

Romans 3:27-31
(Jeremiah 9:23-24; John 13:12-17)
“Then What Becomes of Our Boasting?”

Introduction

Last week we looked at what some have called the most important words ever written, because in them the apostle Paul explains why the gospel of Jesus Christ is the end of religion and the beginning of the only fully and truly human life that can be lived – life lived as God intended, not as mere animals pursuing our passions and desires, but rather as created in God’s image for intimate friendship with him and reconciled relationships with one another. He did that by explaining two problems, God’s problem and ours, and by describing God’s solution to both our problems.

Paul summarized our problem in verse 23: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” God’s solution is the cross of Christ: Jesus died for us, and Paul described in two crucially important words how the cross saves: “Justification,” by which we are not merely forgiven or pardoned, but are actually declared righteous by God; and “redemption,” by which we, who are born and live our lives apart from grace in bondage to sin and death, have been bought out of bondage and set free to live as God’s children, unafraid of whatever may come in life and in death.

God’s problem is how he can justify sinners and still be just, when he has promised to punish and never acquit the wicked. How can those suffering injustice and cruelty hope that God will one day judge the wicked and answer the cry of the oppressed if he declares the guilty to be righteous and lets them go free? The answer to God’s problem is also the cross of Christ: Jesus died for God. The word Paul used to describe this is “propitiation,” a perfect sacrifice for sin that satisfied the demands of justice, so that God’s wrath might be turned aside. Thus God could justify the unjust – who through faith are in union with Christ and thus have died and risen to new life in him – without violating God’s own just character.

In chapter four, Paul will prove that this gospel of salvation by grace through faith is not something new, but is in fact the way that God has always saved his people, as demonstrated in the lives of the patriarch Abraham and Israel’s King David. But before Paul does that, he wants to make certain that we don’t misunderstand what he has been saying thus far and in doing so, presume to be saved by the gospel of Christ when in fact we may still be far from grace, having simply replaced a law religion with a grace religion, but still as proud as ever in our religious activities, and happier than ever because now we think of grace as having set us free from God’s law in a way that excuses selfishness and sin.

Let God’s Word search you this morning as Paul gives us a twofold warning: of the gravest danger to our inner life of the spirit, and of the gravest danger to the life we live in the world.

Body

1. Paul warns us of the gravest danger to our inner life of the spirit: Salvation by grace through faith excludes a proud spirit (3:27-30).

If you are proud of being a Christian, proud that you study the Bible and have a prayer life, proud that you give to the work of God, proud that you are living a moral life in the midst of an immoral culture, proud that your marriage is strong, that your children are thriving, that your life is successful, then you don't yet understand the gospel.

When we begin to understand the gospel of grace, we suddenly realize the vanity of all the things that once caused us such pride, the good things as well as the bad. We should always be deeply grateful for such things, but must never place our confidence or our sense of worth in these good gifts of God. Enjoy them, yes, thank God for them. But if they are a source of pride, of feeling good about your self, then beware. Paul here mentions the two main forms that false pride takes: pride in what we do, and pride in who we are.

- The gospel abolishes any ground for pride in what we do, because all have sinned.
- The gospel abolishes any ground for pride in who we are, because all are sinners.

2. Paul also warns us of the gravest danger to our life in the world: Salvation by grace through faith upholds God's law (3:31).

If you think that, since you are saved by grace through faith and not by works of the law, you now have a license to sin, you do not yet understand the gospel. Rather than freeing us to sin with impunity, the gospel calls us to true holiness and provides us with the incentive, the opportunity and the power for pursuing true holiness. After all, Jesus Christ upheld the law in his own life by perfectly keeping it, and so by being able to offer himself in our place as a perfect sacrifice for sin.

The heart of holiness is love. The summary of God's law is this: love the Lord with all your being and love your neighbor as you love yourself. It is not rule keeping or rule breaking, but lovingly pouring out your life for others.

- The gospel upholds the law by freeing us to keep it, because in Christ's cross we have died to sin and sin no longer has dominion over us.
- The gospel upholds the law by empowering us to keep it, because in Christ we have been given Christ's own Spirit.

Conclusion

Have you begun to grasp something of the extraordinary riches of God's grace declared and displayed in the gospel of Christ? Do you see that everything rests upon the cross of Christ? At the foot of the cross there is no place for boasting, no place for pride, no place for thinking well of ourselves. As long as we live, we must say with the apostle, "I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh" (7:18). I have "sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23), and my only hope is of being "justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (3:24). Has God's way of salvation yet gripped your heart and called you out of the old ways, the ways of rebellion, the ways of religion, the ways of self-salvation?

Do you now love the law of God because the life and death and victory of Christ have upheld it, established it, shown its perfection, and set it as the way of life for those who are in Christ, as a picture of the life of love for God and for others? Until the Spirit has done such a work in your heart, you will either think that you are a law-keeper and so suffer the death of spiritual pride, or you will know that you are not a law-keeper and so will resent the law, and hope that salvation by grace means that you can do what you want and ask God every night to forgive you, and so suffer the death of continuing to live the life of the flesh.

God has saved you for something so grand and glorious that once you've been born again, you are at once humbled to the dust because of your sin, and lifted up to the heavens because of God's mercy and grace toward you in Christ. If you have known his love and grace, then you will desire for others to know them as well, and as you give yourself in love, you will know the joy and wonder of intimate friendship with the living God, who made you and saved you for this.

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