

# SAKLC CONVERSATIONS

Mid-week adult study at St Armands Key Lutheran Church, Sarasota, FL

## **“ROMANS, a letter for today”**

Session Plan “and facilitator’s notes” for

Thursday, February 16, 2017

### Opening Act of Devotion-

#### Session Objectives:

1. To empower each participant in this study to be able to state in *her/his* own words Paul’s assertion that we are now justified by faith as God’s gift.
2. To explain how Paul uses the traditional language of temple sacrifice to demonstrate that our justification is the result of God’s action.
3. To discuss the role of faith in our justification, using the story of Abraham as an example.
4. To respond personally to Paul’s question, “*What’s to become of boasting?*”

**An initial Interpretative Note:** When reading the early chapters of Paul’s Letter to the Romans, it is sometimes helpful to adopt a **“trial mentality.”** The situation is that All People - both Jews and Gentiles – have been put on trial and judged by God, and the pronounced verdict is guilty! Still, the trial is not concluded. In today’s study we are moving into the **“sentencing”** phase of that trial. What happens in any trial, before final sentence is pronounced? Extenuating circumstances are often considered; character witnesses may be called. But, what happens in Romans represents a *radical difference* from what would be expected in a normal trial setting! God, the judge, intervenes on behalf of the defendants, not just to lighten the sentence, but in a surprise action to erase the guilty verdict! Follow along below, and see how this develops:

### **I) PAUL’S EXPRESSION OF THE DIRE CONDITION OF HUMANS in God’s sight–**

(this is true of both Jews and Gentiles):

**Romans 3:9-10** *“What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all; for we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, <sup>10</sup> as it is written: “There is no one who is righteous, not even one;*

### **II) GOD’S SURPRISING GIFT: “Righteousness through Faith!”**

**ROMANS 3:21-26** *“But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, <sup>22</sup> the righteousness of God through faithfulness\* in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, <sup>23</sup> since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; <sup>24</sup> they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement\* by his blood,*

***effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; <sup>26</sup> it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.***

**[\*Note:** This is a valid alternative translation from the original Greek text! **NRSV** and many other translations read: ***“through faith in Jesus.”*** - - an important insight to be gleaned from this improved translation: Our justification (*righteousness or right relationship with God*) comes not through OUR action – not even our faith – but by the faithfulness of Christ!]

**[\*Note:** Paul here uses the language of temple sacrifice to talk about Jesus’ death. An important part of Israel’s worship from its earliest origins was the sacrifice of animals as a means of **atonement** {*a word that means reconciliation*} with God. Cattle, sheep, goats, doves, and pigeons were sacrificed. The animals were to be unblemished; they could not be diseased or injured. When an animal was sacrificed, its blood was dashed against the sides of the altar or smeared on the horns of the altar. The kidneys and the fat around the entrails were burned on the altar. The people understood animal sacrifice as a means God provided to remove the barrier to covenantal relationship caused by the people’s sin. The Jewish ritual continues to be practiced – “THE DAY OF ATONEMENT” or “*Yom Kippur*” based on the ancient descriptions given in Leviticus 16.]

### **DISCUSSION BREAK:**

1. In what ways do you find it helpful and meaningful to interpret Jesus’ death as an atoning sacrifice for our sin?
2. How might the language of Jesus as a sacrificial lamb be troubling to some people?
3. How essential is the sacrificial theme to our faith?
4. Look at the Worship Liturgy in the “*Lutheran Book of Worship*.” (front pg. 57 ff.) What language references do you find in the Communion Service to Jesus’ death as a sacrifice?

### **III) PAUL’S RESPONSE TO SPECIFIC FALSE BELIEFS HELD BY MANY JEWS:**

***ROMANS 3:27-31 - <sup>27</sup> Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. <sup>28</sup> For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law. <sup>29</sup> Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, <sup>30</sup> since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith. <sup>31</sup> Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.***

### False Beliefs

Righteousness depends on the law  
Salvation is earned by keeping the law  
Only Jews will be saved  
The law is overturned

### Paul's Teaching

Righteousness depends on God's grace  
Salvation is a gift from God  
Salvation is for all – Jews and Gentiles  
The law is upheld

### THE CHARGES AGAINST PAUL:

a) Critics who thought that Paul's practice of accepting the uncircumcised into the Christian community was dangerously wrong based their conclusions on Genesis 17:9-14 ***"God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. <sup>10</sup> This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup> You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. <sup>12</sup> Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. <sup>13</sup> Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup> Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant."***

b) Paul answered his critics' insistence that Christians must observe Jewish rituals and practices such as circumcision, by referring to several different stories about Abraham's faith - Genesis 12:1-4 ***"Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. <sup>2</sup> I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."***

***<sup>4</sup> So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran."***

c) Next, see this account in Genesis 15:1-5 ***"After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." <sup>2</sup> But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" <sup>3</sup> And Abram said, "You have given me no offspring, and so a***

*slave born in my house is to be my heir.”<sup>4</sup> But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.”<sup>5</sup> He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”*

**Facilitator’s interjection:** Remember that Abraham was 99 years old and Sarah was 90! Put your feet in Abraham’s sandals: **What might have been your first reactions to this promise?**

d) Abraham’s response is given in **Genesis 15:6** - **“and he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness”**

e) Abraham eventually practiced circumcision; see **Genesis 17:9-14** - **<sup>9</sup> God said to Abraham, “As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. <sup>10</sup> This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. <sup>11</sup> You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. <sup>12</sup> Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. <sup>13</sup> Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. <sup>14</sup> Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.”**

Dr. Calvin Roetzel, in “Romans, a letter for today” (RESOURCE BOOK pg. 35) writes: **Paul’s sharp eye noticed that before the report of Abraham’s circumcision in Gen. 17, Abraham was himself uncircumcised, and, therefore, a Gentile who, on the basis of his trust in God’s promise was counted righteous. Paul concluded from this that Abraham, the Gentile, accepted God’s justification by faith (Gen. 15) before he was circumcised (Gen. 17) and, therefore it was on the basis of Abraham’s belief in the truth of God’s promises and not on the basis of his circumcision that God made him the patriarch of all people – Jew and Gentile alike.**

## DISCUSSION BREAK:

1. If Paul's gospel speaks of *free grace* that does not depend on what we do, why do we need faith?
2. Can faith be turned into a 'work?'
3. Does it really matter what we do?

## **IV) WHAT BECOMES OF BOASTING?** Re-Read Romans 3:27–28;

### **1. What are some examples of religious boasting?**

- **by individuals?**
- **by churches?**
- **What might Paul's response be?**

### **2. Why do we boast?**

### **3. How does boasting about our works or beliefs affect us?**

### **4. How does it affect others?**

### **5. How does it affect our relationship with God?**

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Romans 3:9-31 The Message Translation (MSG) [Eugene H. Peterson](#)

### **“We’re All in the Same Sinking Boat”**

<sup>9-20</sup>So where does that put us? Do we Jews get a better break than the others? Not really. Basically, all of us, whether insiders or outsiders, start out in identical conditions, which is to say that we all start out as sinners. Scripture leaves no doubt about it:

There's nobody living right, not even one,  
nobody who knows the score, nobody alert for God.

They've all taken the wrong turn;  
they've all wandered down blind alleys.  
No one's living right;  
I can't find a single one.  
Their throats are gaping graves,  
their tongues slick as mudslides.  
Every word they speak is tinged with poison.  
They open their mouths and pollute the air.  
They race for the honor of sinner-of-the-year,  
litter the land with heartbreak and ruin,  
Don't know the first thing about living with others.  
They never give God the time of day.

This makes it clear, doesn't it, that whatever is written in these Scriptures is not what God says *about others* but *to us* to whom these Scriptures were addressed in the first place! And it's clear enough, isn't it, that we're sinners, every one of us, in the same sinking boat with everybody else? Our involvement with God's revelation doesn't put us right with God. What it does is force us to face our complicity in everyone else's sin.

### **"God Has Set Things Right"**

<sup>21-24</sup> But in our time something new has been added. What Moses and the prophets witnessed to all those years has happened. The God-setting-things-right that we read about has become Jesus-setting-things-right for us. And not only for us, but for everyone who believes in him. For there is no difference between us and them in this. Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners (both us and them) and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we're in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ.

<sup>25-26</sup> God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world of sin. Having faith in him sets us in the clear. God decided on this course of action in full view of the public—to set the world in the clear with himself through the sacrifice of Jesus, finally taking care of the sins he had so patiently endured. This is not only clear, but it's *now*—this is current history! God sets things right. He also makes it possible for us to live in his rightness.

<sup>27-28</sup> So where does that leave our proud Jewish insider claims and counterclaims? Canceled? Yes, canceled. What we've learned is this: God does not respond to what *we* do; we respond to what *God* does. We've finally figured it out. Our lives get in step with God and all others by letting him set the pace, not by proudly or anxiously trying to run the parade.

<sup>29-30</sup> And where does that leave our proud Jewish claim of having a corner on God? Also canceled. God is the God of outsider non-Jews as well as insider Jews. How could it be otherwise since there is only one God? God sets right all who welcome his action and enter into it, both those who follow our religious system and those who have never heard of our religion.

<sup>31</sup> But by shifting our focus from what *we* do to what *God* does, don't we cancel out all our careful keeping of the rules and ways God commanded? Not at all. What happens, in fact, is that by putting that entire way of life in its proper place, we confirm it.