

# Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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9/21/25

**Sermon Title:** “No Room to Brag”

**Sermon Text:** Romans 3:27-31

**Rom. 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.

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

**Rom. 3:29** Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also,

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

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

**Main Point:** Because justification comes by faith in Christ apart from works, the gospel excludes all boasting, unites Jew and Gentile together, and rightly restores the law as a guide for those who have been humbled by grace.

**Outline:**

1. Humiliation
2. Integration
3. Affirmation

## Introduction

Humility is baked into Christianity, and has been from the beginning. We've been so Christianized in our thinking in the west that we still admire humility and look down on people who brag or boast or are proud.

The historian, Tom Holland (in his book *Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World*) argues that in the Greco-Roman world of Paul's day, humility was very stigmatized. Humility was real, but it was for the weak, for failures, for outcasts. You were lowly because you didn't excel in the ancient world. And one of the points that he makes very forcefully is that the Cross of Christ flipped those values. Suddenly it was the weak, the powerless, and the poor who triumphed. Here is what Holland says about Paul's message to the Corinthian Christians:

“In a city famed for its wealth, Paul proclaimed that it was the ‘low and despised in the world, mere nothings’, who ranked first. Among a people who had always celebrated the agon, the contest to be the best, he announced that God had chosen the foolish to shame the wise, and the weak to shame the strong.”

We sort of take the virtue of humility for granted today. But we should remember just how revolutionary this was in Paul's day. We in the west are inheritors of Christian moral teaching, but we should remember that in Paul's day the idea of God making a people who aren't supposed to boast would have been very new and unique.

Paul says the gospel keeps us from boasting or bragging because there is nothing that we can do in ourselves to bring ourselves peace with God. There is no law we can keep, there is no rule we can follow, there is no ceremony we can perform to bring us peace with God once we have broken God's law. Only Christ can justify us. But at the same time, the Gospel also tells us that the law remains good, and that for a justified person, the law is actually a blessing, and something that we can embrace.

Paul is saying to us that the gospel does two things: it humbles us, *and* it encourages law keeping.

If you're listening closely so far, this is the part where you might wrinkle up your nose and go, "Hmm. It's either one or the other. You can't have your cake and eat it too. You can't say that God saves us through faith so that we won't boast, and then also say that the law is good and we should keep it. Because it was lawkeeping that was the problem in Israel, right? Jesus was so angry with people because of their lawkeeping, and he was trying to get them to believe in him and forget about the law, right?"

That's a question I could fully appreciate someone asking.

And in fact, that question betrays a view of the law that Paul wants us to know is not accurate: this idea that the law is not helpful or good in *any* sense. When in reality we'll see today that whatever our view of the law and gospel is, we need to see them as being in harmony, not at enmity because the law is a reflection of the goodness of God and his holy character, just as the gospel is. They are both good, and they both show us God and what he is like. *In the law*, we see that He is good and just. *In the gospel* we see that he is merciful and gracious. And they are both true.

So what I'd like to do here in the short time we have is, we need see that there is an important sense in which faith and lawkeeping do come together in the Gospel, while fundamentally keeping us humbled by the grace that has been shown to us.

Our three points this morning from the text are first, Humiliation. Second, Integration. Then third, Affirmation. Paul is telling us how the gospel humbles us, brings us together regardless of ethnicity, and then gives us a good glimpse of the law so that we use it rightly.

## **1. Humiliation (boasting excluded)**

First this morning, Paul speaks of humiliation.

In verse 27, Paul says this: "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. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

Again, this is Paul's application: This idea that we have no rights for bragging whatsoever. And his reason for that is: justification by faith happens without us adding any works of our own. We're not justified by something we do. And because of that, we can't brag.

In a sense Paul here does the opposite of what we sometimes do in preaching. Usually I'll preach a doctrine and then do an application after I've explained it. Here Paul leads with the application and then gives the theological undergirding for it. "Here's what your attitude should be, and here's why..."

He's saying that the gospel he has been talking about so far transforms the way you look at the law, and therefore transforms the law almost into something else in the hand of a gospel loving Christian who thrives on and lives on the good news of Jesus Christ.

In the hand of a Christian, the law humbles us, makes us see what we can't do, and makes us see the greatness of the God who saves, and exalts Christ who did keep the law.

But in the hand of a legalist (and we will get to this more next week), the law becomes something that's really about you – what you can do, what you've accomplished, which rules you've followed. You get a taste of this in Paul who almost lets us look at his past history with this way of thinking.

In Philippians 3, Paul gives this list of things that it appears he was accumulating during his days as a Pharisee. His larger point in this passage was that of all people, he would have been a great candidate for somebody who was "righteous by works" if such a thing was even possible. He goes on to say it wasn't, but you can tell how he was keeping track:

"If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ." (Philippians 3:4-7)

Paul *knows* what a legalist thinks like. He lived as one for years. He counted on that circumcision, his family history, his knowledge of the law, his avoiding things he was supposed to...

And guess what the legalist thinks that he has in the law: something to hang his hat on and brag about. And this *was* Paul. At the time Paul believed he had something to brag about.

This is what Jesus Christ did to Paul, though. And perhaps you need to experience this too, in some way. God struck Paul down and changed his life forever, and stole all the self-confidence from Paul. He snatched his bragging rights away in a second, and Paul was left saying, “It’s all garbage.”

This is a big part of what makes the gospel so very offensive – not just to Jews of Paul’s day, but to people of all stripes. Look around at all the religions of the world that were created by man. All of them create the conditions for pride, not humility:

In Islam, you can always be measuring yourself: “Have I prayed enough? Given enough? Fasted with enough devotion? Have I made a pilgrimage and so on...” And if you think you have, guess what you get to do? You get to boast. That’s a righteousness that lets you brag.

In Hinduism, your moral and ritual actions (karma) determine your place in the cycle of reincarnation. Live well and you are reborn in a higher state; live poorly and you regress. And so if you believe you’ve lived a good life, accumulated good karma, and are rising up the spiritual ladder, you have every reason to look down on those you think are “lower” than you. That’s a righteousness that comes from your own climbing—and it gives you grounds to boast.

Buddhism. Through meditation, moral living, and detachment from desire, you achieve enlightenment. Ironically, even in a system that warns against pride, you can still end up proud of how “unattached” you are—how disciplined your mind is, how enlightened you’ve become. And there it is again: boasting, just with a spiritual twist.

Even non-religious systems have their version of righteousness. In secular humanism or modern moralism, your value comes from being on “the right side of history,” holding the correct social or political views, or being an ethical person by your own standard. It may not be religious, but it’s still law. And it still gives you reasons to say, “I’m one of the good people. I care more. I understand more.” It’s a moral scoreboard—and people love to keep score.

And here’s what sets the gospel apart from every one of these systems: It will let you keep whatever résumé you’ve been building. It says the only righteousness that counts is the righteousness of another—Jesus Christ. You don’t achieve it, you receive it. Which means the gospel tears the pen out of your hand before you can write your own story of how good you’ve been. It writes Jesus’ name at the top of your page, and leaves you with nothing to brag about—except him.

Here’s another important question: what is so humbling about exercising faith, anyway? Why is faith so much more humbling? Why does the gospel coming by faith instead of works shut us out from being braggadocios people?

Well it has to do with the nature of faith. For starters even the act of faith that we exercise is a gift of God according to Paul in Ephesians.

Now there is more. It also has to do with what faith really is. Faith is not an act of strength – it’s an act of weakness. John Piper has said that faith is “the weakest, most helpless, and most empty-handed act of the soul. It is all-dependence on Another. In a sense, it is an acted non-act... It is unique among all the acts of the soul. Since it is empty- handed, it is not like a virtue. It looks to the virtue of another. It looks to the strength of another. It looks to the wisdom of another. It is entirely other-directed and other-dependent. Therefore, it can’t boast in itself, for it can’t even look at itself.” (Ligonier article)

If I might pile on the quotes, I think Sinclair Ferguson, that great preacher, once said something very helpful that strikes a similar note: “Humility is not simply feeling small and useless – like an inferiority complex. It is sensing how great and glorious God is and seeing myself in that light.”

And faith does that.

Here is Piper saying, faith excludes boasting because it is the weakest thing possible, not the strongest. And in fact real faith is not even interested in itself. And then along comes Sinclair, speaking of real gospel humility saying that when the greatness of God consumes us we're humbled because it's like we're not even there. In the gospel Christ becomes all in all; he is everything.

## **2. Integration (the God of Jews and Gentiles)**

Our second point this morning is integration.

Now remember, in verses 27-28 Paul was saying, we have no room to brag, *because we are justified by faith, apart from works of the law.*

Then he asks a question in verse 29: "Or is God the God of Jews only?" It might seem like an odd question at first: "where does this come from?" you might think.

What he asks in verse 29 is what would be the case if we weren't justified by faith apart from works. He is challenging Jewish exclusivity and false confidence.

Because of who God is, all people matter to God: even people who haven't been given the written law of Moses like the Jews were.

But Paul is saying, if the law was actually how we're saved, that would be terrible news for all the people who never received the law of Moses to begin with.

"Doesn't God care about people who didn't get Moses' law as well?" is what Paul is asking. And the answer is yes, he created the Gentiles too.

Part of the good news comes from the fact that anyone can believe in Christ – law of Moses or not.

So after what Paul has said, the Jewish listener now knows he can't depend on his history, his genetics, or his ethnicity. He can't depend on his works. He can't depend on anything apart from Christ. God is in the business of taking away anything else that we might lean on besides Christ.

It takes a sort of gospel humility to be able to say, "Okay, it's not my ethnicity that makes me special in God's eyes – in fact, it never was." "It's not these ceremonies that make me great in God's eyes – it's the work of Christ on my behalf that the ceremonies and laws always were pointing me to."

Do you lean on those things? If you come from a Christian background do you feel a sense of peace when you think of all those who came before you? You imagine that because your parents or grandparents or great grandparents were Christians that there's some kind of coat tail that you get to ride on?

If the thing you feel confident in is anything other than Christ and what he has done, you have a bankrupt and false confidence.

### **3. Affirmation** (the law is established, not nullified)

Our third point in the text today is affirmation. Affirmation of God's law in particular.

If you read through the gospels, on a first read it might be understandable if you read about Jesus' interaction with the scribes and pharisees and said, "It looks like Jesus has a problem with the law of Moses. You know, he goes after the people who tithe every last ounce of spices. He runs into these Sabbatarian legalists and gives them the what-for. He touches lepers and the unclean. He associates with the sinners and tax collectors. He seems to have a problem with the law of Moses!"

And it seems that many bystanders, who watched Jesus' ministry, came away with the mistaken impression that he was opposed to the law. In fact, Jesus is not opposing the law. What Jesus is doing is going after human traditions that had accumulated around what was in the law of Moses. But he also attacked those who wanted to act but without love. Jesus was saying, "Do the law, but do it from love of God and neighbor, not out of love for your self."

This is why Jesus says almost the same thing that Paul says here today. Jesus says in 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. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the

kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

You do not come away from this passage thinking, “Jesus thinks the law is bad, and we should drop it,” right?

When we hear Paul speak negatively about the law, like Jesus he is not actually rejecting the law, he is rejecting it as the basis of a sinner’s peace with God. We have already crossed the spiritual rubicon; we are at war with God until peace is made. Someone needs to bring peace. The law is not how that is done. It can justify a righteous and sinless person, but it can’t wash away sin.

You know, we saw this already, the law just does not have the equipment for that. It has the instruments to show us Christ and point us to him, and to show us God’s holy character, but it can’t bring peace.

That’s Jesus who does that.

But then here Paul is, and he says in verse 31, “Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.”

The law did have this aspect to it that was very focused on the specific people of Israel in this specific place. And it would have been easy for the Jews to say, “It’s really all about our ethnicity. We’re Jewish, and therefore we’re good.” It would be tempting to think that because they are Jews, they have a leg up on the rest of the world. Paul has already said, the Jews did have an advantage in the sense that they had the Scriptures, but they don’t get preference over the Gentiles.

Paul has already shot down the idea that God has an ethnic preference for one group over another. He is the God of all people – Jews and Gentiles alike. Yet Paul is constantly in fear of being misunderstood. The sense in which God is the God of Gentiles as well doesn’t mean that the law was never good, or that it is being rejected now. Instead, Paul is saying that the gospel brings these blessings together truly and demonstrates the real and true and complete law as it was always *meant* to be enjoyed and understood. Not as a means of justification but as a rule of life for people who have been saved by Christ.

We come back to the theme that we see between both Jesus and Paul: the law is good when rightly understood and rightly used.

This is the sort of lawkeeping that also doesn't lead to boasting: a gospel-rooted, God-centered, Christ-exalting, self-abasing type of lawkeeping. An obedience based in weakness, not in strength. The obedience of faith.

We saw this a few weeks ago, that if we don't see the law as a reflection of the character of the God we love, then we will not see it as good or lovely at all – and we'll either try to escape from the law (antinomianism) or we'll try to nullify it in our own way by doing it down to the letter and being overcome by legalism. Both of these errors come from seeing the law as a bad thing that constrains. And fundamentally *that* comes from a bad view of God, thinking that he is in some sense opposed to us. In the gospel, this simply is not and cannot be true.

So the law, rightly understood, tears down ethnic divisions and reasons for bragging. If you use it the wrong way it builds walls and pride. If you use it rightly, it breaks them down.

This is part of Jesus' own frustrations with the Pharisees: they were using the law in precisely the wrong way with the wrong goal, and were only growing more proud in it. That would be like a man who's given a mirror so he can clean his face—but instead he holds it up to everyone else, pointing out their flaws, all the while refusing to look at his own.

The Pharisees had the law, but instead of letting it do its job by humbling them and driving them to God's mercy in Christ, they used it to exalt themselves. They missed the point entirely. The law, rightly understood, should lead to the Savior and repentance, not comparison; It should lead to faith, not self-congratulation.

This is why Jesus was so severe with them—not because they cared too much about the law, but because they cared about the wrong parts in all the wrong ways. They turned something meant to reveal the beauty of God's character into a weapon of spiritual superiority. But when the law is received as a gift from the God who loves us and redeems us, [here's what it does] it humbles us, leads us to being united to Christ through faith, and leads us back to peace with Him.

## Conclusion

Here is the real key. And I want to go back to it as we close because it's the beginning, middle, and end of it all. Paul has been saying that boasting was excluded because "we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."

The Christian knows that the basis of our humility is that our works of the law aren't even a *factor* in our justification except insofar as Jesus has done them. Only one person has truly kept the law, and we find our peace in him.

The peace we have with him is not our own doing. I mean look at that language: "one is justified by faith *apart* from the works of the law." It's not like God does most of the work for us, but we bring some kind of work or a ceremony or something about ourselves into play that tips the scales of salvation over. No, he says, our justification is *apart* from works of the law. We've got nothing to add to what Jesus has done.

Build your life on this. No bragging rights: only Christ and what he has done.

*Let's pray.*