centered. It revolves around my "rights" and my worth and my goodness. And it minimizes God's worth and God's righteousness and God's justice, and it ignores the seriousness of sin.

My prayer is that we will be overcome by the God-centeredness of the Gospel. The Good News that sinners can be reconciled to a holy God: it's ALL about God's worth, not my worth, and it's about God's righteousness, not my righteousness, and it's about how God justly deals with the issue of our sin.

Up to this point in his letter (up to 3:20), Paul's main point has been that all human beings are sinful. Everyone, everywhere, at all times, is sinful. Jesus Christ is the only exception to this. I am sinful. You are sinful. And this is the biggest problem that faces us in our lives. First, coming to terms with the fact that we're sinners who deserve God's punishment, and then seeking to

know the solution. Is there a way I can be delivered from this? Is there a way to avoid punishment? Is there a way that God's wrath can be turned away from me?

What we saw last week in this amazingly Gospel-packed paragraph of verses 21-26 is that a righteousness from God is bestowed upon us by faith. It's not a righteousness we earn by law-keeping. But rather it's a righteousness God graciously grants to us. It's a gift. And He is able to do this while also maintaining His justice, because He put forward His own Son to bear the punishment for sin. That's what verse 25 means, where it says that God put Christ Jesus forward as a propitiation by his blood. Christ Jesus is the propitiation, meaning He appeased God's wrath against sin. He stood in our place and received the penalty for sin. And, therefore, because of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross, God pronounces over us in the courtroom, "Not guilty." For those who trust in His Son, God says, "You are justified. I reckon you righteous. Your sin has been placed on Christ, and Christ's righteousness is placed upon you." That's justification. That's what Christ's work has accomplished for us—for any who will repent of sin and look to Jesus to rescue them. In this way, as verse 26 says, God is both just and also the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Now, as we come to the next paragraph, which we'll focus on this morning, we see an all-important implication of this teaching of justification by faith alone. And that all-important implication is the fact that human boasting is totally excluded. This is the God-centered Gospel. We don't get any glory in this. God gets the glory.

Paul returns to this diatribe style like he used at the beginning of chapter 3, where he raises questions that come up in response to his teaching. And the big question here, in light of the previous paragraph, is in verse 27: Then what becomes of our boasting? And then he gives the simple answer: It is excluded. What he does next is give a couple of concrete reasons why all boasting is excluded by this God-centered Gospel. He gives two distinct reasons for this, and then at the end of the paragraph he responds to an objection.

Let's look at these two reasons that undergird the assertion that boasting is excluded. Then we'll look briefly at the objection raised in verse 31. And we'll close by talking about boasting only in the cross.

Reason #1: Justification is not by works, but by faith alone.

Boasting is excluded because justification is not by works, but by faith alone. This is how God ordained to save sinners. He planned it in such a way that He would get all the glory. He planned it in such a way that we would get no glory. We have to be OK with that. We certainly *should be* OK with that, because the greatest delight we'll ever have is the experience of looking away from ourselves and beholding God's glory. And we'll get to do that forever in heaven. It would be foolish for us to think, "I would enjoy this more if I could get a little more attention, if the spotlight could shine on me."

Consider this analogy. A couple years ago Stacy and I went to see the Broadway musical "Mary Poppins." And we thoroughly enjoyed it. The music and singing was incredible, the choreography was amazing to watch. But suppose if in the middle of the show I decided that if I was really going to get the most enjoyment out of this experience, I just had to be up on stage. And what if I jumped up out of my seat, ran up on the stage and grabbed a microphone and started singing, "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious." That would not be a pretty sight, or a pretty sound. And not only would Stacy be embarrassed to tears, it would also greatly detract from my enjoyment of the show. Because it's not like anyone would cheer for me. They'd be throwing tomatoes at me.

Well that's kind of like the foolishness of us wanting to get some credit and some applause for our salvation. It's absurd. We need to sit back and let our jaws drop at the amazing grace of God that forgives our sin and puts us in a right relationship with Him. It's not our business to get up on stage and try to get in the spotlight. The Gospel, by its very nature, eliminates any boasting in ourselves. And therefore the better we understand the Gospel the more humble we ought to become, the more content we ought to be with not being in the spotlight.

Think about it. Think about the Gospel and how it excludes pride and bragging. If I do the work and earn a reward, then I get the credit. I can boast in that. I can say, "Look at what I earned by my hard work, by my effort, by my intelligence, by my initiative." That's not the Gospel. That's every other world religion. But that's not biblical Christianity.

The Gospel that God's Word reveals to us is a radically God-centered Gospel. It is Good News because God does the work for us. He works, and we rest. He makes the ultimate sacrifice and gives us a gift. All we do is receive it by faith. And

we can't even boast in that, because He gives us the faith, too. He does it all, from start to finish. And therefore He gets 100% of the credit. He gets all the glory.

Listen to Isaiah 64:4, "From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him." Did you hear that? Who is active and who is passive in that verse? God is the One doing the work. We are simply waiting for Him, resting in Him, hoping in Him, finding our peace and contentment in Him. The point is: we're *not* working for Him! God does the work, and He gets the glory.

Or think of the doxology at the end of Romans 11. "'For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.'" (Romans 11:34–36) You cannot give a gift to God that will put God in your debt. You cannot do anything for God that will earn some reward from Him. Everything is from Him, through Him, and to Him. He gets all the credit for the good things He has done, and the gracious gifts He has given to us.

The amazing truth that Romans 3 teaches is that individuals are justified by faith apart from works of the law. This point has already been emphasized in verses 21-26. Verse 22 speaks of "the righteousness of God *through faith* in Jesus Christ for all *who believe*." Verses 24-25 say that we "are justified *by his grace as a gift*, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received *by faith*." And then that paragraph ends with the statement that God is "just and the justifier of the one who has *faith* in Jesus."

Verse 27, then, contrasts the law of works with the law of faith. I think he's using "law" in this verse to mean "principle" (like he does at the end of ch. 7). So he sets up this clear contrast between works and faith.

And then verse 28 summarizes this teaching using the same contrast. "For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law." Do you see the sharp distinction between faith and works of the law? Works of the law are any works done in obedience to God's law. It's anything we might do in obedience to God, no matter what the motive may be. It might be deeds done with a prideful spirit, or with the hope of pleasing people, or in an attempt to win God's favor. Or it may be acts of obedience done with the best possible motives, wanting to glorify God and serve

others. The point is: no achievement of ours plays any role in getting us into a right standing with God.

What we need to realize is that even the most well-intentioned, God-honoring behaviors and thoughts and attitudes, even those that are fruit of the Spirit and arise from a heart of faith, they are still in no way part of what makes us right with God. They are a definite result of being right with God. But they're not part of getting us right with God.

That's the critical difference between justification and sanctification. In justification, God declares us righteous on the basis of Christ's righteousness, and this happens when a person repents of sin and puts their hope in Christ. Then, at the point a person is justified, God then begins to sanctify that person. Sanctification is the process (very often the painfully slow process) of actually becoming righteous. God, by His grace, does gradually conform us more and more to the image of Christ. But we have to get these in the right order and with the right distinctions. Justification comes first, by which God declares a person to be righteous, and then sanctification follows as a result (sanctification being the process by which God makes us righteous). We'll be talking about these categories more as we continue through Romans.

The first reason why boasting is excluded is because justification is not by works, but by faith alone.

Answer #2: Justification is not for one ethnic group only, but for all peoples.

The other reason Paul gives in this paragraph for why boasting is excluded is because justification is not for one ethnic group only, but for all peoples. The connection from verse 28 to verse 29 may seem unclear at first. What does justification have to do with this question about God being the God of Jews only? Well, I think the connection is between the phrase "works of the law" and then these questions about Jews and Gentiles. If justification came through works of the law, then it would be limited to the Jews. The Jews were the ones who possessed the law. They knew the law. They knew what the works of the law were. They knew what they were supposed to do to obey God. But justification is by faith alone, apart from works of the law. [By the way, the word "alone" doesn't actually appear in verse 28, but Luther added it here, and others have as well. And I think it's perfectly legitimate to do so, because that's Paul's point. Justification doesn't happen by any works whatsoever, but through faith alone—sola fide.]

Well, now Paul poses this next question, and he does it in a way that should help his fellow Jews realize the bigger picture of what's going on in God's plan of salvation. He asks in verse 29, "Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one . . ." Up to this point, his fellow Jews would be agreeing with him. Of course our God is the God over all. He's not just a tribal deity. He's not just the God of our nation. He's the God of all nations. God is one (at the beginning of verse 30), that's a reference to the Shema in Deuteronomy 6:4—"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." That's the great Old Testament statement of monotheism. There is one God. We are to worship Him alone.

The implication Paul draws from that is the fact that this one God saves Jews and Gentiles in the same way. (Continuing in verse 30), He "will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith." That's just another way of saying, "Jews and Gentiles."

So here's the point in this paragraph. Justification by faith alone eliminates boasting. And justification for all nations eliminates boasting. The Jews can't boast in themselves, thinking that they are going to get special treatment from God, thinking that they're going to be justified automatically because of their ethnic heritage. Paul has been hammering on that misconception already. He wrote in 2:23, "You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law." He's been telling them—It's not enough to have the law; it's not enough to be a Jew; it's not enough to be physically circumcised; none of that's going to give you automatic favor with God. The things that separate you from the other nations are not the things that will bring you into a right relationship with God.

In fact, the only thing that will bring you into a right relationship with God is something that puts you on the same common ground as every other people group on the planet. It's only by *faith* that you can be united to Christ and become an heir of all that He has accomplished for us. And that puts all of us in the same place before God. None of us can think that our group (however we might think of that) is going to get special treatment with God. None of us can boast in our ethnic heritage, or our family connections, as though that's something that puts us closer to God.

So here is another thing that crushes our foolish pride. We cannot boast, first of all, because we don't contribute anything to our justification. It's by faith alone. And we cannot boast, secondly, because God is taking this Good News to all the people

groups in the world. There's nothing about me that I can boast in. Not my deeds, not my family, not my background, not my education, not my church. The Gospel eliminates all boasting in ourselves.

The one kind of boasting it leaves open for us is boasting in the cross, boasting in God. We'll come back to that in a moment, but first we have to briefly look at this objection in verse 31.

The Objection in verse 31

The objection is, If justification is not by works of the law, and not confined to Jews who are circumcised and have the law, then you, Paul, have effectively overthrown the law with this teaching about faith alone. It's the accusation of antinomianism. It's the accusation that says, the doctrine of justification by faith alone will produce a bunch of people who continue to sin because they think grace will continue to abound.

Here in 3:31 he responds strongly with the words, "By no means!" And then he affirms, "On the contrary, we uphold the law." He will give more detailed responses later. For instance, at the beginning of chapter 6, he raises the similar question, "Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?" And his response is, "By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?"

Then in 6:15 he asks another similar question, "Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?" Again, the answer is, "by no means!" And then he talks about how we used to be slaves of sin but are now slaves of righteousness.

The Gospel does not produce antinomians. The Gospel does not make us lawless. The Gospel changes us from the inside out so that we want to do those things we are commanded to do.

Boasting only in the cross

Well, lastly, let's talk about the one kind of boasting that is supposed to be part of the Christian life. We've seen that we have nothing to boast about in ourselves. We have no ground for boasting in our deeds or our background. The Gospel excludes all such boasting. But Paul writes in another place, in Galatians 6:14, "far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ . . ." So there is a way in which we can, and should, boast. We don't boast in anything of our own. But we do boast in the cross, and everything that the cross means for us.

In 1 Corinthians 1 Paul spells this out in some detail. He says that "the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing,

but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” And then a few verses later we read this: “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”” (1 Corinthians 1:27–31)

You see, the message of the cross offends our pride, because it shows us that we really need that much help. We’d like to think that we don’t need any help. But the cross is a picture of how heinous our sin is, and what a terrible punishment we deserve. So the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, those who continue down that path of arrogant rebellion and rejection of God. But for us who are being saved, we recognize the cross as the power of God—the power of God to save wicked sinners like us.

The Gospel is necessarily humbling. God, in His Word, seeks to offend us, offend us, offend our pride, until we let go of our pride and bow humbly before Him. That’s the painful, but powerful, experience of becoming a Christian. We have to be humbled before the cross. God has to do that sovereign work in our lives so that we admit our failures, and acknowledge our desperate depravity, and stop trying to defend ourselves. And then it’s such a beautiful thing when we finally lay down the idol of self and cast ourselves at the foot of the cross.

I want to close this sermon with an extended quote from C. S. Lewis’s chapter in *Mere Christianity* on “The Great Sin.” He’s talking about pride, of course. And I’m always moved when I read this chapter, because I so much want to kill pride in my own life and grow in the happiness that’s found in humility.

Lewis writes, “The point is: [God] wants you to know Him: wants to give you Himself. And He and you are two things of such a kind that if you really get into any kind of touch with Him you will, in fact, be humble—delightedly humble, feeling the infinite relief of having for once got rid of all the silly nonsense about your own dignity which has made you restless and unhappy all your life. He is trying to make you humble in order to make this moment possible: trying to take off a lot of silly, ugly, fancy-dress in which we have all got ourselves up and are strutting about like the little idiots we are. I wish I had got a bit further with humility myself: if I had, I could probably tell you more about the relief, the comfort, of taking the fancy-dress off—getting rid of the false self, with all

its ‘Look at me’ and ‘Aren’t I a good boy?’ and all its posing and posturing. To get even near it, even for a moment, is like a drink of cold water to a man in a desert.”

And then the last two paragraphs of his chapter on pride go like this. “Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call ‘humble’ nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, swarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what *you* said to *him*. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.

“If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.”

So I hope you find yourself, this morning, in a place of recognizing your sinful pride, and also passionately wanting to humble yourself before the cross. I pray that as we meditate on this great doctrine of justification by faith alone, that it will have a profound humbling effect on us all. May all of our boasting be put aside, save our boasting in the cross of Jesus Christ.