

POTOMAC HILLS COMMUNITY CHURCH

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“The Grace of God in the Gospel”

A Series on Romans

Romans 3:27-31, “The Remedy of the Gospel”

INTRODUCTION: “Saving Yourself”¹

Pretty much everyone here uses computers on a regular basis.

And there’s something I really can’t stand about computers.

What I can’t stand about computers is that they do what I say and not what I mean.

Example: I want to correct one letter but inadvertently hit the button that removes the entire word. “That’s not what I meant,” I mumble to the one-eyed monster, and then I have to correct my mistake.

Now I know I shouldn’t be so hard on the computer, after all, it’s just a machine ... a tool that I use. It apparently is unable to read my mind ... though considering what it cost; it should at least keep me from making mistakes. However, a computer doesn’t really think. A computer computes. It doesn’t often question what I’m writing. It doesn’t smile, shake its monitor, and say, “Look, I know what you’re trying to do. You really don’t want to be hitting the delete key, removing the very letters you want to keep, but since you and I are such good friends, and you leave me plugged in, I’m going to give you what you need and not what you ask for.”

But computers don’t do that!

Computers are legalists! Computers are impersonal pragmatists.

Push a button – get a response. Learn the system – get the printout.

Blow the system – stay up all night.

Computers are heartless creatures. Don’t expect any compassion from your laptop. They don’t call it a hard disk for nothing.

Some folks have a computer theology when it comes to understanding God. God is the ultimate desktop. The Bible is the cd-rom, the Holy Spirit is the operating system, and Jesus is technical support. Computerized Christianity!

Push the right buttons, enter the right code, insert the right data, and presto – print out your own salvation!

It’s professional religion.

You do your part and the Divine Computer does his. No need to pray (after all, you control the keyboard). No emotional attachments necessary. And worship is a lab exercise – insert the rituals and see the results.

Computerized Christianity. No kneeling. No weeping. No gratitude. No emotion. It’s great ... unless you make a mistake.

Unless you screw up.

Unless you enter the wrong data and forget to save the document.

¹ The introduction is adapted from And the Angels were Silent by Max Lucado, pages 103-108. Max has a weekly email devotional called “UpWords” which you can get at <http://maxlucado.com/newsletter>

Unless you're caught on the wrong side of a power surge.
 And then ... well, tough luck, buddy, you're on your own.
 Religion by computer. That's what happens when ...

You replace the living God with a cold system;
 You replace the love of God with a hard and fast budget;
 You replace the sacrifice of Christ with the achievements of man.

When you view God as a computer and the Christian as a number-crunching spreadsheet, or a cursor-commanding document, or a button-pushing programmer ... then you have religion by the computer.

God hates it.

It crushes His people. It contaminates His leaders. It corrupts His children.

How do I know? Jesus said so. In Matthew 23 Jesus blows holes through the hot air of the Pharisees. His sermon there is a permanent proclamation against salvation by a system ... any system. Thirty-six verses of fire were summarized with one question: ***"How are you going to escape God's judgment?"***

Perhaps another simple question will help clarify the point.

How **IS** a person made right with God?

Simple question. Yet don't let its simplicity fool you. How you answer it is critical; it reflects the nature of your faith.

A person is made right with God through ...

Being good. A person is made right with God through plain old goodness. Pay your taxes. Give sandwiches to the poor. Don't drive too fast or drink too much or drink at all. Christian conduct — that's the secret.

Suffering. There's the answer. That's how to be made right with God — suffer. Sleep on dirt floors. Walk through dark jungles. Malaria. Poverty. Cold days, long nights. Vows of chastity. Shaved heads, bare feet. The greater the pain, the greater the saint.

No, no, no. The way to be made right with God is through ...

Doctrine. Dead-center interpretation of the truth. Air-tight theology which explains every mystery. The Millennium simplified ... and put on a easy-to-read chart. Inspiration clarified. The role of women defined once and for all. God has to save us — we know more than He does.

How are we made right with God?

All of the above are tried. All are taught. All are demonstrated.

But none are from God.

In fact, that's the problem. None are from God. All are from people.

Think about it. Who is the major force in these examples? Man or God?

Who does the saving, you or him?

If we are saved by good works, we don't need God — weekly reminders of the do's and don'ts will get us to heaven. If we're saved by suffering, we sure don't need God. All we need is a whip and a chain and the gospel of guilt. If we are saved by doctrine then, for heaven's sake, let's study! We don't need God, we need a lexicon. Weigh the issues. Explore the options. Decipher the truth.

But be careful there, Presbyterian scholar. For if you are saved by having exact doctrine, then **one mistake** would be fatal. That goes for those who believe we're made right with God through good deeds. I hope the temptation is never greater than the strength. If it is, a bad fall

could be a bad omen. And those who think we're saved by suffering, take caution too, for you never know how **much** suffering is required.

Those who are trying to save themselves promote themselves.

Those saved by works display works.

Those saved by suffering unveil scars.

Those saved by emotion flash their feelings.

And those saved by doctrine—you got it.

They wear their doctrine on their sleeves.

A person is made right with God through what? Fill in the blank.

Ironically, it was a Pharisee who first wrote that line. Or, at least he used to be a Pharisee. He got his training in front of a theological terminal. He was an up-and-coming religious technician. He could answer the pickiest questions and solve the difficult problems.

But the big question, Jesus' question, he couldn't answer.

“How are you going to escape God's judgment?”

I wonder if he was present the day Jesus asked it?

If he was, he had no answer. No legalist does. The man who would save himself says nothing in God's presence. All of a sudden, our best efforts are pitifully puny. Do you dare stand before God and ask Him to save you because of **your** suffering or **your** sacrifice or **your** tears or **your** study?

Not me. And neither did the Apostle Paul. It took him years to discover what he wrote in only one sentence, *“So we are made right with God **through faith** and not by obeying the law.”*

Not through good works, suffering, or study. All those may be the result of salvation ... but they are not the cause of it.

“How are you going to escape God's judgment?”

Only one way.

Through faith in God's sacrifice.

It's not what you do, it's what He did.

Not sure about that? Then turn with me to this morning's passage ...

I'll be using both the New Living Translation and the English Standard Version today. I'm going to read first from the New Living, a meaning for meaning translation, and then later, as we go through the passage, I'll be reading from the English Standard, a word for word translation.

Romans 3:27-31, *“Can we boast, then, that we have done anything to be accepted by God? No, because our acquittal is not based on our good deeds. It is based on our faith. [28] So we are made right with God through faith and not by obeying the law. [29] After all, God is not the God of the Jews only, is He? Isn't He also the God of the Gentiles? Of course He is. [30] There is only one God, and there is only one way of being accepted by Him. He makes people right with Himself only by faith, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. [31] Well then, if we emphasize faith, does this mean that we can forget about the law? Of course not! In fact, only when we have faith do we truly fulfill the law.”* (NLT)

As we saw last week, God has demonstrated through Jesus' death that His hatred of man's evil is as real as His forgiveness of man's sin. God did not spare His Son one iota of the wrath we deserve. The only way God could save us consistent with His own justice was the way He did — and it cost Him everything!

We are loved! This is so amazing that perhaps we should lie flat on our faces, struck dumb before God — or perhaps on our backs laughing. So phenomenal is His love that both responses would be proper.

It is good to often reflect on this miracle of justification. First, the miracle was made possible because a special radical righteousness exists apart from the Law. This should be an encouragement to us because in our radical corruption we could never become acceptable to God. Next, the miracle comes through faith, not works. Lastly, the miracle of justification is possible because of the genius of God who made His Son a mercy seat, receiving our just judgment and giving us life. There is a double transfer — all that we are and have done becomes Christ's, and all that He is and has done becomes ours. **2 Corinthians 5:21** tells us, *"For our sake He [God the Father] made Him [God the Son] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him [Christ] we might become the righteousness of God."*

What does this radical righteousness mean practically?

After Paul tells us the solution of forgiveness of sins and salvation in Christ alone, by Grace alone, through faith alone, he goes on to give us some examples of how this grace is applied to us and who this grace is applied to.

And he does it in a question and answer format in verses 27 to 31.

And so we begin with ...

v. 27-28: QUESTION 1: CAN WE BOAST?²

And the simple answer is no! There is to be no boasting.

Romans 3:27-28, *"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. [28] For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."* (ESV)

Paul begins with a question, *"Then what becomes of our boasting?"*

In other words, if men are justified by faith alone, who gets the credit for your salvation? This is a crucial question, because it focuses attention on the Prime Mover in salvation. Does salvation begin with man, or does it begin with God? The answer is clear. It begins with God alone. If salvation is truly a work of God's grace, then it must of necessity begin with Him.

Jonah 2:9, *"... Salvation belongs to the Lord!"*

Revelation 7:10, *"Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"*

Why is this important? If salvation begins with man, then he has something to boast about. He can say, "I had a hand in my own salvation. I went to church, I kept the rules, I played the game, I lived by a strict moral code. God did His part, but I did my part, and together we made sure I was going to heaven."

But it doesn't work that way. When you get to heaven, you'll discover the truth of that old gospel hymn — "Jesus paid it all, all to Him I owe." We'll owe Him everything for our salvation; He will owe us ... nothing.

I like the way J.B. Phillips paraphrases these two verses, *"What happens now to human achievement? There is no more room for it. Why? Because failure to keep the law has killed it? Not at all, but because the whole matter is now on a different plane — believing instead of achieving."*

That's a nice way of saying it: **"Believing instead of achieving."**

² The exposition of the text is adapted from an old message of mine, "Grace Is For All Of Us," 1/19/97; the message, "God Plays No Favorites," by Ray Pritchard, 4/5/92; and Preaching the Word: Romans by Kent Hughes, pages 85-87.

He's right. That's exactly what Paul is saying. Because of Jesus Christ, our salvation has been lifted to an entirely new plane. No longer do we have to achieve anything. We simply have to believe that Jesus has achieved salvation for us. When we believe that He achieved, we are saved.

Let's imagine that there are two chairs in the middle of an empty room. One chair is labeled "Do" and the other chair is labeled "Done." Those two chairs represent the two kinds of religion in the world. Every religion is either a "Do" religion or a "Done" religion.

The "Do" religions are based on the notion that in order to please God you have to do something: Pray, join a church, give money, be good, keep a list of do's and don'ts, go to confession, offer a sacrifice, make a pilgrimage, wear certain clothing, go to the temple twice a year, follow the Ten Commandments, and so on. Although these religions may seem to be very different on the outside, they all teach that salvation is "**earned**" by the things you do. In various degrees, and in various ways, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism are all "Do" religions. So is Mormonism. So is the Jehovah's Witnesses.

In fact, every religion in the world is a "Do" religion, except one.

Christianity is a "Done" religion.

Why is Christianity a "Done" religion?

Because Jesus Christ did everything necessary for our salvation when He died on the cross. Nothing more needs to be added; nothing more could be added. His death is fully sufficient for the sins of the entire world.

How are we made right with God?

"How can I be saved?"

You can go the route of the "Do" religion, which sounds like this, "'Do this and live.'" "Try harder and you'll make it." "Work to gain it." "It's earned."

Or you can go to the "Done" religion, which sounds like this, "It is finished."

"Stop trying and start trusting." "It's free for the asking." "It's a gift."

Now let me ask you one simple question: Where are you sitting right now? Are you sitting in the "Do" chair or on the "Done" chair? Everyone in the world is sitting in one of those two chairs. Either you are trying to save yourself by your own good works or you are trusting in Christ alone. It's either "Do" or "Done."

When Martin Luther translated Romans 3:28 he was roundly criticized for adding the word "alone" to the text, "*For we hold that one is justified by faith **alone** apart from works of the law.*"

But Martin Luther was right. That's exactly what Paul meant. Salvation is by faith **alone**, wholly apart from human works of any kind.

Why is that important?

It eliminates human pride.

It makes salvation available to anyone who believes.

The Living Bible puts verse 28 this way, "*So it is that we are saved by faith in Christ and not by the good things we do.*" Thank God that's true. Salvation comes by simple faith in Jesus — plus nothing ... minus nothing. Those who transfer their trust to the Son of God are saved immediately and forever.

So when it comes to salvation, boasting is unthinkable. Everything is of God. This is a call for humility, and humility paves the way for the infinite grace of God to flood our bankrupt hearts and bring us life. This is where all who are without Christ must begin. They must put

down their pride and boasting and come with empty hands that they might receive this radical righteousness of Christ.

That's the first implication of justification by faith.

And the second is a logical follow-up to the first ...

v. 29-30: QUESTION 2: CAN WE TRUST?

What else does this righteousness through faith mean?

It means we are all on equal footing.

Romans 3:29-30, *“Or is God the God of Jews only? Is He not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, [30] since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.”* (ESV)

Paul's logic here is flawless. Since there is only one God (This was the moral heart of Judaism. Even his most implacable opponents would agree with this.), there can be only one way of salvation.

Here is a tremendous truth to ponder. One God ... one way of salvation. Don't let anyone tell you that God has two ways of salvation. Salvation has always been by grace through faith. It is never through works. No one has ever been saved by good works; no one will ever be saved that way.

It's faith alone—first, last and always.

God doesn't have children who come into His family in different ways — everyone comes by faith. No one comes by works. That means everyone stands on an equal basis with God in the area of salvation. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. Everyone must come the same way—Jew, Gentile, American, Asian, German, Ethiopian, Pakistani, Bolivian.

That means that Christianity is the only true world religion. It is a universal religion — suited for all people everywhere in every situation. No culture or country is excluded. Since salvation is by faith, anyone can believe and be saved. The God we serve has a heart as big as the entire world. He's not a Jewish God or an American God. He's a God for the whole human race.

It doesn't matter what color your skin is, or what language you speak, or what country you come from, or how you dress or wear your hair. There are no racial or cultural distinctions in the matter of salvation. Since salvation is by faith alone, anyone can be saved. Since there is only one God, salvation is the same for everyone. When we get to heaven some of us will be surprised at who we see there. And some of them will be surprised when they see us!

Now we come to the third question ...

v. 31: QUESTION 3: CAN WE OBEY?³

Romans 3:31, *“Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.”* (ESV)

Here's the connection. If salvation is by faith and not by keeping the law, does that not make the law null and void? Or in other words, why bother with the Ten Commandments?

"God forbid!" is Paul's energetic reply. Nothing in his teaching is meant to say that the law has no value. It has enormous value ... but not as a means of salvation. You aren't saved by keeping the Ten Commandments, but that doesn't mean you can forget about them and live any way you like.

So what does Paul mean when he says that his teaching "upholds" the law?

³ Warren Wiersbe quote comes from his commentary, The Bible Exposition Commentary, Volume 1, page 524.

He means that his doctrine puts the law of God in its proper place. When all things are seen correctly, the law is fully established and honored . . . but not as a means of salvation.

The Living Bible says, *"If we are saved by faith, does that mean we no longer need to obey God's laws? Just the opposite! In fact, only when we trust Jesus can we truly obey Him."*

That paraphrase hints at one part of the answer.

Justification by faith upholds the law in at least four ways . . .

1. **The law shows us our sin.** Without God's law, we would go our own merry way, never knowing what God demands of us. We wouldn't know how to live, what moral code to follow, or how to please the Lord on a daily basis. But the law shows us not only what God wants; it also shows us how far **short** we fall of meeting God's demands. Every time we break the law, our sinfulness is confirmed all over again.
2. **The law shows us our need for Christ.** Galatians 3:24 says the law is a schoolmaster who leads us to Christ by showing us we can never please God on our own. Every time we fail, we are reminded that unless a supernatural change takes place within us, we will **always** fall short of what God wants from us.
3. **The law was fulfilled by Christ.** Only one Person has ever kept God's law perfectly. In His sinless life and in His sacrificial death Jesus fulfilled the righteous demands of the law on our behalf. When we trust Christ, His obedience is credited to our account. He did the obeying and we get the credit! We did the disobeying and He took the blame! That's the wonder of the gospel.
4. **The law is fulfilled in us by the power of the Spirit.** Paul will develop this point more fully in Romans 8. For the moment, let's simply note that when we trust Christ, the Holy Spirit comes to dwell within us, and it is by His indwelling power that we are supernaturally changed and enabled to please God day by day.

Warren Wiersbe sums up the basic message of this passage in a wonderfully clear statement, "If salvation is through the Law, then men can boast; but the principle of faith makes it impossible for men to boast. The swimmer, when he is saved from drowning, does not brag because he trusted the lifeguard. What else could he do? When a believing sinner is justified by faith, he cannot boast of his faith, but he can boast in a wonderful Savior."

Here is the gospel message in three sentences:

What God demands, we don't have.

What we don't have, Jesus has provided.

What Jesus has provided, we receive by faith.

That leads us to a summary statement . . .

God has designed salvation so that He alone gets the glory!

What would heaven be like if you had to earn your way there? It would be like going to one of those \$100-per-plate political dinners where people stand around bragging about how much they gave to help their man win the election. "I gave \$5,000." "So what? I gave \$10,000." "Big deal. I gave \$50,000." "I own this guy. He's got \$100,000 of my money." And so it goes.

Heaven would be just like that if you had to earn your way there. "I was an elder." "I made tapes for blind people." "I gave a million dollars to missions." "I helped old ladies across the street." "I changed dressings for burn victims."

As good as those things are, they will not help forgive even **one sin**.

As good as they are, they will not save you or help save you.

Wouldn't it be horrible to spend eternity listening to people brag about what they did to

earn their salvation? Heaven would be **Hell** in that case. Someone would put his arm around Jesus and say, "You and me, Jesus, we did it. You died on the cross and I baked the cookies."

Thank God it's not like that. When Jesus died on the cross, He paid the full price for your salvation. It doesn't matter whether you baked the cookies or not. Jesus paid the price by Himself. Entrance into heaven is limited to those who trust in Christ—**and Christ alone**—for salvation.

That's why God alone gets the glory in your salvation.

Jesus did all the work when He died on the cross.

CONCLUSION: *What do these people have in common?*⁴

Today, this text was about asking the right questions and getting the right answers. And so I want to end with a question as well.

It's a very simple question, really.

All you have to do is listen to a list that I'm going to read.

Then, after you've heard the list, tell me what special thing the members of the list have in common. Ready? Here we go: Actresses Hope Lange, Penny Singleton, Katherine Hepburn, and Nell Carter. Actors Art Carney, Fred Berry, Donald O'Connor, Charles Bronson, Gregory Hines, Buddy Ebsen, Buddy Hackett, Hume Cronyn, Gregory Peck, Robert Stack, Michael Jeter, Richard Crenna.

What? Did I hear someone say, "These are all people who were in show business?" Well that's true, but it's not the answer I'm looking for.

What do the people on the list have in common?

I'll keep reading...

Doctor Robert Atkins. Athletes Willie Shoemaker, Althea Gibson. Dictator Idi Amin, Senator Strom Thurmond. What do these people have in common? Singers Robert Palmer, Gisele MacKenzie, Barry White, Johnny Paycheck, Maurice Gibb. Do you think you've got it figured out? Some of you do.

Let me finish my reading of the list. Reporter David Brinkley. Cartoonists Bill Mauldin, Al Hirschfeld. Musician Herbie Mann. Writers George Plimpton, Leon Uris and last, but certainly not least, genuine good guy ... Fred Rogers.

So what do all of these names have in common? If you came to the conclusion, "They're all **dead**," you'd be on the right track. If you said, "These are all people who died last year, in 2003," you'd be getting warmer. The answer I'm looking for is, "These are all people who died in 2003 and have appeared before their Lord who judged them. I would also accept, "These are people who have been judged and are, right now, either in heaven or in hell."

A long time ago, Jesus asked this question, "***How are you going to escape God's judgment?***"

Only one way. And in Romans 3, the Apostle Paul gave us the answer, "***we are made right with God through faith.***"

And the focus of that faith is **God**, not us.

It is **God** who makes us right.

It is **God** who redeems us.

It is **God** who heals us.

It is **God** who is faithful.

⁴ The conclusion is adapted from the message, "*This Is What You Should Do*," by Ken Klaus, Lutheran Hour Ministries, 10/24/04.

We are merely to trust in **God's** faithfulness to us, demonstrated once for all in the life, death, and resurrection of the **Lord Jesus Christ**.
And all who believe it said, "Amen."