

Romans Part 15 – Chapter 3:31-4:12

Sunday, June 19, 2022

With input from John MacArthur, Barnes Commentary

Romans 3:31:

“Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.”

Do we then make void the law - Do we render it vain and useless; do we destroy its moral obligation; and do we prevent obedience to it, by the doctrine of justification by faith? This was an objection which would naturally be made; and which has thousands of times been since made, that the doctrine of justification by faith tends to licentiousness. The word "law" here, I understand as referring to the moral law, and not merely to the Old Testament. This is evident from Romans 3:20-21, where the apostle shows that no man could be justified by deeds of law or by conformity with the moral law.

God forbid - By no means. Note that Romans 3:4 states *“Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? ⁴ By no means! Let God be true though every one were a liar, as it is written,*

*“That you may be justified in your words,
and prevail when you are judged.”*

Barnes Commentary: This is an explicit denial of any such tendency.

Yea, we establish the law - That is, by the doctrine of justification by faith; by this scheme of treating people as righteous, the moral law is confirmed, its obligation is enforced, obedience to it is secured. This is done in the following manner:

- (1) God showed respect to it, in being unwilling to pardon sinners without an atonement. He showed that it could not be violated with impunity; that he was resolved to fulfil its threatenings.
- (2) Jesus Christ came to magnify it, and to make it honorable. He showed respect to it in his life; and he died to show that God was determined to inflict its penalty.
- (3) the plan of justification by faith leads to an observance of the Law. The sinner sees the evil of transgression. He sees the respect which God has shown to the Law. He gives his heart to God, and yields himself to obey His Law. All the sentiments that arise from the conviction of sin; that flow from gratitude for mercies; that spring from love to God; all his views of the sacredness of the Law, prompt him to yield obedience to it. The fact that Christ endured such sufferings to show the evil of violating the Law, is one of the strongest motives prompting obedience. We do not easily and readily repeat what overwhelms our best friends in calamity; and we are brought to hate what inflicted such woes on the Saviour's soul. The sentiment recorded by Isaac Watts is as true as it is beautiful:

"'Twas for my sins my dearest Lord.
Hung on the cursed tree.
And groan'd away his dying life,
For thee, my soul, for thee.
"O how I hate those lusts of mine.
That crucified my Lord;
Those sins that pierc'd and nail'd his flesh.
Fast to the fatal wood.

Romans 4:1-4

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." ⁴ Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. (notice how far Paul takes this, in this scenario if we earned our salvation we would "require" it from God since we earned it).

We heard from our field workers in Turkey last week. They mentioned to the Elders that there is a point system in Islam. Online I found a person who wrote "replace the word "point" with "Neki". The points counted in Islam are called "Neki".

Like if you pray in Group, you get x27 time more neki/positive points then praying alone. If you don't pray at all you get unmeasured or mentioned numbers of negative points, also know as gunah. And mention of neki or gunah is all around the Islamic scriptures.

Paul tells Timothy about a sincere life of faith as opposed to the purpose of the law:

1 Timothy 1:5-11 *But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. For some men, straying from these things, have turned aside to fruitless discussion, wanting to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand either what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions.*

But we know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully, realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous person, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching, according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted.

Paul told us in chapter 3 how to be right with God and he said a man is right with God not by what he does but by what he believes, by believing in Jesus Christ and His perfect work. Now in chapter 4 he uses Abraham as his illustration because what he just taught would be unacceptable to the Jewish mind.

1. Abraham would show the eternal truth of righteousness by grace through faith since Abraham was an Old Testament character. In other words, by using Abraham, Paul is saying this is nothing new, this is something very old. Abraham even preceded Moses. Abraham even preceded the identity of the nation Israel. Abraham really belongs in the patriarchal period, the very primitive time. He appears early on in the book of Genesis. And if Paul can establish that a man in the book of Genesis was saved by grace through faith and not of works, then he has given to us a timeless truth and nothing new at all.
2. Paul selects Abraham because Abraham is also the supreme example of faith. Nobody in the Old Testament exercised as much or more faith than Abraham. And the New Testament even tells us in Galatians 3 that Abraham is the father of all who believe. In a very real sense, all who come to God by faith are children of Abraham, who set the standard for faith by believing God in a most incredible way.

Galatians 3:5-9 *Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith— ⁶ just as Abraham "believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"?*

⁷ Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. ⁸ And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed." ⁹ So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

This would run contrary to the rabbis' teaching of day. The majority of rabbis at the time of Paul and the time of Jesus, said that Abraham was made right with God, was saved if you will, was forgiven of his sin, was given eternal life, and was chosen by God for salvation because of his character.

He was the best man in the world, the best man in his generation. Therefore, he was chosen by God to be the father of His people Israel. And they say Abraham was a righteous man and that's why God chose him.

We should ask two questions:

1. How could any man be righteous at God's standard level?
2. How could a man keep God's righteous standard when it hadn't been given yet?

Well, they would probably answer back: "he kept it by intuition and anticipation. He sensed in his conscience the law of God and he kept it as he anticipated it and he kept it intuitively.

And so the rabbis said he was the best man, he was a good man; he was a righteous man on his own terms therefore God chose him because of his self-righteousness.

Paul selects Abraham in order to destroy this myth, to wipe out the Jewish illusion and establish the truth that Abraham is not an example of a righteous man whom God chose, he is an example of an unrighteous man whom God chose. He is not an example of a man who earned salvation by his good works; he is an example of a man who received salvation by grace through believing.

In simple child-like trust, he yielded to God, he took God's word at face value, believed God. And by that act of faith he received righteousness. And it was very important to the Jews to have Abraham be an example of a righteous man whom God chose because they believed by their own self-righteousness God had to choose them to.

But Paul wants them and us to realize that it may be the supreme discovery of all of life to find out that you don't need to torture yourself with a losing battle to earn salvation. You don't need to torture yourself with a losing battle to gain acceptance with God on your own good works. You don't need to think you can buy salvation on the installment plan.

And there's a third reason that he chose Abraham. And that is because up till now all that he has said to us has been theological theory, theological truth, and it needs flesh and blood. And so he takes it out of the abstract and puts it into the concrete. He gives it flesh, the flesh of Abraham.

For these reasons Paul chooses Abraham as his illustration. Now as you go through the 25 verses that make up chapter 4, Abraham's life is an example and a model and a pattern of saving faith in three key ways. And I think the chapter divides easily these ways.

1. He was justified by faith, not works, verses 1 to 8.
2. He was justified by grace, not law, verses 9 to 17.
3. He was justified by divine power, not human effort, verses 18 to 25. Simple enough; he was justified by faith not works, by grace not law, by divine power not human effort. And in all three, there are both negative and positive perspectives. Faith not works; grace not law, divine power not human effort, and Paul hits on both the negative and the positive in each case.

If Abraham can't glory and boast then nobody can because it must be of grace.

The reason that they believed that Abraham was righteous is because they picked certain scriptures, selected certain scriptures, turned and twisted certain scriptures to come to their own conclusion.

Genesis 26:5: *"Because that Abraham obeyed My voice and kept My charge, My commandments My statutes and My laws."* Now God said that Abraham kept My laws, My commandments, My statutes, My charge.

But they say, look, Abraham did all that. What they don't say is: This is not *why* God saved him and made him righteous — but that is *because* God saved him and made him righteous.

Isaiah 41:8 in which God spoke to Abraham as "My friend."

They also draw from the book of Ecclesiasticus, (the Book of Sirach or Ecclesiasticus, is a Jewish work, originally in Hebrew, of ethical teachings, from approximately 200 to 175 BC, written by the Judahite scribe Ben Sira of Jerusalem, on the inspiration of his father Joshua son of Sirach, sometimes called Jesus son of Sirach or Yeshua ben Eliezer ben Sira) which is an apocryphal book, not to be confused with Ecclesiastes. In Ecclesiasticus, that non-inspired book taught that Abraham was given justification, or made right with God, justified, and he was given circumcision because he earned it by keeping the law.

The rabbis also taught that Abraham was one of the seven men who by his merit and by his personal righteousness had the privilege of bringing back the Shekinah glory to dwell in the tabernacle. The rabbis also taught that Abraham was so righteous he began to serve God when he was three years old. And there is the following quote from the prayer of Manasseh which is another writing, a non-biblical writing, says: "Therefore, Thou O Lord God of the righteous, hast not appointed repentance for the righteous, for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who did not sin against Thee, but Thou hast appointed repentance for me who am a sinner." Isn't that interesting? You have not appointed repentance for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who did not sin. Now you've really got to go through Genesis with blinders on to come to that conclusion, that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob didn't sin.

The Book of Jubilees — another historic, traditional, Jewish book, non-biblical, probably dating from the second century before Christ — said Abraham was perfect in all his deeds with the Lord and well pleasing in righteousness all the days of his life.

And so, the rabbis said because he was perfect and because he was righteous and because from the time he was three he served God and because he wasn't a sinner, God chose him and made him the head of the nation. And that's the standard. If you want to be righteous, if you want to be right with God, if you

want to get your sin forgiven, if you want to be saved, as it were, and brought into the kingdom, you've got to get to where Abraham was. You've got to be righteous on your own good works.

They were so in love, by the way, with this theory, because it fed their ugly pride, that they needed Abraham for their support so they twisted everything around. For example, in Habakkuk 2:4 there's a very familiar verse which Paul quotes in the New Testament and it is this: "The just shall live by faith?" The rabbis changed it and they quoted it: "The just shall live by his faithfulness." See the difference? Instead of living, that is, before God in a right relationship, by believing faith, the just live by being faithful to keep God's law. So they twisted the scripture conveniently to fit their own desire.

One ancient rabbinic commentary says, Abraham our father inherited this world and the world to come solely by the merit of faith whereby he believed in the Lord. And this is an interesting shade. What they say is that it was by faith, but it was his own faith, it was the merit of his own faith, he earned it with his own faith. And that isn't right either, as we shall see.

Because of all of this teaching that Abraham was righteous before God on the basis of his own personal righteousness, Paul has to attack Abraham. And he has to disprove that because Abraham became the standard and then the Jews said that's the standard so we all gain righteousness by living as Abraham in perfect obedience to the rules. So, they all tried to keep the law, which is why Abraham's faith must be made clear.

The faith of Abraham was the genuine kind. He heard the facts. He believed them. He desired them. He entrusted his life to the living Lord in hope of eternal fulfillment, this is genuine faith. He was committed to the outworking of genuine faith which is obedience and worship. It was not something of his own effort, it was all of grace. Romans 11:6 that says: "And if by grace, then it is no more of works, otherwise grace is no more grace." It's either grace or works. It can't be both, one or the other.

Romans 4:5-12:

⁵ And to the one who does not work but believes in^[a] him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, ⁶ just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

*⁷ "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven,
and whose sins are covered;*

⁸ blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin."

⁹ Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. ¹⁰ How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised.

¹¹ He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, ¹² and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.

