

Romans 3:20-31

The Nature of the Gospel - #2

Last Sunday we began a study from the verses we've read in which I made the statement that no other portion of Scripture contains so condensed but at the same time so comprehensive a statement of the gospel. You could say that in the space of these last 12 verses in Romans 3 you have the message of the entire Bible encapsulated. It would be a monumental task to memorize the entire Bible – but it wouldn't be such a monumental task to memorize these twelve verses. And in so doing you'll have tucked away in your mind and heart a ready index to just about every heading you could think of in terms of gospel doctrine.

Let me list a few of those headings for you. In these verses you find:

- The sinfulness of man – v. 23
- The righteousness of God vv. 21,22,26
- The forbearance of God – v. 25
- Salvation by grace – vv. 22,25
- Justification by faith – v. 24,28
- Redemption – v. 24
- Christ's atonement – v. 25
- The true people of God – vv. 29,30
- Sanctification – v. 31

Under these doctrinal headings I've borrowed the analysis of Charles Hodge and included a point of my own to come up with:

1. The Need for the Gospel
2. The Nature of the Gospel
3. The Ground upon which the Gospel is based
4. The Ultimate Purpose which the Gospel Serves
5. The Results that the Gospel Accomplishes

Last week we considered the need for the gospel. You may recall that I pointed out that the need of the gospel is traceable to the universal sinfulness of man. All men are sinners. All men are completely sinful. There are no exceptions and sinful man is without excuse. He'll stand condemned before God based on what he knows. He may not know the gospel – he may not know the 10 commandments as we find them in the Bible. He may not have ever heard the gospel.

He will not be judged by what he's never heard – but he will be judged nonetheless. He'll be judged by the law of right and wrong that is stamped on his heart. He has broken the law of his conscience. He knows enough to be condemned – but he doesn't know enough to be saved. He must learn the gospel in order to be saved. This is why we must take the gospel to every creature.

I can remember a Bible professor dealing in one of my classes with the issue of *what about those who have never heard the gospel?* Can they be condemned? This professor made an interesting observation about that question. He said that if men could not be condemned who have never heard – then our desires and efforts would be better spent in making sure they never hear. Rather than taking the gospel to all the world we'd do better to hide the gospel from all the world that the world might not be condemned.

But in fact the world will be condemned, indeed is condemned already – not by a gospel they've never heard – but by the law that has been stamped on their hearts. If that's all they have then it's all they'll be judged by and it will be sufficient to bring forth their condemnation.

This morning, I would like to continue our analysis of the passage by considering Charles Hodge's first point which is:

The Nature of the Gospel

Hodge makes the remark – *As to it's nature the righteousness which is taught in this epistle is not attainable by works, but by faith.*

I like the way Hodge expresses this statement because it shows his awareness that the gospel is all about righteousness. We could say with regard to the nature of the gospel that the gospel is righteous.

Look at what vv. 21 & 22 say – *But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe.*

This is a very important point that needs to be stressed – the gospel is righteous. The gospel reveals righteousness. You remember the thesis statement for Romans found in 1:16 – Look at that and the following verse – *For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. 17 For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith.*

I say the point is important to emphasize because the notion has been put forth that in the gospel God is somehow lowering the standard of his righteousness. I can remember as a young Christian actually hearing the point made that God put forth the 10 commandments in order for men to be saved by obedience to those commandments. But when it became apparent that nobody would keep the 10 commandments then in His grace God lowered the standard to make salvation attainable.

He said in effect – since sinful men have failed to keep my commandments I will by grace lower that standard and require sinners to keep but one commandment – *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.* (Acts 16:31). Now it's absolutely true that

you must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved. But it's totally false to think that God has lowered His standard in order to save sinners.

Those who put forth such a notion only demonstrate that they don't understand the nature of the gospel – or the character of God. And I know I've pointed this out before but let me say it again that such a gospel – or should I say such a presentation of the gospel that gives the impression that God somehow lowers His standard in order to save sinners carries no credibility to the sinner's heart. In our last study I showed you from Romans 1:32 that sinners know the judgment of God. They know in their hearts that God will do what's right. They possess that intuitive knowledge.

And to suggest that God somehow lowers His standard of righteousness in order to save sinners goes against that intuitive knowledge that God must and will do right. So the first thing we must note with regard to the nature of the gospel is that the gospel is righteous in it's nature. It would have to be for Paul to say what he says in v. 26 – that the purpose of the gospel is *to declare, I say, at this time his righteousness.*

Now we'll have to come back to God's righteousness when we come to the heading – The Grounds upon which the Gospel is based. We'll see in due course that the gospel is based on the righteousness of God. For now all I want you to see is that God doesn't compromise His character in order to save sinners. He doesn't lower His standard.

How then does He save sinners? This brings us to our next point of consideration about the nature of the gospel – the gospel is a gospel of grace. Look at 3:24: *Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus* When we read the phrase *freely by his grace* – the thing that you must keep in mind is that the term *freely* means without any reference to your merit – or lack of merit God has devised a way for the sinner to be justified.

This same idea is expressed in v. 21 when we read – *But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets.* That phrase *without the law* – means without any reference to your failure and my failure to keep the law. Without any reference to your works God has devised a way to demonstrate His righteousness in the salvation of sinners.

The same idea is expressed in v. 28 as a conclusion Paul draws from the gospel – *Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.* And you take those occurrences of the phrase – *without the law* – v. 21 – *without the deeds of the law* – v. 28. And add to them the verse I just cited – v. 24 – *Being justified freely by his grace* – and you begin to understand that the nature of the gospel is such that you can be saved without any reference to your obedience – or more precisely your lack of obedience.

Your salvation has no reference to your works. That's the meaning of salvation by grace. And it's a good thing that it has no reference to our works because our works fail to measure up to what God demands. If, as Paul says in 3:10, *there is none righteous, no not one.* If as Paul says in v. 23 – *all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.* Then if

salvation is to be manifested at all then it must be manifested in a way that makes no reference to our demerit.

This is the same thing as saying that we don't deserve salvation. And when God justifies us freely by his grace – then we are gaining something from God that we don't deserve. Perhaps you've heard that simple illustration of a rich man approaching a down-and-out man on the street and offering him enough money to change his status from a down-and-out, to a rich tycoon. That tramp on the street will have done nothing to earn that gift. It's given to him freely.

The illustration doesn't quite paint the picture accurately, however. Imagine that rich man approaching the down-and-out man on the street and offering him this free gift of wealth – and then imagine the down-and-out man turning upon the rich man with scorn and contempt – perhaps spitting on him and cursing him to his face, despising him and maybe even becoming physically abusive of the rich man – until not only does he not deserve the gift that the rich man would offer him – but he deserves the rich man's anger on account of the contempt shown toward his generosity.

That picture begins to reflect the grace of God in salvation. It's not just a matter of our not deserving salvation – we in fact do deserve something from God – we deserve His condemnation. We deserve His righteous anger and wrath. But instead of that wrath He gives us His Son – to die in our place. You begin to see something of the nature of the gospel when we say salvation is by grace.

And then we go on to say, as the Bible says – that salvation is by grace through faith. If I could quote the statement from Charles Hodge again – *As to its nature the righteousness which is taught in this epistle is not attainable by works, but by faith.*

I never realized until I looked more closely at these verses just what an emphasis is placed on faith –

- v. 22 – *Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe.*
- v. 25 – *Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood.*
- v. 27 – *Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? Nay: but by the law of faith.*
- v. 28 – *Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law.*
- v. 30 – *Seeing it is one God, which shall justify the circumcision by faith, and uncircumcision through faith.*
- v. 31 – *Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law.*

You begin to see the importance of faith in the matter of salvation. The next chapter gives us a couple of Old Testament illustrations of what faith means. I like vv. 16-21 in particular which speak to us of an impossible promise given to Abraham – {4:16-21}.

Who against hope believed in hope (v. 18) – the promise, you see, was to given to Abraham that he would be the father of many nations at a time when he and his wife Sarah were beyond the child bearing years. How could he become the father of many nations when he and his wife were too old to bear children?

He didn't know – but he took God at His word. He believed the promise. That's what faith amounts to – believing the promise. And from that analogy we can ask with regard to ourselves – how can we as sinners be declared justified before God? How can we gain a home in heaven? How can we who have broken God's law escape hell and make it to heaven? We're faced with a situation that is just as impossible as a couple in their 90's bearing children. But like Abraham – we believe the promise. And the promise is that Christ will receive those who come to Him. The promise is that we shall be saved by believing in Him. *Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.*

Now it's very important when we deal with the nature of the gospel that we recognize faith to be the means to salvation and never the grounds for salvation. The failure to understand that distinction will land you in bondage. The Roman Catholic Church will teach salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Do they believe the same thing we do? And the answer is they do not. They believe that faith becomes the grounds for salvation rather than the means to salvation. **{see verses in chp. 4 that seem to indicate faith as the grounds rather than the means to salvation}**

JFB: Romish expositors and Arminian Protestants make this to mean that God accepted Abraham's act of believing as a substitute for complete obedience. But this is at variance with the whole spirit and letter of the apostle's teaching. Throughout this whole argument, *faith* is set in direct opposition to *works*, in the matter of justification - and even in Rom 4:4, Rom 4:5. The meaning, therefore, cannot possibly be that the mere act of believing - which is as much a work as any other piece of commanded duty (Joh 6:29; 1Jn 3:23) - was counted to Abraham for all obedience. The meaning plainly is that Abraham believed in the promises which embraced Christ (Gen 12:3; Gen 15:5, etc.), as we believe in Christ Himself; and in both cases, faith is merely the instrument that puts us in possession of the blessing gratuitously bestowed.

And if you mistake faith as the grounds for salvation rather than the means to salvation then ultimately you make salvation a matter of works rather than a matter of grace. You see the exercise of faith – and our attempts to obey the law have one thing in common. They are both acts of our wills. Faith requires the action of our wills and that makes it a work.

Christ went so far as to say that faith is a work. In John 6 the Jews ask Christ in v. 28 *What shall we do, that we might work the works of God?* And in v. 29 Christ answers – *This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.* So faith is in one sense a work.

This is why it's important to realize that faith is not the grounds for our salvation – i.e. God does not bestow salvation as an earned reward for the exercise of our faith. And indeed we have to see regarding faith that it's a unique kind of work – it's a work that disowns all works. It's a work that confesses with God's word that *all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags*. Faith is a work that confesses that we're sinners – lost and undone – that we're hopeless and helpless before a thrice holy God.

And then faith lays hold of Jesus Christ because by faith we see our need of Christ and by faith we believe in the provision He has made through His atoning blood. Look back at our text in v. 25 – *through faith in his blood* we read. In other words we believe that the shedding of His blood was required for our salvation. We believe that it was our sins that nailed Him to Calvary's tree. We believe that He bore the wrath of God in our place and we believe, therefore, that we're saved on the grounds of His work – not the grounds of our believing – but the grounds of what He Himself has accomplished by the shedding of His blood.

Faith is the means, then, for appropriating the salvation that is based on Christ's merit – not our own. There's a sense in which you can say salvation is not by faith – salvation is by Christ. Faith serves as the means through which we appropriate the atoning death of Christ to our own souls.

We'll see this distinction again under the next heading we consider – the grounds for our salvation. We need to be very careful to make the distinction between the means to our salvation and the grounds for our salvation.

By distinguishing between these two things we'll go a long way in gaining assurance of salvation. Those who mistake the means for the grounds hand the devil a club to beat them with.

You see the devil can always challenge us on the quality of our faith. And if we're honest we'll have to acknowledge that our faith is not what it should be. We constantly fight against unbelief. How often do we do this in the mundane things of life. We say we believe that God will save our souls for all eternity – but do we have the faith to say that he'll meet our other needs today? Very often we fail to believe God and then we give the devil leverage to challenge us – *how can you say you're trusting Christ for the eternal destiny of your soul when you can't even trust Him for simple things far less important – you're a hypocrite*, the devil will say.

And Paul teaches in the 7th chapter of this epistle that any good we do – including the exercise of faith – is still tainted by our sin. *I find a law* he says in 7:21 *that when I would do good, evil is present with me*. This means that evil is with us even when we would endeavor to exercise faith in Christ.

And so how do you know that your faith is sincere enough? How can you tell that you've truly exercised faith? These are questions the person must ask who has been deceived into trusting in his faith instead of trusting in Christ.

And the answer to the dilemma is to realize that faith is only the means to laying hold of Christ. I acknowledge that my faith is tainted with sin. I acknowledge that my faith is not what I want it to be or what it should be. But faith, properly exercised, acknowledges all this and then looks away from itself to Christ. Christ, in other words, must be the object of our faith. We don't look to our own trusting – we look, rather, to Christ.

And as a result – based on the merits of Christ – we're justified – justified by faith – justified freely through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

May God help us then to understand the gospel. If we would gain the benefits of the gospel in our day to day walk with God then we have to understand the nature of the gospel and we have to distinguish the nature of the gospel from the grounds of the gospel. May Christ Himself help us all, then, by His Spirit, to stagger not at the promise of God through unbelief – but to be fully persuaded that what He has promised, He is able also to perform.