

Free From Slavery

Message 4

Illegal Righteousness

Romans 3:21-4:25 (Read 3:21-31)

Introduction

Paul should know what he was talking about. If anyone tried to please God by his own efforts, Paul was the prime example. In Philippians chapter 3 he details his religious credentials. Listen to how he describes his life before he met Christ.

If anyone else thinks he may have confidence in the flesh, I more so: circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews; concerning the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless.
Philippians 3:4-6

Did you catch that last phrase – “concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless”? Paul did it all. He kept every law just as written. No one could find any fault with him. He had no equal. You and I don’t even come close! If anyone could have pleased God by living a good life, it was Paul. But last week we found Paul teaching that even the best of us – Jews or Gentiles – don’t even come close to the moral perfection that God requires. He wrapped up his depressing case by quoting from the prophets.

*There is none righteous,
no, not one;
There is none who understands;
There is none who seeks after God.
They have all turned aside;
They have together become unprofitable;
There is none who does good,
no, not one.*

Romans 3:10-12

And he concluded that the whole world is guilty before God. Everyone is totally hopeless.

Righteousness Apart From the Law

But now Paul reveals hope for the hopeless! There is a way for sinners to become good, and for the guilty to become innocent! How can this be? Everyone knows the leopard cannot change his spots, and the judge who declares the guilty innocent is himself guilty of miscarriage of justice. There is no earthly way for sinners to become righteous and for the guilty to become innocent – so God accomplished this Himself from heaven. In Isaiah 63:5 He said, “I looked, but there was no one to help, And I wondered That there was no one to uphold; Therefore My own arm brought salvation for Me.” God saw that mankind’s situation was hopeless. He saw that man could never escape His anger by his own efforts, so God rescued us Himself. God did for us what we could never do for ourselves.

Galatians 4:4-5 says, “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law.” We might paraphrase this verse this way. “At just the right time, when everything was ready, God sent His own Son into the mess man had created for himself. God’s Son was born a real human being. He lived and suffered all the same problems and temptations we all face. He faced the absolute demands of God’s law – the law which no man had ever

kept. And He did all this to rescue all us who were trapped in a permanent death sentence.”

Imagine this. Picture a squad of soldiers trapped in a remote valley in Afghanistan, surrounded by Taliban warriors. They were sent out on a reconnaissance mission, but at a critical juncture they set aside their orders and turned into this valley to chase a handful of Afghans. Turns out it was a trap. Now they are stranded in this isolated valley and no one knows they are there. If they stay, the best they can hope for is death by starvation. If they attack they will be mowed down by the enemy. If they surrender they will be horribly tortured. So one by one, they make an effort to escape and bring back reinforcements – and one by one they are picked off by their ambushers. A third, a half of them die trying to escape – and it becomes clear that escape is completely impossible. So those who are left dig in and wait to die.

But just when all hope is lost, a U.S. green beret parachutes into their mountain cave with a rocket launcher. What rejoicing! The half-dead soldiers spring to life at the possibility of escape. Their hero lifts their flagging spirits, then blasts the Taliban and completely incinerates them! Finally, the hero leads the remaining soldiers triumphantly through the smoking ruins to safety.

Don't you just love stories like this? Hollywood has made billions filming super-hero stories. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Tom Cruise, and Harrison Ford have made life-long careers portraying amazing guys who overcome impossible obstacles to rescue the weak and helpless. Star Wars, Indiana Jones, Mission Impossible – these are a small sampling of the movie series that have tapped into the primeval human longing for a hero to save us. In an earlier age the hero was conceived as a strong, good knight in shining armor who beat back the enemy, slew the dragon, wed the gorgeous princess, and ruled the realm in peace. When I was a kid one of my favorite heros was Zorro. It was corny, but I loved the way he swung right into the midst of the corrupt Spanish government, beat back inept soldiers right and left, and rode off victorious. Deep in the core of our being we long for a savior.

These stories resonate very powerfully with us, because they are simply retellings of the one great story of the human race. Man was lost and helpless, but Christ came to save us. He routed our enemies who enslaved us to the law or to idols (Pharisees and demons), He decisively defeated the dragon (Satan), He wed His beautiful bride (the church), and now He rules us in peace. Christ is the hero who parachuted in from heaven, leveled all the enemies, and leads us all to safety. This is why Christmas is such a joyous occasion for Christians. At Christmas we celebrate the arrival of the hero we long for all our lives.

But now think about this. Picture yourself again in that mountain cave in Afghanistan. What would you think if, when the green beret parachutes in, one of your comrades refuses to believe he can rescue you. Okay, it's a tough situation – really tough. So perhaps he's in shock and can't think straight. So your hero goes ahead and blows away the enemy and calls you to follow him to home and safety. But your comrade refuses to go. “How do I know he got *all* the Taliban,” he says. “Furthermore, how can I be sure he knows the way home? What if we get lost? And what if we are attacked again? This whole thing is way too risky. I'm staying put right here. I've still got some food left, and it's safe here.” What an idiot! Don't you just want to grab him and shake him? Would you knock him out and carry him home? Maybe! You can understand that he might have had reservations at first, but after seeing the green beret wipe out the enemy you couldn't even touch – how could he question the rescuer's ability to save you? How could he not believe the evidence? But believe he must. If he looks at the evidence, if he looks at the facts of what happened and concludes that he can't trust the hero, he will surely die in that cave.

This is how we are saved from God's anger – by faith. You see the soldiers could do nothing to save themselves – in fact they died every time they tried. We can do nothing to save ourselves, and we will die

if we try. The green beret did everything necessary for escape. He had the ammo, he fired the weapons, he wiped out the enemy. Likewise, Christ did everything necessary to rescue us from God's anger. He came as the perfect, divine man. He attacked the Pharisees and the demons, and He destroyed the power of Satan. We did nothing. We can do nothing. It's all been done, so there is nothing more we can do which will add to our salvation. Christ did everything there was to do. But now He calls us to follow Him out of the ruined wasteland. He calls us to go home, to safety, to our father. You will soon die here. Although there are pleasant aspects of life on earth, compared to heaven it's dry, miserable, and lonely here. Christ will take us home. Do you trust Him? Will you go with Him? Will you obey Him as He leads us? Do you believe He will save you? Do you long for your heavenly father? Are you looking for real treasure? Or are you satisfied living on the scraps of happiness you can find here? Salvation requires faith. You've got to believe Jesus knows what He is doing.

Justified by Grace

In verses 24 to 26 Paul introduces some uncommon words – “justified”, and “propitiation”. These terms refer to legal matters. The more I think about it, the more schizophrenic America seems. We are the most litigious society on earth, but we resent laws and are bored by legal issues. Who do you know who actually enjoys studying tax law, even though it might be very financially rewarding? Christians today are more attracted to the softer, gentler aspects of God. But God will not be defined one-dimensionally. In addition to His love, grace, and fatherliness, He is ruler and judge – and justice is a vital part of His character. If you don't understand God's justice and recognize it's importance, you don't know God very well at all.

Look at it this way. God is infinite, but as He reveals Himself in man, He expresses His infinite character in specific aspects. So God is a father, and He created man to live in families. God is a lover, and He created man to long for a husband or wife. God is a trinity, and He made man to live in society. God is holy, and He made man with a moral sense. And God is a ruler, and He created man with a sense of justice. When God saves us, He saves us completely. Every aspect of our being is rescued from sin. Salvation has family, marriage, social, ethical, and legal components. Here Paul explains the legal aspect of our salvation, and to do so he needs to use legal terms.

When verse 24 says we are justified by His grace, Paul is saying that Jesus changed our legal status. In chapter 2 Paul showed that we all are sinful, and in verse 19 he concluded that therefore we are all guilty before God. To be justified means to be cleared of guilt. Suppose you were arrested tonight for dealing cocaine. Eventually you would be tried and found guilty. The prosecution presented incontrovertible evidence of your guilt – supplies of cocaine, witnesses, etc. that left no doubt that you were dealing. So you were locked up for 10 years. But suppose new evidence came to light. Some of the witnesses admitted to lying under oath, and your roommate was found to have planted the coke among your things. The case would be reopened, and you would be found innocent. You would be justified. To be justified does not mean to be forgiven. It does not mean a commuted sentence. It means you are found to be not guilty. Even more, to be justified means you are found innocent. You never committed the crime in the first place.

Now Paul says we are justified. So we are found not guilty, even innocent. This is good news as far as it goes, but there is a grave problem. The problem is, we *are* in fact guilty. Paul proved that in chapter 2. How can God declare us not guilty when we really are? Is God playing a game of pretend? Did God's love overwhelm His justice? No! For how could we live with an unjust God? The answer is in the next verse.

“Propitiation” is a strange word that pleasantly rolls off your tongue. It means “legal satisfaction”. Jesus is our propitiation because He fully satisfied the requirement of divine justice. From the very

beginning God declared that sin has fatal consequences. God warned Adam he would die if he disobeyed God, and Paul repeated this judgment. He said, “those who practice such things are deserving of death,” (Romans 1:32) and later he says, “the wages of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23) The reality is that man has sinned and must die. If God were simply to forgive our sin, He would be unjust. If He were to be just, He would destroy us. What would you do in this situation? If you were a judge and had to chose between justice and love, which would you choose? Most of us would say love, but I think that’s because most of us don’t really care much about justice after all.

I know of a guy who faced this situation. He was a character in a true story told in the book *My Six Convicts*, about the adventures of a psychologist working in Fort Leavenworth Federal Penitentiary. This man had to recruit six convicts to help him in his work, and the book is about them. Connie was a brilliant safe cracker, Punch was a minor Chicago gangster, Gibbs was a car thief, King was a counterfeiter... but they all recognized something entirely different about Scott. He totally stood out in the prison. He had no practical skills in crime and obviously no experience. His attempts to fit in so he would be less subject to harassment by the hardened criminals were comical. Sure enough, he was as innocent as a new-born baby. His “crime” was possession of narcotics, and all the evidence pointed to a young lady, a member of a family close to Scott’s. He was a southern gentleman, steeped in the tradition of loyalty in the old south. Scott confessed to the crime to save her and her family the humiliation of a trial and possible conviction. He served the sentence and one day walked out to resume his life – four years later.¹

You see, justice must be done. God is just, and He made us so that justice is woven into the fabric of humanity. God is also love, and He also made us so that love is part of our nature. You can’t separate the two. But that is what we want to do. We want a cheap and easy salvation. We want an anemic old God who can’t remember our sin very long. We want effortless love. But there is no such thing, and cheap love is unsatisfying. A corrupt judge might have ruined the trial. A selfish young man might have remained silent. Love and justice can meet, but only with the conviction of a lover who takes the place of the criminal.

This is what Jesus did for us. God will be just, and He will be loving – so Jesus had take our sentence. He had to die for us. Although He was God, He suffered death and hell as a human. The brutal whipping, the agony on the cross, the torment of hell – you will never know any of this. But Christ freely, fully conscious of his fate, walked right into death for us. He is your lover who was bound that you might go free, who took death so that you might live. He is your propitiation. God’s justice was fully satisfied. God’s anger was fully exhausted on Christ. There is no more left for you if you believe in Him. One of my favorite hymns says it this way.

Jehovah lifted up His rod: O Christ it fell on Thee!
Thou wast sore stricken of Thy God; there’s not one stroke for me.
Thy tears, Thy blood, beneath it flowed, Thy bruising healeth me.²

So in the death of Christ God is both just and the justifier of His people. Our salvation is not fake justice or false love – it’s divine love and justice met in the death of the one who loves us.

In the face of this awesome love of God, how do your good deeds compare? Pitiful, aren’t they? Are you proud of your virtues? Do you think you are better than your classmates who don’t go to church, are sexually immoral, and get drunk on weekends? Do you think you are a better Christian because you go to

¹ Donald Powell Wilson, *My Six Convicts* (New York: Rinehart & Company, Inc., 1948) p. 56.

² Anne R. Cousin, *Hymns II* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1976) p. 64.

RUF? Sure you do. Sin moves us all toward boasting. We compare ourselves with others, and are impressed with ourselves. But when we compare ourselves with Christ – how pathetic we appear! That’s our problem – we get caught up in ourselves and stop thinking about Christ. Let’s ask God to keep us focused on Christ so we are less boastful of ourselves.

Establishing the Law

So if we cannot please God by keeping the law, is the law expendable? Many Christians think so. They act as though loving Jesus has nothing to do with His father’s law, and some pastors even teach this error. But look at what Paul says in verse 31 – “Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.” In other words, do we negate the law if we live by faith? Is the law irrelevant to those who believe in Jesus? No. In fact, it is only by believing in Jesus that you can keep the law. So Paul spends the rest of the book of Romans demonstrating how faith in Jesus enables us to keep the law.

He begins in chapter 4 with the example of Abraham. He points out that Abraham, the father of the Jews, was saved by faith, not by keeping the law (v. 3). Then he shows that this salvation by faith is for Gentiles as well as Jews. What distinguished the Jews and the Gentiles was circumcision. But God declared Abraham righteous *before* circumcision was introduced. We could say that Abraham was ritually a Gentile when he was saved! If Abraham was saved by faith without being circumcised, then definitely all Gentiles could be saved by faith without becoming Jews first.

Paul wraps up his argument in this chapter by noting that righteousness is *imputed* to those who believe. In verse 22 he quotes Genesis 15:6, “it [i.e. faith] was accounted to him for righteousness.” This is an important concept. Imputation is an accounting term. It refers to how something is entered in an accounting ledger. If you engage in a financial transaction, you will either pay someone else, or he will pay you. It’s the job of your bookkeeper to make sure the transaction is recorded right so that the debit or credit is imputed correctly. The key point here is that righteousness is credited to us when we believe in Christ. You see, not only does Christ take the guilt and suffer the punishment for our sin, we get the credit for His perfect life. Isn’t this amazing? I don’t know about you, but I would be satisfied with losing my sin record. But God goes far beyond that and gives us a record of perfection. So when you stand before God in the judgment day and He opens the books, when He comes to your name He will read, “healed the sick, cast out demons, raised the dead, had compassion on the lost”, etc. God gives you the credit for all the wonderful things Christ did.

Conclusion

So now do you see how perverse it is to think that you could do anything to save yourself, or to add to your salvation? Even if you lived a perfect life, even if you compiled a heavenly record of good deeds without a single sin to mar it, I would be more righteous than you – for I get the credit for what Christ has done! In Christ we get more than we could ever achieve even if we were perfect, for we get the credit for His divine miracles. So if we can’t add to our salvation, what *should* we do?

First, we must love and worship our wonderful savior. Can’t you see that His love is beyond words? Won’t you give yourself to Him unreservedly? What could be better than to follow Him all your life? What human love compares to this divine love? What human lover compares to this divine lover? How could you not love Him in return? Surely only a monster would spurn such love. No – even monsters succumb to love. It is absolutely inhuman to reject such a lover.

Second, won’t you invite others into this love? All around us are lost people futilely struggling

toward hell. You know how to escape the slavery of sin. You know where joy is. Will you keep this to yourself? May God deliver us from such selfishness.

C. David Green
Lehigh University
February 4, 2003