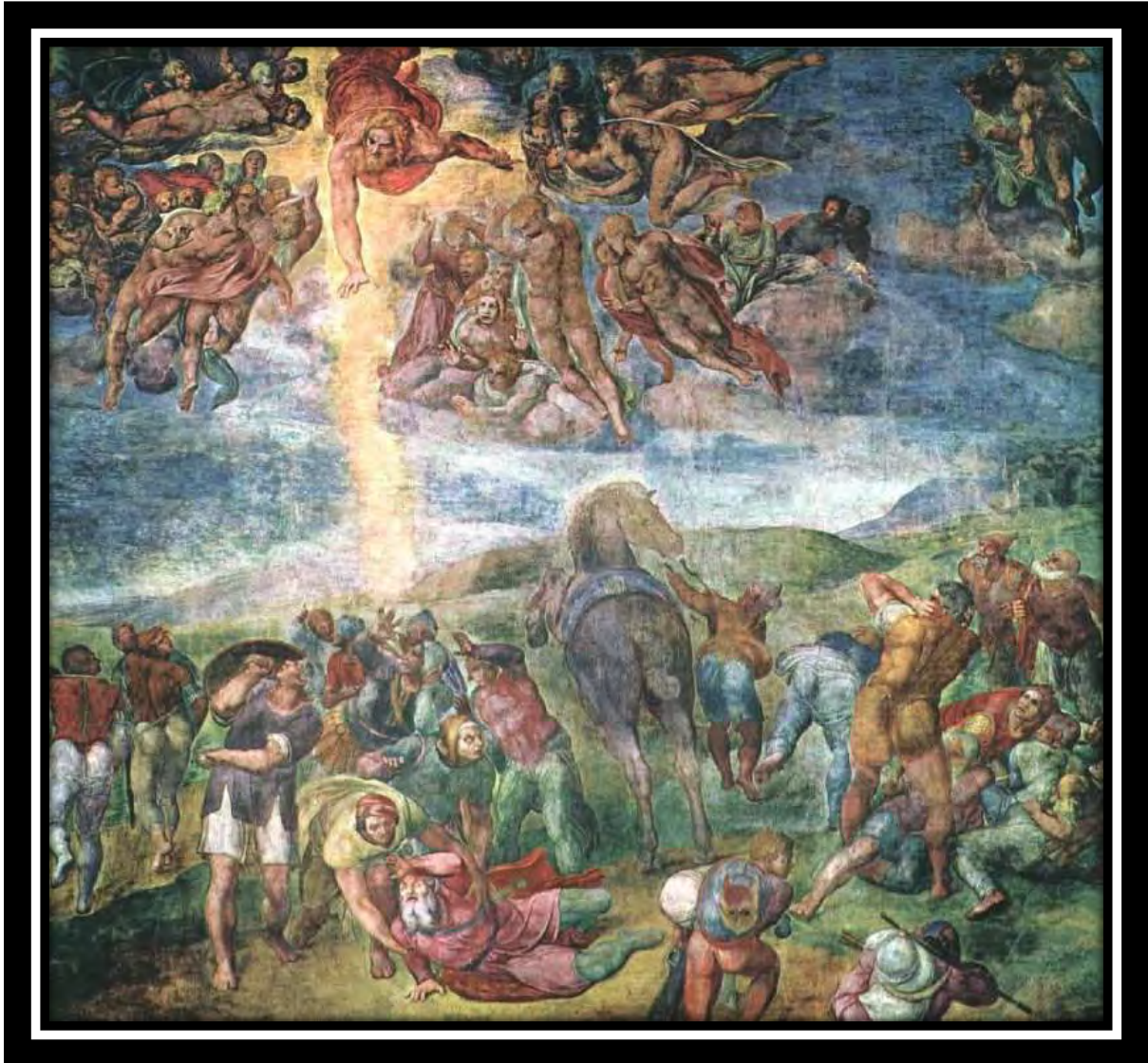


ROMANS—WEEK 3

THE STRUCTURE OF GRACE



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is the Conversion of Saul by Michelangelo Buonarroti

In this section, Paul gets into the law and legalism. Specifically, he treats circumcision, which was a contentious issue in the first century. Paul explains the complex interplay between the law and grace.

Without the law we wouldn't see our need for grace.

We're pleased to provide *the DEEP* studies in PDF format at no charge. We hope you will find them helpful and encouraging as you press on in your journey toward spiritual maturity in the Lord.

The Fellowship of Ailbe offers many opportunities for training, prayer, personal growth, and ministry. To subscribe to the daily DEEP email, visit our website at www.ailbe.org and click the sign-up button at the bottom.

There, you will also discover many other resources, including many email newsletters, such as our worldview study *ReVision*, our devotional newsletter *Crosfigell*, and *the DEEP*.

We are a spiritual fellowship patterned after the Celtic Revival. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

T. M. Moore, Principal
tmmoore@ailbe.org

Thank you.

All the individual weekly study guides are available for download here:

<https://www.ailbe.org/resources/itemlist/category/91-deep-studies>

Romans, Week 3 — The Structure of Grace

Copyright 2020 F. Michael Slay

The Fellowship of Ailbe

www.ailbe.org

All scripture references are noted. ESV stands for the English Standard Version. © Copyright 2001 by Crossway. Used by permission. All rights reserved. NKJV stands for the New King James Version. © Copyright 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved. NIV stands for The Holy Bible, New International Version®. © Copyright 1973 by International Bible Society. Used by permission. All rights reserved. KJV stands for the King James Version.

1 Romans 3:9-18 (NKJV)

What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin.

As it is written:

“There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one.”

“Their throat is an open tomb; With their tongues they have practiced deceit”;

“The poison of asps is under their lips”;

“Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.”

“Their feet are swift to shed blood; Destruction and misery are in their ways; And the way of peace they have not known.”

“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

This time Paul doesn't say, “May genoitaw.” The Greek that's translated as, “*Not at all,*” isn't as emphatic. But Paul is still raising and answering an important question. He began Chapter 3 by asking what the benefit of circumcision is – and answering it with, “*Much in every way.*”

So, after making sure no one undervalues circumcision. Paul now wants to make sure no one overvalues it. When he asks, “*Are we better than they?*” he's asking if the Jews are better than the gentiles.

But the lesson applies to us too; Paul's explanation hammers that home. “*There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one.*” (see Psalm 14:3, Psalm 53:1-3 and Ecclesiastes 7:20)

That's depressing, but Paul's just getting warmed up. Next, he recites some ugly stuff from Psalms 5, 10, 36 & 140 and Isaiah 59. I know some people are that bad, but is Paul really saying that we're all that bad?

He must be.

Christians spend their lives memorizing this doctrine—that we are all “that bad.” It's called the doctrine of total depravity and it's taught in churches around the world.

But memorizing something isn't the same as learning it. You can know this by heart and fully agree with it, but what do you see when you look in the mirror? Go back over the list of bad behaviors in this passage. Which ones are you aware of in yourself?

Everyone has strengths and weaknesses—we're not equally guilty of all sins—but there may be one or two that you practice without realizing it.

A frank conversation with your spouse or accountability partner can be a valuable eye opener.

2 Romans 3:19-20 (ESV)

Now we know that 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.

Virtually every culture on earth bans murder and stealing. Yet in the animal kingdom, murder and stealing aren't just common; they're everywhere. Life is mostly about protecting what you have and not getting eaten. It isn't really, "survival of the fittest." It's more like, "survival of the strongest," or even, "survival of the meanest."

Animals know no right and wrong. Might makes right. The law of the jungle is that the best fighter wins, and the loser dies or runs away. There are no rules.

But we invent rules (such as "don't pee in the house") that make no sense to them. Only animals that obey my rules are allowed in my house.

God gave us rules that are totally different from the law of the jungle. God's law bans murder and stealing. God also bans lying and adultery. He even has religious laws.

And we break those laws constantly. One of the great mysteries of life is why intelligent people can't seem to be housebroken. The rules aren't all that difficult—and each one is a good idea—but we just won't learn. (It's an even bigger mystery why God still lets us into His house, but that's not for today.)

Paul's point here is simple but essential. The law is the lens through which we see sin. Without the law, we'd be just like the animals.

But notice that Paul doesn't say that without the law there would be no sin. He says that without the law there would be no *knowledge of sin*. We'd still be in rebellion against God, there just wouldn't be specific rules to break, so our rebellion wouldn't have such obvious "symptoms."

This is a key part of God's magnificent plan of redemption. It sets the stage for Christ. Without the law we'd have no idea that we need Him.

It's funny how this aligns with the cliché, "Rules were made to be broken." That's a pretty lame cliché, yet it exactly describes what happens with God's laws.

But God's laws were also made to be obeyed. They should be obeyed. The fact that they aren't obeyed sets up the gospel, but that doesn't mean breaking them is a good thing. Paul will get to this point soon. Meanwhile, we should try to obey God's laws. In fact, we should try as hard as we can. Why? So we can do good?

No, so we can fail—and in failing gain even more *knowledge of sin*.

Then we see our desperate need of Christ.

3 Romans 3:21-31 (NKJV)

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. 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. Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.

We're back to May Genoitaw. This time, Paul uses it to keep our understanding of justification by faith from going overboard.

He says, "*Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.*" A natural follow-up question might be, "What do you mean, 'apart from the law'? Doesn't the law matter?" Paul words that as, "*Do we then make void the law through faith?*"

Paul's answer to this hypothetical is, "*Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law.*" Luke 7:47-50 shows this principle in action.

Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little." Then He said to her, "Your sins are forgiven." And those who sat at the table with Him began to say to themselves, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" Then He said to the woman, "Your faith has saved you. Go in peace." (NKJV)

Is Jesus telling the woman that she didn't do anything wrong? Certainly not! When he said, "*Your sins are forgiven,*" he confirmed that she had sinned.

Forgiveness is not acquittal; forgiveness affirms the law and the guilt of the one forgiven. Judges can go easier on people who plead guilty because the law and the crime are no longer at issue.

Where is boasting then? It is excluded. In Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul says this even more emphatically; excluding boasting is the purpose of salvation by grace through faith. Imagine that. What is God up to?

God's choice to save us from the fate we deserve does not overrule the primary objective of His glory. Nothing could be more unglorifying than someone boasting about the grace they've been given.

So, what does God do with that possibility? *It is excluded.*

4 Romans 4:1-8 (NKJV)

What then shall we say that Abraham our father has found according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, 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 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.”*

Part of this passage is puzzling at first.

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,

This seems to contradict what James says about faith and works.

Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. — James 2:17 (NKJV)

But it doesn't. James is referring to “works” (the noun **ἔργα** “erga” in Greek) — good deeds, which genuine faith produces.

Here, Paul is referring to someone who works (the verb **ἐργάζομαι** “ergazomeno” in Greek) — does a job for a salary. Paul's contrasting a regular worker with someone whose faith is counted as righteousness.

Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.

Paul's point is that a worker's wage is not grace.

But faith being credited as righteousness is.

You didn't earn the righteousness you're credited with. It's a gift. This is at the very heart of the gospel. None of us is capable of being righteous or earning righteousness.

But note, we're credited with righteousness, not given righteousness. Our sinful nature lingers. The great challenge we all face is to live up to the standard we've been credited with.

And guess what? We fail. This makes life in Christ frustrating, but there's one magnificent benefit. No one in heaven will think that they deserve to be there.

Even now, that attitude is the mark of the kingdom.

5 Romans 4:9-12 (NKJV)

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, 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.

What is up with this infatuation with circumcision? Paul makes it sound like circumcision is the be-all and end-all of life.

Bingo. That's exactly the mentality Paul is dealing with here. This is a window into the first century Jewish mind. They've made circumcision more than just a sign of the covenant—overextending what God said to Abraham, in Genesis 17:11, “*and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you.*” (NKJV)

This passage is designed to shoot that down. Specifically, Paul refutes the idea that only circumcised people can have faith by noting that Abraham had faith before he was circumcised.

Take a moment to let that sink in. The Jews have a magnificent covenant with God, where He says things like, “*I will be their God, and they shall be my people.*” Also, “*For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.*” — Jeremiah 31:33b & 34b (NKJV)

So what do they do? They obsess over a sign of that covenant—a sign that is never said to have any power of its own. They seem to be hoarding God's love. How did they get to this point?

This is what sin does with every good thing. Instead of just enjoying it, we focus on making sure no one else gets a piece of the pie. Even when the pie is unlimited and sharing it would benefit everyone, we still hoard.

We miss how big God's plans are.

Every new convert makes the world a better place. Expanding the gospel to the gentiles was God's marvelous plan and Paul's glorious mission.

It's our mission too. What do you think your role is in spreading the gospel?

Note: the purpose of all evangelism is God's glory. Getting more people to confess Christ is part of that grand plan, but it's not the essence. My main church jobs used to be mowing the lawn and making coffee. Those jobs count. Beware of thinking that only the high-profile jobs are glorious.

Serving God supports His Kingdom operations. That connects to spreading the gospel in countless ways.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Who holds you accountable?
2. What have you learned from your failures?
3. What do people brag about?
4. Do people appreciate humility?
5. What job do you wish you could do?

Items for prayer: