

Faith or Obedience?

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[0 : 00] So this morning for a little while we're going to turn back to, or we're going to turn to, Romans chapter 3. We're coming to the end of this chapter. As I said last week, we've kind of slowed down the studies a little bit in the last couple of weeks, taking smaller sections, because it's such an important part of this letter that Paul has written. So I'm going to read the last few verses of Romans chapter 3, and then remind ourselves of where we are, particularly for those who are here and haven't been part of this series. Romans chapter 3 from verse 27. 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. For we hold that one 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 God is one. Who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith?

Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means. On the contrary, we uphold the law.

Okay, so we've come to this point where the first number of chapters, at least the first two and a half chapters of Romans have been quite bleak. They've not painted a good picture of the human race, and it's been stripping back our self-reliance and maybe our tendency to have God as a hobby in our lives. And Paul is hugely keen through the Holy Spirit to remind us that we are lost, that we need rescued and redeemed. And in the context of the book, he is reminding both the Jewish believers who have a great heritage and also new believers who have come in who don't have that heritage, the Gentiles, that they are without Christ, they are absolutely equal. And everyone needs a redeemer, everyone needs Jesus Christ. And last week, we kind of, the load or the light was, the weight was lightened a little bit because we came to the great gospel message of the righteousness that we are given, we are offered, that we receive through Jesus Christ and what He has done on the cross. And it is a remarkable revelation of God coming down to us rather than us trying to reach up to Him. And so Paul then concludes what he's saying about Jesus and about the gift of grace and the hope of the gospel and the work that Jesus has done and by dealing with a couple of things that are practical implications of the truth of Jesus

Christ as our Lord and Savior. And we're going to look at them for a few minutes this morning and remind ourselves of the centrality of the gospel and how it changes our lives. So this is a baptismal service as well. We have Brody being baptized towards the end of the service. And that baptismal sacrament is all about the gospel as well. It's all about the promise of the gospel.

[3 : 25] And it's a reminder to us of how we are to bring up our children and how we are to live as believers, as parents, as mothers and fathers, with respect to our children as well. The gospel, what Paul is saying, what God is saying through Romans is the centrality of the gospel in every part of our lives, in every part of who we are and what we do and how we live. And this great covenant of grace and the sign of the covenant in baptism is one that is central to our understanding of the importance of Jesus. So the context here, as we recall, is this letter to the Romans, which is to a young church, and Paul is clearly expounding, is laying out the central pillars of the gospel. So probably if we can quantify or qualify the value of the letters of Paul,

I think we can say this is preeminent. It wasn't the first letter he wrote, but it's put first after the Acts of the Apostles of the early church. It's preeminent in its importance.

And he's setting out for all of church, right through time, the significance of the gospel. There are Jewish believers, as we say, and Gentile believers. And what's happening is they're struggling, they're struggling with the radical nature of this new gospel community. You know, we've got 2,000 years of gospel community, greater or lesser degree, better or worse manifestations of that.

But this is a new church, and it's the new gospel really that they are seeking to understand. And what they're trying to come to terms with it is that it transcends race. It transcends background, your religious or pagan background. It transcends your privileges.

And it transcends all things so that in Christ, the gospel community of the church in Rome was to be one. It was to be a people who were fused together, and that identity was in Jesus Christ, and that's no different for all of the church, and all of the manifestations of the church, whether it's in America or in Scotland or wherever it is. He is setting out here the significance and the importance of the gospel. And if you remember the key verse in chapter 1, verse 16 and 17, I'm not ashamed of the gospel. Jewish believer in Rome, Gentile believer in Rome, believer in St. Columbus, believer whatever we are, we are not ashamed of the gospel for it's the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and then to the Greek for it in that a righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. So we've seen the recognition and we understand why it's so important that our condition is far more serious than we can ever, ever imagine. No one is exempt. And no one today is exempt from the analysis and from the diagnosis of God about our condition because he's God, isn't he? And he sees and he knows. No one is exempt. No one today is exempt from the challenge of God's diagnosis of the human condition. So putting it simply today, if you can introduce me today to somebody who will not die, who doesn't age, who isn't subject to any of the struggles of life, internal or external, then we'll just close just now. We'll just finish up. I'll just say amen and even then it'll be a bit of a waste of time. We'll just finish the service, we'll stop and we'll never again meet in

[7 : 28] Christian worship because if there is someone who is in that condition in the world in which we live, who will never die, who doesn't age and who has no struggles and battles, illness or any other condition, then God's diagnosis is wrong. But the spiritual, God is saying, and God's reminder, the root of the condition of broken human humanity is spiritual. And God's solution, as it's revealed in Romans, is much more amazing and mind-blowing than I can ever explain.

And that's a constant frustration for a preacher. And I'm sure the preachers who are here will know and experience that same frustration that we simply can't put into words. We don't have the dynamic ability to put into words how mind-blowing the gospel is that is offered to us as a gift of grace and a gift of love, something that we can't do anything whatsoever to earn.

And so Romans, with all its difficulties and depth and yet beauty, it challenges every conception we have about God, I believe, about ourselves and about the new society of the church.

And I want to focus a little bit on that today for a few minutes about the church because so often I think it's easy for us as ministers and people in the church to reflect selfish attitudes to Jesus and to others. So what I'm saying today is that every church, as we go through the centuries, every Christian within the church, then, as it was needed in Rome, so is now that we all need radicalized. Now, that's become a very politically weighty word or weighted word. I don't want to give any kind of political or ideological emphasis, but I do feel we need radicalized by the gospel of His love. We continually need to be challenged by the radical nature of what grace will do to a community, what grace will do to you as an individual and how it will change your life.

When we look at Romans, when we look at this section, we're challenged about the kind of people, the kind of Christians we are, the kind of church community we are. Do we grasp, do we recognize the constant need of change and the power that comes from a grace transformed individual family and community of believers? What is the difference that great, the radical nature of grace in our Christian life? What difference is it making as parents for Craig and Jenny? What difference is it making? What difference will it make for Fer and Siobhan who will get married? What difference will it make in your workplace as an individual, as we parent, as we work, as we witness, as we live, as we finish our studies, as we look for careers? I'm going to briefly talk about two negatives and one positive in the light of what Christ has done for us that come from this section here.

[10 : 50] The first is we cannot boast, okay? That's what Paul is, that's one of the conclusions he's coming to when he's spoken about the gift of salvation being given to us. Therefore, he says, what becomes of our boasting? There was obviously boasting going on in the church in Rome. I'm a Jew, I've got lots of privileges, I'm better than you, you're just coming late, you're a Johnny Come Lately to the gospel and to the church, you're a Gentile. There may have been some kind of boasting going on.

What becomes of boasting? It is excluded. I think boasting is one of the deepest issues that we face in our Christian lives. You may disagree with that. It's a powerful influence for destruction because it's the same as pride. Boasting is really the same as pride, because if we're boasting, then we're proud. We're proud about ourselves and we're proud about our achievements.

And it will often be the very core of division in a family or in a church and in a grace community. It will cause division and disunity, for there's boasting in the Christian church and in our lives. So how does disunity happen? Because I do believe there's a... Paul is speaking into a real church and into some of the real issues that they were facing and the disunity that is caused. And that's throughout the New Testament. How does disunity happen in relationships? How does it happen in church?

It's boasting, isn't it? It's pride. I think I'm better than you. I know better than you. I feel free to judge your motives. And I want to make unfavorable comparisons between you and somebody else. I'm the standard. I'm the gold standard that I'm judging everyone else by.

[12 : 47] And I can choose to be harsh on other people so that more sympathy is directed towards me. So pride and boasting is divisive and it displays an ignorance of the very core of the gospel that is being spoken of and laid out here by Paul, that it is by grace that we have been saved.

It's the single biggest battle that each of us face is to understand what the Bible, what God, God's diagnosis of us is. The first response to the gospel is humility, isn't it? That we fall in our knees and we say, I need you, God. I need you as my Savior. The first three chapters has made that clear that there is no one righteous, no there is not one person for all of sin and fall short of the glory of God. Therefore, the gospel is a humbling power in our lives.

Before God, we are all equally lost, equally failed, equally guilty, and as Christians, equally rescued by His grace because of what He has done. We haven't earned a grain of sand when it comes to our relationship and our standing before God. I'm going to come back to that briefly. So we recognize that there is a practical implication of understanding the gospel. And the first is that we cannot boast. We cannot be proud. Now, boasting comes naturally to us. It is just, we are born with the ability to boast, maybe not proudly in the sense of trumpeting boasting in a very outward boastful way, but pride is, and it can be very hidden in our lives. The way we talk to, the way we talk about each other, our put downs, our cynicism, our criticisms, it's all about boasting.

But it's thoughtless because it ignores what we profess to believe. And what we seek to do, and our doctrine studies in a Wednesday evening are to remind ourselves that we can't be thoughtless Christians. We can't be Christians who are not willing to apply our minds and our intellects to the truth of the gospel so that it changes who we are and who, how we think.

You know, we don't believe in marshmallow kind of Christianity, soft and pliable and pink. Sorry, that doesn't really mean anything. But, you know what I mean, we want something meaty and strong and something that molds and moves us into our very hearts and souls because it's true.

[15 : 36] And Christ boasting is excluded. And that means for us that we need to be genuinely rooted in Jesus Christ as believers. We need truth and relationship. We need prayer. Ultimately, it can't be taught, it needs to be lived. Only then do we begin to see people, other people, as Christ sees them and us, as Jesus. So that we live without boasting, loving, respecting, honoring others above ourselves and living to serve others rather than to be served because that is the core of the humility that is implied here. And that also means understanding the gospel community where there is no, this is written to a gospel community where there is no boasting. And I just want to speak very briefly in one area. When you and I, when I'm tempted to be critical of someone else in the church, another Christian, it doesn't need to be in the church, it may be in another church, may it be another denomination, another tradition of the faith, you maybe know them and you're tempted to be very critical about them to another person. I'm going to talk to others about it.

If there is no boasting, that shouldn't be how we act. Because when we talk to other people about the life and the witness of another Christian, we're saying, I'm better than them, I'm judging them, and I'm more important than them, and I want to be liked better than them.

What we must do in the radical nature of grace is to first talk to that person who we know about whatever it is that we are grieved about. If we're unwilling to do that, then either deep down we want to boast about ourselves and look good, or we come to the point of recognizing that our complaint is simply not serious enough, and we forget it, because love covers a multitude of sins. That's an outworking of not boasting, is that love covers a multitude of sins and the kind of things that we pick up on and sometimes pass on to others is based on lovelessness, not loving them. And we want others to treat us similarly.

So the first thing is we cannot boast. The second thing is our identity is not in our best efforts. That's one of the implications of understanding the gospel of grace and justification of by faith, which we looked at last week. 28 says we recognize that it's not our best efforts, that we hold that no one is

justified by faith from works of the law. In other words, we don't justify ourselves before God, before obeying the law of God. There's no self-justification.

Now I think sometimes even as long-standing Christians, we have this deep-seated battle and struggle to take some credit for being a Christian. That we must have done something, surely we must have done something for God to accept us, that we feel that we have something that God has seen in us that has made us righteous before Him, and Jesus can add to that.

[19:05] So I think if we battle with pride and boasting, I think we struggle to accept that salvation is a free and full gift, that we are made right with God because of what Jesus Christ achieved 2000 years ago on the cross and the death and resurrection. There's no works that we can do to earn God's favor. This goes back to boasting, I guess, doesn't it? So our background, good or bad, our knowledge, our charity, our church life, our generosity, none of it can enable us to reach up to God. Now I know we know these things. We know it in our heads, but it's hugely difficult to live in the light of that knowledge, to know that only Jesus Christ has bridged the gap between ourselves and God and has taken the death penalty so that we can escape the just judgment and wrath of God. Christ has taken that. We read it in Ephesians, for by grace you have been saved through faith and this not from yourselves. It's the gift of God, not by works. Not by works, therefore why?

So that no one can boast. So it's related, the two are related. Christ alone makes us right with God. It's the kind of fundamental tenet of our confession, of our belief that His righteousness His law keeping where He perfectly loved God and perfectly loved His neighbor and His everyone that He came into contact with is lived out in our place and yet He dies on the cross taking God's wrath as the sinner, representing us. The only way we are reconciled to God, the only way we can call Him Father, standing before Him now and on that last great day when all humanity will be judged before Him. The only way we can do that is by accepting Him as Lord and Savior and what He has done. He lived a life we couldn't live, died the death we deserve. It's that sacrifice, it's that substitution that we've looked at and spoken about so often. So the challenge for us today, and I challenge you today, if you're not a Christian, I challenge you to believe in what is revealed in God's Word and Scripture to do the most ludicrous thing you've ever done, to put your faith in a first century Jew who claimed to be God was crucified by Roman authorities and who was raised on the third day, ascended to heaven. That's the gospel that we believe in the 21st century. Now some people may say I'm insane, but many of the people here who believe are not insane, they're normal, ordinary people who believe and who have accepted and have been transformed by the love of Christ and who has redeemed them. Accept that gift and as Christians we need to accept that we are forgiven and declared righteous with God and entrust your life to Him and let that reality change you. No one can ever love you more than God loves you in Christ. No one can ever do more for you in your life than Christ has already done for you if you come to Him by faith. A child who has had no parents and has been moved from foster home to foster home when they are welcomed by an adoptive father and mother who love them and the papers are signed and the work is done. Their life is transformed by that security and by that love. Maybe in the workplace at a different level today where everything is zero hour contracts and semi or you know six month contracts or day to day contracts where your boss, your company that you work for gives you a long term permanent contract and it's signed and sealed. It changes the way you think, it changes the way you work in your employment and the person that you love, your partner finally says yes and then next week we'll sign on the dotted line and once they've signed there's no turning back. That marriage document that will be there, that's your signing your life, I mean it's a wonderful tremendous fantastic time that is so exciting and it will change you because the whole thing about that public declaration and the vowing

and the signing is publicly committing and knowing that love changes and the truth must be multiplied infinitely with Jesus Christ then shouldn't it? That when He has already sealed His love for us in His blood He can't do anymore and He said look it's a gift I'm giving it to you, you don't have to do anything but simply accept that gift. There's no boasting, there's no works of the law that you can't add to it, it's absolutely there and as you accept that and know His love then it transforms who we are and so I close with this, does it matter then how we live? If this is a gift to us and we're forgiven and we're accepted and we're declared righteous then hey we can live any way we want because God's accepted us, isn't that the argument? Well He finishes by saying do we then overthrow the law by this faith by no means on the contrary we uphold the law.

Of course it matters how we live, of course it's going to change us, the adopted child, the secure employee, the married couple, genuine love and gratitude always leads to a desire to please and in the case of our love for God we are awoken, we are made alive with a desire to obey God's laws of love because they're laws of love because love is what makes this world go round and because God's love is at the core of all so by loving Him through grace and therefore then seeking to love one another we become obedient to His commands, we don't see them as burdensome, the law is established in our heart. It's not only there as we saw in the last few weeks to expose our failure because we can't reach the standards of God's perfect law, not only there's a moral code which will restrain evil in the world in which we live but it's there as to follow as we're given a new heart. Some theologians have said they were justified by faith but that faith is never justified by faith alone but that faith is never alone. So there's always works of gratitude, the fruit of faith that we've been looking in the evening worship, the fruit of the spirit in our lives. If we're saying, wow, God's forgiven me anyway and I'll just live anyway, what was that? Isn't that twisted? Isn't that tainted love? Perverse, abusive, manipulative, selfish and dangerous. Jesus says, if you love me you will obey my commands.

So today I implore and encourage myself, Craig and Jenny as parents and all of us here to be as Christians lawkeepers. The commands of love in your relationships, in your workplace, in your family, in your home, it'll be the greatest example to your children and can I say it's the greatest apologetic for the gospel in the world in which we live today is grace being worked out on the ground by a community of people.

[27 : 39] So what can I ask if you know what is your reputation in the workplace? What's your reputation in the classroom? What's your reputation at home? What's your reputation in your neighborhood? Because I think if you know that then you have some kind of understanding of whether you understand the transform, whether I understand the transforming power of grace.

It's radically different from living without grace in terms of boasting and in terms of understanding his great love. So prize grace and prize the gospel and as a congregation I encourage you to prize unity. It's an impossible dream I know that without the aid of the Holy Spirit but unity will mark this community of God's people out as those who know and understand His gift and the grace that He's given to us. Let's pray about these things.

Father God, we thank you for the gospel. We thank you for its power. We pray that you would forgive us for when we stifle its remarkable energy and its life transforming grace. When we choose to be boastful and when we choose to feel that we have to earn something before God and be comparative with others and hope that our being better than others will earn us favor in God's sight. But remind us that your gift of salvation is that and we are simply asked to believe, to accept and to allow the transforming power of grace to make us new people with a new perspective and a new priority and a new hope and one that reflects how we were created to be. Help us be praying that. Help Craig and Jenny and that as the parent their children and as all as we parent not only our own children but as we in Covenantal family care for all the children in the church and as we live together and as we interact with one another in all that we do and all that we are help us to live by grace in all the humility of grace and the glory and beauty of grace. So bless us and bless us now as we come to the baptism. We ask and pray that all that we do would be done in your name and for your glory. Amen.