

“The Glory for Our Justification: God’s and Not Ours (Soli Deo Gloria)” – Romans 3:27-31

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Take a Bible and let’s meet up in Romans 3...

I’m going to be shorter today (I think) because I want to introduce an idea that is really critical and spend some more time elaborating on the idea next week. The idea is one of those “five solas” that we associated with the Protestant Reformation, which we have been exploring along the way as we have been studying the doctrine of justification. The “sola” we are going to consider this week and next is *soli Deo gloria*, which means glory to God alone. Today we are going to come at this emphasis through the lens of justification and by the end we will begin to broaden our view to other aspects of our salvation. Then next week, my hope is to show that God’s glory is the end of all things and that we all should be living all of our lives for His glory alone. So that’s the plan.

We are actually going to move into some new territory in Romans 3. For the past several weeks we have taken a deep dive into verses 21 to 26. These verses have reminded us of many key aspects related to our justification, and, remember, to be justified means to be declared or counted as righteous in God’s sight. Among those we have considered are the following:

THE SOURCE OF OUR JUSTIFICATION: GOD AND HIS GRACE (*Sola Gratia*)
THE GROUNDS OF OUR JUSTIFICATION: CHRIST AND HIS CROSS (*Solus Christus*)
THE MEANS OF OUR JUSTIFICATION: FAITH AND NOT WORKS (*Sola Fide*)

Now to these we are going add a fourth reminder, this one related to...

THE GLORY FOR OUR JUSTIFICATION: GOD’S AND NOT OURS (*Soli Deo Gloria*)

To see how Paul reinforces this point we need to venture into the final paragraph of this chapter. This is new ground for us. Take a look at verses 27 and following. I’ll read. You follow along. And remember that this is God’s Word...

“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—who 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 3:27-31)

Now then, there are really three questions (or categories of questions) that Paul is trying to answer in this paragraph and each of these questions is raised by the content that precedes it. The first question is “What right do we have to boast in light of what God has done for us?” The second question is “Is God the God of Jews and Gentiles?” And the third, “Does faith make the Law of God irrelevant?” It’s the first of these questions that we are going to spend most of our time on today, but let’s at least appreciate Paul’s answers to the other two. We’ll take them in reverse order.

Does Faith Make the Law of God Irrelevant?

Paul's answer, in verse 31, is "*By no means!*" "In other words, the Mosaic law may not play a role in justification, but Paul does not want his readers to conclude that it plays no role at all in God's plan of salvation."¹ Precisely what role it plays and in what sense "*we uphold the law*" is a matter of much debate, since Paul doesn't really elaborate here. Time will not allow us to get into all of that today. But for those of you who are curious, Doug Moo captures the four main possibilities that people advocate for as follows:

1. We uphold the Mosaic law as a testimony to the gospel (ch. 4).
2. We uphold the Mosaic law as bringing conviction of sin (3:19-20).
3. We uphold the Mosaic law as a source of guidance for the Christian life (13:8-10).
4. We uphold the Mosaic law as a standard of God's holiness, now fulfilled in Christ (8:4).²

All of these possibilities are true in a sense. The issue is what does Paul have in mind in this context and that can legitimately be debated. For what it's worth, Moo himself argues that the final option fits the development of Paul's argument and, if I had to choose, I'd probably follow him on this one. He writes,

"Paul affirms the valid demand that God makes of people in the law, and that demand cannot simply be swept under the carpet. But one of the things Christ does is to fulfill the law on our behalf. We who are in Christ are therefore accounted as having fulfilled the law and been set free from its penalties for disobedience. It is, paradoxically, this very freedom from the law's condemnation that puts us into a relationship in which true obedience, motivated and directed by the Spirit, can come about."³

Isn't that wonderful? The Gospel doesn't suggest that the Law doesn't matter. It shows that the Law matters very much. "It must be kept; and, for those who have faith in Christ, it has been." How so? Because, as Tim Keller explains,

"...the ultimate sacrifice of atonement, Christ, not only took his people's sin upon himself; he also imputed his law-keeping—his righteousness—to them. When we put our faith in Christ, our sinfulness is given to him; he has died for it. And Christ gives us his perfect obedience to God's law, and we live through it. 'God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Corinthians 5:21). So, the gospel upholds the law by demonstrating that law-breaking is so serious that it brings death and judgment; and that law-keeping is so fundamental that no one can pass through judgment without it being kept on their behalf. The law is upheld in Christ's life and his death, not nullified."⁴

This is why we so desperately need Jesus. If we are going to be counted right before God we need to have our sins forgiven and we will need to have a perfect righteousness. Neither of those things are within our grasp. But God has offered both to us in Christ. If we will trust in Christ alone to save us through His work—that is, you'll remember from last week, what saving faith is—He will do so. This is the gift of the Gospel. And there is no greater gift. We contribute nothing to our salvation but the sin that made it necessary. Nevertheless, because of God's great love and mercy, He will receive all who turn from their sin and self-sufficiency to trust in Christ alone to save.

You may think that God would never save someone like you, but you're wrong. He came to save the broken and the spiritually sick. You're not outside the reach of His grace. So don't run from Him because you feel unworthy. That would just be another form of pride. Run to Him because He only saves those who are unworthy. He is a Savior who doesn't discriminate based on the variety of sinner you are. He came to save every kind of sinner. So trust in Him. Call upon His name to save you. And He will.

In fact, a second question that Paul addresses in this text relates to confusion over this matter. The people in Paul's day were a little confused over who Christ came to save and if some people were excluded. And so he asks here, secondly...

Is God the God of Jews and Gentiles?

Paul's answer is that God is the God of both, the God of all. And salvation, therefore, is obtained by all in precisely the same way—through faith. There is not one way of salvation for the Jews and a separate way for everyone else.⁵ The way is the same for all—faith in Jesus Christ.⁶ And Paul is about to illustrate this in chapter 4 (which we'll get to in a couple weeks).

One of the implications of this is that there is no reason for any elitism or discrimination among God's people. What God has done in Christ does not do away with our distinctions, but it puts them in their proper place. As John Stott pointed out,

“Not that all such distinctions are actually obliterated, for men remain men and women women, Jews are still circumcised and Gentiles uncircumcised, our skin pigmentation does not change, and we still have the same passport. But these continuing distinctions are rendered of no significant account. They neither affect our relationship with God, nor hinder our fellowship with one another. At the foot of Christ's cross and through faith in him, we are all on exactly the same level, indeed sisters and brothers in Christ.”⁷

This is one of the reasons the world really needs the church. And the church needs to make sure it's acting like the church and not like the world. The divisions that we see in the world should find healing in the church. This reality is one reason the church is (and has always been) so countercultural. Larry Hurtado wrote a helpful book called *Destroyer of the Gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World*, in which he identified five standout marks of the early church. One of those marks was that it was multiethnic, and Hurtado makes the case that it was really the first multi-ethnic religion.⁸

Whatever you think about racial tension in America today, it paled in comparison to the tension that existed in the first-century Roman world between Jews and Gentiles. But the Gospel brought these historically divided groups together, at the same table, and into the same family. This was a big part of Paul's ministry and celebration among the churches he planted. By way of example, here is what he said to the Ephesians,

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. ¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ¹⁵ by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶ and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” (Ephesians 2:13-16)

Paul is making the same case to the Romans. God is the God of both Jew and Gentile. The Gospel is for every people group. Hostility was nailed to the tree. And the world should see that in the church, as we talk about regularly.

Now the final question Paul is addressing here is the one we will linger on more today...

What Right Do We Have to Boast?

Paul makes clear that they cannot boast in some sort of ethnic superiority, but he also makes clear that they can't boast in themselves at all since salvation is a gift of God's grace alone. If our salvation had anything to do with our works, then we would have grounds to boast in ourselves. But if justification is by God's grace and through faith alone, then we have no grounds to boast in ourselves.⁹

Boasting may be “the language of our fallen self-centeredness”,¹⁰ but boasting betrays a clear ignorance of the nature of salvation. “What people boast in, God rejects.”¹¹ Salvation, by its very nature, involves a recognition that we have no grounds to boast because we have no means of earning God’s favor in ourselves. Our best achievements can do nothing to justify us—nothing to make us right with God.¹² “To boast in them is like a drowning man clutching to a fistful of hundred-dollar bills and shouting *I’m OK! I’ve got money!*”¹³ What a foolish boast!

But the grace of God destroys boasting. And, therefore, the Christian is marked by praise, not pride. Their boast is in the Lord because He alone is responsible for their salvation (1 Cor. 1:31). They say, with Paul, “*far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Gal. 6:14). Christians are people who know they are “saved solely and wholly by Christ’s work, not their own.”¹⁴ Their identity and self-worth are tied to Him now and, therefore, He is their boast because what people boast in is what they draw our sense of identity and self-worth from.¹⁵ As one writer explains,

“Their boasting is transferred from themselves to their Savior, because everyone will always ‘boast’ in—draw confidence and hope from—the object of their faith. If you know you are saved by Christ’s work alone, you have great confidence, but it is not self-confidence in your own works; rather, it is Christ-confidence in his death. You face the day, even the day of your death, saying to the world: *I have Christ. His death means that when God looks at me, he sees his beautiful child. World, I need nothing from you, and you can take nothing from me. I have Christ.*”¹⁶

Talk about a reason to worship! The doctrine of justification by faith alone fuels our worship. But when we misunderstand it or fail to keep it front and center it “stifles our worship”, as Doug Moo explains,

“As long as we think, however subconsciously, that we have contributed something to our salvation, we will not put God on as high a plane as we should. We will loom too large and he will seem too small—and we will not worship with the absolute sense of humility, dependence, and thanksgiving that always marks the best worship.”¹⁷

Now, pause for a moment, take a step back, and consider Paul’s answers to these three major questions. Taken together, the answers that Paul gives to show why this doctrine of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone is so important. If faith doesn’t render the Law of God irrelevant, then there is no room for antinomianism or this idea that God doesn’t provide objective moral norms for people. If God is the God of Jews and Gentiles, then this excludes discrimination based on ethnicity. And if their justification is by grace, through faith, then the sinner should be humbled and do away with self-righteous boasting. So the doctrine of justification is powerful in its implications. When properly understood, it should exclude antinomianism, discrimination, and boasting.¹⁸ Or we might say, it should produce moral living, unity, and humility. Amazing!

But I want to push further on this point about boasting. It’s not merely that our justification demolishes all grounds for human boasting. It is that God has designed our salvation—every aspect of it—in such a way to make sure that we cannot boast and He gets all the glory. All of it. Ephesians 2 makes this crystal clear:

“*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*” (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Why did God orchestrate salvation to be by grace and through faith? Why did He make sure it had nothing to do with human doing? He did so, we’re told, “*so that no one may boast.*” That should tell you what God thinks of human boasting. He doesn’t like it. Why? Because it attempts to rob Him of glory. And everything that God does it for His glory. That’s what’s meant by that “sola” I have tied to this sermon—*Soli Deo Gloria*. What does that mean? It means “to God alone belongs the glory.” And every aspect of our salvation testifies to this priority of God. Don’t take my word for it though. Listen to God’s Word...

PREDESTINATION

“In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ **to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.**” (Ephesians 1:4-6)

CREATION

“Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the end of the earth, ⁷ everyone who is called by my name, whom I created **for my glory**, whom I formed and made.” (Isaiah 43:6-7)

FORBEARANCE

“**For my name’s sake** I defer my anger; **for the sake of my praise** I restrain it for you, that I may not cut you off. ¹⁰ Behold, I have refined you, but not as silver; I have tried you in the furnace of affliction. ¹¹ **For my own sake, for my own sake**, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? **My glory I will not give to another.**” (Isaiah 48:9-11)

INCARNATION

“For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, ⁹ and **in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.**” (Romans 15:8-9)

PROPITIATION AND REDEMPTION

“For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. **This was to show God’s righteousness**, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. ²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” (Romans 3:22-26)

SANCTIFICATION

“And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, **to the glory and praise of God.**” (Philippians 1:9-11)

JUDGMENT

“So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. ¹⁹ You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’ ²⁰ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ ²¹ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? ²² What if God, **desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power**, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, ²³ **in order to make known the riches of his glory** for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory— ²⁴ even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?” (Romans 9:18-24)

CONSUMMATION

“They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, ¹⁰ when he comes on that day **to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed.**” (2 Thessalonians 1:9-11)

These are just a few examples, a sampling from God’s Word. But what do they show us? “From eternity past to eternity future, God’s actions are described as self-exalting. God is aiming in all he does to communicate his glory.”¹⁹ This is so important for us to grasp. The Christian life is not lived rightly until it is lived in light of this fact—that all glory belongs to God. Remember, our mission statement as a church begins with that acknowledgement: “We exist to glorify God through Gospel-transformed lives.” So this notion of *Soli Deo Gloria* is critical to our mission as a church as well. So next week I want to remind you of that. I want to explore that idea with you more thoroughly, Lord willing.

I hope you’ll be here. This will give us a chance to rehearse what we are about as a church, which is always a good thing. Especially in times like this when we are increasingly coming together again and hopefully finding ourselves less and less limited by this pandemic in the days ahead. So come next week. Bring a friend.

Let’s pray...

¹ Douglas Moo, *Romans* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 139.

² Ibid. See his footnotes for advocates of each view.

³ Ibid., 140.

⁴ Timothy Keller, *Romans 1-7* (The Good Book Company, 2014), 91. He goes on to point out some further implications: “So if you are obeying the law in order to be saved, you must do one of two things:

* Change the law, making it easier to meet its requirements. You want your commands to be limited and achievable. You don’t want: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself;’ you want: *Don’t drink alcohol* or: *Go to church*.

* Be crushed by the law, because you know you cannot meet its requirements. You will either hate yourself for failing; or (as Luther did) you will come to hate God, because you cannot meet his requirements.

Whichever you do, you will nullify the law! Only the gospel allows us to recognize and uphold the perfect standards of the law, because we know that the law matters enough to God for it to bring death; but we also know that it no longer means *our* death. We don’t need to ignore the law we cannot keep, or be crushed by the law we cannot keep. We are free to have a right respect for moral absolutes and to care deeply about justice. We can be secure in ourselves, non-judgmental of others, forgiving to those who wrong us, and not crushed by our own flaws and failings. The gospel frees us to uphold the law.” Ibid, 92.

⁵ “If justification were by works of the law, then only Jews could be justified, because it is to them that God have the law. So Paul asks rhetorically whether the only people who can be justified are Jews. ‘Is God [who justifies] the God Jews only?’ The form and emphasis of the second question (‘is he not the God of Gentiles also?’) calls forth a decided ‘Yes, of Gentiles also’ from Paul. The Gospel properly understood has universal relevance. It is for all people and peoples, because all have sinned (v. 23) and because God’s gospel invitation goes forth to the ‘ends of the world’ (10:18).” Robert W. Yarbrough, “Romans” in *ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 75.

⁶ “Jewish people were extremely conscious of their special covenant relationship with God, in which Gentiles did not share. It was to the Jews that God had entrusted his special revelation (3:2). Theirs too, as Paul will soon write, are ‘the adoption as sons ... the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises’, not to mention ‘the patriarchs’ and ‘the human ancestry of Christ’ (9:4f.). What the Jews forgot, however, was that their privileges were not intended for the exclusion of the Gentiles, but for their ultimate inclusion when through Abraham’s posterity ‘all peoples on earth’ would be blessed. This covenant with Abraham has been fulfilled in Christ. He is Abraham’s ‘seed’, and through him the blessing of salvation now extends to everyone who believes, without exception or distinction.” John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 120.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Larry Hurtado, *Destroyer of the gods: Early Christian Distinctiveness in the Roman World* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2017). See also the remarks of Tim Keller here: https://qideas.org/qmoments/what-can-we-learn-from-the-early-christians/?fbclid=IwAR0yzBdkipqrCDZOfvI2ln4zhtl_pyUo9rpdny-qQIAI2NLUiHrAGFHXYU .

⁹ “Verse 28 is a famous statement of the doctrine of justification by faith, and, under the influence of Luther, many of us almost automatically add an ‘alone’ after faith. The word is not, of course, found in the verse. But it legitimately brings out the sense of what Paul is saying (long before Luther, the Roman Catholic theologian Aquinas had also added it). For in denying that even the best human works can justify us (e.g., Jewish obedience to God’s holy law), Paul is, in effect, denying that anything a human being does will ever justify one before God.” Moo, 138-139.

¹⁰ Stott, 119.

¹¹ Yarbrough, 74.

¹²Yarbrough writes, “Meritorious actions cannot suffice, nor actions plus faith—because that would no longer be ‘faith’ as the gospel calls for, which is comprehensive confidence in Christ and thoroughgoing rejection of sufficiency in oneself” (Ibid., 75). Similarly, Moo states, “The minute we think that our good works exert a claim on God, we have moved from legitimate contentment to illegitimate boasting. All our works, however good they may be—and all our works in this life are inevitably stained by sin—are the product of God’s grace, as his Spirit moves in us” (Moo, 142). Finally, James Montgomery Boice notes: “I doubt any of us would want to be in a heaven populated by person who got there, even in part, by their own efforts. The boasting of human beings is bad enough in this world, where all they have to boast of is their own good looks, their money, their friends, or whatever. Imagine how offensive it would be if they were able to brag about having earned heaven through works, even the work of faith. But it is not going to be like that! Salvation is a gift. It is receiving God’s righteousness—apart from law, apart from human doing. It is, as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, ‘not a result of works, so that no one may boast’ (Eph. 2:9). No one in heaven will be praising man. In heaven the glory will go to God only. *Soli deo gloria!*” James Montgomery Boice, *Come to the Waters: Daily Bible Devotions for Spiritual Refreshment* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), October 9.

¹³ Keller, 88.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 87.

¹⁶ Ibid., 88-89.

¹⁷ Moo, 142.

¹⁸ As pointed out in Stott, 121.

¹⁹ John Piper, *A Peculiar Glory: How Christian Scriptures Reveal Their Complete Truthfulness* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 213. Many of the Scriptures, though not all, were also drawn from this source.