

The Law of Faith

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on August 8, 2021.

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. For we hold that one 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 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 (Romans 3:27–31).¹

Who typically enjoys hearing someone boast about themselves? Probably only the one who boasts. And yet, such a small audience has not detracted from its popularity. It's become increasingly part of our culture, a justified means of self-promotion.

Have you ever wondered why boasting sounds so good to the one who boasts, and often obnoxious to those who hear it? Perhaps it is because the one who boasts is momentarily intoxicated on his or her self-importance while the one who hears it is not. It is only when we are sobered to reality that boasting sounds wrong. But it's not just that boasting sounds wrong, nothing good comes from it.

The giant Goliath boasted, “Am I a dog, that you come to me with sticks? ... Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and to the beasts of the field” (1 Sam. 17:43-44), and he lost the fight and his head (1 Sam. 17:49, 51). King Nebuchadnezzar boasted, “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?” (Dan. 4:30), and that very day “He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles’ feathers, and his nails were like birds’ claws” (Dan. 4:33). Even the great prophet Elijah boasted, “I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left...” (1 Kings 19:14), only to be told by the Lord that there were in fact seven thousand others (1 Kings 19:18). The truth is, as Jesus said, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt. 23:12).

To our proclivity to boast, the Lord says, “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight” (Jer. 9:23). And yet, ignoring what delights the Lord, we continue to boast in our wisdom, might, and riches, and even in our religion. The Jew boasted of his heritage, his circumcision, his keeping the law. Perhaps the Christian boasts of her choice, her baptism, verses memorized, quiet times kept. Regardless, whether masked with religious terms of endearment, it's still as wrong as Goliath's rant or Nebuchadnezzar's arrogance.

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

“Then what becomes of our boasting?” What silences it? One possible answer is the perfect standard of God’s law. Indeed, “The law of the LORD is perfect, . . .the testimony of the LORD is sure, . . .the precepts of the LORD are right, . . .the commandment of the LORD is pure. . .” (Ps. 19:7-8). All of this is true, yet the rich young ruler could boast, “All of these I have kept” (Matt. 19:20). Even Paul could boast, “as to righteousness under the law, blameless” (Phil. 3:6).

Although the law of God is perfect, sure, right, and pure it will not silence our boasting alone. Why? Because apart from the gospel of God’s grace, the law alone becomes a law of works, and as long as it is up to you or me, then we have something to boast about, even if it’s wrong. No, boasting will never be silenced by a law of works—only a law of faith. In other words, our boasting can only be silenced by faith.

Silenced by Faith

It sounds counterintuitive, doesn’t it? Why is our boasting silenced not by a law of works but of faith? For one reason, while “The law of the LORD is perfect,” I am not; while “the testimony of the LORD is sure,” mine is not; while “the precepts of the LORD are right,” mine are wrong; while “the commandment of the LORD is pure,” I am a commandment breaker (Ps. 19:7-8). But Christ is not. He is perfect, sure, and right, and obeyed the law. Therefore, my faith is in him, not my works, so my boasting is silenced.

Another reason is that like a spiritual x-ray, the law reveals my sin, but offers no treatment for it. Of course, my sinful flesh tries to hide my sin, encouraging me to do a little better and try a little harder, but no matter how hard I try, the x-ray of God’s law tells the truth of my sin. But Christ “committed no sin” (1 Pet. 2:22) and was “without sin” (Heb. 4:15). And for my sin, God “made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). This God does not through a law of works but through faith: “For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us. . .” (Rom. 8:3-4). Boasting is silenced when our faith is in what God has done in Christ alone.

But there is a third reason that our boasting is silenced by faith. Even our faith is not our work but is a gift from God. A gift is given and received not earned and paid. Paul explains it this way: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9). If faith were derived from within us and our efforts, if we made the decision to believe or chose to follow Jesus, then perhaps we could boast of our decision or brag of our choice. But that is not the case: faith is a gift, “so that no one may boast.”

Justified by Faith

To understand this further, Paul explains that, as Christians, “we hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.” To be justified is to be in legal right-standing. By faith, the Christian is justified as perfectly righteous before God.

Though an essential doctrine of the Christian faith, justification is misunderstood by many, believer and unbeliever alike. Some allege that sinners like you and me believe we are perfect. The misunderstanding is understandable. In actuality, we believe that no Christian is perfectly righteous *but* that every Christian is perfectly righteous. Perfectly clear, right?

The Shorter Catechism is helpful here, stating, “Justification is an act of God’s free grace by which he pardons all our sins and accepts us as righteous in his sight, only because of the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, received by faith alone.”² Our sins are pardoned, and we are accepted as righteous by God not for our works or cooperation with God but by his grace. He is neither manipulated nor persuaded by anything we do but acts monergistically according to his good pleasure and for his glory.

Rightly can it be said that we are *not* perfectly righteous, because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). Though, rightly can it be said that all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ *are* perfectly righteous, because “we are justified by [God’s] grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:24-25a). The key distinction is that God pardons and accepts “because of the righteousness of Christ imputed to us.” Our righteousness, as it were, is an alien righteousness, “so that no one may boast.”

However, someone might argue that although faith is a gift, we do use that gift, doing our part in our justification. But even this is wrong, because even what we do is not our own doing. As Paul explained to Titus, “[God] saved us, not because of our works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior” (Titus 3:5-6). It is the Holy Spirit who brings us to life and enables us to believe. Our justification is indeed an “act of God’s free grace,” and thank God we had nothing to do with it, “so that no one may boast.”

Therefore, this we know, as Paul reminded the Galatians, “a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified” (Gal. 2:16). Paul’s redundancy is intentional, as should be our own. Our justification by faith is a truth worth repeating, over and over again.

Upheld by Faith

If we are justified by faith not by works, what is the place of God’s law in our life? “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith?” Or, does our faith nullify the law? It is important for us to remember that Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17). Christ perfectly fulfilled the righteous requirement of God for us in his obedience to the law and his atoning death, but that which he fulfilled and our faith in him does not nullify the law. “On the contrary,” as Paul puts it, “we uphold the law,” not by works but by faith.

² David Snoke, trans., *The Westminster Shorter Catechism in Modern English* (Pittsburgh: City Reformed Presbyterian Church), 5, <https://www.cityreformed.org/uploads/9/8/8/6/98869954/wsc.pdf>.

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In fact, God's law plays a prominent part in the Christian's life, not as a means of salvation but as God's perfect standard of righteousness. The one who is justified by faith is also sanctified by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit through whom we desire and strive for righteousness in our life. In fact, a desire to obey the law is a testimony of our conversion. James Boice puts it bluntly, "If a person does not strive to live a moral life according to the law of God, the failure proves that he or she is neither regenerated nor justified."³ Or, as John Calvin put it simply, "It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone."⁴

Practically speaking, one of the key manifestations of this truth in the Christian life, though often ignored, is sacrificial love for others. Later in Romans Paul returns to this very theme, writing, "Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments...are summed up in this word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:8-10). Because our boasting has been silenced by faith, because we are justified by faith, we uphold the truth of God's law in our life, notably through love. In fact, love does not boast (1 Cor. 13:4). In this sense, our boasting becomes loving.

Far from a license to sin, faith has freed us to love others as God loves us. The Christian has not been liberated from legalism to become enslaved to licentiousness. God, forbid! "How can we who died to sin still live in it?" (Rom. 6:2). No, we must heed Paul's caution to the Galatians, "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' (Gal. 5:13-14).

Love lived out in the Christian life is a beautiful thing, revealing not a boastful arrogance but a sacrificial love, not a life of works to find God's favor but a display of God's unmerited favor through loving others as Christ loved us. For it was for love that God the Father sent his Son; it was for love that God the Son atoned for sin; it is for love that God the Spirit conforms us to God's perfect law. This our one God has done and is doing, not by a law of works but by the law of faith. And so, brothers and sisters-in-Christ, by faith and in love, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1 Cor. 1:31).

³ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1991), 1:421.

⁴ John Calvin, "Acts of the Council of Trent with the Antidote," *Monergism*, accessed August 5, 2021, https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/calvin_trentantidote.html.