



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## The Law of Faith

### Romans 3:27-31

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It's always interesting as you go from one church to another to find yourself sometimes singing familiar hymns to different and unfamiliar tunes. Often it's a matter of going from one country or one denomination to another where different hymnals are used. The hymn, *At the Name of Jesus*, stands out for me because we sing it fairly regularly. I grew up singing it to *King's Weston*, which is full of gravitas. In the REC we often sing it at synods or at General Council where the basses and tenors or most prominent and the gravitas and majesty of the hymn powerfully washes over the congregation as all those male voices belt it out. But here we sing it to a tune called *Camberwell*, which I'd never heard before. It's light and joyful and about as opposite of *King's Weston* as you can get. The words are the same, but the sense of the hymn is changed dramatically with the tune. It's not better or worse, just profoundly different.

Sometimes these things do make things better or worse. In the English-speaking world we almost always sing the hymn, *Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken*, to the tune *Austria*. My father-in-law was visiting once and commented that it was a very odd combination for him. Why? Because he was German and *Austria* is the tune of the German national anthem, *Deutschland Uber Alles*. It's interesting to look it up in Lutheran hymnals. The Lutherans with Scandinavian background sing the hymn to *Austria*, but the Lutherans of German background sing it to other tunes. Imagine singing that hymn, a song of the New Jerusalem and the kingdom of God, to the tune of *O! Canada!* or *The Star-spangled Banner*. It would be confusing. Which kingdom are we singing about?

But consider now: What if we're singing something like the *gospel* to the wrong tune? It is remarkably easy to start singing the gospel itself to the tune of our own nation anthem, aligning the gospel with the ideals of our own country, our chosen political system, or even with our culture. Countries and politics and culture can certainly fall in line with the gospel—and we certainly hope they do—but throughout history we've often done the opposite and aligned the gospel to country or politics or culture. That gets us into all sorts of trouble. Amongst other things, it typically undermines our witness to people outside our group. It also tends to make us feel that we have a certain God-given privilege. Brothers and Sisters, we need to let the gospel teach us its own tune.

Something like this happened to Paul on the road to Damascus. In Paul's case, what he'd been singing was the law, the *torah*. But that day on his way to Damascus he was met by the risen Jesus and everything changed. Paul realised he'd been singing the right song to the wrong tune. And it wasn't just him. Israel had, for a very long time, been singing the right song to the wrong tune. I think this illustrates what Paul has been getting at in Romans. In our passage today he finally brings this part of the discussion to a conclusion. Look at Romans 3:27.

**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.**

Remember that Paul has been working to show that while the law that God gave to Israel through Moses gave Israel an advantage over the pagan Gentiles, it didn't grant her any special privileges. In fact, it gave her greater responsibility—responsibility she hadn't lived up to. When Paul asks, "What becomes our boasting?", he's asking this of his fellow Jews—not us, although we've come up with our own ways of boasting too. No, think of what Paul is talking about in terms of singing a song to a certain tune. He and his fellow Jews were singing the law to a tune that went something like this:

When God had rescued Israel from her bondage in Egypt he gave her his law. The law was good. The law taught the people what holiness and justice look like. The law taught people how to live as God's people. It taught them about grace and mercy, because it taught them that they were sinners and gave them ways to make atonement and—at least temporarily—to remove the obstacles in the way of their fellowship with God. God had graciously rescued Israel and made her his own and he gave her his law to mark her out from the pagan nations. The law was supposed to show the nations what it looked like to live as God's people and in fellowship with him. But Israel forgot that part of it. She started singing the law to a different tune. Israel expected the Lord to come at some point to vindicate her and, as he had done to Egypt in the Exodus, to judge the Gentile nations, in part for all the wrongs they had done to Israel, but also to judge them because they didn't have the law. And—here's the key you need to understand where Israel and people like Paul were coming from—the way to tell who would be vindicated by the Lord in that future judgement, was to look around and see who was keeping the law today. This is what Paul means when he talks about "works of the law". Law-keeping, particularly things like circumcision, eating only clean food, and observing the Sabbath, were the badge that marked out the people in the present who would be rescued and vindicated by God when he came on some future day in judgement.

Remember, as I've said several times now, that when Paul talks about "justification" he's talking about God's declaration of who is in the right and to be in the right, in this case, is to be part of God's covenant people. We often think of justification as "being saved". That's not wrong, but it gets ahead of Paul and sort of short-circuits his argument. We'll see this as he unpacks his argument in the coming chapters. Paul talks about "justification by works of the law" and by that he's referring to the Jewish idea that God will recognize his people because of their law-keeping. It's important to understand this, because it's often been distorted. In Christian theology—particularly in traditions like our own that owe a great

deal to St. Augustine—we've often looked back to the Jews, and particularly to the Pharisees, as people who were trying to earn their salvation by doing good works. We got this idea because Augustine and the theologians who were influenced by him, particularly the Reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, had little historical information to tell them about the Jews of the period between the Old and New Testaments. They were dealing with controversies in their own times—Augustine was arguing with the arch-heretic, Pelagius and the Reformers were arguing with Rome—and they tended to read those controversies back into Paul's arguments with the Jews. In the last century, however, we've discovered a wealth of Jewish literature from this time, which we call the Second Temple Period, and it's helped us to better understand what the Jews and the various Jewish pressure groups were really all about.

What we've learned is that they weren't interested in "salvation" as we think of it. For them, "justification" was about taking part in the age to come, in the Messiah's kingdom. They were *already* confident of their status with God. They were his people after all. Keeping the law was the proper response to his gracious election and calling and it was the means by which he would recognize his own when he came to judge the nations. This was why the Pharisees developed their complex systems of rules for keeping the law. They wanted to help everyone keep the law better, in part because keeping the law was the proper response to God's gracious election and calling of Israel, and partly because the nation simply needed to get back on track to escape judgement.

All of this was restricted to Jews, because they were the ones to whom God had given the law. Gentiles were on the outside. The only way for Gentiles to be included was to convert and to be circumcised. They had to stop being Gentiles and become Jews instead. (This gave rise to the problems we see Paul addressing in Romans and Galatians and in his dispute with Peter. Did Gentile Christians need to convert to Judaism in order to follow Jesus?)

Some groups took things a step further. They taught that it wasn't enough just to be a Jew. Various groups came up with their own interpretations of the law and more rigorous ways of keeping it and taught that theirs was the only way. The Pharisees did this and an even more exclusive group called the Essenes—the Dead Sea Scrolls were their library, which they hid from the Romans—took it even further. They separated themselves from the rest of Israel and went off to live in the desert to await the Lord's return and to pray for the destruction of everyone else. This was the tune to which Israel was singing the law. It was exclusivist and proud.

This is what Paul means when he talks about "boasting". And, Paul says, this kind of boasting is wrong. Yes, it might make sense if you think of the law in terms of works. It was an easy mistake to make, because the law has an awful lot to do with doing things. It's also an easy mistake to make when you get centred on the way in which the works of law separate you out from the Gentiles. But, Paul writes, the law isn't fundamentally about works. The works are on the surface, but what lies deep down underneath, the centre of the law, the foundation of the law is *faith*. When God gave the law through Moses, he intended it to be sung to the tune of faith, not works. And when you start singing in the tune of faith it rules out all the boasting—all the exclusivity and all the pride.

Just as Paul explained in our passage last week that the righteousness of God is revealed in the faithful of Jesus and that all along the law and the prophets were pointing to the law being fulfilled in just this way, now we see what Paul was getting at back in Chapter 2 when he talked about Gentiles fulfilling the law by faith even when they'd never heard the word *torah* or read a word of it. The law is fulfilled by *all* who hear and believe the proclamation, the good news about Jesus, who was crucified and rose from the dead.

Paul goes on to make three key points in the next four verses. First, look at verse 28:

### **For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.**

We are justified—we are declared to be in the right, we are declared to be part of God's covenant family—not by works of the law, but by faith. Note that Paul doesn't say the works of the law are bad. What he says is that the Jews had it wrong in thinking that when the Lord returned he would recognise his people by their law-keeping. No, when the Lord returns he will recognise his people by their faith in Jesus the Messiah. When a person believes in Jesus, God declares him or her to be a member of his covenant family in anticipation of the verdict he will give on the last day. These are the people who are the true sons and daughters of Abraham, the true heirs of God's promises, and the people whose sins have been forgiven.

Now, this doesn't mean that God isn't interested in the holiness of his people. Real faith results in real transformation. Real faith results in the gift of the Holy Spirit who transforms us from the inside out. This is why St. James writes that faith without works is dead. Faith that doesn't bring transformation, regeneration, and renewal isn't real faith. When I was in elementary school our family was involved with an evangelistic organisation that focused on children. Once a week we got out of school an hour early and would walk down the street to a church where we would hear Bible stories, sing songs, and—every week—be led in a prayer in which we said we believed in Jesus. There was a lot of pressure put on the kids—all of us, whether Christian or not—to pray the prayer. The organisation reported a stunning number of conversions. Virtually all the kids eventually prayed the prayer. And if you prayed the prayer, the leaders gave absolute assurance of salvation. The problem was that there was no follow-up, aside from our going each week to hear Bible stories, sing songs, and pray the prayer again. My sister and I pointed out to our parents that the method didn't seem to be working. Most of the kids weren't showing any

change. None of the kids who hadn't been going to church suddenly started. The bad kids and the bullies were just as bad as ever. What was really happening was that the group was kind of fun—it was better than being in school—and that's the only reason most of the kids went. They didn't care about the prayer and they didn't care about Jesus, but the leaders were assuring them that they were "saved" because they had prayed the prayer. But we don't just do this with children. We do it with adults too. And we don't just do it by encouraging people to pray a prayer. We also do it by encouraging people to be baptised without making sure they really understand that Baptism is a taking hold of Jesus by faith, and we do it when we baptise people without following-up or working to fully incorporate them into the life of the Church.

Faith is more than praying a prayer or being baptised. Faith is more than warm-fuzzy feelings on the one hand and it's more than intellectual assent on the other. Faith is putting our trust in Jesus as the crucified and risen Lord of Creation. As a book I've been reading, I think, makes the point very helpfully: We can and should think of faith as something like "allegiance". Our faith is a pledge to follow Jesus, to daily take up the cross and follow him wherever he leads as we give up everything for his sake and for the sake of his kingdom. Baptism—and, for that matter, the Lord's Supper—are tangible reminders through which God gives us assurance of our place in his covenant family, but without faith they do nothing. In fact, without faith, they can become sources of *false* assurance.

It's not that our faith merits us anything. Faith doesn't earn us points with God. It's that faith is the evidence that the good news about Jesus has transformed us from the inside out. Faith is the evidence that our hearts of stone have been replaced by hearts of flesh. Faith itself is God's gift, given to us as we hear his Word and as his Spirit causes it to bear fruit in us.

Look now at verses 29-31:

**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.**

Paul's second point here drives at just why justification, why being declared to be in the right is dependent not on keeping the law but on faith. He asks, "Is God the God of only the Jews?" And, of course, every Jew knew that he is not. The God of Israel is the Creator, he's the God of the whole earth. This is what gives him the right in the first place to judge the nations as so many of the Jews longed for him to do. No, God is not *just* the God of Israel; he is the God of the Gentiles too—even if they refuse to acknowledge him. (Getting the Gentiles to see and acknowledge God was Israel's task—that was why God had chosen her.) If the law is about works—the works that single out the Jews as the covenant family—then the Gentiles have no hope. But, in fact, the law places Jew and Gentile alike on level ground before the cross. Both are sinners and both are declared to be part of God's covenant family on the basis of faith. Both have a place in the covenant family. When Jews—the circumcised—hear the good news about Jesus and believe—when they put their faith in him and give him their full allegiance, they are reaffirmed as members of the covenant family on the basis of that faith. In the same way, when Gentiles—the uncircumcised—hear the good news and believe, God welcomes them into the covenant family, also on the basis of that faith.

As non-Jews it's easy for us to miss the third point that Paul makes. It's easy to pass quickly over his statement in verse 30 that God is one. Paul's Jewish readers, however, would immediately see that Paul is pointing them to what they called the *shema*. This is the passage from Deuteronomy 6:4-5. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." The Lord is one. This was Israel's most basic and foundational statement of faith. As Paul wrote

earlier, humanity's most basic problem is idolatry. All our other problems, including our sin, grow out of our idolatry problem. We setup other gods in the place of the one, true God. And so the Lord stressed to Israel that he is one and he alone is God. He is the God of Israel, but he is also God over the nations. He alone is worthy of our worship. This is Paul's final crushing blow against this idea of Jewish privilege or exclusivity. If you believe—as all the Jews did—that the God of Israel is the world's Creator and the God of the nations, then Jesus, who is Israel's Messiah, is also Lord and Saviour for the Gentiles too.

This was the great truth that changed everything for Paul after he met Jesus on the road to Damascus. This was what caused him to start singing the law to the tune of faith instead of works. And as he sang this tune, it's what motivated him to take the good news about Jesus to the nations. This is why he finished by assuring his Jewish audience—and we Gentiles need to hear it too—that Jesus doesn't overthrow the law. The law wasn't the problem. It was the tune it was sung to. It was the lens through which the law was seen. Israel had come to see it through the lens of works, but the Lord intended it to be seen through the lens of faith. This doesn't mean that Gentiles are now bound by the law and Paul will expand on this later in Romans. What it means is that the law as a law of faith in the good news that Jesus, crucified and risen, is Lord is as firmly established as it ever was.

Now what does this mean for us. Paul's been writing to correct Jews who thought that they had special status with God. They were singing the law in their own national key. But we're prone to doing the same thing with the gospel and we need to be careful. It's hard for us to grasp what a big deal it was for Paul, a devout Jew, to go as a missionary to the Gentiles. Even Jewish Christians were challenged by this. But Paul knew, as he says so often, that in Jesus there is neither Jew nor Greek. Whatever our background, wherever we come from, we are united as Christians by one thing and one thing only: Jesus

the Messiah. Whenever we start singing the gospel to the tune of anything else, whenever we start thinking that as Canadians or Americans, as Westerners or as white people we have special status with God, we undermine our gospel witness. It's understandable that in a country made up of immigrants that we bring out particular cultural or national flavours of Christianity with us, but when we start forming churches that become exclusively or predominantly for members of one ethnic group or one language or on culture, we undermine our gospel witness. This is why we don't have a national flag at the front out our church. It's good and right to give thanks for the good things about our country, but here in the house of God we come not as citizens of an earthly country, but as citizens of the kingdom of God. Here we pray for our Queen, for our members of Parliament and our legislature, we pray for the justices who sit in our courts, but we come as people who know that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar and everything we do should demonstrate our faith, our trust in, our ultimate allegiance to Jesus over all others. We come on an equal footing—as Caucasians, as Natives, as Asians, as Canadians, Americans, South Africans, Britons—and kneel at the foot of the Cross, made one people by faith in Jesus. That's the tune to which we must sing the gospel and to forget that, to sing any other tune undermines our witness to Jesus and his kingdom.

The other take-away here is a cautionary note. It's very easy to misunderstand Paul when he writes to his Jewish brothers and sisters that they were not justified by works of the law, but only by faith. I hope I've made it clear what Paul is really saying here, because many Christians have misunderstood him and have become allergic to "works". Out of a fear of legalism, we ironically become legalistic about avoiding works. There are Christians who have gone so far as to abandon Baptism and the Lord's Supper out of fear that they might become "works" to replace faith. Believe it or not, there's actually a controversy today over whether or not faith means truly acknowledging Jesus as Lord. Some folks are so afraid of

adding anything to "faith" that they stress that all that's needed to become a Christian is a bare acknowledgement of Jesus. They forget, however, that real faith produces and is evidenced by real trust in and real allegiance to Jesus. The indwelling Spirit is evidenced by the bearing of good fruit. Some Christians place their focus almost exclusively on private holiness. I have a friend, a dear Christian brother, whose hackles are raised every time he hears someone talk about the need for Christians to work in the world for justice and peace and mercy. "That's the 'Social Gospel'," he says—just a liberal version of works without faith. And while these things are sometimes distorted by some people, the fact is that seeking to make a difference in this world by working for justice, peace, and mercy is the natural outworking of real faith in Jesus. Brothers and Sisters, the inward work of the Spirit to sanctify us, to make us holy, will always show itself in good works that spill out of our own lives, out of the life of the Church, and overflow into the world. This is how we make Jesus and his kingdom known. In fact, this is how we carry on the mission that God gave to Abraham to be a light to the nations.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, in our collect this morning we prayed that you would inspire us to think on things that are good and for the guidance to put them into practise. We give you thanks for the redeeming work of Jesus and the life of the Spirit you have poured into us. You transform us from the inside out as you turn replace our hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. But remind us always, Father, that this is your work in us. Let us never claim the life you have given as reason to boast. Rather, send us out be life in the midst of death, light in the midst of darkness, we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.