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Romans 1:17, NRSV.

¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."

Old Testament Law: *Salvation by Acts?*

This will be the fourth message in our series on Romans, but we'll go a bit beyond the Book of Romans this time. First, let me quickly overview the Book of Romans.

In this long, highly structured, deeply theological letter Paul is conveying important information to a church that he has never visited, and as a result this church has some significant misunderstandings of Jesus' teachings. Paul has decided to start from scratch and overview what he teaches churches that he finds. Thus, he is not writing one of his typical, brief "corrective letters" where he is addressing focused problems that have developed within a congregation that is intimately familiar with his teachings. But there is one "corrective" aspect of this extensive letter, one that has been a source of controversy over the centuries. The church in Rome has many Jewish followers of Christ who seem to believe that some or all of Mosaic Law must be followed to be justified with God. As a result, Romans is best known for its promotion of the principle of "salvation

by faith alone”, which is of course a proper aspect of Jesus’ teachings. The heavy focus on the need to assure Gentile followers of Christ that there is no reason for them to adopt Mosaic law has caused people to think that in Romans Paul overemphasizes this doctrine at the expense of promoting kindness and forgiveness, as Jesus also taught. But Paul does cover the fact that true faith always leads to good acts in his letter to the Romans, as well. We live by that rule.

What we’re going to look at today is this issue of whether the Jewish followers of Christ in Rome, Jews who had accepted Jesus as their long-awaited Messiah, truly believed that justification in the eyes of God, what Christians equate with salvation, by just faith, is true. Do the Jewish Christians in Rome, people who still very much consider themselves to be Jews, somehow not believe that they could be made righteous in the eyes of God by faith alone? What does the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, truly teach about the balance between faith and acts? Modern Christians have adopted a very simplistic understanding of this issue. It is widely taught in Christian churches that there is a black and white difference between Israelite/Jewish teaching and Christian teaching. Christians have come to believe that Jesus came along and threw Mosaic Law away and radically changed people’s perspective, and now the detailed, disciplined following of many hundreds of intricate laws was replaced by simple

faith as a way of being embraced by God. Importantly, once we get a clearer understanding of this, what does it mean for us today – and the way that we live out our faith?

But first, I'd like to talk about a couple that I met as a chaplain. They were both rabbis and were there to visit a loved one. I was in the room alone with the patient, reading a couple of Psalms at the patient's request. They were Psalms traditionally associated with healing and the protection of God. They were Psalms 6, 20, and 41. As I was finishing, the couple came into the room and quietly sat down. One of them was a sibling of the patient, whom we will call Nate. I am changing things a bit for privacy reasons, as always. I then engaged Nate, who was very seriously ill, in a discussion of the Jewish vs. the Christian interpretation of Psalm 20. Nate was a decade or so younger than me and he pointed out Verse 6, which I am taking from the NRSV:

⁶ *Now I know that the LORD will help his anointed;
he will answer him from his holy heaven
with mighty victories by his right hand.*

This is one of many passages in the Hebrew Scriptures where Jews and Christians differ on its interpretation. To Jews, "*his anointed*", or God's anointed, refers to King David, while Christians have traditionally said this is a foreshadowing of Jesus, that the Messiah is the anointed one. Quite frankly, I told Nate, I realized

that Christians had hijacked this verse and of course the author was not referring to Jesus Christ. At this point, a nurse came in to give the patient some pain medication, and I stepped to the side of the room. The couple who had come to visit him greeted me – and the three of us had a very intriguing discussion.

Here are verses 16 and 17 of the first chapter of Romans:

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

To understand this passage, we need to remember that crucifixion was considered a deliberately humiliating form of the death penalty by Romans. So, Paul starts out by saying that people should not feel ashamed for Jesus, that his crucifixion was a sign of strength, not weakness. Then Paul says that God first introduced himself to the Jewish people, and now, through Christ, to Gentiles. In verse 17, Paul says that we are made right with God simply by having faith. By saying “*through faith for faith*”, he is simply making this point in a very emphatic fashion, countering any belief that it is our actions on this planet that justify us in the eyes of God.

Now consider verse 20 of Chapter 3:

²⁰ For “no human being will be justified in his sight” by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

This reinforces the idea that “*the law*”, by which his readers know that Paul is referring to Mosaic Law, does not have to be followed to be made right with God or to be a follower of Christ. He makes this point repeatedly in Romans. But let’s look at this carefully. Notice the end of this: “*for through the law comes the knowledge of sin*”. Paul is saying that following the law doesn’t save us, but he is also saying that the law, and he is not referring to anything in what we call the New Testament, and he is explicitly referring to Mosaic Law, tells us when we have done wrong. The implication is another major Christian principle, and it is also a major Jewish principle, and that is that everyone is guilty of sin.

In fact, let’s go back to verses 16 and 17 of Chapter 1 of Romans. Note these words specifically:

¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

It’s easy to miss the words “*as it is written*” before the words “*The one who is righteous will live by faith.*” The “*as it is written*” means that Paul is referring to the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. Yes, he is saying that salvation by faith, making yourself right with God simply by having faith is NOT a New Testament, a New Covenant revelation. It had always been part of Jewish belief. They did not believe that one could be righteous in the eyes of God simply by following the

complex system of Mosaic laws that include the Ten Commandments, civil laws about justice and order, and ceremonial laws about purification rituals, food purity, and honoring major festivals like Passover. Scholars count 613 laws in Mosaic Law in the Old Testament - and let me say this again: Paul is implying here that the Hebrew Scriptures explicitly say that following these laws is not sufficient, but that faith alone is indeed sufficient.

What is Paul quoting here? Remember that Romans was being written to a largely Jewish audience of followers of Christ. They know that he is referencing the prophet Habakkuk, where in 2:4 the prophet says in his poetic verse:

⁴ *Look at the proud!
Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.*

Habakkuk lived in the 7th century B.C. and his writings describe the impending invasion of the Babylonians who will destroy Jerusalem and the Temple, and exile many of its people. In this part of his brief book, Habakkuk is contrasting the dangers of self-reliance with the need for total trust of and dependency on God. He is telling us that arrogant, prideful people will face spiritual destruction, but those who simply rely totally on their faith in God are the ones who will be made right by God. In other words, Paul is simply reminding the Jewish followers of Christ that they have always relied on salvation by faith, but that the law was

always there to guide people morally, to keep their daily lives focused on God, and to remind them that they did not live the way their corrupt pagan neighbors lived. Justification by faith is nothing new. We do need to note, however, that at the time of Jesus, Jews believed that their “salvation” largely consisted of God’s protection of them here on Earth, but Christians believe in a universal offering of eternal, spiritual salvation by God to all people. But most Jews of Jesus’ time did believe in some sort of afterlife, despite it being a topic of debate among them.

There are many lines in the Old Testament that make this principle of justification by faith very clear. Here are a few.

In Chapter 15 of Genesis, the author is talking about the faithfulness of Abraham when God promises him a child:

⁶And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Paul himself in Chapter 3 of Romans refers explicitly to Abraham:

³For what does the scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” ⁴Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

Paul comes right out and says that Abraham was found righteous by his faith, not by his earthly works. He is reminding his Jewish believers in Rome that this is what they have always believed, so they should expect nothing more of Gentiles.

In Chapter 12 of Isaiah, the prophet offers a joyful hymn of thanksgiving to God, giving honor to a God who has chosen to live among his people:

*² Surely God is my salvation;
I will trust, and will not be afraid,
for the LORD GOD is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.*

We see that a proper historical reading of the Book of Romans tells us that Paul is not saying that Old Testament law is somehow a negative thing, that it needs to be abandoned. We need to remember that neither Paul nor Jesus taught that Jesus came to Earth to start a new religion, a new faith. Rather, the message is that now God is embracing all people.

In Chapter 11 of Romans, Paul references Jews who have not embraced Jesus as the Messiah. He speaks of them as the “broken branches” when he says:

¹⁷ But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, ¹⁸ do not boast over the branches. If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you.

He calls the Gentile believers “a wild olive shoot”, something formally uncontrolled and undisciplined, and says that they have been grafted onto the “rich root of the olive tree”. In other words, they are inheriting the blessed gift of the God of the Jews. They should not think of themselves as superior to Jews, but rather they should acknowledge that Jewish tradition supports them.

This is what this Jewish couple talked to me about while their loved one was being given powerful pain medication. They said that they appreciated me reading to Nate from the Hebrew Scriptures, that Nate had had bad experiences with Christians who believed that the Jewish faith was archaic and dead, that Christianity, the so-called “New Covenant” had fully replaced it. I told them that I certainly did not believe this, and that I would make this clear to Nate. One of these two visitors then used my Bible on my phone, to quote this from Paul’s letter to the believers in Galatia:

¹¹ But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; ¹² for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. ¹³ And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. ¹⁴ But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?”

This begins with Paul referring to “Cephas”, which is a word in the language Jesus spoke, and of course, Paul spoke, too, Aramaic. It means “rock” and he is referring to Petros, whose name derives from the Greek work for rock, and which we translate as Peter. Paul tells us that he has publicly called out Peter after Peter stopped eating with Gentiles to avoid being criticized by strictly Jewish believing followers of Christ. Paul is accusing Peter of making it appear to Gentile

Christians that somehow Gentile practices were inferior and that they should therefore become Jews. Paul is doing just what he does in Romans, and that is working to unify Jewish and Christian followers of Christ. Nate's visitor pointed out to me that it was too bad that passages like this were mistakenly interpreted by Christians as suggesting that Jewish life was inferior or passe, while in truth Paul was a committed Jew and was only arguing that Gentiles were now part of the People of God, but that they did not have to become Jews.

The reason I wanted to talk about this today is to explain why the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, are truly an important part of our Bible, just as important as the New Testament. There are Christians today who consider themselves to be "New Testament" Christians. This is a movement that began in the 18th and 19th centuries as a way of unifying all Christians. The idea was to focus on the one major thing we all have in common, and that is our roots in first century Christianity, the people to whom Paul was writing. The problem is that over the centuries this has caused many Christians to somehow believe that the Hebrew Scriptures are less relevant. But they are not. They are at the root of the tree onto which we have all been grafted.

Let's look at a passage from Genesis 12:1-3. God is speaking to Abraham:

12 Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

That "great nation" does not refer only to ancient Israel. It refers to all people in the Kingdom of God, and that includes us. We have been grafted in. We are people who believe that right and wrong is not political or subjective, that being giving and forgiving is not optional. This is an incredible gift we have received. When you read the Old Testament, don't have that biased perspective of the Israelites back then versus us Christians today. We are all one people under God. The richness of the Hebrew Scriptures is truly ours.

When I went back to my discussion with Nate, he was getting sleepy from his pain meds. But I took his hands, and I apologized for any Christians in the past who somehow didn't understand the incredible legacy and gift of the Jewish people, and I offered him this passage from Deuteronomy:

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. ⁵ You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

I told Nate that his God was my God and that we both loved God with all our heart, soul, and might. He was smiling as he fell asleep.