

96-04-05b

Okay, we're resuming now after the break, and we have followed the thread of Paul's argument and we have reached a rather, at least viewed in the light of tradition, something of an unorthodox conclusion up to this point, that by the time we get to verse 20, no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, that we're not looking at the great white throne judgment, we're not looking at the distinction between believers and unbelievers, and that no one is going to be able to claim salvation by the works of the law, because if you think about it, who would try that? The law comes from God, and someone who rejects God isn't going to bother with his law. This is righteousness before God. This is the idea that says, I have lived in a way that accords with the absolute standard of righteousness, and yet that person has suppressed the truth about that righteousness after their salvation.

No human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, and every reference that we have had to the sight of God and the judgment of God and the day of wrath and indignation and so forth, has been to the judgment seat of Christ thus far, those who by patient continuance in well-doing and so forth. All of these times of evaluation that have been brought up to this audience have been the evaluation of believers, and there's no reason to think that Paul has suddenly switched over for a number of reasons. So now when we start in verse 21, he says, now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, we're still talking about the way to live that pleases God.

In the Old Testament age, Jesus Christ had not yet come. The embodiment of God's character and the fullness of Him that fills everything in every way and all the other wonderful descriptions that Paul gives us of Jesus Christ had not come. So how could God's righteousness be revealed? How could we understand the absoluteness of His righteousness and justice and the severity of the penalty for falling short of it even after being entered into the fold of the people of God? That's what the law pictured.

The law had severe consequences. Just by brushing up against a corpse, one was rendered unclean. Just the natural functions of the body, the monthly cycle for women and the various things that happen by way of injury and bodily functions could render one unclean.

A priest, if he was doing the sacrifices and happened to lop off the tip of his finger, was disqualified and could no longer serve before the Lord. And this was in the context of function as a believer. It communicated the absolute holiness of God.

The law was the mechanism to communicate the righteous standard of God and how difficult it was to qualify us to even come into God's presence and how easy it was for us to fall away because of our continuing battle with our sinful nature and our fallen state as the people of God. That's what the law communicated. The law was for believers to teach us things about our God and about our salvation.

In that age, it was the future salvation that would come. Now we have that more fully revealed. This is what the author of Hebrews talks about in Hebrews chapter 1. God in diverse parts and various ways in former times communicated.

But in these latter days, He has spoken to us through His Son. And that's why in this age we don't have to go through the intermediate agency of the law. And we don't have a ritual system imposed on us to teach us these things.

We have the embodiment of God's character in the person of Jesus Christ. And so through the mystery that was hidden, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory, they didn't have that in the Old Testament age. So there were limitations on what God revealed and what God was able to show people because there wasn't the universal ministry of God the Holy Spirit and so forth.

Now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law. The law and the prophets bear witness to it. Paul quotes the Old Testament that it's what you believe that God judges you by.

It's what your motivations are that God evaluates you by. And that's always been true. But the way God was teaching from the external to the internal in the Old Testament age, He said, here is the way someone who loves the Lord with all their heart and all their soul and all their strength, this is the way he'll act.

He'll respect his neighbors. He won't covet his neighbor's possessions. He won't steal.

He won't bear false witness. He won't lie. He won't go after idols.

And all of the commandments that you see in the law were a description of a person who had the right motivation and the faith in God. And so it was a descriptive illustration of what one was supposed to be. But everyone saw that I can't keep that.

I want to, but I can never achieve a complete conformity to that ideal of holiness that's set up in the law. And so through the law came the knowledge of sin and the need for the power of God to cleanse us and free us from that power of sin. And that's where Paul is going with this argument.

He says this righteousness of God comes through faith in Jesus Christ for all the ones having that faith. And this is living faith. We're not talking about salvation here.

There is no distinction. Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, the Jews and the Gentiles, or believers, is what's comprised in that word all. And the reason we understand that is look at the next verse, being justified by his grace as a gift.

Now whoever the all is in Romans 3.23 is the same all in verse 24. And so if we want to try to apply Romans 3.23 to the entire human race, then we have to say that the entire human race has been justified by his grace as a gift because it's got the same reference. The ones who sinned

and fell short in verse 23 are the same ones who are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption in Christ Jesus in verse 24.

So we can't have it both ways. And verse 24 tells us that the all who have sinned and fallen short are believers. And Paul is making the point here, you can claim to be Jewish and have a law and be a teacher of the blind and so forth, but you've still got a sin problem.

And the righteousness from God that justifies you before God at the judgment seat doesn't come from your works, it comes from your faith. And you're justified at that judgment seat, you're justified in the eyes of God by his grace as a gift through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. The reason God can declare us righteous is because we've been redeemed.

And the work of Christ on the cross is the basis upon which we can be declared experientially righteous. We have no hope of producing any righteousness that pleases God if we're not redeemed. We have to be redeemed to be qualified to take advantage of this grace gift of righteousness by faith in Christ Jesus.

Christ Jesus is the one that God put forward as an expiation 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. Now, let's go back a step and think about this passage in the traditional understanding.

Are we saying then, if we're talking about salvation here, that in the Old Testament days God passed over sin and people didn't go to the lake of fire, people weren't unsaved and God didn't impute their sins to them? Not at all. We're talking about the life of a believer. And in the former days God in divine forbearance passed over former sins.

There wasn't the same remediation of sin in the Old Testament days as there is in this age. There was a different system. There wasn't the presence of God the Holy Spirit in the sense that we have him and his ministry to transform us by the renewing of our minds.

And when he was functional, by request, we know from Scriptures, Jesus says, if you being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, and of course Jesus is speaking in the Old Testament dispensation, he says, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him? And Proverbs chapter 2, those who sought and searched and lifted up their voice and cried out, sought wisdom as silver and searched for it as for hidden treasure, they were the ones who requested the ministry of the Spirit so that they could digest spiritual truth and understand it. And so they would have a special ministry of God the Holy Spirit, but it wasn't universal. It didn't go directly to the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Instead it went to the revelation of the law. The Word of God that the Holy Spirit revealed to an Old Testament saint was an understanding of the law and the revelation of God's character in the law and so forth. But the truth of Jesus Christ and the full orb'd revelation that we have in this

age wasn't there.

So God's righteousness is shown now because in the expiation and the redemption that we have through Christ in this age and the righteousness that we have by faith, this is a new thing. This is the mystery that Paul has been made an apostle of. And God's righteousness is shown because in divine forbearance he passed over former sins and it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.

And we're still talking about living faith. This is experiential justification for believers. It's not based on the works of the law.

Okay, so now when we get to the last little section here, what becomes of our boasting? Well, what is the propensity when you're relying on your works? You've got to make sure that people know about your works. And this is a thing that happens today and we're not hung up on the Mosaic law per se, but we still have this problem. And that's why Romans is still so pertinent to us today because by way of application when we get down to our lives in this day and age, in Christianity in 1996, we face this same principle.

It just wears a different face. Christianity today is still marked by and marred by an idea that we're justified. Our experiential righteousness comes from what we do.

Church attendance, involvement in ministry, the amount or extent to which we witness to the lost, both verbally and non-verbally. And people feel this pressure and feel the need to conform to this standard. The Jewish Christians in Paul's generation not only decided that they were righteous because they did these deeds, but they were very busy judging the rest of the world.

And that's why we have Romans chapter 2. You who are busy judging everyone else, you need to turn that laser beam of vision on yourself. What do we have today? The same thing. People who have either consciously or unconsciously adopted spirituality or living righteousness by works, what do they do? They want to establish their own righteousness.

We as believers often fall into this. We want to establish our own righteousness by what we do. So what happens? In conversation, it just happens to come up that, well, when I was down at the orphan's home the other day, or I just had the opportunity to share Christ with someone the other day.

This sticks in our mind that we participated in a righteous deed or we engaged in a ministry. And it's prominent in our mind. And we say, you know, God's using me.

I'm a conduit for righteousness. And God is at work in me and through me. And we look at these deeds and what happened in a day rather than the climate in our soul and the principles and the priorities that guide our thoughts and our intents.

And we fall into this unconsciously. But you can see the fruit of it because just like the Jews, we

feel like, well, other people are going to be judging us by what we do. And so we want to be sure they know about the good things that we've done.

And so it just kind of slips in. And when we're talking with each other, we hear other people. It's kind of like name dropping, except it's works dropping.

And all of us have heard this, and we don't want to be critical of one another, but it's just a common environment in Christianity. You can hear it in men that speak on the radio. And, well, I was in Russia and I was talking about what a great work God is doing and so on and so forth.

There are times when we can bring those things up and it's legitimate and it isn't a matter of boasting. But we wind up, any time you're in a system of works, you're in a system of boasting. It's got to be communicated.

You've got to let people know that, hey, you're talking to me about the person, well, you know, I shared Christ with someone the other day. Or, you know, I was just down at the church doing this and so. And I took this missionary trip and we went over and built this and constructed that.

And we helped these poor foreign believers of various sorts. And you understand. And this is what Paul is addressing himself to.

So now, if this is all on the inside and it's the evaluation of God, of the invisible thoughts and intents of the heart, what happens to boasting? Well, it's excluded. There is no boasting. What are you going to do? Well, you know, I was just having a thought of love the other day and, you know, I was having such peace the other day as all of this fire and brimstone was raining down around me.

I mean, you know, boasting gets excluded when you're operating in the realm of the invisible life of faith and the invisible fellowship with God that takes place when we're living by faith and not by works. So this is the point that Paul makes and it makes perfect sense here. What becomes of our boasting? It is excluded.

On what principle? On the principle of works? No. On the principle of faith. If you get in the principle of works, there will be boasting because it's not enough that we say, well, you know, I know that I was down there burning the midnight oil and I knocked myself out for the Lord.

And this is where we get the vocabulary of my ministry and the vocabulary that talks about, well, my labor for the Lord and full-time Christian service. And we tend to think that, well, because I'm a missionary, because I'm working for this agency or that organization or I'm a deacon or an elder or hold some office, that this is righteousness. And we are exactly like the Jews in the first couple of generations of the church.

It's just not the law. Instead, it's a manufactured system of righteousness that we've dreamed up.

It's excluded.

We hold that a man is justified by faith. He's declared righteous in God's sight as a believer apart from works. Is God the God of Jews only? See, in this system now, your Jewishness and your law-keeping is irrelevant.

Who cares about the law? Now, you can't say God is the God of Jews only. He's the God of Gentiles also. Since God is one and He will justify the circumcised on the ground of their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith.

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? Not at all. In fact, we uphold the law. And He's going to expand on that idea in chapter four.

He's going to talk about the fact that by the law comes the knowledge of sin. And the law was a great teaching tool. The law is just and right and holy.

There's nothing wrong with the law. It's what we turn the law into. There's nothing wrong with Christianity.

There's nothing wrong with ministry and evangelism and giving and all of the other things that can be genuine expressions of what's in our heart. There's nothing wrong with those things. It's what we turn them into when we make them a system of righteousness by works.

And the clue, the red flag that ought to wave in our soul is when we feel the need to let someone know. It's not enough to be trusting God. We feel like, you know, I wonder if so-and-so knows that I really am a dynamic Christian.

And it creeps into our conversation. And we say, you know, as I was down with the orphans last week, as soon as we feel that motivation, we're trying to justify ourselves by works. And that's the flag.

If we feel the need to be viewed as righteous in the eyes of another person, we fall under the condemnation of chapter two and chapter three. Because as soon as we look at ourselves that way, we will instinctively start looking at others that way. We say, well, you know, I was at church on Sunday when it was raining.

And I noticed some of you didn't make it through the rain. So I'm a notch above in my righteousness. Or, you know, I was there for the deacon's meeting.

Or I volunteered when the building had to be cleaned or the lawn had to be mowed. Or here was this needy person in the congregation and they needed help moving from point A to point B. I was there. I didn't see you there.

And this applies. I mean, this is right where we live and it's our instinct. It's our nature.

The Jews had a built-in opportunity in the law. We have a built-in opportunity with the trappings of Christianity. We meet in a group that meets in a house.

We have interaction with believers who meet in a church building and they say, well, you know, I was down at the church the other day and we had a dynamic speaker and we had this ministry and we took a bus and we went here and there. By the way, where do you go to church? Well, I meet in Sam's living room. And if we start to feel a sense of inferiority or, well, you know, we're not quite up there on the spiritual ladder, we've fallen into this trap.

What is our motivation for meeting here instead of in a building? What would be our motivation for going and meeting in a building instead of here? There might be a legitimate reason. There might be a building somewhere where there's a great dynamic teacher of the Word of God and there's opportunities and God has made a slot for us in that congregation and in that place and it's perfectly fine. It doesn't matter that we're here.

And we can't take a perverse satisfaction in meeting here and saying, well, I'm like the early church and I'm roughing it and we have no building and we have no steeple and we're proud of it. Our nature constantly bends us toward measuring ourselves by works and what we do. And that's the whole purpose of this book.

Paul is only peripherally addressing himself to the issue of what happens at salvation. He's talking to believers about the life of believers and he's saying, look, we've got to be constantly on our guard to evaluate ourselves the way God's going to evaluate us so that we know where we stand. And it's the thoughts and intents of the heart.

It's the love and joy and peace and patience. And if we meet here because that's what we're pursuing by patient continuance and well-doing, we're seeking for glory and honor and those imperishable things that are a part of the inheritance that Christ bought for us on the cross, it's good to be here. And we can do that here.

We can do it in an organized church. We can do it in isolation. There are people who listen to these classes and other classes on tape and they haven't been able to find even a group meeting in a living room that is of like mind in pursuing those goals and they're alone.

And many of us have been in that situation. And that's fine. God doesn't care what the form is.

He's looking at the thoughts and intents of the heart. So when Paul goes to chapter 4, he's going to pull an example that no one can argue with. He's going to go back before the law of Moses.

He's going to go back to the most famous man in Israel and the man that everyone claims. The Muslims claim Abraham. The Jews claim Abraham.

The Christians claim Abraham. Everybody says, well, Abraham, he's our man. So Paul's going to

say, okay, fine, let's look at Abraham.

And when we resume our study in Romans chapter 4 next week, we're going to see some very interesting things and we're going to see how helpful it is to understand that the issue under discussion is the Christian life because we're going to see that it's not Abraham's salvation that's in view. It's Abraham's reward. It's Abraham's promise.

It's the covenant. There were other believers in Abraham's generation, but Abraham received the promise. And this promise is not the promise of salvation.

This is a covenant. This is like David. There was Jonathan and many other believers in David's generation, but David received a promise and David received a covenant.

And it had nothing to do with salvation. It had everything to do with being a man after God's own heart. That was the thing that caused David to excel.

That's the thing that caused Abraham to excel. And so Paul is going to go to Abraham and say, look, before there was a ritual and before there was a circumcision, there was righteousness by faith. And that's where we'll be next time.

But let's, we've got plenty to chew on between now and then. So we'll stop here and close in prayer. Father, we thank you for the wonderful provision that you have made for us in your word.

And you have not left us orphaned. And when Jesus Christ left the earth to sit at your right hand, he didn't leave us without resources. He has sent the Holy Spirit to guide us into all truth.

And we have a wonderful, glorious revelation of your truth in the pages of scripture. And we are so grateful to have the scriptures and the Holy Spirit to train us up and to transform us by the renewing of our minds. We pray that the truth that we've seen here will stick with us, that our motivation will be sound and that we will clearly perceive when we fall short of these things and when we start, consciously or unconsciously, getting into measuring ourselves and measuring others by works rather than pursuing the righteousness that comes by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

We ask all of these things in his name. Amen.