

# Second Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

**To Hell With Distinctions**

**Romans 1:16-17, 3:22b-28**

**Second Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 4)**

**Analysis by James Squire**

1:16For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.” 3:22For there is no distinction, 23since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25whom 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; 26it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus. 27Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith. 28For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.

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**DIAGNOSIS: Distinguished to Death**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** – *Boasting in Distinctions*

Paul's readers love to make distinctions. Don't we all? "Passing over sins previously committed" (3:25) is not our cup of tea, at least not with certain sins. We not only make distinctions between "us" and "them," but we also make distinctions between some sins and other sins (1:18-32). Paul can do it just as well as we can. In civil society, such distinctions are necessary in order to help maintain good order and keep the old creation intact. Where we get in trouble is in not making the crucial distinction between keeping the law and having faith. Righteousness comes only through the latter and not through the former, but we tend to muddle that in our dealings with people. Dealing with certain sins by isolating their perpetrators from the rest of society is one thing. Thinking we can justify ourselves before God by contrast is quite another. It leads us astray and right into the clutches of Paul's hypocrisy trap (2:1-5).

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Trusting in the Law***

Actually, it only appears on the surface that we don't distinguish between keeping the law and having faith. Our public testimony is confused on this subject because privately we do make a distinction that we know won't sell publicly: we prefer to get our righteousness through the law. Faith is fine as long as it doesn't get in the way of that. But the problem is, faith – even generically – cannot be dabbled in whenever it is convenient. Wherever we find our righteousness is also the source of our faith, and Christ is not accessible through the law so our trust is not in him. We trust that at the final judgment, God will justify us by comparing us to the "real" sinners (even though we have no reason to believe that will happen other than that's how we want it to be). As if we were the ones in charge!

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Excluded***

Alas, we are not. Paul says our boasting is excluded (3:27), and since that is where we put our trust, we are excluded along with it. We will have plenty of time in hell to stomp our feet and fume over the unpredictability of heaven, and God's lack of concern for distinctions. But we are not in charge. God is. And he has chosen to reveal his righteousness through faith in Christ, rather than through our preferred method of works righteousness. There's nothing we can do about it.

## **PROGNOSIS: Justified by Faith in Christ**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** – *Included as a Righteous One*

But there is something Christ can do about us! He can, and more importantly does, extend justification to us as a gift. This gift is for "all [who] have sinned and [have] fall[en] short of the glory of God" (3:23). In Christ, the glory of God does not fall short of reaching us. In fact, since "there is no distinction" (3:22), there is no longer any "ladder" of works with some people "up here" and some people "down there." Christ goes the distance-from heaven to earth and even to hell. That's "divine forbearance" (3:25), and through Christ's becoming one of us – with God's blessing – the measuring stick of the law has been thrown out! This is how God chooses, in Christ, to manifest his glory!

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution)** – *Righteousness Received By Faith*

And that glory, that righteousness, is revealed – and bestowed – "through faith for faith" (1:17). To the one who insists on using the measuring stick of the law, faith is a conundrum: you can't receive righteousness unless you have faith in Christ, but you can't achieve faith in Christ without his righteousness. But for those who have been leveled by the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, there is no measuring

stick that can be used. Faith breaks in unilaterally, awakening us to a new life in which the faith that has been given to us feeds off the righteousness of God. And the righteousness of God continues to be received by our faith in Christ. Instead of being confronted by a conundrum, we are swept away in an overflowing cup of salvation that the world will never be able to vanquish!

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Righteousness Lived**

Yes, in the world we live in, measuring sticks still abound. But we have seen the future: all measuring sticks are doomed to extinction. Boasting has been excluded, not by some law, but by our faith in Jesus Christ (3:27). Yes, great is our faith, as Jesus often liked to say to those whom he had healed. And one of the privileges of our faith is that we get to go back into our own world and begin dismantling the measuring sticks that keep other people locked in mortal combat with that conundrum we were bedeviled by. As long as there is sin in the world, and as long as we are still in the process of redeeming the world through Christ's message, we will have to support the distinguishing of sins from righteous acts and certain sins from other sins, but we can call a halt to the distinguishing of "bad" people from "good" people. We can instead treat each as a child of God, worthy to receive the gift of justification through faith in Jesus Christ. Let us "not [be] ashamed of the gospel" (1:16).