

**Romans:
The Instrument by Which We Receive
the Righteousness of God:
Faith**

Romans 3:27-31

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 3. We've been in Romans 3:21 through 26 for the last few weeks as we have meditated upon this glorious doctrine of justification by grace through faith. And just as Isaiah, before he gives us that beautiful presentation of the gospel of grace which he begins to unfold for us in the 30's and especially in Isaiah 40 and on. He gives us first the bad news of God's judgment, warning and woe. So also Paul in Romans, and especially chapters 1 and 2, and the first part of chapter 3 prepares us for the good news with the bad news. The good news makes no sense if we don't understand the bad news, and if we do not embrace the delivery of the bad news. You can hear the bad news and still say, "Well, I'm not sure I buy that." Paul's good news makes no sense if you're not a person who senses the need for the forgiveness of sin, senses the need for the reconciliation with God, senses the need for redemption and propitiation and forgiveness and justification. Those things make no sense.

Now you understand, of course, that just because you don't sense it, doesn't mean that you don't need it. But Paul spends all that time with the bad news, not because he's morbid, but because he wants you to embrace with joy the salvation provided by God that you do need. That urgency for Paul is still here today. As we read his words, they're just as urgent today speaking to us. So, let's hear God's holy word here in Romans 3, beginning now in verse 27:

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. 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. Do we then nullify the law through faith? May it never be. On the contrary, we establish the law.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired word. May He add

His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Heavenly Father, we ask that this day, not only as every Lord's Day, but especially this day that You would open our eyes, our hearts, to understand Your word. Perhaps there are some here who have never embraced Christ by faith. They've never understood the glory of what it means to be justified and to receive that justification by faith alone. They don't understand the terms, they don't understand the offer, they don't understand the grounds. They certainly never embraced it themselves. For those we pray that You would open their eyes. That they would see just how grand this truth is. That I would overwhelm them, that it would flood them with the knowledge of God and of grace. Perhaps there are other believers here who have never adequately taken into account the implication of justification for their own lives. They've never known the freedom that the believer can have. Freedom from guilt. Freedom from fear of condemnation that comes only through the free justification provided in Christ Jesus. We pray for those believers, that You would shake them, shake them with the grace of the gospel so that they embrace it in a way that they never quite understood it before. Perhaps there are others, O God, who have presumed upon Your love. They think of themselves as believers, but they have presumed upon Your love. They've never really trusted in Jesus Christ. They've never known the power of the Holy Spirit transforming them by the gospel of grace. Take hold of them, show them their sin, their need, and then display the Savior and the gospel and humble them and exalt them simultaneously. Hear our prayers, we pray, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Beginning in Romans, chapter 3, verse 27 Paul is interested in drawing some deductions from the teaching which he has been giving to us in Romans 3:21 through 26. He has set forth all the basics of his doctrine of justification, his doctrine of salvation by God's free justification based upon the finished work of Jesus Christ received by faith alone. He has set forth all the basics of that doctrine here in a short span of verses from 21 to 26. Now He wants you to see some of the implications of that doctrine. In fact, he wants you to see a lot of implications in that doctrine. Much of the rest of the theological section of the book of Romans will be based upon Paul's expounding the implication, his applying the truth of justification and its ground, its origins, and its implications for your life.

Why is Paul so concerned to talk about this? Why is Paul so preoccupied? Why is he so fixated on this? Why does he spend all this time thinking with you, telling you about justification? Because it's at the heart of Christianity. Because justification is at the very heart of the gospel of grace. It's at the very heart of God's plan to reconcile sinners to Himself.

Confusion in this area is spiritually deadly. The person who thinks that he or she has something in and of himself or herself to commend himself or herself to God is in trouble. The person who thinks that Christ plus a little bit that they do makes

you safe before the searching judgment of God is in trouble. The person who believes that God does a little bit, and we do a little bit. The person who thinks that God does something, and we do something in response that merits His justification. All of those mistakes are of a kind, and they are deadly. They are spiritually deadly. And Paul knows that. And Paul is concerned for both the Jewish and the Gentile believers in this young church, this young congregation of Christians in Rome. He's concerned for both of those groups of Christians to understand the basics of the gospel and the basics of how people relate to God almighty.

Think of the struggles, for instance, the Jewish Christians in that congregation would have undergone. Not only had they been reared in a system which taught them to think about salvation in different terms than Paul is talking to them, but they have a circle of family from which they have come. They are Jewish Christians, and if you know Jewish Christians today, you know the enormous strife and tension that can be created in a family when a person reared in the Jewish ethnic situation and faith comes to faith in Christ. Suddenly there's enormous tension in these young Christians who are of a Jewish extraction. They know that tension, perhaps more than any generation of Jewish Christians has ever known. And Paul knows that their friends and their family, and their relations, their colleagues, their associates, all of them have a different view of salvation than the one that he is setting forth, and the one that the apostles are preaching. And he wants those young Jewish Christians to be grounded in the faith as Christ wants them to understand it. And they can so easily be confused. And so he dwells on this doctrine, because it's almost alien to their categories of thinking. They naturally think in terms of meriting. They naturally think in terms of boasting in the unique privileges which they have been given, and that those privileges in and of themselves set them apart from the Gentiles and warrant them as recipients of the blessings of God. And Paul wants to completely disabuse them of that kind of thing.

And then there are those Gentile Christians. Bless their hearts. They don't know Genesis from Malachi. They haven't been reared in good Bible believing Jewish homes. They don't know anything. They don't know anything about salvation history. And they could be so confused by the crazy ideas about salvation floating around in the Greco Roman world, and Paul knows that he needs to take them right back to the Old Testament. They need to understand their Bibles so that they can understand how glorious and how free is this justification that God has provided for them in Christ. And so both those Jewish Christians and those Gentile Christians are in need of grounding in the way of salvation. Of course, Paul is fixated on this because to conceive of relating to God on the basis of one's own merits in any way, shape or form is to condemn yourself to eternal perdition. And so Paul here directs us again to reflect upon the truth of justification by faith.

And I want to put three matters before you in this passage, and really I'm going to

zero in just on the first one today. We'll see how far we get, and maybe we'll get to the other two next week. Let's look especially at verse 27 to begin with. Notice what Paul says in response to his exposition of justification by faith. He says this. "Where then is boasting? It is excluded," he says. "By what kind of law, of works?" No, but by a law of faith. Paul has been concerned all along about misguided Jewish boasting. We saw that in Romans, chapter 2. The Jewish people had responded to his presentation of the gospel by saying, "Paul, look, you don't understand. We're the elect. We've been chosen by God from among the nations. We've been set apart. We're His people. All this that you're saying, well, it may be nice for the Gentiles, but we don't need this. We are the elect. We have circumcision. We have the sign of membership in the community. We've received a law. God has revealed Himself to us in His law. We've been set apart. We're God's people. We don't need reconciliation with God. We've already got it. We've got privileges. We've got standing. We don't need this gospel that you're peddling." Paul has been concerned about that kind of misguided Jewish boasting precisely because that religious self-confidence blinds the Jew to his need of the gospel. The Jewish person who thinks that he's already got it, doesn't want to respond to Paul's exposition of the gospel by saying, "Well, you know, I really am needy, and I need Christ."

You may have remembered about twenty years ago a campaign was mounted, and it was called the "I Found It" campaign. It was a gospel evangelistic campaign to spread the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in the United States. It was entered into by a variety of denominations and paired church groups. Well, there were many Jews that were offended by that campaign. And they began to run billboards themselves that said, "We Never Lost It." Paul's used to that kind of response from the Jewish people. To say that you're lost and that you need to be found is dependent upon the reality of your lostness. Paul is concerned about people who say, "Well, I've never been lost. I'm not in need of this that you're offering." And here Paul is telling us that when you understand salvation, when you understand justification, when you understand the grounds on which God accepts a person, when you understand the way that you receive the blessings of justification, then there is no room left for pride. There's no room left for boasting. There's no room for saying, "Well, you know, I didn't need this. I didn't need grace. I didn't need the death of the Messiah. I didn't need forgiveness." There's no room for boasting. There's no room for saying, "Well, you know, there was a little something I did that set me apart from him. In the final analysis, I was a little better person than that person, and that is why I was accepted by God." Paul says, "If you understand the way that God saves, there's no room left for self-congratulation. There's no room left for self-commendation." You would never, ever think of presenting yourself before God and saying, "Well, Lord, you know, actually I have been a pretty good person." You would never even think of it if you understand the way of salvation.

And this is very significant my friends because the way that you come into the kingdom dictates in large measure the quality of life that you will experience in

the kingdom. If you think that you become a Christian through something that you do, that will determine in large measure the kind of Christianity that you practice as a professing believer. If you think that it's a little of God and a little of you, then you will work like a beaver as a professing believer to try and assure that you get the things that are offered in the word. You will begin more and more to work for the promises of God. If, however, you understand that free justification is the entrance gate into a reconciled experience of communion with God, then the whole of your experience as a believer you will understand is under- girded by free and sovereign grace. And everything that you do in your believing experience is the result of God's grace in you, not the cause of it. It's what God is aiming to work in you, not that which you have to do in order for Him to love you. And my friends it's all the difference in the world. If you have ever known anyone who is racked with struggles, with assurance because they weren't sure that they had done right enough to be accepted by God. You know how crucial that distinction is. The apostle Paul is hitting it with full force.

This is important, my friends, because true religion in the Bible is always characterized by humility. Anywhere the Bible defines for us true religion, I promise you you'll find humility somewhere nearby. When Micah is talking about it, he talks about humility. When Isaiah is talking about it, he can speak of God being high and lifted up, and yet dwelling with whom? With the humble and lowly of heart. And it's not just an Old Testament thing. Humility is part and parcel of the Christian experience. And Paul is saying that the way that God saves us itself humbles us and leaves us with nothing to boast of. The way we are saved must accord with the spirit which is to characterize the true Christian. You cannot produce humility through a way of salvation which in and of itself leaves a person able to boast. If in the final analysis as I stand before God, my hope is that there is something about me and in me that is different from another person who is under God's condemnation, then I am undone. Because the apostle Paul says "The hope that all those who trust in Christ have is not based upon something that has been done in them. It is based upon something that has been done outside of them. It is not based upon something which God is doing in an ongoing work in them, it is something that God has done for them in their place." And that something is the free justification which flows from the work of Jesus Christ. And, therefore, Paul says my doctrine of justification by faith does just that. You exclude boasting all together. You understand what I am saying about justification, you have no ground for boasting, but at the same time if you embrace it, you have no ground for fear. And those are the two directions that I'd like to take this with you today for just a few moments.

But you may be asking, "Well, hold on. How is it that Paul's doctrine of justification by faith excludes boasting? How is that Paul's doctrine of justification by faith makes it absolutely impossible to reimport our obedience, our works, the things that we do, our efforts, however good they may be. How is it that that doctrine keeps you from importing those things into God's salvation?"

Well, I'm glad you asked that question. There are two parts to Paul's answer. You really see the two parts to Paul's answer in verse 27. "Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith." Now right there Paul focuses us on that way by which we receive our justification. He focuses us on the instrument of justification: Faith. But previous to verse 27, in verses 21 through 26, he has spent a lot of time telling us the ground or the basis on which we are saved. Now those two things are different. There's the basis on which we are justified, there's the way in which we receive that justification. There are the two parts of Paul's answer. Let me tell you, Paul says, how it is that my doctrine of justification by faith excludes boasting. First look at justification, then look at faith. First look at the basis of your acceptance with God, then look at how you receive that acceptance. First, look at the ground of salvation, then look at the means of salvation. First, look at what I do to save you. Secondly, look at what you do to receive the gift that I have accomplished in salvation. And as you look at those things, Paul says, you will see how impossible it is to import your works and thus any of your boasting or self-congratulation or self-commendation back into salvation. So let's look at these two parts together.

I. The ground of our acceptance with God.

First, if you'll look with me at verses 20 through 26. I want to focus for a few moments on the ground of our acceptance with God. How is it that boasting is excluded all together? Six ways, just in these few verses that Paul shows you. First, Paul emphasizes that it is God Himself who justifies. You don't justify yourself. God justifies you. Look at verse 26. "That He might be the justifier." Who's the 'He'? God. God is the justifier. God justifies. You don't justify yourself. Nobody else justifies you. God justifies you. It's not something that you do. It's something that he does.

Secondly, notice in verse 24, God emphasizes that that justification is a gift of grace. Look at his words. "Being justified as a gift by His grace." Once again, justification isn't something that you earn. Justification doesn't require that you do something to get it. It's a gift that's offered in grace. Notice how Paul is already building an argument as to why your works don't play a roll in it. It's a gift of grace, it's not something you do. It's something you receive.

Thirdly, look again at verse 24. He emphasizes that that justification is itself grounded, not in something that you have done, but in fact it's grounded in something that Christ did. It's grounded in the death of Christ. It's grounded in the redeeming death of Christ. Look at those words, "through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus."

Fourthly, notice again in verse 24 that Paul makes it clear that the basis of justification, the basis upon which he declares you to be righteous, is not something in you, it's something outside of you. Notice those words, "whom God

displayed publicly as a propitiation to demonstrate His righteousness." What's he talking about? He's talking about the death of the Lord Jesus Christ as an atoning sacrifice for sin, and He's telling you that justification is based on that, not on what you do.

Fifthly, he goes on to say. And if you'll look all the way back to verse 20, you'll see it. He emphasizes that justification is accomplished apart from our obedience. Justification is not something that our obedience contributes to in any way, shape or form. He says it negatively, but look at verse 20: By the works of the law, no flesh will be justified. Paul doesn't even say by doing some nice deeds that you thought that you might just do on the spur of the moment. He even speaks of works of the law. Those things which God commands us to do in His law. He says, "Look, even if you do the things that God commands you to do in the law, you won't be justified, because, of course, everything that we do is riddled with sin. And those of us who are most self-aware are most aware of it. You take the casserole to your neighbor across the street. You know you muttered all the way back. "Oh, that house. I just couldn't stand to be in that house. Oh, it's a pig sty." Or your neighbor who you've repaired the lawn mower for three times: "Couldn't he buy a new lawnmower." You help him out all right. You're kind to him, you smile. You're muttering under your breath all the way back home. Even the good things that we do are shot through with sin. Our motives are warped, our goals are warped, our attitude is skewed. Paul says, "By the works of the law no flesh will be justified." Justification is apart from our obedience.

And finally in verse 22 he makes it clear that justification is something which is received through an act of self-renunciation. Justification isn't based upon affirming something that you do. In fact, it is based upon renouncing yourself and entrusting yourself to another person. That's what we call faith. Notice verse 22. It is through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. Paul, just in case you forget, says it twice. Faith for all who believe. And so justification is received by the self-renouncing means of faith. In all those ways, Paul shows that the ground of our salvation is based upon something not in us but something outside of us. Not something that we do, but something that God does. And he's not finished yet. Because he even wants to talk with you about how you get the benefit of what God has done.

II. How we receive the gift of eternal life?

How is it that you receive the gift of eternal life? And he meditates on that with you here in verse 27. He says that boasting is excluded because of the law of faith. By that he means the principle of faith. God has chosen that we would receive His salvation by the means, by the instrument, not of our own obedience, not by performing some work, but by faith. And Paul is saying that the very way that God has designed for us to receive the benefits of Christ's work, that very

way is in accord with grace. If salvation is purchased by grace, but received by obedience, then grace is overthrown, boasting is not excluded. You've reimported the law. You can say, "Okay, God saves us by sacrificing His Son, and then we believe, and we do good works, and we're saved." You've just reimported good works back into salvation. Even he said, "Well, I'm not saying that God accepts us because of those good works, it's just that the way He accepts us involves us both believing and doing good work. Once you've done that, you've imported good works back into the scheme. Paul is saying that only the principle of faith and the principle of faith alone is conducive to the humbling grace offered in the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Faith.

Think about it for a minute. Yes, faith is something that we do. It's an act that we do as humans. But, as an act it is in its essence essentially focused not on us and not on our works, it's focused on someone else. Faith is focused on another. In this case, God. Faith doesn't look to what we do. It looks to what God does. Faith doesn't put trust in ourselves, it puts trust in God. Faith doesn't try and find strength from within, to stand before God is righteous, faith renounces our righteousness as filthy rags and looks to the righteousness of another, Jesus Christ. Now do you see the implications of what Paul is saying here?

There are just two things I'd like you to think about for a moment. On the one hand there are those who think they have something to commend themselves to God by. And Paul is just saying here that no form of self-commendation whatsoever will work before the judgment throne of God on the last day. I mean you stand before the judgment throne of God and you say, "Well God, basically, I'm a pretty good person." And the response is, "No, you're not. You are not basically a pretty good person. You have missed the point of everything that the prophets and the apostles were saying. You're not basically a good person." You stand before God on the judgment day and say, "Well, I believe in Christ. But, you know, I believe that you not only need to believe in Christ, you need to add some of your good deeds to that. You know, in order to be saved." You know what you're saying there? You're saying, "Lord, Christ is nice, but He's not enough. I did a little bit better deal, Lord. I did Christ plus my works." You see, you understand, my friends, that that addition is actually subtraction. What you're saying to God almighty is, "Christ wasn't quite enough, so I did Christ, plus a little better." But Christ plus is always Christ minus. And so what you're saying is, "God, the sacrifice of Christ is insufficient. I needed to do something, too."

My friends, that's not something that God is prepared to hear. God is not prepared to hear on the last day, "Oh, and by the way, Lord, the sacrifice of Your only Son, the Son of Your love, it wasn't quite enough for me. I did a few extra things, you know, just to make up." That's not something that God is prepared to hear. And so everyone who stands and commends their self in any way, will be condemned. Because Christ alone and faith alone in Christ alone is the way that God has dictated that His people will be saved. That's the negative side of it.

Think of the positive of it. Every believer of any depth of maturity whatsoever has known the struggle of sin, has known the specter of the remnant of sin and habitual sins that are so difficult to slay; desires that we can't expunge from our hearts. And if our justification is based upon the eradication of those desires, we'll never have any assurance of it in this life, because those desires aren't going anywhere. God's mercy grows us some, but there are always some that stay with us. There's always that thorn in the flesh.

The apostle wants us to understand that our standing with God has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with anything in us. Because justification doesn't take place in us, it takes place outside of us.

Do you see the implication of that? You're standing with God in the final analysis is based upon something to which you do not make even a thimbleful of a contribution. Thank God. Because if I even made a thimbleful of a contribution to it, I'd mess it up. And this is the one thing I can't mess up, because I didn't have anything to do with it. I simply stretched out the empty hand of faith, and I said God have mercy on me, a sinner. Nothing in my hand I bring simply to Your cross I cling. My friends, that is the most comforting thing in the world. Now it's utterly alien to the way we think. If we're not religious, we think we're basically good people, and God's going to accept us anyway. If we are religious, we think we've got to get out there and start doing our thing so that God will accept us. And the apostle Paul says wrong on both counts. Christ alone, faith alone. Only way of salvation. We'll start working out the implications of that next week. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, help us to understand the free justification which we have in Christ Jesus and then to embrace it by Your grace. We ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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