

Pr Mark Turner: Getting Right with God. The Gospel According to Paul (2/11/19)

Scripture Reading: Romans 3:20-28

Introduction:

It is often far more motivating to study the Bible with a question in mind that you want to find an answer for. That way you are digging throughout scripture with a purpose. The challenge, however, that presents itself when we come to the Bible with a question, is that the terminology of our question will not necessarily be found in Scripture.

For example, if my question was 'how do I get right with God?' I am not necessarily going to find anything in the concordance that matches those words. So we need to find a Biblical term for what we are seeking to know about.

To find out about getting right with God we could look up the word 'salvation' in the concordance. But upon looking that word up, we would probably find that it was quite a broad term. So, rather than picking a broad term like salvation, we are going to use a more refined term today 'justification.'

Upon looking up the word justification we would find prominent theological passages in Romans and Galatians, but we would also have to consider the book of James, which also talks about Justification.

The challenge when we do that, is that this raises a bit of a conundrum, as James and Paul seem to contradict each other.

Paul's justification theology, as seen in the book of Romans, was that a man is 'justified' by faith - apart from the deeds of the law (see Romans 3:28). To come to this conclusion, Paul uses Abraham as his case study (Romans 4:1-5). Whereas James' justification theology says that Abraham, the same case study, was justified by works (see James 2:21-23).

What does it mean to be Justified?

Being justified (right with God), is an important experience for everyone, because it is this that brings peace to the soul.

So, with this in mind, let's see what the Bible says about justification.

We could have chosen the term 'reconciliation' to understand getting right with God. If we had have, we would have found that the term reconciliation in Scripture is used to describe getting into a right relationship with God.

Whereas the word we have chosen is the word 'justification,' which is a legal term, and refers to getting into right standing with God.

In the Bible, justification is a legal term. It is used of a favourable verdict in a trial. It is the opposite of condemnation. It means "to acquit," and "to declare righteous" (See Deuteronomy 25:1).

Justification takes place in the context of judgment (See Romans 2:13; Matthew 12:36-37). Therefore, to be justified is to "be right with God."

The Problem:

Paul begins the epistle to the Romans by making a clear argument for what theologians call 'Universal Condemnation.' (see Romans 1:18-3:20).

All the world stands under condemnation, Jews and Gentiles alike (see Romans 3:9).

“For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” **Romans 3:23**

There are two problems presented in this verse:

1. The record of the past (“all have sinned”)
2. The falling short in the present (“all...fall short of the glory of God”)

We all have a tainted record. Yes, since Adam, we have received an inheritance of condemnation. Yet, we have also all made choices in the past and stand condemned. But that isn't the only problem. Even on our best days, Paul says, we fall short of the standard of God's good character in our present situation.

Imagine for a moment, that you were 1 million dollars indebted to someone. That is something like our situation. We have all accrued a massive debt that we are unable to pay! Then imagine someone came along and had compassion on you and paid that debt. You now stand free of debt, yet you are still without anything. You have aspirations of being in the millionaires club, but in order to get there, you need someone to give you another million dollars so that you have credit in your account.

In a similar way, when God forgives us for our sins, our debt has been cancelled. But in order for us to be declared 'righteous' we need someone to come along and offer us righteousness as credit on account.

That should give us a hint at the sense of hopelessness that attends our condition. We are in dire straits!

What are the 'Deeds of the Law?'

Bible Study Principle #1: Ask - What is the Author's intent?

Bible Study Principle #2: Don't read your experience into the text.

“Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.” **Romans 3:20**

What does this phrase, 'deeds of the law,' actually mean in Paul's writings?

- It became the traditional Protestant view that Paul means that 'good works performed don't produce justification.' Largely as a result of the way that Martin Luther read his experience into the book of Romans.
- More recently, the popular Protestant understanding of Paul's use of this term has been updated. It is now believed that he meant that 'what the law required of Israel, as God's people, does not produce justification (e.g. circumcision).

Paul only uses this phrase, 'deeds of the law,' in the epistles in which he was addressing the topic of circumcision. It seems that this addressing circumcision was Paul's primary intention.

The righteousness of God was manifested 'apart from the law' (see Romans 3:21,22).

Paul is specifically addressing the fact that Salvation was available to all - not just the Jews. So, he concludes, it is not through those distinctly Jewish ceremonies that someone is made right with God (see Romans 3:28,29).

The truth of this, Paul says, was witnessed in the Old Testament (the law and the prophets). Abraham (from the Torah - law) was justified by faith, and David (from the prophets) was also justified by faith.

Abraham's example illustrates having righteousness credited to our account, and David's experience illustrates that not only was his debt cancelled, but his account was also credited with God's righteousness.

What is 'Faith?'

If this is true, that righteousness is both credited and debts cancelled by faith, the next question needs to be 'what does it mean to have faith?'

“But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference” **Romans 3:21,22**

Bible Study Principle #3: Compare Bible translations.

In the KJV and the NKJV it says ‘through faith in Jesus Christ.’ From the Greek text it could either be translated ‘through the faithfulness of Jesus’ or ‘through faith in Jesus.’

It’s not critical, but Pastor Mark prefers the translation that puts all the emphasis upon Jesus’ faithfulness, rather than our faith (which only accesses His faithfulness toward me).

As we put our complete trust and confidence in the action of Jesus, in staying faithful to death, we are forgiven our debts and credited with His righteousness. So, Paul says, our entire confidence needs to be in God’s promise, provision, and power.

Our actions, important as they may be, are not the foundation for our justification. Circumcision, Paul says, may be important, but it is not the foundation for acceptance with God.

Conclusion:

“We have no righteousness of our own with which to meet the claims of the law of God. But Christ has made a way of escape for us. He lived on earth amid trials and temptations such as we have to meet. He lived a sinless life. He died for us, and now He offers to take our sins and give us His righteousness. If you give yourself to Him and accept Him as your Saviour, then, sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ’s character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had not sinned.”

Ellen White, The Steps to Christ, pg 62

Our good works, important as they are, are not able to get us right with God. When we get right with Him, the works will follow, but God’s acceptance is based solely on the merits of our Saviour - Jesus.

“The thought that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us, not because of any merit on our part, but as a free gift from God, is a precious thought. The enemy of God and man is not willing that this truth should be clearly presented; for he knows that if the people receive it fully, his power will be broken. If he can control minds so that doubt and unbelief and darkness shall compose the experience of those who claim to be the children of God, he can overcome them with temptation.”

Ellen White, Gospel Workers, pg 161

Where is your confidence today? Is it in your ‘Adventism?’ Your deeds? Or is it in Christ?