

## Lesson 38 at StudyRomans.org

When we ended last week, we were looking at the final phrase in verse 25 — “because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.” And we noticed that Paul used a very unusual Greek word in that phrase — a word that is found only here in the New Testament. Paul did not say that those former sins were forgiven or remitted, but instead Paul said that those former sins had gone unpunished.

We talked last week about the significance of that word, and why Paul used it here. And Paul continues his explanation of that very unusual word in verse 26.

### **Romans 3:26**

**Romans 3:26** — It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

The previous verse told us that God allowed those former sins to go unpunished. Did that show God’s righteousness or unrighteousness? Absent Christ, it would have been unrighteousness. Why? Because sin deserves punishment, and so it is not right to allow sin to go unpunished.

**Proverbs 17:15** — He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD.

But under Christ, allowing those former sins to go unpunished showed the opposite. Under Christ, that lack of punishment showed God’s righteousness. Why? Because God later forgave those sins

with the power of the gospel. That was why those former sins were not punished — God knew that those sins would later be forgiven by the blood of Christ. And so that lack of punishment showed God’s righteousness.

And **when** did God show his righteousness this way? Paul tells us right here — God did that in **the present time**. And, again, that temporal phrase confirms what we said last week about the timing. Sins by God’s faithful people under the first covenant were allowed to go unpunished prior to the cross, but those sins were not forgiven or remitted until the time of the cross (which is “the present time” here in verse 26).

I think that timing explains why the faithful people of God under the old covenant went to be with Abraham when they died (Luke 16:22), while the faithful people of God under the new covenant go to be with Christ when they die as Paul quite frequently tells us (Philippians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:14). Paul said that his desire was “to depart and be with Christ” — not to depart and be with Abraham.

Prior to the cross and as we see in Luke 16, the faithful people of God could not dwell in the presence of God because, while their sins had not been punished, they had also not yet been forgiven. But all of that changed after the cross.

After the cross, there is nothing preventing the faithful people of God from approaching the throne of God — in fact, we can do so with confidence (Hebrews 4:16)! Ephesians 3:12 says that “we have **boldness** and **access** with **confidence** through our faith in” Christ. Why? Because our sins have not just been unpunished, but now our sins have been forgiven. We have been cleansed by the blood of Christ, but of

course that could not have happened prior to when that blood was shed.

And perhaps Luke 16 also helps us answer another question — **when** did these former sins of faithful people under the old covenant go unpunished? Was it during their lifetime or after their death?

There's an obvious problem with saying that their sins were not punished during their lifetime, and that problem is this: sometimes God's faithful people were punished during their lifetime. King David, for example, was severely punished during his lifetime for his sin with Bathsheba.

But what about after David's death? We know that David broke the law. Was David punished as a lawbreaker after his death? No, he was not. I think we know that David went to the same place where we find Abraham and Lazarus in Luke 16 — and that was a place of comfort rather than a place of punishment.

But that place of comfort was not yet with Christ before the throne of God. Why not? Because, while David's sins were unpunished, David's sins were not yet forgiven. And that was also true about Abraham and Lazarus. But, again, that all changed at the cross.

I think the lack of punishment that we see here in Romans 3 occurred after death. In fact, I think we can see this "passing over" of sin when we look at Abraham and Lazarus in Luke 16. I think they were both experiencing the "passing over" of sin described in Romans 3:25.

But that's just a parable, right? Well, maybe — but maybe not.

Remember the prodigal son? Let me ask you a question about him: what was his name? What was his father's name? What was his brother's name? What was the name of the good Samaritan? What was the name of the unjust judge? What was the name of the unmerciful servant? What was the name of the rich fool? Of course, they don't have names. None of those characters was named by Jesus in his parables.

But what about the rich man and Lazarus? There we find a name. In fact, there we find three names: Lazarus, Abraham, and Moses. And those three names are not the only such details we see. The rich man did not just have some brothers — we are told that he had five brothers. And, unlike some other stories from Christ, the Bible never refers to this account as a parable.

So maybe it's a parable, but maybe it's not. Does it matter? Not really. Why not? Because parables are **not** fables. A parable is a true-to-life story that could have happened. We don't find any talking animals or talking trees in the parables as we do in Aesop's fables.

And, so, for example, if we are wondering whether there is consciousness in the afterlife, whether there is memory in the afterlife, or whether there is mutual recognition in the afterlife, I think we can answer yes to all of those questions based on Luke 16. And we can do that whether or not this is a parable. Jesus would not have taught us something false about the afterlife in this story about the afterlife — and that is true whether or not this story is a parable or a real event.

But if it is not a parable, then that does open up some very interesting possibilities. To whom was this story directed? Luke 16:14 tells us it

was directed to some Pharisees who were ridiculing Jesus. Did that group perhaps include that dead rich man's five brothers? Was Jesus simply passing along that rich man's message to them? And did their response prove Abraham right when they ignored that message from their dead brother? How many times had they stepped over Lazarus on their way to their brother's house, likely never even knowing his name?

And what happens immediately after we die? Are the faithful people of God carried to their destination by angels? Lazarus was. Is that perhaps why we find Satan and Michael disputing about the body of Moses in Jude 9? Was Satan complaining that God was allowing Moses' sins to go unpunished? As I said — some very interesting possibilities! And, yes, some of it is speculation — but there is nothing wrong with speculation when it is labeled as such and when it is based on what we find in the Bible.

But back to our question about verses 25 and 26 — **when** were those sins allowed to go unpunished? As I said, I think it was after death. When Abraham died, his sins had not yet been forgiven by the blood of Christ. When Lazarus died, his sins had not yet been forgiven by the blood of Christ. Both of them deserved punishment — and yet neither was punished. Why not? Because Jesus was coming to die for them — just as surely as Jesus was also coming to die for those of us who live after the cross.

Is there a verse somewhere that describes that great event when the faithful people of God under the old covenant were forgiven by the blood of Christ and were finally able to come before the throne of God with confidence? I think there is, and I think it is a prophecy in Psalm 68:18 that Paul quotes in Ephesians:

**Ephesians 4:8** — Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.”

I think what that verse is telling us is that when Jesus ascended back to God the Father, Jesus did not go alone. I think that Jesus took the faithful people of God under the old covenant with him. I think they are the “host of captives” in the prophecy. And I think they are the same group whose sins went unpunished in Romans 3:25.

Moving on, Paul once again adds some additional explanation at the end of the verse — “so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” What does that mean?

First, I think that statement tells us something that might seem surprising at first but that shouldn’t be surprising — I think it confirms that the faithful people of God under the first covenant had faith in Jesus. In fact, they were saved by faith in Jesus.

I think Paul already told us that when he quoted the prophet Habakkuk in Romans 1:17 — “The righteous shall live by faith.” And I think Paul tells us that again here in verse 26 when he refers to God as the justifier of “the one who has faith in Jesus.” I think that description certainly must include those under discussion in the previous verse — those under the old covenant whose former sins were left unpunished.

Oh, but some might say, that was faith in God the Father rather than faith in God the Son. What? How can anyone have faith in God the Father without also having faith in God the Son? When has that ever been possible?

There is no way for anyone to be saved absent faith in Christ, and that is true both before and after the cross. As we said last week, Paul told us in Galatians 3:8 that the gospel was proclaimed to Abraham. And listen to the Hebrews writer's description of Moses:

**Hebrews 11:26** — He considered **the reproach of Christ** greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.

The reproach of Christ? What is that if it is not persecution for the sake of Christ? And what is that if it is not an example of Moses' faith in Christ?

Although the people of God prior to the cross did not have the full revelation of God's word about Christ, they did have a revelation from God about Christ. We can find Jesus on every page of the old law, from the first page to the last page. The gospel was proclaimed to Abraham in Genesis 22. And we know that the prophets all pointed to the coming Messiah, as did the many Messianic psalms of King David. When the people had faith in God the Father and believed his promises about the coming Messiah, the people also had faith in God the Son. When the people had faith in God the Father and believed the promises about the Son of God in Psalm 2, the people also had faith in God the Son.

**Deuteronomy 18:15** — The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers — it is to him you shall listen.

When the people had faith in that great promise, they had faith in Christ — their promised Messiah.

Finally, what does Paul mean in verse 26 when he refers to God both as “just” and as “the justifier”?

As we see in the English text, we also see two forms of the same word in the Greek text. The Greek word translated “just” is an adjective meaning innocent, and the Greek word translated “justifier” is a noun meaning one who renders innocent. And so Paul is saying that God is innocent and that God renders us innocent as well. God is just, and God justifies us.

And the end of verse 26 confirms what we said earlier about Jesus being the only way to God the Father. Everyone who has ever been saved — either those who lived before the cross or those who lived after the cross — has been saved through faith in Christ. That is what verse 26 is telling us: God is the justifier of the one who has faith **in Jesus**.

And why does Paul remind us here that God is just? Because it is only the cross of Christ that allows God to be both just and the justifier of sinners who have faith in Christ. Absent Christ, God would have to choose between being just and justifying sinners. But the sacrifice of Christ allows God to be both just and the justifier of the unjust who have faith in Christ.

If we were able to keep the law perfectly, then we would be innocent; we would be just. But we are not able to keep the law perfectly. Does that mean that we can never be just? That we can never be innocent? Not at all. The promise of the gospel is that we can be just; we can be innocent. But only through faith in Christ.

As we said when we first looked at the word “justification,” we sometimes hear that the word justify means that I am just as if I had never

sinned. And perhaps there is some sense in which we can say that, but that statement is not precisely correct.

Why not? Because there is a difference. If I had never sinned — if I had kept the law perfectly — then I would definitely have reason to boast about that. But, having been justified by faith in Christ and having received the free gift of God’s grace, I don’t have any reason to boast in that way, and Paul deals with that issue in the next verse.

**Romans 3:27**

**Romans 3:27** — 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.

So far we have seen at least two big differences between justification by the law and justification by faith.

- The first difference is that justification by the law is impossible because none of us can keep the law perfectly, but justification by faith is possible because it does not require anything we are unable to do. As Paul will explain in Romans 10, it is God who has done all of the hard work under the system of faith.
- The second difference is that justification by the law would give me a reason to boast because I would have kept the law perfectly and justified myself. But justification by faith excludes my boasting about myself because it is based, not on something I have done, but on something God has done.

Verse 27 is all about that second difference. Our boasting in what we have done is excluded by the law of faith.

But is all boasting excluded? No. If we want to boast about something under the law of faith, Paul tells us elsewhere what our boast should be.

**1 Corinthians 1:31** — So that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

**2 Corinthians 11:30** — If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

**Galatians 6:14** — But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

So when we are told that boasting is excluded, it is referring to a boast about what we have done. The law of faith is based on what God has done, not on what I have done — and so it makes no sense for me to boast about anything I have done when it comes to the law of faith. But I can boast about what God has done!

Now, before we leave verse 27, let’s focus a bit more closely on that phrase “the law of faith.” I thought that Paul has been contrasting law and faith — how can he now be telling us about a law of faith? How can there ever be such a law if law and faith are opposites?

The answer, of course, is that law and faith are not opposites. The opposites here are not law and faith, but instead the opposites are works and faith. The opposites are justification based on what I have done versus justification based on what God has done. One of those is a law of works, and the other one is a law of faith — but both are laws. Paul calls each of them a law right here in verse 27.

And this is not the only verse where we see that law of faith:

**Romans 8:2** — For **the law of the Spirit of life** has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death.

**1 Corinthians 9:21** — To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under **the law of Christ**) that I might win those outside the law.

**James 1:25** — But the one who looks into **the perfect law, the law of liberty**, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.

The opposite of faith is not law. If anything, the opposite of faith is sight (2 Corinthians 5:7) or perhaps meritorious works (verse 27 right here) — but not law. The opposite of faith is not law.

If there is something God has commanded us to do, then we live under a law from God — and that has been true ever since the Garden. Adam and Eve lived under a law from God, which they broke. The Patriarchs lived under a law from God, as did the people of Israel. Even Gentiles prior to the cross lived under a law from God written on their hearts as Paul has already explained. And we today also live under a law from God — Paul calls it the law of Christ in 1 Corinthians 9:21. Has there ever been a time in human history when people did not live under a law from God? I don't think so.

And so where are we at the end of verse 27? The law **of works** is just that — a law that demands works. And the law **of faith** is just that — a law that demands faith. The law of works encourages boasting about what I have done, but the law of faith excludes such boasting.

### Romans 3:28

**Romans 3:28** — For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.

“For we hold.” Who are “we”?

As I discovered this past week in researching that question, there is much to learn from a study of Paul’s pronouns! Throughout his letters, Paul sometimes uses **singular** first person pronouns (I, me, my) and other times uses **plural** first person pronouns (we, us, our). We have certainly see that so far in Romans. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel” in Romans 1:16 versus “we hold that one is justified by faith” here in Romans 3:28. Why the switch? And what can we learn from it? And do you know what I think will help us answer that question? Math!

The Handout for Lesson 38 shows the percentages of first person singular versus first person plural pronouns for each of Paul’s letters (where again, and as always, we are excluding Hebrews from that list due to the lack of certainty as to its authorship). For each of the 13 letters, we can see the counts and the percentages of first person singular pronouns versus first person plural pronouns found in that letter.

What stands out from this data? Look, for example, at Philippians and 1 Thessalonians. They are almost complete opposites. 93% of the first person pronouns in Philippians are **singular**, while 96% of the first person pronouns in 1 Thessalonians are **plural**. Why is that?

Well, what does Paul do in Philippians? He shows his deep personal affection for the church in Philippi, and he includes a deeply per-

sonal and autobiographical prison narrative in the middle of the letter. Philippians was more like a personal letter between friends than it was a letter written to settle a dispute or condemn false teaching. And when you put all of that together, you get 93% first person **singular** pronouns — despite that letter being from both Paul and Timothy!

And 1 Thessalonians? Why do we see the opposite there? Again, that letter also came from multiple people — Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy — but here that fact seems to have driven the use of plural pronouns. And the lack of big controversy meant that Paul did not need to assert his individual apostolic authority. Instead, the tone is warm, grateful, and pastoral — and so we see a 96% usage of first person **plural** pronouns — the opposite of Philippians.

Here is a fun exercise — do the same thing for the other epistles. Why do the singular pronouns pick back up in 2 Thessalonians? Why are there a lot fewer plural pronouns in 2 Timothy than in 1 Timothy? Why does 2 Corinthians have both a high plural percentage and a high singular percentage (at least as high as possible when they are both high)?

And Romans? What can we say about the data for Romans? We know that Paul was writing to a congregation he did not found and had never visited, which means that he needed to introduce himself and establish his apostolic credentials. But we also know that the letter contains a great deal of theological argument in which Paul might use plural pronouns for rhetorical effect (“we know,” “we hold,” “let us”). Perhaps those two facts explain the close balance between singular and plural first person pronouns that we find in Romans.

And that observation leads us to a final question about these pronouns — what are the reasons why Paul might write a letter and use a plural pronoun? We have already seen a few reasons, but are there others? Let's list them.

- Paul might use a plural pronoun when he is making an argument based on some common ground or some common experience shared with his readers. I think we see that in Romans 2:2 — “**We know** that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.” Paul expected everyone to agree with that.
- Paul might use a plural pronoun when his letter came from both Paul and his missionary team. I think that is what we see in 1 Thessalonians.
- Paul might use a plural pronoun when he is speaking as part of a larger group — such as the Jews or all of mankind. I think we see that in Romans 4:1 — “What then shall **we say** was gained by Abraham, **our** forefather according to the flesh?”
- Finally, Paul might use a plural pronoun to better draw his readers along with him in reaching a shared conclusion. I think that is what we see right here in verse 28 — “For **we hold** that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” And I think we will see that again in another famous “we” verse — “What shall **we say** then? Are **we to continue** in sin that grace may abound?” (Romans 6:1)

Now that we have considered Paul's choice of pronouns, let's look at what Paul said after the pronoun! “For we hold that one is justified

by faith apart from works of the law.” What does that mean, and why did Paul say it here?

We know what it means. Paul is simply telling us again what he has been telling us all along in this section of the letter — that our salvation is a gift freely given to us by God. We did nothing to merit it. We did nothing to earn it. We did nothing to deserve it. We have no right to demand it. That, in fact, is the definition of a gift that is freely given, and that describes the gift of God’s grace.

But is that the only way to be justified before God? Yes and no. Yes, from a practical standpoint, but no from a theoretical standpoint. If we could keep the law perfectly, then we would be justified before God. But only in theory. Why only in theory? Because no one but Jesus was ever able to keep the law perfectly. As Paul has already proven, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And so, with the path of perfection off the table, what path is left? The path of faith.

Faith in Christ is the only path to justification before God. And that is what verse 28 is telling us — “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” We are justified by faith. We are not justified by works of the law because we are all lawbreakers. Lawbreakers cannot depend on the law to save them.

I think we should view verse 28 as a bookend to an earlier verse in Romans.

**Romans 2:13** — For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified.

Like Romans 3:28, Romans 2:13 also tells us how we can be justified — we can be a doer of the law. But, alas, as Paul has carefully proven, none of us is a doer of the law. Instead, we are all breakers of the law.

And so that leaves us with the only remaining path to justification, which is the path found here in Romans 3:28 — “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” That path is open to all and attainable by all who will obey the gospel of Christ.

And speaking of obedience to the gospel, let’s ask another question: is verse 28 giving us a contrast between **believing** things and **doing** things? Is that Paul’s point here? That the old path was a **doing** path, but the new path is a **believing** path?

At least one well-known commentator (Moo) thinks so. Here is what he wrote about verse 28:

“The contrast in this verse therefore supports a fundamental Pauline antithesis: between believing on the one hand and all forms of human ‘doing’ on the other. ... A serious erosion of the full significance of Paul’s gospel occurs if we soften this antithesis; no works, whatever their nature or their motivation, can play any part in making a sinner right with God.”

That view is completely wrong. That view is not at all what Paul is saying here. Paul knew that his salvation was not based on any sort of meritorious works, but Paul also knew that he had done something that played a part in his salvation — he had been baptized to have his sins washed away (Acts 22:16). Paul had, as he explains elsewhere, worked out his own salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12).

That commentator we just quoted said that no form of human “doing” could play any part in making a sinner right with God. But is that what the Bible says? Is that the example of Scripture? Is that what we see with the first gospel sermon preached on the very day that the church was established in Acts 2? No, it is not.

What did Peter’s listeners ask in Acts 2:37? “Brothers, what shall we **think?**” No — they did not ask that. Instead, they asked, “Brothers, what shall we **do?**”

And Peter did not just tell them what they must think. Instead, Peter told them what they must do. Peter answered their question in the very next verse:

“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

That is not the answer that commentator just gave us! That commentator’s answer to the question in Acts 2:37 would have been, “Nothing! No form of human ‘doing’ plays any part in your salvation!” But that was not Peter’s answer, was it? They asked Peter what they must do to be saved, and Peter told them what they must do to be saved.

Peter, does any form of human “doing” play some part in my salvation? Peter answered that question with a resounding, “Yes!” in Acts 2:38.

Paul, does that human “doing” mean that I have earned my salvation? Does it mean that I have merited my salvation? Does it mean that God now owes me my salvation? Does it give me a right to demand my sal-

vation? Paul answers all of those questions with a resounding, “No!” in this letter to the Romans.