Romans 3:21-28: Paul’s Doctrine of Justification

Bibliography


Textual Issues

1. Martin Luther translated 3:28, Saint Paul’s key statement (justificari hominem per fidem sine operibus legis / δικαιοῦσαι πίστει ἁνθρώπων χωρίς ἔργων νόμου), as “daß der Mensch gerecht werde ohne des Gesetzes Werke, allein durch den Glauben” (that man is justified without the works of the law, through faith alone). The addition of the word “alone” is

² Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church.
significant and incorrect, as it implies that faith and works stand in opposition to each other.

This issue contributed to a dispute between Lutherans and the Catholic Church that has lasted for over 400 years and is still upheld by some branches of Lutheranism.

2. In 3:27, Saint Paul uses a word play to show the difference between the “law of works” and the “law of faith”. This is partially lost in some English translations. See below.

**Key Words and Terms**

1. “Law” (νόμος) - Saint Paul uses this word in two ways: First, and primarily, for the Mosaic Law of the Torah, which constitutes a set of codes of conduct ranging from rites of worship to observances concerning food and ritual purity. Secondly, the Greek word can also mean “custom” or “principle”. The RSV and NAB translations of 3:27 use the word “principle”, while other translations and the Vulgate use “law” (Latin: lex) throughout.

2. “Works of the law” - The observance of Mosaic Law, expressed in following its ceremonial precepts, such as observance of the Sabbath, circumcision and dietary rules.

3. “Justification” (δικαίωσις) - The act by which a sinner is made righteous, or justified, before God; the act of God declaring men free from guilt and acceptable to Him. This word is closely related to “righteousness” (δικαιοσύνη); the Latin Vulgate uses “iustitia” for both. To be made just means to be justified by being received into the merciful justice of God, to enter into a relationship with Him, on the foundation of the unmerited forgiveness of sin.

4. “Grace” (χάρις) - A favor rendered by one who need not do so; an act of divine influence upon the human heart. Divine grace is God’s gift of Himself to humankind; it is generous, free, unexpected and undeserved.

5. “Faith” (πίστις) – Persuasion, conviction of religious truth, trust. Reliance on Christ for salvation. It is always received from God; it cannot be generated by human effort.

6. “Boasting” (καύχησις) - A statement of accomplishment and pride. In this instance, the word has a negative connotation, but it can also be used in a positive sense (e.g., 2 Cor 1:12).
Historical-Cultural Factors

1. Paul wrote this letter to the Christian community in Rome several years before his visit to the Eternal City, the capital and most important city of the Roman Empire. The letter to the Romans is distinct from Paul’s other writings because it is addressed to a community that was not founded by Paul or one of his missionary colleagues, and most of whose members he did not know personally, except for a few, e.g., Prisca (Priscilla) and Aquila, whom he knew from an earlier extended stay in Corinth (Rom 16:3, Acts 18:1-2). Therefore, the tone of this letter is more formal, and it does not have the cordial greetings and admonishments we find in Paul’s letters to other communities.

2. It is generally agreed that Paul wrote this letter during his third missionary journey, around A.D. 56 or 57, most likely from Corinth, before going to Jerusalem (Rom 15:25, Acts 19:21).

3. By the time Paul wrote this letter, the Roman church was well-established, flourishing, and known throughout the empire (Rom 1:8).

4. The Christians in Rome were a mixed community of Jewish and Gentile origin, roughly even between the two at the time of Paul’s letter. There was some conflict between both sides, especially on the subject of whether observance of Mosaic Law was necessary.

5. Paul had three principal purposes for writing this letter. (1) to introduce himself to the church in Rome in preparation of his visit, (2) to establish a missionary base in Rome before proceeding to Spain, a journey he planned but never undertook, and (3) to ease tensions that existed between Jewish and Gentile Christians.

Literary Factors

Being the longest of Paul’s epistles, the letter to the Romans is a comprehensive theological discourse based on roughly twenty years of preaching and defending the gospel. Saint Paul addresses a range of issues, such as judgment, sin, justification, sanctification, grace, and the trinity.
The epistle to the Romans is written in a more formal style than Paul’s other letters, largely due to the fact that he was writing to a community he had neither founded nor visited. Paul frequently uses the literary format of the diatribe, answering questions of an imaginary interlocutor, rather than responding to questions and issues that were brought to his attention by the community he is writing to, such as in 1 Cor 1:11 or 1 Cor 7:1. Likewise, cordial remarks that indicate familiarity and friendship, such as those we find in Phil 1:3-5 or 1 Thess 1:2-4, are absent from the letter to the Romans, except for the greetings in 16:1-23.

The passage on justification (3:21-28) appears after a discussion whether Jews have an advantage over Gentile Christians, which they do not, and is followed by an explanation that Abraham was justified before God before he was circumcised, i.e., his righteousness did not depend on obedience to the Law, but on faith in God’s word, an explanation that supports Saint Paul’s teaching on justification.

Rom 3:21 begins with the words “but now”, indicating that what follows is a response to the preceding paragraphs, in which Paul explained that no one can be saved through observance of the Law.

Main Points of the Passage

In this passage, Saint Paul addresses the question of man’s justification before God, which is central to his teaching and fundamental to understanding the salvation brought by Jesus. Saint Paul writes that since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, all are justified by His grace, which is a free gift given to us through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus (3:23-24). Thus, grace, being a gift from God, cannot be merited through any effort of our own. The only prerequisite is faith in Jesus (3:22, 26), which is itself an unmerited gift of grace, conferred on us in baptism, that moves us toward God. There is nothing for anyone to boast about, since righteousness is not earned, but a gift (3:27).
God the Father, the source of all good, by his merciful grace is the source of our salvation. Jesus Christ, by shedding his blood on the cross, merits this salvation for us; faith is the instrument by which His redemption becomes effective in the individual person. The righteousness of God is the action by which God makes people righteous, or just. It is not the Law that saves, but faith in Jesus Christ. Mosaic Law as a way to salvation has been fulfilled and overcome through Christ. What justifies a person is faith (not faith alone, as Luther wrongly argued), which works through charity and all that God has revealed. Faith moves the heart of the Christian to place his hope in Christ’s merits and to repent of his sins. In 3:28, Paul shows that justification before God is possible apart from the law, purely through faith in Jesus and in God’s grace. (cf. Gemeinsame Erklärung, 31-33, Casciaro, 79, 82)

After his encounter with the risen Christ, Saint Paul understood that the question of salvation had changed radically. In his prior life, he regarded observance of Mosaic Law as the only path to justification before God. Before meeting Christ, Saint Paul saw freedom from the Law as a threat to Jewish identity, which is why he persecuted Christians. After the encounter in Damascus, Paul realized that we can only be justified by faith in Christ, not through the works of the Law (Gal 2:15-16). In justification, we receive from Christ faith, hope, and love and are thereby taken into communion with him. We become just by entering into a faithful relationship with Christ, who is Love (1 Jn 4:15-16). In a life that is lived in full communion with Christ, the Law is no longer necessary because our nature changes in such a way that, by keeping our focus on Christ’s commandment of love, we will become consumed by a desire to unite ourselves with God’s will, to the point where we no longer need the guidance of the Law. In other words, the Law is neither abolished nor invalid; it is simply no longer needed. In Christ, the entire law can be summed up in the twofold love of God and love of neighbor (Mt 22:37-40, Rom 13:8-10, 1 Jn 4:11-12, 21).
Saint Paul’s words can easily, and conveniently, be misinterpreted as the abolition of moral law and liberation from ethics, in the sense of “I can do what I want”, arguing that no matter what we do, grace will save us anyway. In other words, as long as I claim to have faith, I am not bound by the Ten Commandments. This erroneous attitude is not a modern phenomenon; we know that it existed even in Corinth, because Saint Paul responded to the Corinthian slogan “all things are lawful to me” in 1 Cor 6:12 and 1 Cor 10:23. However, Christian freedom is not libertinism; the liberation of which Saint Paul speaks is not liberation from good works. (Benedict, *Saint Paul*, 80)

The passages in the epistle of St. James that “faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead” (Jas 2:17) and “a man is justified by works and not by faith alone” (Jas 2:24) are often cited as opposing Paul’s teaching, especially in the ecumenical debate about Luther’s doctrine. Upon closer examination, however, Paul and James are not in disagreement; even Martin Luther translated Saint James’ words faithfully (“daß der Mensch durch Werke gerecht wird, nicht durch den Glauben allein”). The passages in Romans and James draw attention to different aspects of the same doctrine. Paul, addressing issues of conversion, is referring to the faith of a convert to Christianity, whether Jew or Gentile, being brought from sin to salvation. Paul speaks specifically of the works of Mosaic Law, the obedience to which cannot earn us the free gift of grace. He does not say that the Law itself is sin, only that, though holy, it can lead man to sin (Rom 7:7-12). James, on the other hand, writes to professing Christians who “hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Jas 2:1). Thus, James is referring to works that are undertaken in response to the grace of Christ, not in an effort to earn it. In other words, if we are obedient to Christ, good works will follow; faith has to express itself in works, lest it be a dead faith. Paul himself supports this point when he calls us “through love [to] be servants of one another other,” because that is how “the whole law is fulfilled in one word.” (Gal 5:13-14)
Saint Paul revisits the subject of justification frequently, with varying levels of detail. It can be found in other sections of Romans (1:17, 4:16, 5:1, 5:9, et al.), several passages of the letters to the Galatians (2:16, 3:23-26, 6:13-15) and to other communities (e.g., Eph 2:8-9, 1 Cor 6:11, Phil 3:9, Tit 3:5-7, Heb 9:15), as well as in Acts (13:39, 17:30-31).

**Sermon List**

1. Rom 3:21-25, 28 is the second reading on the 9th Sunday of Ordinary Time in Year A, along with Dt 11:18, 26-28, 32 and Mt 7:21-27. Depending on the timing of Easter, this Sunday can be the last one before Lent (2011), first after Corpus Christi3 (2008), or omitted in some years (2014). It is the first in a series of 16 Sundays that feature readings from Romans. In the reading from Deuteronomy, Moses relates God’s instruction to the Israelites to “observe all the statutes and decrees that I set before you today”, a blessing for those who obey and a curse for those who do not. In the gospel, Jesus tells his disciples that in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, one has to do the Father’s will and act on Jesus’ words. The reading from Romans lends itself to showing the progression from the Old Testament covenant being based on adherence to the Law, to justification through faith in Jesus Christ, who came for our salvation.

2. Rom 3:21-30 is the reading for Thursday of week 28 of year I, with Ps 130 and Lk 11:47-54. It is the fourth in a series of 24 consecutive readings from Romans, excluding Sundays. The gospel speaks of two main points: (1) Pharisees’ responsibility for the death of all the prophets who had been sent, and (2) scholars of the law taking away the key of knowledge, concealing it from the people. Jesus denounces the Pharisees as a hindrance to the people of God because they impose heavy burdens, based on their interpretation of Mosaic Law, that they are not willing to carry themselves. Faith in Christ sets us free from these legalistic burdens through the redemption He earned for us.

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3 Although Ordinary Time begins again after Pentecost, in the U.S. liturgical calendar the first two Sundays after Pentecost are Trinity and Corpus Christi, superseding the 7th and 8th Sundays of Ordinary Time if they fall after the Easter Season.