

ROMANS 3-4 HOW FAITH & LAW WORK TOGETHER; ABRAHAM'S EXAMPLE



Paul begins this vital section on understanding *the proper use of God's law, its limits, and of faith*. On this topic, Bible commentators aren't very helpful since most are biased against keeping God's laws – a belief called antinomianism.

Paul explains to the Roman brethren, composed of believing Jews and Gentiles, about *the new way of life* Christ has opened for us all. It can be called *God's Loving Plan of Salvation*, and it was virtually unknown in the past. Paul calls it a *mystery* or a *secret* that is now revealed (Rom. 11:25; 16:25). (The *outline* of this Plan can only be understood through *God's Feasts*, which are "a shadow [or future events] of what is *to come*" (Col. 2:17.)

It starts by becoming aware of having *broken* God's holy laws, then accepting the guilt and recognizing that nothing we can do on our own can remove that penalty of sin, which leads to a permanent death. As Rom. 6:23 surmises, "For the *wages* of sin is *death*, but the *gift* of God is *eternal life* in Christ Jesus our Lord."

This also means realizing that sacrifices and purification rites can only deal with the *sins of ignorance* and can't actually remove the spiritual stain left by sin. As it says in Hebrews 9:7-10, "But into the second part [of the tabernacle] the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and *for the people's sins committed in ignorance* [remember, deliberate sins such as adultery and murder then had only one penalty—death]; the Holy Spirit indicating this, that *the way* into the Holiest of All was *not yet* made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. It was *symbolic* for the present time in which *both gifts and sacrifices* are offered which *cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience* [or spiritually]—concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed *until the time of reformation*." That is *now*, which Paul calls "a new and living way" (Heb. 10:20)—made possible by Christ's sacrifice and resurrection.

So, this new way of life means *repenting* of sin and accepting Christ's sacrifice *by faith*, which means through trust and obedience, to obtain true forgiveness. As Paul had said in the previous chapter about this obedient faith, "For not the

hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the *doers of the law will be justified*" (Rom. 2:13).

He then explains how no one is exempt from condemnation by God's law. He says in Rom. 3:9, "What then, are we [Jews] *better* than they? *By no means*; for we have already *accused both Jews and Gentiles, that all are under sin*." The phrase "all are *under sin*" means being "under [the condemnation and penalty] of God's holy law."

He concludes, "But we know that whatever the law says [of what is binding], it says to those who are *under the law* [under its condemnation and penalty], so that *every mouth may be stopped* [for no one is innocent of not sinning] and *the whole world may come under the judgment of God* [all are found guilty]; for by *the deeds of the law* no human being will be *justified* in his sight; for through the law is the knowledge [or awareness of the guilt and penalty] of sin" (Rom. 3:19-20).

As *The Preacher's Commentary* points out, "The apostle's objective was to show both Jew and Gentile [are] 'under sin,' and he concludes that those 'under the law' are those who belong to 'all the world,' *which is guilty* and 'every mouth,' *which is stopped* [from boasting]. This means that the Gentiles, without having the advantage of the law as given to the Jews, *were still guilty* of the things outlined in the law and *come under the same condemnation*. The *solidarity* of the human race is to be seen not only in its *common bondage to sin* but *to its common guilt before the law of God*."

As Paul later says of this awareness of sin and its penalty in Rom. 7:7-14, "But I knew sin only by the law: for neither would I have known covetousness, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet. But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, produced in me all covetousness; for without the law sin is dead [there is no awareness of it]. And I without the law lived at one time [being ignorant of it as a child] but when the commandment came [knowing it afterwards], sin revived, and I died [by being condemned]. And I found that the same commandment, which was unto life [it was good], became unto death to me [by condemning me for transgressing it]: for sin, taking occasion by the commandment, deceived me, and by it *slew me* [he came under the penalty

of death]. Therefore, *the law indeed is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good...* For we know that *the law is spiritual*; but I am *carnal*."

So, despite the holiness and goodness of the law, it has its limits since it can't eliminate the penalty of sin before God, for true forgiveness requires someone paying for those sins.

He then reveals God's incredible solution to sin and its penalty – His Loving Plan of Salvation by the sacrifice of His Son. He says, "But now the righteousness of God [God's standard] apart from the law [despite sin] is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets [this truth was already in the Old Testament], even the righteousness of God, *through faith in Jesus Christ*, [the new way] to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*, being *justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*, whom God set forth as a propitiation [sacrifice] by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness [God's], because in His forbearance God *had passed over the sins that were previously committed*, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:21-26). So, God can now *forgive* sin.

This is the new way of being righteous before Him. It is not possible with this carnal nature to always keep God's laws by one's own efforts to be justified. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Through His prophets, He said that one day there would be access to a better way of being justified—through a new covenant—by receiving the Holy Spirit so His law could begin to be written in our hearts (Jer. 31:31-34).

Paul continues, "Where is the boasting then [of earning salvation by one's own efforts to keep the law and its ceremonies]? It is excluded. By what law [or legal system]? By works [the Jewish system of justifying oneself by its ceremonies]? No, but by the law of faith [based on Christ's sacrifice]. Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law [the previous sacrificial legal system of justifying a person before God]" (Rom. 3:21-28). So, Paul introduces the concept of "the works of the law"

versus "God's law" and their contrast through a series of rhetorical questions that he answers.

He asks, "Or is He the God of the Jews only? Is He not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith (Rom. 3:29-30). So, God's laws to be justified by faith applies to all.

He then asks, "Do we then make void the law [God's law] through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law" (Rom. 3:31). God's law works *with* faith since it is a new way of being justified that satisfies "the righteous requirement of the law" (Rom. 8:4). At the same time, he denounces the system of "works of the law," or the distorted legalistic system of observing rituals and ceremonies used by Jewish leaders to justify themselves, thinking they didn't need a Savior and relying on being Abraham's descendants.

Paul will now use that very example of Abraham to explain how the ceremonial part of the law (as a legalistic system perverted by Judaism to justify oneself), had nothing to do with Abraham's faith or of his justification before God.

He asks, "What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found *according to the flesh*? For if Abraham was justified *by works* [of the law], he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness.' Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work [or do the ceremonial law, like circumcision] but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered: Blessed is the man to whom the Lord shall not impute sin.' Does this blessedness then come upon *the circumcised* only, or upon the uncircumcised also? For we say that faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness. How then was it accounted? While he was circumcised, or uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised. And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the

righteousness of the faith which he had while still uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised, that righteousness might be imputed to them also apart from circumcision, [a ceremonial work of the law"] and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised" (4:9-12).

Paul is confirming it is not necessary for the believing Gentile to be circumcised and keep the ceremonial law to be a church member (see Acts 15:22-29). This ritual aspect of the law is not required, but *obeying the commandments of God by faith* is still necessary. As he said, "Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters" (1 Cor. 7:19). Also, God's Church is described as "those who *keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus*" (Rev. 14:12).

So, God forgave the sins of Abraham and his descendants because of their faith and obedience to Him, not because they kept perfectly the law and its ceremonies. This same principle, Paul explains, also applies to the Gentile believer.

He says: "For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, because the law brings about wrath [by breaking it, which all do]; for where there is no law there is no transgression [no legal basis for condemnation]. Therefore it is of faith [in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to forgive sins] that it might be according to grace [something that is not merited by faultless performance, but by trusting and obeying God and His Word, knowing that he will forgive sins], so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law [Israel], but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham [Gentiles], who is the father of us all (as it is written, 'I have made you a father of many nations') in the presence of Him whom he believed—God, who gives life to the dead and calls those things which do not exist as though they did; who, contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations,

according to what was spoken, 'So shall your descendants be.' And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body, already dead (since he was about a hundred years old), and the deadness of Sarah's womb. He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. And therefore 'It was accounted to him for righteousness.' Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification" (Rom. 4:13-25).

As Samuele Bacchiocchi says: "The goodness of the Law is sullied when it is used wrongfully...God has only one set of moral principles. Paul openly and constantly condemns the *abuse* and not the *proper use* of God's law. The abuse was found in the attitude of the Judaizers who promoted the works of the Law as a means to achieve self-righteousness before God...It was the incredible pride and self-deception that caused the Jews to "rely upon the law" (Rom. 2:17) to establish their own righteousness (Rom. 10:3), when in reality they were notoriously guilty of dishonoring God by transgressing the very principles of His Law...This was the problem with the Pharisees, who outwardly gave the appearance of being righteous and Law-abiding (Luke 16:12-15; 18:11-12), but inwardly they were polluted, full of iniquity, and spiritually dead (Matt. 23:27-28). The Pharisaic mentality found its way into the primitive church, among those who refused to abandon the wrongful use of God's law. They did not recognize that Christ's redemptive accomplishments brought to an end those ceremonial parts of the Law, such as circumcision, that foreshadowed His person and work. They wanted to force 'the Gentiles to Judaize' (Gal. 2:14). These Judaizing Jews insisted that to be saved, Gentiles needed to be circumcised and to comply with the ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic law (Acts 15:1). In other words, the offer of salvation by grace had to be supplemented with the observance of Jewish ceremonies" (*The Sabbath under Crossfire*, 1998, p. 195).