

An Exegesis on Romans 1-8

As the Apostle to the Gentiles, Paul wrote his letters in a very specific context. He sought to demonstrate how Christianity could be in continuity with Judaism yet explain why gentiles did not have to observe the mosaic law. Hence, all his writings throughout Romans and Galatians are written in the context of how the new covenant is now open to Gentiles, and not exclusively to Jews.

In Romans, Paul is not making an absolute distinction between grace and free will, or between faith given by God and human action. *The consensus among biblical scholars is that Paul's phrase "works of the law" is not synonymous with free will, but rather this phrase indicates the means by which Jews maintained a national, ethnic, and religious distinction from gentiles.* Paul is trying to show that the new covenant community, the new "people of God," is made up of people who share a common faith in Jesus, rather than a national race of people who share external characteristics (circumcision, Sabbath-keeping, etc). In this way, our Christian identity is centered in faith in Christ rather than in "works of the law".

Consider the passage often cited in support of sola fide (salvation by faith alone):

"What occasion is there then for boasting? It is ruled out. On what principle, that of works? No, rather on the principle of faith." (Rom 3:27).

Paul continues on...

"For we consider that a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

So "works", in 3:27, is referring to "works of the law". Paul continues...

"Does God belong to Jews alone? Does he not belong to Gentiles too? Yes, also to Gentiles, for God is one and will justify the circumcised on the basis of faith and the uncircumcised through faith. Are we then annulling the law by this faith? On the contrary, we are supporting the law" (Rom 3:28-31).

Why does Paul follow his statement that salvation is by faith with an exegesis on the unity of Jews and Gentiles? It is because he is not talking about a false distinction between faith and free will, i.e. between faith and works as if human effort plays absolutely no role in salvation. *He is addressing a specific situation occurring in the early Church in which Jewish converts thought that their justification came through being Jewish, their national identity, signified by "works of the law", rather than through Christ.* This belief is false--our identity as Christians and our salvation does not come from being Jewish, or circumcised, or other "works of the law", but rather from faith in Christ. This is the issue Paul is addressing, not the relationship between faith and free will.

Paul goes on in chapter 4 to discuss Abraham's faith. The point Paul makes is that Abraham was justified before there even was a mosaic law! It was not Abraham's national identity as a Jew (his

“jewishness”, if you will) that made him a child of God, but rather his faith in God. We know for a fact that Paul isn't making a distinction between faith and works (free will) here because James specifically says that Abraham was justified because he ACTED on his faith (i.e., works). An interpretation that seeks to separate faith from free will contradicts James chapter 2. Interpreting this passage to mean that our salvation comes from faith apart from our free will is also contradicted by Rom 2:13 which states,

"For it is not those who hear the law who are just in the sight of God; rather, those who observe the law will be justified."

We can easily see here what Paul is referring to—Jews who thought that they were justified and were God's people because they "had the law". Paul tells them no--it's not your Jewish identity that saves you, rather God's covenant family is open to all people, regardless of race or national identity, through a common faith in Christ. Paul continues...

"For when the Gentiles who do not have the law by nature observe the prescriptions of the law, they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the law. They show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even defend them on the day when, according to my gospel, *God will judge people's hidden works through Christ Jesus.*" (Rom 2:14-16).

Paul continues with this argument in Rom 2:17-23, where he points out that Jews are not justified just because they have the law. Paul highlights the fact that even though Jews have the law, they don't keep the law, and therefore they are just as guilty as Gentiles are of sin! But this part of the argument follows with:

"Again, if an uncircumcised man keeps the precepts of the law, will he not be considered circumcised?" (Rom 2:26).

Paul continues to make the point *that it is not these physical identification marks that establish our righteousness, but rather the inward state of our heart* (Rom 2:27-29).

Again, this is the guiding interpretation of what Paul is saying throughout Romans and Galatians--it is not being Jewish and possessing the mosaic law that justifies us--it is the inward state of our heart through Christ, both Jew and Gentile.

If being a Jew doesn't matter, then what benefit was it to be Jewish at all? Paul answers this question in 3:1-4. He then goes on to establish the universality of sin in 3:10-20. The context of Isaiah's words that Paul references relates to the unfaithfulness of Israel to its covenant. Much like someone giving a funeral eulogy might say "He always had a smile on his face," Isaiah moans that there is no one who seeks God, everyone has gone astray. His hyperbole and invective are directed at the Jewish nation's

unfaithfulness to its covenant and is not a theological discourse on the nature of the human soul or an attack on free will. Paul is not addressing whether people are completely evil or free to make good choices, *he is establishing the fact that all people are imperfect and guilty of sin*. Since we are all guilty of sin, keeping the law won't help our plight since we have all broken it already!

"...since no human being will be justified in his sight by observing the law; for through the law comes consciousness of sin." (3:20)

Paul obviously can't mean that we shouldn't strive to keep God's moral law, because in chapter 2 he just finished writing that

"...it is not those who hear the law who are just in the sight of God; rather, those who observe the law will be justified".

Paul's point is made clear by 3:21-26. Bear with me here—this passage is difficult but I'll explain it.

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law and the prophets, though testified to by the law and prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction; all have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God. They are justified freely by His grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as an expiation, through faith, by His blood, to prove his righteousness because of the forgiveness of sins previously committed, through the forbearance of God--to prove his righteousness in the present time, that he might be righteous and justify the one who has faith in Jesus."

These verses provide a clear statement of Paul's gospel--God has found a means of rescuing humanity from its desperate plight: Paul's general term for this divine initiative is "the righteousness of God" (3:21). God's divine mercy declares the guilty innocent and makes them so. God does this not as a result of the law but apart from it (3:21), and not because of any merit in human beings but through forgiveness of their sins, freely given, in virtue of the redemption wrought in Christ (3:22-25). God has manifested his righteousness in the coming of Christ Jesus, whose saving activity begins a new era in salvation history.

Now, here is the same thing stated in layman's terms: Paul is not saying that men are 100% evil, incapable of using their free will, and must be elected by God's grace which makes us immune from having to keep God's moral law (Calvinism), RATHER *he is saying that we are all guilty of sin and are incapable on our own of keeping God's commandments perfectly--but instead of condemning us in*

accordance with divine justice, God has freely chosen to die for us and forgive our sins—not according to our own merit but because He loves us.

Paul's very technical exposition here is not aimed at separating faith in Christ from human responsibility and action, or at saying that salvation is by what we intellectually believe apart from how we freely choose to live and behave. The bulk of the Scriptures condemn this false interpretation (Mt 5:19, Mt 7:21, Lk 18:18, Jn 5:29, Rm 2:5, 2:10, 2:13, 2 Cor 5:10, Gal 6:7, Heb 5:9, James 2:14, 1 Pet 2:17, Rev 2:12). Paul is saying that 1) God's free love and forgiveness to us through Christ is not because we have kept His commandments perfectly or because of our own merit (rom 3:21-25), so we cannot boast, and 2) it is not "works of the law", i.e., a Jewish national identity that is required for salvation (3:27-30). Salvation is not just for the Jews, but is meant to be open to all mankind, and it is the result of God's free love and forgiveness. This is the guiding principle of all of Paul's theology.

Paul continues with an exposition of the law in chapters 5-7. *His contention is that original sin (he doesn't use this term, but it is implied in chapter 5) has made it impossible for men to keep God's law perfectly, so we are deserving of death and condemnation, but God has freely and graciously chosen to forgive our sins through Christ (5:15-21).* Paul's soteriology here is concerned with an overarching view of salvation history. The technical theological term for this is REDEMPTION. Redemption is God's free work in justifying us from a broad view of salvation history. Redemption must not be confused with SALVATION--salvation is how God's forgiveness and mercy is applied to our own souls. Loosely speaking, redemption is the big picture of God's work in Christ *for mankind* while salvation is the little picture of God's work in *my own soul*. Everyone has been redeemed by Christ's saving death, but not everyone will be saved. *Salvation requires our free response to God's love and free offer of forgiveness.*

Romans gets even more confusing due to the fact that Paul uses the Greek word "law" in several different ways. He is fond of wordplay using the word "law", which in Greek can also mean "principle" or "custom". For example, the moral "law" of God gives rise to a "law of sin and death", i.e., a principle whereby people can't keep the law perfectly and are thus subject to judgment and punishment.

So when Paul says that "...you are not under the law but under grace" (rom 6:14-15), he can easily be confused as saying that we are no longer under God's moral law, which is contradicted by the words of our Lord in Mt 5:17-20; rather, he means we are no longer under a law of sin and death created by the old covenant, but under the "law of grace", or the principle of grace, by which we are freely forgiven by God instead of condemned. The "law" he describes in chapter 6 and the beginning of chapter 7 is not God's moral law, which he affirms as holy, righteous, and good in 7:12, but is rather the "law" of sin and death arising from our inability to fulfill God's moral law.

As Christians, we recognize that we are free from this law of sin and death because of God's gracious forgiveness through Christ, *but we are by no means free to sin and break God's moral law.* This is made clear by Mt 5:17-20 and by the bulk of our Lord's teachings, which deal mainly with how we should live, treat each other, and practice our faith. We are free from the law precisely in the sense that God's grace helps us to FULFILL God's law by changing us on the inside. I am free from the law "thou shalt not kill" because by God's grace I have no desire to kill. But I am not free to go kill people.

Finally: The apostolic Church had to deal with a very specific situation in which Jewish converts clung stubbornly to their mosaic law and Jewish heritage, and acted as elitists over their Greek brothers and sisters, relying on external characteristics to perpetuate their Jewish identity as the People of God. The Church also had to deal with the theological dilemma of how Christianity could be continuous with Judaism yet not impose the mosaic law on gentiles. Paul's letters must be read in this context. It is easy to see how Paul can be misinterpreted to say that salvation is by faith alone, apart from works, and that therefore our free will or how we choose to live and act has no bearing on our salvation. But Paul is not making this distinction, and it is not harmonious with the rest of the Bible. Paul is instead explaining how the Church in this particular context should be united by their faith in Christ rather than be divided as Jews and Gentiles, separated by "works of the law," their national identity.

It is unfortunate that Luther constructed an entire systematic theology around a misreading of Paul. But it is understandable; Luther didn't live during Paul's time period, and Paul's writings are admittedly hard to interpret. Luther's own religious experience and chronic inability as a young monk to trust in God's love and mercy also help explain why he formulated this theology—a theology that attempts to grant peace of mind and reassurance at the expense of the reality that how we live and behave really matters and will, in fact, be judged by our Lord. The result is a basic denial in classical protestant theology of free will and the fundamental necessity of living a good life—so much so that some actually believe that we will be judged more according to a single act of faith (going up for the altar call) than on how we have chosen to live our lives.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory. . .he will separate the sheep from the goats. . .and will say, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom. . .for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me’” – Mt 25:31

“Behold, I am coming soon. I bring with me the recompense I will give to each according to his works” – Rev 2:12