

“Justified by Faith”

Sermons on Romans # 8

Texts: Romans 3:21-31; Psalm 53:1-6

In Romans 1:18-3:20, Paul has spelled out the bad news about the human condition. By citing a litany of texts from the Psalms and Prophets, Paul completes his indictment of the human race: There is no one righteous. There is no one who understands, not even one. There is no one who seeks God. There is no one who does good. No, not even one of Adam’s fallen race does so—Jew or Gentile. All have turned away from God and have together become worthless.

In this “bad news” section of Romans, Paul has made the case that the law, which is holy, righteous, and good, actually serves to expose our sin. The problem is not with the law. The problem is that we don’t obey the commandments of God, therefore, we come under God’s curse. Indeed, God has promised to give to each one of us according to what we have done (Romans 2:6). Furthermore, God has promised to justify all those who obey the law. But he will not justify those who merely “hear” the law (Romans 2:13). So when Paul is done with this section, the human condition is clear to anyone who is willing to accept God’s verdict. Jew and Gentile alike stand condemned before a holy God. There is no one who is righteous before God. The Jew hasn’t obeyed the law revealed upon tablets of stone any more than the Gentile has obeyed the law written upon the human heart. Both Jew and Gentile have turned away from God. Even though the Jew had every advantage, possessing the very oracles of God in the Scriptures, the Jew has mistakenly assumed that merely possessing the law and the covenant sign of circumcision exempted them from that judgment which was coming upon the whole world. The law cannot justify since we don’t obey it. Rather, it exposes our sinfulness and our need of a Savior.

Rather than leave us in despair, Paul will now give us the good news of the gospel. Beginning in Romans 3:21, Paul will tell us what God has done in Jesus Christ to save us from our sins. If the bad news is really bad, then the good news is really good! There is a righteousness which can justify guilty sinners. It is what Luther called an “alien righteousness.” It is not our own. And so Paul now begins a new section—the “good news” section—in his letter to the Roman church, although everything which follows builds upon—indeed presupposes—the description of the sinful human condition the apostle has set forth in Romans 1:18-3:20. Having shown humanity’s guilt before God, Paul will now set forth the gospel as that which reveals to us a righteousness from God which meets and satisfies his just demand for a perfect righteousness, a righteousness which can withstand divine scrutiny on the day of judgment.

As Charles Hodge once put it, what follows in Romans 3:21 builds upon the fact that Paul, “having proved that justification, on the ground of legal obedience or personal merit, is for all men impossible. . . proceeds to unfold the method of salvation as presented in the gospel”¹ Here, then, in this next section of Romans (3:21-5:21) is the gospel according to the apostle Paul. As Martin Luther wrote in the margin of his famous German translation of Greek New Testament, this is “the chief point, and the very central place of the epistle, and of the whole Bible.”² This densely packed section of Romans includes a discussion of many of the things which were so succinctly summarized in Romans 1:17. Paul will

¹ Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, p. 87.

² Margin note on Romans 3:23 ff, from the *Luther Bible*.

discuss the righteousness of God as well as how that righteousness is received through the means of faith. He speaks of the justification of sinners, both Jew and Gentile, demonstrating that this eliminates any Jewish boasting (3:27), as well as pointing out that once the gospel is rightly understood, the law is not nullified, but now can be seen for what it truly is, both the teacher of sin and the rule of gratitude.³

It is also vital for us to notice that Paul's presentation of the gospel is centered upon what God has done *for us* in Jesus Christ and not upon what God is doing *in us* or *to us!* Paul's discussion of justification precedes his discussion of sanctification for a number of important reasons, as the divine indicative (what we are in Jesus Christ) precedes the divine imperative (what are to do to live lives of gratitude before God). Paul will indeed discuss the application of the gospel to the daily life of the believer in Romans 6-8. But Paul knows of no two-tiered, two-stage Christian life, typical of much of evangelicalism. For Paul, every justified sinner is also a sinner under-going the process of sanctification. The same act of faith which justifies also commences our sanctification. Paul could never conceive of the misguided notion that someone could accept Jesus as "Savior" but not take him as "Lord. The Jesus that Paul preaches is prophet, priest and king, and we receive him through faith as he is revealed to us in the Scriptures or we have not received him at all.

We will divide our text into two sections. The first section includes the material found in verses 21-26, where Paul speaks of two main themes, justification and righteousness. Then in Romans 3:27-31, we will take up the means by which this righteousness is received and we are justified, namely faith alone.

Before we actually look at our text, we ought to be aware that this passage is "loaded with key theological terms," to use Doug Moo's descriptive phrase. Paul will speak of the righteousness of God four times. He will use the verb "to justify" twice and the adjective "just" once.⁴ There is a great deal of important material packed into these few verses.⁵ Luther had it right. Understand these few verses of Romans correctly and you'll understand the gospel. Misunderstand these verses, and you'll be greatly impoverished in your understanding of the gospel.

The connection between this section and the preceding description of human sin can be seen in verse 21. "*But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.*" "But now" (Νῦν δέ) indicates much more than merely a logical relation—i.e. here's what happens when God views us apart from the law. Instead this indicates an important redemptive-historical shift has taken place from this present evil age and the dominion of sin, to that of the age of salvation which has now dawned in the person and work of Jesus Christ.⁶ It is clear that for Paul, something decisive has happened with the coming of Jesus, something which transcends a mere contrast

³ See the helpful summation in Moo, [The Epistle to the Romans](#), p. 218.

⁴ Moo, [The Epistle to the Romans](#), p. 219.

⁵ Cranfield reminds us of the fact that this entire section reads like "a solemn proclamation. Notable, in particular, are the emphatic 'But now' followed by the perfect tense, the fewness of the verbs especially in the latter part of the section, the impressive use repetition of key-phrases, the striking use of prepositional phrases placed one after the other without connexion" ([Commentary on Romans](#), I.199.).

⁶ Moo, [The Epistle to the Romans](#), p. 221; Nygren, [Commentary on Romans](#), p. 144.

between being justified by faith and or being justified by works. Not only is it impossible to be justified by good works because of human sin, but the coming of Jesus Christ means that the free gift of God's righteousness is now revealed through the gospel to all who believe.⁷

This major shift in the course of redemptive history has do with the coming of Jesus Christ to fulfill all that was promised in the Old Testament. This age is an age dominated by human bondage to sin. Everything associated with it will come under the wrath of God. But with the coming of Jesus Christ, the age to come has already dawned—although we must await its final consummation when our Lord Jesus returns at the end of the age. The age to come is the age of salvation in which God's righteousness is revealed to all who respond to the gospel in faith. God has acted decisively and once for all in the perfect life, sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection of Jesus Christ. Wrath now gives way to righteousness.

As we have seen, when we dealt with the thesis statement of this epistle (Romans 1:17), the phrase "*the righteousness from God*" (δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ) is loaded with meaning as well as being highly controversial. In Romans 1:17, Paul told us that this righteousness from God is revealed through the preaching of the gospel. After all, the gospel is the proclamation of the doing and dying of Jesus Christ on behalf of his people. And for the same reasons we mentioned when we covered this phrase in Romans 1:17, there can be little doubt that Paul is here likewise referring to a righteousness *from* God, not the righteousness *of* God.⁸ This righteousness is something which God gives to us through faith, apart from the law. The contrast Paul makes is between the way God's righteousness is manifest (through faith and the preaching of the gospel, in contrast to being manifest in the law and good works), and not a contrast between two kinds of righteousness, i.e., the righteousness of faith or the righteousness of law.⁹

What is more, this righteousness from God was proclaimed throughout the Old Testament, because the Law and the Prophets both testified to it—the Law and the Prophets being a common way to speak of the Old Testament in its entirety. This means that from the very beginning of redemptive history, indeed from the first promise of the gospel uttered immediately after the fall in Genesis 3:15—"*And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel*"—until the final prophecy of the coming of Jesus in Malachi 4:2—"*But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things,*" says the LORD Almighty"—there has been one gospel, one plan of salvation, one covenant of grace, because the entire Old Testament bears witness to Jesus Christ, although it does so in type and shadow.¹⁰

What, then, does Paul mean when he says a righteousness from God is made known, apart from the law? At the very least, Paul means that since we are all sinners who do not, indeed, cannot, obey the law, a righteous status must come to us through some other means than through the law if we are to be

⁷ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.201.

⁸ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.202.

⁹ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 222.

¹⁰ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.202-203; II.824-826; 862-870.

justified.¹¹ We don't obey the law, hence it condemns us. Sinners must be given a right-standing through some other means, namely the work of Jesus Christ as proclaimed in the gospel. But as several recent commentators insightfully remind us, the law cannot justify because it belongs to that order of things which passed away with the coming of Jesus Christ.¹² Therefore, the law, as the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai, passes away with the coming of the one to whom that covenant pointed, Jesus Christ. But although the Mosaic economy is no longer in effect with the coming of Christ, this does not mean that Christians are not required to obey the Ten Commandments. Indeed, the Ten Commandments are the re-publication and elaboration of the terms of original covenant of works, which does remain in effect until the end of the age. They are written upon every human heart. Furthermore, all ten of the commandments (the so-called "moral law") are reaffirmed in the New Testament as binding upon the Christian in the dual sense of a teacher of sin and the rule of gratitude.¹³

That this is the case becomes even clearer in verses 22-24. Paul writes, "*This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, 23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.*" If this "righteousness from God," does not come through the means of the law and the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai, it must come through some other means—namely "*faith in Jesus Christ, to all who believe.*" While a growing number of scholars argue that the phrase, "faith in Jesus Christ," should be translated "the faith of Jesus Christ," i.e., as a reference to Christ's own faithfulness,¹⁴ there is no reason whatsoever to reject the traditional interpretation,¹⁵ in which God freely gives this righteous status to all who believe the gospel, i.e. all who trust in Jesus Christ. While this justifying righteousness is freely available to all, it can be found no where else, but in the person of Son of God, who is, as Paul says in another place, "*our righteousness*" (1 Corinthians 1:30).

There is no difference between Jew and Gentile as it regards the bad news of sin, as well as the good news of the gospel. In light of the divine indictment of the human race spelled out so thoroughly in the previous verses, it is patently clear that both Jew and Gentile have sinned and that both Jew and Gentile fall short of the glory of God, the glory of God being related to our being created in God's image, and

¹¹ See, for example, Nygren, Commentary on Romans, pp. 145-149; Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 174; Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.210; and Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 108-113.

¹² See the discussions of this in Moo, The Epistle to the Romans (pp. 222-223); and Schreiner, Romans, pp. 180-181; cf. Schreiner, The Law and its Fulfillment, pp. 65-71.

¹³ See, for example, the exposition of this in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Q 86-115.

¹⁴ See R. B. Hays, The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1-4:11 (Chico, CA: The Scholars Press, , 1983); and Luke Timothy Johnson, "Rom. 3:21-26 and the Faith of Jesus," in Catholic Biblical Quarterly, 44 (1982), pp. 77-90.

¹⁵ For a thorough refutation of this view, see Cranfield, On Romans: And Other New Testament Essays (Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1998), pp. 81-97. As Cranfield cautions, "we should be wise to hesitate about trying to construct a theology in which Jesus Christ's faith has an important place" (p. 97).

participating in the tarnishing of our original glory through Adam's sin as well as our own.¹⁶ But despite the consequences of human sin, both Jew and Gentile can be freely justified through the redemption that was accomplished for us by Jesus Christ.

And this gets us to the very heart of the good news of the gospel. Even though we have sinned and defaced the divine image, nevertheless, through the means of faith, and not through works of law, and only because God is gracious toward Jew and Gentile sinners, and not because we have earned anything from him, God freely justifies those who trust in Jesus Christ, through the redemption that Jesus himself accomplished for us and in our place.

A number of very important things need to be stated here. This is the first time in Romans Paul uses the verb "to justify" in relation to Christian salvation. Unlike evangelicals, who often speak about "getting saved" or having a "personal relationship with Jesus," Paul, on the other hand, speaks most often about being justified. The verb translated here "justified" (δικαιούμενος) refers to an instantaneous declaration made about the sinner—namely, that he or she has a right-standing before God because a perfect righteousness has been freely given (imputed) to them through the means of faith. This verb does not in any sense refer to a process (the error of Romanism), nor to merely being forgiven of our sins, as important as that is. No, to be justified is to be forgiven of our sins and to be positively reckoned as righteous.¹⁷

Neither is justification a mere legal fiction as Rome accuses Protestants of teaching—that God disingenuously declares the sinner righteous while the sinner still remains sinner.¹⁸ Justification is, as Paul puts it in Philippians 3:9, is to be found in Christ, "*not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.*" This glorious declaration that the sinner receives a justifying righteousness from God—meaning that this is a genuine and not a fictional righteousness—is not only the historic center of all Reformational theology, this declaration lies at the very heart of the biblical gospel. When we are justified, God reckons as though we were perfectly righteous, even while we remain sinful. It is from this that Protestants following Luther have used the phrase, *simul justus et peccator*. If we don't understand that we are simultaneously justified, while remaining sinners we don't understand the gospel!

Notice that in this verse Paul has stacked adverbs together—we are justified "freely," and "by his grace," to emphasize the fact that the whole act of justification is a free gift. Furthermore, it is not the act of "faith" which God regards though it were righteousness, as if faith were the one thing we must do to be justified. Rather, it is through the means of faith—the scholastic term "instrumental cause" is perfectly appropriate—that we receive this declaration which is grounded in the redemption (ἀπολυτρόσεως) accomplished for us by Jesus Christ. When Paul speaks of redemption being accomplished for us by Christ, he is referring to the fact that our Lord's death is a payment of sorts which secures the release of captives. This does not in any sense mean that Christ's death is a payment to Satan as some have argued

¹⁶ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p.226.

¹⁷ See the helpful discussions in Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 227-243, Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.204-224; and Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 176-184.

¹⁸ See, for example, the polemics of Karl Keating, Catholicism and Fundamentalism (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), pp. 167-168.

(the so-called “ransom theory”), but that our Lord’s death paid the price necessary for sinners to be delivered from their sentence of death.¹⁹ Christ’s death sets slaves free! He redeems us from both the guilt and the power of sin.

The idea that Christ’s saving work on the cross is the basis of our justification, not our faith, is also plainly evident in verse 25. Says Paul, “*God presented him [Jesus] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.*” As you have undoubtedly heard me say before, the NIV’s translation of the verb ἱλαστήριον as “sacrifice of atonement” is most unfortunate—indeed awful.²⁰ The Greek word ἱλαστήριον is better translated as in the marginal notes of the NIV, “*the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin,*” or even as in the KJV/ESV, “a propitiation,” for our sins. Indeed, through the writings of the prophets, such as Ezekiel 7:8-14 (our Old Testament lesson), we read of God’s wrath and anger being poured out upon the disobedient, as a matter of divine justice—a point which surely lies in the background of Paul’s discussion here.²¹ In other words, if Jesus is a “propitiation” for sins, then Jesus offers a sacrifice (himself) which turns aside God’s wrath which is otherwise directed toward sinners. Simply put, Jesus Christ endures the wrath of God on the cross, so that the sinner does not.²² It is, in part, from texts like this that we develop the idea of a substitutionary atonement, Christ dying in the place of sinners, being punished in our stead.

Since we cannot earn salvation through “works of law,” Paul reiterates that the means by which we are justified is “through faith,” this time through faith in Christ’s shed blood, that is, faith in the efficacious and saving nature of Christ’s propitiation for us.²³ We must be very clear that we are justified by the object of our faith—the cross of Jesus Christ—and not on the basis of the act of faith. We are justified by the merits of the one in whom we have believed. We are not justified through the merits of believing.

This point, too, is now further elaborated upon in the latter half of verse 25, when Paul explains part of the purpose behind Christ’s saving work. Jesus became a propitiation for our sins, “*to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished--26 he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.*” Paul’s point is simple. God is just. He must punish sin. And since Jew and Gentile alike are all law-breakers who deserve God’s wrath, God must save his people in such a way to satisfy his justice,

¹⁹ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 179; see also Morris’ Apostolic Preaching of the Cross (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), pp. 11-64; and B. B. Warfield, “The New Testament Terminology of Redemption,” in The Person and Work of Christ (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950), pp. 429-475.

²⁰ And this despite the efforts of Douglas Moo to defend the NIV. See Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 236.

²¹ Morris, Apostolic Preaching of the Cross, pp. 147-154.

²² Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 180-181. While a number of commentators contend that this refers to the “mercy seat,” as is sometimes the case in the Old Testament (cf. the discussion in Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 231-236), Morris’ point that the mercy seat was hidden from public view, and that Paul is speaking here of a public event, not a blood-splattered lid, is surely determinative.

²³ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 182.

while at the same time demonstrating that he is merciful to those whom he intends to save.

This can be seen in the fact God is long-suffering, and he bears with the sinful human race in that he does not punish people with an eternal vengeance the very moment that they sin. Rather, on the cross, God demonstrates his justice. Christ dies for the sins of his people, paying the debt they owe and bearing in his own body God's wrath against sin. Those who exercise faith in Jesus Christ receive divine mercy, because God's justice has been satisfied. Think of it this way. Sinners who trust in Christ receive mercy because Christ has received the divine justice owed to them. Indeed, all those who reject this free gift of the perfect righteousness of Christ will likewise get justice. Only the justice they will receive will come in the form of eternal punishment. They will be punished for their own sins.

Obviously, this text presents a powerful argument for the Reformed notion of limited atonement (or better, particular redemption). Jesus' death both redeems us and propitiates God's anger toward us. His death does not make people savable if they meet certain conditions, i.e., they believe. Rather, Christ's death effectually redeems and turns aside God's wrath for all those who whom he is dying. Do we really want to say, as universalists do say, that Christ dies in the place of a sinner, but that sinner may then suffer eternal punishment if they don't believe? If Christ redeems someone and turns aside God's wrath from them, on what basis then do they perish now that the ground of God's anger toward them has been removed? If you say it is because people do not believe, then you end up with Christ dying for some sins, but certainly not for the sin of unbelief! At the end of the day, if you believe in hell, you must limit the atonement either to its extent (those for whom Christ dies—the elect), or else you limit the atonement as to its saving efficacy (Christ dies for people he never intended to save, and who commit certain sins—unbelief—from which his death cannot save them).

This now brings us to the second part of this section of Romans, verses 27-31, namely Paul's discussion of the means of justification, which is faith.

Having made his point with great power, Paul now returns to his oft-repeated practice of asking rhetorical questions and then immediately answering them to further reinforce his point, as found in verse 27: "*Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith.*" If Jesus Christ has done all that is necessary for sinners to be justified, what place does this leave for boasting, presumably a reference to human self-confidence in being able to do something to earn favor with God? As Cranfield reminds us, "there can be no question of any man's putting God in his debt."²⁴ When Paul asks if we can boast about observing the law, i.e., doing good works, Paul's answer is "no." The negative is emphatic and is followed by another adversative—that of faith.²⁵ We cannot boast about our good works, because we don't obey the law. Paul has just told us that the law makes us conscious of our sins. In fact, we cannot boast about anything we have done. And once the law has pointed us to Jesus Christ who is our righteousness and we embrace him through faith and receive everything we need to stand before God in the day of judgment, how can we boast? We cannot boast about something freely given to us.

Verse 28, is considered one of the watershed verses in the history of Christian theology. In context, Paul offers these words in support of what he has just said. "*For we maintain that a man is justified by faith*

²⁴ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.219.

²⁵ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 186.

apart from observing the law.” Luther thought Paul was so clear on this—that we are justified by faith and not by works—that he inserted the word “alone” in his translation of this verse. And it is from Luther we get our phrase *sola fide*, “faith alone.” Although Roman Catholics howl that this insertion is unwarranted and distorts Paul’s meaning, none other than Origen, Hilary, Basil, Ambrosiaster, Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexander, and even the greatest of Rome’s theologians, Thomas Aquinas, all agreed with Luther, that the adverb “alone” is demanded by the context.²⁶ It really is this simple. We are justified by faith alone, and not by works.

Having established this fact as plainly as he can, Paul now resumes his line of questions and answers. If there is no difference between Jew and Gentile when it comes to sin or salvation, then the God of Israel is the God of all. This is the point the question in v. 29 is designed to flesh out and clarify. “*Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too.*” If there is only one God, then he is the judge of all people, Jew or Gentile, leading Paul to conclude in verse 30, that if there is only one God, there is only one gospel: “*since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.*” Therefore, Jew and Gentile receive a right-standing before God in exactly the same manner. Both are justified through the means of faith and not through works of the law. And it is this precise point which separates biblical Christianity from all other religions and historic Protestant Christianity from Rome and the Eastern churches.

Paul’s final question and answer (v. 31) was as important to his original audience as it is to us today. “*Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.*” If we cannot be justified by works of law, then what good is the law? Why not just get rid of it and live apart from it (antinomianism)? This question would have been especially pressing to Paul’s Jewish readers who thought that in the law, they possessed the very embodiment of the revealed will of God. If law cannot justify, then does it play any part in the life of a Christian? Even the life of a Jewish convert?

Given Paul’s emphatic denial that faith does not nullify, but rather establishes the law, it should be clear to Jew and Gentile alike that despite the fact that the law cannot justify, the commandments of God are not simply to be discarded. But given what Paul has just said about the Law and the Prophets bearing witness to the gospel, any continuing role for the commandments, must be seen in light of dawn of this new age of salvation. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus Christ is said to have fulfilled the law. He did so through his life—perfectly obeying and therefore fulfilling its righteous demands—and through his death, removing its curse from all those who place their trust in him.²⁷ It is only when we see the law in the light of the coming of Christ, that we establish its true purpose, which is to reveal to us our sin and show us the way that we as God’s people are to live, now that Christ has come and the new age of salvation is at hand.

Since Paul is speaking here specifically of the commands of the law (seen in the use of the phrase “works of law”) as he had been doing earlier in Romans 2:26-27, and since Paul will go on to speak in Romans 8:2-4 and 13:8-10 of Christians obeying these same commandments, John Murray is very likely right when he speaks of faith as establishing the law, in the sense that the moral law remains binding on the

²⁶ Fitzmyer, *Romans*, pp. 360-362.

²⁷ Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 189.

Christian since it is a revelation of the will of God, even though keeping the law cannot justify.²⁸ While the demands of the law are fulfilled by Jesus Christ, and with his coming the entire Mosaic economy is rendered obsolete, nevertheless, the moral law remains binding. All ten of the commandments are affirmed as part of the ethical teaching of the New Testament. Although the law cannot justify, and while faith in Jesus Christ does, that same faith points out to believers that they cannot simply reject the law as a rule for Christian living. That faith establishes the moral law, but not the Mosaic economy, as the norm by which we as Christian are to live our lives, having been justified by faith, apart from works.

The application from this section of Romans ought to be readily apparent.

The bad news is that the law cannot justify us, because we do not obey it. And because we don't obey the law, we all come under its curse, rather than receive its blessings—righteousness and life (cf. Romans 2:6, 13). We are all guilty, Jew and Gentile alike, before God and we deserve his just condemnation. As Paul says, through the law, we become conscious of sin.

But the good news of the gospel is that Jesus Christ has accomplished for us that which is necessary for sinners to be justified before God. On the cross, Jesus Christ has redeemed us from our sins, paying our debt, and setting us free from both sin's guilt and power. But not only that, Jesus Christ's death is said to be a propitiation for our sins, a sacrifice which he offers (himself) that turns aside the wrath of God, rightly meant for us. Jesus is our righteousness because in him alone is found all that guilty sinners need to be given a right-standing before God.

Because Christ has done all of this for us, we can be justified through faith in his blood, and not by any feeble, indeed sinful attempts on our part to earn favor with God through our own good works. Indeed, it is because of Jesus Christ's work on our behalf that Paul can say with such utter simplicity: "*For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.*" This beloved, is how sinners receive a righteousness from God which does justify—through faith alone and not through works. Martin Luther was not the first to teach the doctrine of justification *sola fide*, Paul was! As we have just seen, the doctrine of justification *sola fide* virtually jumps off the page in Romans 3:21-31. And it is Paul's doctrine of justification by faith which gives every sinner here this morning the hope of heaven. Because what God demands of us under the law—he freely gives us in the gospel, if only we receive it with faith.

Justification is a free gift. It comes to the sinner because God is gracious. It is based upon the merits of Christ, not the merits of human works or even the merits of faith. Rather, faith humbly receives this righteousness from God which justifies, this righteousness which is the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself. This beloved is the gospel. And this is why it is such good news for sinners!

²⁸ Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 126; cf. Schreiner, Romans, pp. 207-208. Moo's point that faith in Christ fulfils the law is not convincing (Epistle to the Romans, p. 255), especially in light of Murray's point about the pastoral context of Paul's statement. Notes Murray, "Paul is well aware of the danger of antinomian inference from the doctrines of grace. He deals with it in detail in chapter 6 and offers arguments which not only refute it but reduce it to absurdity" (p. 126).