

## Un-misunderstanding Paul

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Ever since Paul wrote his letters, people have been arguing about what he meant. It is of course well known that even according to the New Testament Paul is “hard to understand” (2 Peter 3:16). In this essay I would like to consider what has become the dominant understanding of Paul – which I believe is a profound misunderstanding.

Paul is often quoted as championing “faith,” particularly faith in Christ, over “works of the law” as the only way to salvation. According to this view of Paul, one cannot get right with God by trying to obey the law, specifically the Jewish law, and doing good works. This is because we are inherently sinful and cannot make ourselves good enough to deserve to be saved, no matter how hard we try. The law commands us to be good, but does not give us the means to make ourselves good. Therefore the law brings only condemnation. It shows us a standard we cannot possibly meet, and so reminds us of how sinful we are. Even with the law we still do the evil we do not want instead of the good that God desires.

But there is a way out. Christ sacrificed his life for us, paying the debt of our sin in full. If therefore we embrace faith in Christ and accept Christ’s death as payment for our sins, our debt will be erased and we will be saved due to Christ’s merit imputed to us regardless of what we have done, which is no longer of any account. That is the “good news” of the Gospel supposedly preached by Paul.

I believe this is a complete misunderstanding.

This way of interpreting Jesus’s death (called the “atonement”) has many unfortunate consequences:

1. It encourages the attitude that what we do does not matter in God’s sight, but only what we believe. Faith is what’s important; how we treat others, not so much. So, for example, we can support extremely unethical politicians with no misgivings, as long as they give us what we want: after all, we are all sinners, but all saved by grace, so who are we to judge?

2. It encourages disrespect for other religious traditions. If Christ is the only way out of hell, then non-Christian faiths must be “evangelized” to save the souls of their adherents. On a grand scale, this has helped rationalize colonialism and exploitation of indigenous populations.
3. It makes antisemitism inevitable. Judaism is caricatured and condemned as a religion of “works righteousness” whose arrogant people think they can earn their own salvation and put God in their debt by stacking up personal credits. And there is something even worse: Judaism does not see faith in Christ as necessary for salvation, and if correct this would mean Christ suffered and died for nothing. Therefore Judaism, and with it the Jewish people, had to be delegitimized. All of this has caused unimaginable suffering for Jews over centuries, leading many Jews to think of Christ as an enemy.

This way of understanding the Christian message must be questioned. We can begin with a more careful consideration of what Paul actually wrote.

Paul was not against the law. “So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12). Conforming to the law’s requirements is actually essential:

For he will repay according to each one’s deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. (Romans 2:6-10)

For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. (Romans 2:13)

So “doing the law” really *is* important. But Paul recognized this is difficult, given our impulsive human nature. He describes this conflict quite dramatically in Romans 7.

So what is the way out? If we are judged according to our adherence to the law and so many of us fall short, how are we to be saved?

Paul presents Abraham as an example of one who found the way out.

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor 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 reckoned to him as righteousness." Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. (Romans 4:1-5)

The Greek πίστις is much richer than the English "faith." The latter is often equated with belief, while the Greek implies complete trust and commitment. "Justify" is an awkward translation of the Greek δικαιώω, which can mean "vindicate," and which can also mean "make righteous." Now we know that Abraham was a righteous man. What the scripture is telling us is that Abraham's righteousness *came from his trust in God*. It did not come from anything he did. Doing good works is not what made Abraham righteous; rather, it was his trust in God, which transformed him and inspired him to do righteous works.

Note that Abraham's "faith" had nothing to do with faith in Christ. Neither Genesis nor Paul mentions Christ in regard to Abraham. It is not faith *in* Christ that "justifies," or makes one righteous, as Abraham's faith made him righteous. It was Abraham's faith in God, *the same faith Christ had in God and so can model for us*.

The way Romans is translated has a lot to do with what we think it means. The English word "justify" has caused no end of confusion. To be "justified" by faith sounds like our faith (in Christ) acquits us of all guilt related to anything we have done. Unfortunately, in English the words "justify" and "righteousness" are distinct and unrelated. But in Greek they are the same word. To be "justified" literally means to be "righteoused" (if such a word could exist), or to be *made righteous*. It is faith as *complete trust in God leading to an inner transformation* that makes one righteous: as for Abraham, as for us. If it were not so, Paul would not have presented Abraham as an example for the rest of us.

Another closely related translation issue concerns the phrase πίστις Χριστοῦ, which the NRSV translates as follows:

...the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.  
(Romans 3:22)

But note: NRSV also supplies an alternate translation in a footnote:  
“through the faith *of* Jesus Christ” (emphasis added).

This is a notoriously controversial issue in translating Romans, *very* much debated. Scholars are about evenly divided on which of these two renderings they prefer, and the Greek can actually support either: “faith in Christ” (“objective genitive”) or “faith of Christ” (“subjective genitive”). I believe “faith of Christ” is far and away the preferred reading. It fits the context much better: Paul is comparing the faith of Abraham to the faith of Christ, and will show how the latter can bring us to the former. Faith “in” Christ is not the issue here, as we have seen. Abraham simply trusted in God, in a profound and transformative way; faith in Christ was not an issue for him.

Paul understands that we are not Abraham. We want to get to where Abraham was, so absorbed in his trust in God that it changed him profoundly and made God a constant presence for him. So we have a helper, who is Christ. Christ, through his life, ministry, and especially his resurrection (which is very central for Paul) affects us in a way Abraham cannot. In union with Christ, symbolized in baptism, we participate in Christ’s faith and complete trust in God and it becomes ours as well. In this way we too can be transformed, as Abraham was transformed.

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:3-4)

But this union with Christ requires total commitment.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:5-11)

For Paul, sin is not just a bad act; it is a cosmic power. Without faith we are slaves to this power. To overcome it, we need to participate in the faith *of* Christ, allowing it to infuse us as it infused him. Then our old self, the one enslaved to sin despite its best efforts, dies and we become a “new creation.” This transition is profound, affecting us on the deepest level of our souls.

And this is the key. Belief is not what saves. We are saved by an *inner transformation*, allowing the faith in God that flowed through Christ to flow through us as well. This is not a simple act of “making a decision for Christ” and being done with it. It is a lifelong commitment, which baptism initiates, in which we allow the faith of Christ (πίστις Χριστοῦ) to enter us and change us and become our being.

This, I believe, is how Paul should be understood. *Paul did not say good works count for nothing and faith is everything.* Paul had respect for the law, even calling it “holy.” But he believed we needed help in realizing it, which is the faith *of* Christ, the faith Christ had and imparts to us as well when we come into union with him. What does it mean to come into union with Christ? To allow the spiritual presence manifest in Christ to find a dwelling place within us.

Understanding Paul in this way avoids the pitfalls mentioned earlier. When he says we are “justified by faith apart from works of the law,” I take this to mean that it is not the law itself that makes us righteous, but rather the complete trust in God modeled by Christ and resulting in a transformation of the heart. Such a faith will not lead to religious intolerance or the other abuses mentioned above. It will rather make us humble seekers of a closeness to God that can become our greatest spiritual resource.

There are nevertheless possible sources of confusion. Paul admittedly was not clear in what he wrote. We also have English translations influenced by misreadings of Paul based on questionable theological assumptions. Most notorious is Romans 3:25, ἱλαστήριον, translated “sacrifice of atonement” or “propitiation.” The word does not actually mean that; these translations are influenced by an assumed theology. The exact meaning of this verse is not clear at all, but the word ἱλαστήριον could be translated “place of mercy” and is in fact so translated when it occurs in the Greek Septuagint

(e.g. Exodus 25:17, where it is commonly rendered “mercy seat”).<sup>1</sup> The doctrine of penal substitution, that Christ took the punishment for our sins upon himself, so often taken for granted, is not explicitly found anywhere in Paul.

What are the practical implications of this reconsideration of Paul? We move away from a simplistic view of Paul in which faith is set in opposition to the law and good works. Paul understood that you cannot dispense with the law and have a functioning society; he calls the law “good,” “holy,” and “spiritual,” and he says “I delight in the law of God in my inmost self” (Romans 7:22). He does not want to throw the law out; he wants help in obeying it! This help comes from being infused with the faith demonstrated by Jesus.

Sometimes it can seem like Paul is opposing the law, especially when it comes to the inclusion of the Gentiles. In such contexts Paul refers to Jewish ceremonial law, rather than general moral principles. Paul does use the word “law” (νόμος) in different senses, and one must be careful to discern Paul’s intent from the context. Again, Paul did not think the law was evil, but that Jewish law should not be required for Gentiles. For if Gentiles are led to believe they need the Jewish law to become saved, then their faith in Christ avails them nothing. But while Paul also wants Jews to come to this new faith, he does not tell them to stop being Jews. The Letter to the Galatians adds other nuances I am not addressing here. What we have looked at in Romans appears to be Paul’s best-considered statement regarding the purpose and fulfillment of the law.

We also need to consider that “salvation” did not mean for Paul what it usually means for us today. Paul was an apocalypticist, and expected the end of history and the final judgment to occur soon, probably within his lifetime. “Salvation” for Paul meant acquittal at the final judgment and admission into the new resurrection life. It did not mean escape from an unending fiery hell. Paul never speaks of such a hell; we have later theologians to thank for that. Most likely Paul believed that those who were not saved at the final judgment would just pass into oblivion.

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<sup>1</sup> For more detail see my article “The Most Hotly Contested Word in Romans,” <http://www.judeochristianity.org/ilasterion.pdf>.

And so the principal concern for Paul was not being saved from hell but active participation in the new life to come. In this sense it was very positive. Paul found a model of perfect faith in Jesus as the Christ. He believed Christ's example had the power to change lives decisively. We too can look to Christ as an example of a faith that can change us from the inside, as we expose ourselves to the life and influence of Christ as preserved in the Gospels and drawing us toward faith. A faith that really will make us more loving toward others regardless of their own religious persuasion. A faith bringing an abiding awareness of spiritual presence. And baptism is just its beginning.

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