

The Basic Gospel Issue

Introduction

The great problem for people seeking God is the reliance upon the flesh; on human works.

People that know nothing about God, or the Bible, believe that if they do enough good works they will be accepted by God and will go to heaven. Usually this is some form of good works outweighing bad ones over a lifetime.

But even religious people, and many in so-called 'Christian' churches, think that salvation is merited by human works. Roman Catholics trust that the works they do involving the church will save them: penance, baptism, confession, hail Mary's, attending Mass and so on. Arminians believe that it is their human work of deciding for Christ by their own will, and believing in Christ by a worked up human faith, that will save them. Pelagians believe that they can fulfil the law of God by their own merits. Charles Finney taught that sinners could regenerate themselves.

All of this kind of thinking is totally wrong. Man can do nothing to save himself. There are no human meritorious works that produce salvation.

The stumbling block for people is the fact that in the Gospel God does all the work and chooses those who will benefit from it. A divine righteousness is prepared for the elect along with a means of remitting sins by atonement. This is a concept that is foreign to human thinking.

This is the basic fact of the Gospel: there is a salvation prepared by God in Jesus Christ whereby sins are propitiated, justification (declaring righteous) is given freely and eternal life granted as a gift to those God chooses. The means of gaining this grace salvation is by a divine faith and repentance given by God to those he chooses.

[No one should consider themselves excluded from the elect if they are seeking God and desire salvation:
Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.
For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Matt 7:7-8

I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. Rev 21:6

Let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely. Rev 22:17

Those who actively seek Christ will find him and realise their election.]

There are two problems to be solved for salvation to occur. The first is getting rid of sin in one's life. The second is gaining a divine righteousness to stand before God. The act of justification resolves both these problems. It deals with sin because of the redemption and propitiation gained by Christ in his passive obedience in substitutionary death. It provides legal righteousness as a result of the active obedience of Christ fulfilling the law for us in his representative incarnation.

I will explain this salvation by grace and justification by faith from one passage of the NT.

Text

Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin. 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; 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 by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, 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. Where *is* boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. Rm 3:19-28

Summary

- The law does not save. Its purpose is to magnify sin and demonstrate that all men are guilty before God. The law shows what sin is and divine wrath against sin.
- All people have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. There is no exception.
- Therefore by the deeds of law no flesh will be justified. Obeying law by human effort does not bring justification.
- God reveals his righteousness separate to the law in Jesus Christ. This righteousness is achieved by faith not by works. Those who believe in Christ are justified.
- Saints are justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God manifested his propitiation by the blood of Christ. Jesus' cross work provided the means of propitiation (turning away God's wrath against sin).
- Propitiation is received through faith. This demonstrates God's righteousness, it is not worked up by man.
- God demonstrated this righteousness in the sacrificial work of Christ on the cross, which took away the sins of the elect. He could then justify those who had faith in Jesus. God was patient in demonstrating this and was forbearing about the sins committed before the cross. Before the cross, salvation was pending to those who had faith in the OT.
- Thus no man can boast about salvation because it does not come from human works but by the law (principle) of faith. Man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.
- This Gospel fact is witnessed in the Law (the five books of Moses) and the Prophets (the remainder of the OT).¹ The OT pointed forward to a deliverance from sin in God's Messiah and affirmed that human works cannot save. It did this in multiple ways: typology,² symbolism,³ didactic instruction,⁴ poetry, prophecy and historical narratives.

¹ Poetry (e.g. the Psalms) and historical narratives (often written by prophets) were considered by the Jews as prophecy.

² Where people, acts, rituals and objects figuratively stand for (or are a type of) a doctrinal truth. Thus the OT offerings speak about aspects of the suffering of Christ.

Exposition

Whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.

Technical note

The 'law' here centres on the moral law contained within the Mosaic Law but Paul has in mind generally the whole of the OT. The letter is addressed to Roman Christians who knew the OT, not a synagogue of Jews. Also, in his argument he quotes (in verses 10-18) from the Psalms and Isaiah, which are outside the Pentateuch (the five books of Moses). By talking in terms of 'law' Paul is considering the principles of righteousness that men must live by but utterly fail to do so. These principles are enumerated in the whole of the OT.

That every mouth may be stopped

There is no room for boasting in God's salvation because it is not a human work.

All men are guilty

All the world is guilty in sin before God.

God's moral law affects all human beings. This is absorbed in the Law of Moses, which was for Israelites released from Egypt and further articulated in the rest of the OT. Everyone is under God's law, not just Jews (God's moral law⁵ affects everyone). It demonstrates the guilt of every person. This stops everyone from boasting because they are guilty. No one can boast that they are perfect.

God requires perfection

You shall be holy; for I *am* holy. Lev 11:44

You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God *am* holy. Lev 19:2

Be holy, for I *am* the LORD your God. Lev 20:7

As He who called you *is* holy, you also be holy in all *your* conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy'. 1 Pt 1:15-16

God created man to be in fellowship with him. The purpose of God was always to dwell with men. This is typified in Israel in the Tabernacle being in the midst of the wayfaring people in the wilderness: 'I will dwell among the children of Israel and will be their God' (Exod 29:45). In the last day God restores the burned Earth and the saints will dwell with God forever.

To fellowship with God man has to be perfectly righteous and holy like God: 'Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?' (Amos 3:3). When Adam was created he was righteous and holy because he was created good (Gen 1:31). The Fall of Adam lost this holiness and

³ Where something directly represents an idea, quality or truth.

⁴ Doctrine; teaching.

⁵ The moral law was understood and obeyed from Adam onwards. No doubt God explained it to him as he did regarding the need for blood offerings. We see all the principles of the Ten Commandments already observed before Moses received the Law at Sinai (excepting the details of the Sabbath). All men are born with a conscience that witnesses to God's law and shows us what is right.

man became depraved. Every person afterwards was born in sin. There was no one that was righteous. Every person is guilty.

The very best human works that sinful people can do pales into insignificance when compared to God's standard of righteousness. What was needed was a Gospel whereby man could become righteous and fellowship with God like Adam in the garden.

Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law *is* the knowledge of sin.

Since the law is to demonstrate that man is guilty, the law cannot produce justification. The law shows what sin is. Why is homosexuality evil and not just a life choice? Because God's law shows that it is sin (Lev 18:22, 20:13). Law shows us the full realisation of sin; it reveals what sin does and what sin is.

The definite articles are absent here; Paul says 'law' (not 'the law'). By this he includes all ethical law, whether godly or pagan. No one can follow any law and be justified. Legal works cannot justify. [Note that the Roman church contained former Jews who followed Mosaic Law and many Gentiles who previously followed various codes of law.] Moralism, of any sort, cannot justify. Thus the modern rationalist, ethicist, humanist and modernist cannot be saved by obedience to legal codes.

Justification

Justification is the act of making a person righteous in legal standing before God. This means that sin has to be remitted and removed and an imputed righteousness given to be able to stand in God's presence.

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.

Righteousness

The law cannot produce righteousness; it only demonstrates sin and 'brings about wrath' (Rm 4:15). However, God reveals his righteousness through faith in Christ.

Those who believe in Christ receive the righteousness of God.

The OT witness

Just as the law and the OT show us that obedience to law cannot justify, and shows us what sin is, so it also reveals the only way to have sin removed and be justified: righteousness by faith.

Righteousness by faith in God's Messiah was witnessed in the OT in many ways.

Historical narrative

And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.
Gen 15:6

Abram's faith was reckoned as righteousness because he believed in what God told him. (Compare Gal 3:8).

Prophetic word

The just shall live by his faith. Hab 2:4

The prophet makes it clear that faith produces justification.

He shall see the labour of His soul, *and* be satisfied. By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many, For He shall bear their iniquities. Isa 53:11

Spoken of the coming Messiah. He will justify many people and bear their iniquities.

Seventy weeks are determined For your people and for your holy city, To finish the transgression, To make an end of sins, To make reconciliation for iniquity, To bring in everlasting righteousness, To seal up vision and prophecy, And to anoint the Most Holy. Dan 9:24

The Messiah gets rid of sins and makes reconciliation by bringing in everlasting righteousness.

Poetry

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. Ps 32:1-2

David considers the man whom God justifies and cleanses. He then confesses his own sinfulness in the rest of the Psalm.

Other

The offerings illustrated that something had to die in the place of a man for sins committed and the blood was a means of cleansing.

The typology in the Tabernacle spoke of the cleansing required to approach God (the laver), the foundation of redemption (silver sockets), the bread from heaven (bread of the presence), blood for cleansing everything, and so on.

The feasts and fasts also spoke of the ministry of Christ in various ways, such as the Day of Atonement whereby the blood of another was necessary to cancel sins for all the people.

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 by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, 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.

There is no difference between Jews and Gentiles; everybody is in sin. The Jews sinned with the Mosaic Law, and Gentiles sinned without the Mosaic Law. No one can attain to the glory of God required to fellowship with him.

Believers are justified freely by grace (an undeserving gift).

This grace comes from the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. There is no other kind of grace, just the grace that justifies the elect.

The reason that God can give grace is because he has propitiated elect sinners by the blood of Christ. The cross, blood and resurrection deal with the sin and pays for it (Rm 4:25, 5:16, 18). This redeems the elect to God; their sins and judgment are paid for by the blood. God then gives faith to the elect who, on using this faith and believing in Christ, are justified and made righteous.⁶

God justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

God was patient during the OT and those with faith in the coming deliverer were saved by their faith, but had to wait in Abraham's Bosom (Lk 16:22)⁷ until the cross allowed Christ to take them to heaven. The sins of OT saints were accepted as remitted ('passed over') but the actual remission occurred at the cross. [Note the KJV 'remission' is wrong. *Pariemi*, means 'to let go', 'to relax'; hence 'passed over'.]

Where *is* boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.

There is no room for any person to boast; no one can live a perfect life.

The law of faith – the rule that God only justifies by faith not works – shows that there can be no human boasting. Faith received as a gift from God initiates justification, therefore it is not a work of man in any fashion.

Man is justified by faith (given by God) and no human works are involved.

This means that every religion and theology that includes human works to initiate or activate salvation are false. Thus Pelagianism, Semi-Pelagianism, Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, Wesleyanism, Open Theism, Universalism and Socinianism are false. This includes the majority of modern professing 'Christians'.⁸

⁶ 'Propitiation' (turn away wrath): most versions use this word; some, expiation (turn away sin); some, descriptions (such as 'a sign of mercy' BBE) but only Darby and Young use 'mercy seat', which is what the Greek word literally speaks of (Heb 9:5). *Hilasterion* is a focus on the means by which sins are forgiven; having atoning power; an appeasing or expiating; a propitiation. It was used of the cover (Heb: *Kapporeth*; *hilasterion* in LXX – Greek OT) of the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies, which was sprinkled with the blood of the expiatory victim on the Day of Atonement when God was appeased and the sins of the Israelites were propitiated). Hence the lid of propitiation; the propitiatory. Since Paul was writing to the Romans it seems more sensible to use the secular use of the word, 'propitiation'. In Heb 9:5 Paul is addressing lapsed Jews and referring to the typology of the Tabernacle, so here 'mercy seat' is a better translation.

⁷ The place of blessing in Hades reserved for saints in fellowship with Abraham. After the cross Christ took these people from Hades to be with him (Eph 4:8). The rest in Hades are in torment (Lk 16:23) awaiting final judgment.

⁸ For example: Charismatics are mostly Arminians (one UK denomination is Amyraldian). Pentecostals are almost exclusively Arminian. Methodists are Wesleyan Arminians. Most (General) Baptists are Arminian (some are Amyraldian). Anglicans are mostly liberal Arminians (a few claim to be Reformed, i.e. Calvinist). Finneyites are virtual Pelagians. Quakers are liberal Universalists. Brethren are almost extinct in Britain but what remains are mostly Arminian (they began as Calvinists). Independents are mostly Arminian (some are Amyraldian). The United Reformed Church is mostly liberal and Arminian. New Calvinists are mostly Amyraldian. The Emerging Church is pretty much liberal or Arminian at best. Anabaptists are virtually

All these fail to see that justification is by faith alone.

Pelagians teach that salvation is by human works. Semi-Pelagians (Catholics, Arminians, Open Theists) teach that it is by faith PLUS something (e.g. human will, church sacraments). Reformed Protestants teach that salvation is by faith ALONE.

Summary of Paul's doctrinal argument

In the context of Rm 1:1-3:28.

- UNIVERSAL SINFULNESS: all people have sinned; everyone is corrupted; no one is righteous; therefore, no human being can fellowship with God.
- TOTAL DEPRAVITY: due to endemic sinfulness, everyone is totally depraved; that is, every part of their being is corrupted by sin.
- ENDEMIC CORRUPTION: no one is righteous before God.
- NO MERITORIOUS WORKS: no person can initiate salvation by human works. No one can generate saving faith; no one can decide to be saved. No one can be justified by human effort. The law of God reveals what sin is. No person can fulfil this law and no one can be saved by attempting legal righteousness. The law cannot justify.
- PROPITIATION: Only the blood of Jesus can forgive and remit sins.
- JUSTIFICATION: Righteousness comes by faith in Jesus Christ. This is the righteousness of God, which is given to the elect by grace through faith. Justification is by faith alone.
- SOVEREIGN GRACE: God is sovereign in salvation. He gives grace to whom he chooses (the elect).

Sin is universal. Grace is particular.

Conclusion

This is why worship of the Father for his decree and of Jesus for his work is so important. The whole of salvation is a gift of grace. It is freely given to those who seek God because he drew them to Christ.

Jesus is the author and finisher of salvation (Heb 12:2). It is a sovereign work done by God and freely given to those he chooses. The means of obtaining this salvation are faith and repentance, which are gifts given by God to the elect. Thus salvation is by grace through faith.

No man can achieve salvation by works; this is called 'autosoterism' (self-salvation) by theologians. Meritorious works are only found in heretical systems.

'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 but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness. Rm 4:3-5

Arminian. Most UK Lutherans are Universalists or sort of Arminian (one US synod is more like Martin Luther's original position). Calvinism only survives in the rump of the Strict and Particular Baptists, some isolated independent works and a few independent Presbyterians.

A man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified. Gal 2:16

No one is justified by the law in the sight of God *is* evident, for 'the just shall live by faith'. Gal 3:11

PostScript

The Reformation Solas

The Calvinistic Reformation theologians summarised Protestant theology in a series of 'solas'.⁹

- *Sola Gratia*: Grace alone.
- *Sola Fide*: Faith alone.
- *Solos Christos*: Christ alone.
- *Sola scriptura*: Scripture alone.
- *Soli Deo gloria*: Glory to God alone.

Salvation is by grace, through faith, is in Christ alone, is based upon the word of God and is to the glory of God alone.

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⁹ From the Latin *solus*; the adjective (fem. *sola*) meaning: alone or unaccompanied. Reformation theologians wrote academic works in Latin.