

No Boasting Allowed

Romans 3:27-31

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OPENING PRAYER:

Gracious heavenly Father, thank you for our Lord Jesus Christ, that he became flesh for us in order that he might become sin for us, in order that he might be Savior to us and become our King and Master. We thank you that he reigns in heaven, that this very night he is honored and worshiped and yet we praise you all the more that he has not forgotten his church here on earth. Surrounded by the perfect praises of heaven, he cares for us and by his word speaks to us and so we pray, our heavenly Father, that through your word and by the gift of your Holy Spirit and his ministry among us this evening we may be drawn closer to Jesus Christ, that he may seem all the more wonderful to us, that our sins and our needs may be laid bare by his word, that our secrets may be exposed by your Holy Spirit. And as you work upon us, O Lord, as this room becomes the workshop of your Holy Spirit, we pray that you would transform us by your grace to be more and more like our Savior Jesus Christ. So teach us, Lord, as we are disciples in your school, draw us close to yourself as we are your children and your servants. Instruct by your truth that we may live lives that are marked by truth and give us that special joy that we experience as you speak to us and as you, by your Holy Spirit, point us to our great Savior. And this we pray together for his great names' sake. Amen.

Please be seated.

SCRIPTURE READING:

Now we're turning in the New Testament to Paul's letter to the Romans and are reading this evening in Romans 3:27-31 and you'll find this on page 941 of the pew Bible if you're using it. So let us hear God's word as Paul continues his exposition of the gospel. He has spoken about the righteousness of God being revealed in Jesus Christ who is the redemption of God, the propitiation for our sins, who when received by faith brings justification to his people. Says Paul,

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.

SERMON:

We are returning this evening, as you know, after a break of two months now – the months of December and January — we’re returning to our studies in Paul's letter to the Romans. This is a series that we began in mid-August. We went on to the end of November. We've had these two months break and we begin again. I, perhaps, ought to underline that when I said at the beginning of this series that the series would take 18 months, I was not including the breaks in those 18 months so if the thought has crossed your mind that we are now 5 1/2 months into our 18 month series on Romans, you simply deduct two months from 5 1/2 and you realize that actually we're only one-fifth of the way through our series on Romans. I thought I would mention that partly for the sake of honesty and partly to encourage you in every way.

I am a post-war baby and in post-war, certainly in Scotland and in our house, there was not a great deal of literature coming into the house. We were tremendously blessed by a magnificent local lending library but I did try and read everything that came into the house and one of the things that regularly, every week, came into the house was a magazine to which my mother subscribed called *The People's Friend*. I don't believe it's ever been published in the United States of America and it's full of Scottish stories. Some of them, I mustn't get off at a tangent on this, but some of them I didn't realize this when I was reading them as a little boy, some of them were about young Scottish ministers who went to churches and the choir stalls filled up and after a few hiccups along the road, some beautiful Scottish girl would fall in love with the young minister and they would get married and live happily ever after or at least until the next series began.

With very little to read, I would take my mother's *People's Friend* into a room where nobody could see I was reading it and I would catch up with what was happening in these romantic escapades in Brigadoon. But those stories always began with a little section in italics and that was always headed “The Story Thus Far.” That's where I want us to begin our study this evening: the story thus far.

The Apostle Paul is writing this long letter to his friends in Rome because he has, as he said in chapter 1, a long held desire to go to Rome. He knows that it's the capital city. He, himself, is a Roman citizen and as Christ has given him this special charge to take the gospel to the Gentiles, you can understand that he's been through many of the great cities of the ancient world but naturally has a longing and a burden to preach the gospel in the capital of the Empire. It's clear from the very last chapter of Romans that he actually knows a quite surprising number of Christian believers in Rome and that itself, is a most fascinating insight into the interconnectedness of the people of God in this vast sprawling Roman Empire. It's amazing the number of Christians who have passed Paul's path or, perhaps, many of them away from Rome have been converted through his ministry and he longs to see them as he says in chapter 1 to impart some spiritual gift to them but since many of them have never met him and that might seem just a little bit arrogant, he tells them that he wants to be encouraged together in their mutual faith in Jesus Christ.

But why write such a long letter? Well, for one reason: the Apostle Paul appears to have a desire, he mentions it towards the end of the letter, he appears to have a desire to begin to press westwards with the gospel. He has been all around the north side of the Mediterranean but he's looking towards Spain beyond Italy, beyond Rome and there may be just a little hint in his letter that he's looking to the Christians in Rome to be for him what first of all, the Christians in the city of Antioch were, a kind of sending and supporting church. And he understands that if that's going to be the case, then in this letter he needs to lay out his credentials to these Roman Christians not least because as he gives indication in this letter and in other letters, his teaching was sometimes misinterpreted. Sometimes by other people, his teaching was distorted. And so he's giving the Roman Christians his credentials as an Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an Apostle," is the way he begins his letter.

But he also knows something about the Christians in Rome and so he not only has this concern to express his personal credentials as an Apostle but he has a pastoral care for them. He has little hints that everything is not perfect in the church in Rome. There are hints in this letter that they don't fully understand the implications of the gospel. There are hints in this letter that there are tensions between Jewish believers and Gentile believers, between those who think of themselves as strong Christians and those who think of themselves as weak Christians. Those who have particular views about days and about diets and he's giving them spiritual help as he expounds the gospel. And he wants them to understand, as is true of all of his letters but supremely true of this letter, that the solvent for every problem in the Christian life and in the Christian church is the gospel and things tend to go wrong in our own lives and in the Christian church in our fellowship together when we lose sight of the grace and glory and power of the gospel. As he's begun to expound this, he has told us in chapter 1:16 and 17 how he is not ashamed of the gospel because he has seen that it's the power of God for salvation to everybody who believes, came first of all to the Jew and now is going all over the world to the Gentile.

He picks up the great question: why do we need the gospel? Why do we need the gospel? And his answer comes immediately. He says, "Because the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness." From chapter 1:18 as we've seen, to chapter 3:20, he pursues us into a corner, whether we be Jews or whether we be Gentiles, he takes away every last vestige of our hope that we can save ourselves and by his rigorous exposition of the truth of the gospel, he brings us to the position where he's able to say, "Now, in the light of this, we understand none is righteous, no not one, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and before God's justice throne, every mouth is shut and the whole world – Jew or Gentile, Gentile or Jew – is held accountable and guilty before God."

He brings us to the place which we often sing, although it's interesting how much more readily we sing it than we're sometimes prepared to say it: guilty, vile and helpless we. That's the position of men and women apart from Jesus Christ. And then, with some relief, you may remember that we came to these magic words of Paul. He uses them on more than one occasion when he turns the corner from looking at this dark back-cloth of our sin, the glorious good news of the gospel and he says, you remember here in chapter 3:21, "But now." In the face of all this

sin and the face of our guilt as we stand there before the judgment seat of God, our mouths closed, conscious that we are under the condemnation of God, he says, "But now there is good news." And into the verses that follow, that we spent several weeks on, into those verses he presses all of the big words of the gospel. He says: God has righteously found a way of constituting us sinners righteous in his sight and he does it through faith and as we come to trust in the redemption that is in Christ Jesus who has given himself on the cross as a propitiation for our sins, we receive justification by grace.

It's a glorious, glorious relief when we discover this and Paul's concern now is to work this through, and he does it in such an interesting way. He does this on more than one occasion in these opening chapters whether he is thinking through the gospel and as he thinks through the gospel he comes to places where it seems there is a tension, even a contradiction, between what people believe and what the gospel says and he raises these questions. Or does he imagine in those days when, perhaps, gatherings were a little less formal than our gatherings are, does he imagine somebody or had he actually experienced somebody in the back seat of the synagogue, for example, putting up his hand as students do in the middle of lectures and saying, "I have a question for you, Paul."

And in these verses this evening, you would notice that they are framed around a series of questions. There are four questions and I want to notice with you, you'll be glad to hear, that to these four questions Paul at the end of Romans 3, gives the short form answers. He gives the short form answers. This is the short form answers we're getting tonight. That's not very like Paul to give short form answers. Why does he do this? For the simple reason that in chapter 4 he's going to pick up these short form answers and he's going to expand on them and show — and this is sheer divine genius — he's going to show especially from the situation and life of Abraham that the gospel that he is preaching is absolutely consistent with the spiritual experience of Abraham, the great father of the Jews. It's a stroke of extraordinary genius especially when he seems to have Jewish people in mind.

So first of all, he gives the short form answers and then he has this, as I say, stroke of genius when he says, "Let's talk to Abraham about this. What was Abraham's experience?" Notice how he does this. His first question is: in the light of this gospel, what becomes of boasting? People are saying: Paul, I believe that gospel. I will have nothing left to boast about. And you notice how at the beginning of chapter 4 in verses 1 and 2 that's the very thing he picks up: what did Abraham have to boast about?

Second question he asks is: But by what kind of law is boasting excluded? And you'll notice how in chapter 4 in verses 3 through 8 he gives us the longer form answer to that question. And then the next question: Is God the God of the Jews only? And his answer is, "Of course not." And he gives the long form answer to that question you'll notice in chapter 4 in verses 9 through 12, "Is this blessing then only for the circumcised or also for the uncircumcised?" Finally, he answers the question: does this gospel nullify the law of God? And he gives the short form answer at the end of chapter 3 and in chapter 4 verse 13 through chapter 4 verse 25, he gives us the longer

answer to show us the beautiful harmony between the promise of the gospel and the giving of the law.

Well, let's try and look at these short form answers. That they are short form answers is, of course, no guarantee that this is a short form sermon but at least we can try. Let's look at these four questions one-by-one. "In the light of the gospel," says Paul, "what becomes of boasting?" Now, why does he even ask that question? For this reason: that this was one of Paul's great difficulties with the gospel. This was one of Paul's great difficulties with the gospel. It's clear before he was a Christian, that he was a man who insisted that he had something special to boast about. He was a Jew, after all, could he not say that God himself had said, "You only of all the nations of the earth have I known?" And I think it's fairly evident from the number of times that he uses the language of boasting in his letters that it was probably something that he struggled with.

And what he wants to emphasize, point #1 is: that the gospel of Jesus Christ closes the door on all of our boasting in ourselves. You remember how he says to the Philippians when he picks up a similar theme, he says: You know, as I look back I know that there was not another individual in Jerusalem, certainly not another one of my generation, who had so much to boast about as I had to boast about. Actually, personally I believe that was true until he met Stephen and I personally think that's the reason why Paul says later on in this letter that when the commandment "do not covet" came to him with force and power, he realized he was dead in trespasses and sins because he saw in Stephen something that he did not have in himself. He coveted it but he knew he could not have it apart from Jesus Christ.

So, though he says in Philippians 3, "I was a blameless person before I became a Christian, I had something to boast in if anyone had anything to boast in." One of the things God began to do in his life as God worked surrounding those events on the Damascus road, in his knowledge of Stephen and then in his participation, at least mentally, in the execution of Stephen, God was working in his life to end his boasting. Which is why he says in one of his early letters, "By God's grace I am able to say that I will boast in nothing except the cross of Jesus Christ."

So, he wrestled with a particularly Jewish form of boasting but, you know, although there is a parable in the New Testament, in the gospels, that Jesus tells us, that we usually think is a peculiar form of Jewish boasting, I sometimes wonder if the great parable of the pharisee and the publican doesn't have something very special to say to those of us who are evangelicals. Now, we know that parable so well: we know the good guy and the bad guy. We know the good guy is the publican who is not looking up to heaven but saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner," and the bad guy is the Pharisee. We also understand no Jew would have heard the story that way so we're already inclined to boast in the fact that we understand that the pharisee is the bad guy because he prays, "Lord, I thank you for what you've done in my life. I fast twice a week, etc, etc. I thank you, Lord. I thank you that you've made me different from that man." That's what he's saying. Why is that boasting when he's standing in the temple saying, "I thank you, Lord"? Because in the process of giving thanks to God, he's looking sideways out of his eyes and making himself rather superior to that wretched sinner in the corner.

My dear friends, unless I am mistaken, the evangelical church is rife with that kind of thing. Rife with that kind of thing. Which underlines for us that this instinct to boast is not an ethnic instinct for which Paul is criticizing the Jews, it's a human instinct and he's bringing all of us under the searchlight and saying to all of us, "Don't you understand that there is crass boasting but there is very subtle boasting." And when I engage in that very subtle boasting, it's a very subtle indication that the gospel hasn't fully come home to me yet and I've not been brought to the place where I just bow down before the majesty on high and say to him, "O God, I've got nothing to boast about."

That's fifty percent of humility, isn't it? Humility is not something that grows up so that you look big. Humility is coming to recognize that actually you've got nothing to boast in so why on earth would you say anything, do anything or think you were anything that was superior to any other mortal on the face of the earth? But we do and that's why we still need the message of the gospel. That's why we still need these early chapters of Romans. Because it's sin and boasting all the way down and the gospel gets down there, and down there, and down there, and down there although we naturally wish there were some instantaneous way in which we could be delivered from this instinct to self-boasting and superiority. And it comes out in our lives in a thousand different ways but we are masters of doing it in subtle ways. That's why the gospel gets underneath my subtlety and says, "Now down. Down peacock's feathers because if you have anything to boast in, it is only the gospel of Jesus Christ that has saved you, you proud boaster, from God's condemnation of your boasting."

That's a marvelous thing. That's a marvelous thing to see in somebody, to see the boasting beginning to be dealt with. It comes out in different ways. I don't want to over-stress this: it comes out in ordinary boasting but, you know, another place where it comes out, it comes out in inferiority complexes, doesn't it? Why should you have a complex about being inferior if you've bowed down before Almighty God and said, "God, be merciful to me the sinner"? You've made the great confession that you are the ultimate inferior one and, you see, that's one of the things that enables you to break through the inferiority complex that is so related to, "I'm always thinking about who I am and I've always thinking about what other people think about me." That's why the gospel is so wonderful. That's why this basic message of the gospel that our sin is being brought to the surface in all its multi-faceted subtle ways in order that God's grace may take away the dross and refine us until we realize that all of our dignity is to be found exclusively in Jesus Christ. So says Paul, "in the light of this gospel, what becomes of our boasting? Well," he says, "it is excluded."

But then he asks a second question and it's very interesting. He asks this question. His second question is: "By what law is this boasting excluded?" Now, it's become a very popular thing in New Testament scholarship and in the study of Romans to say that every time Paul mentions law, uses the word "law," *nomos*, he's always referring to the law of Moses and so there are scholars who suggest that at this point, what Paul is saying: What becomes of boasting? It's excluded by what kind of law? By treating the Old Testament law as a law of works. "No," he says, "by treating the Old Testament law as a law of faith."

Now, for reasons I won't bore you with, I don't think that's the right interpretation. In this passage, Paul very much sets almost in contrast the law and faith and he's speaking, you notice, he says "to those who have failed to keep the law." Not just the ceremonial law, though — verses in chapter 3:10 through 18 have nothing whatsoever to do with whether you keep the ceremonial law or not. So what is Paul saying? If you've got the NIV, it probably translates something like "by what principle" and personally I think that's the right way to understand what Paul is saying. "By what principle is boasting excluded?"

Now, notice the answer, it's far more subtle than it seems at first sight: "Is boasting excluded on this principle of works?" That is to say: If I try to work my way in obedience to God's law, if I try to work my way into his favor, is boasting excluded on that principle? Now actually, the answer to that question is yes. That's what he's been saying. You try and work your way into God's favor by obedience to his law and you'll fall on your face. So, boasting is excluded if we try on the principle of our own works to be acceptable to God because none of us can accomplish it. But do you notice Paul says that's the wrong answer? That can't be right. Paul, you've just been arguing that if I tried to justify myself before God on the principle of works, I'll never be able to justify myself and my boasting will be silenced. I'll have nothing to boast in. Why isn't that the right answer? Well, he says, just hold on a minute. Wait a minute. Commercial break. Let me give you the answer. The answer is this: "Boasting is excluded on the principle of faith." Why? For this reason: that by its very nature faith is saying "nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling."

The principle of works in theory leaves room for boasting but the principle of faith theoretically and actually leaves no room for boasting because in its very nature, faith is not directed to anything I am or anything I do. Faith is exclusively directed to the doing and the dying and the rising and the reigning of the Lord Jesus Christ and for the Apostle Paul, that must have been just a glorious relief. The reason I don't need to struggle on with my superiority complex or my inferiority complex is because I trust in Jesus Christ and as I trust in Jesus Christ I, by that very act in principle, cease to boast in anything I am, anything I have done or fear anything I have failed to do because I'm resting on him. This is the great genius of the gospel, that God has devised a way in which the believer, the individual, is active in receiving and embracing the Lord Jesus Christ and at the same time contributes absolutely nothing to his or her salvation. That's an amazing thing. You understand that so long as you're looking in faith to Jesus Christ, boasting will be excluded. So long as you are thinking: There is some part of my relationship to God that depends on, is grounded in, the measure of my obedience, that's the moment I begin to say: Well, hmmm, not bad. Better than him. And that's the place where boasting sneaks back into the Christian life.

So, this message of Paul's is an amazing message. The genius of God in devising just this particular way of salvation is overwhelming. I want to say: God, how could you possibly have thought this up? It's absolutely astounding, that you've found a way of saving me in which I am totally, 100%, Sinclair Buchanan Ferguson, active in embracing Jesus Christ and saying, Jesus Christ, I trust in you. You're mine. I give myself to you. I want to live my life for you. And yet in

doing so, I do not contribute one single gram to my salvation because that very embracing of Jesus Christ is non-contributory in nature. That's absolutely stunning.

So, what becomes of boasting? It's excluded. By what principle is it excluded? It's excluded by the very principle of faith. The moment I begin to boast in anything but Jesus Christ and what Jesus Christ has done, that's the moment that my faith is diminished and I'm no longer looking to Jesus. And you see the marvelous fruit of this exclusion of boasting is that contrary to everything I've tried to do – I wonder if you're one of those people and you have been struggling all your life to have some significance and the moment you look to Jesus Christ you have all of the significance you'll ever need in this world and the world to come.

The third question: well then, is God the God of the Jews only? He doesn't need to stop on this. No, he says, don't be ridiculous. "He's the God of the Gentiles also. Yes, of the Gentiles also." There is only one God and he will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. Now, let me just give you a preview of how he's going to answer this later on. Here's the question: why couldn't they see this? Why couldn't Saul of Tarsus have seen this? When was Abraham justified? After he was circumcised? Because he was circumcised? Or before he was circumcised? Well, you know the answer: the answer is number three, isn't it? He was justified before he was circumcised. At the point of which Abraham was justified, there were neither Jews nor Gentiles, there was only this pagan man, Abram, and he was a total pagan and he lived in total paganism. That's part of the explanation for the rather crazy way he sometimes lived. He didn't know any better. He was a pagan brought into God's grace.

So, he's going to be able to say, and this is just a sneak preview: how could you possibly think that God is the God only of the Jews when this God who is the God of the Jews, is actually first of all, the God of Abraham? And God justified Abram before he was circumcised and hundreds of years before the law of Moses was given. It's amazing, isn't it? I just find this absolutely amazing except that I see it in myself and I see it in other people. I read my Bible and now that Paul's helped me I see it so absolutely clear. How could anybody not see that? Except we know the answer.

So, boasting is excluded. It's excluded in the principle of faith and that means that God is not just the God of the Jews, after all, the promise that was given to Abraham was that in his seed the nations of the world would be blessed. This would be a pretty empty church if that were not the case, wouldn't it?

And then his fourth question: but Paul, all of this is overthrowing the law. Your gospel is denying the teaching of the Old Testament. It's overthrowing the teaching of Moses. Well, however did you think that? he says. Because the reverse is the case. Rather than overthrow the law, we uphold the law.

Now, how is that the case? Let me just give you a couple of hints. It was true because of this: because so much in the law of Moses, sacrifice, the priesthood and tabernacle were very evidently just models, pictures, of what God was going to do in the future. Didn't we see that in

our studies the last few weeks in Hebrews? I mean, it's so plain in Hebrews. How could people not see this? That if God has promised to bring a once-and-for-all salvation, then any system where the priest needs to make a sacrifice on Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday and Friday and Saturday and Sunday and then start all over again, that's not taking anybody's sins away. And you see, even Old Testament believers could see that. That's why they looked forward to the great sacrifice that would come.

So he says: Rather than destroying the law, this gospel of Jesus Christ is what the law was pointing to. It was the children's pop-up picture book version of how God was going to save them in Jesus Christ. And he's going to tell us much later on in his letter that there's another important way in which the gospel doesn't destroy the law but actually upholds the law. You remember how he puts it in Romans 8:3-4, he says, "Listen, what the law could not do because it was weak, because of our sinful flesh, God has done sending his Son, Jesus Christ, in the likeness of the flesh of sin and for sin he condemned sin in the flesh in order that the requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit." That's one of the great differences in becoming a Christian: the law that recently crushed you to death is the law that you delight to obey in the power of the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, why is Paul so thrilled about this? For this simple reason: that he sees in this gospel that God has righteously, maintaining his own righteousness, God has righteously devised a way of justifying ungodly sinners. Doesn't that strike you as being absolutely amazing? That the righteous God has devised a righteous way of righteously justifying ungodly sinners. And what is that way? Well, it's the wonderful way of Jesus Christ.

"I will not boast in anything, No gifts, no power, no wisdom. But I will boast in Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection. Why should I gain from his reward? I cannot give an answer. But this I know with all my heart, His wounds have paid my ransom." You see, the moment you say that, pride and boasting is dissolved. It's just dissolved. And the moment pride and boasting is dissolved, another wonderful thing happens: all the coping mechanisms that you've built up to disguise what you are really like from other people, they begin to go and the amazing, amazing benediction of the gospel is that you can actually begin to become the true self the Lord Jesus Christ wants to make you and no matter what you accomplish — and you may accomplish much in his service and by his grace, no matter what lofty heights your life may touch, people will be very puzzled how you can remain so humble, so extraordinarily ordinary, so approachable, so real, no pretense, no hypocrisy and it's because you're Christ's.

Are you Christ's? Is he beginning to work this way in your life? The scales, the dragon scales, remember old Aslan tearing them off, tearing them off, tearing them off, tearing them off, tearing them off? You know, if there is no Christ in your life, that'll kill you because when he's finished tearing them off, there will be nothing left but if Christ is yours, it will be like the scaffolding of some great building being taken away and the tarpaulins being taken down and people standing back and saying: Wow! That's what he was doing in the midst of it all.

O, what happy people you and I would be together in this safe haven if boasting was excluded and Christ was magnified. That's all that matters, isn't it? I can see it in your faces. It's one of the treats of being a minister, you can see only one face but I can see hundreds and I see it and he sees it and in his eyes, it is the most beautiful thing in all the world thus to live.

CLOSING PRAYER:

Heavenly Father, O my, what sinners we are and how strangely we err and stumble and fail and yet you come and you pick us up and you dust us down and you make us over. You work in our hearts and you embrace us. Lord, as we come to the end of this Lord's day, this is our chief desire, this will be our satisfaction, with this we can put our heads on the pillow and rest like sweet spirited babies if you will just be all-in-all to us and we desire to be all-in-all to you. Make it so and multiply it among us that we may see it with our own eyes by your grace. In Jesus, our Savior's name, we pray. Amen.