

Concerning The God Market

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[0 : 01] What I thought I'd do to make sure that you are up to where I am in talking about all these things is get you to ask the questions and then I'll answer them. You'll notice that there's a lot of questions in this particular passage.

And so I'd like to get you to ask them and then I'll answer them. The basic sort of thingamababra here is that you have this thing here and then you have this thing here and then you have you here.

Now this is called boasting here and it's sort of displayed. And that most of our religious life comes from getting knocked off here by the circumstances of our life and then going back and climbing slowly back up again so we can get on top of it.

So that unless we're firmly established and our boasting is all justified, we feel terribly insecure. And so it's interesting that what this passage that we're looking at today does is keeps knocking you off here so that there is no way that you will ever keep climbing back up again.

To try and teach you not to keep climbing back up there because that's not what your life is about. Now you ask the first question from the passage all together by saying, And the answer Paul gives is it is excluded.

[1 : 56] Finally, completely, permanently, forever it is finished. There is no ground whatever.

This has gone. And the idea of climbing up here just doesn't work.

Well then, boasting is so natural to us and seems to be...

You see, we're talking about being justified by faith. The way we justify ourselves is because we are established and so we...

That we are self... We've achieved something. We have built a little platform for our boasting. And we keep climbing up on it.

[2 : 57] You have lunch with somebody. You watch them climb up on their little pedestal. And you climb up on yours and see which one of you is highest.

Which means you've wasted a whole lunch hour. Playing that fairly silly but very human game. And as far as our world is concerned, boasting is what it's all about.

I don't know whether there's an exception for having grandchildren. But there's something very wonderful and very powerful about this statement.

And I think that it particularly applies to our religiosity. You know, that we mostly think that we have some ground for boasting before God.

And so we are constantly putting ourselves in the position where we tell God he owes us something because of what we have achieved.

[4 : 12] Because of the fact that we have kept the law. That we have observed our duty. That we have been good citizens. That we have kept the rules.

All those things form the foundation of our very human and very natural boasting. And when by some unhappy circumstance we get knocked off here, then we do everything in our power to get back up here again.

And that's not where we're supposed to be. Because, as Paul says, in answer to the question where then is boasting, it is excluded.

And then comes the next question. Now, in answer to that question, he says, he asks them a question.

So I ask you the question. Is it on the basis of observing the law? No, it isn't. But on that of faith.

[5 : 22] Now, the essential difference here is this. That humanly speaking, the way we work and the way we think is that we act and God responds.

We read the rules and obey them. And God comes along and says, well done, and rewards us. And that's the way we think about religion.

And I don't think that there's anything particularly difficult about that. I mean, I think the whole of human religion works that way.

God is there in some remote place, by some remote means, to reward you when you are morally upright and keep the law and observe the rules.

You hope that he's blind enough that he doesn't see everything. But by and large, if you can project the image, you recognize that that's how religion works.

[6 : 41] And when I read this passage, I become quite acutely depressed. Because I know that that's what I talk all sorts of times, as though that was the case.

I know that that's what congregations want to hear. You know, I mean, we have in our church probably the best music in the whole of the city of Vancouver.

That's what I heard about our church before I ever came here. So I know. We have large congregations, beautiful buildings, big budget.

We've got everything. And so anybody who really wants to know where it's at should really come to our church. I'm quoting you.

You see, what Paul is saying is that that is, in fact, exactly the opposite to the truth.

[7 : 52] Because it's not on that of observing the law, keeping the rules. It is, the basis of it is on faith.

Now, what this means, and I, and, I mean, once I've said this, you should probably go, but I'll keep talking.

What it means is this, that the whole of our life in Christ is to be a loving, faithful response to what God has done, is doing, and will do.

That's all it is. It's a response to what he's doing, not him responding to what we're doing. Our understanding of religion is almost invariably that God is there to respond to what we're doing.

And to be available to respond in situations where we need some help. But what Paul says is that is no longer true.

[9 : 10] The basis of your justification is on what God has done for you, is doing in you, and will do ultimately. And you keep your eyes totally on that and live in relationship to that by faith.

And you don't go back and back and back to this process over and over again. Which, I mean, we do it. I mean, it's so instinctive to us to do it.

So, he says in verse 28, We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

It is a faith, trust, love in God, who has intervened in our life, and who has done for us, and laid a foundation for our lives, which, of course, we could never and will never do.

Could never do. Let me see again. We just simply couldn't do it. We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

[10 : 25] Well, I think that speaks of a totally different kind of relationship.

I mean, it's capable of distortion. And I don't know whether I should talk to you about the way it gets distorted or not. But what it means is that, like when I've told you, I think when young couples come to me and talk about getting married, I tell them, Well, there's two things that will happen.

One is that you'll be married as a Christian in a church, and the other is you will be married as a citizen in a province.

Now, the reason that you want to be married as a citizen, or that you will need to be married as a citizen in a province, is that if you break the rules, the province will stay there to enforce the rules and make you pay if you break them.

So the province is part of the marriage service because it's there to make sure you keep the rules. But what the marriage is really all about is a love for, a confidence in, a trust of the person that you are to marry.

[11 : 48] So that in that relationship, you will discover something of the depth of the relationship between Christ and his church. And Christ and his church is a relationship where in response to and in love for God, as he has made himself known to us in Jesus Christ, we live out our lives.

You have the freedom to be enormously creative. You have the freedom to be enormously individual. You have the freedom to do all sorts of things.

You have the freedom to work through with God in faith that particularly messy situation, which is your personal life.

That's the freedom that you have in a relationship with faith. And the minister is not the place to whom you go and tell him your life is in a mess.

And he says, well, have you kept the rules? And you say, no, I haven't kept the rules. Well, then no wonder your life is in a mess. Come back when you're ready to keep the rules.

[13 : 02] I mean, that's what religion is thought to be. And that's how ministers are thought to behave. But the fact of the matter is that when you're dealing with an individual person, no matter what their personal circumstance might be, you're dealing with them, not on the basis of whether or not they've kept the rules, but on the basis of the reality of what God has done for them, quite independently of how they've responded to that.

And so you don't say, now if you do this and if you do this and if you do this, then everything will be all right. No. No. What all you can say to them with love and care and compassion, as I say to you, in the particular circumstances of your life, what I can say to you is simply this, that what God has done for you is the basis of your justification, that your sins are forgiven, that the gift of the Holy Spirit belongs to you, that you have nothing to boast about, and may God grant that you never do have anything to boast about, except the reality of encountering what God has done for you in Christ.

And if you're aware of that, then life is going to be radically different for you, because you are living now, not on the basis of what God wants you to do in order that he might respond to you, but you're living on the basis of what God has already done for you, and your life doesn't make any sense if you ignore that, if you ignore what God has done for you.

And that's why he says, this is why we maintain that at the heart of it, a man or a woman is justified by faith. That's who they are.

That's who you are when you wake up in the middle of the night. That's who you are in the midst of your, in the midst of the circumstances of your life.

[15 : 16] You are justified by faith in what God has done for you. Now there is room to be miserable and contrite and repentant, because in the awareness of what God has done for you, it's entirely appropriate to be that, so that you are justified by faith apart from observing the law.

Well then comes the next question, verse 29, which, to bring you in on it, says, God, the God of the Jews only. Now that, I mean, he's going over the ground again because of the importance of what he's saying here.

He's saying is, God has given the law to the Jews as though he was ultimately concerned only for the Jews.

Now I don't know how to think about this, but it, I mean, Christianity has so badly broken down into a sense that, you know, God is an Anglican, God is a Catholic, God is a Presbyterian, God is a Baptist, God is this, God is that, God is something else, and we have that feeling here.

And we lose the sense of the universality of the whole of humankind, of whom God is God, and what he has done, he has done for the whole of humanity.

[16 : 55] And it doesn't matter. And if you try and hide from that by saying, well, I am a Jew, and so I am in a privileged relationship to God, or I am a Baptist, and we Baptists know who God is, or I am a Catholic, or I belong to this church.

In other words, all we're doing is making this our boast and climbing back up onto the pedestal. And you see, that's what, that's what he says doesn't work, because what God has done for us, he's done for everybody.

Now remember, two weeks ago, I tried to establish as clearly as I could with you, the fact that the great, one of the great bonds that ties the whole of humanity together, every single member of the human race, is, in the words of Romans, we have sinned and come short of the glory of God.

There is none of us. We have the universal, the universal, shared human experience of not seeking God, not understanding God, not meeting God's, meeting God's standard.

That, that is something which is universal. And, recognizing that that gives us a tremendous bond with one another, which transcends race and ethnicity and culture and language and all those things.

[18 : 26] It transcends all that. So, what God has done for us in Christ transcends all our differences. And so, when you meet some fellow on the street who happens to belong to some, you know, some insignificant little group like this and you climb up on the magnificent pedestal of your spiritual heritage heritage and can talk down to him, you're missing the point.

Paul says, God is not the God of the Jews. He is as much the God of this insignificant little person whom you choose to ignore as he is of you. And what he's done, he's done and made available to this person as much as he's made it available to you.

Now, that's very hard for us because, you know, the whole of our life is what I would call the kind of, the whole of our life is the fabric of the structure of our personal boasting.

And what we do is, I mean, we set, we set the whole of mankind up in a row and you say, and say that we come just about here, most people are down there and there's a few people who are better off than I am, but not very many of them and certainly not very many people are better than I am.

I mean, somehow that gets hold of our minds and we think that way. I have always known myself that I come from a very aristocratic and well-known and famous family.

[20 : 15] And I hate it when other people think the same about themselves. And that, it's so instinctive to us. And yet, and yet we do it all the time.

But you see, Paul is turning that whole thing upside down. And he says, God is not the God of the Jews only. He is God and by definition what he has done, he has done for all.

there is only one God. And, and, and, and, and that this is the God who justifies the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through the same faith.

this, that God has done is available to everybody. Now, I mean, that's, that's where the rub comes for us as Christians.

And that is, you know, when, when you get into the realm of comparing religion with religion and you see, well, this is a much higher moral and ethical group than we are and therefore they're a better religion than our religion.

[21 : 29] and these people are much more sincere than we are and therefore better than we are and these people are much more devout than we are and those people over there pray six times a day and these people read their Bible all the time and that person has gone and given the whole of his life to live in solitude so that he can pray for the rest of humanity.

All these wonderful things that we do in terms of religion, Paul says, don't count ultimately.

The only thing that counts is the recognition of what God has done for us in Christ. What God has done that we can't do. And then, you see, Paul ends the passage by asking the final question.

Do we then qualify the law by this faith? And of course, Paul's answer is not at all.

Rather, we uphold the law. Remember when John's gospel starts and he says, in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God and that the whole of creation hangs together in this word of God?

[22 : 51] He says that. And what he means by it, and part of what he means by it because it seems a fathomless statement in terms of its depth, is that the way that God has created us is not that we should pride ourselves on our independent existence and our independent achievement, but that what we should be most aware of is the fact that the way God has put the world together, the way God has shown us how the world is put together through his word, through the law, that's the way the world was meant to be.

And the world being meant to be that way, what happens when we enter into a faith relationship to God on the basis of what he's done for us as our creator, our redeemer, our sustainer, and our judge, is that we show, yes, the law is right, but the law is not given for you and me to climb onto a pedestal, but the law is given in order that we would give our whole heart's praise to the God who has created us, redeemed us, sustains us, sanctifies us, and is our judge, that that will be the business of our lives.

Not, as it turns out, to boast about our accomplishments, but to give praise to him for his goodness and his grace.

And we only come close to understanding of that, I think, lots of times when we sing the great hymns of the faith, where the whole realm of nature mine, that were an offering far too small, love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all.

What God has done is laid claim on my life, and I have nothing to boast of, save the wonder and grace and mercy of a God who has acted towards me in this way.

[25 : 14] So, what, what Paul does in this passage, we're going on to begin Romans 4 next week, but, what Paul does in this passage is, in a sense, kick the pedestal out from under us, the one we keep climbing up on.

and it's, it's so, it's so, it's so hard for us not to do that, not to, not to go through this process over and over again, and we don't understand, we don't understand the reality of our own circumstances until, this has been kicked out from under us and we're sort of flat on our face in the mud, and then you say, oh yeah, yeah, this is where I should be, you know, this is, this is the appropriate place for me to be, not, not, I mean, I, I still remember this, I don't know what it's helpful to tell you, but, but, so, so often, particularly in the early years of the ministry, before I learned how to be respectable or to pretend to be,

I, I, I, I, I would, I would suffer in various ways and through various trials and temptations, I would come to a place of sensing utter defeat, and as though I was totally, destroyed and had nothing, whatever, to offer anybody, and then God would send somebody along who wanted something from me, and I had nothing to give, and of course, that was the best, best situation from which to minister to somebody, didn't feel good, but it was absolutely the best because you couldn't say to him, well, if you'd only do what I do, you would have all your answers solved, all your problems solved.

No, I, in a sense, in the mud, like you, can only point you to what God has done for both of us through Christ, and, and, that, you know, seemed to be the way that, that you have, you have to, you have to work, and, as soon as you start climbing back up here, you start creating space between you and people that, that, that you need to be able to talk to.

And, and, Paul, with this sort of magnificent thrust of this chapter, kicks that pedestal out from under you, and, brings you back in to the ground, to the ground, again, and again, and again, in order that your heart might not be filled with boasting about yourself, but might be filled with boasting about God.

[28 : 31] Remember how Paul says in Galatians, God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the pedestal is kicked out from under me all the time, you know, by which the world is crucified unto me and I unto the world.

That's the wonder and the, the heart of what Paul is saying, but it's, we, we, we, we just gravitate away from it all the time and need to be brought back and back and back, need to ask these questions and find these answers.

Let me pray. God, we praise and thank you for the wonder of the massive intellect of somebody like Paul who was able to take the simple reality which is at the heart of our humanity and show us the cross of Jesus Christ and help us to see that in all the experiences of life, in all the wonder of your creation, in all the philosophical imaginings of men, there is no touchstone of reality which brings us to the place you want us to be, which compares with Jesus Christ publicly portrayed as crucified and risen.

Amen.