

Romans 3:27-31

Pastor: Romans 3:27-31: Justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

“Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. Or is God *the God* of Jews only? Is He not *the God* of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one. Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law.”

3:27-29 Having just emphasized the work of Yeshua as paramount for justification/righteousness (Romans 3:24-26), Paul elaborates a bit further on what he has previously stated in Romans 3:20, as various “works of law” or sectarian *halachot* will be insufficient to reckon outsiders as members of God’s own.¹ This is determined entirely by what Yeshua the Messiah has accomplished. “Where then is the boasting? It is excluded. By what manner of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith” (Romans 3:27, HNV). It is best, given the theme of Romans 4:1-9 which will follow, for justification/righteousness to primarily be viewed in Romans 3:27-30 *here* as involving remission from sins and a declaration of innocence, but secondarily involving and/or resulting in membership among God’s own.

Any of the Jewish Believers in Rome who might cling onto any sectarian “works of law” or *halachah* to keep non-Jewish Believers separate, cannot do so any more, and have no reason to boast. One’s justification—either his identity as a part of God’s people and/or forgiveness from sins—cannot be found in them (Romans 3:28). That these “works of law” would keep people separate is clear from how Paul will strongly assert that God is God of both the Jews and nations (Romans 3:29), and how both are reckoned justified via their faith (Romans 3:30). And God’s Torah still does remain important for people who place their trust in what Yeshua has accomplished (Romans 3:31). But the focal point of the *ekklēsia*, and what is to bind it together, **is what Yeshua has done for all of us!** Those who believe in this find what is to hold them together, as fellow brothers and sisters who have partaken of redemption.

Paul asks the Jewish Believers in Rome, “Where then is boasting? It is excluded” (Romans 3:27a). He then asks why such a boasting would be excluded. “By what kind of law” (Romans 3:27b) would boasting be excluded? Is it a law “of works,” *tōn ergōn* (τῶν ἔργων)—a likely reworking of *ergōn nomou* (Romans 3:20)—that excludes boasting? No, because “works of law” is a likely *cause* of boasting. Paul says that instead what excludes boasting is by “a law of faith” (Romans 3:27c), *dia nomou pisteōs* (διὰ νόμου πίστεως). The first is how the Torah for many had turned into man-made “works of law,” as various exclusionary measures—but the second is to be rightly regarded as what God intended the Torah to be.

When one has his or her priorities straight, then trust in God will enable His Torah to accomplish its function of revealing human sin, defining His holiness, and it will point to the Redeemer (Romans 3:20b). A “law of faith” reveals sin, and forces a person to be shown his or her fallen humanity. Contrary to this, when the Torah is turned into sectarian “works of law,” the original function of the Torah can be totally lost, or at least skewed. N.T. Wright further remarks,

“Paul is thus distinguishing, not for the last time in his letter, between the Torah seen in two different ways. On the one hand, there is ‘the Torah of works’—this is Torah seen as that which defines Israel over against the nations...On the other hand, there is the new category Paul is forging here: ‘the Torah of faith,’ ...[which] gives the indication of where the true, renewed people of God are to be found.”²

And from this point, the Apostle Paul reaffirms his teachings on what identification among God’s covenant people is to be marked by: “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law” (Romans 3:28). One’s trust in God, and now in His Messiah—and in all that Yeshua has achieved—was to reckon both Jewish and non-Jewish Believers as full and equal members of His people: “Or is He the God of Jews only, and not also of the nations? Yes, of the nations also” (Romans 3:29, LITV).

¹ This entry has been adapted from the commentary *Romans for the Practical Messianic*.

² Wright, in *NIB*, 10:480-481.

Today's Messianics who look to Yeshua the Messiah for their salvation and spiritual identity do not call what Paul is saying here into question. Being justified, whether we consider it being cleansed from sins and/or being reckoned as a part of God's people—does not occur by "works of the Law." And, whether one views "works of the Law" as being rote Torah observance or a manner of *halachah*—the fact remains that who we are as redeemed saints who make up the Body of Messiah **is to be fully focused on the Messiah and His accomplishments.** The justification of born again Believers who acknowledge Him is the same, whether one is a Jewish person or of the nations.

There were certainly challenges in the First Century, and even up until today, with people who look to be justified via their "works of the Law"—either their various human actions or applications of God's Word to somehow make them right before Him. Too many in their quest to value the Law, can take their eyes off of the Lawgiver (cf. James 4:12). Because of various mortal limitations, it is endemic to our common human nature to think that our deeds can merit us a guaranteed place among the redeemed.

3:30 The Apostle Paul is quite clear to assert the universality of God's salvation in Yeshua by saying, the "God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one," something with a definite echo of the Deuteronomy 6:4 *Shema*. Such justification comes *ek pisteōs* (ἐκ πίστεως) or "on the ground of trusting" (CJB/CJSB). Because every human being is a sinner, be they those raised with the instruction of God's Torah from the time of their birth *or not*, redemption is something that must be incumbent upon proper belief and trust in God. Such faith for redemption and inclusion among His people is required of all, not just Paul's fellow Jews. Ben Witherington III is right to state, "There will be no room for Gentile or Jewish boasting about ethnic or moral superiority when Paul gets through. All are equally in need of and indebted to God's grace, and all should be as compassionate as God is toward the lost and spiritually blind."³

At least for the problems and challenges of the Roman assembly, perhaps Paul's words would be able to communicate to all how their common identity was to be focused around them each being human sinners—yet those who were saved by Yeshua the Messiah *entirely by* the Heavenly Father's favor toward them. David H. Stern further states, quite correctly, that "the righteousness which God confers through Yeshua is absolutely the same for Gentiles as for Jews. In the Kingdom of God, wherein God rules the saved, there are no second-class citizens, no 'separate but equal'; rather, there is 'neither Jew nor Gentile.'"⁴

3:31 While much of Paul's writing in Romans ch. 3 (particularly 3:19-28) can, and certainly has, been read as him being anti-Torah or anti-Law—because he does expel the effort to demonstrate how justification does not come via "works of law" and/or any kind of Torah keeping—Paul is very clear to say that God's Torah has not been nullified as irrelevant instruction for His people. Simply because a decisive, spiritually transforming faith in Israel's Messiah Yeshua has arrived onto the scene in human history, **which all must partake of to be redeemed**, does not all of a sudden mean that the Torah is to be put off to the side. Paul is clear to say, "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law" (Romans 3:31, RSV).

In the opening question of this verse, *nomon oun katargoumen dia tēs pisteōs* (νόμον οὖν καταργούμεν διὰ τῆς πίστεως), appears the verb *katargeō* (καταργέω), "to make of none effect" (LS),⁵ which is notably employed in Matthew 5:17, in Yeshua's explicit claim "Do not think that I came to abolish [*katargeō*] the Law or the Prophets⁶." Faith in God does not all of a sudden "cancel the Law" (Moffat New Testament) or "undermine the law" (REB). As Paul directly states, instead of faith in God and His Messiah somehow abolishing the Torah, *nomon histanomen* (νόμον ἱστάνομεν), "we uphold the law" (RSV/NIV) or "we confirm the Law" (Common English Bible). The verb *histēmi* (ἵστημι) is defined by BDAG with, "**to validate someth. that is in force or in practice, reinforce validity of, uphold, maintain, validate.**"⁷ James D.G. Dunn further summarizes,

³ Witherington, *Romans*, 89.

⁴ Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*, 353.

⁵ LS, 413.

⁶ Grk. *Mē nomisēte hoti ēlthon katalusai ton nomon* (Μὴ νομίσητε ὅτι ἦλθον καταλῦσαι τὸν νόμον).

⁷ BDAG, 482.

“καταργέω [katargeō] can have the sense of ‘abolish, do away with’ as well as ‘nullify, render ineffective’ (see on 6:6). Its precise sense here is in large part determined by the fact that it stands in antithesis to ἵστανω [histanō], ‘establish, confirm, make valid’...This certainly reflects and may indeed be a rendering of the contrast we know to have been used by the rabbis between בטל [betaṭal] (‘neglect, render futile, break’) and קיום [qum] (‘uphold, fulfill, confirm’), and in *m. Avot* 4:9; (cf. also *4 Macc* 5.25 and 33). That it could be rendered more strongly as ‘destroy/fulfill’ is suggested by Matt 5:17...Paul’s rejoinder here was probably taking up actual objections which had been put to him by fellow Jews and Jewish Christians.”⁸

Even with belief in God, acknowledgment of the Messiah Yeshua, and trust in the gospel being most important—such things do not all of a sudden render God’s Torah inoperative. And here, as C.E.B. Cranfield notes,⁹ it is appropriate to view *nomos* (νόμος) as composing the whole of the Tanach, and not the Pentateuch exclusively.

Believers who have been born again and spiritually regenerated, are called to see the Torah upheld as valid instruction and a major guiding influence in their lives (cf. 8:1-16). In our emulation of the Messiah Yeshua, we are to heed Moses’ Teaching and keep the commandments. In our reading of the Pauline letters, we are to remember how the good Apostle affirms that his teaching is in alignment with the character of the Law, and that any emphasis on faith witnessed cannot substantiate a dismissal of the Law. Cranfield validly concludes,

“[W]hat he has been saying about faith is not in any way inconsistent with the law but upholds it in the sense that it is thoroughly consonant with it. According to this understanding of katargou/men and ἵστα,nomen, Paul is declaring that his teaching about faith is confirmed by the law.”¹⁰

Interestingly enough, given the teaching on Abraham in Romans ch. 4 that follows, F.F. Bruce not only references Genesis 26:5¹¹ and Abraham’s adherence to God’s “laws,” but is most keen to state, “Abraham did indeed fulfil or ‘uphold’ the law, but that, according to the testimony of Scripture, he upheld it through receiving God’s gift of righteousness by faith.”¹²

In the Reformed tradition, Romans 3:31 is a very important verse, which can sometimes be associated with Paul’s later statement of Romans 8:4, “so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” Even with believing that the presumed “ceremonial law” of the Torah was abolished by the work of Yeshua, but believing that the presumed “moral law” is still to be followed, John Calvin, in noting Matthew 5:17, still draws the useful conclusion,

“The moral law is truly confirmed and established through faith in Christ, since it was given to teach man of his iniquity, and to lead him to Christ, without whom the law is not fulfilled. In vain the law proclaims what is right, yet it accomplishes nothing but the increase of inordinate desires, in order to finally bring upon man greater condemnation. When, however, we come to Christ, we first find in Him the exact righteousness of the law, and this also becomes ours by imputation. In the second place we find in Him sanctification, by which our hearts are formed to keep the law...Let us, therefore...remember to preach the Gospel in such a way that we establish the law by our manner of teaching, but let the only support of our preaching be that of faith in Christ.”¹³

The Reformed tradition, taking much of its lead from Calvin, has widely held to a high view of continuity between the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures, with Romans 3:31 as a significantly regarded verse. *Faith in Christ does not nullify the Law of God*, although the Torah on its own can do little more than condemn someone of sin and guilt. A more modern approach to Romans 3:31 is seen in Cranfield’s analysis:

⁸ Dunn, *Romans*, 38a:190.

⁹ “We take it that by νόμος here is meant the OT law in its full extent, i.e., the Torah or Pentateuch, as in v. 21, or—possibly—the whole OT, as in v. 19” (Cranfield, *Romans 1-8*, 223 fn#4).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 223-224.

¹¹ “[B]ecause Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws” (Genesis 26:5).

¹² F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 104.

¹³ John Calvin, *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries: Romans and Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 81.

“[I]t seems natural to understand Paul to be using *κατερργεῖν* [*katergein*] and *ιστάνειν* [*histanein*] to the Hebrew *biṭṭēl* (Aramaic: *baṭṭēl*) and *kiyyēm* (Aramaic: *ḳayyēm*), and to mean that what he has been saying about faith is not in any way inconsistent with the law but upholds it in the sense that it is thoroughly consistent with it. According to this understanding of *καταργοῦμεν* [*katargoumen*] and *ιστάνομεν* [*histanomen*], Paul is declaring that his teaching about faith is confirmed by the law. It is, we believe, true that he thought that the law was also being established in another sense—in the sense of being rendered fully and decisively effective (cf. 8:1-16); but the establishing of the law in this sense of the verb ‘establish’ is something which he ascribes to God, not to men (not even apostles). It is accomplished by God through the gift of His Spirit consequent upon the work of Christ.”¹⁴

Dunn offers the further, important thought,

“Paul’s object is not to make the law as though it had never been, but by universalizing it to confirm it to its proper function. When seen as directed to faith rather than to works, to bring all humankind under the Creator’s rule rather than to divide Israel off from the nations, the law’s role in the eschatological age (the ‘now’ time) is established.”¹⁵

Such an eschatological age, in which God’s Torah is to be properly established in the lives of His people, is not only one where the New Covenant promise of Him providing permanent atonement and forgiveness, and a *supernatural transcription of His Instruction*, is manifest (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27)—but will also involve the nations coming to Zion to be taught such Instruction as well (Isaiah 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-3). When we keep Yeshua as the focus of what we do in our Torah obedience, we will find that God’s blessings will rest upon us, and that we will never be spiritually hungry or thirsty again. We are each admonished by the Scriptures to follow God’s commandments, so that we can all be a part of His holy people and be blessed (i.e., Deuteronomy 28:1-2).

When Messiah followers today seek to emulate their Lord and Savior—One who kept the Torah perfectly and without error—**we must never take our eyes off of Him and the eternal salvation He provides.** It is only our trust in what He has done that justifies us before the Father as His own. From such trust is to come forth an upholding of the Torah, recognizing its proper place as instruction which is to be followed as a means of holiness, defining good works incumbent of those transformed and filled with God’s Spirit. Noting Paul’s word about how Believers “*establish the law*,” John Wesley instructed Eighteenth Century Christians,

“[We establish] Both the authority, purity, and the end [*telos*: Romans 10:4] of it; by defending that which the law attests; by pointing out Christ, the end of it; and by showing how it may be fulfilled in its purity.”¹⁶

May we, as Twenty-First Century Messianic Believers, endeavor to do the same!

¹⁴ Cranfield, *Romans 1-8*, 224.

¹⁵ Dunn, *Romans*, 38a:190-191.

¹⁶ John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament*, reprint (Peterborough, UK: Epworth Press, 2000), 531.