

Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, You have saved us from countless troubles and sin. Stay close to us, so that when we do not know what to do, or when we get things wrong and loose our way, we can call on You for help and guidance. You are our inspiration, our guide and the director of our lives, and we praise You for all You have done for us. Thank You, Lord Jesus Christ, AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

When you have a break during the course of your working day, tell the Lord what is on your mind

On-going prayers

- **Confess your sins to God.** Ask yourself whether there are any persistent habitual sins in your life, and bring them to God for confession
- Praise God for the joy of His love and the friendship of others
- Pray for people who are trying to escape persecution

Meditation

What will you say to me next time You speak, Lord Jesus?
From time to time You have spoken to me in the past,
But what next? What will You say, and how will You say it?
Save me from thinking that I know already what You will say.

Clear out my ears, my heart, my mind, and my spirit,
Open up my soul to hear You speaking new things, new ways,
Whether spoken or read, seen, heard or felt,
Come and speak again to me, and surprise me delightfully.

Speak! And may I never limit Your creative Word!
Liberate me into Your world with a greater revelation
Full of love, prophecy, sustenance, care and guidance,
Just waiting to be seen, and heard, and fully grasped ...

Bible passage – Romans 3:27-31

²⁷ What room is there for pride? It is thrown out! On what principle? That of keeping the Law? No! Rather, on the Law of faith! ²⁸ For we maintain that a person is put right with God by faith, and not by doing what the Law requires.

²⁹ Is He the God of the Jews alone, or is He God of the Gentiles too? Yes, the Gentiles as well, ³⁰ since there is only one God, and He makes the circumcised right with Himself on the grounds of their faith and the uncircumcised through their faith.

³¹ Do we throw out the Law because of this faith? Absolutely not! On the contrary, we uphold the Law!

Bible Study

Review

After the wonderful explanation of faith given in the previous verses (21-26), this passage seems something of a shock! What is Paul saying here and why? The passage is difficult to read, and this is probably because translators have difficulty themselves in understanding exactly what Paul was trying to say here. Elsewhere in his letters, much of Paul's writing is in the form of long sentences (a good example may be found in Ephesians 1), but here, the text is animated, with short, sharp sentences, '*what room is there for pride? It is thrown out! On what principle? That of keeping the Law? No!*' (3:27). People speak like this when they feel strongly about something, so Paul's message here must be something he felt passionate about.

However awkward the passage may seem, it is still about salvation by faith. Paul's main point is this; the Good News is not divided up, as if God has one message for the Jews and a different message for the Gentiles. He insists that the Gospel message is one, just as God is one (3:30). The news that Paul has just announced (3:21-26) says that people can be made righteous in God's eyes freely, through faith in Christ, and this is equally true for all people, Jew and Gentile. Everything about this passage suggests that Paul was very concerned lest some think there was one law for Jews and another for Gentiles, and this went against everything he taught.

The first words in our passage pick up this concern. Paul asks '*what room is there for pride*' (3:27)? Can anyone be arrogant enough to try to justify themselves before God? Paul will have nothing to do with this. Such pride must be '*thrown out*' (3:27). As we read on, however, it is easy to become confused by what Paul says next, and we will look at this further on in the study. But put simply, Paul assumes that his readers accept what he has just said in the previous chapters of his letter, which is that everyone stands accused by the Law. It cannot deliver a right relationship with God, and has been replaced by what Paul now calls the '*Law of faith*' (3:27). You cannot find the extraordinary phrase '*Law of faith*' anywhere else in Scripture, but it captures Paul's point perfectly. The coming of the Gospel does not mean that God's Law is thrown out, rather, human pride in it is thrown out, and 'Law' is superseded by God's greater work of salvation by faith.

Verses 29 and 30 then outline a point about God's unity. There is only one God, and where His favour once rested on the Jewish people, it now rests on all who come to Him in faith (3:30). When reading this, we must remember that the word 'faith' means not merely 'faith in God', but 'faith in Jesus Christ', which is the means of salvation (3:24). This is clear from the rest of the chapter, even if Paul does not say it here.

In the very last verse of this passage, Paul turns again to the important matter of where the Gospel of grace leaves the Old Testament Law of God. Those who heard Paul's preaching about the liberties of the Gospel of grace might have thought that the Old Testament Law had been ditched as irrelevant to the purposes of God. However, he makes clear, as he does throughout Romans, that this is not the case, moreover, he says '*we uphold the Law!*' (3:31). In saying this, Paul is consistent with everything he says about the Law in Romans; the law has a place within God's eternal plan, which is to explain to all people what is right and wrong before God.

It is not easy to pick your way through these verses, and they give us a flavour of the strong feelings these subjects aroused when Paul first wrote this letter. People are not concerned about them today, but perhaps they should be, because the church cannot afford to compromise the principle for which Paul fights. These are that God is One, and we can only be put right with Him through faith in Jesus Christ.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- A detailed look at verses 27 and 28
- The unity of God and the unity of His Word
- The place of the Law

Going Deeper

A detailed look at verses 27 and 28

If you read verses 27 and 28 in more than one translation, you would be entitled to be confused. I offer two such translations below, alongside my own, for you to compare. Of course, the reason for the differences is because those who work on translating the text have different opinions about what Paul's words mean. Even though we are stuck with the results of their efforts, anyone can compare the translations and gain a reasonable picture of the issues at stake, even if they cannot resolve them for themselves because they do not know the language of Greek!

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.
(NIV)

Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. (NRSV)

What room is there for pride? It is thrown out! On what principle? That of keeping the Law? No! Rather, on the Law of faith! For we maintain that a person is put right with God by faith, and not by doing what the Law requires. (PHA)

Without going into the details of what each word means, you can see that the greatest differences appear from the third phrase onwards; contrast, *'on what principle? That of keeping the Law?'* (PHA) with *'by what law? By that of works?'* (NRSV). In order to clarify what is being said throughout these verses and why there are different translations, I will number each phrase and briefly describe what Paul says and how it fits with his theme.

1. *'What room is there for pride?'* Most of the translators use the term 'boasting', but I have preferred to refer to pride. This is because it is a perfectly correct translation of the Greek word, and it implies an inner attitude towards the law rather than the outward expression of 'boasting'. I reckon that this is closer to what Paul is wanting to say here, largely because he is talking about principles rather than deeds.
2. *'it is thrown out'* There is little debate about this phrase, which is just one brief word in Greek. It is rare for Paul to use one word where several will do!
3. *'On what principle'* The Greek word here is an entirely general one that can be used for 'Law', but can also mean 'principle', 'conduct', or 'what is proper'. It is possible that Paul was speaking about the Jewish Law here, but if this is so, it makes little sense in the verse (try reading it with this in mind, as in the NRSV, and you will see). It is much better to think that Paul was asking about the general grounds for dismissing pride, and not saying anything about the Jewish law. This makes the whole sequence of phrases in verse 27 more understandable, for his answer is that no one should be proud because righteousness by faith is universal and not just for Jews.
4. *'that of keeping the law'* In the Greek, this phrase is simple and it says 'by works'. However, this simple Greek word is a technical word that refers to doing the works of the Law, hence my translation.
5. *'No! Rather, on the Law of Faith!'* This famous phrase is made up by Paul to contrast with 'keeping the Law'. It is an interesting thought that despite the power of this expression, Christians today do not use it. If we did, we might perhaps gain a better understanding of what Paul means when he contrasts Jewish 'Law' with various aspects of the Gospel in his other letters.
6. *'For we maintain ...'* This verse (3:28) echoes what Paul has said earlier in 3:22-24. This is the heart of Paul's message and what he seeks to safeguard at all costs.

He unity of God and the unity of His Word

At the beginning, Paul alludes to the fact that Jewish people were regarded as those who had great pride in their possession of the Law, their meticulous approach to keeping it, and the relationship with God they believed they had through the Law. Paul says in verse 27 that such pride and boasting should be 'thrown out', but not the Law itself. In addition, the rest of verse 27 strongly implies, through the rather complicated grammar of the verse, that it is God who has thrown out this pride and boasting, and offered as an alternative the 'Law of faith' which cannot be boasted about. This phrase is the result of Paul's attempt to explain that faith is not so much an alternative to God's Law, but it is a bigger, broader, and more fundamental understanding of God's Law. His argument is that this must surely be the case, because God is Lord of all, not merely the God of the Jews. When he says 'God is one' (3:30), his argument is that God is God of both Gentiles and Jews, and all people from whatever background or race, all are put right with God on the basis of faith, not merely the keeping of the Law as given to the Jewish people.

When put like this, Paul's points here are very similar to the words of Jesus. He was equally clear about the place of the Law within God's revelation: *'Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the prophets; I have come to not to abolish but to fulfil'* (Matt 5:17). So Jesus is Himself an example of what we are talking about here in this passage. He holds that there is something deeper and more significant than doing what is right before God, and that unless the heart is right before God then no amount of observance can help. This is what lies behind Jesus' tough teaching on things like 'turning the other cheek' (Matt 5:39), and his prohibition of lust (Matthew 5:28).

In this passage of Romans, Paul tells us that God's intention is to abolish and throw away not the Law itself, but the belief that one can be saved merely by the human effort to try and keep it, just as Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount. In the context of the whole of Paul's letter, this passage is a short transitional piece between his great explanation of 'justification by faith' (3:21-26), and his more lengthy explanation of how the

revelation of the Law through the history of the Jewish people, fits together with faith in Jesus Christ as preached by himself and the church. Those who study Romans often miss out the next chapter of Romans (ch.4); however, Paul's explanation of how 'Law' and 'faith' dovetail together is essential to his whole letter.

The place of the Law

It is extremely important that we read and take notice of the last verse here (3:31). Paul explains here that the Law is an important part of God's revelation, even though it is not a means of salvation. The Jewish people were wrong to place their trust in it, but this does not mean that it does not have a place in God's plan. At the very least, the Law was important for establishing the people of God when they came out of Egypt, and its laws held people to account throughout the history of Israel. In New Testament times, it has become a means to understand the nature of sin, but as Jesus point out so succinctly in the Sermon on the Mount, it is at times a very limited expression even of God's moral law.

This, of course, is the clue to our use of the Law today. In the Christian church, people frequently suggest that because the Law has been superseded by Christ, it is therefore not worth reading or studying. This is a great mistake. Paul himself knew a great deal about God and Jesus because he had studied the Law throughout his life, even before he became a Christian, and this prepared him for what was to come. In his many letters, he speaks disparagingly about the law at times, but here in Romans, he seems to be aware more than ever before of not being too derogatory about it. At various points in the letter, Paul agonises over the whole question of what God has done to the Jews and whether He has a place for them in His heart despite their rejection of Him (see Romans 9-11). We are wise to accept this passage about the law as being Paul's most measured.

Application

One way in which we can respond to this text is to make sure we have a right attitude towards God's Law. Another is to have a proper appreciation of God's unity and the fact that there is only one Gospel message. This is perhaps something we forget too easily. Churches today sometimes relish their differences from others, and have 'mission statements' concocted to meet what people perceive as their goals. How extraordinary! There is only one Gospel, and there is only one Saviour. Moreover, we only have one Mission, which is to make the Gospel known by all means. So, we must be careful to make sure that when a church publishes its own intensions for mission, this is properly placed within the overarching Mission of God (etc.). God's people must always be careful to preserve the unity of Christ in His Body, and it seems to me that people are far keener on their divisions than their unity today.

Also, in the light of what Paul says here, it is a terrible thing when Christians fall short of their own high calling by appearing before the world to be people who are proud about themselves and what they believe. The exhibition of a proud heart is an abomination to God; for when we set ourselves up in the eyes of others as being better because of our faith than we promote ourselves, and not God, and this is idolatry. The days when Christians argued with Jews about Law and faith are long since gone, but we should remember from this text that Paul's starting point was that the Jews were proud of what they believed, and God was deeply unhappy with this. Perhaps, if past generations of Jews had not been proud of their Godly inheritance, then the message of faith could have been delivered to the world with less anguish and division. Christians today should not respond to this passage by saying 'ah, we got it right and the Jews got it wrong'. Rather, they should accept that the human sin of pride and arrogance can and will disrupt both obedience to God's Law and also faith; we must therefore stand against it.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Discuss in your group what this text says about how law and faith, and how they are connected.
2. Can you give examples of how a Christian might fall into being proud of their faith in a way that does not give glory to God and is therefore idolatrous?
3. What do we mean by saying God is 'Lord of all' in a world of many different faiths?

Personal comments by author

This passage of Scripture holds an important warning for everyone who would be a disciple of Jesus, which is to avoid displaying inappropriate pride. The New Testament tells us that our faith is something that must be shown through what we do, moreover, we must aim for the highest of standards. However, when we

allow the work we do to take a higher place in our own hearts than our Lord Himself, the dangers begin. For example, when we talk more about our achievements than the Lord who inspires us in what we do, or when we spend more time attempting to do what God requires than talking to Him about it. These things are, of course, a matter of the heart, and a matter of how close we keep to the Lord who has given us life.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Think about what you have done, or will do, during the day. How does it all fit into God's will for your life? This may seem a straightforward question, but you may find that in trying to answer it, it becomes less straightforward!*
- *Pray about pride, and ask the Lord to help remove from you all pride in your work, your witness and your church and private life.*

Final Prayer

God of grace and God of mercy; we find it hard to be conscious of Your presence and trust in Your love all our waking hours. Be gracious to us daily we pray, and accept our faith; and by the power of Your Holy Spirit, transform our attempts to do what is right into an acceptable witness to You, who are our Lord and Saviour. Thanks be to God: AMEN
