

ROMANS 3:19–28. (EHV)

Now we know that whatever the law says is addressed to those who are under the law, so that every mouth will be silenced and the whole world will be subject to God's judgment. For this reason, no one will be declared righteous in his sight by works of the law, for through the law we become aware of sin. But now, completely apart from the law, a righteousness from God has been made known. The Law and the Prophets testify to it. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all and over all who believe. In fact, there is no difference, because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God publicly displayed as the atonement seat through faith in his blood. God did this to demonstrate his justice, since, in his divine restraint, he had left the sins that were committed earlier unpunished. He did this to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so that he would be both just and the one who justifies the person who has faith in Jesus. What happens to boasting then? It has been eliminated. By what principle—by the principle of works? No, but by the principle of faith. For we conclude that a person is justified by faith without the works of the law.

How do you get to heaven?

This is the question that plagued Martin Luther. Does it plague you? Is it the most important question to you?

How do you get to heaven?

You don't need to be a Christian to believe that heaven exists. When someone famous dies, just watch and listen for all the reactions along the lines of, "He *or* She is in a better place now," or "is smiling down on us," or "is finally at peace." Considerably less people claim to believe in hell, but heaven is meaningless without hell. If everyone ultimately goes to heaven, then we can murder, rape, and pillage to our heart's content here on earth and still look forward to going to heaven one day. No, if you believe in heaven, then there also needs to be a hell, and more importantly, God's word clearly teaches the existence of both.

So how do you get to heaven?

1. The Righteousness of the Law

People generally know the answer to this question, in a sense. The answer is, "By being good and righteous." But if you ask them how they know they're good and righteous enough to get to heaven, even many people calling themselves Christian will often point to their own merits, the fact that they try to be kind and generous, that they work hard and try to do what's right and tell the truth, that they haven't done this or that evil, and so on.

In theological terms, that's called appealing to the righteousness of the law. And it's natural for us to do that, because all humans know God's law by nature. Its requirements are written on our hearts and our consciences bear witness to those requirements. If we aren't familiar with God's word or don't know it well, the law is all we know. It's the only basis for our religion.

The upside of this righteousness is that, if you actually believe what you are saying, it makes you feel good about yourself. It's like if an employer asks you why you deserve to have this or that job in his business. It feels good to cite a list of reasons that highlights your education, intelligence, reputation, and past experience.

But the downside of this righteousness is that, frankly, before God, it's a sham. If you appeal to the righteousness of the law, you haven't really paid attention to God's law and its demands. The apostle Paul says so here: "Now we know that whatever the law says is addressed to those who are under the law." Then he tells us who are under the law: "...so that *every mouth* will be silenced and *the whole world* will be subject to God's judgment." If we truly understand God's law, then we cannot use it to puff ourselves up and defend ourselves. We are silenced by it. We are judged and condemned by it.

You see, God's law isn't just aimed at our words and actions, but at our hearts, our motives, our reasons for doing or not doing this or that. And it is all-encompassing: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. Keep on doing this and you will live. So we must be perfectly devoted to God, perfect in love to our neighbor, and must be so and do so without any letup, ever.

And people think they're going to heaven based on that? Do you think so? Do I? That's a sham. It's a lie.

And it isn't that God makes these demands like an adult holding his hand out and encouraging a four-year-old to jump up and touch it, knowing full well the child will never be able to. God doesn't make his demands for his own amusement or to highlight his superiority. If his demands were followed, this world would be paradise. Locks and security systems wouldn't be manufactured and sold, because they would be pointless. No one would ever steal, or ever even think about it. After perfectly paying attention to teachers who were perfectly prepared and only taught them what was good and beneficial, children would come home to a mom and a dad who loved each other and always did what was best for their family. Everyone would work hard and provide their products and services at a fair price. No murder, no lying, and the list could go on and on. The problem isn't with God's demands. The problem is with us. Appealing to the righteousness of the law is a sham.

And because it's sham, there's another downside to the righteousness of the law, a downside often evident when you ask people who live by the righteousness of the law, "Where are you going when you die?" Occasionally they will answer confidently that they are going to heaven because of how good they are, but they are the kind of people that are insufferable to be around, because they are proud, arrogant, and quick to judge others—all of which, by the way, are condemned by God's law. But mostly the answer will be something like, "Well, I think..." "I hope..." "I'm pretty sure..." There's no certainty. There's no certainty because their own conscience tells them what Paul says here: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

"Now we know that whatever the law says is addressed to those who are under the law, so that every mouth will be silenced and the whole world will be subject to God's judgment. For this reason, no one will be declared righteous in his sight by works of the law, for through the law we become aware of sin." The law isn't meant to show us how to get to heaven. Or I suppose you could say it is meant to show us how to get to heaven, as long as you also acknowledge that,

in showing us how to get to heaven, it shows us that no one can get to heaven on the strength of his or her obedience to the law. It is a mirror, showing us how repulsive and damnable we truly are in God's sight. And so it essentially locks us out of heaven.

That is the righteousness of the law. It is an unattainable righteousness.

2. The Righteousness of Faith

“But now, completely apart from the law, a righteousness from God has been made known.” Ah, thank God, there is another righteousness! “The Law and the Prophets”—that is, the Old Testament—“testify to it. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all and over all who believe. In fact, there is no difference, because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”

This righteousness is a righteousness through faith. It is a righteousness not by doing but by believing. And not just a generic faith or a generic believing, not just some sort of blind optimism that somehow, some way, God is work this out. It comes through faith in Jesus Christ, who in human history lived a holy life under God's law in our place and who redeemed us, bought us back from sin, death, and hell, by his lifeblood shed on the cross for us. His righteousness is our righteousness, and his death is the payment for the guilt of all of our sins.

Paul uses a neat illustration here: “God publicly displayed [Jesus] as the atonement seat *or* atonement cover through faith, in his blood.” In the Old Testament temple, the ornate, golden atonement cover sat on top of the Ark of the Covenant in the Most Holy Place. So it sat between God, who dwelled in the pillar of cloud that went up from the Most Holy Place, and the Ten Commandments, whose tablets were inside the Ark of the Covenant. It was on that atonement cover that the high priest would sprinkle the blood of a substitute animal that had been slaughtered on behalf of the people, once a year, every year. God looked down and saw that beautiful atonement cover, covered in blood, over his Ten Commandments, over his holy law, and he was merciful and forbearing.

But now God has publicly displayed Jesus his Son as the atonement cover, and it is his own holy, precious blood that was shed, not just for that year, but once and for all, for good. Between himself and his holy law, he sees Jesus our substitute and Savior, and he is merciful. He justifies. He declares not guilty, innocent, for Jesus's sake—“freely, by his grace,” Paul says. It's a free gift. It's undeserved. It's ours.

Are there any downsides to this righteousness? Well, you can't boast anymore. “What happens to boasting then? It has been eliminated,” Paul says. No more citing your list of merits before God, like the Pharisee in Jesus's parable. “I thank you, God, that I'm not like this person or that person. I work hard at my job and I don't cheat on my spouse and I give generous offerings at church.” No more of that. But as we already talked about, you couldn't really boast before God anyway, without essentially lying to God.

No more boasting, except for boasting in the Lord. But is that really a downside, considering the upside? The upside is a righteousness that lies outside of you, in God's own Son, so it is a righteousness that is reliable. The upside is a righteousness that is freely and undeservingly given as a gift, received simply when you believe God has given it to you through Jesus Christ, instead of having to be earned (and being impossible to earn). The upside is that it's

yours right now, not something that might be yours in the future. The upside is that it makes getting to heaven something certain. Instead of “I think...” or “I hope...” or “I’m pretty sure...,” in Christ you can say, “I know that heaven is mine, not on my merits, but on Christ’s.”

Luther had it right on this. Not everything he said was nectar dripping from heaven, but he was right on this. He was right on this because he paid close attention to God’s law and knew that he wasn’t getting anywhere with God through the law. In fact, far from making him a better person, it made him resent God for making such impossible demands.

But it was precisely that frustration and misery that led him to keep searching God’s word until he read words like these from Paul’s letter to the Romans and rediscovered that God’s righteousness wasn’t just that by which he demands that we be righteous, but is also that by which he declares us righteous as a gift, for Jesus’s sake, through faith in him. And the unattainable righteousness of the law led him to run gladly, eagerly, wholeheartedly, and joyfully into the arms of the righteousness of faith, the righteousness of the gospel, and to cling to it all the more tightly and to share it all the more boldly, even when his life was on the line.

How do you get to heaven? By being good and righteous.

But how do you know you are good and righteous enough to get into heaven? Because our faith is not in ourselves and in our own righteousness, but in the righteousness won for us by Jesus Christ, and so our goodness and righteousness is perfect, because it is his, not ours. And yet, by his gift of grace, his righteousness *is* ours.

“What happens to boasting then? It has been eliminated. By what principle—by the principle of works? No, but by the principle of faith. For we conclude that a person is justified by faith without the works of the law.” There are other passages in Scripture that warn against us taking this truth for granted, that warn against us using it as a license to sin. But those other passages are not for today. Today we celebrate and revel in this truth at the heart and core of our faith, that we are justified by faith in Jesus Christ alone, without any works of the law. O happy Reformation, which is to say: Happy and blessed Christianity! Amen.