

Lesson 39 at StudyRomans.org

As we work through Romans, it is important that we consider the entirety of God's word on these topics. The Handout for Lesson 39 is the first of a series of handouts that I plan to prepare to help us do that.

As you can see, this Handout is focused on Romans 3:21-31, and it shows parallel passages in which Paul dealt with the same or similar issues in his other epistles. My list of parallel passages is certainly not exhaustive, but I have tried to include the closest parallels that I could find.

As you can also see from the Handout, the closest parallel to Romans 3 is likely Galatians 3. We are not going to take a deep dive into Galatians in this class on Romans, but it is important for us to keep Galatians and these other parallels (as well as the entirety of the Bible) in mind to make sure we don't go astray in our study of Romans.

The easiest way to misunderstand the Bible is to lift a verse or a passage out of context and then to try to understand it in a vacuum. If we ever get in the habit of ignoring parts of the Bible or skipping over the hard parts of the Bible, then we will very quickly find ourselves in trouble.

- God's word makes us complete (2 Timothy 3:17), but if we ignore part of God's word, then we risk being incomplete.
- We cannot declare the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27) if we do not know the whole counsel of God.

- We cannot teach others to observe all that Jesus has commanded (Matthew 28:20) if we do not know all that Jesus has commanded.
- We cannot live by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matthew 4:4) if we ignore any of those words that we have been given by God.
- We cannot be like those noble Bereans in Acts 17:11 if we keep our Bibles closed.
- The word of Christ cannot dwell in us richly (Colossians 3:16) if we do not know the word of Christ.
- We cannot be “careful to do according to all that is written in” the Bible (Joshua 1:8) if we do not know all that is written in the Bible.

And so my plan is to also do for the later sections of Romans what this Handout does for the second half of Romans 3. I have found that approach very helpful, and you may as well.

Romans 3:29

Romans 3:29 — Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also,

We have already dealt with the misunderstanding that being saved apart from works means you don't have to do anything to be saved. We know that's not right. Instead, being saved apart from works of the law means that we can't work our way to Heaven. We can't earn our salvation. We can't put God in our debt.

But the misunderstanding that Paul is addressing in verse 29 is different. The misunderstanding here is that justification by faith apart from works of the law is just a Jewish thing. Under this view, the reason why Gentiles are not justified by works of the law is not that they can't keep the law (although that's true), but rather that they don't have the law.

But that is not right. In fact, Paul has already told us it is not right. Back in Romans 2:14-15, Paul explained how the Gentiles, even without the law of Moses, still had the work of the law written on their hearts — a law to which they were accountable, and a law that they broke.

And, in fact, Paul made that same point again in the previous verse — “For we hold that **one** is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” The Greek word translated “one” in verse 28 is *anthropos*, which is a very broad term that just means a human being.

Paul was talking about everyone in verse 28. And Paul emphasizes that point here in verse 29: “Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also.”

Yes, the Jews were God's chosen people — but that did not mean that God was not also the God of the Gentiles. God is the God of everyone. That is true today, and that has always been true.

But the common Jewish view was different. The Jewish view was that, while God might be the God of the Gentiles by virtue of having created them, God was not the God of the Gentiles in the sense that the Gentiles could ever enjoy a meaningful relationship with God. That special blessing was reserved only for the Jews.

Under that view, for a Gentile to have any hope of a relationship with God, that Gentile first had to become a Jew. That Gentile had to live under the Torah. We see Paul fighting against that false view in many of his letters. And I think that is what Paul is doing right here in verse 29 as well.

God is not just the God of the Jews. God is also the God of the Gentiles. And so the one path to God is not just a path for the Jews, but it is also a path for the Gentiles.

Yes, Paul has been talking to the Gentiles and to the Jews in this letter, and, yes, he has often been doing so separately up to this point. But when it comes to the issue of salvation in Christ there are no divisions of any sort. That inexpressible gift of grace is open to all. There is no distinction.

God is the God of all mankind, and God has opened the door for all mankind to obey the gospel and enjoy salvation in Christ.

Romans 3:30

Romans 3:30 — since God is one — who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

Paul really drives the knife home here in verse 30 when it comes to the false view that salvation in Christ was something only for the Jews. How does Paul do that?

What was always the most basic and most distinctive difference between Judaism and the other religions of the world? Monotheism.

There is not a pantheon of gods, but there is only one God. That fact about God was always at the heart of Judaism.

Deuteronomy 6:4 — Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

And here in verse 30, Paul takes that most basic and most distinctive Jewish belief — and he turns it against them!

Paul says that the fact that God is one means that God must be the God of the Gentiles. If not, then wouldn't that mean there are two gods — the God of the Jews and the God of the Gentiles? God is one — and so the God of the Jews and the God of the Gentiles must be the same God. Again, that is just Paul the logician in action.

But then Paul adds another phrase — and it is a phrase that, as one writer puts it, “has stimulated the ingenuity of commentators for years.” What Paul says next is that God “will justify the circumcised **by** faith and the uncircumcised **through** faith.”

At one level, the meaning of that phrase is immediately clear and is simply a restatement of what Paul has been saying all along. Both the circumcised (the Jews) and the uncircumcised (the Gentiles) are sinners who need to be saved, and both the Jews and the Gentiles are saved the same way — faith in Christ. In fact, at that level, the end of verse 30 is simply a restatement of the great theme that we saw back in Romans 1.

Romans 1:16 — For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Faith is the path to salvation for the Jews. And faith is the path to salvation for the Gentiles. Faith is the path to salvation for everyone, and faith is the only path to salvation.

But where is the controversy? Where does all of that ingenuity come in? What is so hard to understand about this verse? I can answer those questions with a single word — **prepositions!** The prepositions are different! Paul says that God “will justify the circumcised **by** faith and the uncircumcised **through** faith.” Why does Paul use two different words — one for the Jews and another for the Gentiles?

First, let’s look at the Greek text.

- The Greek word translated “by” to describe the circumcised is “ek” (Strong’s # 1537). That Greek word is a preposition denoting origin or the point from which action or motion proceeds. It is usually translated “of,” “from,” “out of,” “by,” “on,” or “with.”
- The Greek word translated “through” to describe the uncircumcised is “dia” (Strong’s # 1223). That Greek word is a preposition denoting the channel of an action. It is usually translated “by,” “through,” “with,” “for,” “therefore,” or “because.”

In short, the English translations that we see here are accurate. The Greek text describing the Jews means “by faith,” and the Greek text describing the Gentiles means “through faith.” And I think we all understand the difference in meaning there. “I paid for the book **by** my credit card and ordered it **through** Amazon.” The credit card was the origin of the payment, and Amazon was the channel for the payment.

The difficulty comes, not from the meaning of the two words, but rather from why Paul used those two words. After all, if the Jews and the Gentiles are in the same boat with regard to both the problem of sin and the solution to that problem, then why would Paul make some sort of distinction here? And, if there is a distinction here, what is it?

Let's start by looking at something that is **not** the answer to that question. Whatever we conclude about the meaning of these two little prepositions, one thing we know with absolute certainty is that Paul is not saying there are two paths to God. If Paul is, in fact, making a distinction here, that is not the distinction he is making.

We know that Paul is not telling us here that God has one plan of salvation for the Jews and another plan of salvation for the Gentiles. We know that is not what Paul is saying here because Paul has already told us that there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile when it comes to how they are saved. We saw that a few verses ago — “For there is no distinction” (Romans 3:22). We have all sinned, and we are all justified by grace as a gift through the redemption in Christ. We all have the same problem, and we all have been offered the same solution to that same problem.

So, whatever these prepositions mean, we know they are not creating a distinction between how the Jews and the Gentiles are saved by Christ because Paul just told us as plainly as possible that there is no such distinction.

And, after all, what sort of distinction like that could Paul possibly be making here with these prepositions? Is Paul saying that some are saved **by** faith, while others are saved **through** faith? Does that make any sense? Aren't both of those things true for everyone who obeys

the gospel? How is that any sort of distinction with regard to salvation in Christ? They are both true!

- Back in Romans 1:17, Paul told us that the righteous shall live **by faith**. That phrase “by faith” in the Greek is the same Greek phrase we find here. Does anyone think Paul was saying earlier that only **some** of the righteous shall live that way?
- Earlier in this same chapter, in Romans 3:22, Paul told us that the righteousness of God **through faith** is for all who believe. That phrase “through faith” in the Greek is the same Greek phrase we find here. And, as Paul told us in that same verse, it is true for all who believe — not just for **some**.

So, as we said, these two phrases “by faith” and “through faith” in verse 30 are not describing two paths to salvation. Paul has already used the same two phrases in this letter to describe the one path to salvation.

So, if these prepositions are not creating a distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles with regard to how they are saved, then what are they doing? Why did Paul use these two different words here?

I think the best way to answer that question is to notice that this is not the first time Paul has mentioned a difference between the Jews and the Gentiles in the context of salvation. In fact, we saw a difference between the Jews and the Gentiles in the great thematic statement that opened this letter.

Romans 1:16 — For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, **to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**

And, as we said when we studied that verse, that difference is just a simple statement of fact. The gospel was proclaimed to the Jews first. We see that temporal order in Acts 2 and for some time after Acts 2 until the conversion of Cornelius. And, in fact, we see that temporal order in the great prophecy about the church in Isaiah 2:3 — “For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.” That was the origin. The gospel was proclaimed to the Jews first.

But also to the Greek. And how did that happen historically? The answer is that the Gentiles were taught by the Jews. What did the angel say to Cornelius in Acts 11:13-14?

“Send to Joppa and bring Simon who is called Peter; he will declare to you a message by which you will be saved, you and all your household.”

Cornelius the Gentile was saved after being taught by Peter the Jew. That is the first and clearest example of what is meant by the phrase “to the Jew first and also to the Greek.”

Now, let’s get back to our prepositions here in verse 30 — “who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.” And let’s remember what we said about the meaning of those two prepositions in the Greek — “by” points to the **origin** of something, and “through” points to the **channel** of something.

What did we just see in Acts 2 and Acts 11 about the Jews and the Gentiles? What we saw is that faith originated with the Jews, but then the

faith of the Jews was the channel through which the Gentiles were also saved. And we saw an explicit example of that with Peter and Cornelius. Peter first, and then Cornelius through the teaching of Peter.

In my opinion, that is what Paul is saying here — the same thing he said back in Romans 1:16, and the same thing we see in Acts 2 and Acts 11. And, in fact, we still see it today. We can trace our own salvation back to the proclamation of the gospel by the Jews. Had Peter and Paul remained silent in the first century, would we have ever heard the gospel in our own century? If we trace the chain of our own salvation back from teacher to teacher to teacher, eventually we will get back to a Jewish teacher.

And you know what? That makes it doubly sad that so many Jews today have rejected the gospel of Christ. And it also means that we need to make doubly sure that we return the favor by proclaiming the gospel to them. The Jews proclaimed the gospel of Christ to us in our time of need; we need to proclaim the same gospel to them in their time of need.

Later, when we get to Romans 9-11, we will see Paul's own anguish about the state of the unbelieving Jews. And we will also see how some people today twist those three chapters to suggest that we do not need to proclaim the gospel to the Jews today because God has a separate plan of salvation for them ready to be revealed at the end of time. We already know that is not true based just on what we have seen so far in this letter, but we will have much more to say on that topic when we get to those later chapters.

And why did Paul say this here? He has already told us about the Jew first and also the Greek — why repeat it here?

Paul has two main points when it comes to the Jews and the Gentiles. First, Paul wants the Jews to know that God’s plan of salvation is also for the Gentiles. But second, Paul wants the Gentiles to know that they should never look down on the Jews, but instead they should be very grateful to the Jews because God used them to bring the Messiah into the world.

And both of these points are made by the preposition “through” in verse 30. That little word reminds the Jews that God’s plan is also for the Gentiles. And that same little word reminds the Gentiles that they should be grateful to the Jews. It is a little word, but it is carrying a lot of baggage in verse 30.

Finally, why did Paul switch from the Jews and the Gentiles to the circumcised and the uncircumcised here? Why did he change his terms? I think the answer is foreshadowing because Paul will have more to say on the subject of circumcision in the next chapter.

Romans 3:31

Romans 3:31 — Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.

All throughout chapter 3, Paul has been dealing with Jewish objections to the gospel. And, again, these are not made-up objections. These objections were almost certainly actual objections that Paul had frequently heard from his Jewish opponents as was teaching in their synagogues.

Chapter 3 ends with another of those objections. “Paul, if what you are saying is true, then I guess we should just toss the law of Moses right out the window! I guess we should take that beautiful Torah that you see here in the synagogue and just feed it into the shredder!”

Is that right? Does the system of faith overthrow the law? Paul gives the same answer we have already seen twice in this chapter — by no means! Paul answers their objection with a very strong negative response. No way! No way at all!

And Paul explains why — it is because faith in Christ does not overthrow the law, but rather faith in Christ upholds the law. Jesus said the same thing.

Matthew 5:17 — Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

What does that mean? What does it mean to fulfill the law? What does it mean to uphold or establish the law? I think the answer to those questions comes from a simple but often overlooked fact about the old law — it was never intended to be permanent.

How do we know that for sure? We know that for sure because we have studied Zechariah!

Zechariah 6:12-13 — And say to him, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts, “Behold, the man whose name is the Branch: for he shall branch out from his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD. It is he who shall build the temple of the LORD and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne. **And there shall be**

a priest on his throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both.”

There are few verses in the Bible more beautiful or more meaningful than Zechariah 6:13. **He shall be a priest upon his throne!** That is a description of Christ, who is both King of kings and High Priest. And we did not make Jesus King of kings and High Priest — despite sometimes being asked to sing songs that claim we did. Those songs are not right. We did not do those things. God the Father did those things as he promised in Zechariah 6.

And what can we say about the same person being both King and High Priest? What we can say is that it could never happen under the old law. That is exactly what Hebrews 7 tells us.

Hebrews 7:12-14 — For when there is a change in the priesthood, **there is necessarily a change in the law as well.** For the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

Did you hear it? “There is **necessarily** a **change** in the law.” For Jesus Christ to fulfill the prophecies about him in the law, there had to be a change in the law. And there was a change in the law. Paul has already told us about it, and he will have more to say about it later.

But that change in the law did not overthrow or abolish the old law, but rather it fulfilled the old law. In fact, the old law itself tells us about the change in the law and necessarily requires that change in the law. That change in the old law was a part of the old law — it was a

fulfillment of the old law. That change came as no surprise to anyone who understood the old law.

And yes, we are not under the old law, but that fact does not mean that the old law serves no purpose for us. Paul tells us elsewhere about the importance of the old law.

Romans 15:4 — For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

1 Corinthians 10:11 — Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.

I think that is what Paul means here when he says that we uphold the law. And, yes, there is no definite article in the Greek text — literally he says, “we uphold law.” But I think the context tells us the law that Paul is talking about here. What other law but the old law could Paul have been accused by the Jews of overthrowing by his proclamation of the gospel? The focus here is on the old law.

Finally, we have one more question to consider about this final verse in chapter 3 — how do we explain what Paul said in Ephesians 2?

Ephesians 2:14-15 — For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility **by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances**, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace.

Here in verse 31, Paul reacts with horror to the idea that the old law was **overthrown** — but in Ephesians 2, Paul tells us that the old law was in some way **abolished**. And, as we read earlier from Matthew 5:17, Jesus said that he did **not** come to **abolish** the Law. How do we explain this?

We already know what Paul means here when he says that the law was not overthrown but was instead upheld. As we said, I think he means the same thing Jesus meant when he said that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill the law.

Everything in the old law was pointing to Jesus. The old law was a shadow that pointed to something better and greater that was coming. The old law was never intended to be permanent, but, even so, it was not overthrown or abolished. Instead, the old law was established, vindicated, confirmed, and fulfilled in Jesus Christ. And we still have the old law — why? So that we can learn from it. The old law helps us understand the new law of Christ — but we are not under the old law.

But that still leaves us with Paul's statement in Ephesians 2 — that Jesus abolished the law of commandments expressed in ordinances. The key to understanding what Paul meant there is to look both at what he said and at the context of what he said.

Paul did not say that Jesus abolished the law, but rather he said that Jesus abolished an aspect of the law — the law of commandments expressed in ordinances. That is a very specific description. It's not just "the Law" in the abstract, but rather it is all of the specific commandments and ordinances of the law such as circumcision, dietary regulations, festival calendars, and so on.

And why were those ordinances important to Paul's argument in Ephesians 2? Because that second chapter of Ephesians is all peace in the church between Jew and Gentile. Ephesians 2 is all about the great prophecy of Isaiah 2 that "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks."

And what stood as a great boundary between the Jews and the Gentiles? Circumcision, dietary regulations, and festival calendars, for starters. Those ordinances functioned as boundary markers between Israel and the surrounding nations. They were the provisions of the Mosaic covenant that kept Jew and Gentile separated, that made fellowship difficult or impossible, and that created the very social and religious wall that Paul is describing in Ephesians 2.

And what was Jesus' solution to the problem created by those ordinances of the old law? He **abolished** those ordinances (Ephesians 2:15).

And how did Jesus do that? By **fulfilling** the old law through his perfect sacrificial death on the cross (Matthew 5:17; Ephesians 2:16).

And did the abolition of those ordinances mean that Jesus abolished or overthrew the old law itself? Not at all. Instead, Jesus **completed** and **upheld** and **fulfilled** the old law (Romans 3:31; Romans 10:4; Matthew 5:17).

Chapter 4

Before we start with verse 1, let's first look at who and what we will see in this chapter.

As for whom we will see, the very first verse of chapter 4 will answer that question: we will see Abraham.

Abraham is mentioned by name nine times in Romans, with seven of those nine times found right here in Romans 4. And if we include all of the pronouns that refer to Abraham in Romans 4, then what we find is that Abraham is mentioned 39 times just in this one chapter! So, as for whom we will see in Romans 4, we will certainly see Abraham.

As for what we will see, we will see Paul using the example of Abraham to advance his primary thesis — that it is the gospel of Christ, rather than works of the law, that is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

But here is the question: was that also true of Abraham? Was Abraham justified by the gospel of Christ? Or was Abraham justified by works of the law? Paul starts with that question in verses 1-8.

And the next question is what about the Gentiles. Can we learn anything about God's plan for the Gentiles from the example of Abraham? Paul answers that question in verses 9-12.

And finally, what about the relationship between law and faith? Can Abraham teach us anything about that? Paul answers that question in verses 13-25.

And so what we will see in Romans 4 are three lessons that we can learn from the example of Abraham — one about justification, one about the Gentiles, and one about the law.

And the first thing we should note about these three topics is that we have seen them all before in this letter. Paul has already told us about the basis of justification, about the plan for the Gentiles, and about the relationship between law and faith. But what we need is an example! And so Paul gives us a particularly instructive example — the example of Abraham.

And let's make one more point about Romans 4 before we start with verse 1. The word "baptism" does not appear in this chapter.

Why do I mention that? I mention it because the denominations who belittle baptism often point to Romans 4 as support for their false views — which is curious to say the least. Why curious? Because they ignore Romans 6 (which does mention baptism) while leaning for support on Romans 4 (which does not mention baptism). But more on that topic later as we work our way through this chapter.

Romans 4:1

Romans 4:1 — What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?

Let's start with the second half of verse 1 — "our forefather according to the flesh" — and let's ask a question: **was Abraham a Jew?** Is that what Paul is saying here when he calls Abraham "our forefather according to the flesh?"

The answer, of course, is no. Abraham was not a Jew. Why not? Because Abraham predates the Jews. The nation of Israel started with Israel, who was Abraham's grandson, Jacob. And the name "Jew" came from Abraham's great-grandson, Judah.

But Abraham was circumcised, right? Yes, he was, but that did not make Abraham a Jew. Instead, his circumcision was a sign of the covenant that God made with Abraham in Genesis 17. And, yes, circumcision later also became an ordinance for the Jews under the law of Moses — but that happened long after the days of Abraham.

So what does Paul mean when he says “our forefather” in verse 1?

One thing we should consider is something we have already seen from Paul when it comes to the Jews — deliberate ambiguity used to teach a lesson.

Sometimes Paul says something that he knows most of the Jews will understand in a certain way, but then later Paul springs his trap by showing the Jews that their understanding was wrong or incomplete. Paul may be doing the same thing here with the phrase “our forefather.”

I suspect that most of his Jewish readers were thinking of Abraham as being **only** their forefather. They would likely have agreed with what the Pharisees said to Jesus in John 8:39 — “Abraham is **our** father.” But what did Jesus say about that claim?

Matthew 3:9 — And do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father,’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.

I think Jesus is telling the Jews in that verse that Abraham may have more children than they think he does. Paul may be doing the same thing here.