

Intro:

We are working our way through Paul's argument for justification by faith alone. Romans 4 is Paul's proof that faith is the way of salvation.

1. Proven by the example of Abraham and the testimony of David (1-8)
2. Proven by the priority of Abraham's faith to Abraham's circumcision (9-12)

Now we are in a section (13-16) where Paul is proving his point by proving the promise cannot come through law. That gives us our title for this week's message:

Not Through Law

I want to work through the logic of our passage, but before we do, let's pause to consider something about our Christian life.

If someone were to ask you, "What do Christians *do*?" what would you say?

In other words, "What makes up the Christian life?" or "How do you *do* Christianity?"

Now please note that I am talking about real Christians here. We all know that there are people who might not be real Christians, even though they say they are Christians. But I am asking here, what makes up the life of the real Christian who really is on his way to heaven and really is born again?

1. Regular attendance at Christian worship services and events
2. Regular attention to Bible reading and prayer
3. Obedience to what the Bible says
4. Rejection of worldly values and practices (though perhaps not 100% unanimity among Christians on exactly how this is applied)
5. Rules over his own spirit so that he practices Christlikeness in his relationships to others (varies depending on relationship)
6. Actively ministers to the needs of others in some way

We could list other things, but this sums up a good deal of the Christian life.

Why does the real Christian do these things?

[Don't answer! Rhetorical question]

How much different in *activities* is the life of the fake Christian? *Not really different at all!*

Why would a fake Christian do these things?

[Don't answer! Rhetorical question]

I'm not going to really answer these 'why' questions at this point in the message, but I do want to get to these ideas:

- Going to church every week – *and liking it!*
- Following the Christian disciplines (Bible reading, prayer, etc.) – *and liking it!*
- Serving others in need – *and liking it!*

Our passage today doesn't address these things directly. But the truth contained in our passage ought to make you *like* everything about the Christian life!

Read Rm 4.13-16

Proposition: Salvation by means of *any kind* of law is entirely impossible.

As you understand this proposition, you should find sufficient motivation for living your Christian life, even if the Lord tarries his return for another hundred or more years.

I. The proposition: the promise is not through law (13)

A. Emphatic: 'not through law'

1. Literal rendering of the verse:

^{YLT} **Rm 4.13** For not through law *is* the promise to Abraham, or to his seed, of his being heir of the world, but through the righteousness of faith;

2. Notice the emphatic position of 'not through law'

3. Notice no article before 'law': 'not through law'

a. Not 'the Law'; *i.e.*, The Mosaic Law

b. Not the Old Testament in general

c. But just 'law', "any system of law ..."¹

Some translations capitalize 'Law' here, as if it is the Mosaic law – I don't think that is correct. I think Paul is attacking the attempt of putting one's confidence in any kind of law, Mosaic, Muslim, Hindu, or even 'Christian'.

B. Object: 'to Abraham and his seed': all those who believe the promise

¹ William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Romans*, p. 110.

- C. Content: the inheritance of the world
 - 1. Covered in-depth last week
 - 2. Inheritance of everything – the land, the kingdom, the nations, the world, everything, including eternal life
- D. Contrasted means: **but** through the righteousness from faith
 - 1. Very strong adversative: strongest contrast in Gk
 - 2. Not through law **but** through the righteousness from faith

Paul's proposition is our proposition.

Proposition: Salvation by means of *any kind* of law is entirely impossible.

II. The reason: law is antithetical to promise (14-15)

- A. God's promise becomes mere words (14)
 - 1. The opposite proposition: out of law is inheritance
 - a. Newell has a term for these people: "the merit-folks".²

“Those who are of law’ are those who are governed by law as the guiding and determining principle of their religion in contrast with those of whose religion faith is the basic principle.”³
 - b. Again no article

“It is plain from the whole intention and argument of the apostle that by law in this connection he does not specifically mean the law of Moses, but the law of God, revealed as a rule of duty for man. Paul is referring to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews. Its purpose is not simply to convince his readers that obedience to the Mosaic law cannot save them, but that obedience in any form, works of any kind, is insufficient for a man's justification before God.”⁴
 - c. Conditional statement: if this is so (let's assume it is so)
 - 2. If the condition is true, then
 - a. Faith is emptied

² William R. Newell, *Romans: verse by verse*, p. 143.

³ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 142.

⁴ Charles Hodge, *Romans*, p. 118.

b. Promise is ‘put out of work’; ‘rendered ineffective’

“Paul probably uses the perfect tense of both verbs [here] to emphasize the state of affairs that would result from the condition being fulfilled.”⁵

If you can attain the promise by keeping law (by your own merit), then who needs the promise? What good is it?

B. God’s wrath is the only possible result (15)

1. Law produces God’s wrath

a. Paul calls the Law (Mosaic Law) the ‘ministration of death’ (2 Cor 3.7) and the ‘ministration of condemnation’ (2 Cor 3.9)

b. Wrath here is God’s wrath – exclusive use of the term in Romans

1) See Rm 1.18: against all unrighteousness and ungodliness of men

2) God’s implacable opposition and ultimate condemnation

“It is impossible to be under the law without being under the curse.”⁶

This is because *all have sinned*. No law-keeping can eliminate that fact – and the law itself demands to be satisfied

“Any promise based on the law would have ended up in wrath with no one to inherit the promise.”⁷

2. And law intensifies condemnation because it turns sin into transgression

a. Transgression = ‘crossing a line’

b. “If there is no law to violate, there can be no transgression.”⁸

⁵ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 275, footnote 25.

⁶ William MacDonald and Arthur Farstad, *Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments*, electronic ed., Ro 4:15 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, c1995).

⁷ Herman A. Hoyt, *The First Christian Theology*, p. 67.

⁸ Stewart Custer, *The Righteousness of God*, p. 92.

- c. “The Law was not given to save men, but to show men that they need to be saved.”⁹

The Mosaic law intensifies condemnation because it constantly points to men’s failings and falling short of God’s standard.

Every law men devise or follow has the same effect: you are found to be in transgression – no one can say they have kept even the law of our land perfectly.

The only possible result for the transgressor is wrath: ‘the way of transgressors is hard’ (Pr 13.15)

The law – any law – puts men in an impossible position. Law empties God’s promise of any meaning because law demands the death of the transgressor.

III. The conclusion: the promise is out of faith (16a)

Verse 16 serves as a conclusion to the preceding and an introduction to what follows...

A. In conclusion: the promise must be out of faith

1. Expression ‘by faith’ lit. ‘out of faith’ parallels ‘if the ones out of faith are heirs’ (14)
2. Meaning: On account of this (vv. 14-15) the inheritance is out of faith

B. The purpose for inheritance by faith alone

1. So that it might be according to grace (according to God’s free gift)
2. And it is according to grace for the purpose of being **GUARANTEED**
 - a. If it is of works, it is unstable, unsure, unguaranteed
 - b. Since it is according to grace, it is absolutely stable, guaranteed

“Now if you introduce man’s works ... you introduce an element of insecurity and uncertainty. For no man, trying to ‘do his part,’ is ever certain that he has done, or *will* do, his ‘part.’”¹⁰

⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right*, p. 43.

¹⁰ William R. Newell, *Romans: verse by verse*, p. 144.

“The inheritance is by faith, **so that it may be by grace.** And it is by grace, in order that it **may be guaranteed.** If salvation is in any way dependent on the merit, or the goodness, or the ability of man, it can never be certain: no, it must be utterly unattainable. Unless we are saved by grace we cannot be saved at all.”¹¹

C. The recipients are to the seed of Abraham

1. That is, not to those who are depending on law only
2. But to those who are ‘out of the faith of Abraham’

Are you a part of this inheritance?
Do you have the promise?
Are you of the faith of Abraham?

Conclusion:

Proposition: Salvation by means of *any kind* of law is entirely impossible.

You ought to rejoice in that!

Remember the questions I asked in the introduction?

Why does the real Christian do these things?

[the things that make up the activity of the Christian life]

Why does the fake Christian do these things?

The fake Christian does these things because he thinks he gets something out of doing them.

- He might think he gets the approval of other men. [That certainly won't save him, and surely he has his reward.]
- More serious, though: He might think he gets the approval of God.

If that is his motivation, he couldn't be more wrong: salvation is *not through law*! He is treating the Christian life like a law.

You can't 'do' the Christian life in order to get the Christian promise.

You can't 'do' the Christian life in order to be saved.

¹¹ Charles Hodge, *Romans*, pp. 119-120.

All you can 'do' is gain more explicit condemnation.

- How much church attendance is enough?
- How much Bible reading is enough?
- What if you skip?

The real Christian does these things, the things of the Christian life, because he loves what God has done for him in giving him the promise.

- He rejoices in God
- He loves to serve God
- He loves to hear the Word preached, to read the Word, to know the Word, to live the Word
- He serves others because in this way he can serve Christ who saved him.

And even better: emotionally and spiritually he has the stability of a settled confidence in salvation. He has no spiritual worries – he doesn't have to worry about being condemned by his failures, because his salvation is by grace through faith, not out of works but out of promise.